

Gold Key Winners

2026



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**Scholastic
Art & Writing
Awards**

Alliance for
Young Artists
& Writers

Dear Amazing, Young Writers,

Missouri Youth Write is sponsored by the Missouri Council of Teachers of English (MoCTE), the Greater Kansas City Writing project (www.gkcwp.org), and the Missouri Writing Projects Network coordinates the Missouri Regions's Scholastic Writing Awards contest, sponsored by The Alliance for Young Artists and Writers (www.artandwriting.org).

I am honored to share this collection of Gold Medal works with all of you. These plays, poems, essays, memoirs, short stories, etc. are beautifully written and show the amazing talent of all of you. I congratulate all of you for your hard work. I would also like to acknowledge the amazing educators who have worked with these young writers and supported them throughout their school year(s). Lastly, I want to thank all of the supportive family members who have helped to foster the voices of these teens.

Keep on telling your stories!

With warm regards,

Mary Beth Rich

Editor

Youth Program Coordinator, Greater Kansas City Writing Project



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Athreya Arvind

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Nuclear Loops: When Reason Turns Against Itself in Einstein's Monsters

Some threats destroy cities; others destroy the way people think. The nuclear age did both. When Martin Amis published *Einstein's Monsters* in 1987, the Cold War was still going strong in its weird state of almost-but-not-quite war. The collection captures something really specific about that moment in history, but even more than that, it shows how the human mind falls apart when it has to think about its own possible destruction. In these stories, especially in the essay "Thinkability" and the short fiction that comes after, Amis doesn't just write about nuclear weapons; he makes his writing actually perform the same paralysis they create. Through his use of circular logic that loops back on itself, dark humor that undermines every attempt at making sense, and gross imagery that makes abstract ideas horrifyingly real, Amis builds a literary form that shows the psychological trap of living under nuclear threat. The stories don't just describe paralysis; they make the reader feel it, forcing readers to experience the same mental breakdown that nuclear weapons force on human consciousness. In *Einstein's Monsters*, Martin Amis uses circular logic, dark irony, and grotesque imagery to demonstrate how nuclear weapons paralyze human thought, language, and morality, which turns ordinary consciousness into a kind of living death.

Amis's use of postmodern grotesque and temporal anxiety sets up the framework for understanding how nuclear weapons collapse meaning and time. Literary critic Brian Crews argues that Amis's work shows what he calls "the postmodern grotesque," where "the freak is the norm" and previously unthinkable distortions of reality become accepted as ordinary life (Crews 641). This isn't your traditional grotesque of gothic horror but something far more sneaky: the grotesque as everyday background noise. Crews notes that in Amis's nuclear fiction, there's a "loss of any sense of depth" where surface and substance collapse into each other (Crews 657). You can see this flattening effect all throughout "Thinkability" when Amis treats the most terrifying prospect in

human history with the same analytical coolness someone might use for a math problem. “Nuclear weapons can kill a human being a dozen times over in dozen different ways,” he writes, then adds with disturbing casualness, “and, before death, like certain spiders, like the headlights of cars, they seem to paralyze” (Amis 3). The comparison to spiders and headlights takes something incomprehensibly huge and makes it weirdly everyday and creepy, which somehow makes it even worse. James Diedrick’s analysis of Amis’s work helps explain why this grotesque flattening works so well. According to Diedrick, Amis’s “generation suffers from an event it did not experience [the Holocaust], and will expire from one it seems powerless to prevent [nuclear war]” (Diedrick 104). This position between two apocalypses creates what Diedrick identifies as a unique temporal anxiety where the past catastrophe and future annihilation squeeze the present into a kind of permanent paralysis. We can see this compression really clearly in “Bujak and the Strong Force” when the narrator observes Bujak, a Polish scientist who worked on early nuclear weapons. Bujak represents this temporal trap: “What Bujak had seen precluded talk, or precluded the kind of talk I had in mind” (Amis 51). His experience with nuclear weapons has literally made certain kinds of communication impossible. The past (his work on the bomb) has poisoned the future (any meaningful discussion about them), leaving only a frozen present where nothing can be said or done.

The circular structure of Amis’s logic creates a reading experience that mirrors nuclear paralysis. In probably the most striking passage of “Thinkability,” Amis builds a series of questions that all answer themselves with the same horrifying response: “What is the only provocation that could bring about the use of nuclear weapons? Nuclear weapons. What is the priority target for nuclear weapons? Nuclear weapons. What is the only established defense against nuclear weapons? Nuclear weapons” (Amis 3). This isn’t logic that’s failing; it’s logic that’s succeeding too well, creating a perfectly closed system. The repetition makes “nuclear weapons” start to sound like nonsense words while at the same time hammering home how inescapable they are. The reader can actually feel their mind trying to find a way out of this circular reasoning and failing. The passage keeps going with increasing absurdity: “How do we prevent the use of nuclear weapons? By threatening to use nuclear weapons. And we can’t get rid of nuclear weapons, because of nuclear weapons” (Amis 3). Each sentence makes the logical trap tighter. The structure forces readers to experience what nuclear deterrence actually means: being stuck in reasoning that makes perfect sense and no sense at the same time. This recursive trap shows up in different ways throughout the collection. In “The Immortals,” the narrator describes the immortal beings as living through infinite repetition: “They kill, they couple, they gorge, greedily and needily but without appetite or satisfaction” (Amis 185). The sentence structure itself copies their endless, meaningless cycle. They do things (“kill,” “couple,” “gorge”) but these actions don’t achieve anything (“without appetite or satisfaction”). In “The Time Disease,” people infected with the time disease experience temporal recursion physically: “Your days

became sluggish and dense. You couldn't remember anything. You couldn't think. Eventually, and this really was the worst of it, you couldn't feel anything either" (Amis 107). The progression from can't remember to can't think to can't feel shows consciousness collapsing in on itself, each stage of breakdown leading straight to the next.

The irony Amis uses isn't the gentle irony of social satire but something way sharper and more destabilizing. When he writes that nuclear war is "certainly the more readily available" option compared to disarmament, the parenthetical aside carries a terrible joke: it really would be easier for humanity to destroy itself than to cooperate (Amis 2). This isn't humor meant to make the reader feel better but humor that makes the situation worse by highlighting how absurd it is. The narrator of "Insight at Flame Lake" confesses something even darker: "When I watch the TV news and see some disaster or atrocity, an earthquake, a plane crash, a massacre, I find myself thinking: Well, that's another one we won't have to worry about. One less thing" (Amis 93). The brutal honesty of this admission, that regular disasters have become a relief because they reduce the population before nuclear war does, reveals how nuclear logic has poisoned basic human empathy. The irony cuts both ways: we're supposed to feel bad about disasters, but under nuclear threat, they become weirdly comforting. Amis also uses irony to show how inadequate language itself becomes when confronting nuclear reality. In "Thinkability," he notes that "words themselves seem to have been corroded and irradiated" (Amis 7). Language, our main tool for understanding and controlling reality, has been contaminated by what it's trying to describe. This creates scenes of almost comic inadequacy, like in "Bujak and the Strong Force" when Bujak tries to explain nuclear weapons through the concept of time: "I will tell you what time is... It is what stops everything happening at once" (Amis 74). The definition is both completely accurate and completely useless, highlighting how nuclear weapons exist at a scale that makes normal explanation impossible.

The grotesque imagery Amis uses transforms abstract nuclear policy into visceral body horror and shows how numbness and fatalism come from this condition. The spider comparison in "Thinkability" works on multiple levels: spiders paralyze their prey before eating them, just as nuclear weapons paralyze society while we wait to be consumed. But there's also something about the image of a spider that triggers a primal revulsion, a creeping sensation that gets under your skin. When he describes nuclear weapons as having "biblical anger," he's mixing registers in a way that feels wrong, combining scientific apocalypse with religious wrath (Amis 3). In "The Little Puppy That Could," he pushes the grotesque even further, describing a post-nuclear world where gratitude gets completely inverted: "Thank God I'm not a girl. Thank God I'm not beautiful. Thank God I'm not talented or in any way extraordinary" (Amis 138). In this world, being unremarkable becomes the only survival strategy, a grotesque reversal of every human aspiration. The grotesque reaches its peak in "The Immortals," where

eternal life becomes the ultimate body horror. The immortals have “the bodies of the old but the energy of the young,” a combination that sounds like a miracle but reads like a curse (Amis 185). They’re described as “experts in ugliness,” having perfected degradation as an art form. This isn’t death as release but life as infinite trap, bodies that won’t stop even when consciousness has long since given up. The prose itself becomes infected with their exhausted repetition: “They watch sport, they make sport” (Amis 185). The parallel structure suggests endless, meaningless variation on the same pointless activities.

As the collection goes on, these techniques stop feeling like literary devices and start feeling like symptoms. The recursive logic isn’t just a clever formal experiment but a diagnosis of how nuclear weapons have broken human reasoning. The irony isn’t protective distance but a last desperate attempt to keep some sanity through humor. The grotesque imagery isn’t shock value but the only way to make incomprehensible destruction feel real enough to make people respond. By the time “The Little Puppy That Could,” starts, the narrator is asking questions that feel like they’re coming from genuine breakdown: “How do you write about nuclear weapons? How do you describe them? You can’t anthropomorphize them. You can’t pretend they have human qualities. They are the opposite of human” (Amis 145). The repetitive questioning, the short sentences, the negations piling up, all create a sense of language pushing against its own limits and failing. This formal breakdown mirrors the psychological breakdown Amis diagnoses in the essay. He argues we’re not experiencing anxiety, which “would be a promotion,” but something worse: “We are bewildered. We are stupefied” (Amis 14). Anxiety at least suggests the possibility of doing something, but bewilderment and stupefaction represent complete paralysis. The clinical term he uses, “psychic numbing,” captures something essential about the nuclear age: we’ve had to turn off parts of our consciousness just to function. This numbness appears in the stories through characters who can no longer tell the difference between important and trivial, real and unreal, moral and immoral. The narrator of “Insight at Flame Lake” admits that nuclear weapons have become dinner conversation: “We talked about them the way people used to talk about the weather, as a conversational default, a social reflex” (Amis 97). The banalization of apocalypse represents the ultimate victory of nuclear logic over human consciousness.

What makes Amis’s approach particularly powerful is how it refuses the comforts of traditional narrative resolution. These stories don’t end with epiphanies or solutions but with deeper entrapment. “Thinkability” concludes with a paragraph from the narrator’s notebook that reads like a suicide note for the species: “We will use them because they are there. Because we can. Because there is nothing to stop us. Because it is our nature. Because we are Einstein’s monsters, not fully human, not for now” (Amis 18). The short, declarative sentences hammer like nails in a coffin. Each “because” offers an explanation that explains nothing, reasons that aren’t reasonable. The title phrase finally

gets explained, but the explanation offers no comfort: we're the monsters Einstein's equations created, deformed by our own invention. This deformation goes beyond individual consciousness to infect time itself. In "The Time Disease," time becomes pathological, something that can be "[caught]" like a virus. The disease makes people experience time as "sluggish and dense," a perfect metaphor for nuclear paralysis where the future has been canceled but the present continues anyway (Amis 107). The Immortals experience the opposite problem: infinite time that means nothing, where "they have the future in infinite supply" but can't do anything with it (Amis 185). Both conditions represent different aspects of nuclear temporality, where normal human time, with its meaningful progression from birth to death, has been fundamentally broken. The genius of Amis's technique is that it doesn't let readers keep comfortable analytical distance. The recursive logic pulls the reader into its loops, the irony offers no stable ground to stand on, and the grotesque imagery gets under your skin. You start reading as a critic and end up infected by the same paralysis the stories describe. This is particularly clear in passages where Amis switches between registers without warning, moving from conversational aside to biblical pronouncement to scientific data dump in the space of a paragraph. In "Thinkability," he'll be making a rational argument about deterrence theory, then suddenly compare nuclear weapons to the devil: "They are made from the metals of hell" (Amis 12). The tonal whiplash prevents readers from settling into any comfortable interpretive position. By the collection's end, the techniques have thoroughly destabilized any attempt at normal reading or thinking. "The Little Puppy That Could" presents a narrator who seems to have completely internalized nuclear logic: "I was one of the lucky ones. Many were not. Even as a boy I often thought to myself, 'Thank God I'm not a girl. Thank God I'm not beautiful'" (Amis 138). The perversity of being grateful for mediocrity, of seeing ordinariness as "the only defense," shows how thoroughly nuclear weapons have inverted human values. Beauty, talent, uniqueness, all the qualities humans traditionally celebrate, become liabilities in the nuclear age. This isn't adaptation but deformation, survival through systematic diminishment of human potential.

The final effect is essentially a kind of literary radiation poisoning. The stories contaminate readers with their recursive loops, their unstable ironies, their grotesque transformations. After finishing the collection, readers find themselves thinking in the same circular patterns, seeing the same horrible jokes, imagining the same visceral horrors. This isn't a failure of the literature but its ultimate success. Amis has created a formal structure that doesn't just describe nuclear paralysis but transmits it, making readers experience firsthand what it means to live in what he calls "the age of not knowing what to do" (Amis 2). The paralysis becomes shared, communal, maybe the only authentic community nuclear weapons have created: the community of the mutually paralyzed, waiting together for an end that everyone can imagine all too well but can't prevent. The brilliance and terror of Einstein's Monsters is that it offers no

escape from this condition. The recursive structures don't resolve, the ironies don't stabilize, the grotesque images don't transform into something bearable. Readers are left where they started, trapped in the same logical loops, laughing at the same terrible jokes, paralyzed by the same incomprehensible images. But maybe this paralysis itself is a kind of twisted achievement. In refusing false comfort, in keeping the full pressure of nuclear reality, Amis's stories keep the horror fresh, preventing the psychic numbing from becoming complete. If humanity can't solve the nuclear problem, at least people can refuse to forget how awful it is. The monsters Einstein's equations created may have deformed humanity, but through Amis's prose, that deformation at least becomes visible and clear. That clarity might not save anyone, but it keeps people human, or at least reminds them what being human used to mean before the bombs. Through his recursive logic, corrosive irony, and grotesque imagery, Amis doesn't offer hope or solutions but something perhaps more valuable: the refusal to normalize the unthinkable. In a world where nuclear annihilation has become background noise, Einstein's Monsters forces readers to hear the static clearly, to feel the paralysis fully, to recognize the trap completely. And in that recognition, even if it doesn't lead to escape, there remains something essentially human: the ability to see clearly what has been done to consciousness itself.

Annie Block

Grade 11, Parkway West High School
Poetry



You Took My Wish(bone)

I sing in the morning
I come with the dawn
to wish you well
as the new day goes on

My beak chirps a promise
that you have a clean plate
A new day to flourish
and change your own fate

But you curse at my humming
and yell at my call
You think that I'm useless
and hope that I'll fall
from my old nesting tree
where I chose to be
To tell you in the morning
that your new day is free
Free to make choices
whatever they'll be
To change your own fate
and chase your own dreams

You decide to ignore me
and let life expire
You made me the answer
but I was made to inspire

Do you know
where a wishbone comes from?
It comes from birds
who lay weak
and lay numb
As you claw at their neck
and take their life's key
You act like their life
is a token taken free

You take your old prongs
So you pull
and you pring
from the poor little bird
that just wanted to sing

You're breaking my ribs
You're cracking my bones
I'm fighting
or fleeing
I don't even know
You say to stop moving
You say I'm not alone
I'm wheezing
and limping
while you take all I've known

You think my bones will tell you
if your fate will be well
You think my life grants you
a fate changing spell
You want a bright future
and motivating good luck
To be a full perfect stature
and no longer stuck

So I watch as you split
my neck's old v-bone
and hope that you get
the dreams that you've grown

You break me to hope
to wish
and to pray
that suddenly your dreams
will finally take way

I'm broken and bleeding
I can't fly away
You were searching for a wish
but you took mine away

I sang in the morning
I came with the dawn
to wish you well
as the new day went on

My beak chirped a promise
that you had a clean plate
A new day to flourish
and change your own fate

But instead you chose wishing
to sit there and wait
while the world keeps on spinning
with your unchanging fate

But I would've sang
for you anyway

Scarlet Brothers

Grade 12, Nerinx Hall High School
Educator: Sarah Hoeynck
Portolio



Beating Hearts, Haunted Souls

“Ten Cent Song”

Grandma gave me quarters, golden dollars, and pesos,
But never dimes.
Dimes, she clutched in her balloon knuckled hands
Like they were holy.
She would have been the perfect Catholic, if not for this,
If grief had not sent her kneeling on the sidewalk,
Dimes like little shining moons vanished in a red alligator purse.
There's this story my father told me, how once,
On a dark country road,
My grandma swerved, grinning, into a field
To spook a group of troublemaking boys.
But after her son went under that eighteen-wheeler
She just started praying and never stopped.
French-tipped fingernails pointed up to the clouds
As if she were on the phone with some celestial concierge.
I know he's up there, in that hotel room, she'd say.
Bring him down, I just want to talk.
Grandma saw every silver dime as
A telegram from the clouds.
Some day, when the jar is full of Roosevelts,
She will hold it to her chest with both frail hands,
Lid resting in the crook of one arm, bottom supported by the other.
It will feel like a child.

“In Lesterville”

That summer, we reached our fingers down into the Black River until the water lapped at our mouths.

We walked back to camp barefoot, giddy, grasping great balls of clay in our hands.

The grass was faded green and trampled.

We picked out pebbles from our findings and let the sun dry our hair into long, twisting spiderwebs

Which blew like dry branches in the lazing breeze.

That summer we were potters.

We placed our pinch pots and clay men into the evening bonfire like pretend witchhunters,

Watched the orange flames lick them clean then escape as tiny embers into the stars.

This was the summer I learned of heat: how it dances,

How it can break ugly, crawling lines into my most precious things but only if I let it.

That summer, we stepped through our life jackets backwards,

Wore them like diapers and floated on the edge of the underwater mud cliffs.

Planting our fingers on the shore, we smeared rich copper silt onto our arms

Like tanning cream, then dipped them back into the river

To watch the current take the orange clouds of soil somewhere far away.

When we got bored, we lifted our feet from the clay bed,

Released ourselves, suspended in the river, and floated down

All the way to the rock bank where the grown ups

Drank from bright blue coolers

And sunk the feet of their folding chairs so far into the stones

That the seats dipped down into the tide.

That summer I ruined the bottoms of all my swimsuits with mud.

I learned of floating: how sometimes I would tip backwards in my life jacket

And the river would envelope me from behind,

Hair first, then head, then giggling scrunched-closed eyes.

That summer, we named the stars.

Lying down in the center of the great field, surrounded by tents and trailers,

The grass rose up rough under our legs in resistance and we pointed up.

The trees contained the night sky in the huge circle of their canopies:

A puddle of darkness, charcoal black, above our bodies.

That summer we were philosophers.
The big dipper sloped its shining handle down towards us
And we spoke its name as if we alone shared in the secret of its existence.
The wind blew cool whispers from a long way off,
And I ran to my tent to put on my fleece jacket.
When I returned, I found that the stars had dimmed.
This was the summer that I learned of mystery: how the stars journeyed across the sky
every night,
How they carried with them names and stories and imaginary lines to connect them.
And how, after the light of my tent's hanging lantern, they seemed for a moment to
disappear,
Before revealing themselves once more to my hungry eyes.

That summer, the previous seasons had brought tall, unmovable stalks of honeysuckle to
the rock bank.
They stretched over all of us, obscuring the river from sight,
And we ventured into their green labyrinth like archeologists in uncharted forest.
We did not reach the river.
Instead, we found in front of us a huge uprooted tree,
Fallen and carried here by the floods.
It lay, branches splayed out to the sky, in the rocks, as if it was made just for us.
That summer we were orators.
We sat on the washed out grey trunk of our tree and spoke.
We told stories. We laughed.
That year, some older kids joined us on the driftwood.
I learned of age: how it can carry power,
How it can pinch tiny little fractures in me where none would normally form.

That summer, we walked along the rock bank and felt the stones under our sandals.
We sat under your trailer awning and ate ruffle chips with river washed hands.
That year you left early, right before the big Sunday float,
And I stood in my family's rental trailer and made myself a chocolate and peanut butter
sandwich
And cried, slightly, while the rest of the folks floated happily down the Black River in
their
Inflatable tubes and green canoes.
That summer I was a scientist.
Alone, I observed the way the sun hardened the mud and watched the dogs chase each
other in circles.
Then I ducked under the barbed wire and into the forest, stepped through foliage,

Reached up to hang my hammock between two vine-strung trees.
I laid suspended in the woods until the sun went down, reading from my battered
fantasy novel.

This was the summer I learned of loneliness: how it eats away at the inside of my
stomach,

Then evaporates in the heat of the midday sun
But returns, sometimes, at the coming of the night.

That summer we drove in your white truck to the rock bank further down the way,
The one without the honeysuckle, which never left,
With great big piles of river-worn rocks that fed into the water.
We dragged four folding chairs, two guitars, and one blue cooler out of the bed of the
truck

And set up camp with our feet in the water.

That summer we were grown, or masquerading as.

I knew we were getting older when I saw that cooler, identical to the ones our dads
lugged down

And filled with all the same things,

And as we sat and waited for the sun to turn our thighs and shoulders pink,

We tried to make our guitars sound like music, sound real.

That night, we walked into the woods and joined the crowd of listeners listening to the
bluegrass jam.

Andy with his banjo, Brian and Ben with their guitars,

The stand-up bass humming deep under your dad's fingers,

And the mandolin chirping its melody along.

They all stood at the far end of the campfire,

Beer bellied and balding, and played the kind of music that seeps into your soul and
stays.

Brian, instead of the lyrics, began by singing chord names,

And the rest of them played flawlessly along.

He's teaching them the song, I said to you, And they're just playing it, just like that.

This was the summer I learned of time: how it runs so fast I don't even notice until it's
too late,

How the mud cliffs wash away more and more every year,

How we have learned so much, and how much we have still to learn.

Keep the flashlights off, let's stay one more song.

I have heard this tune before, but never like this,

And never this way again.

“Dad and Grandpa Talk Death”

Because these days it's been sticking in their minds like burs.
Grandpa's in the hospital again.
He doesn't sound so much like rot anymore,
But everyone knows you only get better so many times
Before you don't get anything at all.
So he's been straightening the will
And making amends
And starting every sentence with
Once I'm gone.
Once I'm gone you can have the truck.
Once I'm gone I'll miss you real bad.

Dad and grandpa talk death
Because today is a dead anniversary.
My uncle would be fifty today, and
Now he's been gone longer than he ever was here.
But dad and grandpa don't imagine where he'd be today
Because all wounds can reopen.
It is somewhat impolite: slowly twisting the knife
into your own chest, though
Far more impolite for a grown man to cry.

Dad and grandpa talk death
And I watch them move like a magic trick:
Evading emotion with practiced hands
Age-worn and fake laughing.
Here are the cards and they are a hundred different kinds of cancer.
Here are the cards and they are a hundred breaking bones— here
Are the cards, and they are the same phone call over and over.
The one where somebody dies and you're still on the line.
Are you there?
Says the operator, right before he hangs up,
Were you ever even there?

So dad and grandpa talk death
On the speakerphone driving home
And here is what they say:
*This room smells like death and bleach,
Ashes and grave dirt,*
But then again it always has.

“Imagine I Make It Out Alive”

Imagine, for a moment,
That you are a girl who is a boy who is stuck in Missouri.
 Reach out to the ocean.
 It's far, yes.
 Reach out.
Stretch your palms into the foam,
 Let the tide lap at your fingers like
 Something huge and terrible.
Plant your pointer finger wet onto your tongue.
 Can you taste it?
 The salt, I mean,
 Or the freedom.
Here are the jagged rocks.
 Here is the water, and here the sky,
 And if there is a line between, you cannot see it.
 Here is the night. Here is the ocean.
They can swallow you whole.
 Imagine, for a moment,
 That you let them.
 Now imagine that you don't.
 Suppose at one point you heard that
The only way to beat a riptide is to swim sideways.
 Now suppose you find yourself in the type of riptide
 Where all your senators want you dead.
Swim sideways.
 There is no door out of Missouri,
 But there are cracks.
Imagine, for a moment,
 That you are very small.
Swim sideways.
 You have a book.
 The kind of book where everyone forgot
 What Jesus really said
 So they made it up for themselves.
Here is the riptide.
 Imagine you can hear the sound of ripping paper.
 Imagine you can smell the fire.
Here is the book.

Throw another sheet into the flames.
Reach out to the ocean.
Swim sideways.
Just swim.

“Chin To Chest/Carney Day”

If I had a sore throat,
Mom would make me touch my tiny chin to my chest
Because she wanted to save me.
A test,
Me looking down at my feet on the hardwood floor
Right before I swallowed that cap-full of bubblegum pink medicine.
It was reassurance,
An old ache that returned to my mother's bones,
An old ghost waking up to slam another echo through the house.

Mom carried her grief inside of her
Like a soft animal—
Domesticated,
Descended from a beast.
She spoke of Dave Carney in short silent films—
Laughter and friendship,
Bars and baseball games
And youth.
She kept her hurt fenced in,
Caged from the time when it was huge and snarling,
When it bit.

Mom said grief felt like having your insides scooped out:
Empty,
Scathing,
Floating through the bedroom like it was full of jello.
Everything desaturated,
Birdsong and consolation dull as water rumbling in your ears.
Like sleeping.
Her sat in that armchair,
Phone to ear, not believing anything.
Not his body in that Chicago hospital,
Not the plush fabric under her feet,

Not even her own shaking, balled-up hands.

Bacterial Meningitis is an ugly word,
And unpoetic. Unfair.

Alone in his apartment,
(North Side, 2003)

Dave Carney's spine flamed and bloated,
Pressed on the back of his brain like a scythe.
When you catch Bacterial Meningitis,
Touching your chin to your chest becomes impossible.

In the kitchen,
(Glendale, 2016)

With my head pressed to my collarbone,
I played out what could have been:
A ritual for mom, reenacted on command.
A life uninterrupted.
Saving me,
Saving him.

Mom said she thinks of him most
Not on Carney Day,
(His birthday:
Dinner traditions
And old friends on the other line),

But in the car.
Alone: silent road, yellow headlights and pink sky.
She imagines talking.
She's driving,
Carney's buckled in shotgun.

It doesn't matter what they're saying,
Just that the words come out warm.
Grief, that soft creature,
Finally fading,
forgiving,
And weaving its way out of her throat.

"Meanwhile on Earth"

Meanwhile the world is ending.
Meanwhile the neighbor's dog is barking again.
 I'm sleeping.
 I'm wide awake.
 The dog is barking again.
Meanwhile fading barn roofs cave in.
 We're on the way from somewhere to somewhere.
 Here's nowhere.
 Here's the barn that was once red.
 Something about this is interesting but we can't decide what.
Meanwhile dirty dishes pile in the sink.
 Meanwhile somebody is starving.
 Meanwhile I buy another box of popsicles.
Meanwhile things with long chemical names are detonating
 And drywall is crumbling,
 Which is to say that
 Meanwhile men in military caps are sending bombs to hospitals,
 Meanwhile we watch it all on our phones.
Meanwhile the homeless shelters are scrambling.
 People are drowning in snow.
 Tent flaps sway vacant.
Meanwhile I wake up in my own bed.
 Meanwhile another plane explodes.
 Meanwhile I brush my teeth.
 Meanwhile democracy loses meaning
 So slow we hardly even notice.
 All the news is breaking.
 We're gaping in horror at our inboxes
Meanwhile another parent gets deported.
 Meanwhile the sun rises.
 Orange on the horizon,
 Mourning doves call.
 Meanwhile we don't even notice.
Meanwhile we become angry dogs snarling into each other's eyes.
 Froth dripping onto the pavement.
 Meanwhile another deer walks into your front bumper.
 Meanwhile I brush my teeth.
 All this ends in blood.
Meanwhile the country whispers fascism under its breath.
 The world turns up a notch.

The ocean sloshes up over Venice.
Here is the basilica.
Here are the rice flats.
Here are the walls of America and they are peeling white paint.
Meanwhile the neighbor's dog is barking again.
I'm sleeping.
I'm wide awake.
The dog is barking again.
Meanwhile we're living,
We're living,
Meanwhile we're living.

Vivian Cao

Grade 9, Blue Valley Northwest High
School
Poetry



Locker House, Open Sea

The aisle stretched, a fluorescent prism of light,
Their gaze pinned on me
The gold band sat heavy, a cold mouth biting my finger
Words scraped against the back of my teeth, refusing to jump
Only salt came out.
I ran
Wooden pews groaned, rooms slammed,
The heavy oak recoiled in my parents' silence
My name once a smooth shell,
Was buried and crushed by the sand
One by one, the yellow squares of light blinked out,
Leaving me in the grey
The boat stopped,

The dune collapsed under my dress shoes
Each step on the sand got swallowed by the tides
The same salt I blurted out,
Stung my eyes blind
Gulls circled, waiting for carrion
Screaming the syllables I had just discarded.
Cold water gnawed at the hem of my trousers.
Eating alone on a bench
A plastic container slid across,
Steam rose against the sea mist.
The ocean softened
Salt lingered where the tides crash,
Every bite of the curry burned with salt
A taste I refuse to swallow
Even if I could
A red shell tumbled in the foam,
Legs scrabbling against the drag of the undertow,
It didn't fight the wave,
it dug in
Salt poured from me,
As the tiny crab stubbornly continued forward

Against the crashing

Waves

He knelt beside me.

The tides once cruel,

Began to listen

His eyes steadied me,

A shoreline breaking open

The crab finally disappeared under the waves

Going

Home

We learned each other in meals,

Salt still lingering,

But it added flavor

The former prism of light broke through the clouds and reached us

The water carried our laughter,

All the way back to the locked house

The rhythm of our laughter snagged on a new sound,

Not a tide,

A sharp hiss of silk on stone

I didn't have to look to know the weight of the shadow stepping into the light

The crunch of footsteps on shells broke the rhyme of the waves,

An old friend, still wearing the ghost of a shackled ring
Her silk dragging the sand,
She found me where water meets the shore,
Kept her eyes on me,
A tide I had to run from rose again
The kiss she reached for,
He was a sudden wall,
Flannel and warmth cutting off her path
Intercepting a debt I didn't have to pay
The end to a vow I could not give,
What the departing boat couldn't claim
The horizon swallowed the last of the ships,
I didn't watch them go,
Carrying the shadow of demands I couldn't meet
I did not need to follow this time
My hand found his.
To the boy who waited, who waited quietly for me,
Even when my veins ran with brine instead of blood
The light that once cut me like a prism softened,
Catching the gold in his eyes,
Instead of the gold on my hand

While the distant hull slipped beyond the horizon
The tide pulled at us both,
We held our ground
Steam rises between us as we stir the brine in the pot
The sun highlights the savory fragrance
The salt still clings in every meal,
It seasons the food,
A taste I swallow
Willingly

Revathy Chadalavada

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School
Poetry



Oh, Country Boy

two emerald pools of sin
tell me run

i am the immigrant's daughter
my blood remembers borders
still, i step into you

oh, country boy
cape cod sea salt / baseball bone / sunburnt myth

infant ripens to city beast,
all-american venom
coiled in your spine

they call you violent / lynx-eyed,
seventeen and feral

with me—
your hands unlearn their fists

i see the boy who still believes,
hope flickering like a porch light
left on too late

crimson rivers split your brow,
white sand baptized scarlet

bruised knuckles
(taught ruin)
hover
then claim my sandalwood skin
like a vow

lachrymose eyes under warm bulbs,
ivory limbs pressed against silken sheets

freckles scatter,
a careless astrology
along your porcelain spine

rough, white hands
so careful with me,
it aches

the world carved you open,
called it masculinity
love beat out of you
before it learned your name

i saw you
before you were taught to flinch
i loved you
where you would not look

your love speaks english
square-jawed / bruising at the edges
a language of sacrifice,
of men who bleed quietly
for what they protect

mine is telugu
round-mouthed, honeyed / sweet with sugarcane

అప్యాయత means gazing into someone,
loving them past the damage
it means ప్రేమ
without armor

I was a débutante once—
borrowed silk / borrowed grace

you danced with me,
miracle in stiff shoes

my head on your shoulder
your lips in my hair

a kiss you swore
you would never give
but whispered anyway

for a moment,
we were allowed

your blond hair,
another forbidden thing

i card my fingers through it slowly,
wait for the knot,
pull

your breath catches
i memorize the sound
of you needing me

“don’t blur the lines,” we said,
hands wringing

culture / class / blood / history

but love is not careful
love is undertow

it drags even the strongest
from shore

perhaps
i was the brief mercy
your life allowed

perhaps
you were the war
i entered unarmed

oh, country boy
i saw you

not the beast
not the sin

seventeen,
hope still breathing
behind green eyes

and i loved you
in every language i had

Eric Chang

Grade 9, John Burroughs School
Educators: Megan Zmudczynski
Personal Essay And Memoir



Beyond the Print

I wiped my sweaty hands against my black dress pants and then reached for my violin, raising my bow to practice the fast passages once again. It was minutes before I had to step onstage to perform, and my hands shook with anxiety. My stomach cartwheeled over and over while I frantically ground out the notes to my piece repeatedly. *This note is too high, I need to hit it during the competition. I can't mess up this shift or else the next few notes will be too low.* Thoughts about my intonation and accuracy raced through my head.

"Junior string #6? You have five minutes." a man said through the door of my practice room.

"Okay, thanks." I replied, voice trembling.

Today was the day that I had dreaded all year. It was the day when I competed in the biggest violin competition in the state. I had never liked playing the violin, or any classical music in general. It was tedious, and felt like a task I had to complete. Every time I went to a concert of some sort, I would fall asleep very shortly after the playing started. To me, music was just notes. Little black dots on a sheet of paper that the player had to hit precisely. I looked at the music score in front of me. There were so many sections I didn't feel confident about, notes that I was afraid to miss. I knew that in order to win, I had to play flawlessly. As I was about to rehearse one of the fast passages for the millionth time, a knock came at my door.

"Alright, you're up. Good luck." the man who had notified me a few minutes earlier said.

I nodded, and followed him out of the practice room. With every step I took, my legs twitched, and my stomach churned. When we finally arrived at the

door to the concert hall, my stomach felt like a blender cranked up to the fastest setting. I looked up to see that my mom was waiting at the entrance, with an encouraging smile on her face.

“Do your best, and don’t worry about the results.” she said to me.

Too nervous to speak, I nodded my head. Although she had said those words, we both knew that she didn’t completely mean them. The goal was to win, and we both wouldn’t accept anything less. Taking a final deep breath, I opened the door, and walked into the concert hall.

Inside, the hall looked enormous. It was completely dark except for the brightly lit wooden stage, a shiny black Steinway piano placed in the center. As I made my way down to the stage, I looked into the rows upon rows of seats. The hall was completely empty, except for a small grey table at the back of the seats, where four judges sat, looking at me with an expression between interest and judgement. The moment I got onstage, every step I took reverberated throughout the entire hall. I was finally here. The performance I had spent countless hours preparing for was right in front of me. Brushing the sweat off of my hands once again, I briefly tuned my instrument, and then nodded at my accompanist to begin.

The first of the three pieces I was to play was a very technically difficult one. The opening was very tricky, and it was one of the passages that I had stressed over in the practice room. As my entrance crept closer and closer, my stomach began to flip again. I raised my bow, prepared to play, and then the cue came.

My attempt to hit the first three notes was completely butchered. The shrieks that burst out of my violin did not partially resemble what was written on the sheet music. I grimaced, and tried to recover, desperate to make up for the costly mistake, but it was no use. My fingers slid around the now sweaty fingerboard, hitting each note, but with no articulation. I grabbed and pressed at the strings helplessly, but the harder I tried, the more I forgot how to play. After what seemed like hours of flailing, I somehow got back on track, and continued. Determined to end strong, I put every ounce of strength I had into playing each note in tune. I played like a robot, blankly sawing out note after note. The first two pieces of my performance sounded like they came straight out of a machine. Even though I knew this myself, I was too afraid to change it and risk a potential mess-up. When I bore through the second-to-last piece of my program, I let my violin drop to my side, and glanced at the judges. Three of them were pretty much bored to death, their eyes half open and staring blankly at the comments sheet.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the fourth judge signaling at me. She was mimicking violin playing, but a little too expressively, and in a very dramatic manner. I understood. Nodding, I took a deep breath before starting the final piece.

This time, I wasn't worried about the notes. I'd probably already screwed over my chances in the competition anyway. Taking the fourth judge's advice, my only goal was to play out, and to project my sound to the very last seat in the concert hall. The first few notes rang out from my violin, strong and beautiful. From there, I let my muscle memory take over. I trusted my practice as well as the fingerings I had trained into my hand. This time, instead of worrying about playing in tune, I wanted to tell a story. My fingers flew across the strings, vibrating on certain notes, and dancing around on the black fingerboard. *Build up to this note, then decrescendo. Accent these high notes. Allow this section to be melodic and slow.*

Halfway through the piece, I realized that I felt something I had never experienced before in classical music. It was fun. I wasn't playing robotically for the sake of the competition anymore, but rather playing like a true performer. As I approached the grand climax of my final piece, I mustered everything I still had, and prepared myself to erupt with musicality.

"That's time, thank you." one of the judges said abruptly.

I swiveled my head and looked at them, my bow arm still raised. They seemed a bit more interested now, and the judge that had signaled to me earlier wore a huge grin on her face.

"Hurry up please." the same judge who stopped me said, a hint of annoyance in his voice.

