

# A Publication of the Missouri

# Scholastic Art and Writing Awards



**Missouri Youth Write** is sponsored by the Missouri Council of Teachers of English (MoCTE). Prairie Lands Writing Project at Missouri Western State University joined together with MoCTE and the Missouri Writing Projects Network in June 2008 to form the Missouri Writing Region, a regional affiliate for the national Scholastic Writing Awards Contest, sponsored by The Alliance for Young Artists & Writers (http://www.artandwriting.org/). In 2014, the Greater Kansas City Writing Project assumed Prairie Lands' duties with regards to the Missouri Writing Region of the Scholastic Writing Awards. The winning students' writings from the Missouri Writing Region for the 2015 national Scholastic Writing Awards Contest comprise this edition of Missouri Youth Write.

**Editor: Erin Small** 

An expanded edition is available online at:

https://www.moteachenglish.org/missouri-youth-writes

For more information about the Missouri Region for the National Scholastic Contest, see <a href="https://www.moteachenglish.org/missouri-youth-writes">https://www.moteachenglish.org/missouri-youth-writes</a>

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# **Gold Key Winners**



## **Brinda Ambal**

Age: 12, Grade: 7 School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO Educator: Kelly Rebhan Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

### Why Can't I?

My arms pumped, moving rhythmically by my sides, burning and feeling like molten lead, as they seemed to slip away from my shoulders. My feet fell one by one, as my legs churned. The cricket pitch was a line of concrete, shown in contrast to the bright green field. Other teammates were still running, silhouettes of figures moving around the field. I looked back to see if anyone was near, but I only saw Sid, that one annoying kid, about 50 yards behind me. I looked ahead to lock my target and sprinted to finish. My face burned bright red from exhaustion as much as from excitement as I made sure that I was first.

I took a lap to cool down. As I neared the pitch again, a couple of the guys had finished and were talking while doing their cool down stretches. I slowed to a jog and came up behind the group of boys standing around talking. I heard Sid bragging to his cronies, "Hey dudes, I'm so fast, guys. See, I told you guys! I came in first for warm ups!"

He gave a cocky smirk, and it replayed in my head, bringing up the memories of that dreadful afternoon. He was standing by the water fountain at a picnic. Sid was shaking his wavy black hair out of his eyes and turned to face his friends. His short, slight frame drew long shadows on the ground in the diminishing light of day. I had walked up to the water fountain to get a drink, trying to stride by without gaining their attention, but Sid faced me with that sly smirk on his face. "Oh, aren't you the girl who's supposed to be playing on our team?" I answered yes as quickly as could and tried to walk past him, but he said "Oh, look guys, she thinks she's so special." Before I saw, he had stuck his foot out and tripped me. I stumbled and went down, my cheeks and ears turning bright red at the idea that now they would think of me as a wimp. I looked up only to see him and his cronies laughing and pointing at me.

With the laughter from that day still ringing in my head, it took me a second to register what Sid was saying. Anger bubbled up from within me, rolling like the seas during Hurricane Sandy. I stepped up and looked at him, hatred burning in my eyes. I was sure he could see it.

Instead he asked me, calmly and collected, "How may I help you, miss?" He mocked me as he said this, and his squad of guys snickered amongst themselves.

"I came back first in practice," I said, struggling to keep my anger from bursting out. The pressure was building. "You're lying, and I know it, and so do you," I stated, my volume level rising.

Sid snickered, "Look at her. She thinks she can beat a guy." He got up and mocked me running, except that wasn't how I run. He ran on his tiptoes, being "dainty", and mimed fainting after five strides.

"I'll show you," I threatened, my words feeling to me as if they were worse than my bite, yet I tried anyway.

I had an amazing idea just then, and my mouth decided to betray me and blurt it out.

"Let's have a race," I stated, "starting right now."

He hesitated, looking back at his little gang, smirking with his mouth, but uncertain in his eyes. He gestured at me as if to say, is this girl for real? He looked towards me again, and announced, "You really don't want to embarrass yourself like that," acting as if he was very saintly and giving me advice for the greater good.

Ugh, I thought to myself as I shook my head in disgust, how can anyone be that conceited?

"Geez, stop with all the big talk. Don't be such a baby, get over there already," one of his guys said exasperatedly.

His previously unsure expression became guarded again, and he put a mask of assertiveness.

He straightened his posture and walked over to the tree and said, "Start here, end at the flagpole. Touch the flagpole first to win."

I nodded my agreement. We crouched down and took our marks while the rest of the guys lined the sides. My stomach churned, hyped up on adrenaline. Power surged through me, and I stepped up to the line, certain that I was going to win. "Runners take your marks," the voice boomed. "Set." Almost there, I thought. "Go!"

I threw myself forward over the line, my legs buzzing with power and energy. I pushed myself ahead, and now I was five inches in the lead. I used all my willpower, my anger, to keep my speed up. About halfway to the flagpole, just fifty yards away, I passed the rock with the Girl Scouts' inscription on it.

I remembered my first day of practice as I walked onto the field and stood by the rock. I saw the same group of boys huddled a little farther away, by the flagpole, whispering and glancing back at me. I had caught snippets of their conversation, them saying things like, "She's a girl. She can't do anything." "Watch her throw like a girl. I'm gonna laugh." "Dude, why is she even here? She's toast."

I pushed on, using all the pain and the hurt from that day, all of the embarrassment, using it to fuel up my energy. The fire of adrenaline within me burned brighter and brighter, threatening to exhaust my energy at any second. I saw Sid out of the corner of my eye. He was edging closer, head down, arms pumping at his sides, straining for all he was worth, now about three inches behind.

Can I really do this? I asked. I shook my head, pushing all of those self-doubting thoughts away from me as I focused solely on the finish at the flagpole. I was now twenty yards away, willing my legs not to give up on me now. My lungs burned, seeming to fill with jello, and my arms pumped at my sides, the veins popping as my fists clenched. Ten yards now. I lunged with my last burst of power, draining my reserve and all of my emotions, as I threw myself across the finish line and collapsed on the other side.

I turned around to watch him cross the finish line, panting in exhaustion. He took a moment to catch his breath, and then he looked up at me. The embarrassment in his eyes was apparent, like in the way he held my gaze. I stood defiantly, not wanting to be the one to look away. He took a minute more and slowly walked toward me.

I thought about how defeated his eyes looked, brimming with shame, threatening to spill out. I didn't know what to do, or what to say, but he was still walking toward me. My brain raced, trying to come up with something to say, anything at all. Then he walked right past me, without even meeting my eyes, and headed towards his group of buddies.

I turned around to see their faces slack with disappointment, anger and annoyance. This should be interesting, I thought to myself. Sid ignored their very obvious social clues and blurted out, "Well, she was just a weirdo. I was really tired 'cause I stayed up late last night, and she was just hyped up on sugar, probably."

The guys gave him looks filled with so much annoyance and said, "Dude, you just lost. To the same girl you were dissing earlier."

Then they did the unthinkable. They turned around, shrugging their shoulders against Sid, and walked over to my side, sticking their sweaty hands out for low fives. I stuck out my hand too, still stunned that they would diss him so quickly.

We turned around to go and start practice. I turned my head to look back one more time, and saw Sid standing all by himself. I remembered me looking like that on my first day, standing in the same spot by the picnic tables. He looked so lonely, so lost, with only the grass rustling beside him. My resolve cracked, and I turned toward him. "Come on. Let's go grab a ball," I beckoned, starting back towards the field.

Glancing back, I saw a raw expression of gratitude on his face, and I returned it with a smile.

# **Mahryn Barron**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Paseo Academy Performing Arts, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Chris Odam Category: Poetry

### **Roses of Cripple Creek**

In winter, when we couldn't pay our power bills my mother and I kneeled at the foot of the heater, in the light of an oil lamp.

I hung two pink roses just above our gas heater and the petals curled and smoked when they fell to the vent, pink like my mother's nipples when I suckled as a baby.

Any higher we turned the heater, more flesh of the rose burned until its color dispersed in the air. The plumes formed a woman, like my mother's cigarette smoke did.

My mom glimmered in dim light. Her eyes were sunken, but her laugh was frothy. Her breasts were wilted, but flame flickered in the dark of her pupils.

Even as the heater burned, and soot stained the windows in shades of magenta, we beamed, mouths full of roses, and eyes bright with the fire of petals dancing on the altar.

We were safe in the womb of our home. It hummed along when mom murmured: though I wither, I burn for you too, and you will see me in the smoke

long after I've turned to ash.

# **Sydney Cimarolli**

Age: 16, Grade: 11 School Name: Webster Groves High School, Webster Groves, MO Educator: Katie Guymon

Category: Poetry

#### **Faith**

The voices of the children's choir hollow out the church walls stained glass Jesus with slitted eyes that never stop staring sermons rolling off of the pastor's silver tongue love in the form of beration words in a language that used to be mine

Young eyes wide and sparkling, not yet discordant the twitch in my hands far too indicative of my betrayal different hues of faith, matching auras that create rainbow light while the air above me stays stagnant, barely ripples as I grasp at colors with my insatiable hands barely able to watch as they slip through my fingers again

Electric energy crinkles in the air like tin foil forming excitement like dewdrops that I wish I could suck up like the sponges that line the pews in front of and behind me watching the scene play out, rapturous in their seats clearly privy to something that I am not

The woman next to me dabs her eyes with a mascara stained handkerchief, used, I imagine, solely for this purpose taken over by the sheer Greatness of it all a gutting reminder that even in a whirlwind of people I am alone and even in the most spiritual of places

I will never be holy

## **Summer Spawns Teen Angst**

We tear through time on car rides that plunge us into the night ranting about how the world chewed us up and spit us out while still hoping that someday it will bend to fit our wishes.

Secrets that once clung to the roofs of our mouths like taffy begin spilling out of us at a pace too quick to control—a train that will not stop until long after the conductor pulls the brake.

A kaleidoscope of emotions dance against the darkness; we think we know reality because we have been cut by it but though we've gained skepticism, we've never been more clueless.

We'll never have so much time to brag about our sorrows. The night is long, but it will end before we know it.

#### **Escapism**

Leaves crunch ceremoniously as they are trampled under our feet The sunlight above us is pale, not gold; it knows to be soft today The woods are embracing, their chill seems inviting rather than bitter Trees stretch on forever, bark peeling into the discolored sky

We talk into what feels like emptiness, almost forget each other The whiteness we're enveloped in creates an unreality in the natural I feel that if I reached out, it'd all disappear in a whisp of smoke Our darkest secrets: they slip out more easily than small talk

The city looks almost woodsy as revealed by the ethereal light Buildings could be mountains, they rise and dip in the same pattern From such distance, there is no smell of gasoline, no sight of garbage nothing to suggest the harm, all to cultivate the beauty.

## **Mandatory Identity Crisis**

It seems poetic—the glitzy, freshness of the year's start laid out against the harsh, jaggedness of the year's end.

My first time driving a car, clumsy turns and jolting stops juxtaposed with my first time crying in one, shaky hands and windshield wipers that couldn't clear my vision; I thought going for a drive would make me feel better, but gaining control over a machine was no cure for losing control over my life.

Everything slipping, slipping, and me: tripping over the fragments of myself that had been left behind in the wreckage.

Side of the road sobs set off self doubt seeping into every aspect of my life from then on. I'm constantly trying too hard but not hard enough to cement people into my life, a fear of being left behind hurling me into obsessively morphing myself into someone more palatable, someone who navigates unfamiliar emotional landscapes with ease rather than trepidation. Meanwhile, my paranoia spawns new kind of friendship--one deficient in trust, the result of lies that smothered me with a reality lacking alignment with the one previously hardwired into my head.

But while the effects of a breakneck breakup turned breakdown lingered longer than I would have hoped, they still folded away into the fabric of time. Finding myself in losing security brings about an inkling of hope that blossoms into an ocean of optimism. Soon I won't feel so pathetic. Soon I won't be so afraid. Soon I'll be able to just let things go. I worry less about being independent and more about knowing the right people to depend on. I worry less about looking crazy and more about feeling sane. I worry less.

The promise of clemency rests ahead of me. I run towards it.

### **Delayed Reaction**

In the weeks following our break-up

I marvelled at how I held myself together:

shoved my heart back into my rib cage

and curled my lips into a smile.

When monsters tried to claw their way up my throat

I swallowed them whole.

No need to set them loose, they'd only wreak havoc, I thought.

My chest doubled as a cage, held my secrets until it burst.

I beat my feelings into submission,

though I thought I'd beat them into nullity.

I spent my time on long car rides and heart-to-hearts

(the two tend to go hand in hand)

and listened to a constantly incoming stream of

praise for how well I was handling myself, y'know, all things considered.

Back straight, chin up, now able to wear non-waterproof mascara

I considered the situation conquered.

Until I saw you holding her hand, and four months late,

the dam broke.

Tears I'd put off crying poured in like a flood,

pools of shame enveloping me as I couldn't help but feel that

my grief was unjustified.

I waited too long to let my seams rip open—

I'd already put away my needle and thread by the time

I needed to stitch myself up again.

# **Gregory Cox**

Age: 13, Grade: 8
School Name: Platte City Middle School, Platte City, MO
Educator: Kelly Miller
Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

#### **In Good Company**

The cold cut through my coat like a knife. It had been a short drive in the car so I hadn't put on gloves or a hat and I had just thrown on a light coat thinking that I wouldn't get cold. I was wrong. During the entire ride there, I was shivering. Maybe it wasn't from the cold, maybe it was from what I anticipated seeing there. It was my first time. I wasn't excited about it, I was scared. I didn't know what to expect. It's not like they publish any magazine articles or write books about "Visiting Your Dad in Prison for the First Time" -- a primer for the youngest family members.

I looked over at my grandmother's face, my dad's mom. Pretty sure she was hiding what she was feeling at the time because my little brother and I were in the car. I was old enough to know what was going on. The stark reality was there. My. Dad. Was. In. Prison. My little brother didn't really have a clue what was going on. In fact, Grandma lied to him. Just another disappointment from my family. She actually told him that Dad was at work. At work? What kid would believe that line, especially when we rolled up to the prison? Fortunately for all of us, my brother believed it or at least he went along with the charade.

We all got quiet as we got closer to the detention center. I looked out the window. The day was as gray as my mood. The sun peeked out from behind a square cloud. It's weird what details you remember about the days you wanted to forget. I zoned out a little and before I was ready, the car had stopped and we were in a large parking lot. There was barbed-wire fencing around the buildings. We couldn't just play dumb with my little brother now. Once he saw that, he knew where we were. He didn't say anything, just looked at both of us with a blank stare. There were towers on either side of the biggest building. It was like what you would see in a horror movie where the monster is trapped inside the fencing and anyone who comes in is lunch.

I swallowed hard. I didn't want to go in. Why was this happening to me? I didn't do anything. My brother and I didn't deserve this. Yes, we loved our dad. Yes, he was still our hero. But are heroes behind bars? Real heroes, who save the day and put their lives at risk for other people? No, the realization hit me like the Ice Water Challenge. I was embarrassed for me, my brother, and my grandmother. I didn't want to see him. What was I going to say to him? Pretend like it was just another weekend visit?

As we got closer to the entrance, I could see that the doors weren't just any doors. These were big steel doors thick with glass. Reinforced glass. Heavy to open. Slammed shut behind us. The room we walked

into was bright. The lights made me squint. The walls were ugly, the chairs were hideous, and it smelled. Like a hospital. I'll never forget the smell.

The first thing I see though isn't a monster. It's a guard. With a dog. A big German Shepherd. On any other day, I would run up and pet it. This dog wasn't for petting. I knew what this dog could do because they were used in the military. This dog was for chasing down inmates, my dad, and tearing up orange jumpsuits and biting flesh and maybe breaking bones. This definitely wasn't a dog for petting.

#### Two weeks before:

It was finally Christmas. The day was cold and cheerful even though it was 32 degrees outside. I was excited for the chance to finally see my dad again. We got to see each other every weekend, but we had never been together for Christmas since I was little and my mom and dad were still married to each other. This was a great privilege for me. I was wondering though if something was wrong because my mom hates and distrusts my dad and now, all of a sudden, she is letting me see him on her holiday.

Christmas has always been my mom's holiday even though my dad wanted to share it. My mom and dad arranged a schedule for when my siblings and I could see my dad. Most of the time, they didn't want to go, so it was just me. They stayed with Mom and never had as much fun as I did. I never bragged about what we did because I like staying with him by myself.

I never really understood the whole thing about why my parents weren't together like all of my other friends but I guess that I was different that way. I never really wanted to know why. I think that it was my way of blocking out the things that hurt.

I got dressed to go to Dad's house and put on my jeans, a button-up shirt, and my new pair of Jordans that I got from my mom for Christmas. When I got to my Dad's, I ran out of the car and up the giant steps to his house. I knocked on the door and he answered with a big smile and a hug. I hugged him back and went on in to the house. Mom followed up the stairs to talk to him, like she always did every time I came over and I ran on in so that I wouldn't really hear what they were saying. It was never really good stuff and I just wanted to enjoy my time with Dad this time.

Dad's house was huge and only my two brothers and my brother's girlfriend were there so it was really fun. They like to hang out and play the same games on x-Box that I did so I knew that I was definitely going to have a good time. I walked into the living room and hugged everyone and then went up to my bedroom to drop off my suitcase. Dad's boxer Duke was sleeping on my bed on the lower bunk. It looked like he took it over while I was gone.

My brother Alex came in and climbed onto the top bunk and got on his phone. "Hey, let's play X-Box until everyone gets here." I said to him.

"OK," he puts down his phone and then slides off the bed. When we get back down to the living room, I pick out my favorite silver and black controlled and hand him the other one. We play a few games until the rest of my dad's family arrives.

Dad comes into the living room and says, "Hey, everyone, let's unwrap presents." We all drop everything we're doing and make a run for the tree. There is complete chaos. Grandpa takes control and starts handing out everyone's presents. This is a Christmas like no other.

My cousin got a new mountain bike. My little brother got his first new bike and a bunch of little cars to play with. Then I opened up my present. Dad bought me my first skateboard. I didn't know how to ride one, but I told him that I would practice.

After all the presents were opened, Grandma called us into to dinner and we ate a huge meal. Everybody was laughing and making jokes and was happy. I was happy just to be there on Christmas. It had been so long since I had a real Christmas holiday with my dad. I wish it could go on forever and be just like it was when I was little. I tried to stop thinking about that because I knew in my heart that it never would be like that ever again.

I stayed with my dad for the next few days and then before I knew it, it was time for me to go back with mom again. I hugged my dad tight before I left and told him that I would see him in two weeks.

I'm pretty sure that he knew right then that I wouldn't be back in two weeks. Erase that. Yes, I would be back to see him in two weeks, but it wouldn't be at his house. His house was dark and empty. Duke had gone to stay with my grandma and grandpa. My older brothers had moved out sometime in the past two weeks because my dad's new home was here. In this gray fortress with the barbed wire surrounding it.

You see, this wasn't new for my dad. He had been in prison before. He had gotten out and we were allowed to see him for regular visitation which was great. But now, he was right back in here. I was familiar with the routine. Too familiar. My brother and grandma and I sat at a big table waiting for him to come in. The door opened and he was in the line of men walking out. He smiled at me and I kind of smiled back. He was wearing a blue shirt, like all the other men, and jeans. He never wore jeans when he was home. He always wore shorts. Even in the winter, always shorts. He looked so different. I tried to put on a bigger smile. He came over and gave me and my brother a hug. I hugged him back.

He didn't have too much to say, but he showed us around the room. There were a lot of games to play and we picked one and went back to the table. No X-Box like at his house. No big comfortable couch to sit beside each other, just hard seats and a gray table. The lights. I squinted again. They were so bright.

I think we were there an hour or maybe it was two. I don't know. I kind of lost track of time and we just played our game and talked a little. I tried not to look around at the other inmates and their families. I

didn't want to know what their stories were. Everyone was quiet. I wish my dad could come home with me.

Well, basically that's my story. This is how it will play out I guess. I don't know what he's in prison for, I don't want to know. Something about money, I really don't want to know the details. If I know, it makes it real and maybe I don't want it to be real.

He'll get out of prison I hope and we'll go back to the same old visitation schedule. He and Mom will talk again when she drops me off. I'll spend a few days at his house and then I'll go back and wait for another two weeks to see him.

Heros? Nope. Don't talk about them. I'm not sure they exist.

Fact: There are almost three million children whose parents are in prison. Three million of us. I've got a lot of company out there.

# **Shakira Cross**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: David H Hickman High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Nancy White Category: Dramatic Script

#### **My Brothers Keeper**

Characters:

**Melvin Johnson** - main character.1 out of 3 of the frienship (brotherhood) 17 year old black male tired of the typical black male sterotype. Wants to prove to the world that he's more than what people think he is and he's got his brothers to back him up. ambitious and will take on any task.

**Bryan Love** - 2 out of 3 of the frienship (brotherhood) 16 year old black male who loves poetry and has a strong connection with his friends. gentle and forgiving spirit.

**Noah Robinson** - 3 out of 3 of the friendship (brotherhood) 17 year old white male who tries his hardest to fit in with the world but deep down inside is fighting his own personal battles. Awkward and humorous.

**Mr. Jones** - the stereotypical white middle aged teacher who is tired of teaching in a predominately black school.

**Jamal Frost** - 18 year old black male with brothers and a gang, wants what is best for his brothers and will kill for them.

Setting: Takes place in Detroit, Michigan, 2006. It is during late fall and the cold is torture. Main setting is

Broadstreet and Courtland where Melvin and Bryan live and the two schools, Loyola High School and Denby High School.

Lights on, 3 guys standing downstage, backs turned to the audience, 1st guy walks up, turns his face to the audience, spotlight on him.

Narrator: Melvin Johnson. 17 years old. 2:30 pm. Loyola High School.

#### (sounds of knocking on the door)

Melvin: I come from the hard knocks of Detroit where you didn't have to see the shootings on movie screens you just had to pull up a chair and watch it in the streets. Nah, don't follow me around 7/11 I'm not gonna steal shit. Nah, don't lock your car doors I'm not gonna knock your window down to steal your car keys so I can ride down to a corner. Nah, I am not gonna have sex with your daughter and then leave her to avoid hard circumstances. Nah, I have never walked into the prison walls behind bars and no I can't dribble a ball. You won't see me on the TV screen as another black man being shot from the force of the police because I'm not all those things... or maybe... (looks at his hands and arms, examines himself) (sounds of knocking on the door)

# Lights fade Spotlight on second guy

Narrator: Bryan Love. 16 years old. 8:30 pm. Denby High School. 5 shots in the back. November 4th, 2006.

Ghost of Bryan: "Between me and my dream. Rose until it touched the sky—The wall. Shadow. I am black. I lie down in the shadow. No longer the light of my dream before me, Above me. Only the thick wall. Only the shadow." -Langston Hughes. They don't care if you have all those credentials. They don't care that you love poetry or that your favorite poet is Langston Hughes. They could care less about how many brothers you have or the jobs you hold to make ends meet for your grandmother. (sighs) They just don't care. So while I play pickup basketball games with my brothers on the court they don't realize that they are playing pickup basketball games with a ghost. (breaths heavily, gets down on both knees) When I said that I'd die for my brothers I didn't know it would be like this. So excuse me if I use the cliché that ignorance is bliss. Guns don't solve problems with relationships... unless the blood dripping down my back and the bullets shooting through my spine is a love story... (covering his head, crying uncontrollably)

# Lights fade Spotlight on third guy

Narrator: Noah Robinson. 17 years old. 6:30 pm. Loyola High School.

Noah: (waves) Melvin, you were the first to say hi to me when I was wearing my bedazzled jeans and stingy yellow plaid shirt. I was new to the area and you welcomed me into homeroom in Mrs. Johnson's class. I was the only white kid. You introduced me to Bryan from the corner on Broadstreet and Courtland and we would always meet up after school. Now it's just the two of us, still waiting on him. Look, I don't know what it's like to be you. You and Bryan would tell me stories all the time of how you all don't have fathers. The stories about your little brothers. The stories about being on the block seeing live action of killings every day. The stories of walking miles to get to school. See I never understood and maybe my privilege was blinding up my vision but all I know was that you guys were the coolest dudes to ever grace Detroit. (pounds chest twice and throws up the peace sign)

#### Lights fade

#### Spotlight on all Melvin

Melvin: I remember when the police kicked the door in

My grandma screaming at the top of her lungs watching you struggle to get out of the chokehold they had you in, their knee, caving into the spine that held you together and the pressure on your chin as you looked me in the eyes as if you knew how this was going to end, damn.

You couldn't help but grin

And while I stand there with my fist balled up, holding my two brothers around the neck with nothing but an eight year old brain,

I turned to pencil and lined paper to keep me from going too insane

I remember when you took off something around your neck with your wrist stuck together like the bond we never had

Handcuffed as you walked out the house

Grandma holding onto your arm saying "don't take my baby away"

You can hear the voice crying in pain and from your unforgiving hands I grabbed your chain...

I couldn't find the words to say

But as you turned around and looked me in my eight year old eyes

I didn't know if the smile around your eyes was a disguise

As you said

"I ain't coming back for y'all asses just like ya crackhead momma"

Left me paralyzed...

How am I supposed to be a man huh?

Who's gonna teach me how to deliberately keep the strokes smooth in the same direction so I don't get cut when I shave my face huh?

Who's gonna teach me every pick up line for the girls at the school dance?

Who's gonna teach me how to teach my brothers tough love?

Who was ever gonna teach me how to dribble a ball or how to put on a baseball glove huh?

I turned into everything you were not.

I didn't want to be like you.

You were in my life for that short period of time on accident and you loved me on purpose I know that for certain...

#### **Lights Fade**

#### **Spotlight on Bryan**

Bryan: I've become immune to this thing called suffering

Been working on this blank canvas called life ever since I was 10 years old and I'm still coloring,

Hovering, over me like a dark cloud that's never found their way out

Hovering, over me was something I have been in a relationship for too long and that was doubt I shout,

Why me Lord? Why all of this agony? Why you let my mother slip through my fingers like time

This hurts.

This hurts me...

I remember the day we all played at the park, no doubt in my mind crossed when I moved my legs back and forth on the swing.

No doubt ever crossed my mind when I would run to you to prop my leg up on your thigh for you to tie my shoe string as you would sing

'Pick your afro baby

Because it's flat on one side...'

Why did you leave me?

Holding me close to your chest to the heart the rhythm to the heart of your battered drum

Your arms is where I reside

You will forever be the woman I love...

#### **Lights Fade**

### **Spotlight on Noah**

Noah: (examines self in the mirror)

I hate seeing my reflection

Ever since I was 9 years old I hated affection that my mom and dad would give in saying

"Baby you are so cute" but somehow there was some disconnection

Between myself and the enemy inside

So only as a protection in Detroit was to mask the very hate I felt inside, it was the only connection and the direction I was heading toward perfection was all conception...

I am a directionless perfectionist where my mind is so parallel that it does not quite intersect with the perpendicular angles of my high expectations.

I am sorry...

I am sorry for every word that I stumble upon when I speak because my mind always tends to run faster

than what I actually think, they say "think before you speak" but I speak before I think and I cannot slow down from words faster than my intentions.

I am sorry that my idea of perfection is only deception and that these fabricated images in my mind is only my perception and I can't quite seem to put these faint pieces to the bigger picture together. I am sorry...

I am sorry my understanding is not too wide and my thoughts not too deep.

I'm living a life where growth is not adaptable.

I am afraid of change.

BUT I AM TIRED OF PUTTING MYSELF IN A POSITION WHERE I AM 6 FT UNDER WATER WHERE I BARELY CAN'T BREATH WITH WEIGHTS ON MY ANKLES AND THE ONLY PERSON PULLING ME DOWN IS...

me...

I hate myself and I hate it...

# Lights Fade Spotlight on all three

Melvin: 5 bullets deep into his brown back.

Ghost of Bryan: 4 reasons why.

Noah: 3 brothers.

Melvin: 2 hands in the sky

Ghost of Bryan: who would have thought that I'd be the...

All Three: 1

#### **Lights Black Out**

Narrator: The morning of November 4th, 2006. 7:30 am. Bryan, Noah and Melvin getting ready for school.

#### Lights up

Melvin: (knocks on the bathroom door) Devin, bro, if you don't get out of that bathroom using all that hot water I'm gonna kick your ass yo!

Bryan: (looks in the mirror brushing his waves) This morning, I woke up. Feeling brand new and I jumped up. Feeling my highs, and my lows in my soul, and my goals. Just to stop smokin, and stop drinkin and I've been thinkin - I've got my reasons just to get by. Just to get by. Just to get by. (puts both hands in the air jamming out)

Noah: (walks into the kitchen to bacon, eggs, and toast on the kitchen table) Good Morning mom and dad. I will be a little late after school. I've got some assignments to finish up and then I'm going to hang out with Melvin and Bryan. We're going down to the library, possibly up by the lakefront too.

Narrator: 8:00 am and school starts in an hour. 10 miles of walking and talking to do.

Melvin: **(shouts outside Bryan's house)** I hope you ready lil fella! We gotta walk to school remember?! You ready yet?

Bryan: (**shouts outside the window**) Just give me a second bro. The real question is, are you ready? (**points at him**) Today is finna be a good day big fella.

Melvin: ahhhhh, you right. You right. But c'mon, we gotta make sure we get a head start and avoid

these corners.

Bryan: (walks down the steps of his house and zips up his coat) Then let's go.

# **Lights Fade Spotlight on Melvin**

Melvin: Will they ever call your death beautiful. Your life an offering. Like Jesus laid down his life for his friends and he showed his love through his suffering but the death of you has left my mind wandering. I'm choking my thoughts and causing suicide in the mind because what if he finds the mastermind behind... this... (pacing back and forth) he was my brother (shakes his head) man but what was I supposed to do? The bullets should have gone through my back but who left the residue. (holds a gun in his hand)

# **Lights Black Out Lights up**

Narrator: 10:30 am. Loyola High School. 2nd hour. Mr. Jones US History Class.

Mr. Jones: Good Morning class. Your packets is on your desk. They are due at the beginning of class tomorrow. You may begin to work on it as you please, if you have any questions I will be at my desk (**mumbles under his breath**) they don't pay me enough for this.

Melvin: (raises his hand)

Mr. Jones: (sighs) Yes Melvin.

Melvin: With all due respect Mr. Jones, but this is the 5th packet you gave us this week! Can you actually engage us into a conversation about the history of America (scratches his head) even though it's been whitewashed. But c'mon.

Mr. Jones: I do everything they have told me to do that's in the curriculum. Case closed. Do your packets.

Melvin: (smacks his lips together put his head down on the desk)

Jamal: (taps Melvin on his shoulders) pssst, Melvin, can you do me a favor.

Melvin: (looks up) Yeah, what's up bro?

Jamal: My bros and I are on a mission tonight. We on a search for a dude who beat up my little brother at Denby High School. (**looks around**) You know what happened?

Melvin: I'm afraid not.

Jamal: Ol' dude beat up my brother so bad, my little brother doesn't even want to go to school. They was beefin over basketball or sum shit like that. I don't care about all dat, his ass is mine. I will find that dude. No one messes with MY little brother.

Melvin: Most definitely bro.

Jamal: So you in? Meet us up on the corner of Orangelawn Street. (offers his hand for an agreement shake)

Melvin: (shakes his hand) Anything to help show the brother who not to mess with!

Lights Fade Jamal and Melvin Walk Off Spotlight on Ghost of Bryan

Ghost of Bryan: All I knew was that we were gonna meet up downtown at the library and possibly up at the lake front. But Noah got caught up with homework and his teacher and Melvin said he was on a mission that night. It was odd. (looks down at his hands, gets fidgety) Funny how that same night that they seemed to be busy, I was shot. My brothers weren't around to protect me. MY BROTHERS WERE NOT AROUND TO PROTECT ME! (breaths heavily) Brothers are supposed to stick for each other man. Orangelawn Street was a corner we always tried to avoid. I wounded up being right there... (puts both of his hands up in the sky) (gunshot sound)

#### **Lights Black Out**

Narrator: 4:30 pm. Loyola High School. Noah sees Melvin walk out the doors.

Noah: (runs to catch up with him) Hey Melvin. You still wanna meet up after school?

Melvin: Man, I wish. I'm on this mission tonight with Jamal. I don't know if we can dude.

Noah: I mean, it's fine if we don't. I got a lot of homework to do in Mrs. Johnson's class anyways. You wouldn't believe what she has got us doing in her class dude.

Melvin: And what is that?

Noah: (looks around and whispers) Poetry and short story writing.

Melvin: (chuckles) Those are Bryan's favorite things to do. That guy loves to write. I can do a little

writing myself. I actually like it. I mean, no one really knows I do... (looks down at his feet) You better not tell a soul. (laughs)

Noah: (chuckles) No, dude. It's all good in the hood. It's just, I rather would learn about science and how the body functions from the brain all the way down to feet. There's actually a science fair coming up and man I gotta get ready for tha-

Melvin: Hold up lil fella, you lost me at science. (laughs) But hey, we can meet up tomorrow.