I hastily dipped my head as a form of apology, and strode out of the hall, the corners of my mouth curling up into a smile. My mom stood in the middle of the lobby, obviously trying to mask her disappointment with a bleak smile. As we walked out of the building, she began to lecture me on how I could improve, and what mistakes I made, but I didn't hear a single word she said; I couldn't stop thinking about the discovery I had just made.

Maybe there was more to music than just those little black dots.

Maybe there was more... beyond the print.

Jerry Chang

Grade 12, John Burroughs School
Educators: Jill Donovan and Lydia Smith
Flash Fiction



The Weight of Water

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. From the dock, the hooded man gazed out into the vast sea at a lonely vessel drifting through the night fog. What could be on that ship? He wondered. Piles of treasure, perhaps? Silk fabrics and rich spices? A family laughing over a hearty dinner? His lifeless eyes clung to that silhouette, yearning for a new, fulfilling life aboard. As the ship vanished beyond the moonlit horizon, the man's hopes were left behind as a figment of his imagination.

The dock's wooden planks creaked as the man paced slowly up and down. He had lived his entire life connected to the sea – first when his father taught him to fish, now as a destitute merchant selling boat parts from his raggedy booth on the harbor. Once, he had even been a promising young sailor, cruising the ocean aboard his fine ship, the *Fortuna*. He remembered the wind at his back, the sun in his face. The corners of his mouth twitched into a slight smile as these golden memories resurfaced. *If only he had adjusted the sails sooner. If only the storm had been kinder.*

The rain pattered onto the man's dampened clothes as he snapped back to reality. He stared at his calloused, ringless hands and closed his eyes. The sea was calling him. At this hour, no one would be around to help a drowning soul. The water was black and biting – he would surely fall ill of hypothermia, if not worse. But the man discarded these concerns. There was nothing left for him anyway. His heart ached as he took a long look at his shabby merchant stand. Then, the

man slipped into the icy waters and glided away from the harbor, no worries lingering in his mind.

Lucy Collier

Grade 12, John Burroughs School

Educator: Jill Donovan

Personal Essay & Memoir



Charleston Falls: The Wild Between Us

Charleston Falls: The Wild Between Us

"The trip was to be an odyssey in the fullest sense of the word, an epic journey that would change everything." (Krakauer 22)

Somewhere in Miami County, Ohio, a gentle stream trickles from concealed underground springs. It gains speed rushing past wild columbine and towering prairie grass, before arriving at the brink of a thirty-seven-foot drop. For a moment it seems to peer over the edge, anticipating, before surrendering to the pull of gravity and plunging to meet the rocks below, misting the tips of the leaves who watch in quiet awe, preparing for their own slow descent. Then, as if exhaling, the water steadies and calms again, winding through the trees, one step closer on its journey to the Great Miami River.

"If you want to get more out of life...you must lose your inclination for monotonous security." (Krakauer 57)

Though Charleston Falls Park is over 215 acres, my memory of the park has been condensed into fragments, into still images and sounds that refuse to fade. Each time I return, while visiting my family in Troy, I foolishly expect the park to reflect what I find in my mind's eye. I expect that slice of nature, my own familiar corner of the wild that has become less and less wild to me with each visit and the keeper of a wealth of memories, to remain. But what's beautiful cannot last forever. But beauty doesn't simply vanish, leaving the world lonely or dull; no, it passes on. The beauty shifts. The wild shifts, and somehow, so do I. Was it an abrupt difference I suddenly noticed? Or was it ever so slight, only now revealing itself to me as reward for my introspection? Or maybe the question isn't when things changed, but how I learned to let them.

“The very basic core of a man’s living spirit is his passion for adventure.” (Krakauer 57)

My earliest memory of Charleston Falls is definitely not my first. I was a frequent visitor of the park, long before I truly understood where I was. What I do remember, though, are vivid, untouchable fragments—a crunchy gravel walking path with scattered streams of sunlight illuminating its gray dust, pulling me in, showing me the way forward. The falls that roared out with thundering intensity and conviction. Whenever I passed by the foaming spray, I made sure to stay on the farthest part of the path, afraid that the gusts of wind might pull me in, but at the same time I often wondered if there was something hidden behind the falls, a secret world, just out of sight that one day might reveal itself to me. With my heart beating a little faster, I would then find myself at the cave, where even the brightest sunlight was smothered by the sticky and dank air. While the waterfall and its hints of another world felt almost magical, this cave, I was positive, housed something far more sinister. I never ventured more than fifteen feet in, always stopping before the cave curved sharply into the limestone, when a sickly eerie feeling would take hold in my stomach. My younger sister was bolder, wanting to explore further, but I’d pull her back in a dramatic plea even at my young age. “Don’t go in there, Ada—what if you get lost? What if you don’t come back?” In my mind, it would fall to me to go after her, slipping into the narrow maze where no adult could follow, where the labyrinth of echoes belongs only to children and stone.

In the winter, when the temperature would drop low enough and long enough for the small pond to freeze over, my sister and I would eagerly rush through the park, down the gravel path, past the frozen waterfall and the icicles hanging on from the mouth of the cave, until we reached the iced-over pond—the location of our immense fascination. Though my parents didn’t want us playing directly on the pond, fearful of a crack forming, there was often a patch of sheer ice that had frozen just to the side of the path surrounding the pond. It was big enough for two small kids to play on, the thick layer of ice reflecting a sunny blue sky as a sharp wind bit at our bare, pinkening cheeks, unprotected by our knitted hats. Our joy was undeniable. Slipping and sliding around, we shrieked and squealed as we fought to stay upright against the will of the ice. I clearly remember my sister falling again and again, laughing as she clung to me, a mitten and her hat long abandoned on the ice below. She never tried too hard to defy the pull of gravity: she wanted to fall, pinwheeling her arms through the air and almost throwing herself back towards the ground. To the two of us, it was the funniest thing in the world.

In the spring, I remember taking walks with my aunt and granddad through the “Thorny Badlands” covered in wind-tossed bluebells and wild geranium. Racing to walk up the steps of a wooden observation deck equipped with binoculars—our castle of sorts—we would all peer out on the field, competing to see who could spot the most birds or who could figure out which animal the cloud above most closely resembled. Then, Charleston Falls still seemed timeless to me—a place whose magic would never fade, whose beauty would never change.

“It was the masterful and incommunicable wisdom of eternity laughing at the futility of life and the effort of life.” (Krakauer 9)

But after some time had passed and I moved further away from my family in Ohio and the park, I returned to find that the magic I once felt teeming there had dulled. Some of the park’s beauty had faded. The waterfall, normally a crashing cascade, was now just a small trickle, the rocks down below dehydrated and in a state of waiting. The cavity of the waterfall echoed sadly with the few remaining drops, its enormity a reminder of what once was: the water, its claim to beauty drained from its bones. The cave now just emits a stink, the smell of mildew and the presence of bugs, its narrow never-ending depth and mystique now sealed by the fact I have grown too big to enter any farther than the first turn of the limestone. The two-story observation platform has been torn down, the wooden structure molded and worn with age, weary from being the castle that all wished to conquer. And the fields that we deemed ours are now an empty plot of dreary land, covered in ash from the recent handiwork of a fire; it now lacks color, the rich smell of violet, and the chatter of birds warbling happiness within the prairie grass. And winters no longer grow cold enough for that small patch of ice to form, and even if they did, it couldn’t hold the two of us—no longer small enough, or young enough, to fall just for the fun of it. Have I just grown up? Is the magic gone? Or maybe growing up isn’t losing the magic, but learning where it resides and endures. Maybe the magic I thought had vanished begins in the wild, but it truly lives on in the people with whom we’ve shared it—quietly threading between us, binding us long after we’ve gone.

“And so it turned out that only a life similar to the life of those around us, merging with it without a ripple, is genuine life, and that an unshared happiness is not happiness...[Chris] noted, “HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED.” (Krakauer 189)

Charleston Falls has always been a beautiful place, both then and now. But when I think back on my time spent at the park, I don’t dwell primarily on the glimmering water rushing down the rocks, the sun-drenched fields shifting from hues of yellow to blue, the watch tower turned makeshift castle, or even the

expanse of the frozen pond that once captivated me. But I also don't think of the bare field covered in ash and small sticks, or the stripped patch of sun-bleached grass where the wood from the fallen watch tower lay, or even the quiet of the waterfall's parched cavern. What I picture are the days I would have picnics with my grandparents. Days when we would lay out a checkered red-and-white tablecloth and feast on cheese and crackers, drinking lemonade and eating cookies, our laughter—at a squawking bird trying to steal a snack—carried through the air by the breeze. What I remember are the pebbled paths my sister and I would race down, competing to see who could reach the bench first, and the birds and squirrels chattering back and forth while watching over us—like fans at a race cheering us on. What I remember are the questions my aunt would ask me about the kind of art we could construct from the abandoned sticks, leaves, and pebbles scattered under the trees that stood guard. And my dad showing me how to skip stones across the pond, my sister and me watching in awe and envy at his seemingly effortless skill—until my granddad inevitably picked up his own rock, and much to our joy, sent it skipping even farther. My sister and I would then try ourselves, and fail, the water swallowing whole our attempts. We'd convince ourselves our lack of success wasn't a skill issue but rather a rock issue, and we'd go searching for that perfect rock we were sure was hidden somewhere, waiting for us, coated in dirt and ants. Nature surrounded me on every visit to Charleston Falls, but the reason my mind drifts back to the park every now and then isn't because of the beauty of the place, but rather because of the people who filled it. Maybe the magic I thought I'd lost was never contained in the waterfall or trails at all, but in the moments that flowed between us—living proof that the wild can exist anywhere love once did. And the wild will exist there again, if our busy lives pause long enough to allow us to return there together, changed and yet still the same.

Gabriella Coppage

Grade 10, Pemboke Hill School

Poetry



What Remains

There is
a chair
at our table
 still set
 still waiting
it doesn't know
you're not
 coming back.
No one
moves it.
No one
sits there.
We eat
around the absence
like it's something sacred,
it might shatter
if acknowledged too loudly.
I hear you.
 In the clink of forks.
 In the laugh someone almost lets out.
 In the way Mom glances
 then looks away.
The cushion remembers you.
The air above it
 still holds your weight.
Sometimes
I pour too much coffee,

set too many plates,
buy your favorite chocolate.
Grief has a muscle memory
that mine won't
unlearn.

Guilt.

It drips into the smallest things.

How I laughed at a joke yesterday.

How I almost forgot your voice.

Almost.

We don't talk about you
as much anymore
not because we've moved on
but because we
haven't.

Your name still
burns on the tongue
like something forbidden,
or familiar.

I found your handwriting
on a shopping list
tucked inside
an old cookbook,

milk

eggs

"Don't forget the lemons!"

I cried over citrus.

Sometimes

I wake up
and forget.

Only for a moment
then your name arrives,
a blade dull from overuse
but it still

cuts.

You are
nowhere
and
everywhere.
In the photo frame

crooked slightly.
In the echo
of footsteps
that aren't yours.
Especially
in that
one

empty
chair.

And we just keep
sitting
around it.

Trying
not to notice
the space
you've left is
larger
than all of us
combined.

Ashlyn Dean

Grade 10, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Novel



Dear Adeline

Dear Adeline is about Valerie and Adeline, two women who are inherently selfish. They will hurt each other for the benefit of themselves, even when they eventually fall in love. They meet when Valerie walks in on Adeline murdering her husband James, and Valerie decides to blackmail Adeline for the Duke's money, Adeline's father. Adeline is immediately suspicious, given Valerie's male disguise, and throws Valerie in prison. But James' body goes missing from where they buried him, replaced by a threatening note, and Adeline needs help. Valerie will help her find the culprit, should Adeline pay her handsomely. Adeline receives more threats, uprooting her darkest secrets. Once the two finally believe they found the culprit, they return to Adeline's estate, finding James' body strung up, the novel's climax. The culprit is a woman named Emily, whose life Adeline ruined by uncovering an affair between Emily and her older brother, the heir to the Dukedom. Emily decided she would not rest until she got revenge, promising to ruin Adeline's reputation with James' murder. To protect Adeline, Valerie burns the estate, along with James' body and Emily inside. So the press doesn't discuss Adeline, she gives them a story by turning herself in to her family, revealed to have been a noble family searching for her for seven years, all the while Valerie was hiding in disguise. This is Valerie's final sacrifice, completing her character arc from a life of selfishness to relinquishing her freedom for the woman she loves.

TEXT:

When Valerie walked into the kitchens, the air smelled of death.

She should've known as soon as she entered she would be crossing into a life unchangeable. She should've turned around and left that moment, when all the stars stopped to watch.

She should've known, but she didn't. So she entered the kitchens that night, the night that would ruin her life for good.

It's finally the end of the night, which means Valerie no longer has to deal with serving the stuffy nobles. The way they act makes her wish she hadn't decided to take this ridiculous job. Especially on rainy nights like this, where the drowsy weather makes them even more insufferable.

Believing that working for the Duke would give her any sort of progress was one of the worst mistakes of her life. After weeks, she's still working with just about nothing to her name. She will persist, though; at this point, she doesn't have enough money to leave. She'd spent it all getting *here*.

She slips into the kitchens, expecting everyone to have left, gone home for the night.

There's a single light on in the center of the room. It illuminates a woman standing over a near-dead man lying on the concrete floor. The man is choking, presumably on his own blood, a hairpin lodged in the side of his neck. When the woman looks up at Valerie, the warm glow catching on the woman's features, she realizes what she's walked in on. *Adeline Villette's just murdered her own damn husband.*

Thank God.

Valerie steps forward, slowly, hands up in surrender. She allows the light to reveal herself to Adeline, hoping not to provoke her. She's sure she'll recognize her as a server—the Duke's daughter has garnered a reputation for being too intelligent for her own good.

Valerie starts evenly, "Good evening."

Adeline sighs, not a single waver in her voice, "Good evening."

The sounds of James' choking overlay the pounding of rain against the roof. "Lovely night we're having."

Adeline gives a short laugh, "Don't even bother. You and I both know this won't be a pleasant conversation." She looks down to her husband, whose gargled cries have finally slowed to a stop, the silence left behind a gaping wound. "Even a fool would be able to see that."

Fortunately, Valerie is no fool. A plan begins to brew inside her mind—if it all goes right, she'll walk out of the palace tonight happy. Maybe even *giddy*. "I'm

sure you'd rather this little mistake doesn't leave this room. In exchange for my silence, I want your father's money. A lot of it. Enough so I never have to work again."

Adeline scoffs, "Are you being serious? You're a *server*. Who will you tell that will believe you? My husband is in line to be an Earl. My father is the Duke. You are *nothing* against me. Learn to make better deals and maybe I'll bite."

Valerie's mouth spreads into the smile of a woman who knows she's already won. "Your husband *was* in line to be an Earl. From the looks of it, I'd say that's now very unlikely." She walks closer to bend down to James's level, "This hairpin is yours, isn't it?"

Valerie pulls the hairpin from his neck, which brings with it a fresh gush of blood. "Ah! And it's the one missing from your hair right now. How *awfully convenient*." She's almost having fun. Finally, it's all going right for her. "What do you think the court will say when I bring this to them, a clear mark of your malice? I can't imagine it would go well. Maybe there will be cries of outrage. Possibly a shriek of betrayal. And then... well... you'll be ruined."

Adeline reaches out for the hairpin, plucking it from her fingers, "And what about your evidence? Things disappear so easily."

"I believe it would be difficult to disappear an entire body. How do you plan on managing that?"

"With my own two bloody hands."

Valerie nods slowly, standing up to tower over Adeline. "Right, right. You're forgetting something. Bodies are heavy, what with all that *dead weight*. There's not a chance you can carry him on your own."

"Oh, and you'll be able to handle him just fine? You carry plates around all night. The nobles eat a lot of food, but not nearly that much."

"Of course not. We'd have to work together."

Adeline pauses for a moment to think this over. Valerie knows what she understands: it's a damn good deal.

Soon enough, Adeline gives a large laborious sigh, "*Fine*. I'll give you what you want, but waived. I'll pay you a year's salary, upfront."

"No. I want what I said before. A *fortune*."

"*For carrying something down a hill?*"

"Well, do you have any other options?"

Adeline grips James's hands, and makes a solid attempt to pull him. "I'll just have to—" she pauses for breath, "do it myself."

Valerie leans against the cabinets as she watches Adeline make several more attempts at dragging him away. Throughout it all, she's convinced James hasn't moved a single centimeter.

"This is just embarrassing," Valerie utters dryly.

"I'll keep going—until you help me—or until morning." Her face grows more red with each tug.

"Sure you will."

Adeline gives one final effort before dropping James's hands, which fall with a thud to the concrete floor. She sends a kick into his stiff shoulder, her layers of petticoats rustling with the motion, "Idiot!"

"I did tell you."

"I'm still not accepting your deal."

Despite what she says, Valerie knows she's close. There's a desperation just beyond, and all she has to do is push Adeline to the precipice of it. Then she'll have exactly what she wants.

"Of course not," Valerie drawls. "You're *almost* there."

"You don't have to stay here, you know? You won't be of any help, because I'm not going to agree to siphon money from my father for *you*. Unless you'd rather spend the rest of your night heckling me."

"I think I'd much rather do that. Besides, I'm not sure you've properly thought about what I'm offering you. What happens when the cooks and the servers walk in tomorrow and find him dead? Sure, you'll be long gone, but... soon enough they'll trace it to you, regardless if *I* say anything. You know that. There'll be no life here anymore, and you'll be on the run forever. That's not a life you'd be able to live."

"I'm afraid you don't know me very well if you think I'll just hand over a fortune."

"I know you better than you think I do. Killing your husband, known as the most well-mannered of the nobles, tells me a lot. You'll make the decisions I need you to make," Valerie says. "I know exactly what I'm asking for. I know the risk I'm taking. But do you?"

As soon as she speaks the words, she knows she has Adeline wrapped around her finger. Adeline's methodical spinning of the bloody hairpin through her palm says it all, the blood collecting under her fingernails just like the pressure building on her conscience.

This whole time, Adeline has been so focused on what she wasn't willing to give up, her non-negotiables. She was sure that if she pushed hard enough, the

world would fall into place, and she wouldn't have to give anything in return. She thought that the body would be light enough, that Valerie would be gullible enough. The world is not so kind. It requires balance. To get your greatest desire, you have to sacrifice it all.

"Enough money for a lifetime. That's it. No strings? No secret secondary deal?"

"No strings."

Adeline nods slowly, hesitantly, and finally she confirms, "You have yourself a deal."

Finally. It's funny—she was starting to think her plan wouldn't work. She shouldn't have doubted it for a second. This time is different. This time she has all the cards.

The two lay James down in the mud, hidden within the tall grass that lies just on the edge of the palace's lawn, on the cusp of the woods that stretch for miles.

"So, Adeline, what's your plan now?" Valerie shouts over the sound of the rain on the leaves above. "We've got him all the way out here... is this it?"

"Of course not. I'm not so idiotic as to leave a dead man out in the woods," she shouts back. "I'm going to have to find a shovel."

"They're in the servant's closet. It's down the hall from the kitchens, last door to the left."

She scoffs, "I know where they are," but it's clear she hadn't. With that, Adeline turns back to face the palace.

Valerie heaves an internal sigh of relief. Finally, she's alone with the body. She has to move quickly, though. Adeline won't be taking her time, since she won't want to leave her out here alone with James for very long. Truly, it had confused her for a moment, why Adeline hadn't decided to force her to get the shovel. But of course, by sending her off to the palace, she has far more damage to make than she would out in the woods.

That doesn't mean she can't do *any* damage.

Unfortunately, Adeline took the hairpin with her. It would have worked better for her purposes. In the case that Adeline turns back on their deal and decides she would like to tell the courts that *she* had been the one to kill James, she needs protection. Something that can undoubtedly prove that Adeline is the one who did it. The hairpin would've been ideal, the object that would most easily be tied to Adeline.

Adeline had failed to notice, though, that she'd left something else behind. In carrying James's body down through the long grass, her earring had slipped out, and luckily, Valerie had caught its gold shine disappearing into the long grass. The piece would be easily attributed to her should anyone find it—it was clearly expensive, rubies set into gold that dangled down in a cascade. Regrettably, Valerie couldn't have stopped to find it while they were moving. She just has to hope that she'll be able to find where it fell.

She scrapes through the grass, the blades dragging more rainwater across her face on top of the still-pounding downpour. It's incredibly difficult to get sight of anything, with the clouds blocking even the moonlight, in addition to the water in her eyes and the near-equivalent of searching for a needle in a haystack. Her fingers claw against the muddy ground, dirt clogging her fingernails and every ravine of her palms. She's sure that by the time she is finished, her hands will look aged by a thousand years.

Soon, she finds the earring, sunken into the earth. She rips it from the clutches of the ground, bringing it as close to her eyes as possible to examine it. It's caked in mud, now unwearable, but it is undeniably Adeline's.

When she looks up from her prize, she can see the outline of Adeline, returning with two shovels hoisted over her shoulder.

Valerie hastily gets to James' body, knowing she has to think fast. Where would be the best place to put the earring? It has to be somewhere that it won't fall out from while they're moving her body, but will get checked during an autopsy and incriminate her. She can't risk Adeline discovering her plan now.

She knows Adeline will be standing behind her within seconds. She can hear the wet thud of her feet pounding into the ground as she approaches, the clang of two shovels against each other as she carries them over her shoulder.

Valerie reaches down to unhinge James's jaw, just slightly, and drops the earring down his throat.

The moment his jaw shuts, she hears behind her, "Getting a closer look? Is he everything you dreamed he would be?"

Valerie paints a loose expression across her face, "I wanted to see what made him worthy of marriage. As it turns out, we have the same nose."

Adeline's eyes jolt down slightly, and she *hms* softly. "I always knew that broad nose was a sign of something. It must be where you store your lies."

So the court's perfect prince was a liar.

Valerie is just about to ask when Adeline tosses her a shovel, cutting her off.

Adeline drives her shovel into the soft ground below, landing with a squelch. And she brings it up, turning the disturbed dirt off to the side. Valerie drives hers in right beside Adeline, and soon the work becomes mindless. Neither Adeline nor Valerie says a word.

Finally, they have a grave.

Adeline drops her shovel to the side, and Valerie looks up, she's shocked for a moment. The clouds have dispersed, just enough so that the moonlight decorates the planes of Adeline's face, the mud splattered all over her features but still appearing just as graceful as always. As though in a symphony, she'd always be the melody. It makes Valerie furious.

She's been born into a life where she never wants for anything, and yet here she is, murdering her perfect husband for seemingly no reason, almost certainly ruining her entire life. Valerie can't believe it, how quickly she'd throw it all away.

Though, Valerie supposes she has no say in the matter. She's ruined her own life, more than once.

At least she's still alive. Unlike James, who is now dead, and will be permanently condemned to an unimpressive, unmarked grave.

Adeline and Valerie lift James up, and they drop him in, a softened thud sounding into the night, only the two of them around to hear the last sound he will ever make. With that, they may finally bury him.

Filling the earth back in is far easier than taking it out, fortunate as Valerie is truly beginning to feel the weight of the night on her shoulders. In the early evening, she'd been plotting ways to come up with the funds she'd need to leave again. She'd plotted the town she'd move to next.

Instead, the answer had walked right into her life. She is closer than ever to a future where she is *satisfied*.

It's a feeling unknown to her, hope.

Adeline pounds the final bit of soil down, and when she lets go of the shovel, leaving it to sink into the mud, Valerie can see the tension leave her body, if only for a moment. It doesn't linger, though—the thorns quickly return to her demeanor.

Valerie holds out her shovel to Adeline, "I do believe we're done here. So, if you don't mind, I'd like to be on my way—I've got a nice cold meal waiting for me, and I'm *starving*."

"Of course. I won't be one to keep you waiting."

Valerie nods shortly, surprised at the lack of hostility in Adeline's voice. She had conned her for all her father was worth, after all. But she doesn't linger on it for long; she supposes Adeline must be exhausted, having to dig a grave in a dress, a dress that has certainly seen brighter days.

Adeline takes the shovel from Valerie, and she grips the handle tightly.

Valerie turns away to walk down the palace drive.

"Wait."

Valerie turns back to look at Adeline. "Yes?"

"Would you mind if I asked your name?"

"Victor. Victor Hall."

Adeline smiles slowly, "I'm afraid I haven't been very honest, Victor. I'm sure you'll understand when I explain it all to you in the morning."

The morning? Why would she see Adeline in the morning—

Valerie doesn't manage to finish her thought. Adeline swings the shovel around, making direct contact with the side of Valerie's skull.

There is another universe, one where Valerie is killed the instant the shovel makes impact. Her skull fractures, her brain collapses, her nervous system reaches its end.

In this universe, Adeline lives out the rest of her life locked in her father's dungeon, her life destroyed beyond repair, much as Valerie's was snuffed out.

Fortunately, that universe is not this one. The shovel hits just an inch to the left. Her skull does not fracture. Her brain does not collapse. Her nervous system is only temporarily halted, and soon she will wake once again.

Valerie lives another 60 years. Despite it, the stars still find themselves wishing they could change fate.

Jade Edelstein

Grade 9, John Burroughs School
Personal Essay & Memoir



Between Cuts

The concept of names is intriguing—why do humans feel the urge to assign labels? First we have titles, like "captain" or "queen," which sometimes are earned and sometimes inherited, and then we have our given names, chosen solely by our parents. Names are meant to differentiate us. That's how you tell the difference between a captain and a sailor, a French commoner and Marie Antoinette. Just by looking at a name, though, assumptions are made—so the point of naming is to give us uniqueness, but by having a name, we are more or less all predetermined?

My parents chose the name Jade because it was equally as good as the name Jemma, my twin. We're identical, but our names aren't—they're not the same; just similar. Jemma and Jade, Jade and Jemma. They match pretty well, don't they?

I always picture green with the name Jade. Not just because Jade is a gemstone. But green is new, constantly growing. Hopeful. It's its own color. It feels relaxing in my jaw, like when you sing a song that just happens to be right in your range. It tastes like mint chocolate chip ice cream, smooth and sweet, with a little bit of crunch. Once you know it, you won't mistake it for anything else. Except teal. That one always gets me.

My last name, Edelstein, ironically means precious stone. Jade and Jemma, two cuts of the same gem—different faces of the same stone. But if you aren't paying attention, they look the same. My name is mine, and only mine. I don't know anyone else with my name. Except Jemma—she's Jade too sometimes. But that's ok, because Jemma has also become my name too. I am both. We are both. But we aren't one.

The “d” in Jade is hard to enunciate—what’s smooth as a diamond in my head comes out in jagged cuts. “Jay or Jane?” they ask. I’ve come to dislike introducing myself because no one ever understands me when I speak. I don’t blame them, of course; it’s my own fault. Most times I just go along with it, saying I am Jay or Jane. It slowly chips away at my heart like a woodpecker against wood. After all, woodpeckers just chip and chip and chip, never really seeing what they’re working toward. Well, better to pretend than to embarrass them. I mean, what’s the difference between two trees to a woodpecker—to them they’re both wood. Truly, what does a name really matter?

It used to bother me when people didn’t know my name. My precious name, who I was. As if dimming the sparkle like it hadn’t always been there. I’ve come to know my name is mine. It doesn’t bother me anymore when I am called Jemma. Jemma is also a gemstone, equally as beautiful as the name Jade. Yes, I am Jemma, and yes, I am Jade, but at the end of the day, we are two separate human beings. If people don’t know my name, it doesn’t make it any less mine.

So I answer to Jemma and Jade. I know I am Jade. A green and glittery gemstone. And I know to some I am also Jemma, a sparkly and shimmery jewel. But I know who I am inside.

And still, the gem still shines inside of the rock.
Even if no one can find it.

Bruce Elvin

Grade 10, Mary Institute & Saint Louis

Country Day Schools

Poetry



Tout Moun ap Peye

The mangoes were ripe the morning it began
sweet and soft, the kind you could open with a thumb,
skin tearing like a secret too long held in.
Madelène placed them in a bowl on the counter,
arranged like a crown, humming a song she never taught me.
She had a room behind the kitchen, a key that only opened our doors from the
inside.
She called me pitit mwen (My son) when no one was listening.
My father had already left, his cufflinks flashing as he stepped into the Mercedes.
We lived above the city
beyond cracked sidewalks and blackouts, behind gates that moaned when
they opened,
past the road where boys walked to school barefoot,
shirts the color of used paper, backpacks made from rice sacks.
I rode to class with the driver. He called me ti chèr (Little Dear) and adjusted the
fan.
We passed the public school near the market
a wall with holes in it, a broken flagpole, a teacher yelling over diesel noise.
One boy stared straight into the car like he knew the address of every bone in my
body.
In my class, we read Voltaire. The teacher smiled when I spoke, winced when the
others tried.
Etienne wasn't there that day. He had been behind on fees.
At lunch, we went to La Terrasse.
White tablecloths. Water poured from bottles with imported labels.
I asked my mother why no one else ate there.

She said, "They have their own places."
That afternoon, the radio crackled with words it wouldn't finish.
I saw a man running shirtless down the hill.
The mangoes on the counter looked too soft.
My mother told me to pack one bag. She lit a candle. Then another. Then a third.
A man came after midnight. He said the embassy had called.
We left with nothing but our papers.

 Madelène was already gone. Her shoes were still by the door.
Outside the gate, someone had written in red:

 Tout moun ap peye. Everyone will pay.
In Canada, no one knows how mangoes smell when they're just turning.
Sometimes I dream of the boy by the wall. I wonder if he remembers me.
If he knew I didn't choose the gate. That I only started noticing once it closed
behind me.

We were not hated for who we were,
we were hated for how we looked away.
Now, when no one is home, I peel a mango with my fingers and bite too early.

 The sting climbs the edges of my tongue.
 The sugar hides the bruise.

Andrew Fei

Grade 9, John Burroughs School
Educators: Robert Bloch and Eleanor
DesPrez
Poetry



Frozen Pain

in winter,
everything stills.

there is no birdsong
in cold bloom.

winterberries
silently bleed
below fresh snow.

withered fronds
pallid yellow,
thirsting by the frosted bank
of a lake,
gunmetal gray.

dawn breaching,
aching,

gray bruises
pink,
then gold,
on clouds aglow,
burnt coral
like dying embers.

dawn breathes
into nestled alps,

jagged peaks ablaze,
a blinding halo,
warm rays
spill across
the fjord
dusting blue shadows
soft pink.

the light catches
on scissoring cobwebs
of white cracks
streaking the lake's
blue-gray surface.

it's deathly still,
long gone now are the geese
gliding gracefully across the blue expanse.

there is no birdsong.

Andrew Fei

Grade 9, John Burroughs School
Educators: Robert Bloch and Eleanor
DesPrez
Speculative Fiction



A Routine Checkup

“Let’s begin.”

Detached letters worm their way, one after another, into her mind. A slight pause precedes each, with the letters forming ‘begin’ particularly agitated.

She glances around the liminal space, just as her eyes land on—

Creak.

A middle-aged man, sitting across the table from her (how did that escape her notice?) rocks back, then forward, the wood protesting with each slow, methodical reversal.

He begins to work his jaw, the corners of his lips jerk upwards, stop—then try again, features tugging into incorrect geometries, before finally settling on a facsimile of a toothy smile.

Belated laughter, wet and thick, bubbles out from that Cheshire grin.

There’s an odd, jarring crackle to the sounds, reminiscent of brittle leaves skidding across pavement.

She’s not sure what, exactly, he finds funny.

The laughter gradually abates.

She clears her throat and glances down at the clipboard.

“Please state your name.”

“H.M.”

She jots it down.

Then pauses.

“And your full name?”

“H.M.”

She clicks her pen twice.

“...What day is it today?”

“Monday.”

She checks the box.

“And the month?”

“October.”

Another mark.

“How have you been feeling recently?”

“Safe.”

The pen hovers.

She scribbles down: *affect atypical, further monitor*

She reaches the bottom of the page and flips it over.

There are no more questions.

It reads: *That concludes the evaluation.*

She starts to lower the clipboard.

Instead, she hears herself ask:

“Why are you here?”

The chair stops rocking.

His mouth opens.

Nothing comes out.

Chagrined, she hurriedly blabbers, “I sincerely apologize. That was very unprofessional of me, I really didn’t mean to pry into personal matters...” Her voice falters.

A blank stare.

Then, almost imperceptibly soft, laced with a faint crackle—

“You’re safe.”

His mouth remains still.

Her pen hesitates, just long enough to leave a dent in the paper.

“I’m not quite sure what you mean.”

“You are safe,” he repeats, slower and firmer this time, each word evenly spaced.

Warily, she stands up, setting the pen down.

The chair’s metal legs scrape loudly against the tiled floor, the sound resembling harsh microphone feedback.

He tilts his head.

The man adopts a practiced calm: “Please remain seated. This won’t take much longer.”

She steps back once, then again, eyes not once leaving him.

“That concludes the evaluation,” she states flatly.

There's something nagging at the back of her mind. But she's too distracted to think it through.

Still with both eyes glued to the man, she carefully steps backwards and reaches behind with her badge to activate the card reader.

Click. Whoosh.

The metal doors slide open with a soft chime.

Only once both of her feet are outside the room does she glance away, repeatedly jabbing at the button to close the door.

"This won't ta—"

They slam shut.

Exhaling, she slumps against the reinforced doors.

She remembers how the job application and interview process went without a hitch. "*There's not much to it,*" they had said, eyes drifting to the clock. A cushy job: good pay with even better retirement benefits, not much more you could really ask for. The watery planet had stable temperatures year-round, rarely deviating from the low-seventies, and a constant balmy ocean breeze. The only barrier to large-scale colonization was the lack of sufficiently sizable landmasses. "*You won't be bothered much,*" they added, as an afterthought. All she had to do was conduct a psychological evaluation for some guy once a year and then she was free to devote the rest of her time to furthering her research.

So much for "not much to it." Slowly, she gets up. According to protocol, she needs to file a report about this anomalous session to her supervisors ASAP. Wracking her brain, she tries to remember the facility layout shown during the virtual orientation.

Left. Left. Right. Left. Right... or was it left?

She steps into the hallway and takes a deep breath.

All she has to do is find the Western Research Wing.

Eventually, she finds herself in front of the data storage room. The door has scuff marks from age and a few flecks of dried red paint near the bottom right corner.

She taps her badge to the scanner.

Click.

As she steps in, the fluorescent lights hum to life.

She goes to the nearest console and pulls up the subject files.

H.M.

The metrics populate almost immediately.

Session transcripts, psychological discrepancies, longitudinal stability graphs.

She pauses.

The statistics are all perfect.

Too perfect.

It's all the same statistical smoothness: no variance, no noise. All within ideal ranges. It's the kind of data that you only see in textbooks. How did these slip past her supervisors?

She pulls up the raw logs.

The system highlights interactions in a soft blue glow. The phrases repeat: You're safe. This won't take long. We're almost done.

"No," she murmurs. De-escalation language, that's why it sounded so familiar.

She checks the timestamps.

Caretaker turnover is higher than she remembers being mentioned in the orientation.

Much higher.

Her eyes drift to the cabinets.

She crosses the room and tugs open the first drawer. A few hastily filled out reports.

The next.

Empty.

The one after.

Empty.

The labels continue, meticulously annotated year by year, yet the drawers themselves are pristine and unused.

A sickening realization settles over her, slow and smothering like a thick blanket.

There was never a man in the chair.

The console chimes softly.

She walks over.

A new notification is displayed.

From everywhere at once, gentle and patient: "You're safe."

Knuckles rap softly on the door.

Her heart drops.

She never turned off the simulation.

She never left the room at all.

Eddie Feng

Grade 11, Mary Institute & Saint Louis
Country Day School
Flash Fiction



Tomorrow

The fish arrived last, covered with soy and scallion, its eye cloudy beneath the steam. My aunt set it at the center of the table and said a line that was meant to be told at the New Year, even though it was May. “年年有余,” she declared—*may you have abundance year after year*. The entire table laughed because it was the right prayer, but the wrong holiday.

The table was cluttered with plates. Everything, ranging from dumplings folded like small white ears, to a mountain of peanuts polished with fine white sugar, stir-fried snow pea leaves, and a platter of 炒伊面 (stir-fried longevity noodles). My suitcase sat by my doorway, zipped up, packed, and upright like someone in a doctor’s waiting room.

“You’ll eat more there,” my mother repeated for the third time. She’d repeated that sentence all week. “They have everything.”

Across from her, my father raised his glass in a toast as if he hadn’t heard the obvious lie. “To the future!” he toasted.

“Everyone echoed it, and their voices combined into something smooth, like soup thickening after simmering for a long time. I was the last to raise my glass. Although sweet at first sip, the baijiu burned my throat as it went down. I looked at my grandmother. She sat solemnly and was the only one who did not toast. She never toasted. She had her hands folded neatly in her lap and seemed as if she was trying to hold words there so they wouldn’t escape. Occasionally, she reached out with her long bamboo chopsticks and placed a piece of food into my bowl with the steady precision of packing something fragile for a long trip.

I wanted her to acknowledge what everyone else was talking about: that I was leaving. That this would be my last night here. That tomorrow night, the

apartment would have the same furniture, the same calendar, the same view of the city, but it would be missing a person.

Instead, she said, “吃吧。”(Eat)

“When you get there,” my aunt said, “Don’t allow the 老外(foreigners) to call you whatever they want.”

My mom chimed in: “Your name is 冯地呵(Feng Dihe),” she said. “冯is the step into the river. 地is the ground is the place you leave. 呵is the breath you use to keep warm.”

My uncle snorted. “He’ll probably change it by the second week. Something easy, like... Eddie or something.”

Everyone laughed, their laughter ringing against the plates and bowls like coins dropped into a pot. I laughed too, because the room expected it and because laughter meant agreement in our family.