Noah: Sounds pretty groovy to me (puts his thumb up)

Melvin: Weirdo. But you still my bro.

Noah: (pounds his chest twice and throws a peace sign up)

Both Noah and Melvin walk off Lights Fade Spotlight on Noah

Noah: WHAT? THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? (anxiety builds up) WHAT DO I DO? HOW CAN I SOLVE IT? I'VE NEVER EXPERIENCED THIS BEFORE! (screams at the top of his lungs) HELPPPP. (pulls trigger to his head) (gunshot sound)

# Lights Black Out Lights up

Narrator: 8:30 pm. Jamal and his gang of friends on the corner of Orangelawn Street. Melvin right behind them.

Jamal: Ayo Melvin! Let me give you a description of the dude we lookin for. (hunches over, puts his hand on shoulder)

Melvin: I'm all ears.

Jamal: He's 6'0. Brown skin. Glasses. Last name Love ring any bells?

Melvin: Bryan? Oh shit. (thoughts roam his head)

Jamal: Don't tell me your friends with the dude.

Melvin: (hesitantly) uh, oh. No.

Jamal: Good (hands over his gun)

Lights Black Out Lights up Spotlight on Melvin, Noah and Ghost of Bryan Melvin: (Sings) Back to life

Noah: Back to Reality

Ghost of Bryan: Back to the Dream

Melvin: (sings slowly) Back to reality.... (gun points at the audience)

# **Lights Fade Spotlight on Melvin**

Melvin: Overthinking kills. I guess that's exactly what happened. Even though I had the gun in my hand it wasn't me who pulled the trigger. Gun shots went through my back before it went through his... (stares into space) (gunshot sound)

# **Lights Black Out Lights Up**

Narrator: Morning of November 5th, 2006. Melvin residence. (ocean wave sounds)

Melvin: (dreaming) Peace. Peace and quietness. Nothing but the ocean. The water tides moving back and forth. Back and forth. (picks up a seashell he is surrounded by and presses his ear against it) "You were supposed to be my brother" "You were supposed to protect me" "Where were you and Noah, Noah, Noah... (suddenly jerks himself up from his sleep)

# Lights Fade Spotlight on all 3

Ghost of Bryan: 7 bullets deep in the

Melvin: 6 foot boy

Noah: with 5 only known

Melvin: and 4 what reason

Ghost of Bryan: what 3 brothers hold

Noah: and 2 hands in the sky

Melvin: But I was the

All 3: 1

#### **END OF PLAY**

## **Christian Dixon**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Penney High School, Hamilton, MO Educator: Renae Wattenbarger

Category: Poetry

### You Bring out the White Boy in Me

(with apologies to Sandra Cisneros' "You Bring out the Mexican in Me")

You bring out the white boy in me

The slicked back, greasy blonde fade

The darkened September skies

The drunken after-taste

The steaming hot coffee for a long Monday night

until sunlight finds my reddened eyes.

You are the one I would give up my dreams for,

and shower you with the riches of the world.

Let you eat Chinese in my car,

Even on my padded leather seats.

I mean it, with certainty.

Because I would war with the tide for you.

You bring out the Gregory Peck in me.

The tough-guy pissing vinegar in me.

The "square up, asshole" in me

The flip over tables and pick a fight with a tiger in me.

The mismatched socks and oversized jeans in me.

The donkey and elephant in me

The passionate lyrics repeating in my head.

The American passion for freedom in me.

The hard spoken, harsh words boiling in me.

The "pleased to meet your sir," fire-breathing rebel in me.

The Davey Crockett adventure in me.

The trench warfare and storm the beaches of Normandy in me.

The Dust Bowl and Depression in me.

The frenzy of the Red Scare in me.

This is true, this is true.

You bring out the Dungeons and Dragons in me.

The flaming jealousy of seeing you with others in me.

The Twinkie shortage of '08 in me.

The Jesus and sinner sacrifice in me.

The fall into the depths of sadness in me.

The 300 Spartan devotion to cause in me.

The nacho cheese Doritos on Sunday in me.

The mourn the death of a gorilla in me.

Woody, let me be your Buzz.

I'll be the fire in your hearth,

that helps you find your way home in the dark.

I am the first man on the moon with you,

however doomed as Market-Garden.

I want to beat you at Super Smash Brothers,

I want to be everything good that you feel.

I want to load my guns,

every pistol and rifle, and fire them like a mad-man into the sky.

'Cause you bring out the white boy in me,

whether you mean to or not.

You bring out the 70's disco fever in me.

The stick-to-my-guns, I-cannot-be-moved in me.

The hockey mask and chainsaw in me.

The underground cage-fighter in me

The New Madrid fault shift in me.

The bed-ridden cancer in me

The unbridled sense of anger in me.

You inspire me to beat my demons and find strength to carry on.

Bear my fists and take on the world,

Spielbergs and Tarantinos, who wish to have you as their own.

I am unworthy, I am Judas at your supper.

The tree that bears no fruit.

The loveless creature of the deep.

The unashamed pride and fall, you bring out

the indescribable hope for a future in me.

The unshakeable desire to be yours in me.

The unpleasant present, past and future in me.

The unforgiveable heathen in the soul of me.

Red and white and blue and black,

Gold and chrome, paper and coin.

To all the boastful, the hypocrites, and heinous beings,

the Mother Mary, the loving Father, Son, and Spirit,

I will challenge for you.

With every dance, feast, and night, I grow closer to you.

I need you, I want you, I long with every fiber to have you.

Love with the passion of a man depraved for too long.

Take my hand, hold your breath, and let out the white boy in me.

# **Emma Donaldson**

Age: 16, Grade: 10 School Name: Central High School, Saint Joseph, MO Educator: Kyla Ward

Category: Poetry

# Our Own Little Garden

#### **Daffodils**

Let's build a world of daffodils/ That never fades and never dies.
-Andrew Lippa, *Big Fish* the Musical, 2013

There are moments.

Moments where you find everything and nothing.

The light thrown across a canvas which brings hope into every new. So many beginnings await.

So many yellow creatures that have found their soil to be planted in and raised with all the love and care

I could ever offer.

It is exhausting. Heartbreakingly difficult. It takes everything from me but it gives me something that outshines every star that has ever been painted in the night sky.

And to fertilize the seed, I have to believe

If this is the sunlight of my life, Then let it be.
Let it be beautiful
Let me not find myself
But find you.
Find you.

Everywhere
And anywhere.
The places that
You and I
Are always
Going to be found.

You are my new beginning.

My little daffodil that has weathered the storm; that has given me hope to weather mine. It all begins in you. You. Always you. Pink Orchids There is one thank you. Just one thank you That I have to give. For you, For everything that you have given me. For new places in my heart. For sunrises and sunsets. For transatlantic flights. For making me see beauty. All of this. The way you come bounding up the steps. The way you are dangerous to every room filled with encroaching darkness. The way you have crashed your car to always protect my life. But most importantly. This. This feeling of

This feeling of joy Which permeates my being And spreads out across the constellations And brings warm light to everything it touches.

Of...

Of...

Joy.

If this is the moment upon which this new beginning Becomes something more,
Then I will have sunlight pouring out of my fingers.
I will have a light to cast on every canvas.
There will be too many paintbrushes stacked in every corner, spilling out onto the floor and making everything messy, chaotic, and beautiful. Our lives will become a portfolio of all the moments that color the dust settling around us as we run relentlessly towards the calendars turning and the lights dimming.

I will have all of it.

But most importantly, I will have you.

Chrysanthemum

Just the other day, You reminded me.

Red ribbons, Green grass, Picnic baskets, Can I kiss you?

Linguine with braised beef Red Wine Rings I love you.

White dresses. Calla Lilies. Preachers. I do.

I remembered it all with beautiful clarity. You and I had dreams. We had hopes. We had things to be tossed across our very souls.

But...

We have to make

some new plans. Transatlantic flights can't be our lights now.

We have a new one coming. And with it, there is so much to do.

We have to find a crib. To paint the walls. To go to the Doctor's.

And it won't just be you and I sharing this little light in the world.

There will be a new seed that precludes a new daffodil which grows in the most tender soil.

It's time to say I love you to a new beginning.

Marigolds

Honey, let me tell you something. Another story.

Once upon a time, there was a girl. A beautifully splendid girl.

She danced in sunlight.
She sang show tunes off key.
She defeated her demons.
She turned her nothing into my everything.

Her hair would get caught In the windows of our car. Her mind would relate everything in this world To something in a fantasy book she loved.

I fell in love with this girl. And I married her.

We spent a couple of years Running after one another, Chasing the continents, Being together. From first kisses to the I do, I loved your mother. I always will.

And it has all changed.
There's a brutal difference
between tangibility and presence.
Her echoes aren't gone though.
The garden still grows in full bloom.
You still feel her.

So maybe nothing has changed. We are just on different sides of the parting waters of reality. It will be hard but have hope. Have hope in her bright yellow life.

#### Remember...

She got to love you which is all she wanted. No event in the whole catastrophic history of the world would've stopped her from this single, fragile act.

It hurt you so very much to lose her.

But she got to love you.

She was happy.

Rosemary

Dearest Love,

This could be the last letter.

And I think I forgot to bring it up.

The years spent.

The years without you.

This isn't the first time I

have made this call.

You and I have always

had a way of speaking

that transversed every boundary.

You don't really want to know about that, though.

She has grown up and become a Lovely, Beautiful, Kind, Hopeful, human being.

And she is getting married. Today's the day. Where she is no longer our little girl. But someone else's hope.

My greatest prayer for her is
to have the beauty of love that we did.
I understand that she could never be us.
She had her own strength.
A strength set forwards
by the luggage that she had
to place on both of her shoulders.
There was beauty in our love, though.
Something that could make her stronger
than titanium.
You loved her, crystalline as the Thorncrown chapel.
And I know and will impart on her,
the fact that her strength is all
you could have ever wanted for her.

She will walk down the aisle and I will be reminded of you. And that day so very long ago. It all began in you. Always you.

# **Lauren Elmore**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Platte County High School, Platte City, MO

Educator: Marnie Jenkins Category: Poetry

## Life Ain't a Fairy Tale

## **Jagged**

A normal day for me Keep walking straight for me Eyes on the ground Not looking around.

Friends; I got none
I don't need anyone
I just got myself
Don't need no one else.

They say I'm jagged-A broken mess.
I call it mature
More enlightened than the rest.
They say I'm ruined
Can't ever be fixed
No glue can save me now
I joined the lunatics.
I'm just too jagged.

My sneakers are skinned My family is thinned This big city life Makes every wrong seem right.

After running from home Then living on my own When my brother got killed My instincts got skilled

They say I'm jagged-A broken mess.
I call it mature
More enlightened than the rest.
They say I'm ruined
Can't ever be fixed
No glue can save me now

I joined the lunatics. I'm just too jagged.

Nobody comes close They can't break me, no I'm hiding too deep Behind the dragon of my keep.

I'm safe where I am Can't come to anymore harm Just got to stay apart To protect my jagged heart...

They say I'm jagged!
Maybe it's true-Maybe I'm worthless
That my time is through.
No matter how much I crave
That true love or a family
I'll always be alone
Don't got a friend or no place to call home.
I'm just too-Broken. Worthless. Ruined. Hopeless...
I'm just too jagged.

#### **The Stranger Who's Not Strange**

Strange.

A word with no exact definition. A word with thousands of meanings. A word with your own interpretation. A name with pain and hurt.

Even as you walk down the street, The wind blowing through your hair, A feeling of lightness, of happy, Filling your entire being.

But then, there's that one word, Floating to you on the breeze, A whisper, but loud enough to shake you to the core A name with pain and hurt.

Odd, bizarre, weird, unnatural, Freakish--

Words like knives, slicing, cutting,

Cutting to the innermost depths of your soul Ripping, shredding who you are Disfiguring you into something... Something missing the essence, the personality, The You.

Curious, queer, unexpected, Eerie--

Changing who you are,
Losing all of the joy,
The unique, the special.
Disfiguring you into someone...
Someone you're not. Ruining the wonderful person
You are.

#### Strange.

A word that's wounding, A word that's said to hurt. A word that's mumbled in anger, A name filled with jealousy.

While you may not know it, You still can't deny it--While it's meant to cut you, It cut's the other person too.

Jealousy is vicious Secret, and hidden. Even the best of us will be hurt Somewhere, somehow.

It causes darkness inside of us Taints our very soul. Consuming our thoughts Forcing us under its control.

You're not good enough. See her over there? You just don't have what it takes, You're different, you don't fit in.

The victim of the green eyed monster Turns from prey to predator Pouncing on every opportunity To make others feel the way you do. It gives you a source of power, Seeing others who hurt, Making you feel stronger And adding fake self-worth.

Feeling invincible, Knowing that you're not alone In feeling alone

Knowing that others have problems too, And not recognizing that it's you Ripping, tearing, shredding, Until they're as disfigured as you.

Round and round this cycle goes, Never-ending path Loops around, until You're back.

Back to the prey Of a ruthless predator Hunting you down Just to make you hurt.

Snickering in the hallways Laughing at your mistakes. But all the while they're hurting, You can see it in their eyes.

#### Strange.

A word with no exact definition.
A word with thousands of meanings.
A word with your interpretation.
A name full of pain and hurt.

## **Know my Broken Heart**

We went into the doctor, Fingers all crossed. Prayers reachin' heav'n above Hopin' that all was not lost.

The man came out--devil or angel, Of that, I wasn't sure Until he sadly shook his head And I knew that my life was all over. I grasp my momma's hand--Squeeze it so tight. Tears were fallin' down her face Her skin, pale and white.

I want so bad to comfort her; To tell her it's all right. But inside, I'm breaking, bleeding Dying...

The only way that I
Can try to find some peace
Is running away
From the truth that'll ruin me!

People don't understand, What I'm going through. People don't understand, What I know, it's true.

So who are they to judge me? So who are they to judge?

I may be all alone, But at least I know....

'Cause they don't know They don't know, What's going through My head and my heart.

But they don't know They don't know, That my world is crumbling And I'm falling...

Tip-toeing through the house, A silence I never knew Where was all that joy and love, Has it been stolen from my too?

Pushing the door open a crack, Peering in my mother's room. Hearing her sobbing hurts my heart, Breaks it, tears it in two. Curlin' up in a ball Not knowing what to do. Wanting the world to dissolve, But knowing that, that's not true!

People don't understand, What I'm going through. People don't understand, What I know, it's true.

So who are they, to judge me? So who are they, to judge?

I may be all alone, But at least I know...

'Cause they don't know, They don't know What's going through My head and my heart.

But they don't know, They don't know That my world is crumbling And I'm falling.

They don't know...

# Callie Fisher

Age: 13, Grade: 8
School Name: Danby Rush Tower Middle School, Festus, MO
Educator: Nicole Boyer

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

#### **Dream Boy**

I always wondered why I seemed invisible. As if it was in my nature to be an outsider, never caring as I awoke each morning if I was noticed by those around me. My father, who raised me alone from my infancy, was the only living thing with which I had felt some sort of connection. I used to consider all others abnormal, as opposed to he and I; it seemed as though everyone was part of a puzzle in which we all had our spots and I was the piece that could not fit, no matter the direction I was turned.

However, I remember the night I found my place, the night my entire existence found its meaning.

\* \* \*

It all happened in the small coastal town of Grove Hill, Maine. The town would deem fit as being the place where I found my place because it was just like me: unknown to many, small, and quiet. It is the type of place inhabited by families who never leave, generations walking the same streets, sitting in the same church pews. I grew up in this inescapable town, and there I earned the name of "Dream Boy."

The day it all began started like any other. I awoke to the sound of raindrops hitting my tin roof. It was 3:16 AM, the same time I had woken up for years, never able to return to sleep. It was as if I had been programmed, my mind on an unbreakable, constant loop. Every night I had the same dream: I encountered a woman who comforted me, expressing a love that felt natural and familiar. Her love was that of a word on the tip of your tongue that you could not seem to figure out. The love of this woman was something I saw all around town, relative to the love my father and I shared.

Soon after the deep embrace, I was led to the dock, and I stepped upon a wooden ship. The floors creaked with nearly every step and the air was filled with the groans of hauntly despair. We traveled down the hall as I followed the unknown woman to a dark room. I was unaware as to what was inside.

I knew the boat like the back of my hand. I was given a tour of the boat nightly and always found myself in a room that looked as if it was a master bedroom fit for a married couple. I was always placed in the corner and sat upon the dark green chair large enough for two of me.

I stared at the walls trying to identify everything in the room. My eyes always found themselves on the picture of the beautiful woman in a long sleeve wedding gown, her arm linked to the man in the black suit. I smiled, imagining the happiness they must feel and yearning to feel it myself.

I then noticed the second door, and detached myself from my chair to investigate what was on the other side. As I opened the door, I felt hands cling to me; my neck, pockets, arms and legs. I turned, looking for the woman who guided me there, but she was nowhere in sight. In a matter of seconds, I was pulled

inside to the darkness that haunted me. I was so frightened by the darkness, the cold decayed hands, not knowing where I was going. I was frightened by the unknown.

Upon waking, I would lay in my bed, curious where the dream door led. Sleep never came as my mind aimlessly wandered the rooms of the ship, trying to make sense of the premonition. This was a routine, until one night, the night that changed me, the dream changed.

The dream began completely differently. Instead of the woman, I was walking alongside my father who haphazardly swung a tarnished oil lantern in one hand. We walked down the dock as the rain drenched us. He guided me gently and knowingly, as the woman always had. I was baffled as we reached the end of the dock as there was not an old wooden boat patiently awaiting me.

He then shook the lantern three times, each swing louder than the one before. It was as if he was ringing a doorbell announcing our presence. In the midst of the downpour, I saw a boat appear out of the mist and fog. The woman stood on the edge of the boat as it was gliding swiftly toward us. Her expression appeared to be joyful as her smile stretched from ear-to-ear as she saw both of us together greeting her. She embraced us both with a triumphant smile.

I frantically awoke to the sound of my alarm for the first time in ages. I groaned to go back to sleep. I needed to continue the dream.

\* \* \*

The next night, I went to sleep nearly straight away hopeful that the dream would continue. Nothing. No dream, yet I still awoke at 3:16. Confusion overtook me; why didn't I have the dream? Why did I still wake at 3:16?

I told my father I was sick that morning, and I was: sick of the unknown.

My father never really spoke to anyone. I was the exception; he could talk to me for hours and I could listen; it seemed as though he was the only person in the world who I could have an intelligent conversation with, when I chose to speak.

That night at dinner I broke the 10 years of silence that filled me. I asked him about my mother, the woman he loved so dearly was taken from him. You would think I could have done that sooner, but the mere mention of her drove an invisible stake through his heart.

I eventually blurted out question, with the understanding I could not keep courage to question him for more than a few seconds.

"Who was my mother?"

Straightaway my father looked up from his then empty plate, his expression showing a combination of despair and shock. Silence filled the room as guilt overtook me, I knew I shouldn't have questioned him. I should have allowed that curiosity stay a mere curiosity.

But before I could attempt to take back my words, my father answered collectively, "Your mother was the most pure soul you could possibly meet."

I had to know more. I felt this burning desire throughout my body to ask again.

"What happened to her?"

My father then went on, "You would not remember this but your mother was diagnosed with a deadly disease when she was pregnant with you, and after you were born it worsened." He then continued on, "On the last night of her life, your mother was struggling. She understood what was happening to her so she called you and me into her hospital room for one final goodbye. You were placed into her arms. She then placed her cold hand on your head and passed."

I breathed, ready to ask him another question that I was nearly positive I knew the answer to: "What time did my mother die?"

He gazed forward, "3:16 AM." He then explained how her corpse was placed on an old wooden boat, taken to a medical examiner to research her disease, but there is no record of the arrival of the ship at its port.

Finally it made sense. The realization overtook me. I awoke at 3:16 every morning because that is when her soul departed. I awoke at 3:16 because that time was subconsciously tattooed into my mind as the day she, the person who I most longed to see, disappeared forever.

Suddenly, my dream the night before was clear: the lantern. I needed to find the lantern I needed to find my mom.

My father fell asleep quickly, as usual. Once I was certain he was asleep I grasped the lantern on his nightstand by the handle. I was walking out so quickly I almost missed the picture. Although I had looked at this picture thousands of times, I never before made the connection between it and my dream.

I was out of my home in a flash. Quickly hopping onto my bike, pedaling faster than I ever had before. I arrived at the boat-lined dock to see only one open spot at the end.

Mentally recapping the dream of the night before was overwhelming; I strained to remember what happened next. I thought myself mad. A ghost mother? Ghosts in general? I shook off these thoughts as I shook the lantern three times.

I stood still, listening for the slightest noise, but all was calm; not a wave crashed, not a light flickered, not a boat in sight. Sorrow overcame me as I resigned myself to the reality that I would never really meet my mother.

I turned around, my head hanging as my feet robotically walked down the dock.

Suddenly, rain fell, thunder roared, lightning struck, and waves began to crash. I turned, and in the midst of the darkness, there it was: a wooden ship. It looked worn down, like it had been at sea for years. There were holes all different shapes and sizes throughout the center and bottom. I was at the edge of the dock faster than the lightning that illuminated the sky, my face beaming.

I stood like a board watching the boat dock itself; there was no sign of a captain or crew. I stepped upon it, half expecting to fall through the unstable foundation. I guess a little part of me believed it was like a ghost. Climbing aboard, I heard the creaks. The wind whistled as it passed from one end to the other. I held my lantern lofty, turning it in all directions.

I spotted the door, the same I had seen 1000 times before, and sauntered toward it. I was in no hurry, I wanted to have the ability to remember this time exactly as it happened.

As I placed my hand upon the old door handle I could sense its fragility. I turned the knob toward the right like I had seen before. A loud click echoed throughout the room and I saw the master bedroom I had seen so many times before.

Looking around the room I could not believe I was there. I walked towards the door, half expecting to open it and then wake up. I mumbled, "Now or never," my clammy palms reaching out for the handle and there they were. The two sets of pale, boney hands appeared. The first set of hands grabbed the pocket of my coat and my shoulder. The second grasped onto the back of my neck and my wrist. They pulled me into the darkness and I descended down.

I then grew colder, falling down this unknown passage to the place I feared most. The hands released themselves from me and went out of sight.

I don't remember whether my landing was smooth or hard; I fainted before I could get the chance. I woke up in a bedroom, my bedroom. Was it possible? Was this just another dream? It couldn't be. I hopped out of the bed and as my feet touched the ground, a great force stronger than anything I had experienced drew me back. I felt her presence, but she was out of sight.

She leaped in front of me. She had a black, lace, knee-length dress. She was thin and pale with long dark hair. She was just as my father described. I moved back to the edge of my bed. She looked into my eyes, examining my face, my clothes, and my mind. She was not a mind reader, but it seemed as though she was. As her eyes locked on mine, I felt them in my soul. She spoke no words for I believed she was in just as much awe as I was.

"Mother?" I asked after the silence became too much for me.

She shrieked, possibly in wonder or fear. I then replied "Mother, it is me, your son, Henry." She placed her icy fingertips by the corner of my eye and traced my jawline.

It all felt so real. I desired for this fantasy to be endless. The love between a mother and son was unbreakable. I had seen it all throughout Grove Hill. I had spent years longing for that type of love.

Her piercing eyes left a mark of happiness that will maintain itself forever. But what will be nearly impossible to forget is the look inside her beautiful eyes as she was taken from me. I heard her terrifying screech as she faded into the light.

\* \* \*

Upon waking, I found myself on the dock. It was bright, sunny, and the weather was perfect. I stumbled back home thinking about all that had just occurred. I now knew my mother, and soon found myself at my doorstep. I walked through the threshold and into my bedroom, collapsing on the bed.

As I began to drift off to sleep, I was jolted awake by the sound of our landline ringing. Minutes later my father came in obviously having news to tell. He stood at my doorway stared me in the eyes and spoke,

"They found your mother's body."

on,

I sat on my bed in silence baffled by the news that had just been delivered. He continued

"The boat was found down the road docked by ours."

# **Alexis Gavitt**

Age: 16, Grade: 11 Home School, Salem, MO Educator: Jessica Gavitt Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

## **Tears of Gold**

Ember closed her eyes and hoped Mother could forgive her. She was never supposed to talk to strangers—never, under any circumstances, should she ever engage in a conversation with even the friendliest of newcomers. She closed her eyes, the light still dancing behind her eyelids, and the cruel, inevitable warmth licked her skin. There was a cry of agony, and then silence ensued. Oh, how she hoped Mother would forgive her...

A week earlier, Ember's mother told her to fetch some water from the river. "Don't talk to any strangers," Mother empathized, with such great seriousness and sincerity, as an incurable worry sparked into her crystalline blue eyes. Ember, of course, had no intention of speaking to any outsiders, for her parents taught her well. So she tied up her auburn hair with a cyanic ribbon, and off she went, skipping down the dirt path, into the canopy of the forest and towards the river.

As she walked further into the depths of the forest, the scenery transformed. Undergrowth caught the hem of her dress, silently begging of her to stay just a little while longer. Black berries were ripening on a bush on the side of the path. Her heart fluttered, as if a tiny humming bird replaced it underneath her ribcage as she thought delightfully how pleasantly surprised her mother would be, to see the treats she brought home with her! Mother will be so pleased! She thought with a satisfied giggle, picking a beautifully plump berry off a branch. We can make a delicious pie!

By the time half her basket was full with berries, and her fingers were more purple than porcelain white, the freckles of sunlight that once tickled her cheeks and brightened the red of her hair subsided to a single glow behind her. Mother would be very worried if Ember didn't come home soon. Not many eleven year olds made this trek every day, and not all of them came back if they did. Tightening her shawl around her shoulders, Ember pushed deeper into the forest.

She followed the trail faithfully, letting it lead her closer to the faint trickle of the river. A crack in the branches above her head distracted her from that feat. Ember stepped back. A glow, like a little star, glimmered just above the treetops. The leaves were far too thick to get a good glimpse, but she caught sight of a sliver of golden-orange ascending just above the treetops. *Perhaps it's a fire!* Little Ember thought. *How terrible would it be if the forest was caught aflame? I shall have to see!* 

With a new purpose in mind, Ember tucked the basket in a fork in the trees, and then climbed up the sturdy branches. They got more brittle as she got higher and she feared they would no longer be able to hold her weight. The branches swung precariously over the forest floor, but eventually, she made it to the treetop, safe and intact besides a scratch or two. Ember peered up through the branches. There, just a few feet above her head, was a creature of magnificence. It held its head up with regal composure, its bright blue eyes shimmering with pure integrity. Its wingspan was more than half her size, and the

feathers were fiery red and golden-orange wisps that flickered like a flame into the surrounding air, and then dissipated into nothingness. It was embroidered with danger, but beautiful—*amazing*—nevertheless.

Ember covered her mouth to stifle her awestricken gasp. It heard her despite, and the creature tilted its head towards her. "Where have you come from, child?" The voice was steady and gravelly, resembling that of a man. For the first time since she laid eyes on the creature, eternally set ablaze, Ember felt a prickle of fear creep up her spine. She bashfully ducked her head and took to twirling a tight ringlet curl around one of her fingers.

"I mustn't speak to strangers." She replied primly.

"Oh, mustn't you?"

"Yes, I mustn't! Mother would be ashamed if I spoke to you. Good bye, handsome bird," Ember bid to it farewell and crept back under the branches.

That night Ember brought home a pail of water and basket of elderberries, and together she and Mother made a delectable elderberry pie. They enjoyed their desert underneath the pale glow of the moonlight and the stars.

The following day Mother woke Ember early to do her chores. She set out to fetch some water, and once again her mother reminded her, "Do not talk to strangers, Ember." Mother said sternly, giving her cheek a loving caress, and then sent her back out into the woods.

The creature found her again. This time, it waited out on the path for her. It was preening its beautiful feathers. One fell out and glided into the grass beside the trail. It barely touched a single blade of lush green grass before a brilliant flame, spontaneously conjured, spread throughout the meadow. "Hello, sweet child," said the handsome bird once more. "Where have you come from?"

Ember tightened her hold on the handle of her basket and pail, hugging them both close to her chest. The fiery red flower burned for minutes more until it had eaten every flicker of life. Then the fire, dooming itself, died of its own selfish greed. "To those that take more than they give," Ember remembered what her mother had said to her once, "all shall be taken from them just the same."

Once again she shook her head. "Oh, magnificent bird, I mustn't speak to strangers."

"Oh, dear child!" The bird cried. His voice mimicked thunder, for it was as abrupt and colorful, and just as bold. The bird could not smile, his beak forever frozen in a crescent shape, but his eyes seemed illuminated with amusement as he gazed upon her face. "We are not strangers, for we met yesterday. Please, at least tell me your name?"

Ember paused for a moment, for the bird had a point. A brief encounter yesterday they both shared. They were both a bit familiar with each other, but his name she did not know. A weight of discomfort laid on her chest like stone. "Ember Allen," She curtsied. "And whom, if I may, might you be?"

"I am Phoenix." The bird blinked gratefully. "I am very pleased to meet you. Most folk run far from me."

Ember frowned. "But why, Mister Phoenix?"

Phoenix closed his eyes. Ember listened to his tale of woe, a complex story full of tragedy and loss. "The multitude of devastation a phoenix must endure is utterly horrid." Phoenix told her. "A phoenix sets fire to everything that they touch," His wing swept over the feeble remains of the meadow, much to Ember's dismay. She remembered the beautiful daisies and dandelions that grew on the edges of the trail. All that remained of them was ash and dust. "They think that there is a fine line between beauty and destruction. But the line is but a spec, barely present in existence. People fear what they cannot control. I would understand if you did not wish to befriend me."

"I would be more than happy to!" Ember exclaimed. Oh, how butterflies fluttered in her stomach as she thought delightfully of how pleasantly surprised Mother would be, to learn of the friend Ember acquired! Ember bid Phoenix another farewell. She collected her water and returned to Mother with the news.

Mother was not at all as pleased as Ember envisioned. Her face was crestfallen, her oceanic eyes dewy with tears. She looked deflated. "Ember, you mustn't speak to strangers." Mother pressed her hands lovingly against her cheeks. "Promise you will not talk to Phoenix again."

Ember frowned. "I promise, Mother."

Mother prohibited Ember from leaving the farm for several days. She did chores around the house. She woke before the sun peeked over the horizon and made bread and breakfast for Mother in bed and to feed the animals, who'd been cooped up throughout the night. She scrubbed the counters and the floors until her fingers were raw from the friction and she could clean no more. Ember did anything and everything to keep her mind off of her confinement to their modest cottage. She wondered if Phoenix thought she abandoned him. She was his one true friend, possibly the only one he ever had, and her mother forbade her from ever speaking to him again. As much as her heart hurt, Ember imagined it was only a fraction of the pain Phoenix must be going through.

Her inner turmoil continued until, at last, on the final day of that week, Ember's mother roused her from her slumber. Her thumb caressed her cheek until Ember woke. "Good morning," Mother whispered in a silvery voice. "Can I trust you to go to the river and fetch some water without speaking to anyone—especially Phoenix?" Ember nodded. Today she would return to her dutiful, prim mannerisms.

Ember coaxed her body into movement. She removed her blanket, which her grandmother knitted for her as a toddler with sheep's wool. She quickly dressed herself and grabbed the pail she'd left in the corner of her room. As usual, she tied up her hair with her cyanic ribbon, and off she went to fetch water from the river.

It was much more bleak outside than she anticipated. The clouds that usually floated in the sky retreated onto the earth below, impairing Ember's line of sight. Though a little light from the sun

touched the cold ground, Ember felt isolated and alone as she wandered through the dim light of the dreary autumn afternoon.

It was in the heart of the forest that light finally trickled through the leaves. Immediately, Ember recognized the fiery-red shimmer. Without having to say anything at all, Phoenix appeared to her. The leaves of the trees that once barricaded him on the other side burnt like parchment, and then into sheer nothingness. "Mister Phoenix!" Ember awed at him. "Have you been waiting here for me this whole time?"

Phoenix dipped his head in confirmation. "Of course, dear child."

"My mother was very distraught to hear of our friendship, I am afraid she doesn't approve." Ember tried to explain away her absence. Guilt riddled throughout her body as she surveyed Phoenix, but he did not react.

"Where do you come from, dear Ember?" The Phoenix eventually replied. "If I knew, we would never have to be separated again." How bewildered, how utterly horrified would Mother be if she ever heard such a thing come from Phoenix's mouth! Yet how intrigued Ember became as she mulled over his offer. Mother had told her to stay away from strangers as far back as she can recall. Yet, if memory served her justly, Mother never explained to her why she mustn't speak to strangers, nor had she explained why she mustn't speak to Phoenix. *Perhaps*, Ember dared to let herself think, *perhaps there isn't a reason at all beyond Mother's silly, childish fears. And if this is so, then how can I truly be doing wrong, if there is not anything real to fear at all?* 

And so she told the handsome bird where she lived. In a sleepy village called Little Ivywood, just outside of the forest. It is cozily tucked between two mountains, in a low valley on the way to Blackburn. "Thank you, little Ember," Phoenix's eyes seemed to smile pleasantly down at her. "I hope to meet again soon." And this time, it was Phoenix that bid to her a dandy farewell. Ember smiled widely and continued back down to the river.

She filled the pail and carried the water, to the utmost of her ability, back through the winding forest trail and back to the quiet little town of Little Ivywood. As she emerged from the forest she saw a cloud of smoke arising from behind the hill. Little Ivywood just laid beyond, tucked away in the hidden valley. Her chest suddenly felt constricted. In her race to get home, Ember dropped her pail of water and raced as quickly as her feet could carry her. She practically hovered above the ground as she went. Her ribbon loosened and fell back onto the path, but she barely noticed the red locks in her eyes and mother. *Mother!* She thought frantically. *Oh, Mother!* 

When she got back to town, it was much too late. Phoenix's wings swept over the wood buildings. The flames were vigorous in their endeavors. People were screaming, crying out in misery from the *monster* that was attacking them. There was no longer a regal magnificence present in his movement. Phoenix moved with purpose, draping his victims with his fiery feathers.

Ember called out to him, but Phoenix was as relentless as the fires. Ember reflected briefly back to the meadow. She remembered how the fires had eaten away all the life it touched. Ember closed her eyes and hoped Mother could forgive her. She was never supposed to talk to strangers—never, under

any circumstances, should she ever engage in a conversation with even the most civil of newcomers. She closed her eyes, the light of the blazing flames still dancing behind her eyelids, and the cruel, inevitable warmth licked her skin. Ember fell to her knees and screamed. No matter how shrill her voice became, nor how desperate or orotund, Phoenix no longer heeded to her call. Mother, her dearest Mother, called back in unison with her own cries of anguish. Then there was only silence and the crackle of the flames.

A feather, like a tear of gold, fell almost sorrowfully from Phoenix and nestled itself between her shoulder blades. It was a silent apology—a meaningless one, empty to the core. Then the fire sparked on her clothes where the feather grazed the cloth, but Ember was not aware of the burning sensation that overwhelmed her skin. She was only aware of the agony in her heart as she learned the bittersweet flavor of betrayal.

And to those that take more than they give, all shall be taken from them just the same.

# Jessica Goldberg

Age: 18, Grade: 12
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Category: Critical Essay

### **Pygmalion: A Frankenstein Story**

Both Mary Shelley, in Frankenstein, and George Bernard Shaw, in Pygmalion, employ a scientist and his experimental creation to reveal mankind's innate cruelty and expose social injustices. In Shaw's play, Professor Henry Higgins, a scientist of phonetics, transforms a "draggletailed guttersnipe" (16) into a sophisticated, sought-after member of the aristocracy by refining her speech and appearance. Analogously, Dr. Victor Frankenstein draws upon his scientific knowledge to cause a transformation; dead body parts and a secret spark combine to produce a living, functioning being with feelings and personality. Through their interactions within the community, these two "creations" illustrate that society assigns identity and determines a person's worth based on shallow and superficial character traits.

Eliza Doolittle undergoes a miraculous metamorphosis from lowly flower girl of the streets to a respected lady traveling among elite social circles. Only through honing her poor English language skills and polishing her physical appearance can Eliza overcome her inferior social status and become recognized as a human being with feelings. Upon first meeting Eliza under the portico of St. Paul's Church at the opening of the play, Henry Higgins expresses his opinion about her linguistic vulgarity:

"A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere - no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespear [sic] and Milton The Bible; and dont [sic] sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon." (8)

Professor Higgins ascribes divine powers to cultured speech and suggests that Doolittle's failure to display this gift is ungodly and relegates her to a valueless life. He believes one's identity is defined by his or her manner of speaking. When Eliza appears later at Higgins' house clad in dirty clothes, he refers to her as nothing more than "baggage" (14) without "any feelings that we need bother about" (18). In so doing, Higgins makes clear his opinion that, absent respectable attire, Eliza is not a human being with emotions worthy of consideration. In the same vein, Eliza's "shoddy" (2) presentation as a flower girl on the streets coupled with her unsophisticated speech repulses the pretentious Clara Eynsford Hill. Clara is annoyed that her mother, Mrs. Eynsford Hill, demeans herself by speaking to Eliza. However, when Clara again encounters Eliza at Mrs. Higgins' at-home day, Eliza is "exquisitely dressed" and speaks "with pedantic correctness of pronunciation and great beauty of tone" (38). Admiringly, Clara embraces Eliza as a role model who "produces an impression of such remarkable distinction and beauty" such that Clara and the other guests are "quite fluttered" (38). As Eliza crudely describes how "they done her aunt in" (39) and her father's efforts at keeping her aunt alive by "ladling gin down her throat til she came to so sudden that she bit the bowl off the spoon" (Act III, 39), Eliza's hoity-toity audience savors every "bloody" word (40). Clara goes so far as to vehemently defend Eliza's offbeat and coarse way of discussing her aunt's untimely death by responding to Mrs. Eynsford Hill's criticisms:

"It's all a matter of habit. Theres [sic] no right or wrong in it. Nobody means anything by it. And it's so quaint, and gives such a smart emphasis to things that are not in themselves very witty. I find the new small talk delightful and quite innocent." (41)

Eliza's superficiality is convincing. Vulgarity previously deemed unacceptable to the Eynsford Hill family when spoken by Eliza as a disheveled, low-class flower girl is now amusing and attractive from the remodeled Eliza. Society's shallowness is acutely exposed.

Developing confidence and independence, Eliza's self-perception is deeply and meaningfully reshaped by the new identity society has assigned to her. When the reader first meets Eliza in the play, she is an insecure, easily intimidated low-class peddler who worries that she will be mistaken for a prostitute by the "note taker" because she is a dirty girl from the slums soliciting a gentleman to buy her flowers. After her rough cockney accent and tattered clothing are replaced by refined speech and an expensive wardrobe, she emerges as a mature, self-sufficient woman with increased self-esteem because society has deemed her worthy of such regard. Eliza's internal transformation reveals the potent effects on one's self-worth stemming from society's emphasis on superficial traits such as appearance, speech, and manners. As she expresses her appreciation to Colonel Pickering, the "Gentlemen," for his hand in her spiritual evolution, Eliza asks him:

"But do you know what began my real education? Your calling me Miss Doolittle that day when I first came to Wimpole Street. That was the beginning of self-respect for me. And there were a hundred little things you never noticed, because they came naturally to you. Things about standing up and taking off your hat and opening doors - things that shewed [sic] you thought and felt about me as if I were something better than a scullery-maid." (63)

Eliza's comments to Pickering illustrate the powerful influence that society's treatment and judgment of each other has on their ability to love and respect themselves. Her emotional metamorphosis is complete by the end of the play as evidenced by her refusal to capitulate to Professor Higgins. While he makes insulting demands of Eliza that, as "a thing [created] out of the squashed cabbage leaves of Covent Garden" (62), she must take up residence at his home, Eliza rebuffs him: "I won't [sic] be coaxed round as if I was a baby or a puppy. If I can't [sic] have kindness, I'll have independence" (70). Eliza's mastery of the superficial measures of respectable social standing have cultivated a sense of dignity and self-confidence that she can succeed in the world without Higgins as her keeper. In rejecting Higgins, Eliza demonstrates that she now believes herself worthy of more than serving as Higgins' "triumph" (49) and becoming a submissive companion whose job is to fetch his slippers like "a pet" (60).

Like Higgins' dismissive attitude toward Eliza in Pygmalion due to her poor speech and slovenliness, in Frankenstein, the creator rejects his creation based solely on physical appearance. Dr. Victor Frankenstein, the monster's own "father" and creator, shuns his "wretch" (39) at first sight of the monster's awakening. As Victor flees his laboratory, he expresses his feelings of repugnance:

"His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes . . . breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the being I had created." (39)

Without any effort to connect with the monster and forge a relationship as his creator, Victor abandons him in his infancy. Repulsed by the monster's physical features, Victor shirks his moral and

ethical duty to provide for the naive and innocent monster's well-being. In observing his predicament, the monster remarks:

"Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God, a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the special care of his Creator; but I was wretched, helpless, and alone." (105)

Unlike Adam who received protection and direction from God, Victor deserts the monster and leaves him to die. Victor's cold, thoughtless abandonment is mirrored by Professor Higgins, who fails to consider that Eliza, whom he has transformed, now has no sense of belonging. As Mrs. Higgins wisely observes, the manners Higgins has taught Eliza "disqualify a fine lady from earning her own living" (45), and yet she is being turned out into the world "without a fine lady's income" (45). Reformed Eliza can no longer return to the streets as a flower girl nor does she have the financial means to live among the nobility. Victor's scientific experiment parallels Higgins' social experiment, with both creators failing to recognize that their creations are real, with feelings, wants, and needs. Like the monster craves the love and companionship of Victor, so too does Eliza yearn for "a little kindness" (69) and understanding from Higgins.

Just as Eliza's acceptance or rejection among the London elites hinges upon superficial traits, so too does society ostracize the monster because of his outward appearance. Although he demonstrates his kind, compassionate, and self-sacrificing nature in caring for the cottagers by secretly collecting firewood for them and abstaining from eating any of their food so they would not go hungry, his benevolence and devotion to them is obscured by his repulsive physical features. Upon revealing himself to the De Lacy family, the monster despairs at their reaction:

"Who can describe their horror and consternation on beholding me? Agatha fainted; and Safie, unable to attend to her friend, rushed out of the cottage. Felix darted forward, and with supernatural force tore me from his father, to whose knees I clung . . . I could have torn him limb from limb, as the lion rends the antelope. But my heart sunk within me as with biter sickness, and I refrained." (110)

Thus, in the same way that Eliza's social ineptness and vulgar speech act as a social barrier preventing people from seeing her perceptiveness, thoughtful nature, and tender heart, so too do the monster's grotesque physical features impede society's ability to see his caring, considerate constitution. In the absence of refinement, the monster and Eliza stand no chance at acceptance in their respective communities.

Despite their striking similarities, Frankenstein and Pygmalion depart significantly in the sense that Eliza, although abandoned by Higgins, is still nurtured by other mentors such as Mrs. Higgins, Mrs. Pearce, and Colonel Pickering. In sharp contrast, the monster is completely thrown out on his own. Mrs. Higgins is sensitive and kind-hearted and, accordingly, expresses her concern regarding her son's experiment with Eliza. She criticizes Pickering and Higgins' actions toward Eliza to be like playing with a doll, and worries that Eliza will be lost and alone after her transformation. Offering her home to Eliza as a hideaway, Mrs. Higgins supports Eliza's independence and determination. Although Pickering joins in Higgins' experiment to remodel Eliza, he is nonetheless a gentleman toward her who treats her like a lady. Similarly, Mrs. Pearce objects to the coldness with which Higgins treats Eliza, and she shows Eliza kindness and respect. The monster is without any such network of encouragement and understanding. He is rebuffed by every adult and child with whom he comes into contact regardless of his genuine

desire to cultivate friendships and connections with the human world. It is these differing circumstances of support for Eliza versus scorn and repulsion toward the monster that result in Eliza becoming a lady, not a monster. Although born affectionate, kind and compassionate, the circumstances underlying the monster's lonely existence turn his innate goodness into misanthropy and malevolence.

# Mahgol Golshani

Age: 17, Grade: 12 School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS Educator: Shelly Weir Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

#### Flowers Exist on the Moon

Fidgeting my leg against a familiar school desk, the dreadful anticipation always washes over me while listening to roll call on the first day of school. As the teacher goes down the list of names as simple as Mary and Alex, my face darkens with a crimson hue as I await the familiar butchering of my name and the consequential embarrassment. Slowly, the teacher halts their flawless rendition of Marys and Alexs. Usually following this halt, there is the typical "I know I'm going to get this wrong," or "I apologize in advance". However, my seventh grade teacher didn't apologize and instead made an audacious attempt at pronouncing my name. Confident, bold, and severely misled, this teacher assumed that "my hole" would be the most accurate pronunciation of my name.

My Iranian name literally translates to "moon flower," and surprisingly the beautiful concept of my name is nothing compared to the ugly pronunciation it often endures. I never go by my real name in the United States for the sole reason that I wanted to be Iranian in Iran and American in America. Denying my Iranian culture became an instinctive reflex; when people would ask me how to pronounce my birth-given name, I would aloofly reply, "it's not important".

Growing up as a second-generation immigrant was like chasing a cookie I could never get. I saw countless snippets of a "perfect" American life all around me, but it was one I could never achieve. Wherever I went, I was reminded of the other part of me I tried so hard to mercy-kill as it created a divide between the others and me. The shame made me yearn for accent-less parents, Thanksgiving traditions, and weekly church gatherings- not for Christianity's sake, but to fit into the American mold. But Iranian culture ran through the blood in my veins and the pipes in my house.

I stopped speaking Farsi, didn't go to the country for three years, and insisted that I didn't have a middle name, which was just another reminder of Iran. I called myself an easy American name, didn't go to any Iranian gatherings, and started identifying myself as Persian instead of Iranian because of the negative political connation the word has. Simply put, I was whitewashing myself. This cultural cleanse was less of a purification and more of a misled corruption. It was a waste.

Like Alice in Wonderland, I had been led astray in a deep hole of confusion, but soon I awoke from my dazed state when I returned to Iran after three years. At the beginning of my trip, heavy guilt and embarrassment crept in me and weighed down my heart like an anchor. All I could mutter to my estranged relatives were simple pleasantries that were nowhere near in substance to our previous conversations. Our reunion often resulted in incoherent conversations, awkward silences, and pitying smiles as they had immediately realized what I had lost.

By repeatedly calling me my birth given name for the first time in three years and forcing me to participate in a plethora of activities, my family made me fall in love with Iranian culture after years of fighting it. Like the moon, my Iranian culture shines brightly even when the rest of the world seems dark. Like a patient flower, my Iranian culture has taken my entire life to slowly blossom and enrich its surroundings. The newfound comfort of my name and the ease in which it rolls off my tongue has inspired me to drop the cultural shield I once had and instead be bombarded with full adoration for Iran and all of its gracious offerings.

The Iranian food that dances in my mouth symbolizes traditions passed down generations that

finally end with me.

The Iranian sight carries sturdy mountains on the countryside that I would gaze upon while driving to see enchanting coastline of the Caspian Sea.

The Iranian voice subtly carries the beautiful hymns my mother would sing to me, as I would fall asleep and into my Iranian mold.

My Iranian voice proudly carries all of me. For I am not half-Iranian and half-American, I am a mixture of the two as they intertwine and embrace one another.

Accepting my culture has been a matter of learning to embrace its diversity, rather than viewing it as adversity. I still struggle with accepting the mixed background I have, but it has allowed me to see the beauty of the world. There is nothing wrong with my accented parents or my hard-to-pronounce name; in fact, there is a unique merit in these discrepancies. Often times, this beauty gets lost in translation- especially during roll call- but it's one worth looking for.

# **Katherine Harris**

Age: 17, Grade: 11 School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Robert Durham Category: Flash Fiction

### One in the Morning

She took another sip of her coffee and brushed the hair out of her eyes before she began to type. The soft clink of keys being pressed hung in the air as her fingers fluttered across the keyboard. She paused for a moment, staring at her progress with a mixture of frustration and distaste, then quickly backspaced the whole thing. Her right hand deftly grabbed her chipped white coffee mug as she continued to stare at the softly glowing screen. Somewhere out in the darkness of one in the morning, a dog barked and a siren wailed. The radio hummed a soft accompaniment, providing a symphonic background for her frenzied typing. She paused for another moment, readjusting the blanket thrown over her shoulders, and then continued to type. Pages upon pages of text spiraled down the dim screen, the steam emerging from her caramel-colored coffee wove its way through the small circle of light. She paused to reread her work, then grunted in frustration and deleted an entire paragraph. Her muse had vanished into the black of the ungodly hour of morning, riding away on the steam produced from the half-empty coffeepot that rested on the desk barely an arm's length away. With a disgruntled grunt she stood, shoving back the rickety old chair with a dull scrape of wood-on-wood and letting the blanket fall limply onto it. She huffed quietly as she made her way up a dilapidated staircase as quietly as she could, wincing slightly at every creak and groan. As she reached the top of the staircase a pair of bright yellow eyes stared at her, the outline of almost invisible tail swishing through the blackness. She pressed a finger silently to her lip, her left hand never leaving the wall she traced. The creature shrouded in darkness flicked its tail again, then stalked away silently. She quietly moved into the space it had previously occupied, her hand still tracing the wall to navigate the unlit room. She shuffled slowly through the empty black, waiting impatiently for her eyes to adjust. Something slid between her legs, throwing its body weight against her shins. She stumbled slightly, but managed to regain her balance rather quickly. Finally she made it to the refrigerator, fumbling to open the door while attempting to remain silent. She carefully removed a slab of Hershey's chocolate from the top right shelf, cautiously keeping the door open just enough to grab the snack while avoiding turning the internal light on. A loud muttering echoed from down the shadowed hall, she sighed in relief and began to slowly make her way back down the rickety stairs. With a huff of annoyance, she slumped back down into her battered chair and pulled the blanket back over her shoulders, unwrapping the chocolate bar carefully as she stared vacantly at the luminescent screen. The chocolate curbed her appetite and the coffee fueled her tired body, but it seemed nothing could bring her the inspiration she desperately needed. She sighed in defeat as she sipped her coffee between bites of chocolate, cursing her writer's block.

# **Katherine Harris**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Robert Durham Category: Flash Fiction

### **Frost**

She was a quiet girl, the kind who sat in the back of every class. With her black hoodie zipped up to her throat and the long white drawstrings dangling over whatever she was constantly hunched over at her desk, she wasn't the most inviting figure. If anyone dared to glance past the long black hair and the thick black glasses, they would find eyes the exact shade and intensity of ice; ones that would glance up briefly and seem to freeze the blood of whoever dared to look her way. There were rumors that frost flowed from her pale blue lips when she spoke, but no one had any way of knowing if this rumor was true. Not even teachers dared to call upon her, although some students claimed the staff ignored her because she was invisible. The local gossip had plenty of theories surrounding her name, though only a very select few knew what it actually was and they dared not speak it. Word had it that she was a ghost of an angry spirit seeking revenge for her murder so many years ago or that she was a witch, practiced in dark magicks and that if you uttered her name, she would steal your soul. She sometimes contributed to the rumors, scrawling dark messages in the bathroom stalls that made the tales of "Bloody Mary" look like child's play. The others always knew it was her by the thin, spidery handwriting scribbled in ink in the corrosive black-blue of frostbitten flesh. They called her Frost.

Frost was lurking in the library, which wasn't uncommon. What was uncommon was the boy sitting crisscrossed on a throne of expired *Encyclopedia Britannica*, hand in his hair, staring blankly at a sheet of geometric proofs. Everyone knew the corner stacked with expired encyclopedias was Frost's turf, and even the librarian only ventured by to drop off the latest expired issue of *World Book*. The boy sighed and scribbled on the paper with an air of frustration, when suddenly he felt ice clinging to the side of his neck making his blood run cold.

"What," a frigid, brittle voice hissed from beside his right ear, "are you doing in my corner?" The boy's attention snapped to his right, where he found thin, pale blue lips inches from his ear.

"This isn't your corner," he replied glaring at her in annoyance.

"Really?" the voice rasped as the blue lips parted, puffs of frozen air escaping from the slight fissure.

"Really," the boy replied, trying not to shake from the overwhelming wave of cold.

"The others think it's my corner." The boy shivered as more cold air battered his unprotected skin.

"Well, it's not." The boy struggled to get the words between his chattering teeth.

"Why are you here?" Frost moved away, studying him intently behind her huge black glasses and her long black hair.

"Because I want to be alone," the boy replied, relieved that the freezing breath was no longer against his neck.

"Does my company bother you?" the frozen voice asked, its icy sound softening for the question. "Yes."

"Well, you're on my encyclopedias," Frost breathed, "if you wouldn't mind moving."

"Just leave me alone, you freak," the boy growled, glancing up from his proofs to glare at her. Frost studied him briefly, looming next to his face, and then she disappeared back into the dark behind the bookshelves, as though nothing had ever happened.

"Good riddance," he grumbled as he returned to his geometry, taking no notice of the icy blue eyes looming behind the next bookshelf.

He woke up the next morning to find the words "Frost bites" scrawled in spindly handwriting on his arm in the sickly black-blue ink of frostbitten flesh. He shook as a sudden chill overtook him, but thought no more of it as he pulled on a jacket and headed down for breakfast.

The lights flickered as the librarian flipped up the switch that morning, frosty air swirled around under the ice coated lights. She shivered as she picked up another expired encyclopedia and prepared herself for the journey to the small bit of Antarctica that Frost inhabited. A high-pitched scream resounded through the icy wasteland as the heavy book clattered to the floor at her feet, sending small flakes of ice swirling into the air. Curled upon a throne of *Encyclopedia Britannica* was a body covered by a layer of pale flakes of frost, the flesh a grotesque purple-blue. One peeling arm of the frigid corpse was extended to reveal letters scrawled in corroded black ink, "Frost bites."

# **Madelyne Hartleroad**

Age: 17, Grade: 12 School Name: Platte County High School, Platte City, MO Educators: Angela Perkins, Rebecca Stallard Category: Poetry

#### **Daisy Chains**

He was surprised when I knelt beside him
His hands were creased and caked with dirt
Leaving a crumbling trail of earth falling from his fingers
Like comets as he plucked daisies from the galaxy of grass
He was lost in some sort of reverie as he strung them
As though he was building words on a page instead of flowers on a string
And he looked up at me as though I had just walked into his story

His words wound around me like vines, entangling
That feeling of euphoria beating in my lungs with something new
I swore that his rousing eyes were blooming with letters
A pair of ocean blue irises that made me feel as if I was swimming
Drowning in his voice, searching for a golden splash of sand
He held out his hand, his smile striking me with sunshine
And I swallowed the butterflies, the words building in my stomach

We danced and strolled under trumpeter pergolas

And shared whispers behind flowing drapes of moon soaked wisteria

He told me of the epic quest that had budded from his thoughts

The world that roamed and grew inside of his captivating words

And I listened as every story resonated with the rain dripping down my cheeks

And I watched as he smithed a knotted crown of white and golden gems

His story was the woven dream of the frantic flair of fairy wings

The mesmerizing flutter of coruscant monarchs into the warm summer breeze

He knelt and brushed my cheek, laid the daisy chain atop my head

Pronouncing me the forest queen

# **Avery Hasten**

Age: 16, Grade: 11 School Name: South High School, Saint Peters, MO Educator: Amanda Bramley Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

### When the White Flowers Died

Staring out the window, I could see was the magnolia tree in full bloom. The white blossoms were so pristine and pure as they moved with the warm May wind. I focused my attention away from the window and into the kitchen. I could see my sister curled up in a ball on the cherry wood floors rocking back and forth, but I couldn't hear her sobs. I could see my mother in the living room, sitting on the couch, gripping my brother as if her life depended on it, but I couldn't hear the words she was whispering into his ear. I couldn't make out what my dad was saying to me as I looked down at my white knuckles. They gripped the back of a chair. I can't be in this house any longer, I thought. Then I spoke, "I'm taking the dog for a walk."

Grabbing the leash off of the hook, I walked out of the house to be alone with my thoughts, to allow my brain to make sense of the last three hours, to wrap my mind around the fact that my life just drastically changed.

## **Three Hours Earlier**

Coach just called a water break so I made my way over to my bag which was lying on the stairs of the commons at school. I took a sip of my water when I felt compelled to check my phone. I dug around in my bag for a while before the bright yellow phone case caught my eye. I grabbed it and saw that my screen picture was of a white magnolia blossom. However, the picture was covered up by different notifications. One in particular caught my eye. It was a text from my mom.

Reese, Grandma was just rushed to the hospital, has a problem with her heart. I am in the E.R. waiting room. Dad is on his way. Kiley is at the house with your sister. I don't know if she will make it. Please pray for her Reese, please.

I didn't understand what was wrong with my grandma. She was fine the other day when I was at her house. I knew it was dire. Whatever "it" was. My mom would not have texted me to pray for her if it wasn't calamitous. My family wasn't the religious type. I noticed that my team was getting back to practice, so I followed in suit. The thought of my grandma dying was brushed away as danced. I know she will be fine, I thought, She can't leave me.

#### The Next Day

Sitting on a swing in a nearly empty park, I pulled out my phone to look at the time. It was twelve o'clock. As I looked around the park, I took in my surroundings, the calmness of everything. The sky was a clear blue like the ocean. The trees swayed with the wind as if it were their favorite tune. I sat on a swing facing away from the vast playground. The park was situated just off a busy street, down a little hill and in its valley. On one side of the playground, the lush green hill faded into dry, tall grass. The rest of the scenery was a thick wall of trees and bushes providing generous shade to the asphalt walking path. I leaned my head back and let my face absorb the warmth of the spring sun.

Calling me out of my bliss was my little brother, Griffin. "Reese, come on we are going to go get lunch." Nodding my head in acknowledgement, I got up and followed him to the others. My mom's

cousin, Cheryl, took us to the park per my dad's request. Neither of my parents wanted us in the house as they finalized my grandma's affairs. It was just my younger sister, my two brothers, and me at the park today. Luckily, Kiley, my aunt, had her adult care program today. She needed something to keep her mind occupied since her mother had just passed. Luckily, Kiley wouldn't be as aware of the situation as most people would be.

My siblings and I followed Cheryl down the long trail back to her car. Everyone walked quietly side by side for a while. I reached down to hold my brother's hand, when I studied his face. People always told him how much he looked like my grandma with his round face and small hazel eyes. He had dark brown hair with a cowlick all along his hairline causing him to have little hairs sticking up in all directions. The crazy, rambunctious personality that usually filled that space was gone. It was replaced by sad eyes and a look of despair as he looked ahead, focusing on the flowering bushes that lined the path.

#### **Two Weeks Later**

The doorbell rang throughout the house. My mom snapped at me to quickly clear off the kitchen table as she went to answer the door. I swiftly picked up the cups and bowls that littered the table and walked them over to the sink and made a loud clunk as the fell in. The greetings my mom exchanged with Sarah, Kiley's social worker, echoed in the foyer as they made their way into the kitchen.

Kiley had been living with us for a couple of weeks. Since Mom had taken off work, it hadn't been an issue. But as soon as she ran out of grief days, we would be faced with a challenge because there will be no one here to watch Kiley. It was different having her live with us all of the sudden. Kiley's presence wasn't new. I had been around her all my life. She was always with my grandma. However, having her live in our house and mixing her routine into the craziness of our six lives was quite a challenge.

Sarah pulled out the chair and took a seat at the table. As soon as she sat down, she started to pull out a binder with Kiley's name and information on the front cover. Knowing that the upcoming conversation was meant for adults and not my fourteen-year-old self, I tried to make myself scarce, but couldn't find the strength to leave the room. This conversation could change my life. My mother and Sarah started talking about how Kiley was taking the new adjustments.

"She doesn't seem to have an issue right now. She keeps asking where Mom is even though she knows it is going to be Heaven when I answer. I don't even know if she understands what happened," my mom said with tears welling up in her eyes. I continued with my nervous cleaning in the background, picking up papers and moving them from one pile to the next.

"Mrs. Johnson, I am very sorry for the loss of you and Kiley's mother. As you know, I am here to discuss your legal options as far as custody with Kiley goes." Sarah spoke with a mechanical voice, as if this was a routine procedure. "Now that you are the primary guardian of Kiley, you can decide what happens to her. She can remain living here with your family, you could apply to turn your custody over to the state where she will be placed in a state institution, or you could apply for waivers to get her into a group housing program."

Sarah continued on with her little speech, overloading my mom and dad with information that made no sense to me. I watched my mom and thought about how hard this must be for her. Her mothered died only two weeks prior and she was the only one of her two siblings who could make decisions regarding my grandmother's affairs. Both her brother and sister are mentally handicapped. Her brother lives in a state facility, a forty minute drive away, where he receives full time care. He has multiple conditions that make it hard to have him live at home because of the watchful eye he needs. Mom's sister lived with my grandmother because she was easier to take care of. My aunt Kiley had been living

with us for the time being. She is in her thirties, but only functions on the level of a two-year-old. She knows some words and phrases, enough to communicate if she's hungry, cold, or not happy with whatever is on the television. She has some motor skills, but still depends on somebody else to make and cut up her food, turn on the TV, and get dressed.

I could tell when my mom agreed with whatever Sarah was saying because her eyes would light up a little and she would unconsciously nod. She was not impressed with what Sarah was saying because her brows furrowed and she stared off into the distance.

My mom broke her gaze. She opened her mouth as if to say something but she shut it to collect her thoughts before she started again.

"I do not think you understand the severity of our situation," my mother said with a callus tone. "Kiley cannot spend the day by herself. She can't take care of herself at all. Someone has to be with her at all times. I have a full time job as does my husband. Neither of us can quit our jobs without sacrificing the ability to provide for our children. Kiley needs to be in a day program or we will have to turn her custody over to the state. Trust me when I say this, it is the last thing I want to do. I want to honor my dead mother's wish and keep her in my care, but I cannot do that until I have a waiver granting and paying for a program for her to attend. Is that clear?"

Sarah nodded her head fiercely causing a piece of hair to fall loose from her polished bun. "Mrs. Johnson, I can assure you that I am doing everything in my power to do what you feel is right. The only problem is that the state is not as kind as I am and might not be willing to grant money toward a day-program with transportation for five days a week like you're requesting. It might be time to consider turning Kiley into a ward of the state."

My mother stood and looked Sarah right in the eye. "Well then, now you know how I feel on this matter and what my wishes are regarding the care of my sister. I do not want to hear from you again until you are able to convince the state to grant us the waiver. Thank you and have a nice day." She handed Sarah back the binder that had sprawled out on the table and continued. "Let me show the way out."

I stood frozen at kitchen counter watching my mom lead Sarah out of the house. What just happened? I thought to myself. Nothing had been confirmed. How were our lives about to change?

I focused my eyes to the magnolia tree. It had gained a couple more blooms in the last few days as the temperature has slowly climbed, making its preparations for summer. The white blossoms shined against the dull green of the leaves. Walking closer to the window, I could see a little bird's nest. It was made up of little twigs and dead leaves. Each year, a new mom comes and lays her eggs. I get to watch the aviary circle of life. The momma bird was about to feed her chicks. All four of the babies reached their beaks up to the sky and wait to be fed. The birds know their mother is going to provide from them. What would the birds do if one day their momma didn't show up?

#### **A Few Years Later**

I walked in the front door of the house to hear my sister yelling at my brother. All I could decipher from the screaming was that there was a missing remote, a usual occurrence in our house. I went to the kitchen to find left out food and dishes everywhere. I sighed and started picking up the kids' mess. I didn't know how they managed such a mess when they were home for only an hour. After ten minutes, the fiasco was cleaned up. I walked over to the living room to find Kiley sitting there on the couch staring at the black TV screen.

I turned to face my sister who sat on the loveseat. "Are you serious right now, Hayden? Kiley has been home with you for two hours and you couldn't think to put something on for Kiley. You know she can't do that herself." The only reaction from her was an eye roll and she went back to playing on her

phone. I peered into game room and saw that Griffin had dumped out his entire Lego bucket and Oliver had pulled out all of his video game accessories. I muttered something to my brothers about how they really need to clean that mess up.

My mom wouldn't be home for another hour and a half and who knew what time Dad would be home, so I walked over to the fridge to figure out what to make for dinner. Deciding on spaghetti, I got out all of the ingredients and got to work. After a while, the spaghetti was ready and I got out bowls for everyone. I dished out the boys' bowls and called them. I filled up Kiley's bowl and grabbed a knife to cut up the noodles. Even though pasta is a relatively soft food, a precaution is still needed. The spaghetti was mediocre but that didn't stop the kids from devouring it, even going back for seconds. They left their bowls on the table and went back to playing their games.

Just as I finished washing our big red stock pot, I heard my phone vibrate. I picked up my phone to see a text from my mom.

I will be home in an hour. Give Kiley a shower before I get home. The boys both need one too.

Great. It's already six thirty and I still have a big chemistry test to study for and now I have to make sure everyone takes a shower, I thought to myself. I yelled down, "Kiley come take a shower. Oliver and Griffin you both need to take a shower. NOW!" Of course, the boys start fighting about who would go first so I added, "Oliver you go first."