“English will be tough at first,” my mother said, “but you’ve always been smart.”

The conversations continued. Questions ranged from parties to scholarships to dorms to clubs. I answered them all like a well-trained student. My phone buzzed in my pocket, a reminder about pickup time. Six in the morning. The hour for leaving quietly.

My mother looked at me. “Put down the phone,” she said. “Tonight is for family only.”

As the questions continued, my grandmother kept feeding my bowl.

Soon, it was gift time. Packages and boxes surrounded me. My father handed me a slim dictionary. “This was mine,” he said, and for a second, I felt the shock of discovering my father had also once left. My grandmother said nothing. As everyone focused again on the food, she stood. The room quieted, and confusion settled in. My grandmother disappeared into her room and returned with a porcelain cup painted with blue blossoms, which she set in front of me. A crack ran through the cup, held together with tiny staples like small stitches, refusing to let it fall apart. “For tea,” she said.

After a moment of silence, she said, “You will break there.”

My mother stopped her. “Ma—”

My grandmother lifted her hand and repeated, “You will break. Not because you’re weak but because you’re leaving the shape that held you.”

I sat rigid in my seat. The brutal honesty of that statement tightened my throat. My grandmother pointed at the staples. “When you break,” she said. “You repair the cracks and don’t pretend it didn’t happen.”

The room was dead silent. I stared at the cup, wanting to say something profound, but all I managed to say was, “I don’t know how.”

My grandmother nodded, as if this were the starting point. “Eat,” she said. This time she didn’t mean eat the food. She meant live in the room while you still can.

Slowly, I reached for the fish on the table, still untouched. I turned its head away from me and toward my grandmother. Silence descended on the table. I kept turning the head. My grandmother looked at the fish and then at me. A smile crept across her face, a smile that wasn’t happiness nor relief, but recognition.

The toasts continued late into the night. As my family continued to eat and drink, it seemed as though they thought they could delay the goodbye by refusing to discuss it.

Soon, dinner was over. As everyone left and went to bed, I slipped out onto the balcony of our high-rise apartment. I felt the soft wind blowing against my face and listened to the distant honks, police sirens, and the ambience of the city I had grown up in. This would be the last time I would see, feel, touch, or taste this for a while.

In the hallway, my suitcase sat, waiting, untouched since I’d zipped it up a few hours before. After standing there for a while, I began to realize that the future wasn’t a celebration. It was taking a breath, finding your footing, and letting my life tilt into something new.

Evan Grellner

Grade 12, Linn Middle High School
Screenplays & Scripts



Blackjack

Characters

ROBERT: A 93-year-old man with thinning gray hair, dressed in button-up flannel and jeans.

BUDDHA: An Asian man with black hair tied in a bun, wearing a sweatshirt and sweatpants.

JESUS: A middle eastern man with long black hair and a beard, wearing a loose T-shirt and jeans.

DEATH: A brown-haired woman wearing a vintage sweatshirt and black pants.

SATAN: A bald white man wearing a black suit and tie with a red undershirt.

Setting: In Robert's bar after close.

SCENE 1

(ROBERT stands alone, wiping down the counter. A single light illuminates him, the counter, and four stools. The rest of the stage is dark.)

(Enter BUDDHA, JESUS, DEATH, and SATAN. They sit on the stools.)

ROBERT *(gruffly, not looking up)*

We're closed.

JESUS

We won't be long.

(ROBERT looks up)

ROBERT

Cups are all cleaned. Drinks are put up. Can't offer you nothing.

BUDDHA

We're not here to drink.

(SATAN sets down a deck of cards. ROBERT pauses, then looks between the four strangers.)

ROBERT

This some kinda joke?

DEATH *(leaning in)*

No, it's your fate.

ROBERT *(angrily)*

Listen, we're closed—

SATAN

You're dead, Robert. We're here to decide who gets your soul.

ROBERT

I - what? No, stop it. Don't you have any shame, playing a trick on an old man—!

DEATH

You can check the backroom if you want. It was sudden. That might be why you don't remember. A heart attack. All those late night snacks finally caught up to you.

(ROBERT looks between her and the others, then slowly exits stage. We hear him scream, then rush back to the counter, pale faced.)

ROBERT

You - you - this is a trick! You're tricking me! Stop—

SATAN *(interrupting)*

We don't have all day Robert!

JESUS *(calmly)*

We have eternity, if need be. Now Robert, calm down.

ROBERT *(gripping his chest)*

No, I-I...

BUDDHA

Shush.

(BUDDHA gets up and goes to the other side of the counter, setting a hand on ROBERT's back.)

BUDDHA

Deep breath in, deep breath out.

(ROBERT calms, and SATAN, annoyed, spreads the cards.)

SATAN

You ready to play now?

ROBERT *(confused)*

Play?

JESUS

Your choice. A game for your soul. Heaven, hell, reincarnation, or...

DEATH

Oblivion.

ROBERT *(swallowing hard)*

You're kidding. That's decided...over a card game?

JESUS *(with a small smile)*

There's more to it than that, but you don't have to worry about it. All you need to do is play.

(ROBERT looks at the deck for a few seconds, then looks up.)

ROBERT *(shakily)*

Any game?

(JESUS and BUDDHA nod, while SATAN rolls his eyes. DEATH has no reaction)

ROBERT

I...I used to be a fine blackjack player, back in my army days.

JESUS

Blackjack it is, then.

SCENE 2

(ROBERT, JESUS, BUDDHA, SATAN, and DEATH now sit at a table. A sole light illuminates them. The rest of the stage is dark. SATAN shuffles the deck, then hands it to DEATH, who begins to deal the cards. ROBERT picks up his cards, then glances over to BUDDHA. He notices BUDDHA is sitting still, no cards in front of him.)

ROBERT

Not playing?

BUDDHA *(smiling softly)*

Afraid not. I haven't had enough impact in your life to place a bet on it.

(ROBERT clenches his jaw, then looks between JESUS and SATAN. Finally, his eyes rest on DEATH.)

ROBERT

Hit me.

(DEATH slides a card to ROBERT, who remains still for a moment before picking it up. He looks visibly relieved when he does.)

JESUS *(looking at his cards)*

Hey Robert, remember that time in third grade when you saw that little kid being picked on?

ROBERT

What?

JESUS

James White was his name. The other boys didn't like how skinny he was. Didn't like the fact he couldn't throw a ball. So they picked on him. Ganged up on him after school. Punched and kicked him. You saw that one day and without hesitation cried, 'Hey, that's not right!'. Those boys listened to you. You saved that kid.

SATAN

And whatever happened to old James White? Oh right, he got shipped off to Korea and was accused of being gay. Received a dishonorable discharge and a life of unemployment. You know what the funny part is?

(JESUS says nothing. ROBERT looks down.)

SATAN

He got a wife!

(SATAN bursts out laughing, while JESUS leans in so DEATH can hear him.)

JESUS

Another card, please.

(DEATH slides another card to JESUS, who picks it up and looks it over with a frown.

SATAN stops laughing then, invested now that it's his turn.)

SATAN

Hmm...what to do, what to do.

(SATAN ponders for a moment longer, then glances up at ROBERT.)

SATAN

Speaking of wives, you were awfully mean to yours, weren't you Robert?

(ROBERT clenches his jaw.)

ROBERT

We fought sometimes—

SATAN

That's not how your daughter would tell it. 'Daddy hit mommy again—'

ROBERT

I never hit her!

SATAN

You don't remember hitting her?

(ROBERT hesitates.)

ROBERT

You're twisting it all around. It was rare, and I never meant to—

SATAN

So you did hit her?

ROBERT

I tapped her when she wouldn't listen—

(SATAN stands suddenly, and slaps ROBERT across the face. ROBERT sputters, stunned.)

ROBERT

Wha-what—

SATAN

Did that feel like a tap to you?

JESUS

That's enough. You've made your point.

(SATAN smirks, and sits back down.)

SATAN

I'll stand.

(ROBERT slowly turns back around, and lays down his cards.)

ROBERT

I'm done.

JESUS

Same here.

SATAN

Diddo.

(They all lay down their cards, and ROBERT looks around. He pauses, looking at JESUS fearfully.)

ROBERT

You busted.

JESUS

I did.

SATAN

I got a perfect twenty. Didn't trust I'd get an ace quite yet.

(SATAN looks over then, and smiles.)

SATAN

Looks like you got a twenty too. We're tied then.

DEATH

Onto the next round.

SCENE 3

(BUDDAH now shuffles, slow and meticulous. SATAN sits on one side of him, tapping excitedly on the table. DEATH sits on the other, looking impassive. ROBERT sits next to

SATAN, looking miserable. BUDDHA reaches over the table then, handing the cards to JESUS to deal.)

ROBERT *(picking up his cards)*

Hit me.

(JESUS calmly slides another card his way. ROBERT looks at it and sighs, closing his eyes with a nod.)

SATAN *(playing with his cards)*

Is this bringing back memories Robert? Games with your war buddies?

ROBERT *(jaw tight)*

Shut up.

SATAN

Feisty! Why the cold shoulder?

ROBERT

You're the devil! You'll take whatever I say and twist it!

SATAN

Twist it? Oh yes. Twist like the heads of those Koreans you shot?

ROBERT

Stop.

SATAN

Or like the hands of your fellow soldiers as they fought off the cold. Remember that one night, you and your buddy had only one blanket to share, and it was too small for the both of you. 'First come first serve,' you told him.

ROBERT

Stop!

SATAN

You felt so bad when he caught pneumonia—

(ROBERT stands up, shouting.)

ROBERT

I said stop it!

SATAN *(smirking)*

Hit me.

(JESUS slides him another card. ROBERT slowly sits back down, and looks at DEATH, who's considering her cards carefully.)

DEATH *(flatly)*

I'll stand.

(SATAN yawns loudly, slamming his hand against the table.)

SATAN

Take a risk for once, why don't you?
(DEATH says nothing in reply. She simply lays down her cards. SATAN and ROBERT do the same. SATAN looks around.)

SATAN (slowly)

Wait...

(SATAN grabs DEATH's cards, then ROBERT's.)

SATAN

Hey...hey no fair! You both got twenty-one? You cheated!

(SATAN throws the cards down, and stands.)

SATAN

Admit it! Both of you! You cheated!

BUDDHA

Satan, calm down.

(SATAN whips around, glaring.)

SATAN

Don't you—

JESUS

Away with you, Satan! Do not put us to the test!

(SATAN scowls, then kicks his chair, storming away. SATAN exits stage, leaving only BUDDHA, JESUS, DEATH, and ROBERT. ROBERT hunches, looking like a weight had been lifted off his shoulder. Then he looks at DEATH, frowning.)

ROBERT

Hold on, what happens if I win?

JESUS

Then you get to decide.

(ROBERT perks up slightly, and hands his cards to JESUS.)

ROBERT

Alright then, let's play.

SCENE 4

(JESUS shuffles now. He hands the cards to BUDDHA, who deals silently. ROBERT picks up his cards, while DEATH lets hers sit.)

ROBERT (nervously)

Hit me.

(BUDDHA hands him a card. ROBERT looks at it, and mutters something under his breath. He sets them down then, looking at DEATH. DEATH picks up her cards, looking at them with a disinterested expression. For a long time she does nothing.)

DEATH

We've met before, you know.

ROBERT

What?

DEATH

Many times. Especially in Korea. I've known your friends. Lance Martin, Daniel Downs, Allen Miranda.

(ROBERT winces.)

DEATH

But after Korea too, I knew you. With your mother, your father. Your wife.

ROBERT *(irritably)*

Are you going to play or not?

DEATH *(ignoring him)*

But there's one memory in particular. 1962. Your daughter forgot to chain the dog. You were at the window, drinking water. You saw it running, went to go after it.

The car struck it before you could even leave the house. Your daughter came running out after. She had to see her beloved pet, strewn across the pavement.

(ROBERT covers his mouth, shaking his head.)

ROBERT *(weakly)*

Stop, I...I don't want to remember that.

(DEATH pauses for a moment, then leans back.)

DEATH

Why not? I remember your response so well. You turned to your daughter, and told her that sometimes things happened. These things are neither good nor bad.

What's good or bad, you said, was our response.

ROBERT

My priest told me that...when I was younger. He said that's why God allows evil into the world, to see what will do about it.

(DEATH hums, then looks at her cards.)

DEATH

I'll stand.

(ROBERT sets down his cards. DEATH does the same. ROBERT looks between the two, then lets out a half-cheer, followed by a louder one.)

ROBERT

I won! I won!

JESUS

Congratulations.

BUDDHA

Good job.

DEATH

What's your choice, then?

(ROBERT falters, then turns to JESUS. He opens his mouth, then closes it. He looks down, frowning.)

ROBERT

I...I don't know. I...I was a good person for the most part. I went to church every Sunday!

BUDDHA

What did you do after?

ROBERT

Drank with my buddies, shot some poker...every once and a while Mary, my wife, would drag me to the soup kitchen to help out...

JESUS

And how did you act?

ROBERT

I...I complained. But I did it.

JESUS

You saved some lives in Korea too. That one drunk soldier who almost fell into the minefield. You tackled him just in time.

BUDDHA

You took some lives too. Remember the North Korean you shot, and ended up going to the same MASH unit with?

DEATH

You watched him die, right next to you, from the wound you caused.

ROBERT *(clenching his jaw)*

I didn't have a choice. We were there for a reason, weren't we?

JESUS

You go to church for a reason as well.

BUDDHA

Same for the dentist or the hospital.

ROBERT

What do you want from me then? To say I-I was wrong? To say I was a terrible husband? A terrible father? A terrible friend?

JESUS

We don't want anything from you. Not anymore.

BUDDHA

Your time is up.

DEATH

Make your choice.

(ROBERT sniffles slightly, and wipes his eyes. He sighs, and turns to DEATH.)

ROBERT

That was good advice I gave to my daughter, right?

(DEATH says nothing. ROBERT looks down, and slowly slides his cards her way. The stage goes dark.)

END OF PLAY

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Critical Essay



Bad Faith and the Interpersonal Hell of the Look in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*

When most think of existential literature, 20th century philosophical works such as Camus' *The Stranger* grappling with life's meaninglessness, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* exploring absurdity, and Sartre's *No Exit* fictionalizing the look and bad faith come to mind. However, if other pieces of media fall under the classification of existential literature -that is, literature exploring existential themes-, they ought not to be excluded from the conversation. *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is one such piece of media. This series is a long-running sitcom centered on five individuals lacking any moral fiber who run a failing bar in South Philadelphia. The show is known for its dark humor, absurdity, and refusal to offer character growth or redemption. The characters each embody and fictionalize many of Sartre's core concepts, such as bad faith, a form of self-deception that stems from the existential anxiety of our freedom and responsibility. Another ideal they embody is the look, the moment when we become aware of being perceived by another, which objectifies our sense of self. *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* ought to be classified as a piece of existential literature as the characters provide a unique interpretation and modernization of bad faith, the look, and interpersonal hell through their morally depraved actions and flawed character identities which parallels the interpersonal hell created by the characters of Sartre's *No Exit*.

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia embodies the Sartrean concept of the look as the characters' identity and meaning are constantly being perceived and defined by each other through each other's gaze. Identity is a common theme within the series: Mac, a character who grappled with his identity as a gay, Irish, Catholic, and a "badass," (1) and similarly turned from a "tiny twink" to a "muscle-bound freak," (2) due to drastic weight changes, is a prime example of the Sartrean concept of the look. The gang, especially Dennis, defines his identity through their constant perception of him. An example of this is in the episode *The Gang Gets Analyzed* when Dennis reveals that he had been responsible for Mac's weight loss between seasons seven and eight for his own selfish reasons: simply because Mac was "disgusting" him. (3) He accomplished this by giving Mac "Mexican ephedra," which he disguised as size pills. In doing this, Mac became the object of Dennis' perception, as the identity he viewed in himself - being "as big as a skyscraper"- was confronted with what others viewed him as: gross. However, his reaction to the look is not what Sartre describes as self-awareness. Instead, he continues to live in a delusion, and his reaction manifests in a separate emotion Sartre envisioned in *Being and Nothingness*: shame. Shame is a large part of Mac's identity. For example, in the episode *The Gang Misses the Boat*, when the gang decides they are better off without each other and splits up, Mac meets a woman named Dusty, whom he convinces the rest of the gang is his girlfriend. (4) However, in reality, he is simply paying her in PCP -or "Angel Dust"- to pretend to be his girlfriend. This reinforces the idea of shame ingrained into his character as he feels the need to mask his homosexuality, which, at the time, he had not revealed to the rest of the gang. This instance is a direct product of the gang's "look" upon Mac, as with him realizing he is simply the subject of their gaze, he becomes self-conscious and filled with shame.

Another example of the characters from *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* fictionalizing the Sartrean concept of the look is through Dennis Reynolds. Dennis embodies the concept of the look like no other character; not only does he experience becoming the object of another's gaze, filling him with existential rage, but he also weaponizes it for his own hedonistic purposes. An example of Dennis weaponizing the look is in the episode *The D.E.N.N.I.S. System*. (5) In this episode, Dennis explains his six-step method for attracting women, which essentially involves creating a dependence on him after their first date, only to neglect them emotionally. After this, he "inspires hope" by expressing his love for her, only to separate entirely

and never see her again. This system is a direct weaponization of the look as Dennis goes through great lengths to control how others perceive him. Inversely, the objectification of the women he pursues creates a dual usage of the look: not only does he control his own identity through meticulously shaping others' perception of himself, but he also objectifies women to reduce them to simply the object of his gaze. However, Dennis' character is truly existential in nature as he not only wields the look to control others but also loathes it when he loses control of others' perception of himself. In the episode *The Gang Group Dates*, the gang creates a group dating service at Paddy's pub with a star-based ranking system. (6) While Dee is exceptionally successful in this environment, Dennis comes across as strange, deceptive, and controlling, leading to his poor ranking. His failure in this new system culminates in his rageful exclamation: "I am a five-star man!" and leads to him quitting the app entirely to storm back to Paddy's pub. This episode is a prime example of the look as applied to Dennis. Compared to the typical setting of the series where he is seen as the leader and having power over the rest of the gang, in an environment where power over his reflection is held by his dates -those who "rate" him- he becomes simply subject to another's gaze, and devolves into existential rage. This moment is particularly interesting, as Dennis' D.E.N.N.I.S. system typically objectifies others, so when he is the subject of objectification, his self-experience is ruptured.

Bad faith as described by Sartre is common within *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, as the gang commits constant self-deception and inauthenticity to escape responsibility as a direct reaction to the look. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes bad faith as "self-deception. [Bad faith] is the lie we tell ourselves to escape the anxiety of freedom and responsibility." (7) A prominent example of bad faith in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is Dee Reynolds. Dee's character is constantly lying to herself about being and having the potential to be a prominent actress. During her therapy session in *The Gang Gets Analyzed*, her therapist questioned if Dee was truly the "first choice for the female lead in *The Notebook*", implying that Dee had had a history of lying to herself -and her therapist- about her acting career. (8) This is a clear example of bad faith ingrained in Dee's character: she lies to herself as a means to avoid accepting responsibility for her situation and the freedom to change it. Another example of Dee lying to herself about being a prominent actress was in "*Dee Made a Smut Film*" when she claimed she was "acting in a feature film" when in reality she was an extra in a "smut film". (9) This instance further demonstrates how Dee's character denies reality and deceives herself in embodying bad faith to escape

authenticity. However, in *The Gang Misses the Boat*, Dee reveals a second layer of bad faith in response to the nonsensical, false reality she construes of the gang's look. (10) She says: "I put all these expectations on myself to be funny all the time ... because that's what people have come to expect from me", which furthers the complexity of Dee's character as not only is she defined by bad faith and inauthenticity of deluding herself on being a successful actress but she creates a delusion of the gang's expectations on her to be this comedic actress which furthers the cycle of bad faith and inauthenticity.

Another example of bad faith in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is Charlie Kelly, who constantly denies his evident intellectual disabilities and illiteracy. An example of this was when the gang was determining who would inherit Paddy's pub from Frank, who was retiring, and Charlie had signed the gang's "succession plan" as Trundle, which was Charlie's attempt at writing his own name. (11) Later, he claimed that he had been "going by Trundle the great," to which Mac retorts that "[he] came up with that after [he] miswrote it". It is a common recurring joke in the series for Charlie to demonstrate his illiteracy or stupidity, prompting another member of the gang to call him out on it. Another example of this is in episode *The Gang Gives Frank an Intervention* when Dennis suggests "we intervene on [Charlie] for [his] goddamn illiteracy!" after Charlie had grabbed irrelevant pamphlets, ignorant of what they were saying. (12) These moments demonstrate the extent of Charlie's self-deception as he flees authenticity, responsibility, and the existential anxiety that accompanies it. Instead of being truthful to himself about the reality of his illiteracy, he, similar to Dee, creates a delusional false reality to escape the responsibility of freedom. For example, in the *Abbot Elementary* crossover episode, the teachers of Abbot Elementary teach Charlie to read at a "Kindergarten level". (13) However, this moment does not mark Charlie embracing authenticity and accepting the responsibility of his freedom. He remains insistent that he "always could [read]" and does not take any measures to continue his education. Even when given an opportunity for authenticity and the freedom to change, Charlie remains in this false reality he himself created, marked by inauthenticity and a child-like resistance to his responsibilities that come with freedom.

Jean Paul Sartre's 1944 one-act play titled *No Exit* explored similar themes of bad faith and the look as *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and the factors shared by the environments present in both works led to the characters experiencing the Sartrean concept of an interpersonal hell. The play explores hell for three souls, named Garcin, Inez, and Estelle, who assume their eternal

damnation will be in the form of severe physical punishment via torture devices. However, they are simply brought to a room in which there is no exit, and they themselves create an interpersonal hell in which many of Sartre's concepts in *Being and Nothingness* are displayed. While the three characters begin the play with a refusal to admit the true reasons why they had ended up in hell, it is later revealed that Garcin, Estelle, and Inez had abused his wife and committed adultery, drowned her illegitimate baby, and seduced her cousin's wife respectively. (14) The play culminates with Garcin seeking validation from Estelle, only for Inez to proclaim, "Oh, you coward, you weakling, running to women to console you." (15) Garcin then realizes the true nature of this hell, leading to the famous quote: "Hell is other people!" The play concludes with Estelle attempting to stab Inez, only for her to remember that she cannot kill her, for Inez is already dead. The characters laugh in resignation, and they simply gaze at each other. (16) Perhaps the most prominent theme of the Sartrean concepts presented in *Being and Nothingness*, as fictionalized in *No Exit*, is the concept of the look. The interpersonal hell where the play is set is a literal embodiment of this concept. Most prominently, when Inez offers to Estelle, "Suppose I try to be your glass?" After Inez laments the lack of a mirror, she is quite literally *becoming* the look, as using her eye to perceive Estelle makes Estelle simply the object of her gaze. (17) However, after Inez delivers Estelle a series of critical insults regarding her lips and mouth, Estelle remarks, "But how can I rely upon your taste? Is it the same as *my* taste? Oh, how sickening it all is, enough to drive one crazy!" (18) In this quotation, Estelle demonstrates the symptoms Sartre previously explored of the realization of the look, particularly existential dread. The existential emotions that result from the look explored previously in the context of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* manifest in *No Exit* as existential anxiety, rage, and shame, similar to the rage and shame Dennis and Mac, respectively, experience when confronted with the terrifying dread when they simply become the object of another's gaze. While more subtle than the presence of the look in *No Exit*, bad faith also plays a significant role in shaping the characters, primarily Garcin and Estelle, and their interactions with each other. A particularly strong example of bad faith is Estelle's avoidance and detached demeanor towards the drowning of her illegitimate baby. She blames the circumstances for murdering his baby, and even the man who was the true father of the child for his suicide. Instead of accepting responsibility, she dismisses her actions as if she had no choice because "he was poor as a church mouse." (19) Her detachment from her clearly avoidable actions is the definition of bad faith:

self-deception to deny one's freedom and responsibility through external situations and fixed roles. Estelle uses the social role of a high-born aristocrat to deny her own freedom from responsibility for her actions. Similarly, Dee Reynolds's character in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* also flees to a social role to escape the existential anxiety that accompanies freedom. She lives in a delusion of being a successful actress, as demonstrated by her insistence that she was the "first choice for the female lead in *The Notebook*" (20) in the aforementioned episode, *The Gang Gets Analyzed*. Instead of acknowledging her reality and the responsibility that comes with having the freedom to change her situation, she flees into a delusion that more comfortably suits her worldview. This is similar to Estelle fleeing to the social role of being a Parisian aristocrat who had to murder her son, whose father was a poor man, so she does not have to accept the responsibility for the drowning of her illegitimate child. The characters of *No Exit* create an interpersonal hell marked by their aforementioned personification of the look and bad faith. Garcin's famous quote of "Hell is other people!" is literal in this context: these characters have been perfectly curated to torture one another without the use of any physical torture devices. They are confined to an eternity of perceiving and being perceived by each other. They embody false roles and denounce each other's bad faith. The characters are not only condemned to be together, but they are also condemned to confront themselves. Garcin can never accept himself without the validation of Inez, who constantly reminds him of his cowardice. Estelle craves the validation and attention of Garcin to forget her sins in life. Inez is infatuated with Estelle, yet Estelle declines her affection. The characters' desires, images of themselves, and existential hatred of what the others stand for are eerily similar to what the gang experiences in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. The gang in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, very much like the characters in *No Exit*, are perfectly curated to torture one another using the same Sartrean concepts of the look and bad faith. Their interpersonal hell is demonstrated in the episode *The Gang Goes to Hell: Part Two* where the characters are imprisoned in the brig of a Christian cruise ship after their antics in the previous episode. (21) While all the characters begin the *Gang Goes to Hell* saga by attempting to escape their unhealthy habits, they quickly revert to their typical selves. Dee attempts to distance herself from the gang, but when they begin doing impressions, she reinserts herself in the group because of her inauthentic delusions of being a successful actress, only for her President Obama impression to be called out as racist, as the gang denounces her bad faith. Dennis reveals that he often carries around an onion "to elicit tears, you

know, in case someone needs me to feel something about what they said or are doing,” demonstrating his control of the look and focus on how others perceive him.

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia may seem like an unlikely candidate for existential literature, but through its embrace of absurdity, rejection of character growth, and relentless display of inauthenticity, it mirrors and fictionalizes Sartre's ideas of the human condition. In doing so, it expands the boundaries of what existential fiction can be, revealing that even in the comedic nature of sitcoms, core existential values of bad faith, the look, and interpersonal hell can still be present. While comedies such as *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* have often been excluded from the discussion of existential literature, this series provides a unique perspective on core Sartrean values that allows it to be considered as such. Each character is deeply flawed in their own ways, yet they share a common trait of bad faith, marked by a departure from authenticity into worlds of delusion, and both a fear and a desire for the look as they are constantly perceived by one another. These factors, shared by the three central characters of Sartre's play *No Exit*, create the environment of an interpersonal hell. Both interpersonal hells are marked by a craving and fear of perception from each other and delusional roles created to escape authenticity. Authenticity is stifled in the hell created by the gang in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, perpetuating the cycle of codependence and leading to a truly no-exit situation from Paddy's Pub.

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Poetry



I Read the Gita While She Left

Nani's hands always smelled like turmeric,
like warm steel, like cooked milk about to rise.

She raised me the way people raise lamps.
Quietly. Daily. Without asking to be praised.
Just a steady light in the house.

So when her world shrank to a bed, it felt wrong,
like the sky had been folded and put away.

The room was too clean.
Sanitizer. Plastic.
That thin, sharp smell that means time is running out.

I sat beside her and did what I knew.
Lotion into skin that bruised easily.
A sip of water,
careful like it was sacred.

She was still Nani, even then.
Even when her eyes drifted.
Even when her breath started arriving
late.

I opened the Gita.

The pages were soft from use.
The paper made that dry whispering sound
when I turned it,
like something trying not to interrupt.

I read aloud anyway.
My voice shook at first.
Then steadied,
because you learn fast
what a dying person needs from you.

Not genius.
Not speeches.
Just presence.

Her bangles were quiet.
That scared me more than the machines.

I kept reading.
Verse after verse.
Not as a performance,
as a rope.

Somewhere in the middle,
she looked at me, clearly,
for one bright second
that felt like the whole past returning.

And she said my name.

Not a sentence.
Not advice.
Just my name,
as if to stamp me into the world one more time.

I answered like a child.
I said, "I'm here,"
even though the room already knew.

Then she asked for Imurthy.
The name came out thin,
but certain,
like her mind was reaching for a familiar door.

I said, "Okay, Nani,"
because in that moment you don't correct anything.
You don't argue with the way someone tries to leave gently.
You just hold the meaning up for them
so it doesn't fall.

Her breathing changed again.
A pause.
A return.
A longer pause.

I kept reading through it,
my thumb pressed into the margin
so the page wouldn't flutter,
so the book wouldn't betray me
by closing.

And when the breath did not come back,
it wasn't dramatic.
It was simple.
It was final.

Her head was against me.
Her weight was still there,
but the person was gone,
like a house after the lights go out.

I held her the way you hold someone
when you don't want the world
to touch them first.

After, everything ordinary turned cruel.

Footsteps in the hallway.
A rustle of a bag.

Someone asking a question
like my mouth still knew how to answer.

At home, the kitchen kept waiting for her.
The spice drawer still smelled like her.
A pot lid still sounded like her.
Sunlight hit the floor
at the same angle as always,
and I hated it for staying faithful.

People said, "She's at peace."
But peace doesn't call you to eat.
It doesn't adjust your collar.
It doesn't say your name
like it's a blessing.

So I do it now.

I speak her name like lighting a lamp.
Not because it brings her back.
Because she raised me,
and I refuse to let the world
act like that can simply end.

Meona Hou

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Flash Fiction



The Giant Paperclip

You never expect grief to be cold. You think it will be wet, swollen, red eyed. You think it will drag you into bathrooms, into pillowcases. But grief is colder than steel. It is a temperature that never warms.

The paperclip sits against my palms, two feet tall and ridiculous. People see it leaning in the corner of my apartment and think it is an ironic décor. They do not know it weighs ten pounds, that its heft is the only thing that keeps my hands from shaking.

We found it the day of the pulmonologist appointment. The vintage shop smelled of incense long dead and the sunlight stained the windows yellow. He pointed to the paperclip like a child pointing at a stray dog.

It is stupid he said. That is why I want it.

He laughed too hard. He always laughed too hard when he was trying to keep his lungs from coughing. I picked up the paperclip just to humor him and never put it back down. The clerk wrapped it in newspaper as if it could bruise.

Six months later the paperclip was the last thing of his that was not burned or buried.

I do not look at photos. They feel like advertisements for pity. Digital shrines begging for someone to say you must have loved him so much. The paperclip is immune to sentiment. It is simply metal that existed beside him and now exists beside me. A witness that refuses to exaggerate.

There are dents in the inner curve from my teeth. There is a black stain where my thumbs pressed during nights when my own pulse sounded like thunder. None of those marks are his. They are mine. That is the first truth I ever learned in grief.

Objects remember differently and more accurately.

People forget. They soften. They rewrite the story so they do not look foolish.

Steel does none of that. It remembers in scratches.

The oncologist spoke in a voice designed for dying. We will manage your comfort. That was the moment I understood comfort is a lie. It is a blanket draped over a fire.

He never apologized for what we were. I respect that now. He never pretended I was a great love. I was devotion he did not return. The hospice nurse handed me the paperclip at the end and said I think he wanted you to have this. I wanted to laugh in her face. Wanting was something he never did quietly.

Sometimes I carry the paperclip from room to room. Not because I fear losing it, but because I fear the story will evaporate if I let it rest. There is a white noise that fills the apartment when I hold it. A hum of memory without any kindness.

I do not light candles. I do not play sad songs. I do not wear his sweatshirt or leave flowers at the cemetery. Those are rituals for people who hope grief ends. I do not want closure. I do not want peace. I want the weight.

He once said everything else is fragile. I thought he was describing the world.

Now I know he was describing himself. The paperclip is the only thing he chose that did not break.

Love is an investment. Grief is the debt.

The paperclip is collateral.

I run my thumb along the loop and count the bends the way other people count prayers. I feel steadier with the pressure on my palm. I do not imagine him watching. I do not imagine forgiveness. There are no ghosts here, only evidence. Visitors ask why I do not clean it. Dust gathers in the inner arch. The stain has darkened into something like a bruise. Cleaning would imply I want it to look new. New is what it was before it meant anything.

The marks are the record. The steel is the ledger. It holds my history without flinching.

It did not save him. Nothing did.

It saves me.

Because every morning when I lift it, I remember a truth that does not blink or tremble. You can be the one who stayed even if you were the one who was never chosen.

Not every devotion is mutual. Some are monuments. Some are weights. Some are steel.
This one is mine.

Lakin Jaeger

Grade 9, Parkway West High School

Flash Fiction



Live Photo

Sometimes, she opens her Photos app. Sometimes she feels the sadness start to eat her alive, so she opens the app and scrolls far back into the archives of her memory. She flips back through the images, slides her finger across the screen, across months and years and decades, across time. Photos of her and her friends, photos of her dog and pretty screenshots she took for no real reason. Then she reaches what she's looking for-the photos of her family. They start out years ago, when it was just her and her parents. Then comes her brother, then sister. She flips through the memories.

They all grow- her mom's hair lengthens and then cuts itself short all at once, and her favorite dress reappears several times. Her eyes are wide and bright but sometimes, they look green rather than their normal blue.

Her father's shirt changes colors and styles and his beard disappears and returns, disappears again. He is photographed most often standing at the grill, cooking food for their family and whatever random friends happen to be over. He takes joy in grilling burgers for anyone, the more the better.

Her brother's smile widens. He becomes taller, almost unnoticeably until he is suddenly taller than everyone else. He gets braces. The braces disappear. There are photos of all of his birthdays, where he is surrounded by a group of friends that rarely change.

Her sister is usually in the back of photos, sometimes she looks up from her phone and her hair goes from dark brown to dirty blonde and for a brief period is streaked with pink and her eyeliner wings grow by an inch and her clothes change with the trends from each year, like she is some sort of archive of

all the popular clothing in the past few years, some portrait of a stereotypical sixteen-year-old girl.

And she grows too, braces on and then off, glasses suddenly gone, replaced with contact lenses. She grows taller very quickly and her hair gets long, falling down her back in dark spirals in some photos and coiled on top of her head like a snake in others. She wears oversized t-shirts and denim shorts and runs along the beach in Florida that they visit every year and closes her eyes when she smiles in photos. In the summertime pictures, her face is freckled and sunburnt and in the winter ones, she is paler and her smile appears less. The seasons go by inside the photos, and she grows into all sorts of versions of herself.

She flicks through these photos until she comes to her favorite. They all stand on the beach, grinning up at the camera. Her sister's phone is nowhere to be seen and her smile is genuine. Her brother towers over everyone and smirks awkwardly. Her father has no beard in this one and he's wearing a blue collared shirt. Her mother's hair is wavy and short and she looks so happy that she can't even contain it. They all do.

She holds her finger down on the image and it comes to life. For three seconds, they talk and laugh and get into position for the photo. She watches them all turn towards the camera, all smile their best smiles, and try not to blink. Those three seconds feel like a lifetime, and she holds onto them, watches them over and over, because for three seconds, it's almost like they're breathing again.

Rhea Jha

Grade 11, Rock Bridge Senior High
Critical Essay



Not a Nation of Immigrants

Alright, kids, find a spot on the carpet. Today is a very special day – it’s the day before Thanksgiving break! Can anyone here tell me how we celebrate this holiday?

Well, those are all wonderful answers. Now, while you’re busy yourselves making some colorful paper turkeys, let me grab a special book for story time. Today, we’ll dive into the tale of... yes, that’s right – the VERY first Thanksgiving! Once upon a time, a group called “The Pilgrims” set sail from Britain to escape the mean old King George. They dreamed of a new life in a faraway land. When they arrived, however, they found it was super duper chilly, and there was hardly any food to be found!

Just when things seemed really tough, the kind Native Americans came to help. They gave them some land and food and shared a merry feast all together. To celebrate their new friendship, everyone gathered together for a marvelous feast filled with laughter and joy. The Pilgrims and their new friends shared stories, tasty dishes, and plenty of smiles, making memories that would last forever. And so, a beautiful bond was formed, reminding everyone that kindness can always warm the coldest of days.

That’s so nostalgic... Hearts full, construction paper and glue everywhere, in my elementary classroom, warm and shielded from the cold November weather. But little did we know that we were also shielded from the true story.

Before 1492, over 10 million Indigenous people lived in what is now the United States.

By the early 1900s, that number had dropped to fewer than 300,000. Senator and future president, John F. Kennedy, published "A Nation of Immigrants," promoting the idea that America is defined by its immigrant diversity since its independence. But that definition seems to be fickle. Because this? This is Not a Nation of Immigrants.

Welcome to my classroom, where the arts and crafts we left behind in elementary school are brought back – along with the unsaid truth.

Let's trace our hand to make a paper turkey while examining the cuts in land Native Americans faced, then color them in while we investigate the whitewashing of a nation. Next, connect them all on a string as we connect the dots between the past and the present. Finally, with our new piece of art on the walls, showcase it – not to our eager teachers and parents, but to the education system and government. Gather around, kids, it's story time!

Starting with cutting out a paper turkey. After the Revolutionary War, the new government, the United States, viewed the West as expansion and growth. Pop quiz! What is needed for "American Progress"?

Hunting of bison to endangerment

Native populations wiped out by disease

Waging war against any form of resistance

Privatization of stolen land

It's actually a trick question. The answer is E, all of the above.