Kiley slowly but surely made her way into the bathroom. She started to get undressed, but it took her a while. I used the opportunity to study. Right as I opened my chemistry binder, I heard Kiley pull back the curtain to get in, so I walked into the bathroom to give her a shower. It took twenty minutes to help her shower and her wash her hair. When she was done, I went into her room and picked out pajamas for her she dried off. About the same time, Oliver was done with his shower, so I called for Griffin to do the same.

Kiley came in and got dressed. She lifted up her pants, but I had had to take them and remind her to put on underwear first. When her underwear was on, I left her bedroom to turn off the bathroom fan. I returned to find that she had abandoned all effort to finish getting dressed because she was trying to clasp her blue silicon watch. Kiley had OCD, so it made it hard for her focus on tasks sometimes. I took the watch and put it on for her. She needed my help again when she was trying to put on her shirt and couldn't find the arm hole. After she was fully clothed, I grabbed her hairbrush and pulled her light brown hair into a low ponytail.

Finally I could start on my homework. I opened my binder and try to absorb as much information as I could before I moving on to the other subjects.

My mom came home. I could hear the light humming of the garage door opening. I tried to go back to my homework when I heard her call my name.

"REESE! Come down here now."

I briskly made my way to the laundry room where she was stuffing towels into the washer. "When I come home I don't like to trip over people's shoes," she said motioning towards the floor littered with shoes.

"Ok," I said under my breath as I begin picking up random pairs of shoes and put them into their respective places.

"What's up your butt?"

"Nothing Mom, I just have a big chemistry test tomorrow and haven't had time to study yet."

"We all have to make sacrifices, Reese," she said as she brushed past me.

On my way back to my room, I stopped to stare at magnolia tree through the kitchen window. It was September and the air had just turned crisp. All of the trees in the backyard were a striking scarlet red, but the leaves on the magnolia tree were a dull brown. The white blossoms had either begun to decay or

they had already fallen to the ground. I saw one bloom fall to the ground. It fell slowly and with grace, like it was taking in its last breath. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath in. Even though the flower was dead, I could still smell its lemony scent from inside the house.

# Hannah Havemeier

Age: 17, Grade: 12 School Name: Platte County High School, Platte City, MO Educator: Angela Perkins Category: Critical Essay

### Wife of Bath Literary Analysis

### Treatment of Love and Marriage

Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" regales numerous stories told from a vast array of characters. Throughout the tales he explores various aspects of Medieval society, often through a satirical lens. A recurring theme in his tales is that of love and its role in marriage. The lack of love in most marriages reveals the iniquity that comes from marrying for political rather than moral reasons. The Wife of Bath's tale is told from a woman who defies society in terms of her romantic and marital conquests. Through her character we grasp the concept of countering subordinance. From the Wife of Bath's perspective, historical evidence, Chaucer's own biography, and a feminist standpoint, it is evident that women in the dark ages wished to preside over their husbands, providing them some power in their advantageous marital arrangements.

The Wife of Bath's perspective supports the idea that women wanted to be sovereign over their husbands during Medieval times. In the story told by the Wife, she recounts a knight who is sent on a journey to retrieve knowledge over what women desire most in the world. The answer was plain, "women desire to have sovereignty, as well over her husband as her love, and to be in mastery above him" (Chaucer 1038-1040). The ladies of the court overhearing the statement soundly agreed. The Wife of Bath was a prime example of a woman wielding sovereignty over her spouses. She implemented verbal and sexual power onto them, manipulating them for money at the expense of their emotions, "especially in bed they had misfortune, There I would scold and do them no pleasure... until he had paid his penalty to me" (Chaucer 408-411). Exercising this power contradicted the roles of women at the time, who were expected to be submissive and demure. The act of marrying numerous times was frowned upon during this time, primarily due to religion. The Wife rejects this idea, justifying her actions with scripture that she doesn't wholeheartedly grasp. She proves herself as a strong believer in procreation, "but well I know, expressly, without lie, God commanded us to grow fruitful and multiply" (Chaucer 27-28). This radical take on the role of marriage in society challenges the purpose of marriage itself. While marriage was typically advantageous in nature, an individual could grow socially and politically if they were to participate in numerous calculated marriages. In this sense, the Wife of Bath encompasses a woman who wants reign over her own status via controlling her spouses. Despite this, the Wife of Bath confirms negative stereotypes about women by being manipulative and deceitful. It can be inferred that exercising a form of power comes at the expense of affirming negative expectations of women.

From a historical perspective, the institutional practice of subordination of women during Medieval times provided an incentive for women to seek power elsewhere, primarily, over their husbands. Marriages were political arrangements discerned by the parents of the couple ("Marriage"). The worth of the marriage was determined by the size of the dowry, not by the love experienced between the pair. It is understandable that within these marriages, satisfaction wasn't prevalent. This was causation for

rape, adultery, and even incest. However, none of these were grounds for divorce ("Marriage"). Blatant violation of marital promises was a common practice, primarily by husbands. Women in return felt the weight of inferiority and desired something for themselves. This desire is voiced in "The Canterbury Tales" as power over their husbands.

From a biographical literary criticism, Chaucer's portrayal of women directly reflects the desire for power in terms of their marriages. Chaucer's own life was characterized by diplomacy, serving as a public servant to Countess Elizabeth of Ulster. After serving in the Hundred Year's War, he was captured for ransom. The ransom was paid by his royal connections, and thus a life in the politics of the English court began. ("Geoffrey Chaucer Biography"). As was the custom, Chaucer married advantageously to Philippa Roet. Throughout the course of his career he embarked on numerous diplomatic missions, strategized marriages and studied poetry. The few works of literature reflected numerous themes, but a recurring one was the role of love. One such work was *Parliament of Fouls*, which satirically illustrated the follies of courtly love ("Geoffrey Chaucer Biography"). Chaucer's experiences with the marriage customs of the court and his lackluster marriage were the inspiration for his portrayal of women throughout his literature. The desire women held for any ounce of power within a world that was structured in patriarchal traditions was an evident encounter that Chaucer recognized. He marks society as one that patronizes women and then grows fearful and restless if they seek a release from oppression.

When examining The Wife of Bath's Tale from a feminist perspective, the Wife herself emerges as a very complex character. She uses sexual power to obtain her wishes, but she also affirms negative stereotypes about women ("Feminist Analysis of the Prologue for the Wife of Bath (Canterbury Tales)"). Her actions defy marital precedents set for women, but fail to be revolutionary. She embodies several negative character traits and manipulates her husbands for personal gain rather than for the benefit of women as a whole. She also attempts to justify her actions using the Bible as a reference. She claims God's intent is for procreation, and she marries to abide by this rule (Chaucer 28-34). Besides the Wife herself, the story she tells has multiple feminist implications. For example, towards the end of her tale, the ugly wife offers her husband a choice: she can be ugly and faithful, or beautiful and unfaithful. The husband allows for her to make the decision that she deems best (Chaucer 1220-1235). The old hag gives him the best of both worlds in turn for allowing her to decide. This proves superficiality at the end, a ploy by the wife to reward her husband for allowing her discretion. A cynical point of view would infer that the husband manipulated the wife to make the choice so that he could benefit. This serves to illustrate situational irony: the woman who knew the answer of the riddle (which was power over their husband) allowed herself to be manipulated in order to satisfy his superficial needs.

# **Turner Hess**

Age: 16, Grade: 11 School Name: Platte County High School, Platte City, MO Educator: Heidi Mick

Category: Short Story

### A Worm's Life

"Go out and get some more food for the winter. We barely have enough to survive."

"Alright, I'll see what I can find."

This is what it's like every year once it starts to get cold. I always get chosen to fight off the neighbors and collect as much food as we can. That's what life's like for us worms, which includes the millipedes and centipedes. Being from the president's family though, the Earthworm's, I normally get first choice once the harvest time comes for the local humans. There's usually plenty of food though for everyone else in the corn and wheat fields to the east of the city, Dirt City, the capital of the worm kingdom. Sometimes, when there's something new, I get notified first, like today.

"Hey, Fred, I found an apple tree just outside the city limits," my best friend Isaac Inchworm told me as I emerged from the dirt above our house.

"Really? Well show me where it is," I replied joyfully. Apples were the most sought after delicacy in the entire worm kingdom, and I couldn't wait to get inside one of those.

"Well, I would if it wasn't on the Henry's apple orchard," Isaac said reluctantly.

"Isaac, the Henry's always have apples, but they're almost impossible to get," I replied scornfully. "Didn't we go over this last year?"

"Yeah, we did," Isaac answered.

The Henry's and the other humans live west of the wooded worm kingdom that we call home. It's always a risk going into their territory, for fear their pets that they call dogs, and that it takes about a day to go to their yard and back. The only one of us to survive the trip to the apple tree farm was my other friend, Sam Centipede. Being a gold medalist at the 2012 Worm Olympics, he succeeded in his heist of three apples in only half an hour! We knew that he would be our only hope to get an apple off of one of the Henry's trees, even though he hadn't attempted it in a year.

"Wait, why don't we go ask Sam for help? Maybe he can help us get some apples," I said.

"Okay, he should be down at Worm Stadium practicing for the World Championships next year," Isaac replied.

So we dug down into the ground, and we crawled through the roads that our ancestors dug when the city first started. Sure enough, we found Sam leaving the stadium, not even a trail of worm sweat rolling down his cheeks.

"Hey Sam, we need your help with something," I hollered at him to get his attention over his ear buds.

"Sure Fred, what do you need?" he responded.

"I was wondering if you could help us take some apples from the Henry's apple farm."

"Not this time. You two always ask me to go get apples, and I barely come back alive. You're not making me go back there," Sam replied sternly.

"Aw, come on. We'll help you this time," Isaac pleaded.

"Okay, but if you bail out on me, I'm not helping you again."

"Thanks Sam."

So without anyone else knowing, we dug back up to the surface and crawled towards the western city limits. After what seemed like an eternity, we finally arrived at the border and could see the apple tree. It was definitely bigger than last year when Sam made his record run. And every single apple was ripe, just waiting to be picked off the tree. The apples were higher, though, which would make it harder to retrieve them now.

"Alright, here's the plan." Sam started. "Fred and I will make a beeline for the tree closest to us. Isaac, you spread out and stake the net underneath the branch with the clump of apples at the end. You did bring the net, right?"

"Duh, we couldn't bring them back without it," Isaac replied.

"Okay, Fred and I will crawl up the tree and onto the branch. We'll dig into the two apples at the very end of the branch. We'll bite through the core of the apple, and they should drop about thirty seconds after we enter the apple. The goal is four apples, so we'll have to repeat the process. Code word for human is Custard Pie, okay?"

"Got it," Isaac and I replied in unison.

"Alright, let's do this. Apples on three, one two three."

"APPLES!" we screamed.

Sam and I started sprinting for the tree while Isaac started spreading out the net. This is the part where we bailed out on Sam last year, but now we have to stay with him, otherwise we won't get the apples. It took a good five minutes of crawling before we finally reached the base of the tree. That's when I realized that I didn't bring any climbing gear from home.

"Sam, I forgot my climbing gear back at my house," I said.

"Don't worry, these crevices in the bark make it easy to climb trees. Watch," Sam replied.

Sam inserted himself into one of the crevices and started crawling up the tree. It was like he had super gripping shoes on his belly as he soared up towards the branch. "Well what are you waiting for? Start climbing," he yelled.

As I entered my own crevice, I could feel myself fitting perfectly into the tree. I started climbing the tree, and I felt like I was flying. It made me wonder what I had been missing, until I hit my head on the branch at the top.

"Ow. Was I really going that fast?" I asked Sam, who was waiting for me at the top.

"Yeah, a little too fast I should say," he replied looking at my head. "Looks like you took a pretty big hit there."

"Eh, I'll get over it."

"Good, because we still need to get those apples."

We crawled over to the very end of the branch where we could see Isaac finishing the net. I almost fell off of the apple I perched myself on when a gust of wind shook the whole tree. Clearly it hadn't affected Isaac though, as he finished putting in the last stake on the net.

"Are you ready down there?" Sam yelled so he could hear him over the wind.

"Yeah," Isaac replied, barely audible from our position.

"Okay, you go through the top of the apple and bite through the stem," Sam said to me this time. "The apple should fall, so don't try to get out until you feel a thud, okay?"

"Got it," I replied.

I started eating my way through apple, and boy did it taste good. It was so fresh and juicy, and I was tempted to eat the whole thing, but I had a job to do. A faint slamming sound came from the distance, but I didn't think anything of it. Finally finding the stem, I started biting through it, although it tasted nothing like apple.

"Us tar I," I heard from outside.

"What?" I said.

"Custard Pie!" Sam screamed into the apple.

Uh oh. I assumed that the slamming sound came from a door, and one of the Henry's servants was coming outside. I tried to find my way out without splitting myself in two, but it seemed that my tunnel was too small.

"Get out of there. He's coming this way," Sam yelled trying to egg me on.

I resorted to eating my way out of the apple even though I could still see light from my entrance. But before I could get into position, the light faded away, and I feared the worst.

"He's got you, man. He's got you," I heard Sam yelling at the top of his lungs.

"Eh, looks good to me," another voice boomed. I guessed that this was the butler, obviously covering up the hole in the top of the apple.

Suddenly, the light returned, and I could see again. That was until I felt myself falling with the apple. *PLUNK!* I felt a bone-crunching impact as the apple hit the bottom of a basket My body hurt all over and I lost the will to fight on. I started passing out with every apple that bounced against the one I was in. My nerves were sending pain from areas that I didn't even know existed. That was the last thing I remember before passing out.

"This one looks good, so does this one," I heard from a man with a strong British accent as I woke up.

I was still inside the apple, which might have been good if I still didn't hurt like I got run over by an eighteen-wheeler. It was also obvious that I was inside Mr. Henry's house and the apples were being inspected. Clearly the plan had failed, and all I could hope was that Sam and Isaac were okay. My pain flew back to me as I felt the apple I was in get raised up from the basket.

"What is this? There's a hole in this apple!" a voice that clearly belonged to Mr. Henry bellowed. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Sorry sir," the butler that picked the apples replied. "I had no idea that..."

"I don't care! Just go get me a knife so we can see if there's a worm in this apple. I might be able to use it for fishing."

*Oh no* I thought. I had heard stories of worms being used for fishing. They say that the human put you in a jar of dirt until they go fishing. Then they take you out and spear you onto a hook. After that, they throw out into the water until you suffocate or get eaten by a fish. The thought of all of that made me want to vomit, until I heard the butler return.

"Here you go, sir," the butler said, probably giving the knife to Mr. Henry.

"It's about time," Mr. Henry replied sternly. "Now let's see what we have here."

I heard a slicing sound from the other side of the apple, but I was too weak to do anything about it. I let it sink in that I would end up like my Uncle Edgar and be eaten by a fish. Unbelievable how things work out, how all I wanted was this stupid apple and now I'm going to die because of it. I didn't get to think about very long, because just then a knife came out of nowhere and right for my belly. "OW!" I screamed as the blade dug into my flesh. All of the pain that had been pushed aside earlier punched me in the face. I looked down and I could see my blood pumping out of me and tainting the apple.

"Ugh, that's disgusting," Mr. Henry said. "I cut the poor thing."

"May I see?" the butler asked.

"No. Instead, you can take the worm and put it in with my bait, and throw the apple out, too."

"Yes, Master Henry," the butler replied as he walked away.

"And where do you think you're going?" Mr. Henry asked.

"I'm getting a pair of tweezers, sir," the butler replied.

"Don't be a baby and do what I told you to do," Mr. Henry said.

"Yes sir."

The butler reached into the core right towards my face. He pinched down on me and lifted me from the apple. The pain came back to me as he let me dangle in the air, and I could see my body partially split in two from the knife. He grabbed the apple, threw it in the trash, and walked into a different room.

I could tell this was Mr. Henry's garage due to all of the fancy-looking cars inside of it. Because I was a worm, I felt the same towards all cars: pure hatred. When it rains, those things would run right over all of us like we were part of the concrete. I had no time to think about that, though, as I found myself being lowered into a pickle jar full of dirt. The butler sealed the jar and walked away, leaving me in this bait jar, no doubt filled with other unlucky worms. I saw something move in the dirt, and a second later a worm emerged.

"Howdy, partner," the worm said as soon as he saw me. "My name's Jim, what's yours?"

"Fred," I replied.

"Nice to meet you, Fred. What're you in for?"

"I got caught in an apple."

"That sucks. I came up in the rain, and their dog grabbed me in his jaw and took me right in to Mr. Henry."

"How long have you been here?"

"About two weeks, maybe more."

"When is he going to take you all fishing?"

"I don't know. Should be soon, though. There's probably ten of us who've been in here for a couple months. Come on, let's go meet them."

I followed Jim down to the bottom of the jar where the rest of the bait was hanging out. Jim introduced me to Bob, Joe, Sally, Suzy, Jack, Jill, Bill, Rebecca, Adam, and Julie. All of them looked like their time was about to come, and it might not even matter if Mr. Henry goes fishing for them. I tried to make do with the fact that I was now fish bait, but it seemed such a horrible way to go. The best thing that I found to do was relax, and I soon found myself drifting off after what was the longest day of my life.

I woke up after what seemed like two weeks of nonstop sleep to a humming sound. It sounded like a car, so my first instinct was to get away. That's when I realized I was still in this stupid jar. The noise didn't fade, though, unlike what the others had told me about cars entering and leaving the garage. I decided to crawl over to the edge of the Jar to see what was on the outside. When I got to the edge, I saw that my life span had been shortened to maybe thirty minutes.

We were inside of a car. I could tell because there were trees flying by us and I could make out the road in the mirror. Unfortunately, I could also see the fabled fishing pole sitting right next to the jar, with its pointy hook and all. I wanted to warn the others, but they probably would be excited that they didn't have to stay in this jar much longer, so I kept it to myself.

The humming started to die down, and it eventually stopped. I saw a door open and a kid get out of the car. *Maybe we aren't going fishing*, I thought. But right as I thought that the kid opened the door that was right in front of me. He reached out with one of his fat hands and grabbed the jar right where I was watching, sealing off anything else from view. I decided that now would be a good time to tell everyone else.

"They're going fishing!" I yelled at the top of my lungs.

"What?" I heard someone, maybe Adam, reply.

"They've taken us fishing!" I yelled again as I started moving towards the voices.

- "Seriously?" Jim asked. He sounded a little closer than Adam.
- "Yeah," I answered as I emerged back at the sleeping quarters.
- "How many of them are there?" Jill asked me from her makeshift bed.
- "All I saw was a kid, but that probably means that Mr. Henry and the butler are there too."
- "That means we won't all die," Jim said joyfully.
- "What does..."

Suddenly, the dirt above our heads started shifting, and a large hand came into view. It targeted Jim and picked him out of the dirt.

- "Jim, no!" I cried out as he got lifted away.
- "Just get out of there," Jim replied as he got taken out of view.

We all started climbing towards the top of the jar, trying to escape while Jim was distracted. I was the first one to the top, albeit with my body partially split in two, and in plenty of time to see Jim's last seconds.

"You just take one of them like this and put him on the hook," Mr. Henry said as he skewered Jim onto the hook.

"NOOOO!" I cried as Jim got murdered on the hook.

"Then you just cast them out like this," Mr. Henry explained as he launched Jim out into the lake.

Almost instantly there was a bite, and in a few seconds Mr. Henry brought out a massive fish. It was at least thirty times my size, and it definitely ate Jim whole. I would hate for that to be my fate, but then the kid piped up.

"Cool, can I try now?" he asked as Mr. Henry pulled the fish off of the hook.

"Sure, son, let's get some more bait," he replied as he looked right at me. "That one's perfect. We can split it between us."

He pinched down on my head and effortlessly tore me in two. It hurt so badly that I thought I wouldn't even make it to the spearing. But of course, I was given to the kid anyway, who continued to stab my face right onto the hook.

"OW!" I hollered, but it was no good. I was flung back hard and then forward and I flew right into the water. Immediately I started suffocating, but as I felt myself dying, a huge pain flooded through me. Before I could realize I was being eaten, I was ripped to shreds by an even larger fish, one that ripped off my head and sent blood everywhere, and ended all of my memories in one violent burst of hunger, ironically, the same feeling that drove me to retrieving just one apple.

# **Hayden Humes**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Platte City Middle School, Platte City, MO

Educator: Devin Springer Category: Short Story

# **The Hiding Place**

Tears cascade down my pale skin and land on my faded jeans, blossoming through the fabric. My mom cradles me in her arms. The wind gushes and funnels throughout the solemn cemetery. "Lindsay R. Bennett" splays across the small, unnoticeable grave embedded in the ground. My sister died four years ago today. She was the envy of my life. She was tall, lean, tan, popular, blonde hair, blue eyed, and so much more. They say she died from falling from the thin rafters of our old barn. I would have never believed it. A smile spreads across my face when I picture the long summer days well spent in the yard playing with plastic dolls. Forget that, now, she is gone.

I lift myself to my feet. My new green shoes are sunken in the dark mud surrounding me. With each step further away from my sister, I feel a longing to turn back and plunge my hands into the soggy earth and dig for her, as if she would be there. I've never believed in goodbyes. My mom joins me, wiping her puffy cheeks.

"Four years, I just can't believe it," my mom hovers over Lindsay's grave one last time. My mom's depression has clouded over her, blinding her from anything but Lindsay. I don't respond, and trudge back to the car.

It's September, and the tractors rumble outside to harvest the golden stalks of corn swaying outside my window. I guide a purple brush through my chocolate brown hair, each stroke getting caught in a tangle of curls. I can smell the recognizable scent of crisp bacon from our slaughterhouse. Outside my window, the countryside is silent. The sun beams down onto our towering trees, and slivers of light slip through thick leaves the color of emeralds.

"Charlotte, it's time for breakfast!" My mom is at the foot of the steps. I sashay into the kitchen to encounter my entire family sitting at our oak table, waiting for me to join them. I find this strange considering that ever since Lindsay died we barely spend time together in the same room. Henry, my younger brother, kicks his feet underneath the table in anticipation.

"Finally, you're here," my father glances up at me as if he wanted to say something. I slowly sit down in the creaky chair beneath me, wondering why my family is acting so strange.

We all dig into breakfast. Plump eggs rest on my plate next to some crisp bacon sprinkled with cinnamon, my personal favorite. Nobody speaks, and I wonder why my parents thought eating in the same room was ever a good idea. Just as I was reaching for another plateful of hash browns, my father's gruff voice makes me leap out of my seat. My fork clatters onto the wooden floor.

"We were meanin' to tell ya' this earlier Charlotte, but we thought it woulda' been best if we waited," He pauses. "I know it's been hard without Lindsay, but we oughta' get over it now. It's been four years," I can feel my mother wince. "So, to do this, we've decided to....move." Our kitchen goes silent.

"Are you serious? No, this can't be happening. We've lived here our entire lives! You can't do this!" Tears gather in my eyes. My life belongs here. If I were to move, I would be leaving my soul behind, and taking my body with me. That's funny, how it seems just like death. I'm furious. I yank my blue and orange polka dot backpack off its hook and storm out the door, leaving a gaping hole in our screen door.

My muddy shoes trample our daffodils. I grasp a handful Mom's favorite tulips, and rip them out of the soil. I unlock the gate and walk to the bus stop. I rest on a green electrical box, and twiddle my thumbs while I wait for the bus. I contemplate my life here. All the fun times Lindsay and I had together. We played hide and seek in the fields, pink mosquito bites blooming across our skin. We sang to the chickens in the chicken coop, and giggled as they all began to squawk in terror. The most fun Lindsay and I had was when we made codes in our secret hiding place: a large, oak tree with a hidden opening on one side for just the two of us to hide in. Those were the good days. Critters would scamper across our legs, and the dead grass would scratch our necks while we lay down staring up the trunk of the tree. Suddenly, I hear the low rumble of a school bus emerging. That's when I knew. I wasn't leaving Lindsay.

I jumped to my feet and bolted through our sawgrass, hoping to be hidden. I waited and waited for the bus to putter past. Eventually the bus dissipates out of sight, and I begin to enter our cow pasture. It's where I've always found peace since Lindsay died. I open the rusty gate and squat on a barrel of fertilizer. I think of Lindsay, and what I would say to her if she were here now. I remember the day when my parents came to me in a river of salty tears telling me that my only sister died. According to the police she fell from the rafters of our barn while she was making our codes. I thought about that for a long while, and I could sense there was something wrong with it. Lindsay and I never made codes in the barn, red and black snakes roamed about and our father always said to stay out. Lindsay hated snakes, and I just know she would never go in there. I'm her sister, and I know that Lindsay did not die in that barn. Now, all I had to do was find the truth.

I trample through the pasture, patting the solid backs of the milky white and jet black cows. There is a shortcut to our hiding place, that only Lindsay and I knew of. I weave in and out of the barb wire fencing, praying I don't get impaled. I walk the perimeter of the crumbling garage. It smells of rust, gasoline, and oddly, honey. I continue through the shortcut until I arrive at the tree.

"Long time, no see, fellow tree," I find humor in my rhyme. I take in the enormous tree. Its rich coffee - ground colored bark, the emerald green leaves, and the branches stretching towards the vast, blue sky, waving hello to the sun. I take a breath before entering the tree. I haven't been inside since Lindsay's death. My hand grasps a low branch, and I enter. Daddy long legs skitter about, and the smell of old, wet paper envelopes me. It is humid, and musty, just like I remember it. I glance around for any sign of clues contributing towards my "investigation". I discover a single sheet of paper, written in code. It reads: 'Always climb the highest you can when you have the chance, because you may never have that chance again.' I'm quizzical. I clench the sheet of paper. Is this all she could have possibly left me? Wouldn't she have cared more than that? My face goes beet red and I desert our hiding place.

"So Charlotte, are you excited about our big move?" My mom's voice is surprisingly cheerful as she mixes the dough for my favorite chocolate chip cookies.

"Yeah...sure," I stir around my soggy cinnamon toast crunch. I watch the sugar dissolve off of the tiny squares. Maybe that's what happened to Lindsay. The sugar in her life just slowly faded away.

"You know, this could be a huge opportunity for us to restart. We could forget the past and be happy again," my mom stops mixing and her bright blue eyes gaze down at me.

"Just say it Mom. We know you just want to forget that Lindsay died," The moment I said it, I regretted it. My mom's face goes pale, and she drops the bowl full of dough. I watch it shatter into a million pieces as the contents inside plop onto the floor. She makes a choking noise, and retreats into her room. I get up and surprise myself when I head straight towards the hiding place.

The tree is the same, except for one small detail. I notice a small letter wedged into the crevice of the tree. I dislodge the moldy paper and reveal a card decorated with stickers. The air catches in my throat. It was a letter to our dead dog, Gunther. It's not recent, and I wonder why Lindsay would be writing a letter to our dog who died when I was 2. I pocket the damp envelope, brush my hands on my jeans, and head further into the backyard. I arrive at Gunther's grave. It is decorated in small drawings, and I make out a small opening underneath. At first I think my sister dug up our dead dog, but then I realize she buried a small silver key. One for those diaries with locks on them. I recognize the jagged edge of the key, and the small engraving of an L on one side. I know exactly where this diary is.

I burst into the house. My mom is on her knees, cleaning up the mess. I ignore her and carry myself upstairs. I halt in front of Lindsay's old bedroom door. I haven't entered this room since before the accident. I think of how her room used to smell of honey and lavender. I used to sit in her fluffy bean

bag when she was at track practice and just lie there and enjoy the buffet of scents. I tell myself there's no way the room still contains her scent.

"Well, here goes nothin'," I grasp the cold metal in my palm and cautiously open the door. I wave of heat smacks me in the face, and then honey... and lavender. I look about the room, everything is there as she left it. Clothes litter the floor, an open book hides under her covers, and open makeup kits decorate her vanity. I can't believe my parents didn't have the heart to clean up her room. It's as if she never left. I can almost feel Lindsay's presence.

I tiptoe over piles of clothes, towards her bookshelf. I scan the shelves for the green, polka dot cat diary. Lindsay always hid her things in casual places. She always told me that sometimes the most valuable things are hidden in plain sight. I finally find the diary and gingerly slide it out of its place. Dust flies like snow onto the carpet, and rests gracefully. I take the key and insert it into the diary, and hear the silent "click" as the lock opens, releasing Lindsay's thoughts to the world. I open the diary and flutter through more sticker infested pages, in search of anything useful. I reach the end of the diary without finding anything, and fall to my knees in exasperation. I observe my surroundings: the light blue curtains sway in the wind, dust glints in the sunlight, and bright colors attack my eyes in all directions.

"What a waste of time," I roll my eyes and sigh as a make way back to the hallway. That's when a small green post it note slips out of the diary and onto my lap. I pick it up and read the perfect handwriting.

"Just like the birds, no matter how far you've traveled, you'll always be stuck back at home," is all it reads. I stare up at the ceiling hoping something else will fall from the sky to help me out.

"Just another stupid poem," I grit my teeth in frustration and rip the post it in two and stomp out of the room so loudly that the whole house shakes.

"Charlotte, what's going on up there?" I can hear my mom yelling as she loads the dishwasher.

"Nothing," I march into my room, slam the door, and plop onto my bed. I smush my face into the comforter. I can feel the sun beating down through the window onto my back. I take in a huge breath and smell my familiar scent: nothing. I smell like nothing, and then there's Lindsay who smells like a candle store. I scream once again into my pillow and cry. Tears wet my face, but I don't care. My life sucks, and everyone knows it. I quietly drift off to sleep.

I wake up the next morning and it is Saturday. I put on my good overalls and my good boots with red stitches. My mother is outside picking more vegetables from the garden for tonight's dinner. The air is warm and I know today is the day I will discover something great. I trot outside onto the deck and the first thing I see is a sliver of paper shoved in the wooden slats. It drips with old age. I open the

paper as brown water rolls down to my elbow. The paper says, "Well, well, well, look how far you've come." I think about that for a moment, and understand the seriousness behind it. I never knew Lindsay was a poet, and definitely never knew she was undergoing some sort of mental breakdown! This is insane! Why would she do all of this?

I reveal the rest of the mysterious notes from my overalls and place them next to one another on the splintered deck. I scan over the philosophical messages and try to piece them together. I decide that the one from the diary is the best place to start because obviously, you always want to get the hard part over with first. That's another thing I learned from Lindsay. So I find myself standing at the birdhouses, because that's their home. I search and search inside the dirty, plywood, makeshift homes. Just as I was about to give up, I discover a small arrow scrawled in pencil on the outside of the house pointing directly at the hiding place. I recite the first note, "Always climb the highest you can when you have the chance, because you may never have that chance again," and I understand. I must climb.

I grasp the strongest branch on the tree and bustle myself higher and higher. I encounter tiny ladybugs and curious squirrels until I reach the very top of the tree. I observe the lush, green vastness of my home, and I realize I never want to leave. I shove my hand into my pocket and pull out the last note. "Well, well, look how far you've come," I never understood this one. I look about the tree for any messages. The tree is bare. I suddenly hear a whistling. My father is returning from the well after retrieving today's water supply. Wait, a well. It's a well! I become so frantic for my discovery that I almost topple out of the tree. I lower myself as quickly as I can and make way to the well.

I kneel down near the well and look down into the black abyss. The stones are cold against my skin. I brush my hands along the outer rim for any clues, and I find a small engraving in the stone alongside a crimson stain smeared in distress. The initials L.P.B stare back at me. My heart hesitates. I assure myself this can't be happening. My breath quickens and I gaze down into the well. Dark, murky water sidles, and a long, never-ending, bloody handprint slithers down into the depths of the well. The air in my throat catches. I jerk my hand away and scramble home in horror.

Weeks later there is a crane in my backyard. Our beautiful green grass is smushed the big black tires, and the loud screech bombards my eardrums. The crane slowly rises as my family awaits the reveal of my sister's body. Eventually a grey lump appears from the hole. It is my sister. Her limbs are distorted, the life is drained from her, and I can't even make out her once beautiful face. My parents gasp in alarm. I almost vomit at the thought of my family having drank from that well for 4 years with my sister inside of it. The crane inserts her into a cramped, metal crate, for her burial later this week. Then it lumbers away into the gloom. A wave of heat pulsates through me. I collapse to my knees, but my father catches me and drags me inside.

My family is moving today, and I carry the last of our luggage to the truck. I cease in front of my home and watch as it looms over me. I ponder what my life could've been, and what might have

happened if I did things differently. Who knows what that was that fell from the rafters of that barn. Maybe it was another of Lindsay's mastermind doings. What I do know is that I loved my sister, and I will always remember this day for the rest of my life. It was the day I found closure, the day I fell apart.

I capture one last look at our hiding place, and murmur something I have never said before, "Goodbye."

# **Sophie Hurwitz**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Anita Hagerman Category: Dramatic Script

# Rewrite (In Which Certain Women Get to Speak)

# SCENES FROM A VERSION OF THE STORY WHERE CERTAIN WOMEN GET TO SPEAK Cast of Characters

<u>HENRIETTA:</u> Somewhat godlike, but unsure what to do with that position, being slightly removed from life but mostly powerless and ghostly as she is. She is not sure how she got here.