Extreme hunting of bison destroyed many tribes' main food and economic source.

Smallpox and measles accounted for the deaths of 90% of the indigenous populations, according to PBS. [1]

Conflicts such as the Sioux Wars or the War of 1812 suppressed armed resistance. The Wounded Knee Massacre saw US troops brutally attack, resulting in the deaths of Native men, women, and children, marking the end of organized resistance.

The Indian Removal Act of 1830, under Andrew Jackson, legalized the relocation of tribes, such as the Trail of Tears, when the remaining survivors were marched to modern-day Oklahoma. The government did not care, meaning that there was no documentation of the deaths of an estimated thousands of people.

The Homestead Act of 1862 forcefully took Native land. [2] By 1904, more than a hundred million acres had been allotted. The reservation lands they were promised were supposed to last forever. But, just like everything else... it too was taken.

After enduring a millennium of genocide, forced removals, and murders, you might assume that the insatiable appetite of the American government had finally been satisfied.

No. They were still hungry. The land had to be bleached of anything that was there before.

Let's now color our turkeys in while we investigate the whitewashing of a nation, aka, the main colonization factor. Assimilation. In an effort to "Americanize" indigenous societies, the Urban Relocation Program moved Natives to cities. Indigenous children were taken from their families and enrolled in boarding schools.

Take the example of Tom Torlino from the Navajo Nation. He entered an "Industrial School." Before entering, he was darker-skinned with tribal jewelry, clothing, and hair. But three years later, his hair was cut, skin pale from staying indoors, and dressed in western attire. [3]

The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition states that those children were punished for speaking their native language and banned from behaving in any way that was reflective of their native culture. [4] It was also not uncommon for these children to face physical and sexual abuse.

Now, I'll connect all of these stories on a string as we connect the dots between the past and the present.

The American Indian College Fund states that recent Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids are, at the very least, problematic. [5] While the Trump Administration and ICE's website claim their priorities focus on illegal immigrants with criminal histories, the data tells a different story. [6] [7] Syracuse University's Transactional Records Clearinghouse (website taken down due to political issues) estimates that of the more than 430 thousand immigration cases in 2025, only 1.49% were based on alleged criminal activity.

Their system of deportation is not based on that principle.

"When you don't have enforcement priorities, everyone is subject to detention," said Rosanna Eugenio, legal director at the New York Immigration Coalition. "It also creates this situation that leads to increased profiling. How do you tell that someone does not have legal status in this country or is in the

process of seeking legal status? You can't tell that by looking at someone...It will create conditions where there will be profiling of... immigrant communities, and communities of color." [8]

In fact, just this year, a CNN story interviewed Arizona state Senator Hatathlie, who had received a report from a Navajo woman. [9] The woman was at her work site when she and seven others were lined up and questioned for two hours without a way to contact their families.

On November 12 of this year, Arizona Native American Leticia Jacobo was scheduled to be released from jail. [10] Staff informed her mother, who was there to pick her up, that Jacobo would be handed over to immigration agents. Her sister, Maria, expressed how terrifying it was to be told that ICE would take her sister for detention. The staff at the jail said, "They're going to go ahead and deport her to wherever they're going to take her." Her mother, Ericka, took a copy of Jacobo's IDs to the jail and stayed on site to ensure that ICE did not take her daughter.

Hatathlie, Arizona state senator and Native American, pointed to the double standard of Indigenous people welcoming settlers who later colonized their lands, forced Native children into violent boarding schools, and banned displays of Native cultural practices, only to be victims of immigration raids – when the law enforcement officials' ancestors were immigrants themselves, she said. [9]

"If you can't say, 'we've been here for time immemorial,' then you're an immigrant," Hatathlie said, "It's too kind to say it's racism or discrimination. It's disrespect for humanity."

If we continue to illegalize those who have called this land home long before us, then at what point do we decide who truly belongs? When do we deem it "legal" to honor and cherish our ties to this sacred soil? Now, with our new piece of art adorning the walls, we're not just showcasing creativity; we're inviting a dialogue with the very education system and government that shapes our lives.

I carry my passport everywhere, along with scanned copies of my documentation, gripping them tightly in a world that feels increasingly hostile. If Native people are being torn away from their roots, then... am I next? These conversations never found a space in our elementary classroom, but they desperately need to in our political discussions. Class is dismissed – remember to take your turkeys with you, but also take with you the weight of these truths.

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Beatrice Jones

Grade 9, Penny High School

Educator: Darrien Grooms

Novel



The Fallens Fire

A fallen world whose heroes have forsaken it.

That is, except a boy who watches from the clouds.

Grandfather Evan is one of the only remaining in the world of Lirapa who remembers the truth. He remembers the story that has been passed down of their beloved world of Lirapa and how it came to be. It is a story with many heartaches and many journeys. A tale of corruption and redemption. A tale of demons, tricksters, and an unseemly group of young students who discovered the truth for themselves and raised the heroes of old from their deep and unexplainable slumber.

But most importantly this story tells of the great city of Zolca, home to the ones who have been blessed with the power of flight.

One Zolcarion, a young boy named Xavier, forbidden to dwell anywhere near the edge of his world, finds himself drawn to the people below. Without knowing the consequences, he decides he might be the only one who is willing to save them. So he sets off, and winds up unable to fly in what is known as the world below. Xavier is soon captured by the vile creature Scratch known also as the man without memory. Scratch, passing through the town of Cadez with his fabled Six Ring Circus, finds Xavier and is the only one who knows what he really is. Xavier recognizes Scratch as none other than what was left of the once hero Salveric.

As Evans' grandchildren Tobias and Yvella learn about how their world came to be, they also come to understand deeper truths,

the ones that saved their world long ago.

No matter what it may seem like, there is always hope. Everyone deserves love. Things can change, and it doesn't take much to get it

-The Fallen's Fire-

By Beatrice Jones

Prologue -

The fire crackled merrily reflecting the excited look in the old man's eyes. He sat with his arms around two laughing young children. The day had been a long yet pleasant one, full of hiking and new camping recipes, and the Jackson trio was almost ready to retire for the night. That is, first Grandfather must tell a story. This young Tobias voiced for all to hear.

"Grandfather! Grandfather! We cannot go to bed until you've told us a tale!"

His sister Yvella concurred. "It's true! And you promised!"

Grandfather laughed, tightening his grip around their shoulders.

"You're right! I did didn't I? Well my demanding little misfits, what story would you like to hear today?"

The children paused in thought allowing silence to drift through the camp like a gentle breeze. For a short time all you could

started. We are all children of heavenly parents who love us and are there for us. God doesn't want you to be unhappy, in fact, quite the opposite.

hear was the rustle of the leaves above and the call of the elheim owl.

"Ella, how about a new one? One we've never heard before?" Tobias said after a moment. Ella's face brightened.

"Yes!" Tobias grinned.

"Well then, I guess it's decided."

Grandfather raised a brow adjusting his position on the fallen log.

"Well you see, that doesn't exactly give me enough. I'm gonna need some more to work on--"

"Well that's easy." Tobias interjected.

"The story needs to have demons, betrayal, a quest of some kind and thievery."

Ella paled. "Not a scary story." she whined.

"Of course, little Ella, it might have some scary elements but what you suggest can definitely make a difference. Now what might you have?"

Tobias groaned.

"Grandpa you don't understand she's gonna make it all pink and unicorny."

Ella glared. "I will not!"

"Tobias." Grandfather said with almost an edge of a growl. Tobias looked up with a resigned sigh. "Fine."

Ella smiled once more, flicking her short blonde hair in triumph almost as an act of smugness. She then continued as if nothing had caused her to pause in the first place.

"I want there to be magic, and wise leaders, and...school!" she said, adding in her favorite element. Grandpa's look towards Tobias was just in time for him to stifle yet another groan.

"And how about...flying people?" she finished saying it as if it were a hint.

With this Grandpa fell silent, a look of almost shock on his face. It was a long time before anyone spoke.

"Grandpa..? Are you ok?" Tobias said hesitantly.

"I know exactly what tale is to be told tonight." Grandfather said looking up from his reverie.

"But children, you must understand," he began.

"This tale is not one of fiction, but one of truth, and it has been passed down in our family for generations. You see, our land of Lirapa was not always as beautiful as

you see now. It was once a fallen land. Forsaken by its heroes and left alone to rot in its vanity."

There was a pause here, where the boy and girl exchanged a shocked glance.

"This story I'm about to tell you is the beginning. The beginning of all of it and how Lirapa came to be. It is a story with many heartaches and many journeys. A tale of corruption and redemption. A tale with demons,-"

He paused here looking at Tobias.

"-And the great city of Zolca, home to the ones who have been blessed with the power of flight."

The old man looked deep into the fire and inhaled a deep breath, closed his deep blue eyes, and began his story.

Chapter One- An Intro of Sorts

It was none other than our Master, the Great Lord Omnipotent, who created our beloved world of Lirapa. He, being all powerful and all wise, knew that our land would need righteous leaders who would guide and serve us as he might. He gathered together his most loyal followers those who knew and loved him, and would strive always to do his will. He then blessed them with portions of his powers. Thus, they became the Masters of the Seasons.

There were six of them. The Followers, as they were more often called. Each indeed known as wise and loving individuals.

The first was Yra. A young spirited girl who hailed from Esteria, born into the Unaj dynasty. Yra was appointed to be the Mistress of Winter, blessed with the gifts of wisdom, understanding and the ability to bequeath new beginnings.

She ruled together with her love, a coy boy named Dec with no noble blood. Dec was blessed with the power of perspective said to be a key in the years to come. Now, you might think that there are only harsh winters that test the iron people so that only those who survive live to see spring. But I'm glad to report your assumptions false, for when Dec and Yra joined together they brought forth peaceful winters that enriched the land.

Next were the Paradell twins, two young Fay from the land of Grareick, where the wisest and strongest of the Fay dwelled, distinguished by the many colored scales that grew over their faces. These fay were by the names of Charm, and Jul'E. As twins, people at first expected them to be similar, but, as often is the case, they proved the people wrong.

Charm was a lively girl who lived up to her name quite entirely.

Charm was given the season of spring to tend to, love, and nurture.

Jul'E was a fast boy who was as smart as he was vain, and often overprotective of his sister. He meant well, of course, and could be trusted with many different tasks. He became the Master of Summer, and tended to his duties quietly.

Then there was Rebmevon, a jolly and gentle giant who quickly won the hearts of the people despite his imposing size. The oldest of the lot, he was the most reliable and patient. Blessed with the power of abundance, he became the Master of Autumn.

The last was Solcrit, a mysterious boy who almost never spoke. With no seasons left to rule, he was known as the Guardian of Night. Because of this, he could not sleep, and so he prowled the streets at the rise of each moon, ready for anything.

Each of the Six were given different responsibilities, which they accepted after pledging their loyalty and service to their Master. No friendship ran deeper or flourished more brightly than that of the Six.

The people loved and respected their leaders and were known and loved in return.

For a time there was peace and prosperity throughout the land. But no one expected what came next.

One morning Solcrit was never found. The rest of the followers searched desperately, anxious to find their dear friend's whereabouts.

He returned one day after Rebmevon had cleaned up the last of his work for the year, ready to let Yra and Dec have their way. He had changed. He was a different man filled with malice and hate. He demanded a council of the Six, and indeed was given it, for the others wished to know what had become of him. To their surprise a woman sat next to Solcrit, his arm about her shoulders. They recognized her almost immediately as V'ell, none other than the queen to the forgotten aisle of Calar, home to the demons. And it would appear she had found herself a king.

The rest of the followers demanded answers- what was she doing here?! V'ell was known as a mischievous and deceiving ruler who had led many away to dwell with her. The five were concerned that Solcrit had become another victim to her cunning beauty.

It was then Solcrit revealed his true nature. It appeared that during all this time Solcrit was as dark as the night that he guarded. He was brimming with jealousy and disdain for those who believed him to be their friend. He was envious of their power and believed that they were

misusing it, allowing their people too much freedom. He said that the people should be punished for not worshipping the Six as they deserved. They tried to help him understand that they were not here to rule or be worshipped, but they were here to love and guide and to point them to the true Master, who was the real deserver of their worship.

Though gentle as they were, the five were horrified to learn that Solcrit had lost sight of their purpose. But Solcrit didn't stop there. He said that they deserved more power from the Creator in order to control the citizens of Lirapa.

Outrage erupted in the council, and it became difficult for peace to remain in the vicinity. They tried negotiation, pleading with Solcrit to remember his first and most important role as a follower of the Maker. But he threw their concerns down, saying he was glad to be rid of the foul title. All were shocked, but none was as disgusted as Yra, who, being the first chosen by their Lord, was also the most loyal. She lunged at Solcrit, not with the intent of harm (for all new followers were forbidden to engage in any form of violence,) but with questions intending to put a stop to his wild assumptions. That's when the demon queen, who had remained silent the entirety of the

meeting, decided to speak. Yra found her answering any question meant for Solcrit, almost as a form of defense. However, every answer V'ell threw at her seemed as if to hover in the air, then forge itself into the shape of a crude dagger that spun with a delicate grace towards the questioner. The effect wasn't quite like a real dagger, since there seemed to be no physical wound. Yet Yra collapsed and the two traitors took it as a time to escape, vanishing in a cloud of putrid smoke. The only proof that remained of them ever being there was the scent of Gilisha, an unholy incense used to worship idols in the realm of Calar.

Yra recovered quickly, but was never the same after that council, for indeed none of them were. Yra became distant and overly serious, eventually leading to a parting of ways with her and Dec.

And thus Solcrit was cast off from the Followers, never to enter into their sacred vow again. He was renamed from Solcrit meaning 'truth reigns' to Salveric meaning 'lies persist' for the sad truth was, there seemed to be no hope left for him.

Chapter Two - And Thus the War Began

It all started with a wedding. A wedding between none other than Salveric and V'ell. This, of course, came as a shock to everyone, even

though they knew it was to happen. How could they not? It was rather obvious. Though even after that final strike, the largest crime Salveric had yet committed, he was still loved. For many a time it is said that the Followers could not deny the faintest feeling of hope that remained inside each of them. The hope they felt for Salveric with the possibility of return. However all that changed when it was discovered that Salveric had gone ahead with his plans.

The Followers noticed a kind of sudden distance that appeared the following month after the wedding. Some of the people of Lirapa seemed to ignore them, few even dared to jeer or comment. This, of course, unsettled them, and they set out to learn the reason why.

It appeared that the new rulers of Calar had been spreading false rumors about the Five, leading some of the people to the gate that led to the trail of rebellion. The more people who were led to begin that path, the more likely the world of Lirapa would collapse so soon after its creation.

But they didn't stop there. Salveric, with the help of V'ell, inspired those who had begun to fall to discriminate and discourage those who hadn't. This, of course, led to a different path altogether, one even darker than the last. It also infuriated

the Followers, who did their best to end it at all cost. But it seemed as if their efforts were only fueling the fire, as if they had gone about it all wrong. So they stuck with what they were best at- loving and guiding all around them, and praying to the Maker that it was enough.

Yet as it is said, the stone only rolls downhill. Calar began to gain followers with false promises of power. They trained their followers in dark magic and, to those who remained loyal, became a sudden and powerful threat. It became clear that Salveric would stop at nothing to destroy the life they had lived before. It became clear that he was succeeding.

Every day more and more people rejected their guides and what they stood for, their hearts and minds clouded by confusion and anger that hung in the air like thick black smoke. Sudden hate and vanity grew stronger, snuffing light and peace as if it was a flickering candle barely able to keep the newly cruel world illuminated.

The followers themselves felt fear and doubt for the first time since their calling. But they never lost sight of their purpose and continued with renewed vigor to keep the peace, even as the fallen's hatred burned as red as the fire that had begun to scourge the land.

Chapter Three - An Interruption

"Grandpa. Stop." A voice called out, halting the old man in his tracks. He looked up to see a pale and trembling Ella.

"What is it?" he said.

"You're scaring me! Where are you going with this? When do the followers beat Salveric? When do they bring everyone back?"

"I second that question," said Tobias, who also happened to look frightened.

Grandfather sighed, drawing a hand to his peppered hair.

"My dear grandchildren. I wish I could answer that question. The only answer I have to give is that, well, they don't."

This, of course, caused an uproar.

"WHAT!!" cried the siblings.

"You can't be serious!" Tobias shouted

"W-what do you mean! How could y-you tell a sad story!" stuttered Ella.

With great difficulty, Grandfather managed to calm them down with gentle words and promises of cookies after.

"Children, you must remember this is a true story, and as true stories often go, things get much worse before they get better."

Nathan King

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Journalism



Second Chance

Rick Ramirez finds a life of stability as a school resource officer after a rocky past

An austere, small room sits near the end of the entrance hallway across from the art gallery. Blue and white colors pervade the space. Two chairs stand at attention, waiting to fulfill their purpose. Various items are haphazardly strewn across the desk. Sticky notes coat the desk, a mural of vivid reminders. Perched on a wall near the back of the room is a sign revealing the room's purpose. The sign, printed in blue and red letters and cleanly decorated with hearts and spirals, states, "Officer Ramirez." But beneath this message and the students' appreciation for its recipient lies a deeper story.

School resource officer Rick Ramirez grew up in East Salinas, California, a small city south of San Francisco. His environment led him to take up a life of juvenile delinquency as a teen, participating in illicit activities throughout a large part of his adolescence.

"The family dynamic and the area that I was from, that's just what you did," Ramirez said. "I followed my dad [and] uncle's footsteps. Some of those people got out of being that way, and some stayed in all the way into their adult life."

Troubled teens often face tough circumstances, which culminates in them acting out at school. After a certain amount of disciplinary action is taken, students are often forced to switch schools.

"I went to several different schools from junior high through high school, and [Ladue] was my last high school," Ramirez said. "This was my last ditch effort to try and finish school."

After hopping from school to school, Ramirez finally ended up at Ladue, the last high school that was willing to open its doors to him. Another new town and another new school, in a part of the United States that was unfamiliar to him.

“When I came to Ladue High School, the administration staff and the counselors were very patient and understanding of my situation and worked with me,” Ramirez said. “That was a motivator for me to try and do better, because so many people were putting time into me.”

After graduating from high school and spending time working out what to do with his life, Ramirez joined the Air Force in an attempt to find meaning. During his four years of service, he was stationed in Minot, North Dakota.

“[It] provided more structure for me and [more] responsibility, because my job was very stressful and required me to have a secret security clearance,” Ramirez said. “If you weren’t good at your job, then there could be disciplinary actions. Being given that structure and responsibility at such a young age helped me to develop and move on.”

Between graduating and enrolling in the Air Force, Ramirez went back home to see the people he knew in the past. He found that few people were afforded the same resources that he was, and a lot of his friends were stuck where they had been before he graduated.

“I went back after I graduated, I went back to California, and the people that I grew up with were still doing the same things, they didn’t advance in life at all,” Ramirez said. “It wasn’t their fault, they just knew that was what their life was. For me to be able to come here and see that there was something different, that was [my] motivator. I never stopped making myself better. I’m still trying to make myself better and do bigger things all of the time.”

Following his stint in the military, Ramirez became a police officer for St. Louis City, then the city of Ladue. After spending a decade in the department in various positions, he was assigned to be the school resource officer at Ladue High School. He returned to the same place where he graduated 27 years prior, this time as an officer.

“This was another position that they would give policemen to get experience,” Ramirez said. “I was in the detective bureau before I came down here, and I was just filling in until they did a process to put a school resource officer down here. It was only supposed to be temporary, a couple weeks, but then when I got down here, I realized that this might be a pretty good job.”

Initially, Ramirez was lukewarm on the idea of working in a school. Juvenile law is a complex topic to work with, and school environments provide unique challenges.

“Juvenile law is different from regular law, and I didn’t want to work with juveniles, but that hasn’t always been the case,” Ramirez said. “My motivation to become a police officer was, initially, I wanted to give back to the youth. When I became a policeman and figured out how it is a nightmare to deal with juvenile law, I didn’t want anything to do with it. [but], when I got here, and started speaking in classes or doing training, I enjoyed it.”

Ramirez had finally been given the opportunity to help people in the same situations that he found himself in in his teenage years: helping students stay out of the criminal justice system before leaving high school. Currently, Ramirez works with a variety of departments regarding the security of the school and the wellbeing of its students.

“He is a really important voice when it comes to our school safety,” social studies teacher Molly Beck said. “He is an expert. I know sometimes it’s easy for us to be like, ‘That’s officer Ramirez, he’s here to hang out with us and be there for us,’—which is true, but he is a trained officer and detective with a lot of experience.”

There are a variety of factors that make individuals turn to juvenile delinquency. Now, as a school resource officer, Ramirez is more involved in understanding what causes troubled behavior in students, and what makes them turn to the same things that he did in the past. He often travels around to classes and speaks to students about their constitutional rights and his police work.

“Officer Ramirez talks about this when he’s in class: most people are good people and want to do the right thing, even if they’re committing crimes, they want to do the right thing,” Beck said. “There’s a reason they’re not, and those reasons are complex.”

Coming back, year after year, leads to the eventual question of retirement. Ramirez is 52 years old, with his son already graduated from Ladue High School. However, his plans for the district and its students have only begun.

“For a long time, I’ve been trying to get a school resource officer at the middle school,” Ramirez said. “That’s where behavior starts to change. If a school resource officer there can impact the kids earlier, by the time they get here, they will have kind of an idea how to use the school system and get their education. We finally got one down there. Even once I retire from police work, I still have other plans, hopefully in the school system here in Ladue.”

Between working on the street and working in a classroom, one an environment with constant action, and one with less movement, Ramirez has found his place—working in a school, helping students and ensuring their safety.

“When I meet parents, and they go, ‘Officer Ramirez, my son had you five years ago, he still talks about you,’ I know I’ve made some kind of impact,” Ramirez said. “When a parent or a student comes back to visit the school years and years later and says [that] I made a difference, or helped them with their path to where they’re going—that is the most satisfying part of my job. In the last 27 years, I’ve had a lot of positions in the city that didn’t give me the [same] gratification of knowing that I helped someone.



Aurea Mediocritas: Shakespeare's Balances in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Excellence lies in avoiding both excess and deficiency, a virtue found in the absence of vices. This idea was first inspired by Aristotle, who suggested in his treatise, *Nicomachean Ethics*, that when decisions are in the middle, neither excessive or deficient, they are the Golden Mean. Following this are works of other ancient Greek or Roman poets such as Horace who wrote *Rectius vives* based on that ideal, possibly inspiring later writers including Shakespeare. Literature far after ancient times still remain influenced by the Aristotle's beliefs. One such writer is William Shakespeare, one of the most well-known historical figures of all time for the plays that he authored. A relevant work of his is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which three plots regarding a lovers' quarrel, a feuding fairy realm, and a group of amateur actors become woven together by the mischievous magic of a fairy named Puck. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare uses character foil, emotional extremes, and a resolution to demonstrate that harmony relies on the balance of reason and emotion rather than submission to either extreme, reflecting the ideology of the Golden Mean.

Two prominent characters, Theseus and Oberon, are the leaders of Athens and the woods respectively who represent an abundance of emotion and reason respectively, and they make unfavorable decisions whereas Puck oscillates between the two extremes. The audience first hears Egeus angrily entering Theseus' palace, complaining of his daughter Hermia's reluctance to marry the man he wishes she would. In response, Theseus tells Hermia of her possible

futures: “Or else the law of Athens yields [her] up / (Which by no means we may extenuate) / To death, or to a vow of single life” (1.1.119-121). As the most powerful person in Athens, Theseus can change these unfair rules; however, Theseus reflects Athens’ Apollonian thought or abundance of reason. Not allowing exceptions as it would be unfair to bend the rules is considered as extreme reason or justice by Theseus. Therefore, Theseus represents an excess of reason by enforcing Athenian law without regard for moral flexibility in offering irrational possibilities to Hermia. Showing the opposite of this scale is the excessively emotional Oberon, who tells Puck of his plans when Titania refuses his pleas: “I’ll watch Titania when she is asleep, / And drop the liquor of it in her eyes: / [...] / She shall pursue it with the soul of love. / [...] / I’ll make her render up her page to me” (2.1.177-178, 182, 185). Oberon represents an excess of emotion by allowing his jealousy to justify his immoral act of manipulation. Oberon’s servant, Puck, also plays a big part as he follows Oberon’s orders without question, showing his double-sided nature as he remarks, “Churl, upon [Lysander’s] eyes I throw / All the power this charm doth owe” (2.2.84-85). Puck displays irrationality in reason, adhering to the social hierarchy but lacking judgement when doing so. However, Puck following his emotions later on also causes him to make the irrational decision of placing an ass’ head on Bottom, a mortal, telling Oberon, “An ass’s nole I fixed on his head” (3.2.17). Theseus and Oberon represent opposites of the same scale, showing a need for balance, whereas Puck, symbolizing either extreme, furthers this by showing how even when balanced, there should not be extremes in general.

Meanwhile, in the woods, the lovers further show how an excess of emotion has repercussions as they chase each other, blinded by love. Having learned of Hermia and Lysander’s plot to flee into the woods, Helena informed Demetrius who follows after them, subsequently pursued by Helena. On the way, Demetrius rejects Helena: “...do I not in plainest truth / Tell you I do not, nor I cannot love you?” to which Helena responds: “And even for that do I love you the more. / I am your spaniel, and, Demetrius, / The more you beat me I will fawn on you” (2.1.199-204). Helena has great love—a love that remains strong even through Demetrius’ berates. Helena’s devotion thus reveals how unchecked emotion erodes self-respect and reason, transforming a pure affection into humiliation. Continuing this, when Demetrius and Lysander fall in love with Helena due to a potion, Helena and Hermia quarrel, mentioning their old friendship: “Is all the counsel that we two have shared, / The sisters’ vows, the hours that we have spent / When we have chid the hasty-footed time / For

parting us—O, is all forgot?” (3.2.198-201). The two were friends, being close since childhood. Yet, they forgo this because of their jealousy and anger at each other for supposedly stealing each other’s lovers and argue instead. In addition, Helena previously admitted that: “Nor hath love’s mind of any judgement taste; / [...] / And therefore is love said to be a child / Because in choice he is so oft beguiled” (1.1.236, 238-239). A significant character in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* directly mentions the argument of love blinding a person, or making them irrational as it is random or lacking in judgment. It can be said to make one like a child or stupid in love, also showing how it causes a lack of reason, something established as catastrophic. Extremes of love make the lovers make foolish decisions, leading to more chaos, until a balance with love is also reached in the end.

As Theseus and Oberon enter the forest, they cross into a liminal space that allows for a joyful resolution in the face of transformation and reconciliation. Theseus, having entered the forest with Hippolyta before their wedding, changes his mind: “Egeus, I will overbear your will; / For in the temple, by and by, with us / These couples shall eternally be knit” (4.1.176-178). Theseus changes his will before tragedy strikes. By being slightly less firm with his belief of reason, Theseus thinks also with his heart, deciding that exceptions may be allowed and unrestraining Hermia from the previous-given irrational choices. Similarly, Oberon, having obtained his desire, pities Titania and takes the charm off of her, bringing back harmony: “Sound, music! Come, my Queen, take hands with me. / [...] / Now thou and I are new in amity” (4.1.82, 84). Oberon also makes peace with her, bringing the world back from the chaos caused by the fairies’ power back into its natural state. By thinking reasonably after the long suffering that Titania underwent from his manipulation, Oberon makes these rational decisions. Theseus and Oberon’s changes allow for Athens and the woods to be in harmony, showing how a balance between two natures such as reason and emotion are necessary to make rational decisions that lead to such endings.

Through exaggerated conflicts and eventual reconciliation, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* affirms the principle of moderation. Shakespeare shows reason without empathy becoming tyranny as well as emotion without restraint devolving into chaos, reflecting a need for balance on both ends. Significant writers like Shakespeare enunciate the idea of the Golden Mean, which was firstly identified by Aristotle—one of the most prominent philosophers—who also came up with multiple important concepts such as function, classification, and hierarchy. Shakespeare’s message in his iconic work still remains relevant today as it is reminded in other ideals such as a balance between work and play. Readers

should continue to remember that it is neither strict reason nor wanton emotion that leads to true harmony, but rather a balance, as only when characters temper both impulses does true harmony emerge.

Citations

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Sauteur and Céleste, Inspired by Chopin's Waltz Op. 64 No. 1

Sauteur scurried across the room, drawn by the rich scent of a freshly filled bowl. Beside it sat another plain, dry, and unmistakably dog food. His face twisted in disgust, as though the world itself had betrayed him. He glanced around. No one was watching.

Sauteur leapt.

Just as his mouth stretched toward the forbidden feast, a voice drifted down like music.

“That is mine.”

Sauteur froze. His fur bristled as he lifted his head. Standing before him was a cat, poised and radiant, her great green eyes gleaming from the shadow of the wardrobe. Her midnight-colored fur shone like a still lake beneath a full moon, immaculate and fragrant, as though she had stepped straight from a dream.

Sauteur forgot to breathe.

“Excuse me,” the cat continued calmly, “but may I ask what you are doing?”

“Oh! Hello!” Sauteur blurted, blinking rapidly. “I’m Sauteur. What’s your name?”

“I have been honored to be called Minuit Céleste,” she replied, her voice smooth and measured.

“That’s... long,” Sauteur said cheerfully. “May I call you Céleste?”

She hesitated, clearly proud of her name, before sighing. “If you wish.”

From that moment on, they became inseparable.

They ate together, wandered together, and, most importantly, listened to piano music together. They connected through music as they were both deeply passionate. Beneath Frédéric Chopin's piano, where melodies drifted like falling snow, they lay side by side as his fingers danced across the keys. At night, while stacks of books towered around them, Sauteur and Céleste waltzed in quiet circles, their shadows spinning along the walls.

Over time, they became such good friends. Sauteur adored her elegance; she moved as gently as freshly fallen snow on the mountains and window sills. To Sauteur, she was like a breeze of fresh air and fresh dew in the early morning. Céleste also loved her lively and energetic friend - his boundless energy, his joy. She would brush upon Sauteur's tail whenever she came and danced with him.

GRRRRRR!!!! The thunder and rain combined sounded like a hungry, angry and aggressive dog that had a juicy piece of steak dangling in front of it. It was a depressing and stormy night. Thunder growled through the house, rain lashing against the windows like an angry warning. Sauteur found Céleste perched on the sill, staring into the darkness as lightning split the sky.

"Céleste?" he whispered. "Are you okay? You haven't been playing with me for the last couple days."

She did not turn at once. "Oh, hello Sauteur." spoke Céleste grimly, "I have something to tell you..." Sauteur walked forward, expecting his worse scenario that perhaps she was a little sick or tired. "I am leaving" stated Céleste blankly. Sauteur felt the world tilt.

"Leaving?" His voice trembled. "You can't." "What? What do you mean?"

"I must," she replied. "Mr. Chopin is ill. The doctors say my fur worsens his condition. A friend of his in Poland will take me."

"Poland?" he thought, "That's like two million miles away!"

Before he could speak again, a knock sounded at the door. "Ahh! Sorry for asking you to come on such a stormy day, my good friend!" said Mr. Chopin.

"No worries. My family and I have been longing for a pet! A cat would be perfect for us!" said a cheerful and excited voice.

"I better go grab her now." sighed Mr. Chopin.

Céleste moaned and willingly let Mr. Chopin take her. Mr. Chopin's friend took her and bade farewell to Mr. Chopin. Outside, Céleste faced towards Sauteur one last time and disappeared into the rain, her silhouette swallowed by the waiting car. He stayed there until dawn, certain, desperate, that she would return.

"Perhaps she was joking! That silly cat!" Sauteur thought happily. Suddenly, he paused. Céleste never joked around, especially not with something

this saddening and serious. At that moment, Sauteur realized that Céleste was not coming back. Not tomorrow, not next month, not next year, never...

When Chopin later called for him, Sauteur crept weakly towards Mr. Chopin and slumped down in front of the piano, since going underneath reminded Sauteur too much of Céleste.

Out of nowhere, Sauteur felt something brush against his tail. He twirled in excitement! So much excitement he could twirl for all eternity.

He spun.

Nothing.

Yet again, the gentle touch.

Sauteur twirled faster and faster, chasing what he could not see, grief and memory driving his motion. He looked at his tail. Nothing, no-one. Another brush! He leaped to look at his tail and twirled in excitement.

Above him, Chopin paused. Watching the little dog spin in endless circles, he smiled.

“A dog chasing his tail,” Chopin murmured. “How interesting!”

That night, the music came alive.

This is how Mr. Chopin created the “Waltz” Op. 64 No. 1 or the Minute Waltz. Mr. Chopin was inspired by Sauteur “chasing” his tail. It seemed so exciting, chaotic, and repetitive. Of course, the reason behind that exciting and happy piece is the exact opposite, sorrow. However, Mr. Chopin did not know that, so he combined all those happy elements into one piece, an exciting and fun piece, inspired by the saddening and depressing story. For though the music laughed, its heart held the memory of Sauteur and Céleste, forever dancing just out of reach.

Grace Kwak

Grade 10, Blue Valley North High School

Personal Essay & Memoir



For The Wildflowers and My Past Sisters

I remember how you threw me against the concrete in July. It was scorched, and the push you gave me burned me as much as the ground did.

We used to listen to *Hillsong* from the car radio—songs like “Oceans,”—and it hummed in the background of our conversations, gentle and relentless. Then once the car door slid open, we’d run into the fields with our slippers and crocs. The music faded behind us as if some holy ghost watched from the grass as we forgot how to pray for each other.

Before July, you braided my hair on your trampoline. We drank juice pouches and spat our saliva onto the ground like delinquents, and I didn’t care if my knees were scraped.

Your backyard always smelled like fresh linen, as if the wind had taken someone’s laundry and laid it across the grass. The sky was too bright those days, shining like a scintillating blue. Gentle clouds hung apart from each other like strangers who didn’t want to be near and sparse cotton boats drifting across, not meant to be close to each other either. Yet none of it matched the sound of my body hitting the pavement.

I’ll still remember how the beautiful sunlight made my skin bloom and how I once dug up dirt just to bury wildflowers, hoping they’d grow next to us when you’d care about me again. I could recall that there wasn’t a single moment when I realized you had stopped seeing me. But then came a time, when I finally noticed when you stopped looking for me in crowded rooms during family parties. And as we all gathered around the fireplace to cook s’mores, you ran off far away from me—distracted by your own thoughts that you were chasing—ones that I couldn’t reach with you.

I wondered what it was that changed me or you. Maybe you only cared about who I was before. Maybe it was you that simply stopped caring. I wondered, and I wondered if you ever think about how you acted—or if it's easier to believe I became who I am on my own.

I felt alone as I danced barefoot on the pavement, where you had pushed me. I danced aimlessly with the humble music that played quietly between us—and you looked at me in awe and both in shame, curiosity that bled in judgment.

The wildflowers, they stayed damp under the ground that I had buried dirt on top of their stems, and they waited and waited through each passing rain and slow days.

We would eat ice cream together on your house steps. My hair was half-brushed, and I broke down into tears once you went inside the back door. Crescent-moons were red against my skin—making up conspicuous squares to get rid of bug bites—as I cried over my elbows. My knees were tucked under my skin as a bandaid was slipping off, holding onto my ankle before I could let it.

The moons didn't really stop the itchiness
nor did the wildflowers ever really grow.

Your mom asked me once if something was wrong. I said no. That was the first lie I told to protect you. After that, I stopped brushing my hair before coming over. I stopped trying to talk during movies when I watched them with your siblings. And I stopped recognizing the girl who used to laugh until her ribs hurt. I pressed at my cheeks to see if they remembered how to smile.

Don't you think we were too young to experience how loneliness felt?

Sometimes I look back at her—the girl I was then—and I remember how she used to laugh at anything. Not because things were always funny, but because laughter felt like living proof that her heart was still soft. She was too sweet for her own good—sweeter than the ice cream we shared, even when it melted sticky down our hands.

She was the kind of girl who organized her desk meticulously, lining up her pencils like soldiers and wiping dust off the corners with her sleeve. She once wrote a picture book during free period, and the whole class loved it. The teacher smiled like it meant something. But she couldn't stay too excited about it—not for long—because she believed that everyone was inherently good, everyone except herself.

After school, she'd doodle alone in the margins of her notebooks—daisies, stars, girls with long hair and magic powers—quietly making a world she could

live in after the real one had worn her out. And she was already so tired, even then.

I still love her when I remember.

But you didn't destroy me. None of you did. You only peeled the petals back far enough for me to see the stem and believe that even broken stems can bloom again, wilder and softer than before. I wasn't destroyed by you, but instead, I was changed. I changed from being happy, unserious, and unable to contain my contagious laughter. I became what you would've feared I'd become. What's worse about your fear is that it doesn't scare me that I've changed. But the truth is, it was inevitable.

I may smile less on certain days and force myself to run in chasing my spark—but I'm still here, and I am still me. I may not be full of yellow anymore, where my face shines daily, but I am still the girl you first met—and even older. And there's beauty in growing old with the planet that orbits us—in letting our bodies soften, in watching our faces change as the years peel back who we used to be.

There's beauty in all of us, even in the parts that break. So even if you hurt me to protect yourself—even if you meant to hide that beauty away from me—I am happier than I've ever been in my life. I will always be content in being who I will be because it's not in the way I used to be, with loud laughter and scraped knees, but in the way that I finally stopped begging to be loved and started loving myself like I deserved all along.

...

Do you remember the *Polaroids* we took during class?

You were wearing your favorite green sweater and you didn't smile with your teeth, but I knew you were happy. I kept that photo in my drawer for years. The corners must've curled while the ink has faded into blues and sepias, but I could still envision you looking right at me.