<u>DEBORAH LACKS</u>: A daughter who wants to bring her mother back. She has been hurt before but now takes it out in anger rather than self-destruction.

<u>OPHELIA POLONIUS:</u> A daughter who wants to bring her father back. She has been raised to be fragile, and is teetering on the verge of madness.

<u>SARAH POLLEY:</u> A documentarian who is actually mainly interested in the ways history could have gone, rather than how it actually went.

<u>BILLIE MCCANDLESS:</u> Referred to mainly by her last name because that's how she sees herself. She tries to do the right thing.

<u>HAMLET, PRINCE OF DENMARK:</u> Present briefly.

<u>ZAKARIYYAH LACKS:</u> On the telephone.

<u>TWO LITTLE GIRLS:</u> Ages about 7 and 9. Ophelia's daughters.

The stage is a THREE SIDED ROOM. It looks decayed, with piles of dirt in the corners, and vines growing up the cracked walls. There are three doors-- each looking like they come from a different house--- one in each wall. In the center hangs a picture frame. On the downstage left corner, there is a kitchen counter.

Above the main room, there is a second level of the stage. It's an intricate and large balcony, like one of those in New Orleans on the old French Quarter houses. The picture frame can be hung from the bottom of the balcony to be suspended in the middle of the lower room. Actors should be able to move from one level of the stage to another quickly.

HENRIETTA LACKS stands above in a single spotlight.

DEBORAH LACKS, SARAH POLLEY and OPHELIA POLONIUS enter through different doors, then HENRIETTA'S spotlight goes out.

#### **SARAH**

The thing about cameras is they can't bring back the past exactly as it was, but they can re-write it. Through tricks of light they can bring back the people you miss. They can bring you where you are louder than you were able to be before, where you are stronger than you were when it really happened. Cameras show you the people that you miss, almost as if they were still there. Cameras can bring them back, as long as you're ok with accepting that the versions of them that come back aren't going to be

exactly the same. Take my mother-- take our mothers.

#### DEBORAH/SARAH

Without her here--

### DEBORAH/SARAH/OPHELIA

I worry I'm not real.

#### SARAH

I can't help wondering how things could've gone, if we were a bit louder.

The three women stare at each other. DEBORAH and OPHELIA retreat into their own doors. Before exiting, DEBORAH tapes the photo of her mother's cells up on the wall. SARAH-- who has been fiddling with her giant, cartoonish-looking camera for a while at this point-- moves off to a corner and sits cross-legged with the camera to her eye like she's shooting a film.

#### SCENE I

HENRIETTA'S spotlight flickers back on, and BILLIE MCCANDLESS enters below. She stands at the downstage left kitchen counter. There are dishes to wash, and she begins to mime doing so as she speaks.

#### MRS. MCCANDLESS

I am trapped here. On the edge of the new millennium, so they say,

I have to trim these hedges and take out the trash, I think.

I have no crown, although I've got a home and car and tailored skirt suits,

And this America is no monarchy, so they say,

So perhaps this is the closest one can get to being queen.

And once upon a time--before I was afraid to tell my age--I did call myself a feminist

But all that's gone now. Yes. I am trapped here, in my son's letters

Although he hasn't sent them as of late,

but when he did, he painted deer he shot,

And that, I think, is who I am. I'm frozen in the headlights.

I can't run, though if I chose to go, I could be fast--

I ran cross country once like him. (Feet pounding on the pavement,

Neon Nikes, medals-- that's a language I could speak.) But--

During MRS. MCCANDLESS'S speech, lights up on OPHELIA. She is above, on the balcony. She wears branches all over her dress. They obscure part of her face. She is in the tree. At "frozen in the headlights," Billie mimes turning on a faucet. The sounds of rushing water crescendo with the lights.

#### **OPHELIA**

I am like a deer. Prey. If I move, I die.

MRS. MCCANDLESS freezes at her kitchen counter. OPHELIA freezes clinging to the railing of the balcony like it's a tree. HENRIETTA walks up behind OPHELIA. She inspects her during the following

monologue, removing flowers from her hair and clothes and gathering a bouquet.

#### **HENRIETTA**

Women, someone told me once, are like statues more or less. Pretty as a picture to look at; not here to do much. And here we are, Mrs. McCandless. (to the audience) She and I both lost our names to men who gave us new ones

HENRIETTA moves to look at the photo of her cells on the wall.

#### **HENRIETTA**

I never thought this name was mine until it was the name my daughter called me. Then I knew that I was not just Henrietta, I was HeLa too, because I'll be whatever she knows me as. It's like if your child calls you mama, mama's the name you hold most to your heart. It's like that. I'll love her, in whatever form she'll have me.

#### **DEBORAH**

(Above, with Ophelia. She speaks on the telephone.) Zakariyyah. I got a present for you. Yeah. The journalist, she wants to speak with you. I know. I know. But I got you a photo. I think you'll want to see this.

#### **HENRIETTA**

I don't know what I would--

#### **DEBORAH**

This is what she would have wanted. I feel it in me. I'll be coming by on Tuesday.

#### **HENRIETTA**

I don't know what I would have wanted. You can't rewrite the past.

#### **SARAH**

But we can imagine what it looked like.

#### SCENE II

MRS. MCCANDLESS is in her kitchen, surrounded by a pile of letters. She searches through them throughout this scene, opening already-opened envelopes, looking at the contents from several angles, re-folding each letter and replacing it as it was.

# MRS. MCCANDLESS

Oh, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!

#### **OPHELIA**

(Still in the "climbing a tree", but speaking calmly.) Honestly, I'm not sure why I'm still alive. I'd rather have dissolved into a million pieces.

#### DEBORAH

I am giving my mother a crown-- they'll all remember her--

#### MRS. MCCANDLESS

...scholar's eye, tongue, sword---

**OPHELIA** 

(Conversationally, addressing DEBORAH): Yeah, it's like he told me.

"Doubt that the sun doth move,

Doubt that---"

**DEBORAH** 

--all cells come from cells--

**OPHELIA** 

Yes. Yes. "Doubt truth to be a liar--" he told me--

DEBORAH

I know my mother keeps on living, even so. In a million little places. In every piece of her.

**OPHELIA** 

Even so.

**DEBORAH** 

Your boy?

**OPHELIA** 

He's a little out of joint.

DEBORAH

Be careful with him. His tongue and sword are too sharp. I had to learn to be sharp. You could use some of that, too.

MRS. MCCANDLESS enters on the lower level, and HENRIETTA enters behind OPHELIA.

#### MRS. MCCANDLESS/HENRIETTA

Eye, tongue, sword.

**OPHELIA** 

I don't know where the pieces of me are.

**HENRIETTA** 

(*Laughing*.) Me neither, princess. Look at your limbs. Each one is still connected. Look at your cells that have not turned against you yet. Come down out of the tree.

**DEBORAH** 

To have seen what I have seen!

**HENRIETTA** 

See what I see.

HENRIETTA helps Ophelia down from the "tree," and from the upper level of the stage to the lower.

### **SCENE III**

HENRIETTA and OPHELIA come downstairs and enter through the middle of the three doors. HENRIETTA pushes OPHELIA in front of her. DEBORAH and SARAH are standing at the kitchen counter, looking through the pile of letters but watching what goes on.

#### **DEBORAH**

I know the past can't be rewritten. But if we could reach back-- I would hold this girl. I would tell her, fight. Her cells can regenerate, too. She can grow strong.

**HENRIETTA** 

Ophelia--

**HAMLET** 

(Shouting.) Ophelia!

SARAH

(*Picking up her camera and moving to a crouching position as if she were filming a documentary about lions on the savannah*): What if we had them re-enact this scene a different way? Just shift the camera angle, and--- action:

#### **HAMLET**

If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry. Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, go. Farewell. Or, if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool, for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go, and quickly too. Farewell.

HENRIETTA puts her hand on OPHELIA'S shoulder.

**OPHELIA** 

Hamlet. Do not walk away from me.

HAMLET stops.

**HAMLET** 

You have never spoken to me this way before.

**OPHELIA** 

I've never feared for you like this before, my lord. Before, if I was afraid, it was for myself alone.

**HAMLET** 

I won't apologize.

**OPHELIA** 

What did I do wrong?

**HAMLET** 

Ask me not that, you know it well enough. And in your heart it lies. You belie yourself, lying thus To me.

**OPHELIA** 

What does it matter? Your words are all missing their meaning, Hamlet.

**HAMLET** 

You deserve more than this.

#### **OPHELIA**

I deserve more than this. I deserve more than listening and waiting and treating myself like something breakable.

#### **HAMLET**

I know, I tend to break things. I don't know a hawk from a handsaw, or a rat from a---

#### **OPHELIA**

Did I ask? (*Beat.*) At least you have a voice. At least you go mad and people notice and try to speak to you and make you better.

#### **DEBORAH**

You deserve more than this. I deserve more than this.

HENRIETTA/SARAH/MRS. MCCANDLESS

We deserve more than this.

### **SCENE IV**

#### **SARAH**

We don't get to rewrite our endings. But god, if we did. Imagine a home video, but with bits of it altered. Imagine it in slightly-too-bright colors and Walgreens video camera quality. Imagine the actors in wigs and period clothing, portraying the family as it should have been, not as it was.

#### **DEBORAH**

Imagine Ophelia was taught how to use a knife.

#### **SARAH**

In this culture obsessed with keeping women chaste and honorable, it's not too farfetched that they would give her just a little dagger, if nothing else. So picture this:

#### **DEBORAH**

After her father's death she allows herself-- she, who grew up with madness-- to go a little mad, too.

#### **OPHELIA**

(Shouting in her grief, and ripping the rest of the flowers off): Hamlet do not walk away from me. HAMLET!

OPHELIA runs offstage. The lights fade to grey, and Deborah's voice is heard. A mass of bodies, unclear in the light, gathers in a circle like a football huddle in the middle of the stage.

### **DEBORAH**

She knows what has been done, and she knows the boy who is to blame. She does what she and I and every other woman who's been hurt beyond humanity would want-- she takes the knife and plunges it into her first love's jugular.

On "jugular," the mass of people scatters to the corners of the stage like an explosion. Lights come up with OPHELIA left kneeling at center. There is something lying on the floor in front of her, approximately Hamlet-sized.

#### **OPHELIA**

I didn't know how messy it would be.

#### **SARAH**

(Walking circles around them with her camera) Ophelia is no Hamlet-- she does not hesitate. And who could blame her? She is a woman, women are hysterical, it's medical. Who could blame her? Even Gertrude finds it in her to forgive this fragile little girl with blood on her hands.

#### **OPHELIA**

And then Fortinbras comes-- and what am I to do? I see an opportunity, and he is not my love, but he is safe. He is safety. I raise my daughter's heirs to two kingdoms.

TWO LITTLE GIRLS run across the stage, fencing. One falls over and dies dramatically, but hops up almost immediately afterwards. They run offstage shouting and laughing.

#### **OPHELIA**

I raise them to tender themselves more dearly than I ever did.

MRS. MCCANDLESS embraces Hamlet's body, taking the part of Gertrude. DEBORAH stands with her hand on OPHELIA's shoulder. HENRIETTA stands off to the side. SARAH holds a camera and circles the scene.

MRS. MCCANDLESS cries.

HENRIETTA touches DEBORAH's arm. DEBORAH turns to face HENRIETTA, but seeing nothing there wanders away.

OPHELIA picks up a crown from the ground by the body, and places it on her own head.

Lights.

# Mario Jauregui

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Heights, MO

Educator: Test Teacher Category: Flash Fiction

# **Outside In**

Today was going to be exciting. It was the day we could finally get the parts to repair our bikes. It'd been a long time since we last rode ourselves to the pond to swim or play ball with the other kids around the neighborhood. This would have been a sweet release from the agonizing boredom that comes from couch cushions and hours of television.

Jay and I headed towards his mom's car so that she could drive us to the store. We sat in the back, discussing what we were going to do once we get our bike's back, then Jay's mom asked if we were ready. This was of course met with ecstatic confirmation. She smiled, turned on the radio, and left us to ourselves as she pushed on the gas. After some more conversing with Jay, I turned my head toward the window out to see to an orange sky with silhouettes of trees passing over my vision. I began doze off and imagine Jay and I as we raced across the field with our friends, laughing as the fireflies illuminated our play as time inched towards night. The anticipation was truly killing me.

"Hah, what a coincidence."

I immediately woke up from my dazed trance to find a cold presence sitting next to me. This cold was nothing like anything else I had ever experienced, it made me shudder and have fear that overcame all thoughts. Whatever was in my mind before was immediately discarded to focus on the hooded figure that sat on the side of me. "Do you know who I am?" It spoke. Not only did it speak, but in familiar voice, which grated me as he continued to look at the window. I attempted peek at the window to catch a glimpse of his face in as a reflection off the glass. There was no reflection, not even of the hood. "Keeping quiet, huh?" He sighed as he reached into his pocket and grabbed a cellphone while beginning to dial some numbers. "Yeah, we got another one." The voice, who was he?

"Well since you don't know who I am, I'm having a specialist of sorts to help jog your memory," he said with a for certain smile in the void of his hood. I grew more into despair as the minutes passed buy, I did not care about the bikes anymore, and I just wanted to go home.

After some time passed I felt another presence, but this one was much warmer compared to the monster that sat only a few feet next to me in the moving vehicle. This other individual sat in front of me and spoke with a woman's voice.

"Hello Mr. J, you called for me," she spoke with a manner of a secretary.

"Aw come on Angel, you gave the kid a hint," said the hooded figure, annoyed with the mistakes of his subordinate.

"I apologize sir, do you not want me to use formalities here," Angel replied with a concerned tone,

wanting to improve.

The hooded figure sighed and proceeded to turn his face towards her.

"Just make sure he realizes what situation he's and what he can do to get out of it," he instructed, "I've never been really good explanations." She nodded and turned towards me and began her explanation.

"As you see this is not reality, merely a construct created by you. The events leading up to this point were just mere memories of events that already happened. This "world" you created takes place in a time that caused you great stress and is placed in a part of your mind that have been highly suppressed. This is where me and Mr. J come in." What is this woman talking about? I created this whole place. I have not even said a single word to these people. Now they are explaining to me that this world is a repressed memory that I created for myself. "We are here to help you escape this place," she continued, "release the chains that you placed on yourself. The only way of that happening is by you discerning the identity of Mr. J, this will then show you what has been trapping you here.

This was merely too much for me to grasp. I wanted to leave this place, as quickly as possible. I decided to finally break my silence.

"How do I do that?"

"Well as he said earlier, his name may help you discern his full name. Also, remember this your memory, that may help you shorten the list of names." My memory?

"Who else was involved here?" I asked myself. After a lot of pondering, I was the able to put the pieces together. As I did, my face grew dark, my shoulders felt heavy, as if sandbags were placed on both sides. I had figured out the answer.

"Did you figure it out?" She inquired.

"Yes," I replied in a dark and sullen tone.

"You may whisper your answer to Mr. J," she instructed. I did as I was told and Mr. J replied with congratulations.

"Well done Mr. Joseph."

And with a snap the world seemed to go back to normal. A few moments later, however, the world turned to black with the sound glass breaking and metal crunching. That is all I could hear as my eyes only showed black. After for what it seemed like eternity, I finally awoke to a room of white, to find a man consoling a sobbing woman, while a man in a white coat seemingly at the brink of tears. I could not hear much but the only thing I could discern was, "I'm sorry, we did everything we could, but..." The man in the white coat paused. "Your son, Joseph has passed."

# **Emily Kang**

Age: 17, Grade: 12 School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO Educator: Jason Lovera Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

### "All the World's a Stage" and Other Theatrical Clichés

Every year, my school produces two shows. Every other year, one of those shows is a musical. So, by the end of first semester my sophomore year, I was practically a pro at auditioning for plays, but had never attempted a musical. Going into my first musical audition, I had just performed as the lead role in the fall play. Being an upperclassmen or an underclassmen did not matter. The best person for the part got the role. I was the best. I got the part. This wave of pride and confidence, still swelling from last week's glorious performance, swept me into *Mary Poppins*.

Auditions for school musicals do not focus on your ability to act. I am an actor. They focus on singing and dancing. I'm a good singer, but mostly in the shower, and my dance experience is relatively limited. I easily brushed these facts aside, just like my audition songs. Instead, I envisioned what it would be like walking into the audition room. People would stop to congratulate me on my brilliant performance just a few days before. One or two brave souls might make their way over to me and ask for my advice, but I secretly hoped that no one would. I knew that I was a force to be reckoned with, and I wanted everyone to be intimidated at my theatrical prowess.

My vision may have been slightly off. All around me, stone-faced "choir kids," singers that dedicate their lives to singing like I have to acting, moved about as they practiced and warmed-up. Out of thin air, they conjured starting pitches and let the melodies they were rehearsing float through the room in an overwhelming cacophony of intimidating sound, all out-of-sync with each other but lovely alone. My beloved theater, my favorite space in the entire school, had been transformed into an alien world. In an attempt to regain control of my domain, I found a corner and began to "warm up." Really, I was just trying to be heard over the other singers in the space. Someone was sure to hear me, even if I couldn't quite hear myself, and it would psych them out. They would wonder to themselves about how one girl could have such a big voice, such a strong stage presence. As I proclaimed my skill through too-loud scales and short bits of songs, I spotted a familiar face, a girl I knew from my choir class. I thought she looked a little out of place, and I decided she could use some of my expertise.

"Are you nervous?" my friend prodded after I had made my way over. In retrospect, I definitely was, but I pushed it away. I refused to admit my fear and dash the illusion I had created of cool, confident actress-extraordinaire. I convinced myself that I had nothing to worry about, that I was far too talented not to get a part.

"Not at all," I replied laughingly, my nonchalance glossing over my lack of preparation. "Auditioning in itself is a skill. I've had a lot of practice at controlling my nerves. Like, I didn't even get nervous before opening night last weekend. And I barely went off stage that entire show. Like, once we started, I didn't get a single break until intermission, basically." With a shrug and a flick of my hair, I cemented my image of cool, collected, (and terribly cocky) star on the rise.

"Oh, well," my friend replied. "Break a leg, I guess." She meandered off to rehearse somewhere else. I appreciated that she hadn't said "good luck." It's a bad omen to actors.

Shortly after, the actual audition began. The wash of noise suddenly stopped so that we could listen to the instruction of the directors. Somehow, the silence was even more intimidating. We were split into two groups- boys and girls. The boys went to learn their dance sequence while the ladies lined up chorus-line style in front of the directors to sing. One at a time, we stepped forward, sang our bit, and stepped back. Being the experienced auditioner that I was, I knew standing center stage is usually a powerful choice, so there I was, smack dab in the middle of the line. The ripple of song got closer to me. Suddenly my nails really needed a lot of care, and my foot decided it would rather be with the guys in the dance audition. Every inch of my body felt like a spring under pressure, trembling before being released. I became vaguely aware that the space to my left was suddenly unoccupied. Birdsong touched my ears. Then it stopped. The space next to me was filled again. There was a pause.

"Next," a voice (probably a director, I can't quite remember who) broke my nervous trance. I stepped forward. I took a deep breath. And I sang.

If all of the voices before me were lilting birds and lovely butterflies, my voice was Edward Scissorhands- too sharp, a little clumsy, and entirely unexpected. That noise couldn't possibly be coming from me. I definitely do not sound like scraps of metal in a blender when I'm gracing the walls of my shower with my normally angelic voice. The confidence I had projected deflated around me. Thankfully, the selection was short. I swallowed, smiled weakly, and stepped back into line as heat flooded my cheeks. Obviously, I did a great job of controlling my nerves, just like I said I would. I was very thankful we were in a line so I didn't have to look at the reactions of the girls around me, the girls I had been so sure I would intimidate.

The rest of the line went on, and I'm sure they were all lovely. I may have stopped paying attention so that I could focus on keeping my humiliation in check. It quickly became clear to me that standing in the middle was a terrible choice. All I wanted to do was run away and hide my face, but the audition process was only halfway through. Finally, we moved on to the dance audition. Even though I was feeling down on myself from the vocal audition, the dance portion actually went well. The choreographer pointed at me and whispered to the person next to her. She smiled at me as I said thank you and walked away. That dance audition must have saved me because I was cast in the ensemble and given a small feature dance. I botched my audition but still made it into the show... barely.

Technically, I got what I wanted. I was cast. My audition, however, was by no means a success or something to be remotely proud of. I was so ready to be respected, mature, and larger than life that I let my arrogance run unchecked and broke every cardinal rule of audition etiquette. Ironically, trying to embody "grown-up" behaviors made me act more childish than ever. The blistering embarrassment from that audition forced me to redefine maturity and change my behavior. If being "grown-up" leads to childish behavior, maybe embracing childlike qualities could lead to maturity. Children are open to anything and everything, except maybe broccoli. They fall down, they cry a little, but they pick themselves up and keep tumbling along. Children don't judge. They aren't concerned with being the best baby or coolest preschooler. It took botching my audition (for a show geared towards children, I might add) to realize that I shouldn't take myself so seriously. At the end of the day, I know I'm not perfect, not even practically perfect. I now realize that there's no need to pretend that I

am.

A few months later, I walked into my next audition. This one was for a play, so I didn't need to worry about my singing, but I still approached it with a completely different attitude. I chatted quietly with some friends before the audition started.

"Are you nervous?" someone asked me.

"Yeah, of course," I replied, entirely honest with my friend and myself.

"But, haven't you done this like a million times?"

"I mean, not quite a million, but no matter how often I audition, I still get nervous," I admitted. Then, I added, more to myself than my friend, "Just because you're good doesn't mean you'll automatically get cast. I'm just trying to go with the flow, and we'll see what happens."

In this case, the "flow" was on my side and I was cast. I didn't make the same mistake of letting my arrogance be the cause of my failure. I haven't in any of my auditions since *Mary Poppins*, even for the auditions where I didn't end up being cast. If "all the world's a stage," it's impossible to prepare for every audition, every obstacle. It's more important to take a deep breath and accept that what happens, happens. I embrace the little kid inside me, the same kid whose dreams of being an actress helped me get into theatre in the first place. I tumble along towards adulthood, learning and growing with every success and every failure. And, as Mary would say, I do it all with "an element of fun."

# **Nick Kime**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO Educators: John Pierson, Missy Simonds Category: Humor

# **Our Last Kiss**

I wasn't trying to get banned from the zoo. Ok? I swear I wasn't. Like really, you can believe me; I didn't want this to happen. I like the zoo. It's a real nice place. I would always go when I was a kid, see, I remember I lost my favorite little striped red black jacket at the zoo. Anyways, what I'm trying to say is, I really really like the zoo. Maybe a little too much, I guess.

See, this wasn't the first time I kissed one of those seals. You know the ones, right? With those little whiskers, and those two little black eyes, all big and questioning like, yeah yeah those ones. And that big ol' mouth, wow that big ol' mouth.

I first met Gary back in '97. The Zoo got that new seal exhibit, so you could walk through a little bridge and get right up next to all the seals. Anyway, a couple of weeks after it opened up, I was there with some of my buddies, right, and to be completely honest we had a little bit to drink- not like we were disrespecting the zoo or anything, I love the zoo, don't get me wrong. So my friend Marcus dared me to get down on my belly, right up next to the seals, and to kiss one. So I did. I'm not ashamed, not gonna go around pretending like I didn't kiss a seal. I'm not in the middle of one of them existential crises trying to figure out who I am or something, kissin every damn seal thinkin that's my "calling."

And it's not like I'm attracted to seals! Me? No way! Who on God's green Earth would be attracted to one of them flubbering lil guys? I gotta girlfriend man; I couldn't do that to her! Nah man, the first time I kissed Gary it was just a drunk dare, done plenty of worse things from drunk dares, kissing a seal seems like nothing!

But see, that wasn't the last time I saw Gary. No. Certainly not the last time. I think I was back at the Zoo a week later, and I just happened to be walking through that seal thing again. Right as I got in the middle of that bridge, one of them seals came right up to me, I swear to god, he came right up to me and put out his big ol' mouth expecting a little kiss. I knew it was Gary. I just knew. And I mean, was I supposed to not kiss him? I don't know everything about the little dude, but to be completely honest, the guy didn't seem very happy. I don't know if he was just laid off from his little seal job, or if he just got a divorce with his seal wife, or if his seal friends bully him. I don't know. I just know that Gary was upset, and that Gary wanted a kiss. So I did it. I kissed him again. What? Does that make me evil for just wanting to help a dude out?

So Gary and I started this trend, you see, every week after work on Friday I'd go to visit my pal Gary at the Zoo. I'd walk up to the seals, stick my face out, and wait for Gary to come up and gimme a big ol kiss.

Now I'm not saying our friendship was perfect. One time, a couple months ago actually, I was walking up to Gary on Friday, when I saw him with his little face stretched out, giving this eight year old idiot a big kiss. The kid's whole family was there, cracking up a big fucking storm, laughing about how fucking great it was that Gary was kissing little Billy. I mean yeah, Gary can kiss whoever he wants, but like, a kid? I didn't think Gary would stoop that low. Geez man.

I got over it quickly. We met back up the next week, and had a good talk. Well, not a talk. We communicate with our eyes; it's like we just understand each other. Gary and I agreed a kiss is just a

kiss. It's not like he wanted to hurt me, no, not at all. He just wanted to make that little Billy happy. It was one of those learning points for me, and for Gary. Everyone makes mistakes, you know? And you can't judge people, especially your good friends, based off of a single mistake. Nah man, I'm not about that.

So anyways, last Friday, my visit was different. I squatted down, pushed out my face, expecting for Gary to come up, but he didn't. I bent down a little more. And a little more. Until my face was right up by the water and I was barely holding on to the bridge. Finally, Gary came up out of his little seal world to greet me, but when he did, man I don't know how this happened, I really didn't want this to happen, really you gotta believe me. Something shocked Gary or something made him scared, so he pulled back into the water.

And he pulled me with him.

And I fell.

I fell into the middle of the seal exhibit while kissing Gary.

I guess the zoo doesn't accept "kissing my seal friend" as a valid excuse for falling into that ol' seal tank. I guess they also don't accept "kissing my seal friend" in general. I don't know. Gary was my buddy. He really was. We had been friends for 4 months and 2 weeks. That was that last time I'll see my friend. That was the last time I'll kiss Gary.

# **Sophie Krug**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: David H Hickman High School, Columbia, MO
Educator: Nancy White
Category: Poetry

### hurt

younganxiousimpulsivejumpy in my gangly body hands too big for my sharp elbows hips too narrow for my budding breasts i reddened with shame and a sick kind of pleasure when my mom's friends commented on my long legs and my bony shoulders

balletbasketballpianoandguitarlessons i played well with others, if not a bit shyly if not a bit recklessly if not a bit afraid of stormsabandonmentcancerthedevil if not very afraid of being fatuglystupidUGLYFAT

sharp metal scraping my hands johnny cash crooned about hurting himself and i stopped bleeding from scraped knees theoldfamiliarsting and started bleeding from creatively placed scratches well thought-out wounds trying to forget fists and tangled-up limbs butiremembereverything

i read a book about a girl who stuck her fingers down her fourteen-year-old throat "what a clever way to purge the filth," i thought.
"remember when mommy did that?" i thought.
i tried to do the same in the second stall, but failed amongst the middle school graffiti "failuredisgustinggetitoutgetitout," i thought.
"fatuglystupidUGLYFAT,"

### i thought

magazine cut-outs covered my walls and i could stare for hours at my girls.

my room became a clubhouse with a sign on the door:

ONLYPRETTYSKINNYGOODGIRLSALLOWED

sticky tape residue a metaphor for how dirty i was and how purenicecleanGOOD they were, i'd never let a crinkle or tear scar the bodies of the paper girls never let a soul harm their paper skin thinking very seriously to myself,

"if you treat them real good maybe they'll teach you how to be the goodest girl in the world"

sent away to a building with large windows but no sound from the outside, the doors were armed with alarms and i was armed with a carry-on bag full of lieslieslies. two months and my facade cracked; they tore away every inch of my peeling paint and unarmed and unprepared i splintered like an axe was struck against my wooden core until the rot that resided inside of me was exposed. i thought i'd feel nakedpanicdesperationdread but instead i felt relief there's still good left in the world, even if it's impossible to be expressed by my human flesh.

there is good so rawhonestpainfulTRUE that my insides swell with great and unmeasurable love each time i inhale the sweet air that i'm beginning to finally taste. my ribs are still too tight on my heart, my skin too thin over my bones, and my hands too large for my arms. i am not purenicecleanGOOD and i am not fatuglystupidUGLYFAT. and i think sometime soon, i'll be okay with that.

# **Madison Kunz**

Age: 13, Grade: 8 School Name: Platte City Middle School, Platte City, MO Educator: Kelly Miller Category: Short Story

### **Thirty Seconds**

I'm awakened by soft drops of water splashing on my nose. Squinting, I look up to see faint sunlight shining through the roof. The water is coming from a hole where the ceiling of hay has been jostled. It's still very early in the morning, but I can already hear sounds of dogs fighting and chickens squawking in the distance. Mules bray absently down the hill.

I crawl up off the red dirt floor to fold my scruffy blanket of red and black dyed wool. The floor is scattered with my brothers and sisters, still sleeping. There are six of us in all, but as the oldest, I get the privilege of my own sleeping blanket. It may be the smallest and oldest blanket, but it is the only thing I can call my own.

I carefully tip toe into the only other room in the house which is considerably smaller than the sleeping room. We use this room to cook and Papa makes his business deals in here. The smell of plantain porridge tickles my nostrils. You learn to savor the bland dish if it's the only thing you eat all day. One scoop in the morning, one scoop with a piece of meat at night. Mama has her back turned to me and is facing the large pot over our small fire. The fire is enclosed by a few bricks in the corner.

Without turning, my mother greets me. "Good morning, Nadia," she says with her thick Creole accent.

"Morning, Mama," I reply as I watch her slowly stir the porridge. The air in the room grows dense and moist from the fire. Living just outside of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, the weather rarely dips below 65 degrees all year. Even in this winter month, January, it's 70 degrees and partly cloudy.

Mama turns to me and says, "Go fetch the water, child." I nod obediently, and grab two wooden buckets. I crouch to exit the opening that acts as our door. There are two goats tied up to a post in front of our house. "As I pass them, they bleat at me, hungry for more grass than we can provide in our small yard. I try to ignore them though I want to play with them. They will be sacrificed for voodoo soon and are not meant to be taken in as pets. We scold the children who name them as we know that when they are gone, hearts will be broken. The other goat looks up at me, bleats plaintively and then returns its nose to the greens.

I start my walk to the river where we get our water, about 2 and a half miles away. I walk briskly so I might make it home before my siblings eat all the breakfast. My feet have been accustomed to the rocky path, so it no longer hurts when I go barefoot. On my way, a few young men whistle cat calls at me. I'm 17 so I should be married very soon. I've heard lots of hushed whispers from Mama and Papa and I suspect it's about that. I don't want to leave my family yet, but I know I shouldn't complain. Mama was married to Papa when she was only 16. Fortunately in our village, marriages are not arranged. Because the families are large, the older children are encouraged to seek out companionship and marriage at a young age.

My walk goes by quickly because I've taken this path so many times. I arrive at the river and trod

down the bank with my buckets. I set the first one in against the rocks in the stream and let it fill. Once both buckets are filled up, I balance them on my head. I've been practicing this since I was six when I'd go with Mama to get the water. She'd carry the full buckets and I'd balance my empty bowl. Now, this comes as second nature, and I rest a hand on the side of each bucket.

On my way home, the clouds separate and the sun warms the back of my neck. There's no wind at all. I pass a few neighbors doing the same thing I am. An old family friend, Roseline, stops me.

"Nadia!" she greets me. "How's your mama been? So many kids!" she exclaims with a laugh.

"Too many," I joke. Although, most families are like ours. Roseline, with only three kids, is the only mother in our village with fewer than six children. She tells me goodbye, because she's got her own water to fetch.

I make it home and find that there's plenty of porridge left. I set the buckets down near the table and give Mama a kiss on the cheek. She's holding the youngest, Matthew, who's almost one year old. He looks up at me with big brown eyes and grasps at my hair. I grab a bowl of porridge and take a seat on the floor with some of my siblings. Wesley and Widelene are six year old twins who are constantly bickering.

Just as Wesley was about to smear some of his porridge in Widelene's hair, the ground begins to shake. For a moment, all of us stare in wonder at each other. There seems to be a beast living in the ground whose stomach is rumbling with hunger. Suddenly, the spoon in in the serving pot starts to rattle. Clay bowls shake off the table and shatter on the ground. Someone starts wailing. I watch in horror as a crack runs down the wall closest to me. It's followed by many more that weave together to look like a spider web. Time seems to be moving so slowly, yet at the same time, it's rushing by. Mama is the first of us to get some sense.