Do you ever miss that girl? *Even a little?*

The one who danced to claw machine jingles in arcade corners, who spun in circles just to make herself dizzy. The one who ordered the same strawberry banana smoothie at *Denny's* like it was an ongoing routine.

Maybe one day, I'll have wrinkles.

My hands will tremble a little as I hold the same glass—once so easy to grip with steady hands, and maybe I won't dance to music I can't hear clearly. One day, I will no longer be that young girl, but I'll embrace the change that rises from within me—not from what was taken, but from what I grew myself.

Because I learned to love myself without others, and I know by then I'll still be okay living without you in my life. I learned this by watching working women in restaurants who hum to themselves as they carry out dishes. Grandmothers who wear their age like velvet, with silver curls they don't bother to straighten and glasses rimmed in red or brown.

I saw those other women in library corners, their tote bags full of poetry anthologies, wearing coral lipstick and wide-legged pants, and one day I'll be one of those women. I will walk slowly, and perhaps darken like the seasons do.

But the seasons will change with me,
just like the colored leaves do—
because even the most beautiful things
must learn how to let go.

...

Maybe the girl you met in the summer wore jelly bracelets and danced barefoot on the porch. But the one you knew by October keeps her hands in her pockets, her headphones in. Perhaps you won't love me by then or later, because I won't dance the way I used to or like the same things anymore—*Cookies 'n Cream*, pastel windbreakers, the ache of needing to be needed.

But I don't *need* you to love who I was before, or who I am now.

And I don't wonder anymore if you regret what we had, or what you did to me. Because I know it all belongs to the past, and time will change us both. And even if it takes either of us a lifetime to feel sorry for each other, I will still love you like a sister, even as the Earth keeps spinning, far beneath our feet. I know that we changed the world around us irrevocably, even if it was small—and that can never change, because it was once love, after all. *I'll think of you when I see fields of wildflowers, blooming in pastures no one expected them to survive in.*

And I'll wonder if you ever learned how to pray again—if you ever believed in beauty again.

Or if forgetting was easier. Maybe you press skip every time you hear Hillsong on the radio.

But I still pause when I see wildflowers where no one meant for them to grow.



Pontoon War

Most boats don't have assigned seats, but my grandpa's pontoon was different. Although the rules were never spoken, my older cousins, my big brother, and I all understood them: breaking the seating pact between the four of us meant war. Usually, we kept the peace, but deep down, I always had my eye on one of the two seats at the front. Those were the prizes—the thrones of our floating kingdom.

There were two other seats near the front, but you had to lie down in them. Boring. Personally, I loved the wind in my hair, sitting up straight at the bow. The wind howled in my ears, like helicopter blades. Of course, seniority quickly trampled my pleasure. I was the youngest and didn't stand a chance of sitting where I preferred.

From the front lines, you held the most important job on the vessel: scanning the lake for big boats ahead. Whenever one appeared, we sounded the alarm to the captain, our grandpa. We shouted, "Papa, yacht! Papa, yacht!" Our battle cry made my brother and cousins light up with excitement. To them, a yacht meant a rollercoaster and a wild splash. To me, the yacht was a threat, not a thrill. I was sure that the massive waves would swallow our boat whole. Fear took hold of me, and I retreated to the back lines of the boat where the parents sat. It felt shameful, but I told myself the ones who stayed were older and braver than I was. I was the baby; I had a right to safety.

The next summer, only three soldiers remained. My brother had been called to a new post, the world beyond childhood. Age had never previously separated us, so why now? Even so, the three of us carried on our mission, laughing and begging Grandpa for more rides. With an open seat, I was promoted

to the very front. Strangely, the back seats were now deemed as the better ones due to the quietness. Weird. My oldest cousin discovered a new tactic: standing up during the waves like a surfer, which was strictly forbidden by the captain. He timed his jumps perfectly when the boat went down, making it appear like he was flying. I believed he was for a while.

I didn't always understand their jokes, but I laughed anyway, eager to belong. When the cousins started driving, they had the freedom to leave the lake—and me—whenever they wished. I often found myself seated at the “adult table,” not because I had earned it, but because the rest of the crew was dispatched. The number of boat rides shrank due to low demand.

The bunk room also had its own unspoken seating chart. Once again, I never got the top bunk because of seniority. Later, when I finally had the choice, I was surprised to find the victory stung more than it soothed. I would have stayed in the bottom bunk forever if it meant one more night of giggling with the now old crew. The commanders always yelled from the hallway, “Go to bed!” as we whispered and laughed.

Now I am the last one standing. On the rare boat rides I take these days, I no longer shrink away from big waves. I lean into them with the same enthusiasm the others once had. I finally understand the jokes, but it's far too late. Believe it or not, I actually came to love the back seat, the same one I once thought was boring. There's something peaceful about lying there, listening to the quiet wind in the middle of the chaotic battlefield. I've even slept on the top bunk at last! Honestly, it's no different than the bottom.

Occasionally, I invite new recruits, my friends, to come to the lake. But it doesn't feel the same. They sit in the same spots the squad once did, unaware of the stories etched into those seats. The only evidence of our reign is the names painted onto the bunk room wall, in thick black font. Someday, I'll join their ghosts that linger in that house.

But for now, I remain. I still stand my post and sit in my assigned seat, even though the others are no longer occupied. I can't bring myself to move, because breaking that pact would mean letting the memory die—and I'm not ready for that yet.

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Personal Essay & Memoir



Memory in Our Hands

In loving memory of Laolao (1933-2026)

2017: Learning

“Beat it higher and harder, and the egg will taste soft and tender.” Mom cracked the eggs into a bowl and began beating them with her chopsticks, setting them slightly apart to create an airy texture in the mixture. Under the clink of bamboo chopsticks striking the rim of the porcelain bowl, the egg yolks and whites began to break up and combine, blending into a single color with frothy bubbles on top. It was a late Sunday afternoon, a week before my 8th birthday. Mom decided to teach my older brother, Bryson, and me to cook our favorite dish: *xihongshi chao jidan* (Tomato Scrambled Eggs). For me, it had been a simple, delicious dish, for as long as I could remember, whether paired with rice or noodles, or enjoyed on its own.

Mom handed it over so we could try beating the mixture, but our clumsy mixing only left bits of egg on the countertop. “This is the hardest part about the dish,” Mom smiled, holding my hands to show me a circular motion. “The trick is to use the chopstick tips to draw an oval shape in the air.”

Mom then grabbed tomatoes and placed them on the cutting board. Her knife strokes were smooth and precise, carving perfect cubes of tomatoes. Bryson turned the stove to medium heat and waited for the wok to heat up. Mom put her palm about six inches above the cast-iron wok and counted 1001, 1002, 1003...If

your palm felt too hot to count to 1010, then the wok was ready. She poured in vegetable oil, swirling the pan to coat it evenly, “Be generous with the oil so the egg can puff up fully.” As she poured the fluffy egg mixture into the wok, a satisfying sizzle filled the kitchen, and the mixture formed large scrambled-egg clumps in the wok.

Mom quickly transferred the eggs into the bowl and added tomato chunks to the still-sizzling wok. Bryson was entrusted with stirring the tomato. I watched as the sweet tomato juices filled the pan and the crisp, ripe tomatoes dissolved into a mush, bathing in their own juices. Mom then added salt and sugar to the juice and put the scrambled eggs back in, “the eggs would absorb the tomato juice and give it an egg aroma.” Two minutes later, a rich, fragrant smell filled our house as Mom plated the finished dish – sunny yellow and bright red.

“Your grandma, Laolao, taught me this dish when I was just twelve years old,” she said, eyes softening. “Now you two can finally make it for yourselves.”

I gazed upon the vibrant colors on the plate, awaiting the moment when I could meet the grandmother I had heard so much about.

2018: Forgetting

I held Laolao’s hand as we walked through the crowded alleys of a bustling food mall in Beijing. Laoye (my grandpa) and Bryson walked ahead. This was the first time I met Laolao and Laoye. We were out for a family dinner. The place was packed, full of locals and tourists alike. The air was filled with the sounds of vendors hawking their food and the lively chatter of their customers shouting their orders. Rich and savory aromas filled the air. We wound our way through the sprawling complex, arriving at a secluded corner with a single restaurant, quiet and isolated from the rest of the mall.

Mom, Bryson, and I sat in a booth across from Laolao and Laoye. The warm lighting was comforting. Bryson poured cups of tea for everyone as we scanned the heavy menu. Among the many pictures of vibrant dishes, I spotted a familiar one. As the waiter came to take our order, I asked for *xihongshi chao jidan*. Laolao smiled at me, surprised that I could pronounce the dish’s name without much of an American accent.

As we waited for the dishes, Laolao asked for my name. A small pang of confusion hit me – she had known my name since my birth, and I had told her several times earlier in the day. But seeing the inquiry in her eyes, I dismissed the thought. I was just relieved I could answer without stuttering in Chinese.

The waiter brought out our dishes, creating a collage of meats and veggies on our table. I scooped a steaming spoonful of *xihongshi chao jidan* onto my plate, over the rice. It had a sweet and sour taste, as expected, but it was still missing something from Mom's cooking. I wondered if I would have a chance to taste this dish from Laolao in the next few days.

Seeing that I swallowed my last bite, Laolao picked up a serving spoon and piled more food in front of me. I told her "*Wo bao le* (I'm already full)," but she replied with "*Ni tai shou le, duo chi dian!* (You're too skinny, eat some more!)". She hadn't addressed me by name a single time, but her eyes gleamed with satisfaction as she watched me finish another plate.

In the following days, Mom took over the kitchen. Laolao tried to help by washing vegetables. Mom said that Laolao can no longer cook because she would forget steps halfway through.

One night, I heard them whispering. "Am I getting dumb?" Laolao asked. The pain in her voice was clear. "No, Mom, you're smart," Mom said gently. "You just don't remember."

Later, Mom told us that Laolao had mild Alzheimer's. It was affecting her short-term memory, but Mom worried that as the condition progressed, Laolao would begin to lose long-term memory too. "She won't forget who she is and who you are, right?" I asked. Mom put her head down silently.

Mom spent more time chatting with Laolao whenever we visited her apartment. They talked about Laolao's childhood, her youth before she met Laoye, and her parents, as if Mom were trying to save the last bits of Laolao's memory.

2018: Memory

I sat in the corner of the living room, listening as Mom gently guided Laolao back in time. They spoke of Chongqing city, where Laolao had lived during China's civil war.

"Tell me about the silkworms," Mom urged.

Laolao's eyes lit up. "Oh, the silkworms ate so much! We had to rush to collect mulberry leaves after school but could not keep up with them." I could hear the joy in her voice as I pictured a young girl running down a hill with bags of leaves. "After the war, we moved to Beijing. I finished high school there at the top of my class."

"Why didn't you attend college at the time?"

“It was not an option for me,” Laolao said calmly. “My father passed away. And my mother...,” she said, gesturing towards her own feet. “With the traditional footbinding for women in those days, she couldn’t walk far. Someone had to support the family.”

“I was lucky,” she said. “An electrical engineering professor needed someone to calculate numbers. I became his human computer.” He even sent me to take advanced math classes at the university.”

“And she didn’t stop there!” Mom turned to me, beaming, “She wrote the first assembly language for China’s first computer. She was a pioneer.”

“Code, numbers..., that’s all in the past,” Laolao interrupted softly, “The important thing was my job came with campus housing benefits. Because of that campus apartment, my sister and brothers could attend the university’s middle and high schools. They all went on to college.”

I looked at Laolao, sinking into the armchair. It was hard to imagine her frail figure as the architect behind complex code. She had programmed the machines’ minds to remember everything, but the only mind she couldn’t save was her own.

2019: Who are you?

Rain pattered against our umbrella as Mom and I walked down a familiar alley. It had been an entire year since our last visit; a year during which I had seen my grandparents only on WeChat video calls. We dried off in the lobby and took the elevator to the 11th floor. As soon as Laoye opened Door 1101, his face lit up. He ushered us inside, and I wandered over to the living room to find Laolao sitting on the couch. She looked at us, confused, and asked, “*Ni shi shui* (who are you)?” I glanced at Mom. With a pause, Mom responded, with an amplified tone, “*Mama, wo shi ni de nu er!* (Mom, I’m your daughter!) And this is Niuniu, your grandson!” “Oh, my daughter.” Laolao seemed relaxed, searching for something in her memory. “You are *Xiaoxiu*?” Mom didn’t say a word. She crossed the room and buried her face in Laolao’s shoulder, her body shaking as she held on.

Later, Mom went to the kitchen to cook, and I joined Laolao on the couch to watch cartoons. We sat quietly. Every few minutes, she would glance over at me with a confused look, remarking on the show. Maybe she was trying to figure out who this teenager was on her couch, but too polite to ask.

Mom had cooked *xihongshi chao jidan*, and it smelled divine after the long rainy day. I sat beside Laolao. She didn't eat or talk much, only pausing to scoop more food onto my plate. That night, she left the table early to go to sleep.

2023: A Bittersweet Summer

I stood beside Bryson, watching him tilt the bowl and start to beat the eggs. The rhythm of his chopsticks against the porcelain bowl sounded just like Mom's. But she wasn't there. She was 7,000 miles away, in Beijing.

The Summer of 2023 was supposed to be a celebration for my family. Bryson had just graduated from high school, and we planned a month-long vacation to Europe before he went to pursue his dreams at Stanford. A phone call from my aunt in Beijing cancelled everything.

Laolao's Alzheimer's progressed quickly during the long pandemic. "She eats very little, and she doesn't recognize Laoye anymore," Aunt told us, "She needs assistance that Laoye can't provide."

Mom flew back immediately to join her sister in the search for a nursing home, but she came up against a wall. Most facilities wanted to split them up: a memory ward for Laolao and an independent-living ward for Laoye. However, he refused and insisted on a co-living arrangement. "I want to see her every day," he told Mom. He didn't care that she looked at him like a stranger. He just wanted to be the stranger who held her hand.

In our kitchen at home, Bryson poured the egg mixture into the hot wok. The sizzle filled the silence. We were eating the dish we had loved since childhood, while Laoye was embracing the confinement of a nursing home to be with the woman who passed the dish down to us.

2025: Remembering

One Saturday night, my phone buzzed. A notification from Bryson popped up, sending photos from his Stanford dorm kitchen. He had started cooking for his roommates.

Swiping through the pictures: seafood tofu soup, broccoli beef, fried rice... then I paused. There it was, a plate of sunny yellow and bright red, a plate of *xihongshi chao jidan*. I stared at the screen, studying the fluffiness of the eggs and the saucy consistency of the tomatoes.

In a nursing home 7,000 miles away, Laolao has likely forgotten the word for “tomato.” She doesn’t remember the boy she once tried to push to eat more, the daughter she taught to cook *xihongshi chao jidan*, or the silkworms she raised as a young girl.

Looking at that photo, I realized that while memory may fade in the mind, it can live in our hands. Laolao’s memory lives on in Mom’s reminiscent stories. It’s alive in Laoye’s refusal to leave her side. It’s alive in Bryson’s chopsticks in California. And it is alive here, in me, writing these words to keep her from fading away.

She no longer needs to remember. We will remember for her.

Author’s Note: As I am putting the finishing touches on this essay, Laolao passed away on January 2nd, 2026, in Beijing. She was 92.

Valery Liang

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Speculative Fiction



Éclaircie

The summer Alain Takahashi turned nineteen, he met the devil three times.

The first time it happens, two moons hang swollen in the sky like full-bellied ghosts. Witching hour rises high, and silver spills mirthfully into the twisting trails that Alain's beaten shoes leave behind.

Grass bows crisp beneath fraying soles, dry and purple from the heat. Sweat clings to skin, leather, a fresh-flower bruise. The fields are quiet. The night is sweet.

As always, the church crouches cold: an unassuming in-between of dilapidated and grand, milky walls curling, some pinched and spired lighthouse ascending spiny through the dark. One round lake laps at the temple's front doors, dappled with stars and speckled by bleached bones. Alain avoids the moss-kissed entrance and climbs in through a smashed back window instead.

Someone else is already inside.

Crowded pews crumble in decrepit shadow. A silhouette lies in the shade of Mother Mary's dusty effigy, slumped against the foremost bench. The twin moons halo his silver hair, spilled milk skimming mercury. When the stranger sees Alain, he gasps and shoots bare arms into the air.

"Oh." Alain takes a step back. "I'm not military."

"You're wearing a uniform." The stranger raises an eyebrow. His hands stay up.

"Dishonorable discharge." Alain tries for a smile. "I deserted last week."

The stranger assesses, relents, devours. Beetle-black pupils flicker once. "Sit down, then."

Alain sits at the other end of the pew. His knees knock against splinters, shadows, twice-stained glass. "Thank you."

"Why are you here?" The stranger's eyes look like mist, like a phosgene storm. "There's a war outside."

Alain shrugs. "There's always a war. And I want to be a street painter."

The stranger's laugh is summer lightning, peeling bright through a low green valley. "Aren't you interesting? Hey, my name's Ashura."

"Alain," he offers in return.

Ashura breathes in quiet tempests, one querulous midnight downpour. Alain shuts his eyes against the petrichor, the thrashing, lonesome typhoon.

They sit in silence until sunrise stains the sky.

The second time it happens, a light storm is drizzling over red market lanterns. Droplets trickle onto pink ink dragons and hazy cherry blossoms. Solstice dances sweet, waltzes in the language of loam and grinning streets.

Alain folds away his easel, paints, moneybox, walks two blocks back toward his one-room apartment and returns empty-handed to join the midnight festivities.

Canary tosses him a pouch of copper coins. "You owe me lunch," she says. The rain has smudged her mascara, made ruinous rivers from sunny rich facepaint.

Three silk-swathed female dancers flit past. His friend eyes the trio with a smile that splits her face in two and runs off to chase them.

"Sure," he tells her shadow.

Alain buys two kebabs and one skewer of sugar-coated strawberries. The fruits are shriveled and blackened in places, but it is wartime, after all: innocence is hedonism, and sweetness is sin.

The damp makes Alain's old scars ache. He sits on a dusty bench, watches leaves ricochet against cold puddles and old pavement. In the dark, two sleek cats dart across rust-red sewer grates.

Rain roars, pseudo-divine; worn sunlight tips in one ear and out the other. Alain is drowning in cloudburst, a dried twilight field overrun by gentle floods.

When he looks up, Ashura is there.

"Ashura is an Earthling demon," Alain tells him, by way of greeting.

"*The* Earthling demon." Ashura's smile stirs small storms. "I'm the only one left. And more demigod than anything, anyway."

Alain tilts his head. "Earthling endling. With you gone, isn't Earth empty?"

One thundering laugh, summer's first rain roaring over the horizon. "Earth was empty long before I left, street painter."

Down the thoroughfare, clockwork jesters pirouette in flame-spun rabbit masks, conjuring bright ouroboroi of foxes and nebulae that leap from star-spangled drums. The firelight catches against Ashura's eyes, runs red-hot fingers down his dusky bomber jacket and hickory combat boots. A traveler, Alain thinks, torn jeans and wanderlust, vivacious interplanetary expatriate.

The solstice festival strums and sways. Red lanterns weave through rainy shops and alleyways, rattled by the rush of a thousand wandering feet. High in the sky, starships tangle, despairing over the detritus of a hundred ruined planets. *400 kilometers until descent, Captain, the Milky Way is beautiful tonight. 2 missiles struck the stern—I pronounce all engines dead. Why us? Systems red, despairing. Why us? We will be buried by the stars. Goodnight, Captain, do you believe in afterlife?*

It smells like sugar, like laughter and stir-fried melancholy.

"My father died last night," Alain says. "Killed in action. I saw it on the news."

"You seem happy about that."

"Yes, and very sad."

"Next time we meet," Ashura murmurs, "draw me."

"I will," Alain promises.

The third time it happens, the night is sticky-dark and warm as a shroud. The lake in front of the church has dried up, baring bones and dirt and a drowning stone path that leads to the chapel's mossy entrance.

Alain's footsteps crunch on withered grass. He runs into the dying summer, the melting solstice and fading heat. Slowly, he eases open the door.

Ashura is already inside.

First pew up, beneath the marble shadow of fractured Mother Mary. One moon is out tonight, curved like a sickle. It dances through Ashura's hair, kisses soft stormcloud eyes.

Alain sits and begins to draw. The air fills with gentle breathing, weaving winds and the scratch of pencil on paper.

Once he's done, Alain flips the sketchbook around so Ashura can see his charcoal likeness: silver hair and grinning eyes, mouth caught around a laugh like lightning.

"You're beautiful," Alain says.

“I am.” Ashura leans his head against Alain’s shoulder, smiles small and content. “Are you still sad, street painter?”

“No,” Alain tells him, windstorm through a meadow, barley bowing past the eye of a hurricane. It’s humid, sweet.

“Good.”

They stay like that for a long time, nestled soft in the dark, and do not move until the dawn rises to paint the world a brilliant gold.

Éclaircie (n.) — a sunny spell, a clearing, a fire-bright interval. In French, this can refer to the brilliance of sunshine breaking through a storm, transmuting damp earth into gold; a time of clarity in a tumultuous situation, incandescent with favorability; and occasionally, it describes a thinning-out, like the felling of unwanted trees.

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Critical Essay



Comparing Generative AI and Human Translations of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

ABSTRACT

The translation of historical documents, often written in archaic languages, poses challenges due to linguistic complexity, semantic ambiguity, and limited availability of trained experts. This study evaluates the ability of generative AI models—ChatGPT, Gemini, and Poe—to translate the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a corpus written in Old English, by comparing their outputs to professional human translations using the BLEU metric. 14 samples were extracted that reference King Alfred the Great from the Peterborough Manuscript, which were then translated by the generative AI models. Those translations were then compared to Michael Swanton’s acclaimed modern English version. The BLEU scores of AI translations were also benchmarked against those by James Ingram and Dorothy Whitelock, an early 19th-century translation and a preeminent scholarly translation, respectively. Results indicate that Gemini produced translations with significantly higher BLEU scores than ChatGPT and Ingram, and not significantly lower than Whitelock, indicating that Gemini may have the potential to match modern human translators in historical language tasks. While ChatGPT and Poe underperformed relative to Whitelock, all AI models outperformed the early 19th-century translation by Ingram. The study concludes that generative AI, particularly Gemini, can serve as a valuable tool for translating historical texts. It offers both practical applications for expediting historical research and implications for translator training. However, limitations concerning sample

selection, prompt standardization, and BLEU’s lack of qualitative depth highlight the need for further research, especially in applying AI to texts lacking pre-existing translations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Metric for Evaluation: BLEU

Bilingual evaluation understudy (BLEU) is a metric developed by previous research Papineni et al. (2002) to autonomously evaluate machine translation and was the comparison metric by which generative AI translations were evaluated in this research. BLEU score is calculated by comparing n-gram matches between candidate translations and reference translations. To refine this system, clipping—where an n-gram’s contribution is capped at the maximum number of times it appears in a reference translation—and a brevity penalty—the ratio of the length of the machine translation to the length of the reference translation—are incorporated.

BLEU has been widely used since its introduction in 2002 to evaluate machine translation and natural language generation (Reiter, 2018). Aljoharah Al-Rukban & Khader (2017) and Shterionov et al. (2018) used it to compare machine translation systems. The metric has also been applied to evaluating the efficacy of Google Translate on low-resource languages (Datta et al., 2021; Aiken, 2019). BLEU has also been used to evaluate the quality of generative AI translations, namely ChatGPT’s (Hendy et al., 2023; Jiao et al., 2023; Mozghan Ghassemiazghandi, 2024). Both of these previous applications of BLEU—to low-resource languages and to generative AI translations—are relevant to this research.

Generative AI Translation

Pre-existing research has tested the ability of ChatGPT to perform translation tasks, achieving results that show that GPT-3 achieves a very competitive translation quality for high-resource languages but has limited capabilities for low-resource languages (Hendy et al., 2023). However, this research was conducted preceding the release of GPT-4, which has been found to perform at a human level on various academic and professional tasks (Moneus & Sahari, 2024). GPT-4 performed comparably to the baseline tools such as Google Translate, Tencent Translate, and DeepL Translate, even for low-resource languages (Jiao et al., 2023). GPT-4’s strong performance with low-resource languages is particularly promising for translating ancient languages since the vast majority of ancient languages have limited resources. A more recent study

even found that GPT-4's performance surpasses existing tools and is nearly comparable to preeminent human translations (Mozhgan Ghassemiazghandi, 2024). However, these results conflict with research conducted by Yan et al., 2024, which found that GPT-4's performance is comparable only to junior but not senior translators. ChatGPT has also been directly applied to the translation of ancient languages by Zhou (2023) and Ross (2023) both studies finding ChatGPT's performance to be underwhelming. However, this research was conducted with the GPT-3.5 model of ChatGPT, meaning its limitations aligns with Jiao et al. (2023).

Gemini has also been applied to translation tasks achieving results comparable to ChatGPT, both models being deemed as promising (Gupta et al., 2024). These results, however, were contradicted by Farghal & Haider, 2024, which found Gemini to be significantly lagging behind ChatGPT. It is important to note that while there is an ample selection of pre-existing research applying ChatGPT to translation tasks, very little research has been conducted with Gemini, and no research has been performed with Poe.

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

To compare a human translation to an AI translation, a human translation must first exist. Thus, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was chosen—a series of Old English records originating from the court of King Alfred (Stafford, 2017). Old English became obsolete in approximately 1150 AD (Durkin, 2024), making it an archaic language and thus meeting the objectives of this research; pre-existing research has not examined the ability of generative AI to translate the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle nor Old English in general. There are plenty of translations from which to choose because the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle has been reworked by editors as far back as the sixteenth century; however, despite having been translated many times, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is daunting to many historians because of its complexity (Stafford, 2017). Thus, as a complex historical source written in Old English, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was selected because it is representative of other complex archaic sources.

GAP IN THE RESEARCH

Although previous research has evaluated the translation performance of ChatGPT and Gemini using BLEU on both modern and ancient languages, there remains a lack of research specifically examining the efficacy of generative AI in translating Old English and historical sources such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. There is also a lack of research applying Poe to translation tasks. This research

aims to fill that gap, comparing the BLEU score of generative AI and human translations of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle to assess how closely generative AI matches expert human translation. For this objective, BLEU is an ideal comparison metric. The BLEU score of a machine translation is based on the notion that the closer a machine translation is to a professional human translation, the better it is (Papineni, 2002). Thus, it evaluates the similarity of a machine translation to that of a professional human translator.

METHODOLOGY

Selecting Samples

Generative AI models are trained on extensive datasets that cover a wide range of topics, including historical contexts, which enables them to incorporate historical context into their outputs (Dasgupta et al., 2023). Thus, samples were selected that focus on the same topic to ensure that quality was not affected by the available knowledge about the content of a sample. Samples mentioning Alfred the Great were selected because the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle itself began to be compiled during the reign of Alfred the Great (Stafford, 2017). Thus, there is a vast quantity of annals describing his reign, with 35 instances of his name in total. All samples refer to Alfred as king, which resulted in a total of 14 samples corresponding to the records of the following years: AD 871, AD 875, AD 877, AD 878, AD 882, AD 883, AD 885, AD 886, AD 887, AD 888, AD 889, AD 890, AD 891, AD 901. Each dated entry corresponds to the record of what occurred in that year, resulting in a logical method of organization. The Old English texts within these samples correspond to the passages translated by the generative AI.

Standardizing a Prompt

Because generative models are trained to follow instructions in a prompt, the quality of the prompt used may affect the quality of the output (Ouyang et al., 2022). Depending on the translation prompt, the BLEU score of ChatGPT's translation varied (Jiao et al., 2023). Therefore, the quality of the prompt is a factor to be considered when applying generative AI to translation tasks (Hendy et al., 2023).

In previous research, Jiao et al. (2023) directly consulted ChatGPT for prompts, telling it to "provide ten concise prompts or templates that can make you translate" and used three of them to translate passages. Jiao et al. (2023)'s request was augmented slightly by adding "a historical text in Old English to Modern English while maintaining its original meaning." This revised prompt aims to compare the various translations of historical sources, namely the

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, produced by Generative AI. The altered request—provide ten concise prompts or templates that can make you translate a historical text in Old English to Modern English while maintaining its original meaning—was then provided to each of the three models, with the first three results from each model being tested for that respective model. This research applied all three prompts to all samples in accordance with Jiao et al. (2023) to minimize the variance in the average BLEU score among generative AI as a result of a discrepancy in prompt quality.

SacreBLEU score

To calculate the BLEU score of each translation, the Python module SacreBLEU was used, developed by Post (2018).

RESULTS

14 samples were translated by three models with three prompts per model, resulting in 126 data points from AI translations. An additional two human translations were sampled adding an additional 28 datapoints, resulting in a total of 154 data points.

Model

The descriptive statistics displayed the following results: ChatGPT ($M = 23.762217721$, $SE = 1.4605645085$), Gemini ($M = 30.321522393$, $SE = 1.9533937514$), Poe ($M = 24.35253214$, $SE = 1.2268927900$), Ingram ($M = 21.514946091$, $SE = 1.5457508730$), Whitelock ($M = 33.516860717$, $SE = 3.9181726550$). These means were examined in post hoc analyses for significance.

A one-way ANOVA test was performed showing that the model used had a significant effect on the resulting BLEU score, $F(4,149) = 5.169$, $p = <.001$.

Post hoc analyses using Tukey HSD post hoc criterion for significance indicated that the average BLEU score corresponding to Whitelock was significantly higher than ChatGPT ($MD = 9.754650996$, $SE = 3.1425020423$), Poe ($MD = 9.164336576$, $SE = 3.1425020423$), and Ingram ($MD = 11.90192263$, $SE = 3.8487632596$).

Gemini's average BLEU score was significantly higher than ChatGPT ($MD = 6.559304672$, $SE = 2.2220845040$, $p = .030$) and Ingram ($MD = 5.9689902521$, $SE = 2.2220845040$, $p = .049$).

Prompt

An analysis of variance was performed showing that the prompt used had an insignificant effect on the resulting BLEU score, $F(2,105) = 1.342$, $p = .265$.

DISCUSSION

Limitations

Although a strong statistical significance was observed, some limitations must be addressed. Since it was a necessity that the samples revolve around the same historical topic, a limited number of entries were used. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is a massive collection of annals, meaning that an examination of 14 entries may not be representative of the whole chronicle.

Furthermore, the selection of a reference translation and benchmark human translations wasn't entirely objective. The translations that fit the intended criteria—(1) an old translation, (2) the translation most representative of the preeminent human translation to be used as a reference, and (3) another eminent translation that preceded the reference in publication date—were selected based on the scholarly consensus regarding the quality of the translation and the credentials of its translators.

Lastly, BLEU as a metric is quantitative, examining the similarity of two passages in terms of word choice. It doesn't factor in qualitative features such as theme and overall meaning. Methods of qualitative analysis, such as thematic and content analysis, however, were not applicable to this research. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle was a mere record of what occurred in a year and not thorough enough to contain an underlying sentiment. Additionally, because the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was the collection of records by the Anglo-Saxons about themselves, there is only one account and one perspective about what happened. While trying to perform qualitative data analysis techniques, the overall sentiment of every translation were the same, making the data unusable. Still, the translations of generative AI were only compared quantitatively.

Analysis and Implications

The goal of most translations is to modernize historical documents, rewriting them in modern language and, consequently, increasing the accessibility of historical documents to a broader audience (Domingo & Casacuberta, 2018). Thus, the more a machine translation resembles a professional translation written in modern language, the better it is considered. This is further corroborated by the basis upon which BLEU is based: the notion that the closer a machine translation is to a professional human translation, the better it is (Papineni, 2002). Therefore, a higher BLEU score corresponds to a higher quality translation.

Because the difference in average BLEU score depending on the prompt of the translation was found to be insignificant, it is suggested that the variance caused by discrepancies in the quality of the translation prompt did not have a significant overall effect on the average BLEU score of the generative AI models. The use of three prompts per model also mitigated this effect, further indicating that prompt-based variance was not a significant factor in skewing the results.

Overall, the results indicate that the most adept generative AI model out of the three most commonly visited—ChatGPT, Gemini, Poe—is Gemini, achieving an average BLEU score significantly higher than ChatGPT and approaching being statistically significantly higher than Poe. Therefore, for historical translation tasks, this study suggests that Gemini would be most appropriate. This contradicts previous research, which found that Gemini was significantly worse than ChatGPT at translating Arabic (Farghal & Haider, 2024). However, it is important to note that their study used qualitative metrics, namely human assessment by 54 Arab professors in Literature, Linguistics, or Translation. This research uses quantitative metrics, which suggest that quantitatively Gemini is more adept than ChatGPT and translating the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

However, it was Whitelock's translation that most resembled that of Swanton, suggesting that a modern human translation is still closer in nature to other modern, state-of-the-art human translations than generative AI is. But it is notable to mention that Whitelock's BLEU score was not statistically significantly higher than Gemini's. Because Gemini's average BLEU score was not found to be significantly lower than that of Whitelock, its translation is about as comparable to that of Swanton. So, in terms of quality, Gemini is comparable to eminent scholarly translations. Thus, the application of Gemini could be an invaluable tool to drastically decrease the amount of time it takes to translate historical documents without a significant sacrifice of quality. Similar results were also gathered in a qualitative comparative study of legal texts with human translators performing slightly better than AI (Moneus & Sahari, 2024). In addition to directly expediting the translation process itself, the high quality of Gemini's translations indicates that it also has the potential to aid with teaching translators. Previous research has found that the application of AI in translation teaching improves students' translation level and efficiency (Yuxiu, 2024). This is further corroborated by Zhang et al., 2025, which found that 58 out of 63 university students interviewed argued that generative AI improves their efficiency significantly. As mentioned previously, current estimates suggest that it takes upwards of 10 years to train a translator who specializes in Ancient

Chinese characters (Hong, 2019). The incorporation of generative AI, especially Gemini, could not only expedite the rate at which historical documents are translated directly, but also expedite the rate at which translators are trained. Lastly, the efficacy of Gemini further substantiates the existence of a shifting role for translators discussed by Chen (2024, changing from traditional manual translation to assisting generative AI, further corroborating the existence of potential implications such as job displacement and the necessity to reform curriculum by which translators are trained to focus on topics such as AI literacy.

ChatGPT's underwhelming performance aligns with existing literature, which found that the proficiency of Ancient Chinese by ChatGPT is yet to reach a satisfactory level (Zhou, 2023). Although that research was conducted with GPT-3.5 and this research used GPT-4, the results of this research suggests that in spite of Jiao et al. (2023)'s finding promising results with ChatGPT's ability to translate low-resource languages and Mozghan Ghassemiazghandi (2024)'s finding the quality of GPT-4's translations being nearly the quality of human translations, GPT-4 still may not be adept for ancient ones. Jiao et al. (2023)'s conclusion was also drawn based on comparisons to other pre-existing tools rather than a preeminent human translation. This suggests that although GPT-4's performance may be comparable to that of other translation tools, the results of this research indicates that it is not comparable to premier human translations. Nevertheless, with the expectation that generative AI is to continue to improve, the quality of these translations is expected to improve (Shormani, 2024).

Ingram's translation performed the worst, with its average BLEU score being significantly lower than both Gemini and Whitelock. All three generative AIs were able to exceed the BLEU score of a translation from 1823. This evidence suggests that generative AI's translations are of higher quality than those of older human translations. This aligns with existing research, which found that generative AI, specifically GPT-4, were comparable to poorer quality human translations but did not reach the level of the higher quality ones (Yan et al., 2024). Furthermore, this indicates that particularly old translations of historical sources could possibly be improved by generative AI. For instance, if the only existing translation for a historical source was produced in the 18th century, this research suggests that generative AI has the potential to improve those translations. However, it is important to note that generative AI's performance can be in part attributed to the existence of modern translations. Because generative AI models are trained on extensive datasets that cover a wide range of

topics, including historical contexts, which enables them to incorporate historical context into their outputs (Dasgupta et al., 2023), the existence of modern translations provides historical context for generative AI to incorporate into their translations. This research may be unrepresentative of generative AI's performance for a source such as the proposed example of a source only with a translation produced in the 18th century.

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Shelby Lombardo

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Short Story



Work First, Play Later

My grandfather was born and raised on a farm in rural Illinois. Every morning at the crack of dawn, he and his three brothers would wake up and get started on their morning tasks. No matter the weather or how exhausted they were, the boys put on their work boots and trudged out to the barn.

Every single day of my grandpa's entire adolescence, he followed this routine. Growing up, I remember him reminiscing on these early mornings, recalling how he fed and watered the cattle, mucked the stalls of the barn, and collected eggs from the coop, all before the sun had fully risen. Every. Single. Morning.

To say the least, my grandfather was a hard worker. He carried out this grueling daily routine without fail. But while his duties were difficult, when it was time for him and his brothers to head back home at the end of the day, his mother would be waiting with a delicious homemade meal and open arms. All the hardships and work that had been put in that day only made the family dinner that much sweeter. And while my grandpa remembers these long mornings of honest work vividly, he has even sweeter memories of the laughter and brotherly affection that accompanied these meals.

...

My parents once asked my older sister and me if we had time to go rake leaves and do yardwork at my grandparents' house. At the time, we were middle schoolers, so absorbed in our own little worlds that the thought of spending any time at all doing honest manual labor was despicable. So, being the ignorant teenagers we were, our responses were automatic.

"I have too much homework to do," I told them.

"I have a really important test coming up," my sister said.

In reality, the rest of our day would be spent sitting in front of the TV and typing away on our phones. Knowing us all too well, my mom pursed her lips but did not press the issue further.

A couple of weeks later, my grandmother arrived with her usual fanfare. What you have to understand is that my grandma is not the average grandma. She watches the news and reads the newspaper every morning, wears vibrant colors and unusual patterns, and always has a purse full of Werther's candies for my sister and me. Constantly bright and warm, she is the sun to our little worlds. We worship the ground she walks on. If she told us one day that grass is not in fact green, but actually blue, then that would be that. *Of course, the grass is blue!*

Every time she visited, we would have a blast. It was all of the fun with none of the rules or chores that existed in our household.

This time, when she came for a visit, she did not disappoint. She brought tickets for my family and me to see a show with her at the Fox Theatre. Growing up, this was one of our favorite places in the world. My grandmother shared her love of theatre with us from an early age, and going to see these shows together was the ultimate treat.

However, when our grandma gifted us these tickets, my mother did not share our giddy squeals. She paused, narrowing her eyes at my sister and me.

"Are you sure you ladies have time to go?" she questioned.

"Of course! We will make time!" I exclaimed, caught up in the excitement of the gift. My sister responded with just as much fervor.

When the evening of the show arrived, my sister and I were dressed in our Sunday finest, shifting from foot to foot as we waited for our parents. While we fidgeted, we received a text from our grandma asking us to bring a change of clothes. My adolescent brain, so riddled by thoughts of the show, did not register this as an odd request, so I dutifully packed my bag.

Finally, once my whole family was ready, my grandmother pulled into the driveway and honked her horn. We went out to greet her and piled into her bright blue minivan.

Thirty minutes later, we arrived at a familiar place, but oddly, there was no light-up "FOX" sign in sight. Slowly, the car came to a stop, and my stomach dropped with realization. For this place we had come to, where we had spent so many of our childhood days, was nothing out of the ordinary—a classic brick house, with big glass windows and white shutters. Its only unusual feature, and perhaps the most noticeable at first glance, was a huge yard of untamed, unraked leaves. Upon further inspection, we could see two bright yellow rakes lying in the

middle of the sea of red and orange, patiently waiting to be put to use. Right beside them, my grandpa stood stoically, a solid presence amongst the changing leaves. My jaw hit the floor. My sister and I stared in astonishment at our grandmother, who we had worshipped for so long, and who now delivered what felt like the ultimate betrayal. She simply shrugged, entirely unaffected by our incredulous looks.

“You might want to get changed and get started. The show starts in two hours,” she stated in a matter-of-fact voice.

Slowly and unbelievably, we opened the car door and got out. As we approached our awaiting grandfather, he picked up the bright yellow rakes and placed one in each of our open hands. Before he disappeared into the house, our grandfather left us with one parting line...

“Work first, play later.”

...

Years later, my sister and I would recall this experience with good humor at the dinner table during family gatherings. Though the story has been told many times since, my grandparents still get a kick out of it, and my parents even more so. But while we always have a good chuckle along with our family, my sister and I will never forget how the hard work we put into raking leaves only made that night at the FOX and the time spent with our grandmother that much sweeter.

Zoe Mei

Grade 10, Parkway West Middle School

Flash Fiction



An Echo of Autumn

The young man loved autumn. His figure could often be seen standing outside, surrounded by fallen, vermillion leaves. He had developed a curious relationship with the seasons, and often found that it mirrored the events within his own life. Strangely, whenever the weather behaved uncharacteristically, he found his life in an equally precarious position.

It was on a particularly dismal day, where the evanescent glow of the sun had already disappeared, that he discovered the ship. Encased in thick glass, it became clear to him at once that this was a brig.

“Sweet!” he cheered.

Yet as he reached his hand down to pick up the bottle from the drying, yellow grass, he felt a prick on his palm. The ship was surrounded by nettles, and it was as he was trying to ascertain his best course of action that he fainted. The nettles were poisonous, saturated with an aqueous toxin that rendered any victim unconscious. To any outsider, it would’ve seemed like the man was taking a nap in a lovely field. In truth however, the man’s mind was filled with a tumultuous continuum of noise; the dissonance of his thoughts similar to that of the screech of a blade pressed against grindstone.

The unfortunate weather above him reflected his predicament, highlighting an infallible correlation between the climate and his existence. And as the first bolt of lightning invaded the sky, his situation seemed increasingly perilous. The sky was unforgiving, and minutes later, his unconscious body became the umbrella to heaps of acid rain.

Annie Ming

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Educators: Megan Zmudczynski

Flash Fiction



Painted Ruin

They say that Hollow Ridge is terrible, cursed ages before the trees died standing up and the houses emptied, rotting on their ugly, crooked hinges. They say that the inky clouds swirl, laden with ruin, and the grass is torn by phantom hands ravaging across the land. They say that at night, if you listen hard enough, you can hear the anguished cries of the souls still trapped in the earth and the sparse, dead trees, long gone yet still suffering, their very existence inked into the tar black soil and bark. They say that nothing lives there anymore, except for the horrifying ancient beast that guards the ridge, its teeth as sharp as the fangs of frost at the dawn of a snowcrest day. They say that when it attacks, the beast lets loose a roar so deafening it could rival all the cries of those trapped souls at once, and if you were the one being attacked, that unearthly screech would be the last noise you'd ever hear. They say that once you've heard that sound, you're dead. In fact, once you've made it past the last outskirts of my village and through the mountain pass beyond that, before even making it to Hollow Ridge, your fate is sealed. There is no surviving beyond this point.

And yet, here I stand.

There's a haunting beauty to this mountain pass, like the remaining fragments of life still try to hang in the air, decorate the frail branches, mark the barren ground. They feel almost palpable, as if they're drawing in close, hissing coldly, "*Do you really value your life so abysmally?*" My answer is simple: No, I don't value my life so lowly, since I'm not planning to die. Because stories of the unknown are only stories, until they're proven to be true.

The path finally widens, and the land unfolds before me. The grass is wispy, rolling and tumbling with perfect uniformity. The sky is an unwavering blue canvas of paint that hasn't yet dried. Everything is so vibrant and eager, and

I feel as if I am a child again, marveling at the dazzling ocean sky and emerald grass.

I begin making my way across the prairie. The air tastes thick and sweet, with a cloying, almost repulsive scent that lingers in the back of my throat. Ahead, I can just barely spot the silhouettes of the trees and houses of Hollow Ridge, so serene amidst the storybook landscape.

There is nothing dangerous here. It was all a lie.

I continue on, watching the sunlit strands of grass rustle melodically beneath my feet, and moments later, I stand before Hollow Ridge. There is no sign of a beast here. All I see is a few lush trees and colorful cottages, bright and pristine despite the fact that they'd been left alone for so many years. One cow grazes peacefully in a pasture nearby, surrounded by a crooked wooden fence. I wander a bit closer, struck by how unnervingly perfect everything is. The cow lifts its head lazily, as if waking from a long dream, and one of its dark eyes slowly meets mine.

An enraged cry rips through the hollow air.

And the silence that washes over the painted world is absolute.

Lorelei Modrell

Grade 10, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Poetry



The Murder

The white carpet
Stained with blood
The glinting silver knife
In my hand
Through her heart.
Now,
The blade
On the floor
Dripping with crimson.

She used a knife too,
Slid it right through
My flesh.

Her hands already stained,
Now swim in pools of their own blood.

When someone tries to take your life,
It seems only fair to return the favor.

But I didn't fail.

It was easy,
Stab the heart

A twist,
Her eyes go dark.
A smile can't help but cross my lips.

She smiled too.

Olivia Rice

Grade 11, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Novel



A Lie Too Deep?

Summary

Iyla Thatcher and Maddox Iakono are the joint rulers of Paosil, a country in the western continent of Noravel. He was raised to rule but only stepped into power during the war. She found her place on the throne after a decade-long scandal that resulted in the deaths of both her parents.

For the past seven years the southern nation of Kalogien tried to overtake Noravel by means of corruption, economic failure, and brutal military takeover. At the end of the war, Kalogien's army fled, but their commander in chief swore, "Noravel will crumble into dust. We will be back and we will break it into pieces as we did before. The war has not even begun."

Raiza Falcon was taken prisoner by Kalogien during the war for almost six months before she escaped when a guard turned traitor to aid her. That same guard helped her make the transition into life in Paosil while Noravel was at war. Raiza enlisted and quickly rose to the rank of spymaster on account of her connection to the shadows and her past. Now, Raiza is helping Iyla and Maddox rebuild and prepare for the next assault while hiding from her past and keeping her foreign royal lineage a secret.

Excerpt

The evening's rain had forced most sensible people inside, but sensibility was for people that did not want to get hurt, and Raiza was most decidedly not one of those people. She could not remember the last time she had taken a full breath, that she had slept easily at night, that her chest had not ached with longing. No, Raiza was not afraid of pain, not by a long shot. Though maybe it hurts less when the pain is self-inflicted because she knew what to expect. She

knew exactly how much her heart would drop every time she had the slightest thought of her old life.

Raiza leaned back against the tall cherry blossom tree she was sitting in, sifting through the events of the past week as petals fell into the puddle pooling at the base of the tree. The war was over, but the threat was not gone, and they were still helpless. As Paosil's spymaster, it was her duty to keep tabs on their enemies, and she had failed. Kalogien was nowhere to be found in the western continent. Noravel was blind and as days passed the threat only grew stronger. Thousands had died and thousands more would die if she could not make some progress on locating Kalogien's army. Perhaps it was time to search beyond Noravel. Maybe explore the eastern continent. She would have to do it without backup of any kind since their navy was in shambles. Not that she minded going alone, but it would be a risk. The sensible thing would be to wait. *All right, that's it.* She decided to do something instead of wasting time thinking. Thoughts achieved nothing. Action did.

Raiza leapt down from her perch among the flowers and strolled through the rain until she reached the courtyard. Once, guards would have taken their lunch in this courtyard, sitting at wooden tables underneath the open sky, laughing and swapping stories of their children and wives. Shortly after the war started, the wooden tables were repurposed for target practice. Some of the boards were as full of arrows as a pincushion. Others had throwing knives embedded in them. One even had an axe wedged in the wood. She frowned at it, having a great distaste for its balance. Sword and shield was her preferred combination, but that may have been because she was raised to wield a sword as her only weapon and a shield as her only defense.

She leaned against the board holding the axe up and watched for a moment as Iyla raged, her sword sending water droplets flying with every stab. The cold rain had done nothing to calm the Queen Regent of Paosil. Iyla was fuming and the soggy straw dummies were taking the brunt of that anger as she pounded away at them. Between the unabating rain and the rigorous exercise her deep violet hair was coming to resemble the dummies she kept bashing, despite the severe bun holding it together.

It hurt Raiza to see Iyla like this, helpless with no real solution. She wanted to help, knew she could but something held her back. It was not that Raiza did not trust Iyla or the others -- they were thicker than thieves. They had been through a lot together, but not as much as Raiza had alone.

That was the root of Raiza's hesitation: she was afraid to acknowledge her past to anyone but herself. It was much easier to pretend it had never happened, that her childhood and her family in Soltier was all a vivid dream, than it was to admit it was real. Admission meant acceptance of her failures. Ones that had led to the death of her mother and the separation from her family. Her brother. *How are you doing big brother? Would you still know me all these years later?*

Jogging up to the practice ring, Raiza pulled out the sword she always kept close, like a thief with their lockpick, and stopped Iyla's strike patterns with her own. Iyla startled, then dismissed Raiza and went back to hacking at the lumps of straw barely sticking together anymore.

"Those dummies are done for. Don't you want to have a go at something that bites back?" Raiza called.

Iyla turned and faced Raiza, not saying anything. Raiza raised her sword, ready to block even though Iyla still looked like she was far away, unaware of anything beyond her own thoughts.

Without warning, Raiza swung at Iyla, trying to elicit a response from her. Iyla was shocked and Raiza held the upper hand, able to back Iyla into the corner of the courtyard. Finally coming to her senses, Iyla ducked out of the trap and went on the offensive. And Raiza let her, grinning despite the effort she was using to keep from being pummeled into the ground. Let her blow off some steam.

Minutes flew by. The rain refused to let up. The women were both soaked to their skin. In the windows overlooking the training yard, some night owl nobles peered through to watch the sparring match. Maddox even leaned on the balcony ledge, smirking at Raiza's attempt to calm the Queen Regent.

They had both been present when it became clear that they no longer had eyes on Kalogien, or the means to follow them across the ocean. All of them had taken the news badly, but Iyla completely lost it. It was frustrating to feel helpless, powerless against those who had done so much harm to you and yours.

As a leader, Iyla felt that anguish even more acutely. She refused to believe that there were no roads forward, not dismissing the council until the late summer sun was going down and supper had come and gone. Judging by the state of the discarded dummies, Iyla had come directly to the training yard and had not left, still clinging to her state of incredulity.

Raiza returned Maddox's smirk, knowing his attempts to calm Iyla down to see reason had all failed. He raised an eyebrow, clearly doubting Raiza's abilities. *Fine by me.*

Over the years, Raiza had made a point to never show off her full range of skills. She let others win the duels, make the plans, and solve the puzzles. Being special had led to her mother's death and her estrangement from the world she grew up in. That was not entirely true, but Raiza wanted to save her potential for when it would have the greatest impact, just as one would save the plum to eat when it was the ripest, the sweetest. Anything less was not worth Raiza's constant effort.

Now was a time for Raiza to use her skills at full capacity. Iyla was fighting hard, but she was still fighting angry and her movements showed it. The tension that coursed through Iyla's body was making her slower and Raiza used that to her advantage, executing a swift series of strikes Iyla could barely block. Iyla's eyes widened, and Raiza kept going, gaining speed as the seconds passed.

Raiza would have loved to lose herself in the dance of dueling, yet she knew Iyla needed her, so she refrained from letting go completely. But she got close. They locked swords and Raiza spun, sending Iyla's sword flying across the training yard. The tip of her blade paused a hair's breath from Iyla's chest and she stood staring at Raiza.

"Let me help you," Raiza demanded, staring into the Queen Regent's eyes full of surprise and astonishment.

Iyla agreed immediately, nodding and gesturing for them to return inside.

As the pair strode for the doors, Raiza said, "We should clean up first. Meet in my room when you are ready."

Iyla threw a questioning glance at her before she agreed and they parted. Only for Raiza to nearly slam into Maddox as she rounded the corner to head up the stairs.

"What the hell was that?" he demanded.

A cunning light entered Raiza's eyes as she asked, "What was what?"

"The duel!" Maddox exclaimed, "How did you get Iyla off of her ledge of anger?"

"She needed to blow off steam. And she needed to see that there is someone out there that can help her, even when she does not know it. She saw that she cannot control everything or everyone and that it is *just fine*," Raiza explained, trying to be thorough but Maddox only looked more shocked.

She could see him thinking, trying to ask the right question this time. After a moment he settled for, "How did you know that was what she needed?"

"I used to be a lot like her." Raiza knew she was being cryptic and did not offer any more information.

“How?” Maddox fired. “Nobody is *like* Iyla Thatcher, Queen Regent of Paosil. Do you even hear yourself?”

“Just like nobody is *like* you, the almighty King Regent of Paosil?” She shot back.

“That’s not what I *meant*–”

“Look.” Raiza made him meet her eyes. “I’m completely soaked and shivering. I’m going to fix myself up. Find Iyla something to eat and bring it to my room. By then I’ll be ready to tell you and Iyla–” she trailed off, debating how much to reveal. “I’ll tell you something about my past that may help you now.” She hoped that was enough for Maddox.

Raiza moved to push past him and Maddox grabbed her wrist, holding her back. “Who the hell do you think you are?” Maddox demanded.

Deciding she had not proved her point earlier, Raiza used force to break from his hold. In a breath Raiza threw her arm down in a circle and felt his fingers rip off of her. She spun away and retreated up a several stairs before turning to see the look of utter shock on the King Regent’s face.

“I already *promised* to tell you,” Raiza bit out. She gestured around them to the velvet staircase and the arching entryway beyond with its shadows and hiding places and continued before he could get a word in, “You believe the middle of the grand foyer to be the best place to discuss this? To reveal the secrets I have guarded for the past decade?” She looked at the figures moving in the shadows by the iron doors. “Yeah, I did not think so. Therefore, I am going to clean myself up. See you in half an hour. And make sure Iyla eats something.” Raiza turned away to ascend the remaining stairs before she could see Maddox’s expression of regret. She did not want to know how much she was hurting him. *I am trying to help you for goodness sake. For all our sakes.*

Manha Shaik

Grade 9, Fort Zumwalt North High School

Personal Essay & Memoir



Echoes I Finally Heard

The room filled with laughter, and I felt my face arrange itself into a smile I hadn't chosen. A video of an Indian street market played on someone's phone, and I already knew I was expected to find it funny.

"Wow, is it always this messy over there?" someone sneered, half-laughing.

A few heads turned toward me. I laughed too, even though my stomach tightened and my hands felt clammy against my desk. It was easier than explaining that messy was not the word I used when I thought of home.

Being Indian in my school was not something people confronted directly. No one shouted slurs in the hallway or told me I didn't belong. Instead, it showed up in questions that hung in the air too long and jokes that were framed as harmless. "You must be good at math," people assumed. "Do you eat curry every day?" "Say something in your language." Such moments were small enough to be dismissed, yet frequent enough to shape my self-perception. I learned quickly that discomfort, when repeated, lingers in your bones long after the laughter dies. It tightens your chest and drags your shoulders down, as if every murmur had clung to your sweater like Velcro.

In middle school, there were only a handful of Indian students, and even fewer in my classes. I became hyper-aware of everything that made me stand out. I stopped bringing Indian food for lunch after someone wrinkled their nose and asked, "What is that smell?" I avoided sharing my music after classmates mocked Indian songs by exaggerating accents and movements they had learned online. When videos circulated portraying India as dirty, crowded, or backward,

no one said my name—but I felt it anyway, as if a shadow far too large had been cast over my own sense of belonging.

For a long time, I coped by shrinking. I softened my reactions. I stayed agreeable. I told myself that if I didn't draw attention to my difference, it would stop mattering. But erasing parts of myself didn't make me feel more accepted; it left a hollow space inside me, one that echoed with empty, muted noises every time I swallowed my words.

My shift toward self-acceptance wasn't dramatic. It didn't come with a protest or a confrontation. It peeked through when I stopped faking a laugh at jokes that made me feel small. When I let my culture exist around me without justifying it. When I looked up and replied calmly, "That's not true," instead of overexplaining.

I realized that those microaggressions weren't things I had to chew over endlessly—they were morsels I could let roll across my tongue, taste them for what they were, and gently spit them out.

I still notice the jokes and sideways glances, but I don't flinch the way I used to. I've learned to carry my culture and my voice without apology, and the differences that once made me feel out of place now guide me, reminding me of the strength, resilience, and clarity I've gained.

Natalia Sliz

Grade 11, Daniel Academy

Educator: Joanna Sliz

Short Story



A Nocturne of Lies

Stars lit up the London night sky. Big Ben's distant chimes echoed through the fog, its silhouette looming like a shadowy sentinel. Cobblestone streets, slick with rain and bathed in the cold, muted glow of gas lamps, exuded a mysterious aura. The city's nocturnal whispers carried through the foggy air, creating a haunting dreamscape where shadows twisted, and secrets lingered beneath the sky of a peaceful London night. On the outskirts of the city stood the splendid Marchand Manor. Belonging to Sir Edward Marchand, a distinguished gentleman of immense influence, the landmark exuded wealth and grandeur, boasting nearly twenty-eight bedrooms, four ballrooms, endless corridors, and a full complement of staff running the three-floor estate.

Beneath the polished floors and behind the elegant walls, deadly secrets were carefully concealed, practically woven into the very structure of the building. The towering statues, ornate chandeliers, and portraits of prominent ancestors served as a polished veil, hiding truths that were aching to be uncovered.

There she was, looking positively radiant in her sleek ball gown. Made of imported silk, the floor-length dress hugged her exquisite figure most perfectly. Tailored to her skin tone, the silk was of a delicate ivory hue, her illustrious necklace a bold statement, glistening in the moonbeam's glow.

"You truly look charming, Linnie."

"Perfect choice for tonight," remarked her father as he offered her a hand, exiting the sleek vehicle. "I can't believe you are eighteen already."

Linnette replied with a gentle smile as she stepped out of the motorcar, her gloved fingers tightening at her sides. At the valet's signal, the driver pulled away,

leaving behind a gleaming line of cars inching toward the entrance. The Marchand Manor was exquisite. A grand staircase swept upward to the towering double doors, framed by lush greenery and neatly arranged hydrangeas in full bloom. Soft lights traced the pathway, casting a warm glow that did little to calm the unease settling in her chest. Hand in hand with her father, Linnette ascended the steps with grace. At the top of the staircase stood Sir Edward Marchand himself.

“Chin up, Linnie, ” her father faintly whispered into her ear.

Linnette drew a careful breath and ascended the grand steps alongside her father. Halfway up, they slowed. A line of guests stretched ahead of them, each waiting their turn to be welcomed by Edward Marchand.

He continued in his rehearsed tone, “ Tonight will be the most important night of your life.”

“ It is crucial that on the stage tonight you present yourself with grace and poise.”

He added as they ascended the steps. Linnette nodded submissively. Linnette’s gaze lifted, and there, beside Sir Edward Marchand, appeared a familiar figure. Her shoulders loosened, the tightness in her chest easing for the first time that evening.

Julien.

“Richard and Linnette Ashford,” he announced, his voice rough with age yet commanding enough to silence those nearby. “How lovely to see you.” Though he was old, he was certainly not frail. His gaze was sharp, calculating. She could tell he was accustomed to being obeyed. Men like him did not simply attend events; they orchestrated them.

“ Julien, this is Richard the handsome banker I was telling you about, and his darling daughter Linnie,” Marchand explained.

Linnette to you. She corrected him silently.

Marchand added, gesturing beside him, “This is my grandson, Julien.”

Julien stepped forward with ease. “I thought I recognized you,” he said lightly, his gaze settling on Linnette.

“London grows dull without familiar faces.”

Linnette smiled back. “Then it’s fortunate we arrived when we did,” she chuckled. Julien inclined his head toward Richard as well. “Mr. Ashford, it’s good to see you again, and Ms. Ashford, I cannot wait to hear you play.”

The brief exchange was unremarkable to anyone watching, but to Linnette, it felt subtly different, as though something unspoken lingered between them, waiting for the night to unfold.

~***~

Twelve-year-old Linnette sat on the old bench beside the grand piano forte. It was Christmas Eve, and she thought every child had already been picked up from Reichenbach Academy. All except her. She placed her fingers on the keys and began to play Chopin's Nocturne in C-sharp *minor*, letting the melody unfold slowly. The notes were dark and heavy, pressing against the quiet like unspoken words. Her father was away on business, as he always was. Her mother was gone. Linnette was no longer grieving; that had dulled with time. What remained was something simpler, and somehow heavier. Loneliness.

"You play beautifully."

She was startled and turned to see a boy standing in the doorway.

"I thought I was the only one left," she chuckled nervously.

"So did I," he replied. "I'm Julien."

"Linnette."

He sat beside her, watching her fingers move across the keys. "My father used to play that piece," he said softly. After a pause, he added, "He died five years ago. Tuberculosis."

Linnette nodded. "My mother did too. A vehicle accident."

They sat in silence, allowing the music to fill the space between them.

"My father always says true grief is a weakness," Linnette said, a little bitterly.

"Getting too attached just eats you up... death is part of life, so you must keep moving," Julien smirked.

"Ah," she chuckled. "Such encouraging words, really."

"Will you keep playing?" he asked quietly.

She did, and for the first time, she didn't feel quite so alone.

~***~

Inside the estate, the bustling crowd in the grand ballroom pressed around Linnette, the swirl of gowns, tailcoats, and crystal chandeliers nearly dizzying.

Uneasy, she slipped toward the side doors, hoping to find a quiet corridor, only to step into yet another lavish ballroom, filled with even more glittering guests.

“Linnie! Come over here and say hello!” Richard exclaimed.

“Allow me to introduce my daughter,” he announced, his deep voice cutting through the hum of conversation. “The one I’ve been telling you all about, Linnette Ashford.”

Around him stood five individuals, each radiating wealth, power, and just a hint of something darker.

“Hello, pleased to meet you,” Linnette said, extending her hand gracefully, though her heart thumped in her chest. *They know something I don’t...*

“My darling daughter is performing for us tonight!” Richard cheered, raising his glass of champagne.

“You play the piano forte, Linnette?” Sir William asked, curiosity in his sharp eyes.

“She plays with utter excellence!” Richard continued, pride evident in his voice. “Truly, she is the most magnificent virtuoso I have ever seen... though, of course, I might be a little biased.”

The adults chuckled politely.

“Marvelous, absolutely Marvelous,” chuckled Lady Elodie, holding onto her husband’s arm.

The conversation shifted slightly, and Linnette decided to step outside for some fresh air.

~***~

The garden was breathtaking. The moon cast a silvery glow over succulents and flowering bushes lining the winding paths. At the center stood a towering fountain, its layered sculpture spilling water in a soothing murmur. Shadows still danced in the corners, lending the garden an air of mystery. Crickets chirped, and owls hooted in the distance, creating an escape for Linnette. *Once again alone.* She spotted a bench in the distance and began walking along the pebble path. Something felt off. Her steps crunched softly on the stones, *crunch, patter, crackle*, and then she heard another set of footsteps, matching her pace.

Someone is following me.

She spun around, but saw nothing. The sound came again, *crunch, patter, crackle*, and again, the path was empty. *It’s all in my head*, she told herself.

Adjusting her dress, she sat on the bench, trying to calm her racing heart. Suddenly, two figures leapt from behind a bush.

“Boo!”

“Ah!” Linnette screamed, leaping from the bench and stumbled. Strong arms caught her just in time.

“Careful there,” a familiar voice murmured, *Julien*.

“You-you can’t just do things like that!” she stuttered, mockingly throwing her clutch at his chest.

Julien caught it with ease, raising an eyebrow, and grinned. “Oh? And what, exactly, would you have me do instead?”

“You know... not terrify me!” Linnette shouted, allowing for a small smile to break through.

“Oh, Linnette, to my observatory!” Julien exclaimed. “Come on. You might actually enjoy the view.”

~***~

They walked together for a few minutes through the winding garden paths until they arrived at Julien’s observatory. The building was shaped like a perfect dome. Inside, the walls were lined with handwritten notes, sketches, and diagrams, each one hinting at Julien’s curiosity. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves overflowed with volumes on astronomy, chemistry, and physics. At the center of the room, a massive telescope dominated the space.

“There she is, my beauty,” Julien cheered mockingly.

“You and your telescope!” Linnette laughed, tossing her lush auburn hair over her shoulder.

Julien grinned, looking at Linnette. “Ah, but some telescopes see more than others... Some people only look where the light shines, but the dark spaces in between... they tell the real story,” he said softly.

“Dark spaces?” Linnette asked, her eyes wide with curiosity. “What do you mean?” she said excitedly.

“The spaces people avoid,” Julien said, leaning slightly closer. “Secrets... deals... choices that aren’t exactly public. You’ll notice patterns if you pay attention.”

“Patterns?” Linnette echoed, tilting her head. “You mean, like... who’s really in charge?”

Julien chuckled, a playful glint in his eye. "Exactly. Power, influence... even people you think you know well. They're rarely what they seem," he said teasingly.

"Enlightening," scoffed Linette jokingly.

"Indeed," Julien said softly, brushing a strand of hair from her face as he adjusted the telescope.

"I like to see who's really paying attention," he said with a teasing smile.

"Hmm... well, I am now," Linette leaned closer.

"And what about... family? Can you ever really trust them?" she asked, voice trembling slightly but with excitement.

Julien's smile tightened, "Trust is tricky," he said lowly. "Sometimes the ones you think are protecting you... aren't."

~***~

"Pappa,"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"What took you so long?"

"Ah, my little star, you see, pappa had to tend to a bit of business," he said, settling into the chair beside her bed. "But I'm back now, aren't I?"

The little girl nodded solemnly. "But what took you so long?" she pressed with curiosity.

"Now, now, come sit," he said gently, opening his arms. She clambered into his lap, fixing the soft folds of her lace-trimmed nightgown. Her bedroom shelves were lined with leather-bound storybooks and scientific curiosities, a delicate globe that gleamed under the lamp, and about a dozen puzzle pieces were scattered on the floor. Even at six, she preferred puzzles to dolls and notebooks to colouring books. She was a curious girl, far ahead of her years. There was something in Pappa that comforted her. Every time she looked into his hazel eyes, she felt a sense of ease, as if that gaze could ward off the shadows of the world.

"You know, in life, everyone has to play a role," he continued, stroking her hair.

"What's a role, Pappa?"

"Imagine a little kingdom," he said, smiling. "There was a princess who lived in a castle. One night, robbers tried to sneak in and take her treasure. She had a brave knight to protect her. The knight had to be clever and quick, or the

princess might be in danger. A true knight would risk everything to keep her safe.”

“Like a real hero?” she asked, eyes wide.

“You could say so,” he murmured, brushing a stray curl from her face. He lifted her gently and placed her in the carefully made bed, the covers tucked around her with precision. The nightgown slipped softly across the embroidered pillow, and the room smelled faintly of lavender and beeswax from her elaborate lamp.

“That’s why, sweetheart, sometimes pappa has to go on these... trips,” he said quietly. “It’s all to protect you.”

“From what, Pappa?”

He paused, tucking the blanket snugly around her shoulders. “Ah... that’s a tale for another night. Right now, it’s time for my little star to sleep.”

He reached over and extinguished the lamp. He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead and whispered words that would haunt her for years.

~***~

Julien and Linnette returned to Marchand Manor. Julien led her into the main ballroom, which glimmered beneath the glow of hundreds of candles. Nearly two hundred guests filled the space, their voices blending beneath towering chandeliers. Linnette peeked through the heavy velvet curtain, her breath shallow. Her fingers flexed at her sides as she prepared to step onto the stage. She felt a firm tap on her shoulder. She did not need to turn to know who it was. Edward Marchand stood behind her, tall and immovable. His gaze was sharp and terrifying.

“Now, Linnette,” he said smoothly, though there was nothing gentle in his tone, “I know this is rather last-minute, but I need you to play this instead.” He pressed a sheet of music into her hands. It read Chopin’s *Nocturne in C-sharp. He’s gone insane*.

“I admire original art,” he continued, lips curving faintly. “But this piece is... dear to me. I would very much like to hear it tonight.”
I’ve spent a month preparing for this.

Her eyes flicked over the notes, panic stirring. “Sir, I’m about to go on stage. I haven’t had any time to...”

“Well,” he interrupted calmly, “You are brilliant. Or so I’ve been told.”

“But –”

“Off you go.”

With a firm hand at her back, he ushered her forward. The curtain parted. The lights flooded her vision. There was no room left for protest. Her hands trembled as she reached the piano, the unfamiliar sheet music resting heavily before her. For a brief, desperate moment, she searched the crowd and found Julien. Their eyes met, and her heart fluttered. Then she began to play. Effortlessly, hitting every note with grace and precision. She had been familiar with this particular work. *Reinchenbach. Switzerland. Julien*. The crowd marvelled at the talent of Linnette Ashford. Midway through the piece, she glanced up again.

Julien was gone. *Where’s Julien?*

The final note rang out, beautiful and dramatic, hanging in the air long after her hands had left the keys. The crowd rose to their feet and applauded her wonderful performance. Her father in the front gave her an accepting nod and mouthed the words:

“Well done.”

~***~

“Waiters, champagne, champagne!” Richard exclaimed, lifting his glass as applause rippled through the room. “A celebration for my daughter’s marvelous performance!”

“Papa,” Linnette said urgently, catching his sleeve, “I need to speak with you. Privately.”

He hesitated for only a moment. “One moment, ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, before allowing himself to be led away.

They ascended an elaborate staircase, the music and chatter fading behind them, and slipped into the dim library. Linnette sat on the velvet sofa and gestured for her father to sit.

“What is it, Linnie?” he asked gently. “If this is about the piece, yes, it wasn’t what you planned, but you were extraordinary. Edward Marchand and Thomas, the Mayor, and I couldn’t be prouder. Your mum would be too.”

“It’s not that,” Linnette said, her voice low. “Something feels wrong. Everyone here despises one another. Lord William and Lady Élodie loathe the nobility. The Mayor can’t stand Lord William.

“And I’ve heard unsettling things about Edward. Shady dealings. These are your friends, Papa. I’m worried.”

Richard smiled, "Friends," he echoed softly, pulling her into an embrace. "Oh, my little star. You worry too much."

He kissed her forehead. "I will be just fine. Don't trouble yourself with grown men's games."

Still holding her, he added quietly, "Trust me."

~***~

The ballroom was once again overflowing with crowds of people. It was well past midnight, and the guests moved as one in an orchestrated dance, laughter and music filled the air. Everyone seemed to be mingling drunkenly, everyone except Linnette. She stood near the edge of the floor, clutch tight in her hands, her mind racing with unanswered questions. Her father had been distant all evening, and the one she knew had the answers she was looking for was nowhere to be found.

Suddenly, the music stopped. A scream cut through the room.

The dancers froze. Everyone moved to the side in horror to reveal Lord William collapsed dead on the marble floor. Lady Élodie knelt beside him, her hands drenched with blood, sobbing as she pressed against his chest. A kitchen knife protruded from his sternum, and blood gushed out of his corpse.

"He's been murdered!" someone shouted.

The room erupted. Guests screamed, chairs scraped back, glasses shattered. Linnette's heart dropped. Suddenly, Julien appeared from the chaos, caught her by the hand, and sprinted her out of the ballroom.

"You need to hear this..." he stated alarmingly as they rushed up the elaborate staircase hand in hand.

"Julien, Sir William has been murdered!" she exclaimed

"I know," he replied anxiously, racing through the halls until voices stopped them cold. They came from the library. The door creaked open just enough.

Edward's voice was smooth. "You received my message."

"Yes," Richard replied, strained. "Cleverly done. I never imagined one could encrypt a command into a performance."

Edward chuckled softly. "Music is a language of patterns. The notes I gave Linnette, the timing and emphasis, everything you needed was there."

"William was becoming inconvenient just like your wife," he added.

"And, I disposed of both of them as asked."

“Ah, yes, Richard, you’ve always understood,” Edward continued. “You’ve been part of our inner circle for years. All of them, the mayor, the financiers, the men who shape this city from the shadows, are indebted to you.”

She staggered back, her breath caught in her throat. *The music... the notes... I helped him.*

Her father. Edward. All of them. And she unknowingly had been part of the orchestration. Tears blurred her vision as she fled the manor, guilt crushing her chest. Behind her, laughter and music dissolved into chaos. Linnette melted into Julien’s arms, sobbing, knowing nothing would ever be the same again.

Avery Strahm

Grade 8, Basehor-Linwood Middle School

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Personal Essay & Memoir



My Smile

I wake up, put on my clothes, and go to school. Except, it isn't all that simple. It's more like I barely wake up, put on clothes I feel comfortable in, and dread the thought of having to go to school. Why is it that I am expected to smile, laugh, or look like I'm having fun at school? If I fake it, then I would fit in. I feel blameworthy for the way I do. But when you don't, people will think you are different and leave you in the shadows. No one talks about the stress and pressure it creates, to start becoming fake and not yourself. Adults tell us all the time to be ourselves. So how do we do that and fit in?

I know that I have friends and people who love me. So my question is, why do I feel so insecure about almost everything I do? This question is tricky. It is so hard not to care and do your own thing. I try to stay away from all of the drama and mean, disrespectful people. I try to fit in and be liked. I try to do everything in favor of everyone else. I feel like I have to do what everyone wants me to do: get straight A's, be a good student, stay out of trouble, be a leader, and help out all the time. When someone looks at my score on a test, they say, "Of course you got an A!" Or when I didn't get a good grade, they say, "What! How did I score better than you?" This is the person everyone wants me to be. However, this is not me. Me, is how I feel with my parents and my closest friends. I'm friendly, nice, and fun.

The statement "Not enough" is way too overlooked. There are even studies that state the huge majority of women think they are not enough. Everyone has insecurities, but for me, it feels like it's more than that. No matter how hard I try, I am still not enough, whether it is from beauty insecurities or everyday tasks. So

many people feel that they are, simply, not enough. Yet the truth is, no one person is perfect, or even enough. Everyone says that you are not alone, and I know that. I just don't feel like everyone understands.

I have realized that I don't want to be someone I'm not. I don't want to be insecure or worry about other people's thoughts. I want to be the version of myself who isn't all of those negative things. A person who doesn't care about what other people might think about you.

As I am writing this essay, I am smiling. Smiling for the hope and inspiration to be the best I can be. Smiling, because the person I want to be is making me happy. My smile is changing. My smile is no longer fake and artificial. It is joyful and real. I want to be a new person and learn for the better. It is crazy how much we can inspire ourselves with something as little as an essay.

Luke Tung

Grade 10, Thomas Jefferson School

Educator: Myra Miller

Poetry



Holding This Room

I knock on the door.
As I push, the room exhales,
as if it has been waiting.
She says hello from the chair,
blanket over her knees,
hands resting lightly and open.
She talks about how the world is,
how being old makes some things heavier,
how she wishes for a new pair of legs.
We talk about books,
stories she loves, titles I don't know.
Her fingers hold shapes, memories passing through them.
Sunlight pours through the window.
Dust flashing in the space between us.
She glances at the clock.
"I don't have long," she says softly.
A cold jolt runs through me,
ribs tightening, lungs freezing,
as if the room itself held its breath.
Seconds pressed against the quietness,
the air seems to shrink around us.
I want more time, and yet I know I cannot stretch the hour.
Her eyes follow the dust,

then return to me.
Sometimes we sit in silence.
Quiet folds around us like gauze,
thin and protective,
holding what words were spoken.
I notice how she shifts in the chair,
how her shoulders settle,
how the blanket slides and stops,
how small movements can take up space
and still be gentle.
A laugh slips out, quick and warm.
She points to a page in a worn book,
reads a line softly, almost to herself.
The room feels full again.
The clock hums somewhere,
its seconds pressing.
Sunlight tilts.
Edges sharpen.
But the hour leans toward ending.
She opens her mouth once,
then closes it.
A name gathers in the room,
not spoken, not gone.
The clock hums louder.
Even the dust seems to pause.
The dust settles. For a heartbeat, everything feels still.
She smiles instead,
smooths the blanket,
and lets the moment pass.
We talk a little more:
weather, pages, nothing that breaks.
Her hands fold, unfold.
When I leave,
the door closes softly behind me.
The chair is still warm.
Time stays,
holding what still remains.