"Ruuuuuuunn!" she screams with fire in her yes. Her voice is hoarse, but it doesn't waver. She's clutching Matthew into her chest and he's sobbing into her. Some of the older children look at me, expecting me to act on this. The younger ones sit in place and cry. It's so loud and all I can hear are painful screams and a constant roar in my ears. I look up to the sky only to be slashed in the face by falling hay. One of the wooden beams in the ceiling is sagging and I can tell it's about to collapse. Right as it's falling I tackle my little sister out of the way. Mama runs by me scooping up the little ones. Before I can think, another beam falls and traps Wesley underneath it. He screams in agony under its weight. Clutching Widelene's hand, I run to him and try pull him out. I dig my heels into the ground and groan from the effort. It's no use. I let go and he looks up at me, his eyes begging. I have to turn away. My heart aches and the pressure in my chest burns. I notice that I'm crying.

When I turn, I see one of the corners crack violently and cave in. A very large chunk of the house comes down...on top of two of my siblings. There are wails of suffering and I clasp a hand to my mouth. Mama shrieks and falls to her knees in front of the heap, setting baby Matthew on the ground. She starts clawing at the rock and debris crushing the children, but it's too late.

"Mama, no!" I yell. I know she needs to get out of here. So do I. I squeeze Widelene's hand and tug her behind me. I dodge falling beams and dirt stings my eyes. I duck out of the house, the ground still rumbling.

I take my sister way back, where nothing can harm her. I can hear my heart thumping in my ears. I wait for more to emerge. I wait for what feels like an infinity. The ground turns calmer and I wait. I wait for minutes on end. Nothing comes. *Nobody is coming out* I realize. The guilt overwhelms me. The real world, here outside of what used to be my house, melts away. I was so selfish. I am so selfish. Panic washes over me. Mama. My mama. A baby. I left my family behind because I was scared. I have no clue what I am going to do now. I have no one left and I don't know where to turn. In a matter of thirty seconds, my world ended. My life didn't...but I almost wish it had.

# **Madison Kunz**

Age: 13. Grade: 8 School Name: Platte City Middle School, Platte City, MO Educator: Kelly Miller Category: Short Story

#### My Kind of Different

People say that it's such a great thing it is to be different. To be unique from the acceptable *norm*. "If you're different, you're special, and nothing's a richer feeling than that."

Really? I mean honestly, that's pretty hard to believe. I'm not looking for a bland self-confidence booster from the school counselor. You know who they are. They call you down in the middle of class and everyone stares at you as you get up and walk toward the door. Why? In the middle of class. Nothing shouts "special" like being called down to the social worker or counselor for a quick conference right outside the classroom door.

No, those people, the kind who say being different is an amazing gift, are just full of it. That, or it's clear they're simply forgetting about just one kind of different. Not the kind where you're a kid prodigy or an amazing athlete. Not the kind where you're being praised for whatever you are. Not even the sort of weird kind of different, where kids on the playground point and stare with awe, as you show off your double jointedness. No, I'm talking about the kind of different that no one yearns to be. The kicked aside, the lowest class, the kind people often turn their nose up at. The kind of different much like the ugly duckling. The one who obviously sticks out like a sore thumb. Yes, I'm sure people wouldn't still think it's "amazing" or "a true gift" to be that kind of different.

That's the kind of different I was.

As I walk to the bus stop that day, I realize I don't see James, my best friend ever since we were little. He would always be the prince after I kissed the frog, but I could never really think of him that way. I'm not going to lie, I got pretty bummed out not seeing him, knowing I'd be sitting alone at lunch that day. I'm not exactly what you would consider a "popular kid."

The old, faded, yellow school bus rolls up the hill and I cringe at the sound of the squealing brakes in desperate need of oil. My bus driver's name is Bill, and he's the closest thing to a second best friend as I've got.

"Well, Courtney Grace, what a fine Monday morning it is." Bill's dark, stone grey eyes glisten up at me as he greets me with his usual warm smile.

"Morning, Bill," I greet him. We do our daily fist bump and I slide into the seat right behind him. I take off my jacket, put my backpack on the seat next to me, and scoot over to the cool window seat. I watch as my warm breath fogs up the glass on the crisp morning. I draw a heart, then a smiley face, then a star.

Suddenly, the voice behind me emerges clearly through all the small, meaningless chatter around the bus.

"Dude, so my aunt adopted this kid from Africa last week, right? The only thing is, he's a total retard, like literally. I went over there on Saturday and his face and hands were totally covered in drool. I'm

pretty sure he was going cross-eyed too!"

I listen cautiously to the story coming from the two boys behind me, both in my grade. The other one says something I can't make out and they both burst into a round of snickers and sounds of disgust. I turn away then, deciding I don't really want to hear more. I hate that word. Retard. It sounds so cruel and sharp. And then I think how that word can be used to describe me...that word is me. I hate standing out in anything but a good way. It gives me the most twisty-turny feeling in my stomach. My throat seems to get so swollen, it's hard to breath. I take out my notebook and pen out of my bag and start to make a list. A list of all the words I hate.

I start with retard. R-E-T-A-R-D. A six letter word thrown around so casually, but always hushed awkwardly when someone realizes they've said it around me. I keep writing, thinking about each word and how they've been used towards me. It's pretty funny how different combinations of letters, which are just scribbles with meanings anyway, can do so much damage. Or give someone the power to do so.

I am jolted into alertness when I hear people around me stirring with impatience. Looking up, I see we've arrived at the mid-size, brick school building, still intact with the classic bell resting at its peak. Students are already flowing into the doorways to socialize with friends before they had to head to their first classes. I glance down at my notebook and read the words I've come up with on the drive. retard

special ed disabled freak handycapped mentel spaz different

All of them are nasty and give me a queasy feeling in my gut. I feel eyes on my notebook from over my shoulder. My cheeks grow rosy red and I quickly snap the cover shut, trying not to make it too obvious. I shift my shoulder over to block any lines of vision and focus directly on a little Sharpie mark on the back of the seat. People start pushing past me to the front so I briskly pack up my things. I shove my jacket into my backpack, not wanting to take the time to put it on.

I keep my head towards my feet and fiddle with my thumbs as I slide into the aisle, dense with chattering students. Bill smiles at everyone, but when I pass him he gives me a special wink and a pat on the shoulder.

I hop off the bus stairs and immediately regret not wearing my jacket when I'm hit with the first gush of cold October air. There are clumps of people standing around me, laughing, talking about the daily gossip, or making plans for the upcoming weekend. Sometimes, I swear I feel like Moses from The Bible, the one who parted the red sea. I weave my way through the clumps and can't help but notice the unnecessary side steps people take just to avoid coming into actual physical contact with me. What a terrible thing that would be.

I can tell that some people try to be compassionate with a purposeful glance my way and an unsure half

smile. I appreciate those people, I do, but I still feel how they would never really accept me as one of them. Like I'm frail and fragile and just one wrong move could send me to pieces. This is my whole life. You never really become fully immune. There's that feeling again...different.

# **Ida May**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Central High School, Cape Girardeau, MO

Educator: Mickey Heath Category: Short Story

# **Fundamental**

She embodied the past and present, spinning with the power of all her former training and the brilliance enveloping her now on stage. As the music piled on top of itself in operatic crescendo and scores of other performers stood breathlessly to the side, her head whipped around on its axle. She faced the darkness of the packed theater, made dark because of the intense lights washing over her. For a split second, the world was a blur, the faces of her companions smeared as she turned, and then she looked out into the hushed hall once again.

Beneath, the floor breathed with her—sharp, deep breaths—when her heel landed briefly on the smooth surface to gather momentum for another turn. A single, invisible line stretched from her one grounded foot, through her straining leg, tight core, graceful neck, and up through the center of her head, shooting up to the rafters above. The leather sole of her shoe whirled in another kiss of the floor. The line remained still, frozen, as masses of beguilingly delicate yet hard-trained sinew and muscle revolved around it.

Around and around, her foot pushed against the floor, the bones pivoting around the center, and she rose onto the tops of her toes while her other leg—airborne—glided in large, suspended arcs. She, the floor, and the music tugged and heaved. She bobbed with regularity along the line that held her while her heel caressed the light-warmed tiles. She spun, anchored on the tiptoes of one foot. She danced without straying from the center point that the line pierced, balancing on the bounds of human passion and dedication, bounds that she whisked with her as she twirled around and around.

At last, the music clambered to its highest pitch, and a single, bombastic chord exploded out of singularity. It wrapped around her, filled her as if with gravity-defying helium as she spun two more times. With one leg lunged behind her and the other resting in front, she landed at the conclusion the famed thirty-two *fouetté* turns. She tilted her head back with a dazzling smile that emanated not only from her face, but from whole being, and she curled her outstretched hand through the air, cinching up the last notes of the music.

For one or two long breaths, the darkness gaped. Then, while she stepped forward to take her bows, mountains of applause rose from the audience. The sound cascaded over her and she bent from the waist like a diving swan, and it continued to roar through the heavy folds of the closing curtains.

The lights dimmed, and she felt some of the magic slip quietly away. Her legs ached, and the floor retreated into its usual stony-faced slumber. Sweat beaded along her temples and sparkled on the backs of her palms. She bent down to untie the ribbons of her light pink slippers from around her ankles. The stiff tulle fanning out around her waist crinkled as she moved; the glass beads and sequins adorning her costume knocked together in the whispers of a wind chime.

Gently pulling the ribbons, she felt the satin skate between her fingers. She swiveled to undo the ties of her other shoe, when she heard a quick voice above her.

"Hi, I'm Seth—from the newspaper." He tucked a small memo notepad under his arm and offered a hand to shake. "I'm writing an article about the new young artists of the city. We had talked earlier about discussing your experience with the company so far."

She looked up, eye level with a laminated backstage pass and a press badge. She unfurled from her kneeling position and grasped the hand in front of her.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Rachelle," she said.

"Yes, we've heard a lot about you. Come, let's go to the lobby. It'll be lighter in there so I can actually see what I'm writing." He held up his notepad and chuckled softly.

"Wait just one second." She untied the ribbons around her remaining shoe and slipped both of them off. Toting her shoes by the heels in one hand, she got up, dusted off her knees, and shifted her weight around her feet to loosen them up.

"Alright, let's go."

The pair, a pen-armed reporter and a lithe ballerina, left through the towering mahogany doors of the now-empty performance hall.

~ ~ ~

Out in the reception area, chatting members of the audience sparkled under the golden, scintillating glimmer of a magnificent chandelier. The vaulted ceiling soared, it seemed, miles above them, and gold embossing promenaded around the walls. A row of long windows facing the street let in streamers of silver moonlight. At the foot of the winding staircase leading to the balcony seats, a pod of spongy chairs tucked in diminutively. As Seth and Rachelle made their way there, the ladies and gentlemen nearby stopped to compliment that night's performance. Rachelle thanked them, and as she turned her head this way and that, the entryway seemed to grow so large that the entire world could fit inside it. The magic that had been on stage had never vanished; it had fluttered out here—to this enormous place.

They took their seats under the awning of the staircase. Seth flipped methodically to a new page in his notebook. She heard a pen click, and then the question, "How was your first performance?"

She remembered looking at the weed-cracked sidewalk when she walked with her mom, holding her hand, past the pond filled with geese and ducks and swans. A blanket of laughter always encircled the edge of the water. Children squealed, tossing in pieces of bread to feed the community pets. The birds were the hungriest in the winter, like her, when no one had a need for her mom's green thumb, and no amount of labor could conjure sprouts from the frozen ground. She remembered how the swans would tuck their infinite necks deep into the hollow between their wings, a warm nest of feathers, a warmth against the frosted curtains that descended from icy clouds. It was a warmth she tried to imagine,

scratching rudimentary pictures of great swans flying across summer sunsets. It was the picture she drew over and over again in the ice gripping the window of her five-by-seven room. How glorious it must be to fly! Huge wings lighter than air, purer than snow, splashed with fiery hues of red and yellow and orange, sailing across oceans. The rays of the sun transform them, reflecting the feathers a thousand times over the perturbed water beneath them. The reflections shine brilliantly—the facets of crystals that do not melt—the pieces of everlasting diamonds breaking out in perpetual flight, flying across the Pacific, flying across the stage. Leaping, turning, bending in lines and waves of organic motion. Living, breathing, dancing with the same unmitigated happiness that infuses a swan when it flies.

"It was splendid," she said at last. "I do not know how else to express..."

Seth was poised to write, but he slowly laid down his pen when he heard the tangle of emotions behind her words. He didn't lift his eyes from the blank pages in front of him as he said, "Is the stage liberating?"

"Incredibly, yes."

The lobby dissolved into the aged, well-worn studio she had first set foot in. Mirrors, some sparkling and some dulled by age, lined the walls. She darted a quick look in the mirror, checking her position as she prepared to turn. Her hips weren't aligned.

The instructor who had told her to come to her studio one day when she saw her leap behind the swans, chasing them around the pond—this instructor addressed the class. "Make sure to square your hi—"

Rachelle rotated her hips parallel to her ribs. The instructor didn't have to finish her sentence. Rachelle glimpsed a smile on her instructor's face when she peeked at the mirror again. Smiles were so rare, except on stage, where they were poured out like a bottomless cup of wine. It was an accomplishment to be "not bad," almost unheard of to be "good," and impossible to be "perfect."

"Rotate the leg! Tighten the core! You can always do more. Do not get lazy. Do not become complacent. Progress comes from effort—from determination, dedication—from love."

Snippets of light filtered into her second studio, branding her face. The discerning eyes of her new instructor scrutinized the room of eighty dancers, noting any and all imperfections. Rachelle tilted her head slightly towards the mirror. Her back was an inch too arched; she flattened her spine. Her movements were not entirely crisp; she sharpened the whisk of her head as she spun around and around. The block of her pointe shoes clicked on the tile.

"Do not be afraid of the mirror," the instructor said above the gentle piano music. "The mirror is your friend. We are not vain; we are pursuing an ideal—an ideal which is unattainable, but to which we can draw close. We are always dancing, for the job is never done. Always dancing, correcting, adjusting. This is what the mirror is here for. To reveal our mistakes, the things we could do better. Do not dance blindly."

The stories spilled out of her. "The mirror is always there," she said. "And it isn't about glamour, but on stage, it's different. You cannot see yourself, but you can feel the pull of the music, the speech of the

movement, the ties with those watching—those who are breathing with you. That's all there is. And all the hours you had spent in the studio are suddenly released. You tango with freedom—freedom from inhibitions and cataloguing eyes. The sense of being *observed* disappears."

"You are no longer your own observer," he said, barely audible.

She nodded. "It's a feeling that you can be anything and everything at once."

"A relative and endless reality," he murmured, staring not quite at her and not quite past her. Resurfacing memories flooded his vision, and he thought, *Until you observe again, all the waveforms exist—here, there, everywhere—a variety of kinematics as endless as an ocean of stars.* 

"Exactly. And you are certain in your uncertainty. Without a mirror to check, you don't know if your feet or hands or head is perfectly where it should be, but you keep moving. The motion of a fantastic dream launches you forward constantly."

"So of course, there must be both—the mirror and the stage."

"Yes, they are separate, but inextricably intertwined."

"There must be moments of free motion and pauses for reflection."

"Both are fundamental."

The last word rang over and over. It filled his senses. Through the transparent hologram of sound, he saw his younger self bent double over engrossing articles that fought to reveal the mysteries of the universe and enticing stories that wove their own mysteries with words. He remembered feverishly penciling the answers after wading through pages of calculations and penning verses before the fleeing inspiration could run out.

What about the days of the fundamentals? he thought. Nothing was the same after those days, when he learned that everything was, at the same time, collections of particles and never-ending waves, and that the instant you observed one, the other collapsed—the dualism irretrievably lost until you closed your eyes again. Those were the days he head-butted universal uncertainty, the days he felt cornered by the textbooks and books of poetry stacked on his desk. Everything was irreducible; truth was relative. How his pens had snapped when the pencil-leaded numbers stared at him so. What was the point if he could not pursue both?

But he had been wrong; his wrongness was an unmysterious law. There was still an immense volume of truth to find, but the deepest ones—the ones broiling in the core of the Earth and at the heart of the singularity—these could never be wholly and perfectly drawn out. They were fundamental, meant to be experienced but not to be observed. And they would always be there, just one more meter away, tantalizing but unreachable no matter how far and arduously he stretched. They existed beyond comprehension, in a realm of magic. Progress, strivings, they could only take you so far. The mirror could never reflect the stage, but without one, you could not have the other.

"And with both, you are timeless," he whispered in his reverie.

"How true. Time passes so quickly on stage, and yet I feel as though I could keep dancing forever."

Dancing in the fragile magic that defies probing scrutiny—a scrutiny that would cause the entire enigma to collapse. But if you don't fight it, tackle it, smother it, it will always be there. "Do you ever try to understand it?" he asked.

"How can it be understood? I let it be, and that is when I feel all of my younger selves and the audience and my friends beside me—everyone throughout time and with me in time—dancing."

By now, the lobby was mostly empty, and lonely footsteps echoed in the grand hall. The chandelier had become one with the stars, and the glistening light pink shoes lying next to Rachelle, unburdened by watchful eyes, kept on dancing.

# **Ida May**

Age: 17, Grade: 12 School Name: Central High School, Cape Girardeau, MO Educator: Jennifer Weiss Category: Poetry

### **Flutterbird**

#### Ι

She hummed in the garden on an earth-and-grass bed with red trumpet flowers serenading overhead, blowing a golden tune of sweet, sunlit scents that danced with a flutterbird who fluttered and went to hover by her shoulder, beating the air with thin wings that belied their powerful share of the energy that pulsed through the dewy leaves and ran with the light beams that shot past branches' sieves.

Back foliaged with feathers of twinkling iridescence and invisible wings beating with flighty evanescence, the flutterbird slipped by the trumpet for a sip of the golden music wafting from its lip, a garnet reflection of its partner in dance, who had a throat of ruby and a beak like a lance, who hummed and hovered, a dazzling gem drop with the freedom to fly and swoop from tree tops.

The flutterbird hummed and swooped, spiraling away. She paused when it left, bid her hummingbird good day, and hummed in the garden while with quick, flighty hands, she caressed the greenery that feathered her land—her small plot of land.

#### II

She hummed in the kitchen while she set out the plates filled with fronds she had picked from her garden of late. She peeked through the blinds in the settling night and watched as, with a hum, the flutterbird did alight on the air that the red trumpet proudly still breathed out like a bellows, softly stirring the heath fanned by fluttering wings during late evening tea between her ruby-throated hummingbird and she,

Who startled in dread at the sound of a thud and uneven footsteps that dragged as if through mud.

The flutters quickly hid, and the trumpets laid still when she clutched with one hand at the windowsill. A lumbering hand swept the plates to the floor. Crashes and shards spilled like the words he swore, slurred together, booming with erratic gunshots aimed to strike and pierce her hovering heart stretched taut where it was suspended, a ruby in her throat that beat with the hailstorm of fists ending her float, bruising her arms and tearing for her ruby heart while lightning crackles of words shot for her face like darts.

Thunder raged by the window with the whipping wind outside; the howling maelstrom clawed at her garden, her pride. It smashed the trumpets mute and searched all around for the flutterbird that knew the taste of the sound of unadulterated joy painted by nature's great artists that filled the songs of operas and the chords of harpists. It searched in the swirling mayhem for the single red gem cradled by emeralds greener than the trumpets' stems.

A roar filled the bowels of the blinded darkness as lightning caught the sky in a blinding harness and glared at the flutterbird fighting the tempest, flailing against an anger more wrathful than a wasp nest. One heave of the storm clouds launched a serrated rock to smash the wings and deliver a lightning-fed shock. Down came the flutterbird; down came she under a drunken fist tossed by a drunken sea—a memory-void sea.

#### III

She hummed in a raspy voice while she tried to calm her mind tortured by fears of what's both in front and what's behind. She stared at her ceiling that didn't blink with stars and lay in the night that clouded her hummingbird's scars. For years was she gripped by an unwanted battle that sickened her food and made her nerves fragile, even when the sun rose on her long, sleepless nights and she listlessly roamed the garden now smothered by blight

And yet was still home to the flutterbird nursing its wing, broken by the callous storm and slow in healing. She looked at the powerful creature wrenched from flight, and it looked at the woman with a face twisted by might, an incensed might that had finally pulled down one side of her wearied face into a broken frown.

With shaking hands, she smoothed the trembling feathers ripped by hail and crumpled like discarded leather. The flutterbird wobbled when it tried to flutter past her shoulder and into the weedy, leafy clutter. She turned her face and peered into the green shadows and saw her hummingbird by the trumpet below—a single trumpet below.

#### IV

She hummed by the trumpet flower she tried to mend, wrapping its stalk supportively and smoothing its bends. The sun raced tirelessly across the sky—once, twice, thrice—as many days went by, and the trumpet flower raised its head bit by bit until the sun's rays skated across its petals and lit up the instrument to trumpet once again and resound the majesty that had before then lain mute in destruction but now burst forth, proclaiming its golden notes and their immeasurable worth.

The trumpets lifted the glory, sent music to the sky, and framed a blazing flutterbird preparing to fly.

Emerald wings thumped the air with diamond-strength might, fanning a rain of dazzling gems to catch the light.

Her hummingbird hovered in the trumpet's fanfare, royalty of nature and renewal's heir.

It lifted with the music and skimmed her one cheek that her palm had hid but now lifted with the wingbeats.

The flutterbird flitted and flew out of sight, leaving echoing music and the sparkling red light of its crystal ruby throat surging with power that the storm could not rampage with its fearsome glower—a power that neither hail, nor lightning, nor rain, nor booming thunder could replace with searing pain. The power belonged to the flutterbird and now to her; it sang in chorus with the trumpet's musical liqueur.

So the flutterbird hummed around distant flowers, and she hummed in the garden by red trumpet flowers—the serenading red trumpet flowers.

# Bryn McGehe

Age: 13, Grade: 8 School Name: Platte City Middle School, Platte City, MO Educator: Kelly Miller

Educator: Kelly Miller Category: Flash Fiction

### **Life Upside Down**

"Who	are	you?"
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"Why are you here on earth?"

"Why are you in my house?"

These are the three questions that have taken over my life. One month and two days ago, my mom was robbed of her future, and ultimately her past. Her mind slowly deteriorating, losing her memories and the ability to create new thoughts. When you see my mom, you see a person from the distance- a beautiful woman with long, ember-colored hair flowing gently over her shoulders. When you hear her speak, you hear unfinished sentences, noises she doesn't notice she makes, and a lack in her once-full green eyes that leaves you feeling empathetically empty.

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"Who are you?"
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"Why are you here?"

"Why are you in... this place?"

On days there is lucidity, you hear singing from the kitchen and smell freshly- baked chocolate chip cookies- her signature. You hear conversations flowing from husband to wife, reminiscing on days they would kill to relive and laughing about the days they wouldn't. My heart aches for the "Real Mom" days when we can sit on the couch and watch movies together, not having to rewind every 5 minutes. Some days, though, she is just a shell of her old self. Her eyes glassy, not being able to move to turn her alarm off, then forgetting there was an alarm blaring. She burns the food on the stove, leaves the house in her nightgown, and won't even indulge in leftover cookies from a day prior. Day after day, the person we will see in the house is like tossing dice, hoping for double sixes- the hardest combination to roll.

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"Who are... what?"
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"Why are you here?"

"Why are you...?"

. . .

A sunny Thursday morning greeted my dad with blinding light through the shutters. "Good morning honey", Dad says to Mom.

My mom opened her eyes and shoots a look over at him.

"WHO ARE YOU AND WHY ARE YOU IN MY BED?" my mom screams. Immediately he knew the person he way lying next to recognized him as much as a stranger in a coffee shop. He races out of his bedroom to give this woman in bed her space. Defeated, he slumps against the closed door and slides down to the shag-carpeted floor. Behind him, he hears a click - the door locks.

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"Who are you?"

"Why are you here?"

"Why are you in my house?"
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"Dianne Lancaster," a man in a long white lab coats projects across the waiting room. My dad stands and grabs my mother's hand to pull her with him. On this day, my real mom doesn't accompany my father to the appointment - today, she is only a shell.

The doctor sits across from my father and speaks on her progression with Alzheimer's. Words jumble throughout the conversation and for a brief moment, I feel the confusion that my mother might feel on a daily basis. The doctor hands a large pamphlet to my father with information on caregiving opportunities for her in the future. In this moment, my father's hope collapses as he makes a decision to hand over her care to a stranger.

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...
"Wh...?"
"Why... here?"
"Wh...?"
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I faintly smell chocolate chip cookies somewhere in the kitchen. Half-asleep and in a dream-like haze, I walk down the front stairs and turn into the kitchen. With her amber hair pulled tightly back into a ponytail and a red polka dot apron tied tightly around her, she pulls out a batch of her signature cookies from the kitchen's double oven. I roll over in bed and the dream quickly passed - almost as fast as mom left our family

# Will Moorhead

Age: 13, Grade: 8
School Name: Platte City Middle School, Platte City, MO
Educator: Kelly Miller
Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# **The Detriments of Young Curiosity**

Back in first grade, I was always troubled with how to act in school. I had never been to a public school before because I went to a private preschool an extra year for kindergarten. My parents also taught me all the basic things I needed to know for elementary once I got there. I got to first grade scared and alone because I didn't know anyone there. Even though I was ahead of everyone academically, I felt like an outsider. The only thing that I knew about a public education was that you were supposed to call the teacher a 'Mrs.' instead of just their regular name. I got used to that in less than a few days. The real challenge was learning the rules that my parents hadn't told me. I didn't know when to talk, if we had snack time or nap time, when to get up and walk, how to walk properly, I knew nothing. In time, I learned these things. But I never learned to not trust other kids.

Since I didn't have any friends, I kind of befriended the first few people I met. Looking back, I should have found better friends, but I didn't know how to do that. I met Tim and a couple of his friends first. The reason I trusted them was because they helped me through the standard first grade protocol. The teacher also helped a little bit by getting frustrated with me when I did something stupid. But these kids felt more reliable than the teacher. And they were fun to hang out with, too. We would play tag at recess, sit together at reading time, and do partner work with each other. We grew on each other until I didn't question what they told me.

One day, while we were waiting in line for lunch, Tim, Mike, and I were talking about what we did at home yesterday.

"I went to the park and played there for a whole hour!" Mike bragged.

"I watched a movie and it was PG!" Tim boasted.

I hadn't actually done anything yesterday, so I made a story up.

"I went and got ice cream and then went to the bowling alley!" I said proudly.

They oohed and ahhed at my day and then we started talking about bowling alleys.

"The first time I went bowling was in kindergarten." I told them. "It was fun."

"What's bowling?" Mike asked.

We laughed at him for a minute because he didn't know what bowling was.

"Well, when I went," Tim said, "A guy said a bad word!"

Mike and I gasped in horror being the soft first graders we were. Bad words were quite literally the worst thing you could do in our world. I don't think anyone in our grade had even comprehended saying one.

"Which one did he say?" Mike asked in disbelief.

Tim leaned in close to us, "The worst one ever."

"What, the h word?" Mike asked, "That's bad but grown-ups say it all the time."

"No the f word." Tim whispered.

At the time, we were confused as you could be as a little kid. Mike and I just kind of stood there while Tim let it settle in. Both Mike and I had no clue what Tim was talking about. By now, we had reached the lunch lady who had our precious chicken patty. She plopped my food on a plate and handed it to me. The three of us walked over to our usual table. Tim sat in the middle of us two so we could hear him. He looked at us, waiting for a response. He got one from me.

"What word is that?" I asked innocently.

"I've never heard of that either," Mike said, "It doesn't sound that bad."

"It's bad, really bad." Tim said dramatically.

Being little kids, Mike and I got curious instantly. That would be my undoing. We kept peppering Tim with questions about what the word was. He wouldn't tell us what it actually was because he was afraid a teacher would overhear us from across the cafeteria. At the end of lunch, we had worked on Tim until we got to the spelling of this forbidden word. He just kept telling us that it started with an 'F'. We got back to class a few minutes later. Mike and I were giving Tim a death stare all class long. He finally caved in and wrote something down on a piece of paper. He passed it along to us and, thankfully, no one tried to read it. It got to me first and I uncrumpled it. I handed the paper to Mike and mouthed the word to Tim and he grew wide-eyed. He moved his finger across his neck as if to say 'stop'. Mike looked at me and mouthed it. I nodded. Just then, the recess bell rang.

We all filed outside on that warm Spring day. The air was warm and there were no clouds in sight. We ran out the door just like every day and climbed the slide so we could be the first ones on top of the playground. The conversation started with me saying the word. Tim practically screamed.

"Shhhhh!!!!" he said harshly, "Don't say that!"

"I don't understand what's so bad about that." I said.

"If someone hears you, you'll get in really big trouble!" Tim told me.

After that I started taking what he said seriously. I had said the word pretty loudly, so I wouldn't be

surprised if some other kid heard me. We kind of just stood there for the rest of recess. I was really scared so I didn't feel like playing or running around. Once recess ended, we all lined up to go back inside. Our class was the last to go back inside as usual because this one kid was always slow to get in line. We filed back in the classroom and sat back down. The teacher sat down on her computer just like usual and started typing. We continued class like normal for the rest of the day until our second recess. Then, when everyone else was filing outside, the teacher stopped me.

"Come over to my desk." she said aggressively.

I walked over as she glared at her computer screen.

"Yes Ms. Thomas?" I asked a little too innocently.

"I got a report from another student that you were being VERY disrespectful at recess." she said, "The student says that you made him cry by saying a very mean word to him."

"But I didn't say it to anyone!" I blurted out, immediately regretting saying it.

"Yes you DID!" she said as she raised her voice.

"No I didn't I just said it to my friends and he must have heard me!" I explained.

"I don't want to hear it!" she said as she raised her voice.

"But I didn't say it to anyone directly!" I said helplessly.

She looked at me for a minute and said, "Go to the office, and ask for the principal's room."

She handed me a "Think Sheet" as she glared at me, clearly disgusted. I had never gotten a "Think Sheet" before and I had never intended to get one. But going to the principal's office? I was officially a bad kid now. She sent me out of the room without a word. After walking for what seemed like miles, I arrived at the office. Before I could open my mouth, the secretary pointed to the principal's door in the back of the office. I took a deep breath and opened the door, expecting a dungeon of some sort. But it looked just like any other classroom but smaller. Confused, I looked at the chair behind the desk in front of me. It was empty. Then, I heard a rustling sound off to the side of the room. I turned and saw the principal. He looked at me and smiled as I stood there, frozen with fear. He sat down at his desk with a sigh and turned his computer on. He motioned for me to sit down, so I did. I was terrified. He looked nice on the outside, but I knew he just wanted to punish me.

"Who sent you down here?" he asked me suddenly.

"M-Ms. T-Thomas." I stuttered.

"You're alright son." he said calmly.

He finished typing on the computer and rolled over to me in his chair. He told me to write my name

down on the

"Think Sheet". The paper had a couple questions, like 'what did I do?' and 'why is it wrong?' and stuff like that. It sounds dumb enough now, but I thought I was filling out my death warrant.

"So why are you here?" he asked me.

I explained everything to him starting at the lunchroom but didn't tell him the names of my friends. He listened intently, obviously trying to comprehend the first grade nonsense spewing out of my mouth.

"So you said a bad word?" he asked.

"Yes but I didn't say it to anyone!" I said helplessly.

"Okay, that's fine." he said, "Just write down, 'I said a bad word' on your paper."

I opened my mouth to protest, but realized that he was trying to make this easy on me. I put my pencil on the paper and spelled it out, just like he said. He smiled at me and told me I could go. I opened my mouth but stopped myself once again. I slowly stood up and made my way to the door. I walked out, shut it behind me, and walked back to class. I was in there for no less than five minutes.

When I got back, I handed my teacher the "Think Sheet".

"You only answered one question." she said.

"The principal told me to." I replied innocently.

She looked at me for a minute as my classmates started filing back into the room. She pointed to my seat and I turned around and walked to it with the tiny hint of a smile in the corner of my mouth. But as I sat down, it was quickly wiped out of existence by the realization that I had to go home to my parents. I froze in place as the other kids all laughed and giggled with each other. Mike and Tim were in the corner of the room with their other group of friends, isolated from me. Ms. Thomas got up and filed us out of the room while we grabbed our backpacks.

Everyone walked out to the buses like a normal day, while I moped along.

On the bus ride home, I didn't sit next to anyone. I'd never felt more alone in my life. The bus went to all of the other stops before screeching to a halt in front of mine. I got off the bus and it roared away. Everything was silent, even the birds. I guess they could sense my impending doom as well. It took me minutes to get to my front porch because I was walking so slowly. I reached out for the doorknob and held it there for several moments. My hand outstretched, I pondered my next move. *Do it already*. I quickly grabbed the handle and opened the door. I cringed as the creak of the door rang out through the neighborhood. Then, one foot in front of the other, I stepped inside.

"Mom, I'm home."

# **Bailey Newell**

Age: 16, Grade: 11 School Name: Platte County High School, Platte City, MO Educator: Marnie Jenkins Category: Short Story

### In my Eyes

My fingers tapped nervously on the wooden table in front of me. I watched the tendons in my hand pop up and down, and thought about what I was about to do. I had drank three full beers, and that still didn't seem like enough.

A fire was ablaze in the middle of the room. Someone had speared a pig and was slow roasting it over the flames. The fire seemed to claw at its flesh. I could stare at a fire all day, my mother use to claim that I'd sear my eyeballs out. I never cared. Watching something so wild and destructive had always made something inside of my ache for something more, for something exciting.

Dozens of people were dancing around the fire in a drunken stupor. Most were Ballezan knights with some women woven in. A few were drenched in sweat, some cackled uncontrollably, and most looked like they were precariously close to dancing into open flames. One man was particularly concerning. He was fatter than the rest, with a shaggy unkempt beard and squinty eyes you could barely see. As he danced, he would grab the ass of the skinny redhead, or squeeze the breasts of the full chested brunette. Instead of being indignant, they would only laugh and prance away like tipsy fairies.

It was disgusting.

He was disgusting.

I wouldn't regret killing him. He was in charge of the troops stationed in this town. I don't know how, he looked like he could barely take care of himself, much less a group of men.

My stomach suddenly twisted. I pushed away from the table and rushed outside. I made a half hearted attempt to sweep my auburn hair out of my face, and heaved into a bucket that was probably for water collection. Opps.

Only beer came out. So much for drinking myself silly. I wiped my mouth on my sleeve and attempted to put my hair back in place. Turning to re-enter the tavern, my foot snagged on a buckle in the wood. My arms flew around me wildly, trying to grasp onto something, anything, so I wouldn't face plant. My hand collided with something, but not what I was expecting. It was warm and firm and reassuring, everything that tonight wasn't going to be. I grabbed onto the rail with my other hand and whipped around to see who had helped me.

Blue, brighter than rippling waves on a crystal clear day. Eyes that saw more than my outer shell, they saw me, they understood me. The pressure on my hand began to fade, like it had been an apparition there to torment me. I squeezed back, wanting it to stay. The blue eyes faded, the hand dissipated into nothing but a memory. A feeling of complete loneliness rushed over me. My knees buckled and I let myself slide to the ground. I clasped my head in my hands and took a deep breath. Too much alcohol, too much. I had been stupid, I had come here with a job, a job that if I failed, it wouldn't go unpunished.

I let the blue fade from my memory, I tried blink it out of my eyes. It was one of those things that was so bright, it still rippled across your vision even when your eyes close.

I opened the door and slipped in once again. Walking back into the tavern was more difficult than I thought it would be. I wanted to run away. I could go anywhere, start a new life. But I have too much at stake. When I was captured a few months ago as a prisoner of war, they had almost killed me immediately. They had asked me if I was good for anything, if I had any special talents that would make me worth keeping. I mumbled something about my mediocre sewing abilities, and my father being a butcher. The man had stared at me with squinty eyes, accessing whether I was on any use. He asked, "Are you any good with a knife?" I nodded my head fervently. My father had trained me in how to slice up meat; he also felt it was important that a woman be able to defend herself. He had taught me how to hold it, throw it, and put my body weight behind all of my movements. "Women need a little more help than men, they can't just depend on muscle, they must also depend on strategy." he'd say. The man nodded his head and yanked me to my feet. "I think this one could be of some use." He thrust me behind him and handed me off to another guard. I'll never forget the way he grabbed my butt, and the obnoxiously strong grip he kept on my wrists, or the screams of the townspeople who had been deemed useless as I was tugged away.

I clasped my eyes together in the effort to erase the thoughts from my head. The seat I had occupied was already taken by a group of giggling whores. I looked back to the dancers. He was gone. My eyes skimmed the crowd looking for the unruly beard of Sir Peter Banworth. Enemy of the people I now served. I walked past the group of whores, past the dancers, in front of the bar, he was gone.

He was gone.

I raced back to the group of women. I pulled something out of my pocket and slammed it onto the table. The familiar clink of metal on wood gained their attention. The glint of gold could be seen in all of their hungry eyes. "First person who can tell me where Sir Peter Banworth is gets the coin." The table erupted in voices that couldn't be differentiated from one another. The outburst of noise had earned me the attention of everyone in the tavern. My panic had made an idiot of me.

"Quiet down!" I roared. "You." I said pointing to the skinny red head I had seen dancing around the fire only a few minutes before.

"He's upstairs with Mary!" For such a tiny girl her voice carried. I flicked her the coin and whipped around to head up the stairs. I heard the coin smack the table, then a clamor of women pouncing. I glanced behind me to see them ripping hair, and tugging on dresses. The seam of one sleeve had already been torn leaving a woman incredibly vulnerable. The dancing had stopped. The men were cackling over the unfolding scene, and some even seemed to be placing bets. Disgusting.

The stairs creaked under my feet. The light up here was dim, barely touched by the fire light. The alcohol was beginning to wear off. My mind was sharp, but fear was soaking in to me like water into a sponge. Boxes were scattered miscellaneously across the floor.

Towards the back, the fat figure of Peter was silhouetted by window light. He was kissing the plump brunette I had seen earlier. As I got closer I saw he was a messy kisser, he was practically drooling on the poor girl and making awkward smacking noises with his lips. I pinched my lips together in barely restrained disgust. I kicked his foot and got no response out of him. I kicked harder and got a half

hearted grunt. After a few seconds he pushed himself up and turned to face me. He looked annoyed at first, then his face softened like melted butter.

"Aren't you a pretty one." He slurred. "Did Harry send ya up fer me?" He smiled, revealing he was missing a front tooth.

"Yes." I squeaked out. "He sent me to discuss a certain matter of business with you." I raised an eyebrow at him suggestively. His eyes widened and his vulgar smile grew across his face.

"By all means, sit down. Mary I'll see ya next time I'm in town?" He flicked her a silver coin that made her lips pinch. "Sorry hon, you're going to need ta do more than kiss me to get more than that." She turned without another word and slunk down the stairs. He watched her go.

"Apologies, I had to get ma full money's worth ya know." He said when he turned back to me with a wink.

"Of course." I forced out. His face this close to mine made me want to recoil. His breath smelled like death with more than just a touch of rum.

"So, the buisness ya mentioned?" He leaned into me and smashed his face into my own before I could push him away. When I was finally able to collect myself, I forced him away from me and onto his back. His eyes widened. He must've not expected me to be that strong.

"I need to know how many men you have ready to send towards Arden." I snatched the knife I had in my boot and pressed it into the eggshell white flesh of his neck. His eyes flashed in surprise, but he didn't look scared. His smile remained on his rotten face.

"You're a feisty one aren't ya." He smiled wider.

I put more pressure on the blade. "Answer my question."

"What makes ya think I would do that? I'm an honorable man that loves his dear country." He said it like it was a joke.

"Because you're also a selfish man who only really cares about himself." I pressed myself closer. His eyes showed a glimmer of fear for the first time. "If you try to escape your throat will be slit before you can blink." I hoped I sounded strong and confident. It probably came out as the voice of an anxious girl. "Now do you want to answer my question?" My hand was shaking.

He stared back at me like he didn't know what to do anymore. His eyes held the glassy quality of a drunk. "We have over a thousand men ready ta march on Arden in two days. They plan ta sneak around by sea and attack from behind. Our generals believe it just might be our turning point." I stared at him with a blank face, expecting him to elaborate on details. He said nothing.

"You have nothing else to ask me?" I inquired. I raised my eyebrow again, he sneered. "So than what are you doing here? If you're supposed to be pouncing on us from behind?" He pinched his lips together again, like the small part of him that was a human being didn't want to betray his comrades. "What, you have nothing?" My voice had turned taunting. My patience was gone, my sympathy nonexistent.

"Come here." I didn't move. "Come here!" He yelled louder. Hesitantly, I leaned my ear towards his putrid mouth. His breath was warm. "You have no idea what's coming for ya. You will face more pain

than you believe you can endure. Now get out of ma face you nasty minx." He spat in my face and slammed his body towards me with all the force of an angry, drunken man. He forced himself on top of me and grabbed my head in both hands. He pounded it on the ground rhythmically. My skull felt like it was caving in. But my knife was still in my hand, he was too drunk to remember to disarm me. I brought it up and plunged it into his left side. His hands let go of my head and clutched his side. I stumbled to my feet and kicked him square in the balls. He wailed so loud. Why wasn't anyone running upstairs?

I kneeled down next to him and pressed the blade into his throat again. "I don't have to worry about anything coming for me, because I'm pretty sure it already came." With that I slashed the knife across his throat just like my father had taught me. "Worst Baron I've ever seen." I mumbled.

Red filled my vision and I could no longer keep myself upright. I fell over onto a crate behind me and squeezed my eyes shut. What had I done? What had I done? I had killed. How could I live with myself, how could I go on. I was worthless, I was scum, I was no better than the man I had just murdered. I opened my eyes again and saw a pair staring right back at me. They were the same as the one's I had seen earlier. They were no longer crystal clear blue, they were glowing red. They no longer appeared friendly. They judged me. They no longer respected the person I was. Maybe because I was no longer the same person. I dropped the knife and started to run towards the stairs. I looked below into the tavern, but it was empty. The fire continued to roar in the middle of the room. It looked so vibrant and devoid at the same time. I stumbled down the stairs and across the room, leaning on things to keep me upright as I went. I cracked the door that led outside and peaked through the slit. What I saw took my breath away.

Soldiers had ridden into town on a thousand horses. They were everywhere, outnumbering the townsfolk two to one. Many held torches, all had swords, and they would strike down on anyone who got in their way. Screams filled the streets, and the dim glow of fire could be seen across the entire village. He had told me he wouldn't do it tonight, he had told me he wouldn't risk my safety like that. All lies. I reached into the pocket of my skirt and pulled out a small flag. Ardens coat of arms was sewn into the front. He had given it to me when he decided to send me on this mission. "Use it if you need our help, you're one of us now. We will provide for you, if you provide for us." He had said. I wanted to burn that flag more than anything, watch pieces of it fly into the sky.

I took a breath and walked out into the chaos of the streets, holding the flag high above my head. A knight saw me and brought his horse to a stop. "Get on lass." I put my foot in the stirrup and haphazardly launched myself onto the back the the beast. He whacked the sides of the horse with his heals and the horse lurched into a trot. I put my forehead on the back of the knight and let the noise and fear and guilt consume me.

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Waking up in my own bed was unsettling. It felt like a strangers blanket and pillow. I sat up slowly. My head was pounding painfully, every heartbeat was felt. It was dark except for a single candle in the corner of the room. Eyes stared out at me. They weren't red or blue, they were bright green. The bright green of my tired old father who had sacrificed so much. Pain was etched into his face from years of hardship, starvation, and loss.

"Goodmorning, lovely." He gave me a warm hearted smile that made me happy and guilty at the same time. I didn't deserve those warm looks anymore. My eyes pooled up before I could stop them. He rushed to the side of my bed and grabbed my hand. I put my head on his shoulder and wept into his sleeve. "What happened." He prodded. His voice was tender and warm.

I didn't respond for several minutes. I needed the tears to fade away first, I needed to be able to speak without my voice cracking. I wasn't broken, not yet.

"I killed for you. He told me he would hurt you if I didn't." I turned to look at him and saw that his mouth had hardened. His eyes were steely, unforgiving.

"I didn't want this to happen." He whispered. He rubbed his temples, he always did that when he didn't know what to do.

"I feel different, I don't feel like I'm the same. I feel like I killed a part of me with him." Silent tears were sliding down my face now, and I didn't know how to make them stop. My pa's arms went around me and held me to him tight.

"You're still my little girl. It's not your fault you drew the short stick in life." He paused a moment. "You're going to have to learn to live with the person you've become. Because you will never be the same person you were. This man will haunt you. Even if you kill again, this will be the man you remember." I let that sink in. "Please tell me you won't kill again." His voice felt broken, like a had just killed a tiny piece of him too. It was too much for me to handle.

"I don't know what he'll make me do pa. I just know I have to keep you safe, and I know you'd do the same for me." He didn't say a word, because he knew it was true. A knock on the door startled us both. My dad stood to open it, but I pushed him back. This was for me, I already knew. I walked over carefully and twisted the knob. The door swung open revealing a squire. He had perfect posture, and a pretentious chin that made him look entitled.

"Our Lord would like to have a word m'lady." I turned back to my father and gave him a sad nod. He did the same and shut the door gently behind me. Walking towards his chambers felt symbolic. I was walking away from the person I was, permanently. The new me had a goal in mind, I wanted to kill him. I wanted Arden to fall, I wanted Balleza to crumble, and I wouldn't be going down with them.

# **Amanda Nicklas**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: David H Hickman High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Nancy White Category: Dramatic Script

# **Backup**

Cast of Characters:

Onella: 18, Indian girl who is a natural born leader who takes care of everyone she can.

Sihn: 17, A Vietnamese immigrant of 5 years, questions everything, very logical and is a keen researcher.

Max: 17, A Nevada Native, mixed race of half white, half Native American. Lived on a reservation until age 15, when his mother passed away. Very reserved.

Xochitl: 17, A girl of Nahuatl descendants, often paranoid and overly prepared, and is unwillingly adventurous.

Veca: 18, A Serbian immigrant of 8 years, incredibly daring and often brash. She is deaf, and has implants that allow her to hear.

Tadesse: 17, An African American boy who has a leading sense of adventure and family, a jokester, with an instinct to keep his friends safe.

Int., Early morning. Police Station.

Max is sitting by a table in an empty interrogation room in the police station. He is drumming his fingers on the table when a policeman enters.

**Policeman**: Max, right?

Max nods.

**Policeman**: They told me you were resisting a police officer, is that true.

*Max is silent.* 

**Policeman**: Kid, I'm not playing the good cop, bad cop on you. Don't stay silent to see how far you can push me. Just tell me what happened, and your parents can come get you.

**Max**: Let me call my friend.

**Policeman**: Why do you want to call your friend?

Max: So that they can come get me.

**Policeman**: its 4:00 in the morning, I don't think he'll appreciate that.

**Max**: (Emphasizing the pronoun) She won't care.

**Policeman**: I think you should call your parents.

Max: He won't pick up the phone, or me. My friend will come get me and take me home.

**Policeman**: Why won't your parents come get you?

**Max**: Onella's 18, okay? She's old enough, she can come get me. I'll put her on speaker so you can hear everything while I talk to her.

Policeman: (Nodding) Okay... Call her.

The policeman hands Max his phone. He dials Onella's number, putting it on speaker and placing it on the table. The phone picks up on the third ring.

**Onella**: (Obviously tired, but not frustrated) What's wrong?

Max: I'm at the police station... can you come get me?

**Onella**: (There is shuffling in the background of the call) Yes, how much is bail?

Policeman: I'm not sure yet, depends on what he did. He said he'd tell you if we got you on the phone.

Onella: (Startled) Oh, hello.

Max: You're on speaker.

Onella: Thanks.

**Policeman**: I assumed you would ask what happened.

**Onella**: He would have told me on the way home. But, if you want him to tell me now; Max, what happened?

**Max**: I went on the trail behind my house at like one in the morning and I guess the people who own the farm a few miles down saw someone walking and assumed I was doing something sketchy. They called the cops on me and when they showed up I ran off and hid from them.

**Onella:**(Sighs) Okay, I'll be there soon. How much is bail?

**Policeman**: (Standing up) Nothing, he's getting off with a warning. Please be ready to fill out the correct paperwork when you arrive.

Onella: Yes, sir.

Max hangs up the phone.

Max: You're not making her pay bail?

**Policeman**: I wasn't sure if we were, but when they told me what you did, I decided you'd make that call for yourself.

Max: That I'd what?

**Policeman**: I knew exactly what you had done when I came in here, and I decided that if you told me the truth about what you did and didn't try to lie, then I would let you off with a warning. None of us have ever seen your face before, so you must be a good kid who made a bad decision. Don't make anymore.

The officer leaves, picking up Max's phone and shutting the door behind him. Max lays his head on the table and closes his eyes. He hears the door open and picks up his head. The Policeman is standing in the doorway.

Policeman: Your ride's here.

Max gets up and goes through the door, into a hallway and then into the lobby of the police station. Onella is leaning over the desk and signing paperwork. Max picks his phone up off the desk as Onella looks up.

Onella: Come on.

Max goes up to Onella, and they start walking out of the police station.

Max: Thank you so, so much.

**Onella**: You're welcome. Did you try calling your Dad?

Max: Wasn't even worth trying. Bar kicks him out at 3:00, he won't be home until 6:00.

**Onella**: Will you be able to get in the house?

Max: Yeah.

They both get into Onella's car, an old white van, and Onella drives off.

**Onella**: Do you think you'll be at school tomorrow?

**Max**: Anything is better than home.

*Int. Later that morning; School lunch table.* 

Max is flipping through his phone at the lunch table, with Sihn next to him, holding his right hand and reading a book. Onella is asleep with her head in her arms on the table, with Xochitl writing in a calendar next to her while eating a salad. Veca sits next to Xochitl, eating her lunch. Tadesse in on the

other side of Max, quickly finishing the worksheet in front of him.

**Xochitl**: (Nudging Onella) Why are you so tired?

Onella: (Not picking her head up) I had a long night.

**Xochitl**: What happened?

**Max**: She picked me up from the police station at 4:00 in the morning.

There is a short moment of silence.

**Veca**: What the hell did you do?

**Max**: Got busted hiking then hid from the cops. They found me at 3:30 the morning and Onella came to get me at 4:00.

**Tadesse**: And I thought I was gonna be the first one Onella bailed out of jail!

**Onella**: (With her head on the table) No bail.

**Sihn**: Why were you out on the trail at 3:00 in the morning??

**Max**: Because I didn't forget about the curfew. I just couldn't sleep, then got drunk called, which pissed me off enough to make me get out of the house in case he came storming home early.

Sihn: Did he?

**Max**: He was passed out on his favorite spot on the floor when I got home. Didn't even notice when I stepped over him.

Everyone is quiet.

**Xochitl**: It could've been worse.

Max: I don't doubt it.

**Tadesse**: Hey, are we still on for after school?

**Veca**: (Not looking up from her laptop) Yep. My apartment?

**Tadesse**: Center point, as always. Onella, are you busing?

**Onella**: (Giving a thumbs up) Uh-huh. But I can only fit four. You and Xo have to go together.

Tadesse raises his eyebrows at Xochitl, and she nods. The school bell rings, and the surrounding

students get up and leave. None of the 6 move until Onella brings her head up.

Onella; Let's go.

The camera follows Onella as she gets up with everyone else and walks to her classroom, splitting off from everyone else and walking to her class.

Int. Afternoon; Veca's apartment.

Onella walking through the door is used as a transition shot, and she walks into Veca's apartment. The front room of the apartment has a couch, a television, and two sofas. The other five characters are strewn about the room, sitting in various spots. Onella sits down on the edge of the couch as Veca, who now has her hood up, turns on the television, and the channel is in Serbian. No one notices for a few seconds.

**Xochitl**: Ingles, por favor!

Tadesse: Come on, lady, put on the shared language!

**Veca**: Well I'm sorry that my television doesn't have the capacity to have 5 subtitles at once! (*Veca messes with the remote, causing the news to turn on in English.*)

On the news in a newscaster with a picture of a teenager displayed on the screen.

**Newscaster**: This is the 5th case of a missing teenager in a month.

The room becomes uncomfortably silent and all heads come up to watch the news.

**Newscaster**: Fear is on the rise in the community, and no one can say what is happening. Police have no leads, and are desperate for any help that civilians can give.

**Onella**: (Frustrated) Turn it off.

*No one pays her any heed, and the newscast continues.* 

**Newscaster:** Suspicions, however, are beginning to turn to MTG Labs, whose new building was erected only 6 days before the first teen went missing.

Onella: (Louder) I said turn it off!!

Veca scrambles to change the channel, turning to a cartoon that is in Serbian again. No one says anything about the language shift.

**Xochitl**: (Quietly) What if that happens to us?

Veca: It won't.

**Xochitl**: But what if it does? It could!

**Tadesse**: It can't. No one even knows any of the kids who are disappearing, this could just be a news blow out from a few towns away.

Onella: It isn't.

**Veca**: She probably got herself into trouble. That being said, it's not justification for disappearing. All of these kids, they are high schoolers. Parents freak out, teenagers get mad. Max, your Dad reported you missing when you fell asleep on the back porch. This wouldn't be the first time that someone in the school has run off to spite their family. Missing doesn't mean kidnapped.

**Sihn**: If we're arguing that point of view, then this could be a plan between the people who are missing. They could all be running off together, or taking someone's lead and going off on their own. Assuming that they've been kidnapped is a... worst case scenario.

Onella shakes her head and pulls up a list of all the missing teens on her IPad, with names and pictures.

**Onella**: They weren't collaborating. The five that were missing, it's the first two that are the bad omens. They both went to the other high school, (*Pointing to the second picture on the list*) but Muna was a friend of a friend. Outgoing, but not incredible social until you get to know her. She's also the most stubborn person on the planet. Caleb, (*Pointing to the first picture on the list*) was her best friend.

Veca: (Interrupting) That's exactly what I'm trying to prove.

**Onella**: She was devastated when he disappeared. And then she looked for him. She told a closer friend that she was going to ask around through a not-so-lawful group of people as a last stitch effort. Two days later, she said she found something and was going to look for him. No one has seen her since.

**Sihn**: Where did she say the lead was?

**Onella**: MTG Labs.

**Tadesse**: So you think that's the place?

Max: It could be someone who works there, who moved here as soon as it opened for business.

**Sihn**: But they aren't open for business. All they do in internal tests and research. They're 100% owned and operated by themselves. That on its own doesn't incriminate them to something like this. It could all be some huge coincidence. The starting point they had was when they started letting people in for work and began running their research programs. That's when this started.

They all sit silently for a moment.

**Xochitl**: No one answered my question. (*Pause*) What if that happens to one of us?

**Tadesse**: Then we'll find them and get them back. Simple as that. And that's *if* it happens. It won't.

**Xochitl**: How can you be sure?

Veca: He's not. But if trying to stay safe if the best we can do, we will.

Xochitl nods.

**Onella**: This has to stop eventually, things like this... they can be dragged on, but they can't go on forever. It will be fine, once the police find out what is going on.

**Sihn**: What do you think is going on? Do you think it's the labs, like everyone else?

**Onella**: I don't know.

**Veca**: Of course it's them. This town was small and quiet before they showed up, and now there's the equivalent of a skyscraper for us less than a mile out of the town. As soon as they're in business, people start going missing. That has to mean something.

Ext. Night; Max's Porch.

Max is opening the door to his house. As soon as he locks the door behind him, a glass bottle flies past him and shatters against the door. His father is standing in the doorway to the next room. He is obviously drunk.

Max's Father: Where were you?

Max: I was at Veca's.

Max's Father: Liar.

Max: I'm not lying. I did exactly what I told I was going to do. I told you this morning before I left.

Max's Father: You didn't tell me anything.

**Max:** Yes I did. Whether you were hungover or not is your own problem.

Max's Father: You disrespectful-

Max's Father lunges at him, and Max is punched in the face, leaving a small open wound. His father takes another blow, and Max dodges. Max sprints into his room and locks the door behind him as his Father barrels into it. The door stays closed, and Max's Father is yelling on the other side.

#### Max's Father:

Open the door and let me teach you respect!!

Max watches the door as he father pounds the other side, and then gives up. Max wipes blood off the side of his face with the comforter on his bed, and then goes over to his window, opens it, and climbs out.

Int. Late Night; Veca's living room.

Xochitl and Onella are asleep on the furniture, Tadesse is asleep sitting against the couch where Xochitl is sleeping, and Sihn is sleeping against the loveseat that Onella is sleeping on. Veca is sprawled out on the floor with a blanket. Xochitl's phone rings, but no one stirs at the quiet ringtone. The phone stops ringing. In less than 10 seconds, Veca's phone starts ringing. It is ridiculously loud and everyone wakes up.

**Veca**: (Answers the phone in Serbian)

**Tadesse**: (Turning back to fall asleep) I hate time zones.

Veca: Max!?

Everyone in the room perks up, Onella falls off the couch and onto Sihn's legs,

Ext, Same time; MTG Labs.

Max is standing outside the lobby of MTG labs, his face is still bloody. The building has glass doors, and the illuminated lobby is easy to see into.

Max: I'm outside MTG Labs... there are still people in there.

**Veca**: (Over the phone) Why are you there??

Max: Couldn't sleep. Veca... people are in there. People are working.

Veca: Stay away from there! Go home!!

Max waits to respond, and sees a girl in a hijab run across the lobby and into the next hall. Three guards chase after her.

Max: (Stepping back) I just saw someone running. I saw the girl. Veca I saw that girl!

**Veca**: Stay away, we're coming over there to get you! ... What girl?

Max: That girl who Onella said disappeared looking for her friend... I just saw her!!

**Veca**: Get far away! Get away from there and go home! We are only going over there as a last resort, get out of there!

Max looks up at the building and sees a woman looking down at him from an upper window.

Max: Someone sees me. There's this lady watching me from an upper window...

Onella: (Over the phone You need to leave You need to leave now!

As if Onella voice snaps him back to reality, Max takes more steps back from the building.

Max: Onella, I saw Muna.

Onella: You saw her?

Max: I think so...

**Onella**: We're going to be there in 5 minutes! Hide, do something! We all jammed in my van, we're coming over there. Why can't you go home?!

Max: My Dad was drunk... he hit me and I climbed out the window.

Max looks up at the upper window again, but the woman is gone. When he looks down, a security guard is coming towards him from the building. Max starts backing up, but the guard holds up his flashlight.

Max: I can stand here! I'm not doing anything wrong, I'm not doing anything wrong!

The security guard approaches Max and grabs his arm, pulling him towards the building.

**Security**: Shut up and come with me, this is private property

Max: Let go of me! This isn't private property! Let go!

**Security**: My boss wants to have a word with you about why you were outside our building this late at night.

**Max**: She doesn't have a right to know! Let go!!

The guard pulls Max into the building, and starts pulling him to a hallway. Tires can be heard peeling out outside, and Tadesse and Veca come storming through the doors.

**Tadesse**: Leave him alone!

Veca sprints up and jumps onto the security guard, who doesn't let go of Max. Tadesse starts pulling on Max, but the guard's grip tightens. Another guard comes running and grabs Veca. Onella and Sihn come running through the doors, and Sihn is holding a whiffle ball bat, and begins swinging the bat like a madman. Another guard runs outside from the lobby.

Onella: (While trying to pry Max away) Xochitl stayed in the car!!

Tadesse tries to run out to get her, but a guard grabs him by the arm and pulls him back. As they are fighting, a guard drags Xochitl in through the doors.

Onella: Let us go! We haven't done anything wrong!!

Sihn is still unsubdued, swinging around the whiffle ball bat. The guards do not respond, and out of nowhere there is a gigantic, ear-splitting explosion that shakes the building, and some of the ceiling collapses. The guards all release their grips and run into a hallway. More of the ceiling starts to collapse.

**Xochitl**: What is--???

Veca: I don't know!!

The lights flicker out, and every exit is blocked except for a larger window. The back wall has started to catch on fire.

Onella: Get to the window and break through it! Go!

Tadesse runs to the window, but a piece of debris falls on him, The fire is spreading through the room. Sihn runs to help Tadesse, and Max grabs the bat from Sihn and starts slamming it against the window as more debris falls onto them. Veca runs up next to Max, and takes the bat out of his hand and tosses it on the ground.

**Max**: What are you doing!??

Veca: Saving time!!

Veca punches through the window.

Max: Ladies first!

Max helps Veca through the window, The fire is now out of control, and Onella and Xochitl are dodging it to get to the window. Sihn is supporting Tadesse, and gets him through the window. Xochitl and Onella follow, with Max behind them. The weather is now dangerous; it is a severe thunderstorm, and they can barely make it to the car.

Onella: Get in!

Everyone piles into the car, and Onella drives away.

**Onella**: Max! Can you get me to your house?

Max: NO! We have to go somewhere else!

**Onella:** You're the closest! There's no way that I'm gonna get this car anywhere farther than-

An intense sheet of rain hits the windshield as the storm gets worse. Onella loses control of the car and

it veers off the road in front of an old sign.

Max: There's a barn close by! There's a path under that sign! It's old, but we can hide there!

Everyone exits the car and they help each other down the path.

Int, Late night; abandoned barn.

Tadesse rams the door to the barn door open. The barn is old and dilapidated, and rain consistently falls through the holes in the roof. It hasn't been used in decades.

**Xochitl**: (Out of breath) It's better than nothing.

**Onella**: Is everyone okay?

Veca holds up her hand, which is cut and bloody.

**Tadesse**: (Leaning against the wall) I might be a cripple, you know, from getting crushed by the ceiling.

**Sihn**: Both those things are fixable as long as they don't get worse.

**Xochitl**: But what if there's something we can't fix? We were in a research lab, that clearly doesn't care too much about the extent of the law. What if they blame all of that on us?

**Sihn**: They can't, it's just not possible. Whatever happened in that building, there's no way it could have happened because of us.

Max: You guys have to discuss this later; we need to find a way out.

**Veca**: There's the door.

Max: Don't be a smartass, this is serious.

**Veca**: My hand looks like it was bitten by a shark because you couldn't break a window open with a bat, I know this is serious!

**Max**: (Frustrated) We need to find out how long this storm is going to last. I don't know how long we can hole up in here.

**Veca**: What gave you that idea?

Max: Now is not the time. Veca!

**Sihn**: Max has a point. We have two things we need to worry about first. Veca, we can check out your hand, but that won't matter if this storm kills us.

Tadesse: It's a storm. I mean, sure it's bad, but it's not going to kill us. We just have to ride it out.

**Xochitl**: In a barn that hasn't seen use since before this century! I'm surprised you even knew it was here...

Max: Doesn't matter how I knew, it matter that I did.

**Tadesse**: And it probably saved our butts.

**Onella**: There's no probably about it. There's no way I could have driven through that, and it's only gotten worse.

A large piece of the roof of the barn blows off; more rain comes pouring in. Everyone rushed underneath an upper platform in the barn. They have to shout over the rain.

**Tadesse**: How long is this supposed to last!?

Sihn: I don't know! I can't pull anything up on the radar, my phone's useless!

Onella: Let me see!

Sihn gives the phone to Onella. When she holds in, the phone flashes its screen and starts to smoke, turning itself off.

**Onella**: (Dropping the phone) What happened!?

**Sihn**: (Picking up the phone) I... don't know? It looked like it was an energy surge or something?

**Onella**: An energy surge?

**Tadesse:** Were you struck by lightning when we weren't looking or something?

**Onella:** It probably wasn't from me. Besides... I dropped it in the mud, it's ruined now.

**Sihn**: It's seen more than mud, it should... (Slowing down) be fine...

The phone is completely fried, and where Onella had held it are scorch marks.

Veca: Are those scorch marks?

**Tadesse:** Damn, Onella! You were struck by lightning! Are your hands okay?

Onella: It wasn't me... I didn't...

**Xochitl**: We- We can figure this out later. We have a bigger problem!

Xochitl points to some flooding that is coming through the door of the barn. As they notice, the flooding becomes more severe and the storm becomes worse, lightning and thunder pound the barn.

Max: (Pointing to a ladder to the upper platform) Up! Right now!

They all go up the ladder. By the time they are all on the upper platform, there is a moving stream of water through the bottom of the barn. Another part of the room blows off, and everything about the situation becomes worse.

**Xochitl**: What do we do!?

Onella: I don't know! Stay together, make sure nothing-

There is a huge crack of thunder, and the wood under Max breaks, and he starts to fall through the platform. By instinct, Veca grabs his arm with her injured hand, gripping his arm, but letting go with a shout of pain, leaving blood on his arm as he falls. When he is about to hit the ground, he disappears. They all have to shout over the wind again.

Sihn: Max!!?

**Veca**: (Holding her hand) I tried- I- Where did he go!?

Tadesse: Max!!!

**Onella**: It's too shallow for him to disappear!! He has to be down there.

**Sihn**: So where did he go!?

**Tadesse**: What is the water is going too fast!?

Onella: I don't know! I can't see!

The barn is suddenly illuminated by a bright light source. Xochitl's skin is glowing.

**Xochitl**: (Panicked) What's happening!!?

Onella: I- I-

**Veca**: You're a flashlight.

**Xochitl**: Why am I glowing!?!?

Sihn: I don't know!!

Onella: Are you hurt!?

Xochitl: No! I- I feel fine!