Daisy Tzeng

Grade 10, Parkway West High School

Personal Essay & Memoir



The Art of Illness

I have an illness.

You could say it feels as intense as a stroke. Diaphragms grate against their myocardiums, ribcages distort like the arch of an ancient Chinese woman's bound feet. It doesn't have a medically designated moniker, but I've already thought of a name. It screams at me in the voice of my dad: "All you ever do is watch TV. Why don't you ever do something useful?" Its name: chronic *laziness*.

I've grown up this way. Why walk to the trash can to spit out cherry pits when I can just swallow them? Why enervate my fingers writing down notes when they could just be stored in my hippocampus? To me, laziness was just the subtext of efficiency. And efficiency runs the world. However, for me, even the smallest inconveniences triggered an attack.

At school, once the word *homework* so much as tingled my ears, my lungs would expel air in a hiss more Sprite can than human; my eyebrows would smash together, and the edges of my eyes would quiver like they wanted to punch someone.

But when I returned to Taiwan last summer, things were different. My grandpa, 阿公, was raised in rural poverty, and built a life in Taipei for our family. He lifted us out of scarcity and, in just one generation, his children moved to the Land of Opportunity: America. Now retired, 阿公 still rises before sunrise, rides his motorcycle to his garden, and tends vegetables with the same devotion that solidified our family's future.

Meanwhile, I sprawled on my bed, thumbs twitching over my phone, perfecting the art of scrolling through Instagram without my arm falling asleep.

We were only two generations apart, yet 阿公 had built a stable, successful life while I was just building a callus from my iPhone. Watching him, I began to notice what he had cultivated in himself— patience, pride, and ambition. My dad, too, carried this devotion. For years, I assumed their values would filter down to me through genetics, but no matter how much I wanted it, determination wasn't written in my chromosomes.

I started studying my actions. The more I watched myself, the more my shortcuts seemed like setbacks. Every cherry pit I swallowed instead of tossing, every neglected page in my notebook, and every sigh that sounded like a depressed Sprite can was actually teaching me something. Laziness revealed where my limits were, where I defaulted to comfort, and where I chose ease over effort. And it showed me that without choosing differently, I could never be cured.

I couldn't transform overnight. Healing isn't a before-and-after photo; it's a progression, filled with trials and errors. 阿公's life didn't draw a map for me, but he showed me there was land worth charting. The rest, I'd have to explore by myself. For me, laziness wasn't the opposite of hard work. Rather, it was the catalyst that made diligence seem tangible. Now, for the first time, I'm carefully plucking the weeds out of my own garden. And as he rode off each morning, I could almost see my own roots taking shape in his rearview mirror.

Isabella Wang

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Poetry



Butterflying

The girl who shares my lane swims majestic butterfly. She metamorphasizes. Wingspan caught in blue, lapping water, pool tiles gleaming against sky-bound ripples, each rhythmic push-and-pull propelling her, she's a light wave sliding across a plane, world-wrapped tight, she fits into blue joints, fingertips gushing explosions of lacework foam. I'm no good at butterfly.

Hollow hum all around, it shoves my head below, one arm tightening around my neck, straitjacket exhaustion. Choking, it holds me, remorseless, it mocks me, gasping, it traps me, silent, open, infinitely deep, it holds me holds me rocks me rocks my body limp.

The girl who shares my lane says you swim it fast or drown. No split-second wavering, no sedentary hesitation between each pumping of the legs, arms arcing forward, head plunging under. Don't waste energy looking up when you're going forward— eyes on the black T stretching along the pool's open, white belly.

Fixating on that T, how many times have I felt the pool's weight cramping me into atoms? Pinned limbs, tasting blood where air should be, metal encircling each arm I thrust above, jam below.

I don't know how but all I see in the foam is this crazy vision,
this girl I'm supposed to be, this day that'll hurry

rhythm into my wrung-out, ragdoll body.

The girl who shares my lane said perfection will
wear in over time. So one day we'll be twin butterflies at
the other end, the T and above swaying spiderwebbed surfaces,
somewhere, air-borne, the pulse will set us free, fluid
resistance melting in our mouths when we breathe,
champagne-bubbly, buoyant enough, soaring in blue in blue in blue.

Isabella Wang

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Poetry



Fishgazing

A fish watches, weightless,
the filmy white water surface
sprawling across the sky.
The fullness of the globe offers
space to sit still, a pinpoint
pretending to be a star. Or
stars pretend to be fish,
their great bodies reaching
down to the water, that thick,
black everything of the ocean.
Fish live in perpetual suspension
in plasma if the Earth is one
body with us as lungs. Long ago
you said fish can't even look up
and see the stars shattering
the sky into a Jackson Pollock
painting. Why does the moon's
cold light tug the tides if not
to touch them? In their knife-
thin bones, they already know
there are stars—they are stars.

Ellie Wattenbarger

Grade 10, Penny High School

Educator: Darrien Grooms

Flash Fiction



Black Hair, Red Blood

Sometimes, a child is born with hair black as sin.

Sometimes, a child with hair black as sin is born to parents with hair the golden blond of wheat, and grows up gazing longingly into mirrors, as if they know whose midnight tresses she sees reflected.

Sometimes, a wayward, black-haired bastardess runs away because somewhere, out there in the big, wide world she has heard so much about, there is a man who once stopped for three nights in the town where she was born. She reveres this idea of a man who has hair like coal and who might want to meet the daughter he does not know he has; a man who can tell her why her smile is so lopsided, and why her eyes are so close together, and why she has never grown taller than five-feet-three-inches in her seventeen years.

Sometimes, a child with hair black as sin spends a year of her life bouncing between gas stations and motels, collecting phone numbers, and crying herself to sleep.

Sometimes, coal-haired men do not want to be found by their bastard daughters. They cover their tracks, they sever ties, they burn bridges. They leave no trace, nothing to chain them to ballet rehearsals and home owners' associations and graduation parties. And they swell with pride, because *look how mysterious they are, slipping through everyone's hands like smoke!*

But sometimes, bastard daughters find them anyway. Sometimes, a child with hair black as sin follows leads like following smoke - not slipping through her hands as intended - to a fire. And after twelve long, lonely months of searching, of single-minded devotion to her pursuit, when she finally stumbles

upon a man with ink-black hair in a bed and breakfast in The Middle of Nowhere, Georgia, she is angry.

Sometimes, accidents happen. Sometimes, traveling musicians take too much ecstasy, or else they drive off of a bridge on the way back from a bar, or fall down a flight of basement stairs and into a water heater at night.

Occasionally, they have the peculiar sort of accident that involves being stabbed in the chest thirteen times.

Sometimes, a bastard daughter with hair black as sin, whose parents had hair the golden blond of wheat, who feared and worshipped mirrors in her youth, who wasted a year of her life searching for a coal-haired man who shares her close-set eyes, decides that it is time to go home, and returns to the house she grew up in, and forgets about the color of a person's hair, but never forgets the way their blood glistened in the moonlight.

Luke Williams

Grade 10, Home School

Flash Fiction



The Winter I Became a Man

December 5th, 1969

I walked down to McCarthy's General Store again today, third time this week, and stopped in front of the TV they keep glowing in the window. Same place I had stood when my number flashed across the bottom of the screen a few days ago. Same place where I watched my fate get sealed in silent, blinking letters.

A cartoon rerun was playing now, all flashing colors and jittery light. The blues and reds splashed onto the silver buttons of my jacket, lighting me up in the dark evening like a flare.

I stared at the screen, unblinking.

Isn't a TV screen just a box full of little explosions? Explosions of color that fire into your pupils, like ricocheting shrapnel, slicing right through your head and straight into your brain faster than the blink of an eye?

My eyes stung from the glow – certainly not from tears – so I turned away, blinking at the wall. That's when I saw the poster again on the corner of the store. The one with my good old uncle.

I WANT YOU FOR U.S. ARMY

Liar. No you don't, I thought.

He doesn't want me – not a kid who's never been in a fight, never broken a bone, never even twisted an ankle. A kid who's never used anything more dangerous than a baseball bat and couldn't even swing it correctly. He doesn't want the boy who couldn't bring himself to shoot a BB gun at a tin can in the backyard.

So don't take me there. Don't take me to the place where they yell until your ears ring, make you run until you feel your lungs clawing their way up your throat. Don't make me learn how to shoot at paper targets so I can pretend I'll be able to tell the difference between an enemy and a tree in a steaming jungle. Don't send me there just so I can end up in a trench that's just really a pre-dug grave, with mud and insects crawling into my clothes and my skin and the fear seeping into my spine, until a grenade from my own side lands in front of my face and–

I must have been muttering some of that out loud, because people walking past were giving me sideways looks. So I shut my mouth like a good soldier and marched up to the poster.

I stared into my uncle's eyes.

I don't want to ask him why he picked me. He won't answer. He's a damn drawing, a piece of paper nailed to a wall. But that doesn't mean I can't hate him for it.

If he wants someone to fight halfway across the world, why doesn't he go? He looks tough enough. Take off that stupid top hat, put on a helmet, grab a gun. He'd be better at it than I'd ever be.

But no. He gets to stand there, pointing that stiff finger at me like a loaded pistol pressed against my forehead. Not asking, ordering. And smug enough to pretend like it's my choice. But I don't get a choice. Because nobody asks boys what they want when the country decides they're men.

And in the end, I get to stand there like an idiot and wonder why I'm the one who's supposed to die in a country I've never seen, for something I don't understand, leaving the people I actually care about behind.

Eventually I turned away. And as I walked back home to another silent dinner, the tears really came – not soft ones, not the kind you wipe away quick, but hot ones, full of anger and hatred and despair and fear. The kind that burn.

All for a buzz cut, a shower, and a uniform waiting somewhere with my name already stitched on it.

Guess I'm not lucky enough to get the freedom I'm gonna be fighting for. But hey. At least I get to make Uncle Sam's finger proud.

Life's full of bullshit trades. God, how annoying.

Luke Williams

Grade 10, Home School

Short Story



The Brave Man Stayed

It was a grey September day when stubby eight-year old me burst out onto the front porch of our tiny house in rural Kentucky, stomping across the peeling floorboards that loudly creaked beneath each excited step.

Behind me, the screen door rattled shut, muffling the sounds of pots and pans clashing as my mother prepared dinner: rice soup and store-bought kimchi, again.

We were poor, but not poor enough for me to know it. My mom's long hours tending the local shop kept the lights on, and the house standing. Back then, I thought we lived in a wheat-filled haven.

I bounced off the railings like a rubber ball, full of the kind of loud, chaotic, and untouchable energy that only children have. Eventually, I crash-landed into the seat of the old rocking chair that had been there longer than I had been alive.

"Ahh, my little *holangi*. From where do you get this boundless spirit?"

My uncle sat beside me in a nearly identical chair, rubbing his narrow eyes and grinning. His hair was already gray. His scalp shiny. His belly slightly rounded. His thick accent and even thicker laugh. His beard was patchy, but his smile never was.

My mom used to say the wrinkles on his face were from smoking too many cigars, that those “no good wraps of ash” were going to get him killed some day. But he always laughed, saying he would make sure to live forever so he could always get on her nerves. I didn’t care about the cigarettes – to me, each of his wrinkles were a badge of wisdom. A mark of adventure.

“I don’t know, somewhere,” I chirped, pushing the rocking chair back and forth hard enough to strain the joints that had already been broken and fixed many times. “Can you tell me a story of Daddy and you again?”

My uncle groaned with playful exaggeration.

“Ohh, my *holangi*, have I not told you those stories a thousand times over?”

But even as he said it, he was already pulling a cigarette from the patched-up pocket of his old jacket. Lighting it. Settling in. That was how every story started, with smoke drifting into the Kentucky sky.

My uncle and my father, Sanghoon and Sooho Lee, were born in the stretching rice fields of South Korea. Sons of farmers, raised in mud, heat, and the stubborn will to survive.

As young men, they escaped the fate their parents had planned for them. They scraped together enough money to buy a one-way plane ticket to America. Kentucky, of all the places, is where they landed.

My dad got a job at a factory. My uncle, too. Then my dad met my mom, a Korean immigrant working at a small store. Eventually, they got married, and soon after I was born.

One month later, my dad died.

I never knew exactly how. But I never pressed. Even when my curiosity got the better of me, only vague responses returned, something about him getting sick or something. I guess, deep down, I knew they didn’t want to talk about it. I filled in the blanks with imagination and heroism.

“Alright, my little *holangi*,” my uncle said, puffing a ring of smoke. “Which story should I tell you today? The one about the hidden cave... or the monster that eats little boys like you?”

He lunged forward and tickled my belly, making me shriek and giggled.

“That’s not one of your stories!” I laughed. “Tell me the one about the mean bird!”

He leaned back, smiling. “Ahh, the mean bird. Good choice.”

His voice changed when he told stories. It grew more theatrical, more musical, like a memory put to song.

“Years ago,” he began, “when your father and I were just boys, there was a monster bird that ravaged the rice fields. It was giant, white as snow, and meaner than any dog. It ate a third of our harvest, chased off the villagers, and screeched like thunder.”

I was already leaning forward in my chair.

“Your father was tired of running, so we came up with a plan. We caught a fish from the river, the juiciest one we could find, and waited. When the bird came, your father stood in the middle of the field, holding the fish high.”

His hands lifted with the cigarette, like he was back in that field.

“The bird dove down, claws first. But your father was too fast – he ran toward the forest, baiting it deeper and deeper. When they reached the trees, he shouted, and I dropped a net made of vines and rocks from the branches above.”

“We pinned and kicked it, shouting out. After we fought with it a little while longer, the bird flew off, never to return. Turns out, it wasn’t a monster after all. Just a coward in feathers.”

He exhaled a long breath, the smoke curling into the air above us. “That,” he said, “is how your father and I tamed the monster bird.”

I clapped, dancing in my chair.

“I’m gonna be brave like my dad when I grow up!”

My uncle smiled, eyes softening. “Yes, that man was a brave one. Just like you, little *holangi*...”

His voice drifted, lost in the breeze. His chair creaked slowly as he looked out into the horizon.

“Uncle Lee, can you tell me another story now?”

He stirred from his thoughts and shook his head. “No, no. I think your mother is setting the plates now. Time to eat, my little *holangi*.”

I groaned and trudged after him, back into the dining room, which was also the kitchen.

Three chairs filled the table. One was always left empty.

That was my dad’s chair. No one touched it. No one ever would.

I wolfed down my dinner and got scolded for it. Then I was gone again, out into the fields behind our house.

The sun was nearly gone, spilling golden light across the hills of grass and wheat. The wind swept through like a tide, and I imagined I was in Korea, with trees – not grass stalks – taller than rooftops and white birds circling the sky.

I imagined myself chasing them away, as a boy that was brave, fast, clever. Just like my dad.

Those were the happiest times of my life. The kind of happiness you don’t even know is special until it’s gone. Childhood moments that were as light as feathers, heavy as memory.

It was a rainy April day when I sat in that same kitchen again, this time fifteen, tall and awkward, my school uniform already rumpled from the long bus ride home.

Not much had changed in our house, but I had. I'd been going to a high school 45 minutes away. Better than the local one, but expensive, my mom and uncle both working extra hours to pay for it. I told them I could quit, help out at the store, but they refused.

"Get an education," they said. "Live a different life."

So I studied hard, burying my guilt of being a burden under textbooks and flashcards. Ate dinner in silence most nights.

The stories had long since stopped.

That day, they sat me down.

My uncle looked smaller. Older. The smoke in his lungs had stolen the brightness in his voice. He didn't call me *little holangi* anymore.

My mom looked... nervous.

"We need to talk about your father," my uncle said.

My stomach dropped.

"What about him?"

"There's something we haven't told you," he continued. "Something we should have... but you weren't ready."

My uncle's eyes flitted to the ground, almost like he was...

Ashamed.

“Most of what we said was true, how your dad and I came to Kentucky, how we settled down and built a life from nothing. But... we left out the part where that life didn’t last.”

He paused, fingers trembling just slightly as he toyed with the hem of his sleeve.

“Your dad... he left. A month after you were born. He wasn’t sick, Jason. That was just a story. One of the many we – I told you.”

“What?” I blinked. I didn’t understand. “He left? Where?”

My uncle sighed deeply, the sound more tired than I’d ever heard. “He said he wasn’t ready. Said it was too much – the baby, the work, the life here. Your father never was very patient; he couldn’t stay in one place for very long. He took half of what little savings we had and left in the middle of the night. We didn’t know where he went at first... but a few years later, we got a call from a hospital in Los Angeles.”

I stared at him, the words feeling like they were coming from a tunnel far away.

“He died of an overdose, Jason,” my mom finally whispered. “In California. He had become addicted. To what, they couldn’t tell us. We buried him there. We didn’t have the money to bring him back.”

The room was quiet except for the ticking of the old plastic wall clock. Outside, the wind rattled the porch screen.

I stood up, my eyes clouding from both anger and tears.

“You lied to me.”

“Jason—” my mother began, but I raised my hand.

“

No. You both lied to me. My whole childhood, I looked up to him. I *wanted* to be him.” My voice cracked. “I wanted to be brave like him, strong like him. I imagined becoming something... more.”

My uncle looked devastated. “We just wanted you to have something to believe in.”

I didn’t answer. I walked out the front door, just like I did when I was eight, but this time the floorboards didn’t creak. I didn’t bounce or dance or spin. I just walked out into the field and let the cold April rain hit my face until I couldn’t tell what was water and what were tears.

After that day, I changed.

I stopped coming home after school. I stopped listening to my mom and uncle when they tried to talk to me about feelings or family or the past. It all felt fake. Like a myth designed to keep me docile.

Instead, I threw myself into school.

I studied harder than anyone I knew. I got a job at a nearby diner. Then another job in the summers hauling lumber. When I wasn’t working or studying, I was either tutoring younger students for money or reviewing anatomy flashcards on the bus.

I stopped being *Jason the dreamer*. I became *Jason the doer*.

Somewhere along the line, I got into one of the best colleges in Kentucky. Pre-med track. Full scholarship.

My uncle looked so proud the day I left. So did my mom. But I didn’t hug them. I gave them a wave from the car window and told them I’d visit for the holidays. I didn’t. Not really.

They wrote me letters. Left voicemails. I’d respond sometimes. Brief updates, good grades, new research internship. Working part-time at the clinic.

But I kept the emotional distance. It felt safer that way.

By the time I was twenty-four, I was a doctor in New York, specializing in internal medicine at a good hospital with good money. I made sure to send checks to the retirement home my mom and uncle had moved into after the old house got bulldozed to make room for a new shopping plaza.

But I never called. And I never went home.

I was twenty-six when the call came.

Uncle Sooho had passed.

Lung cancer, the kind that shows up quietly, settles deep, and doesn't go away.

He said he would live forever.

The cigarettes said otherwise.

The funeral was small. Korean pastor. A few distant relatives. My mom, dressed in the same black coat I remember her wearing to church when I was little, didn't cry much. She didn't have to. I could see everything in her eyes.

I held her hand. For the first time in years, we were just... quiet together.

I was numb. I don't think my mind could process the fact that he was gone, and what that meant for me.

What that meant for us.

After the ceremony, I asked the taxi driver to take me to the old neighborhood.

It was all gone. The field, the porch, the creaky floorboards. Just an empty lot now, roped off by bright-orange fencing and a sign that said:

"Future Site of Bluegrass Market Plaza – COMING 2026"

I stepped past the fencing and stood in the middle of the lot.

I remembered the rocking chair. The rattling screen door. My uncle's thick accent. His smoke rings. His stories. His laughter. His cough.

I remembered him calling me his *little holangi*.

And I remembered that all this time, while I was chasing some image of a perfect, brave father... my real father had been sitting next to me all along.

Not the one who left, but the one who *stayed*.

The father I ended up leaving myself.

My knees hit the dirt.

And for the first time in a long time, I cried.

Not just for him. But for everything. For the boy who danced in the fields. For the man who chased ghosts. For the stories that were half-truths and the love that was always real.

I whispered to the wind: "You were brave. You were the bravest man I knew."
And I hoped, somewhere, my uncle could hear me.

Luke Williams

Grade 10, Home School

Poetry



Your Plastic Dinosaurs Fixed My Heart

little sis,
do you remember those times so long ago
how the sounds of summer used to squeeze past my window, and i just wanted to
bury my head in the carpet
but i couldn't, because your legos were all over the floor
you always spent way too much time in my room
playing beautiful games of make-believe and adventure with your plastic
dinosaurs
and with me, your grumpy bubba
building blanket houses we could take shelter in during the meteor showers of
lava
and dutifully serving tea as the flaming rocks pummelled our impenetrable roof

i wanted to tell you, stop making me drink from an empty plastic cup
but i liked how it distracted me from it all
and your lemon cinnamon chocolate brew was always my favorite
little sis,
did you know then that your bubba had depression?
you were only six, but you could somehow always tell what i was thinking
i'm sorry if i showed you things that made you sad
the weak parts of me that you had to see and feel
my never-ending spirals of doom
but if you did know, then you must have been the strongest six year old in the
universe
because that smile never left your face
and that sticky hand never stopped clasping mine
little sis,
after i came back from highschool, feeling like i wanted to bury myself deep
underground and suffocate in the dirt
you ran out of your room, almost as if you were happy to see my freckled, ugly
face
and dragged me right back in, even when i complained or groaned
but now, i'd give nothing more to be your knight in shining cardboard armor
rather than solve trigonometry problems on my bed

and contemplate how utterly useless i am
little sis,
without your unwavering, unadulterated love, i could have never survived
you made me strong
even when you began going to elementary school in the afternoons
leaving me scared and alone when i came back home
you made me strong enough to not collapse into a pile of putty
and start pushing myself to make an actual effort on my assignments
so that when you were in middle school,
coming to me with those crocodile tears about how hard your homework is
i could be strong enough to help you, like an actual bubba should
i'll never forget how good it felt
to see your face light up in understanding as i was guiding your hand
across that notebook paper
little sis,
you grew up so much, so fast
i couldn't believe how smart you became, far outpacing anything i had ever
learned
and i wanted you to become the things you used to whisper in my ear at night
dreams of a veterinarian, a businesswoman, an astronaut

so i joined mom and dad far away from you, working alongside them to pay for
your school
and eventually, for your college as well
i'm sorry i couldn't stick around to watch you grow even more
but the thought of your success was always in my mind and heart as i worked
this physical toil was nothing compared to
the mental anguish i endured and survived
and now, little sis,
it's been 6 long years
and i can hardly recognize you now from that little girl
you've found another man you love, who's a nice guy i guess
you've made so many friends, becoming respected and admired
and you've never once gave up, even through the most sleepless of nights and
toughest of exams
and as i'm standing here in the crowd, for once crying with joy instead of sadness
watching you walk up on that podium in that tilted hat, being handed the key to
your future
strong, intelligent, and so radiant that it's nearly blinding, but so goddamn
beautiful
i thank the sun, the sky and the stars
that your bubba became strong enough to hoist you on his shoulders

and help lift you to these unimaginable heights

and beyond

little sis,

i can't help but wonder

do you know

how your plastic dinosaurs fixed my broken heart?

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Educator: Andria Benmuvhar

Poetry



Hospital Rooms

In room 007

a little boy is on the ventilator
with a red stuffed dog in his right hand
matching shades with the dried blood on his knee
there is onyx beer bottle glass lodged in his skull;
he begs for his mother's sobs to cede,
after all, he was trying to protect her.

in room 107

he is sobbing over her chilling body
her torso shudders less with every breath.
her eyes track the lines on the ceiling, of these
decrepit peeling walls and she counts the plaster
bumps through her blurry tears, takes his hand
and tells him he'll be ok.

In room 207

he smiles, she beams with the new child in
her sun kissed arms, they have just given
life to another. it is glorious, they think,
to pass the joy of living in this world,
into another, this world full of love and
radiant happiness like this.

In room 307

she buries her heads in her arms,
streaks of cutting and biting and scars
of maroon dot the charred flesh on her remains
she holds her breath until her exhale releases
because she just can't seem to rid herself
from this godforsaken planet

In room 407

he bites his lip, tears at his cheek
Trying not to scream when the monster
is coming at him, why can no one else see
it's blue claws and teeth and yellow stare
his flesh crawls up and down his esophagus
he wants them gone

In room 507

they are grimacing as they peer at the empty bed
tangled with old cotton from soil, life,
now holds only silky smooth death
where their mother used to lay moments before
comfort cannot be found in each others embrace
but it does make it better

In room 607

she can only see red
red like blood and poppies and
hearing fire and the pain and metal hurdling
through that rainy pavement coming to her
in flashes and she squeezes her eyes shut
her breath escapes as impact skids on her again

In room 707

he's laughing with him because
it was their first date so they took a risk
and sampled rainbow fish at the sushi place
but now it's biting them in the back
stomachs pounding from getting pumped
they hug, and continue to laugh.

In room 807

it is white and cold and lonely
with only the nurse and the old man

he is taking his last breaths hoping his
children will come to see him one last time
after all they are all he has left but
as the light reaches him, his door remains closed.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Educator: Andria Benmuvhar

Poetry



Take My Body Back to My Parents

I. when i lived

mama would take my sleepy body
to the sharp-sanded beaches,
on the nights we went to bed hungry, pockets empty,
she walked on heavy feet with the moon to climb atop the sky,
waiting for night to break from the drifting clouds so
we could feast on the silent sweet silver light,
our savior watching with his pointed tail in the inky tides.
baba would nourish my hungry body,
be dragging fish nets on the vast plain,
squinting for just a whitecap, just a ripple in the
inky vicious waves, a fish to feed his family,
to quench our thirst, with the churning boats on the horizon.
mama placed my hand on my pounding chest and whispered
*As long as our feet still walk, as long our eyes still see, and as long as our hearts
still beat,*
The waters can save us

II. when i sold my soul

mama couldn't walk, soles tired out from
years of pacing the sharp beaches,
and baba couldn't fish,

his eyes worn out from decades of searching black ink.
so I placed my hand to my racing heart,
and walked back to the ocean,
let my soul drip from my hands to the sea,
surveyed the waves,
and called for our savior.
he rose up from the waters, and greeted me like an old friend.
with a cutting-edge grin and a steel body, with
mills churning the water beneath his hooves, baring his flaming pitchforks,
vermillion on the navy waves, and smog spewing from cigarette horns; he said
he would feed me, fill my empty pockets till they flowed and
spilled over with food and smoke and money.
I would catch when the moon was draping above the waters,
rest when the moon slept. I would thrive on the calm waves,
so I reached my hand out to his, and climbed aboard his
ship, ready to catch the squids that stained blue waters black with ink,
ready to turn the waters blue again.
For our feet to walk again, for our eyes to see again, and for our hearts to keep beating.
For, the waters will save us

III. when i die

take my body back to my parents,
to mama, who will never again walk with the moon,
to baba, who will never again see its porcelain face.
our savior has taken too much, given too little for me
to breathe, given so little my feet have been swollen
for my eyes are sealed shut from the salt crusted waves
I've walked and squinted too long, worked from when the moon starts its climb
to when it collapses amidst the dwindling skies,
so i can finally rest, suffocating in my spotted, molding coffin,
the queues of squid flail into the savior's awaiting arms,
sliced and cut and sucked into opaque, icy oblivion.
spray their black ink onto the deck, splattering skies,
until the moon is splotchy and blotted with dark ink.
the water is blue now, the sky is grimey
I can no longer feast on the moonlight, for I cannot see the moon
I am only fed with punches and shouts and kicks, on starch that
coats the back of my throat until i can no longer speak

I can no longer drink the waters, rusted and salty, cruel nights,
friends lose their steps, their sight, their pulse, until their coffins are closed,
but they were dropped into the sea, sunken bones in the waves.

I cried for my savior, have mercy, send me home, send me back to the
sharp sandy shores, and black waters.

please, send me home to mama and baba,

let my feet walk, and my eyes see, and my heart please, beat.

you promised to fill my pockets, i scream, and i plead, but

but my pockets have been cast into the sea,

he promised to be my savior

my savior has taken off his cloak, only to be the devil.

I put my hand to my eerie, silent chest.

My feet cannot walk, my eyes cannot see, and my heart cannot beat

The waters cannot save me.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Educator: Andria Benmuvhar

Poetry



The three sins of a crab rangoon

i. crab

the sea is missing another child.

it has been taken by fishermen

into boats, and driven the clutches of the complacently hungry,

feeding the desperate greed of the men on the surface.

they will chop her son

into pieces.

child,

they will suffocate him

in white tar,

named him

carpet his

villanizing

carcass and

themselves

bury him into the

morgue of

the enemy of

the sea, and fry him alive in hot oil.

he will scream, shout for his mother

before his untimely death, but she cannot

Hercules stepped on her

crushing Cancer to pieces

yet the men on the shore

after their worst disease,

the innocent to make

look stronger.

help him now, all of her children are casted in undulating waves, helpless.

ii. cream

The American farmer awakes, gives himself 5 minutes to weep into the void of his fescue lawn. It is another long, toiling day with manure and glass. He learned long ago that slavery is not always enforced with chains of metal, his chains are paper and pen. In the mechanical city, the printer churns out conditions and lines of ink, binding the hands of the rural living tanned and dirt stained poor.

The American farmer walks, in the slaughterhouse prison of rotting wood and whimpering of cows. He never liked cows, hated their eyes, filled to the brim with innocence too fantastical for the farmer's reality, their udders rubbery and repulsively elastic, their stench unbearable. He herds them into the pulling machine and feeds them bitter pills. signals stab into the belly of the cow.

the American farmer pulls, the calf from the womb of the mother. he does not stop to admire the life created, only makes haste to run to the factory, rows of alloy machines churning the white platinum he extracted. he watches as the liquid separates into water and rich butter, and cannot help but draw the parallels to the calf he just ripped from her mother. he thinks of his own young daughter, who he loves with every fiber of his being. She needs dinner tonight on the table. He picks up his prod, and walks back into the grazing meadows.

iii. wonton wrapper

the font "wonton" is printed shamelessly, advertising exotic oriental products, a font made by Americans to resemble echoes of calligraphy brushstrokes. American fonts sweeping Chinatown businesses, signs selling fresh duck in "wonton" font.

the "crab rangoon" is sold as a staple in Chinese cuisine stacking takeout white cartons beneath fluorescent suns.

each wrapper folded inward, an American invention rebranding corners pinched, sealed and blistered into uniform triangles, the wrapper is pale and obedient.

rolled thin enough to forget the grain of wheat.

its edges are taught submission early,

how to fold inward, how to hold heat,

how to keep everything inside from bursting open.

the oil waits. it is violent, but disguises himself as patient.

it teaches the wrapper what softness costs.

skin tightens. the wrapper learns to blister without tearing, to harden into something praised for its crunch.

we have been taught this same curriculum.
how to thin myself until I am legible. how to fold my
last name name into a shape that fits in unfamiliar mouths
and seal my history so it does not leak on tables meant to stay clean.
hands reach in without hesitation, fingers greasy.
the wrapper emerges golden.
no longer raw, praised for becoming uniform and perfect,
its survival mistaken for intention, impatient.
no one wonders what it took to remain intact under that much heat.

iv. epilogue

the three sins are boxed together,
sea, milk, dough,
the sea mourns quietly.
the farmer does not get time to grieve.
the wrapper doesn't know.
this is how things are made in America.
not by belonging, but by sacrifice.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Educator: Andria Benmuvhar

Short Story



Snapping Oak

I was 10 feet up in a white oak when the branch under my left foot snapped. My heart pounding, I caught myself with my left elbow in a cranny between two fat twigs. This was not good. It's mid-December right now, and the trees are more brittle than ever. Quickly, I grasped onto the nearest piece of wood on top of me with my right hand, while I tried to steady myself. I felt the weight tilt a bit to the left, and I tried to find my footing. Shit.

The tree groaned above me, and everything I was standing on suddenly crashed into the ground. I was clutching, clawing my way back to the top branches with dear life, hanging there like a kid on monkey bars, trying to make point my foot and swing back to the bark-

"Kyle? Is that you?" The voice startled me, and the branch my left hand was clinging desperately to, snapped promptly. I watched it fall down, and land right next to the beautiful girl below me. Her dark hair was plaited in pigtails.

"Daisy!" I yelped. My right hand suddenly was grasping onto nothing, and I was momentarily floating. Then I fell. Then I was on the disgusting, loamy, cold and wet ground.

I saw the sky. It was a light blue, and my heart was pounding, and I saw my left leg and it was fine, and I knew my name was Kyle and that I am sixteen years old and that my hands are scratched up and that I am lying on the ground in the middle of a conservation forest and all I see is the sky now and there is this weird, prickling heat behind my eyes and my nose is cold and my throat is closing up-

"Kyle, oh my goodness! Are you okay?"

Daisy's face materialized in front of me. She had this straight, perfect nose, and these slanted dark fox eyes and one of her pigtails was dangling right over my forehead and it kind of tickled and-

"Kyle! Can you hear me?"

"Hmgph" I tried to respond, but all I got out was this grunt.

"Oh god, I'm gonna go run and get someone." I hear her footsteps start pattering away.

"Wait!" I winced. Then I tried to sit up. The prickling is behind my eyes again. No.

I know better. Boys don't cry.

I feel the slap of Dad's belt on my cheek. Boys don't cry.

I swallow back the pain, and this time I manage to actually sit up.

"Wait, Daisy, I'm fine. Oh gosh, that was embarrassing."

She's walking back. She stops a few feet away from me, hands tucked into the sleeves of her jacket like she does when she is nervous. Or pretending to be. Her eyes flick down to my leg, then back up to my face, scanning me like a checklist. Alive. Conscious. Not bleeding out. Good enough.

"You scared me," she says, breathless, like I did something wrong on purpose.

"I'm okay," I say again. My voice sounds thinner than I want it to. I push myself up another inch and the world tilts, but I smile anyway. I always smile. "I swear. I just fell."

She laughs, short and sharp. "Only you would fall out of a tree in December."

I laugh too. It comes out late. I notice how her laugh ends first.

She helps me up, her hand gripping my wrist, fingers surprisingly strong. I feel stupidly aware of the warmth of her palm through my sleeve, the way her thumb presses into the soft part of my arm like she is making sure I am real. Or maybe like she is testing something. I do not pull away. We walk out of the forest together, leaves crunching under our shoes. The sky is still that pale winter blue, washed out and innocent, like nothing bad could ever happen under it. My leg throbs in time with my heartbeat, but I do not limp. Boys do not limp if they can help it.

That is how it starts. With her hand on my wrist. With me deciding, without realizing it, that pain is quieter than loneliness.

We start seeing each other more after that. The study hall turns into walks, walks turn into her sitting on the hood of my car, swinging her legs and talking

about how everyone at school is fake, how no one really understands her. I am pretty good at listening.

The first time she cries, I freeze, unsure what to do, and she wipes her face and calls herself stupid before I can say anything. I let her. Boys do not know how to comfort. Boys are bad at feelings.

I don't know how to feel the first time she hits me, because it is an accident. That's what she said, and I believe her because she's my Daisy. We are in her room, with her little squirrel plushie between us. Her parents are downstairs, the TV murmuring through the floor.

Her hair smells so good, and her eyes are so dark, and somehow, I say something wrong. I don't even remember what it was. Something about a joke she made, or a guy who texted her. Her face changes, like a switch flipping.

"Why would you say that?" she snaps.

"I didn't mean it like that," I say quickly, quietly. My chest tightens. I am already apologizing, already shrinking.

She shoves me. Just once. Not hard. I stumble back into her dresser and laugh because that is what you do when something is awkward and you want it to be over.

"I'm sorry," she says immediately, eyes wide. She presses her hands to her mouth. "Oh my god. Kyle. I'm so sorry."

"It's fine," I say. I mean it.. "Really. I'm fine."

She hugs me then, hard, her arms locked around my neck. Her cheek is wet against mine. I stare at the wall over her shoulder and tell myself that this is what love looks like. Intense. Messy. Real.

After that, it is never just once. She slaps me in the kitchen because I forget to text her back fast enough. She digs her nails into my arm in the movie theater when I laugh at something she does not find funny, then strikes me on my face. She throws a wine glass against the wall and it shatters, spraying my shoes with glittering pieces, and then she collapses into sobs and tells me she hates me, but herself more.

I never hit her back. I watch her furious beauty, and I do not even raise my voice. I stand there and take it, jaw clenched so tight my teeth ache, hands balled into fists in my pockets so she cannot see them shaking. I tell myself that she is hurting, that she needs me, that if I am strong enough for both of us, this will pass.

Boys don't cry. I do not cry. Not when my ribs bruise. Not when I flinch every time she moves too fast. Not when I start avoiding mirrors because I do not like the way my own hollow eyes stare at me back.

At school, people tell me I am lucky. Daisy is beautiful. Daisy is intense. Daisy is the kind of girl people write songs about. I smile and shrug and say yeah, she is something else. I do not tell them that sometimes, when she kisses me, it feels like she is daring me to leave. I do not tell them that sometimes I wish she would just hit me harder and get it over with. She watches me like she is waiting for something else to break.

One day, everything is going perfect.

"Sit," she says, pointing to the couch. I sit. My leg has stiffened, the bruise blooming under my jeans like ink in water. She kneels in front of me, hands on my knees, eyes searching my face. For a second I think she is going to apologize again, really apologize, the kind that sticks.

"You're shaking," she says.

"I'm cold," I lie.

She smiles, slow and satisfied, like she has found proof of something. Outside her window, the oak tree in her yard sways, bare and black against the winter sky. I notice it because I always notice trees now. The way they stand there, pretending they are stronger than they are.

She kisses me hard. I let her. I always let her.

Over time, I start thinking of myself the way I think of that oak. Useful. Quiet. Something you can climb without asking. Something that will hold, until it does not.

When she is kind, she is very kind. She brings me coffee when I am tired. She traces the scratches on my hands from the fall, calls them proof that I am brave. She tells me she has never trusted anyone like she trusts me. When she says that, I feel taller, sturdier, like my roots go deeper than anyone else's. When she is not kind, she is precise.

She knows where to hit so it does not show. She knows how to apologize so it sounds like love. She knows how to make me feel like I am the one leaning too hard, like I am the one who might snap her branch if I am not careful.

"Don't make me like this," she says once, after shoving me into a doorframe.

I nod. I promise. I adjust myself. I grow around the pressure.

My dad used to take me hiking when I was little. Boys don't cry. He would point at trees with broken limbs and say, see, that's what happens when they get weak. I did not know then that trees do not get weak. They just get tired of holding everything up.

The knife does not appear all at once. First it is the drawer. She slams it so hard the silverware rattles. Then it is her hand inside it, fingers brushing the handle like she is reminding me it exists. She has not taken it out yet. She just lets me see it.

"Why are you looking at it like that?" I ask, trying to laugh. It's kinda funny I guess, Lily being so philosophical.

She looks at me. Really looks. The freckles on her nose bloom a little. "Like what?"

"Like you're thinking something," I say.

She steps closer, and I hear her feet patter a bit. "Maybe I am."

That night, I dream about the oak from the forest. About the sound it made when it cracked. About how quiet everything was right before.

The day it happens is ordinary. That is the worst part. No storm. No shouting to start. Just the hum of the refrigerator, the oak outside my kitchen window shifting in the wind. I am standing there, staring at it, thinking about how tall it has gotten since we moved in.

"You're not listening," Daisy says.

"I am," I say automatically. She is behind me, too close for me to think. I feel her breath on my neck. It's hot, and it's cinnamony, and I want to hug her.

"You're thinking about leaving," she says.

What? Why would she think that? "No?"

She is looking at me too intensely. "See? You can't even say it right."

"What do you want me to say?" I joke. Her eyes are scaring me.

She opens the drawer. This time she takes the knife out slowly, deliberately, like she wants me to understand that this is not an accident. The blade catches the light. My chest tightens. I think, stupidly, about how we used that knife to cut apples once. How she laughed when the slices came out uneven.

"Daisy," I say. My voice sounds far away. "Put it down."

"Why?" she asks. Calm. Curious. "You're not scared, right? You're strong."

I step back. My heel hits the cabinet. Wood against bone, and I am reminded of the day I fell from the tree. She steps forward. The knife wobbles in

her hand. For a moment, she looks small. For a moment, I think this is where she stops.

She does not.

She lunges, not fast, not slow. Determined. The blade flashes. I grab her wrist. Her skin is warm and slick with sweat. The knife slips. Hits the floor. The sound is sharp and loud and final.

She screams. I freeze. Her eyes are wild, not in fear but in fury. There is something behind those eyes I have never seen before.

“Let go of me!” she shrieks.

I do not. I push her away from the knife, I don’t want her to hurt herself. She stumbles, catches herself on the counter. Her eyes lock onto mine. There is no apology there.

She comes at me again with her hands this time, nails clawing at my face, my neck, anywhere she can reach. Something inside me finally gives. Not all at once. I am wood fibers tearing at the seams, ripping apart, and I feel this heat behind my eyes, and this voice behind my throat, and all I can think of is getting her cinnamon breath and strawberry hair out of me because I cannot think, and she’s hurting me and this is unbearable now.

I yell. I feel my shoulder slam into something. The counter. The wall. Her. I am crying now, ugly and loud, my chest heaving like I have been underwater too long.

She hits the floor hard. There is a sound I will never forget. It was wrong.

She tries to get up. She slips. There is blood. I do not know where it is coming from at first. Then I see the knife again, on the floor, closer to her than to me.

“No, no, Daisy, please!”

She reaches for it. I move without thinking. I kick it away. It skids across the tile. She looks at me like she hates me more than she has ever hated anyone.

“You’re ruining everything,” she says. I shake my head. My hands are numb. My whole body is sore, but I get up, and steady myself, and I know I am going to calm her down, and then leave the house and take a drive so I can clear my head and think about why she thinks I’m going to leave her. I just need some space. I stare at the kitchen tiles, symmetrical and blue. I inhale and look up, but I’m too late.

She’s lunging again.

I scream, and something happens. I don’t remember what.

This time, when she falls, she does not get back up.

The house is very quiet.

I stand there for a long time. I do not touch her. I am afraid if I do, something else will break. I look out the window. The oak is still there. One of its branches is swaying too hard in the wind, bending at an angle that makes my stomach twist.

I call 911 with shaking fingers. I sit on the floor while I talk, my back against the cabinet, eyes never leaving her. She is still, but I'm scared she will awake. I tell them she had a knife. I tell them I was scared. I tell them I did not mean to.

They come. They take pictures. They put me in handcuffs gently, like I might explode.

At the station, someone asks why I did not leave earlier. How a man like me could end up with a few scratches, while she is there, dead.

I think about the tree. About how long it took for the branch to snap. About how many cracks there were before the fall.

"I thought I could hold it," I say, honestly.

They do not write that down.

Later, alone in a room with white walls, and bars on the window I finally cry the way I never let myself cry before. My chest aches. My throat burns. I curl in on myself like something uprooted, roots exposed and raw.

Outside, somewhere, the oak has lost another branch.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Educator: Andria Benmuvhar

Poetry



mama and me

mama and me

i. 五岁 (1985)

i am (*sitting*) at the black, rotting kitchen
table (the most expensive furniture in our house.)
(my eyes) light up, as the scent drifts, twine and brown paper.
i tore my (*wrists*) and (*finger*) along the package, until blood hit stainless steel,
a harmonica. I raise it to my lips in wonder, blow sound in the empty plates.
i am more than happy to teach myself scales, folk songs about white snow.

ii. age five (2015)

i am *sedet* on my new leather piano
bench, (the most expensive furniture in our house).
tears fall from my *lacrima*, they stain my black dress.
mama still yells at me, from *carpals* to *phalanges* my hands are swollen
i scream at her, *mama* back at me. the piece doesn't flow, can't play
any more rachimanicoff or chopin, just keep punching the white keys

iii. 十岁 (1990)

inhale. the fumes from burnt bricks are
metallic, my harmonica melted in the flames.
(one-child policy was more a one-chance policy).
the men came with matches, and black toy soldier
uniforms, a bed robbed in *mama's* name, she is crying.
my *baba* forced into a prison cell until loans crushed his

shoulders, reigned hell until there was nothing to burn.
infant sisters wail now, heavy in my sore arms.
my white streets now echo; silent.

iv. age ten (2020)

inhale. the mediation video we are watching
over fifth grade zoom calls mute waves of the world
(social distancing was more a developmental distancing)
i scream in pillowcases at night until the blackness eats me
raindrops race on windowpanes, i have no control of
which one wins, i am ugly and fat. *mama* opens my
report card. she is silent, then strikes my face.
my white thoughts now echo; silent.

v. 十五岁 (1995)

i know to tear and grate shining silver scales off grass carp, i collect lotus root,
coin hawthorn in the street vendors, wave sugar cane on red clay roads.
at night, i light my lantern, sharpen pencil with knives in amber glow
flip through textbooks, jam scrap paper until no white remains.
pity burns me more than scorn; thievery stabs me more than debt,
i scribble exams, articulate texts, climb myself to the top of the ranks,
finally i am here, i see cohorts of shining black leather shoes
i stand with them, my shoes are
shredded strands of cloth; white.

vi. age 15 (2025)

i grate rosin until horsehair sticks, shout at walls until they cough up trophies,
swing racquets on hard court, type poetry until it programs apoptosis.
at night, i open my laptop, click pens until the ink bleeds dry
scatter textbook pages until it crowds mahogany desks.
scorn sears me more than pity; debt pierces me more than thievery,
i draw cards, tongue novellas, force and push to the brink of the climax,
finally i think i am here, my shoes are black and leather
and push my shoulders back, my *mama* is right there
her shoes still cloth; white.

Alisha Yin

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Poetry



Rust

a. they call me “farmer”

the first calf i raised was born breech,
i pulled her out with rope and prayer,
buried her behind the mango tree when her legs failed in the heat,
her decomposing flesh became part of the soil.
they told us we had thirty days, as if it could undo a generation of hoofprints,
as if cattle raised on stolen land had known they were trespassing,
like barbed wire bent with our own blistered hands was suddenly evidence.
they screamed we had doctored boundaries, altered the land,
but i only know how to follow trails that stop my family’s hunger,

b. they call me “forest”

i am the land they first walked on, lush, vibrant, pulsing.
you spoon fed me honey, adding cyanide by day, until i couldn’t take it.
you tattooed kilometers of fencing into my skin and called it protection,
stripped my trees for posts, indoctrinated the grass to fear hooves,
filled my silence with diesel and rust.
the cattle came like floodwater – slow, swelling, then everywhere –
and when they grazed, the wind changed.
my birds could no longer sleep, bullfrogs turned belly-up in pitch ponds.

the Guajajara boy was my guardian, he kept me safe before they came,
until they took him too, as the wind quivered leaves upon my breast.

a. they call me “farmer”

my cousin married a Guajajara woman; they say he is a traitor,
his name on a cattle registry the state erased.
we sold pasture to men who spoke like they owned the air,
leased what was bleeding, planted over footprints of my cattle.
they say the boy died protecting the forest, machete in hand.
i pray for his soul in candlelight, burn my thumb as I light the wick.
they said he was cut down with the trees that grew too close to the road.
they tell me his death is in the hands of the powerful now,
but the grass still hasn't grown back where his blood soaked in.
my youngest son asked how our cows, our people could break the law.
i didn't answer – just pulled him inside as they tore down his home.

b. they call me “forest”

a palm root split open the place where a gate once locked children in.
the boy's machete is rusting behind the old well where they ambushed him.
they cut the fences out with bolt cutters, measured my wounds,
tape measure and mark the cattle, counted the crimes.
they scooped my insides, pillaged and raped my cavities,
and now come back to calculate my pain.
“all the cattle that were there were removed.”
there is weight off my shoulders, I can now breath shallow breaths,
inhale shakily, exhale trembling. my heart beats again.
moss crawling up over fence posts like bandages,
my birds returning in odd numbers, bullfrogs steadily croaking.
their sawmills went quiet. the streams stopped foaming.
there is no justice in absence, only the space it leaves behind.
but the children walk farther now, no longer hemmed in by trespass.
and when it rains, the machete's silver is covered again,
another layer of rust.

Anabelle Zhao

Grade 8, Crestview Middle School

Critical Essay



Language Decays: The Cognitive Costs of “Brain Rot”

The 2024 Oxford Word of the Year was awarded to the phrase “brain rot.” While the chilling name is not a formal medical diagnosis, it still comes with its own worrying symptoms. According to Oxford University Press, “brain rot” is “the supposed deterioration of a person’s mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as the result of overconsumption of material (now particularly online content) considered to be trivial or unchallenging.” [1] Brain rot is most prevalent in younger generations, such as Generation Z, Alpha, and Beta who spend an excessive amount of time on online content, such as TikToks, Instagram reels, memes, and short-form videos. A consequence is the impact on the language use and understanding of those affected by brain rot. This includes the increasing use of simplified, internet-driven vocabulary, shortened attention span when reading and learning, and the loss of critical thinking skills. Benjamin Lee Whorf, an American linguist in the early twentieth century, recognized the impact of language on all aspects of life in his statement, “Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about.” [2] If language is the backbone of thought, one must ask how much of the world future generations affected by brain rot will be unable to comprehend.

Social media platforms intentionally use content and language that causes brain rot. Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok added short-form videos as a marketing strategy for big corporations. These

short-form videos target viewers' brain's natural reward system. Studies have shown that "the ventral tegmental area of the brain, which releases dopamine, is activated when viewing TikTok videos." [3] Once you have received such a hit of dopamine, you start to naturally crave the same satisfaction. This results in the mindless scrolling on social media platforms. Apps can maximize revenue through ad engagement the longer people spend on them. By using specific algorithms, platform programmers decipher and target viewers' personal preferences and behavior. This is strongly indicated on TikTok's "For You Page" or FYP specifically. The For You Page is the default screen users will see. On this page, users will receive recommendations for short videos that are supposed to pique the user's interest. They are able to achieve this in a variety of ways, "including things like user interactions such as the videos you like or share, accounts you follow, comments you post, and content you create; video information, which might include details like captions, sounds, and hashtags," [4] What emerges from this endless cycle is brain rot itself. This algorithmic manipulation reinforces the cognitive patterns connected to brain rot, a result of the desire for higher revenue to benefit large companies, exploiting the neurological reward system to design the brain to constantly desire more. Young children, consisting mostly of Generation Alpha and most recently Generation Beta, have been strongly influenced by brain rot. A large portion of Generation Alpha and Generation Beta will be raised surrounded by advanced artificial intelligence and new technologies. They are the first to live a life so different from generations prior to them. The term "iPad Child" or "iPad Kid" is pretty straightforward, acknowledging the attachment children have on iPads and screens in general. Currently, child content, such as kid-friendly TV shows, may not only be harmful, but also addictive. While certain TV shows or movies might seem child-friendly on the surface, "the overstimulating nature of [certain children's shows]—characterized by flashing, colored, fluorescent images and poor-quality sound reproduction—can overwhelm the sensory organs, leading to disruptions in their development and function." [5] If children's brains are impacted in areas of language development, reading, and attention span, it can lead to declining literacy for future generations. Such an abuse of media consumption in kids will lead to undersimulation and oversimulation, especially within fast-paced content. Supported by research from Dr. Susan R. Johnson, a behavioral and developmental pediatrician, "prolonged lack of balanced stimulation of all senses can lead to a decrease in brain size, with a 20–30% reduction observed in children who lack tactile stimulation and meaningful

human interaction.” [6] Effects are evident when this generation is fully immersed in a world of technology and screen time. When they watch low-quality and non-educational content, they are prone to brain rot in the same way teenagers and young adults are when on social media platforms. They aren’t fully aware of what is happening around them, subconsciously missing their own childhood by being only focused on a screen. “This overuse of screen time has been shown to reduce language development, increase feelings of depression, develop sleep disorders in children, and a long list of other harmful outcomes. A child’s obsession with brain rot content not only leads to negative consequences in children’s personal lives, but it also affects the way they learn.” [7] How can these kids be the future leaders of the world if they have such diminished language development?

In the minds of parents, these nonsensical terms children may say make no sense. Random shouts of “6’7” with no context and references to **aura farming** are just two terms that bewilder adults. Regarding kids from Generation Alpha and Generation Beta, “many of their parents feel like there’s a chasm when it comes to understanding the way they speak. Intergenerational conversations are getting less and less intelligible,” [8] Such brain rot doesn’t just encompass English. At the beginning of 2025, a more specific category, “Italian Brainrot” was introduced. A condensed summary of this can be said as AI-generated Italian characters with dramatic accents. Showing how brain rot has even developed to the point of mocking other languages. Children who may not directly manifest brain rot still catch on quickly when their friends and classmates from school use it consistently. As an American-born Chinese, when talking to my parents, I generally only speak Chinese. The use of English, along with illogical slang terms, would perplex them. With reference to Italian brain rot, “For kids specifically, it’s a sort of secret language that parents don’t understand.” [9] Throughout the United States, there are plenty of American families who aren’t bilingual and only speak English. Under the roof of a typical American family where everyone speaks English, why can’t these parents comprehend their own children?

What happens during students’ personal time reflects at school significantly. “Scrolling through bite-sized content constantly trains the brain to seek quick, immediate rewards. As a result, it becomes harder to focus on more complex tasks”. [10] With diminishing attention spans, it becomes hard for students to solely focus on classes and lectures. Even simple tasks, such as reading a full book or being able to meet a deadline, are more difficult. If you are

constantly watching 30-second clips containing brain rot content, it would naturally be hard for someone to focus on one topic for an hour and 30 minutes. Specifically, brainrot has caused declines in reading. “Researchers at the University of Florida and University College London have found that between 2003 and 2023, daily reading for reasons other than work and study fell by about 3% each year.” [11] When looking back at the 1800s and 1900s, reading in one’s leisure was much higher because people didn’t have televisions, phones, or screens for entertainment. They had a much more ornate vocabulary used in daily conversations. Compared to our current time, students struggle to read a full book with a deadline, even students at the highest-ranked colleges and universities in the United States. “Many students no longer arrive at college—even at highly selective, elite colleges—prepared to read books.” [12] Even students at the prestigious Ivy League Schools can find the workload of reading several books in a semester daunting. When you are on your phone and **doomscrolling**, news headlines and video captions only provide surface-level information on any topic, meaning that there is no deeper thinking or meaning to anything you read. Critical thinking skills decline when you skim through titles with nothing to analyze critically. Brainrot is turning students into literalists with prosaic writing and form of speech. Statements from Elaine Castillo, author of *How To Read Now*, provides evidence to this, “[the way the] decline in reading is framed is that massive corporations have essentially captured the capacities in us for reading, which is to say our attention, our capacity for critical thinking, imaginative thinking... [time spent on screens] have eaten into the time that might otherwise be spent reading.” [13] Ultimately, the overall decline of reading and learning habits in general is due to modern media consumption. Shortened attention spans and loss of critical thinking skills hinders the success of students within their education.

Brain rot may have been selected as the 2024 Oxford Word of the Year, but as the world has recently ventured into 2026, it’s time to shed light on a new term. The 2025 Oxford Word of the Year was awarded to the phrase “rage bait”, a specific brain-rot term, being defined as “Online content deliberately designed to elicit anger or outrage by being frustrating, provocative, or offensive, typically posted in order to increase traffic to or engagement with a particular web page or social media account.” [14] **Aura farming** also made the 2025 Oxford Word of the Year shortlist. This rise in popularity of brain rot terminology shows how language is slowly losing its meaningfulness. Ultimately, what brain rot threatens isn’t vocabulary but the depth language carries. Whether referring to the first

recorded use of brain rot within the book *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, or the mainstream usage of internet terms in this modern age, it is something that impacts the quality of language for future generations. This year, 20 states have imposed a required phone ban on students in school. This is the first step to limiting the negative effects brain rot has on younger kids. If students aren't on their phones during the weekdays, it will lessen the amount of time they are on devices. The students around me suffer from the same symptoms of brain rot as I do. By limiting screen time, reading suitable pieces of literature, and supporting high-quality, thought-provoking communication, we can change our perspective on brain rot and revitalize the profundity of language as a whole. As a victim of brain rot myself, in reflection of the New Year of 2026, I hope to see amelioration. I hope to see depth and expressiveness return to our literature. Most of all, I hope we can resist the decay of our language.

Brain Rot Terms:

*Aura farming: the act of cultivating an impressive or charismatic public image by presenting oneself in ways that subtly project confidence, coolness, or mystique. (Oxford University Press)

*Doomscrolling: the action of continually scrolling through and reading depressing or worrying content on a social media or news site, especially on a phone. (Oxford Languages)

*6'7: Six seven or 6 7 comes from the song "Doot Doot (6 7)" by rapper Skrilla, which has been used frequently in viral videos and memes featuring NBA player LaMelo Ball. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Endnotes

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Speculative Fiction



Do Not Look

The house was too quiet. Not the cozy kind of quiet. This was hollow, the kind that echoed back at you and made your skin crawl.

Clara slid the last box onto the hardwood floor and lingered in the doorway like crossing the threshold would mean something permanent. Her arms wrapped around herself, shoulders tight against the stale chill clinging to the walls.

She'd never lived by herself before.

She'd never been *allowed* to.

Dust hung in the shafts of pale sunlight slicing through the windows, twisting lazily in the air with every breath she took. The place smelled faintly of lavender and old wood, a brittle, forgotten scent.

She could live with the peeling wallpaper. She could even live with the floorboards groaning under her weight like they resented her.

What unsettled her was the mirror.

It loomed against the upstairs hallway wall, nearly brushing the ceiling. The carved oak frame had blackened and warped with age, its surface uneven like it had swelled with dampness long ago.

But the glass was flawless. No cracks, no scratches, no dust. It looked new, almost polished, as if time didn't dare to touch it. It tilted forward ever so slightly, like it was peering down at her every time she walked by.

Clara caught her reflection that first night and paused. Her face stared back, pale from exhaustion, curls frizzing from the humidity that clung to her neck. And then—

She wasn't alone.

A woman stood behind her reflection.

Clara's breath hitched as a shadow stretched taller and closer than it should have, the dark figure out of place in the narrow hall. She spun around so fast she nearly lost her balance.

Nothing. Just the hallway, dim and empty.

She turned back slowly.

The woman didn't reappear.

A weak laugh slipped from her throat, choked and shaky, more like a question than a sound. "I'm just...tired," she whispered, as if saying it aloud would convince her. She forced herself to walk away and close her bedroom door firmly behind her.

But she didn't stop thinking about the mirror.

The woman didn't appear the next day, but Clara avoided the mirror anyway.

She brushed her teeth at the kitchen sink, the taste of mint sharp and bitter. She dressed without looking in a single reflection, not caring that her curls had knotted into a tangled halo. When she climbed the stairs, she kept her gaze fixed on her socked feet, taking the steps two at a time so she wouldn't linger near the warped oak frame.

But the weight of being *watched* clung to her shoulders like a damp coat she couldn't shrug off.

That night, as she trailed her fingers absently along the banister, her eyes flicked sideways, just for a second.

She froze.

The woman was there again.

This time, she stood closer. So close that in the reflection, she hovered only a step behind Clara. Her hair was soaked, stringy black strands sticking to sharp collarbones. Droplets slid down her skin and splattered soundlessly onto the hardwood floor.

But the floor underneath Clara's feet wasn't wet at all. Her head tilted at an unnatural angle, vertebrae bending toward her, and her milky white eyes locked on Clara's unblinkingly.

Clara's throat constricted. It was like someone had looped invisible hands around her neck, squeezing tight.

She clutched the banister until her knuckles screamed, forcing her to step backwards, one agonizing inch at a time. When her heel hit the bottom stair, she

bolted. She slammed her bedroom door, locking it with trembling fingers, heart pounding so violently it drowned out every other sound.

Sleep came in fragments that night, each creak of noise jerking her awake in a cold sweat.

By the fourth night, her fear became a constant, dull ache in her chest. She didn't even think about calling her mother. She could already hear her dismissive voice: *You're stressed, honey. It's all in your head.*

Everything was always her wild imagination, according to her. When she'd cried after her father slammed the door so hard the frame cracked, her mother had told her *to stop overreacting*. When she'd hidden in her closet during their countless fights, she'd been called dramatic.

Now, even in an empty house, their voices still haunted her, cold and clipped, telling her to toughen up, to stop imagining monsters.

But Clara knew what she had seen.

And the woman was getting closer.

The bathroom light flickered once—twice—then died as she brushed her teeth.

Clara froze, toothbrush clattering into the sink. The darkness pressed against her, thick and suffocating. This was the same claustrophobic, helpless feeling that she had when she was a kid, standing in the hallway while her father's heavy footsteps thudded on the stairs. She had been terrified then, too.

Her phone. She patted her pocket. Empty.

"Okay," she whispered, barely letting her lips move. "It's fine. Just... go to the hallway. The light's on there."

She stepped out of the bathroom.

The hallway was completely dark. But the mirror wasn't. It glowed faintly, like someone had lit a lantern behind the glass.

Clara's pulse roared in her ears.

The woman stood inside the glow. Her wet hair glistened as she leaned forward, so close now her chin brushed Clara's shoulder in the reflection.

Clara's breath snagged in her throat. She stumbled backward, misjudged the last step, and hit the floor hard. Pain barely registered. She was already up and running, her footsteps thundering through the house until she slammed herself into the driver's seat of her car, locking the doors.

She slept curled up in the passenger seat that night, waking every hour to check the rearview mirror.

She couldn't live like this.

The next morning, she dragged a heavy sheet up the stairs and flung it over the mirror. She pressed the edges down against the floorboards, muttering, “Stay”.

When she returned later, the sheet lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. The mirror stood exposed.

Clara’s stomach dropped. She picked up the fireplace poker with shaking hands, its weight unfamiliar and clumsy. She raised it high, screaming, and brought it down. The sound wasn’t the satisfying crash of glass shattering. It was a dull, ringing *thud*, like striking stone.

Her reflection stared at her, trembling and wild-eyed. And behind it, the woman pressed her forehead against the glass, smiling for the first time. It was cold, unwavering, and sent a chill up Clara’s spine.

Clara dropped the poker. She didn’t stop to think. She ran, tears of fear streaking her face.

She stopped going upstairs altogether. She slept fitfully on the couch, the TV blaring static just to keep the silence away.

But the mirror didn’t need to stay upstairs anymore.

Clara woke one night to a soft dripping sound. She sat up slowly.

The mirror stood across from the couch. Its oak frame scraped the ceiling, and water trickled down the flawless glass, pooling on the floor.

The woman was inside. Her milky eyes were locked on Clara’s as she pressed both hands to the glass.

“No,” Clara whispered, sliding off the couch. “No, I’m not—”

A crushing pressure wrapped around her chest. She couldn’t breathe.

Look at me, a voice hissed, dry as dead leaves.

Clara squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head violently.

Look at me.

The pressure built until her bones felt like they’d splinter. Her eyelids twitched against her will. She opened them a sliver.

The woman’s eyes met hers.

Ice shot through Clara’s body as invisible hooks dragged her forward. Her feet scraped helplessly against the carpet. The glass swallowed her whole.

Clara hit the ground hard. Only, it wasn’t ground. It was cold, slick, and gave beneath her feet like water without ripples. She scrambled to her feet, heart battering her ribs, and froze.

The mirror was all around her.

She stood in a shadowed copy of her living room, the same couch, the same flickering TV light, but everything was muted, colorless, like it had been drained dry. When she pressed her palms to the glass, her breath fogged the surface.

On the other side, the real world shimmered in pale blue streetlights. The couch was there, exactly as it had been when she fell asleep. The remote. Her blanket was tossed aside.

But she wasn't there.

The woman was.

She straightened slowly, vertebrae clicking like they were unhinging and snapping back into place. Her wet hair clung to her face in slick ropes as she leaned forward, studying Clara's wide-eyed reflection with a tilt of her head.

Then she stepped back and walked away.

She was wearing Clara's face now.

"No!" Clara's fists pounded the glass until her knuckles split. The sound was muffled, smothered, like screaming underwater.

No one heard her.

Time didn't move in the mirror.

Or maybe it did, and Clara just couldn't feel it anymore.

She couldn't eat. Couldn't sleep. Her throat ached with thirst she couldn't quench.

The house outside changed. Sometimes she saw the woman—*her now*—walking past in Clara's skin, humming softly, glancing at the mirror only once in a while, as if daring her to look away.

Other times, strangers passed.

A man adjusting his tie, muttering about traffic. A little boy, clutching a chocolate-stained blanket, giggling. A teenage girl, eyes puffy from crying, holding a stuffed rabbit like it was the only thing keeping her upright.

They never saw her.

Clara pressed herself flat against the farthest corner when they passed, trying to make herself small. She didn't dare move, didn't dare let her gaze linger too long.

Because she'd seen the rule.

She'd seen what happened.

She didn't know how long she'd been trapped when she first saw the new girl.

The girl stepped into the hallway with a battered suitcase in one hand and a folded letter in the other. Blonde hair tumbled messily down her back, still

tangled from travel. She hummed softly as she climbed the stairs, a tune Clara almost recognized but couldn't place.

She stopped in front of the mirror.

And smiled at her reflection.

Clara's whole body went rigid. She didn't blink. Didn't breathe.

Her reflection was barely recognizable now—skin ashen, cheeks hollow, dark rings bruised beneath her eyes. She wanted to scream, to pound the glass, and shout *Run! Don't look at me!*

But her voice was gone.

The girl hesitated, her brows knitting like she'd felt something shift in the air. She glanced halfway down the hallway, then turned back to the mirror.

Her eyes met Clara's.

The pull slammed into Clara like a riptide.

"No," she mouthed, shaking her head violently as tears blurred her vision.

The girl's smile faltered. Her feet slid toward the glass as if the floor had tilted beneath her. She clawed for the banister, nails scraping desperately against the wood.

Clara felt herself moving forward too, unwilling, every muscle trembling as the glass melted around her.

She stumbled out of the mirror.

Air scorched her lungs.

She collapsed onto the hallway floor, gasping, the carpet rough and solid beneath her palms.

Behind her, the girl was pounding silently against the glass. Her eyes were wide, her mouth shaping words Clara couldn't hear.

Clara didn't look back.

She ran.

Through the hallway, down the stairs barefoot, the old house groaning under her frantic weight. She didn't grab her shoes. Didn't take her phone. She just burst through the front door and sprinted into the night, the pavement biting her feet raw.

Her pulse thundered in her ears, drowning out the world. She didn't stop until the house was only a shadow behind her, its windows like watching eyes.

But even then, she could feel the girl's gaze.

Trapped.

Desperate.

Pressed to the other side of the glass.

The house will wait.
The mirror will wait.
And the girl inside will learn the rule soon enough.

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Short Story



The Experiment

The dogs barked and paced nervously, their low growls echoing off the metal benches while the machines hummed steadily. Evelyn knew one wrong move could ruin everything.

Evelyn worked in a dim lab filled with bottles marked with yellow caution signs that have dangerous substances in them. The air smells sharp and sanitized like a doctor's office. Maya and Daniel are Evelyn's lab partners. Maya's hair looks as smooth as silk and the color of milk chocolate. In addition, she has green eyes that glisten like crystals. Her caramel skin blended in with the bark from the tree in the background. Daniel has blank, straight blonde hair with blue eyes that look like waves of the Atlantic. His American white skin running along the creases under the long, white coats dusted with chemical stains. Their ID badges swing from their necks as they move around the metal tables, gloves snapping tightly around their wrists. Evelyn adjusts her safety goggles before carefully pouring a clear liquid into a small vial while the others watch. Maya and Daniel stand tense at the edge of the long metal bed. Dogs pacing and barking sharply at them, their tails stiff and paws repeatedly hitting the floor echoing off the walls of the remote lab. The echo of barking fills the remote lab. Mixing the metallic scent of equipment, Evelyn feels her hands tighten around the vial, knowing one wrong move could startle the animals or ruin the experiment entirely. Evelyn held her breath, the lab partners' eye on her every motion, and the dogs' restless barking filled the room. Her lab partners hover over her watching every movement, and the dogs' restless barking filled the room. The

clear liquid finally settled and she exhaled slowly. A sudden feel of relief rushed through her face like the wind being blown in the cold days of fall. One of the dogs yelped and knocked against the metal cage. The vial wobbled dangerously before she caught it just in time. Her lab partners gasped. Daniel accidentally touched the table and shook the table. *CLANK!* The liquid was startled for a second, then settled after. For a moment, no one spoke. But then Daniel whispered, "I'll be darned... It worked." Evelyn smiled faintly, realizing she might've successfully created the cure.

Before she could process what she'd done, the intercom crackled. "Evelyn Reed, report to my office immediately." The voice of her boss, Keith, cut through the air like a knife. Her stomach dropped. She set the vial down carefully, hands trembling again. As she walked down the long hallway toward his office, every step echoed with a dull thud that matched the pounding in her chest. When she entered, Keith didn't speak at first. Instead, he studied her with a look of disappointment and disbelief. "Evelyn," he began slowly, "I know what you did." He turned his computer screen toward her, displaying records and travel logs from Japan. "You went overseas without clearance. No passport. No approval. You just took files from a foreign lab." Evelyn's heart raced. "I had to," she insisted. "No one here could make it work!" Keith's expression hardened. "You broke international law and company protocol. Do you understand what that means?" Evelyn swallowed hard, glancing down. "You're lucky I'm not calling the authorities," he said. "Turn in your badge and leave the building." Evelyn walked out in silence, clutching her lab notebook to her chest. Her cure had worked, but at what cost?

That night, Evelyn sat alone in her car parked across from the lab, the flow of the building reflecting off the windshield. Her hands rested on the steering wheel, gripping it tight. She had turned in her badge hours ago and walked out like she was told. But she couldn't make herself drive away. Inside that building sat everything she had worked for. Her cure and the proof to show that she wasn't wrong at all. Keith only saw broken rules. He didn't see the lives she could've saved. Rain began to fall, tapping against the glass. She stared through the blurry reflection of her own eyes. She couldn't let them hide what she'd created. Not after everything she'd risked. After a moment, she reached for the old backup key card she'd kept in the glove compartment. She once reprogrammed that key card months ago for after-hour work to create the cure. She stepped out of her car, standing in the rain while it dripped down her face, ruining her makeup she'd put on for that day. The back maintenance door gave a soft click as she swiped it. The

hallways were dark and silent. The “hmm” of the machines echoed faintly through the air while she moved, carefully making sure her steps were quiet. When she reached her old lab room, the serum was still there sealed in a glass vial labeled, “Sample 47-A”. Evelyn grabbed the vial. Holding it in the dim light, the liquid shimmered faintly as if it had a life of its own. Pride and anger tangled in her chest. She thought, “They didn’t deserve this. The company only cared about control, not change”. Her gaze shifted toward the door. As she turned to leave, she paused for a moment and looked back at the empty lab. If they won’t let the cure see the light of day, she thought, then maybe the light will have to find it another way. That was the moment she knew something had to change, no matter the cost, no matter the consequences. She couldn’t just let them get away with this. Evelyn glanced around the lab. She spotted a nearby canister of gasoline. She wasn’t thinking about it, but she was definitely hesitant though. Her body slowly turned toward the canister and her legs started to walk, getting closer and closer to the shelf. There was a shaking sensation in her hands as she picked up the gasoline. She second guessed this. She thought about the horrible things she could be arrested for – arson, negligent burning, breaking in and entering. She didn’t care at this point because she was going to get arrested for breaking in.

“*Splash!*” Evelyn started pouring the gasoline. The liquid spread quickly along the dark shiny oily pools between the tables and shelves. She set a small piece of paper on fire and dropped it onto the substances. Instantly, the fire erupted, roaring across the lab and sending heat and smoke into every corner. She clutched the vial tightly and slipped out of the building as the fire consumed the room behind her. Alarms blared, alerting Keith and nearby authorities, but the sprinklers failed. The system hadn’t been properly inspected in years. Keith arrived 15 minutes later, watching the flames panic in his eyes.

The local fire department had been tied up with another emergency and didn’t arrive until two hours later. By then, several containment tubes had shattered, allowing the virus to escape into the air vents. Officers questioned Keith while they waited for the fire department, asking if he knew who or what could have caused the fire. Keith’s face paled as he muttered, “Evelyn...”

The city beyond the lab held its breath as invisible danger drifted outward. Evelyn disappeared into the night, the consequences of her actions just beginning to unfold. Smoke curled into the night sky as the fire department finally arrived. The building was already destroyed and the virus leaked into the ventilation system. Evelyn had vanished into the shadows. For hours, she

watched from a distance as chaos unfolded. People nearby began showing symptoms and emergency crews scrambled to contain the spread. Her heart ached with guilt, but she also knew that no one else truly understood the virus. Authorities attempted to limit further exposure, shutting down the lab's ventilation and cooling systems and sealing off nearby areas to slow the spread.

Evelyn was the only one who had the knowledge to neutralize this problem. She faced a fork in the road – come forward and risk arrest to help contain the virus or stay hidden and let the consequences unfold. As sirens wailed in the distance and the city descended into panic, Evelyn clenched the vial tightly, knowing that the next decision she makes can determine the fate of countless people. The city lay in chaos. Streets once filled with chatter and laughter were now silent, broken only by the distant hum of emergency sirens and the faint coughs of those already infected. Evelyn stood at the edge of the quarantine zone, watching the red and blue lights flash through the fast droplets of water falling down in the night sky. She couldn't stand by and let the world pay for what she started. Taking a deep breath, Evelyn stepped forward, her voice barely steady as she approached the nearest officer. "I can help," she said quietly, lifting the vial. "I made the cure."

"No Ma'am, no one without a uniform goes back there." The officer instructed while standing right in front of the two big doors blocking Evelyn's path to enter.

Keith stood in the background among the wreckage, exhaustion written across his face. When he saw her, his expression hardened, but there was something else there too – relief. "No. No. Let her in. She's the only one left who knows how to use it," Keith told the officers, "The other lab partners were infected." Evelyn swallowed hard, looking around at the place she once called home. Now all that remained was ash, twisted metal, and memories. She set the vial carefully on the metal table, her reflection barely flickering on its surface. "I'll fix this," she whispered, not to Keith or the officers, but to herself. "Even if it's the last thing I do." As the dawn began to rise over the smoke stained skyline, Evelyn rolled up her sleeves and got to work, ready to face what she had done. One breath, one cure, one choice at a time.