Onella: Then we can look for Max!!

**Tadesse**: Someone needs to call 911!!

Onella: Use my phone!

Onella attempts to get her phone, but as soon as she picks it up, part of it explodes, burning the palm of her hand.

**Sihn**: Stay away from any electronics! Maybe that could help.

**Tadesse**: (Struggling to stand) I've got it, look for Max.

Tadesse leans against the wall of the barn, cupping his hand over his ear to try and call 911. He ends up sitting down and trying to angle himself out of the rain.

Onella: (To Xochitl) Stay lit up!

Xochitl: (Going to the edge of the loft) I don't even know how to do it! I don't know how I'm doing it!

Sihn and Onella start calling for Max, Veca stands next to Xochitl and keeps her from panicking. There is a colossal snapping sound, and Xochitl starts flashing, instead of the steady glow.

**Tadesse**: (Going over to Xochitl) Are you okay!?

**Xochitl**: I think the barn is collapsing!

A crash erupts, and a section from the opposite wall catches the wind and flies at Xochitl and Tadesse. Tadesse holds out his arms on instinct, and the section of wall is held against a light blue field, with blue sparks flying off of where the section of wall is pushing against it. Xochitl's flashing becomes more erratic.

**Xochitl** and **Onella:** (In unison) How are you doing that!!?

**Tadesse**: (Screaming) I don't know!!

**Xochitl**: Don't let go!!

Onella: Don't hurt yourself!!

**Tadesse**: I'm trying!!

**Sihn**: Can you push it away?!

Tadesse: I don't know!! I just don't want to drop it!

Sihn: We have to get rid of it, somehow!

Veca: Onella!!

Onella: What!?

Veca: Hit it!!

Onella: WHAT!?

Veca: You broke the phones, break the wall!

**Sihn**: She's right! Can you transfer whatever you did to the phones onto that wall!?

Onella: I don't know!

Tadesse: I don't know how long I can hold this!

Xochitl's light stops flickering and the barn becomes pitch black, with the exception of the light blue force field.

**Xochitl**: Do it now!!

Onella: I can't!

Veca: You can. Now do it.

Onella slowly approaches the collapsing wall. As she reaches out to touch it, Tadesse's knee buckles, and he falls backwards, getting back onto his knees before the field can go down.

**Tadesse**: Onella!!?

**Onella**: I- I need something to hit it with!

**Sihn**: You'd break whatever you were using! Kick it, hit it, it doesn't matter! Just push it.

Onella, shaking, reaches out again, but cannot bring herself to touch it. Tadesse's force field disappears, and the wall barrels toward them.

**Xochitl**: Do it now!!

The wall reaches Onella's hands, and as it pushed against her, it stops moving for a moment. The places where her hands were break open, and the wall flies backward. Onella slumps over, trying to not fall. Sihn grabs her under the arms and stands her back up.

Sihn: Are you okay!?

Onella shakes her head, and Sihn supports her weight. Xochitl helped Tadesse stand up and supports him on her shoulder. Veca's shirt is now covered in the blood from her hand.

**Veca**: We still need to find Max!

Max appears under the loft of the barn.

Max: Hello!?

Sihn: Max!!?

Max disappears.

**Sihn**: He's gone again

**Xochitl**: That's impossible!

Tadesse raised his head and looks at Xochitl with a look of "Are you serious?" Max appears on the other side of the ruined barn.

Max:-can't control it!!

Max disappears.

**Xochitl**: How are we supposed to stop him!? We don't know where he's going! Neither does him!

**Sihn**: We can try to knock him off balance, break his rhythm!

Max appears in front of Veca. Sihn and Xochitl flinch, but Veca instantly grabs his arm and yanks him backward, catching him by the collar of his shirt. Max steadies himself, and looks around.

**Max**: What happened!?

**Xochitl**: The explosion must have done something to us!

**Veca**: But why some and not others!?

[End excerpt]

# **Daniel Rinder**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO Educator: Shannon Koropchak Category: Poetry

# **Musical Spaces**

"You have to hear the spaces in between the notes." \*

His words were fumbling around my head

When the chair eased me down - like a parachute

Drawing a skydiver back from the heavenly high, unrecognizably false,

To the harsh, but firm reality of the Earth -

Offered me its armrests with subtle, but telling wrinkles.

I could hear the notes just fine, certainly - they had been echoing discordantly Since that morning -

The blaring of the coffee machine as it marched

Its little army into my brain

And prodded it, like a swarm of flies around a carcass, until it mustered up enough

Annoyance to drag itself somewhere else,

The honking that hit my ears,

Harder than I almost hit that dusty-gray car,

My weighted footsteps falling

Through the looming doors that faced the parking lot with -

Oh no - only fourteen seconds,

Snapping back from summer afternoons, or being

A race-car driver, to a voice telling me something important

Ten minutes from lunch,

And the comfortable misery of that isolated corner,

While the others played outside.

So yes, when that chair finally eased my fall, I could hear the notes,

An incessant flood of mind-throbbing metal.

But a pair of headphones drew the flood through a funnel -

Tapering, it became a focused flow, condensed, and now a gentle stream

Gliding out of Miles Davis's muted horn,

Guided by the rock path laid by the meandering upright bass,

And the pattering of raindrops on the water, the brushes.

The last note was nearly breathed,

And then, only silence -

Space.

<sup>\*</sup> from conversation with Mr. Robert Carter, 9/13/16

# Ella Schmidt

Age: 16, Grade: 11 School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan Category: Poetry

#### My Brother's Daughter

The morning your breakfast hug is sold out in her color, her doughy fingers capsize the tupperware container of soggy Lucky Charms with clumsy conviction only once every marshmallow is gone. Eager palms stretch the void of fatherly approval; she assembles your pride of Lincoln Logs. Morning Joe tells of a plane crashing in a part of the world she has learned in geographically "third" terms—she cannot convince herself it will never happen to her.

The next time you fly to Baltimore, you offer her Benadryl and crossword puzzles. It is not her but the world that percolates vulnerability, she insists; you needn't protect her from herself. She nearly drowns the first time her small head is submerged in a public swimming pool. The young lifeguard scolds you for passing up swim lessons, but it's not your fault—why teach a girl to blow bubbles when she was born insisting she knew how to breathe underwater?

She is introduced to the vintage vinyl store on her seven-and-a-halfth birthday.

Even when we were kids it only existed because people love the static sting of nostalgia, but no daughter of yours will play music on a Rube Goldberg machine until she's tasted the chalky mirth between the tracks of *Quadrophenia*—yours. Her music makes your eyes do somersaults in your skull like the sun taking over the moon's babysitting shift in Melbourne.

All of her calculations end in mixed numbers.

Burying her remainders is like learning to Dutch braid her tangled hair.

When she falls in love for the first time, she is fifteen and you offer her Styrofoam to muffle her clamoring heart.

You have handed yourself over to oblivion in place of growing up; you are still allergic to packing peanuts at forty-six—you have fashioned a buffer not between a woman and the world but between a girl and her father-daughter dances.

She comes home that summer with freckled shoulders and the crisscross of camp sandals tattooed in white ink down brown ankles. She drains her college account on middle-school productions of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and snow globes and holographic handbags prescribed by Sophia Amoruso. (In a few years, she'll write a blogpost on American consumerism, just wait.) You consider DNA-testing to make sure she is really yours: she does leave the faucet on while she brushes her teeth, after all. On multiple occasions she will deem you single-handedly responsible for the paucity of women in engineering.

She teaches you that the intricacy of womanhood outpaces pettiness without prompting. Bewilderment is the rubber stamp of impending gratitude when she sits in the car with you, unable to keep her knees fastened to her chest as her hands' frantic utterance on the crooked framework of the 1950s beatnik persona drowns out *Bikini Kill*—hers. Her angular opinions all sound obtuse when set to your favorite Judd Apatow production. She compares notes on Anaïs Nin over green tea sorbet with your boss long after you've left the dinner table. You call me that night with a list of questions about her.

It feels like an apology.

# Ella Schmidt

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO Educator: Jill Donovan Category: Poetry

#### **Leela**

December was the obvious month for making love but for the death of Mr. Luther's son.

The open-mouthed pores of the sky gushing grime, redolent of unblinking time, estuary-fed.

Psalms for the penny-flecked, unwitting but for our struck men, their skinned elbows keeping them away at Christmas.

The wizened bouquet of cadet in locket, a pastor's boy. Rotting yellow and the late pitcher's mound, clinical decay,

Leela: her vodka soda and retainer on the windowsill, her breath, fixed as during sermon to render roses pedestrian.

This morning she curled her toes inside her rain boots and the bus never came. The evening was vesper and rust and

I wished to be a man of coal and work, underground at sundown and by her altar-side as she blushes a Sunday alabaster.

After grace, I stole the neoplastic card table book and left it sprawled across my desk, smudging clean edges to threadbare desire.

Awaiting the chime of the unfeeling former, becoming nubile. Piet Mondrian in giddy recline, and I was easy to love.

Leela's socks were blue and collected the dust. Her hair, like when we were bathed in sinks and smelled hypoallergenic.

December of time zones, of detergent: I wore the ivy boy around my neck and tasted seminary.

Retribution, as it seeks burial as carp in pulse and teething fault, a boy come home bloodless and anointed. He was death-play, unwoman.

This morning Mr. Luther's voice split and the children were all but Leela sorry, squirming in our requiem clothes.

# **Riley Schmidt**

Age: 16, Grade: 11 School Name: Platte County High School, Platte City, MO Educator: Heidi Mick Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

### **Overcast**

Standing out at the bus stop, anxiety rushing through my head like amnesia. Kids staring, backwards glances in my direction. The sun was just peaking up over the hills in the distance, signifying the oncoming day; a bright and sunny day, but I thought otherwise. Within myself, I knew today would not be sunny or bright, but cloudy and stormy. Within myself, I knew I would only feel this.

Over the summer, I left my home in North Carolina and found myself in Missouri. Though this wasn't my first move, it sure as hell felt like it could have been. As I've come to find out though, not much changes from one move to the next. Dad gets orders from his commander, we pack just after school ends and drive to a new military base. Each time, having to make new friends, new memories, and new roots.

But roots aren't planted easy once you change the soil. Memories are one in a million moments. Friends don't just appear. It all takes effort and patience. It's a draining cycle of day to day work until your roots are set and your memories are made and your friends chosen. All until you need to pack up and say your goodbyes' again.

Back then, I was a shy little child who lacked self esteem and a proud step when she walked. I didn't like to sit alone because I didn't like to be seen but I was too recluse to sit with a group. I didn't like to approach people and I didn't like them approaching me. I was insecure about the way I looked, the way I walked, and the way my clothes fit. I wasn't great at making friends and I hated when things changed.

This was the way I was when my father was moved again. We all left together that time; My brother, my mother, my father and I. It was a rare occasion when my father did not have to leave a few months ahead to work at his new station. No, this time he could help us pack, ship and settle into our new house and our new lives. Although that did not stop him from working as soon as we arrived. While dad worked, mom looked for a job, my brother was left in day care and I was left to my own accord in a place meant to be called home. But, to me at least, "home" still felt foreign.

On a typical day, during that summer, I was unpacking in the morning and rolling in the grass in the afternoon. It was a fairly bland summer and much hotter than I was accustomed to in North Carolina where the temperatures were consistently mild. Besides meeting a few neighbors on the suburban street, there's not much else to be said for that summer.

Skipping forward through the summer, I found myself a few weeks out from school. It was a rush of trying to unpack our last few boxes and back to school shopping. My anxiety heightened as the days flew by. It all seemed too fast; too soon would I have to face the uncertainty of 'the new.' Not that I hadn't already, in my neighborhood, but going to a new school reached a whole new level of "new."

In many ways, going to a new school can be very simple. One can easily pick out the different cliques amongst the students and the teachers. Classes are generally the same no matter where you go. And the lunch meat always maintains its mystery. What changes is you.

I, as the new girl, became a single entity, living essentially on a foreign planet. While everyone else

on the first day back may immediately pair with their respective groups and cliques, I was to stand alone. Something I very much hate doing. In that position, I, and anyone else who has had this experience, felt a great sense of disbelonging. I also felt a heightened sense of self consciousness and shyness. Things that I always felt then, but became worse during the move.

All those negative emotions, they felt rain clouds over my head, even when the day was perfectly sunny.

On that first day back to school, I remember walking up to the bus stop, as anxious as ever about going to school. My neighbor walked me to the stop. As we came up the sidewalk, the others who were waiting didn't say a thing. They stared at me as I came up and found a place behind them. A warm breeze rolled through our hair and the sun peaked over the hills. It would be a beautiful day. That still didn't stop the rain clouds from forming over my head.

A large yellow bus guzzled up from down the road, screeching it's breaks right in front of us. It gobbled up the other kids on the stop. I was left hesitating just outside the doors. I knew I had no other choice, so I stepped up, one foot after another and found a spot in the back of the bus. We rode around the neighborhood for another couple of stops, until the bus was almost at capacity. Then we headed toward school.

During the summer, I only got small glimpses of what the school looked like. I was completely unfamiliar with the inside, other than the cafeteria, where registration had been held. Much like my earlier assessment, I would be walking onto a foreign planet, not knowing the landscape or the indigenous.

When we arrived, hordes of people where unloading buses, then streaming into the building through the wide open doors. All the different faces were overwhelming. Again, I found myself hesitating at the doors of the bus, this time, reluctant to get off. It was uncertain what those doors would hold for me, but I knew, sure as hell, that I'd have to go through them eventually. So I took a step, then another, until I was on my way to the school. All the while, the sunny, perfect day, around me seemed to turn darker as the rain cloud over my head grew larger.

When I finally made it through the doors of the school, I was confronted by another overwhelming sight. Swarms of kids were filed into a gymnasium and separating in some order to different bleachers. Watching everyone walk by and find a seat, I just stood there dumbfound. How did they know where to go? Suddenly, as I was distracted by the scene, a hand tapped my shoulder and I turned to face a pleasantly smiling woman. She asked if I was new and what grade I was in. I said yes, I was new and that was in 7th. She showed me to the 7th grade set of bleachers and she walked off. To this day, I still have no idea who that woman was, but she saved me a few moments of embarrassment.

I found a seat away from everyone else. Enough so that I was away from the noise and the chaos, but still within the crowd and not sticking out like a sore thumb. For the most part, I remained unnoticed by the people around me. Another few minutes went by as students milled in, an occasional passersby would stop and inquire about me. My general reaction was a muffled hello and yes I'm new, my name is Riley. Eventually they got bored and scurried off to their friends. Some of them, I haven't said a word to since.

When everyone settled in, the principals and administration welcomed all the students to a new year of school. Then they released us to our respective classes. I remember clutching my schedule and practically burying my face in it as I hurried through the halls, trying to find my first period class. After turning in circles for almost 10 minutes, I finally found my class and slipped in. It was English class and most of the students had already arrived.

I sat at one of the few remaining desks, trying to avoid eye contact with my classmates. But, when I

had the confidence, I would look up and glance around the room, trying to notice the people I was with and the environment I was in.

The class bell rang, and the teacher started talking in a sweet little voice about what to expect in the class and the syllabus. Just like every other class that followed. In each class I saw many new faces. Then some that were from other classes, some who had said hello in the morning. I should have said hello, and introduced myself. It would have saved a great deal of time. Unfortunately for me I was just too shy and too anxious to get the day over with. And that little cloud hanging over my head? That cloud really didn't help. Nor did it decide to go away.

During the next few months, that cloud persisted. Sometimes it rained, sometimes the thunder roared. Some days it cleared up, but would be back again before I knew it. When it rained, it would erode the soil I was trying to plant my roots in. It dug up memories of my old friends and my old house. Sometimes the lightning would keep people away and keep my voice from being heard. When it got too dark, it kept those moments that should have become memories from being seen. It was hard to keep the clouds away, especially when they were only in my head.

Slowly, over time, they cleared up. Until one day, when it was finally sunny and bright, they never came back. Again, it was slow, a tedious progression of pushing through bad weather and a bad state of mind. But your roots do grow and the unlikely friend comes through and the millionth moment finally becomes a memory.

When moving, when changing or just when you're going through a rough time, it's important to remember patience. It's important to remember that, just because the clouds are here today, it doesn't mean they have to be there tomorrow. It's important to remember that eventually we all need to change, so that we can grow.

It took me long enough to figure it out on my own, but, since then, I've grown on steady roots and made memories with steady friends. All it took was a bit of patience and little bit of rain.

# **Ana Schulte**

Age: 17, Grade: 11 School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker Category: Short Story

# **And There Was Light**

They hadn't spoken since the last one had passed away in his sleep. They sat on opposite sides of the bright orange flames, staring at their feet, wondering who would be the first to go. The boy at dawn, or the girl at dusk? Who would perish first? That's what this was now- a test of time. A waiting game that neither wanted to play. But eventually the two children would have to admit to themselves that this truly was the end, unless they wanted to do something about it. It was all up to them.

One evening, when the ashy sky showed its first sign of clearing, she decided to look at him. The first thing she noticed was the wound below his chest, which had healed considerably since the last time she'd checked. Hope warmed her stomach. The alien feeling surprised her so much so that she had to stop refrain from squealing. Until that moment she hadn't realized how sick she felt, the weight throughout her body. This new lightness inspired the girl to clear her head and finally speak to the boy across the fire, whose neck was beginning to ache from being fixed at the ground.

"Hello," She offered. The word split the air like a sword. The battle had begun and a decision had to be made, and both knew that by initiating a conversation, it was going to be made now.

"Hi." The boy smiled meekly at her. "How are you?"

She stared at him. He knew exactly how she was. Like all else on Earth, "destroyed" was the only word fit to describe anything.

"I always thought it would be me to go, from the very beginning. I think that's what I hoped, anyway." The words came out from her mouth before she could stop them. "Oh."

So they were starting like this, diving right in without hesitation.

"Sorry, it wasn't supposed to come out like that. I don't know. I don't know what to do. It wasn't supposed to be *us* making this decision."

"We don't have to talk about it." No, it seemed he would continue to avoid it.

"I guess..." Her voice grew weaker. "Your stomach looks better." And she would avoid it too.

"Yeah, it stopped hurting a few days ago. I don't know if it matters all that much. I won't be feeling anything soon, one way or another."

"Yeah, but doesn't that mean nothing really matters? We might as well kill ourselves."

A solution that everyone had thought of, but no one dared to vocalize. So, when she said it, both of the kids shut down again. Talking ceased. After a while, the girl made her way back into the mess her pod had become and buried herself in blankets, fighting her way into sleep. The boy did the same, although he slipped away into a tent, which was reckless, but he'd stopped caring long ago.

The next morning, she tried again. This time she was more assertive. She sat down across the fire and looked right at him. At first, he tried to avert her gaze and focus on the can of food he was eating. He *knew* what she was trying to do. She was trying to get him to talk first. That way she could get more out of him. He cleared his throat. She blinked. Finally, the boy opened his mouth.

"When I was little, I used to be really afraid of the dark." He looked at her for assurance. She nodded.

"I guess it's because I thought that maybe if it was too dark for too long, I wouldn't be able to see anything anymore.

"I told a boy at my school about it and he said that I was stupid. That if I paid attention I would know that the longer you stay in the dark, the lighter things actually become. And I keep waiting for that to happen here, I keep waiting for things to become clear, but it's still dark. I'm still... *confused*." She wrung her hands together.

"Me too."

"And you know what sucks?" He went on. "I'll never be a baseball player. I'll probably never have another chocolate chip cookie, or any cookie for that matter. And I'm never going to see my family again. Which I should've gotten over that awhile ago. But now I'm never going to see *anyone* again, except for you."

Despite herself, the girl felt a pang of remorse. Did he think she *wanted* to be stuck with him? Alone? She would've traded her life for any other that had been taken. She knew it was a silly thing to become defensive- after all, he'd had lots of friends when this all started out, including a girlfriend who she knew he loved very much. It must've been awful to see her die. But the girl had friends, too. Watching them slip away without being able to do help him was no worse.

"Yeah, it's pretty bad. I know what you mean, though. Every time I wake up there's a second where I think my mom will be standing over me telling me it's time for school. I used to hate waking up on school days, how stupid is that? I was safe."

He laughed.

"You thought you were safe. We all did, but we never were. You shouldn't get too worked up about that."

"I know. Still, things are heaps more dangerous now. And my Mom isn't here."

"Did you get to call her?" He asked suddenly. "Before...you know."

"Before our entire neighborhood burst into flames? I tried, but she didn't answer. She was probably trying to get my little sister to safety."

The boy perked up. He slowly stood and made his way around the fire to come sit by the girl.

"You had a sister?"

"Yeah, just one. Her name was Emmaline. She liked applesauce and cats, and I miss her like crazy. What about you?" She asked. "What was your family like?"

She turned to face the boy, who was looking down at her inquisitively.

"Huge. Two older sisters, and one younger sister, and a younger brother. My oldest sister was married to this guy Manuel, he sold doorknobs. He was pretty cool. He was supposed to take me to a baseball game the day that everything..."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Not a big deal, we'd been to plenty."

The girl nodded, as if 'we'd been to plenty' made up for the fact that Manuel had probably been burned alive with doorknobs melted to his hands. But maybe the boy didn't want to think about that image. When there had still been others left with them, the girl observed that the boy avoided speaking directly about the attack. He always referred to it as, 'the incident' or, 'that day.' That was probably what she found most irritating about him. When her friends were still alive to talk to, she was loud and clear. "Did you ever think you'd actually hear any sirens go off? Why were we the only ones who went through with the proper safety procedure, and why didn't our teacher get in her safety pod? Why did she stand there like an idiot, zapped into oblivion, while we sat there in our pods, by ourselves, in the dark? And how did you feel, then? When you didn't know who else was out there? Before the communication devices were initiated? When the shield over our pods was supposed to block out the light, but the explosion was so bright it rained through like the sun against your window in the morning. When you could've been the only one who survived, all by yourself, and just as the news in

your pod turned on it flicked off, and the world was dark again and you were alone-"

"Are you okay? Hey, are you alright?" The girl blinked and felt her shoulders being shaken. The boy was standing over her, fanning her with a book. "Um, were you asking me?" She gulped.

"Did I say that out loud?" She mumbled. He nodded softly. "Oh no, I'm sorry. I hope I didn't...I know you don't like talking about that day."

"No, it's fine." He sat back down beside her. "Maybe I should."

She was taken back.

"Oh, okay. So...so how did you feel, then?"

They both stared ahead into the vast plain before them. Broken pods were scattered about, along with pillows and pens, empty water bottles, a hairbrush, a tube of toothpaste, and, they observed, a Bible balanced thoughtfully against a torn cardboard box full of fruit.

"I felt guilty."

His response left the girl surprised.

"Guilty? Why?"

"The same reason you might. I had to work so hard to get a scholarship to our school. My Dad was very hard on me, because he knew that if I got in, I'd have a real shot at college. He never went. Obviously I got in, you know, and it was so nice. There was a library and a real dining hall. But the greatest thing our school had was those goddamned pods."

"Oh."

"When I was in my pod, all I could think about was my younger sister and brother at their school. They were probably so confused. They didn't have any protection. What if they were outside, at recess-" His voice broke and he hid his face in his sleeve. The girl wrapped herself around him and held him as he trembled. They seemed to fade together. The fire illuminated his wet cheeks and warmed her back and sat as a stark reminder of the solitude the pair had been left in. After some time had passed and the fire had dimmed, the boy escaped from the girl's arms.

"Anyway, it's too late now to do anything about it. And we have to make a decision." He told her sternly. She sighed and tucked her head against his shoulder.

"Well, you know the options, don't you?" Her cheeks flushed in embarrassment of the implications.

"Repopulate or let all of mankind die off. Yeah, it's pretty clear to me."

She rolled her eyes.

"That sounds horrific. I think of it more as 'start a family and see what happens' or...don't."

"You're lying to yourself"

"Well fine, which do you want? Do you want to have kids and watch them have sex together and watch *their* kids have sex together? Do you want a gross incest fest leading to the unknown, where either nothing works out or everything works out or the Earth destroys itself again? Is that the reality check you needed?"

"Hey, there's no reason for you to get angry. I was just saying..."

The boy ran his hands through his unkempt hair and inhaled heavily. What was he saying?

"Do you even want to have kids with me?"

Another silence fell across the dead campsite. That was the real question, of course. And while the boy was handsome and kind and strong, the girl didn't think she wanted that at all, if she was allowed to think selfishly. She had never really looked forward to having kids. Especially kids that would be the future for her entire species. She wouldn't be teaching her *kids* how to cook, she would be teaching the *world* how to cook. And read, and write, and what if she couldn't remember polynomials correctly? She'd never been good at math. Maybe he was. But what if he wasn't? And what if they fought? What

if she could never learn to love him?

- "Friends with responsibilities to keep the human race running," She murmured. "Benefits sounds more promising."
- "Yeah, and we're not even friends, really," He said with a half smile. "I mean-"
- "No, you're right. We're just two people in the wrong place at the wrong time."
- "The only ones who made it out alive." He leaned back and wiggled his eyebrows. "Maybe that means something."
- "Maybe it doesn't. Maybe it just happened because everyone got injured or sick before we had the chance."
- "So who's next, then?"

They stared at each other. Another pro, another con. Die purposefully, or let it come when it comes? Tit for tat. The fire crackled and filled the emptiness in the air that had been left by a question finally spoken after days of being buried beneath fear and apprehension. *Who's next?* 

- "I don't want to answer that." She replied. "When is lunch?"
- "Lunch happens when we make up our minds."
- "Earlier this morning that's what I wanted, but not anymore. I realized that I don't have a clue what to do. What's the point of doing this now? We have all the time in the world-"
- "Until one of us is mauled by a dog or eats the wrong berries or dies of radiation poisoning! And then the other will have to decide this all on their own."

And that's when she thought of it. Maybe there was a way that no decision had to be made after all. Maybe there was way to never know. A way to make the right and wrong decision both at once, because the outcome would never be known. A way to never be alone.

- "I'll leave." She said. The boy stared at her, confused.
- "Excuse me?"
- "I'll leave. And you won't follow me."

He scoffed.

- "You can't be serious. What, purposefully go off on your own? I get that maybe you're mentality is that of the 'fuck it, let's stop delaying the inevitable truth' kind, but it's crazy, and I won't let you do it." "Think about it! If we both go our own ways, we'll never be alone."
- "And how do you propose that?"

"You'll never know if I'm dead, and I'll never know if you're dead. We'll always be alive to each other. Maybe we'll find other people. Maybe there's water out there, or trees. We'll keep walking, and if we die, the other person will never know. There will always be some sort of hope. But if we stay at this campsite, there won't be any hope at all. Just the truth. The truth doesn't belong here." Silence. In the beginning there had been nothing but silence, and it seemed that in the end, that's all there would be too. That's all there had been. A decision was made. The girl packed away her things shyly, avoiding any sort of look towards the boy. He did the same. They were suddenly all too aware of how human the other was, with families and feelings and irrational tendencies. Stuck in a pitiful situation because one man had decided to play God, signaling the obliteration all the life and land he could see with the flick of his wrist. Nothing would ever be the same.

The sun was setting now. Throughout the day, more smoke had cleared from the sky and for the first time in months, vibrant hues soaked through clouds and stained the sky pink and purple and yellow and blue. As the girl folded up her last belonging into a bag, she noticed that the boy was staring at the sky. She knew she was crazy for making this choice, he knew she was crazy, and she felt sorry she was dragging him along into a life where neither of them would ever feel security, or the warmth of another human again. She walked to him. On her way to bid him a final farewell, she picked up a piece of fruit

from the cardboard box on the ground to offer him a sort of consolation.

"Here," She said as she drew closer, extending her arm. He took the fruit from her hand and bit into it. She leaned against him and followed his gaze to the stars that had begun to appear above.

"Thanks." The boy squeezed her shoulder. "I still think this is ridiculous."

"Well, I've made up my mind. I'm doing this and there's no turning back."

"Fine, then promise me something." He left her touch to stand in front of her, peering into her eyes. She shrugged and nodded. "One day, if you feel desperate or alone, try to find this place. I know you think we can't stay here anymore and that we need to leave, and maybe we do. It's bare and dead and slipping way. But it's everything we know. So when it's the end, when you know it's the end, come back. I will too. And maybe we'll meet again."

"Maybe." She agreed, though she was doubtful. She reached out to hold his hand, but he quickly retreated from her grasp. She shrugged. "Goodbye."

And with that, she turned her back to him and began her trek into what was left of the world. He watched her push forth until her silhouette disappeared in the horizon with the sun. *She could die tonight*. He thought. *She could die tomorrow*. Or perhaps she really would find something worth living for. Perhaps he would too. He looked at the fruit he was holding and dropped it to the ground, preparing to walk the other way.

Baseball was gone, and so was math. But at one point, long ago, none of those things had been there at all. Stars hid for eternity before a hand flipped the light switch. Are all ends beginnings, and all beginnings ends? He couldn't say. But if he held out long enough, he believed, he would live to see the sun rise once again.

# **Bella Smith**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Bode Middle School, Saint Joseph, MO

Educator: Josie Clark Category: Poetry

#### **Wrapping Paper**

as if i do not matter

Wrapped tightly around my existence Stability, How life has always been. I am fragile, Easily torn, easily pulled apart, easily shredded I feel the anticipation building,

i know soon it could all be over it will all go away perhaps it will be liberating, i will be lifted into the wind, or maybe it will be excruciating, i will be torn mercilessly, thoughtlessly, into irreparable shreds they knew I was close to being gone but they left me alone, assuming that I would survive on my own, that no one would care, that my scratches didn't matter but as the day approaches, i know I need help i know that i won't make it the day is here, i can feel it. the excitement among them is palpable the scent in the air is carefree they tear me apart, rip me to shreds they squeal with joy at what they have found their reward. vet they give no thought to what they have left behind who they have left behind it hurts like nothing I have ever felt before once it is over, i am scattered, pushed to the side

they got what they wanted, and they will move on to the next i want to shout a warning, but I am in pieces, slivers of who I once was, eventually, I accept that I must let go, and this is strangely gratifying

# Liam Storan

Age: 17, Grade: 11 School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO Educator: Shannon Koropchak Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

#### Sailing to Imab:

Entry 1: I simply had to get away from everything. My children are brats, the little runts, always questioning me. I work tormenting hours every day going from patient to patient, whining person to person. I've already had enough whining by the time I get home. Why didn't my kids understand that? They should have been respectful, more receptive to my commands. It's no wonder they're gone. They shouldn't have snuck out past my ordered curfew; they shouldn't have ripped out of the driveway at top speed in their cars. God only knows where they are now, maybe lost deep in the dark city or perhaps in the gloomy adjacent forest, filled only with crumbling, maggot worn trees, no place for my reckless children. No, I simply had to get away from all of this: my missing children, the endless police interrogations, the suspicious eyes polluting my neighbors' heads. I may be strict at times but I am not rash like my children. I am a doctor, a man of the people, a man of logic.

Even as I write this message, I am drifting through the smooth pillowy waters, a finite being lost in the glassy infinite, bound for no true direction. This trip will surely cleanse my soul of all the chaos occurring around me. Peace will finally become attainable, if only for these two mere weeks.

Entry 2: I'm sailing to the island of Jarifa today, a lesser known island on the very edge of the Caribbean. The views are supposedly breathtaking, God's own garden if you will. I myself have never met the man, but I would assume he would have an exceptional garden.

Entry 3: Jarifa was incredible, the perfect thing to energize this long aching body after mind numbing hours and countless night shifts. During the day I partook in a tourist expedition through the mountains of the island; my wife always did say I should be more outgoing, god rest her cheating soul. The guide, a girl in her twenties and straight out of college, annoyed me - reminded me too much of my kids-; however, the views were positively superb. Only God himself could have painted such a picture as that of the setting sky: burning reds of the grand fiery ball drowning in the icy blues of the sea until the sun was all but gone.

I spent the night dancing away, gorgeous girls all around me and the moon serving as an overhanging ornament to the intoxicating evening. Although the day belonged to God, the night surely was that of the devil. Temptation was surrounding me, suffocating me, making me bow to its will. Who am I to resist? It was simply time for me to loosen up and embrace the bewitching music, puppeting my limbs. I see the millions of crimson threads now, digging into my body, worming into my nervous system like parasites. I have tried to sever these strings on multiple occasions only to bend perfectly exceptional steel scissors. I now know my only option is to give in to them, for better or worse.

Entry 4: I hate my kids, I really do. They knew how things would play out in this unforgiving universe. They should have listened, obeyed me; I am first and foremost a master before a father. My children knew the certain consequences of their actions. It was their choice to behave as they did, never mine. Trying to escape from me was their ultimate sin, and I merely executed God's will in supplying reciprocal punishment.

Entry 5: My next destination is Imab, another outer island of the Caribbean but on the completely other side of the archipelago. This journey requires at the minimum four days of sailing, assuming only the calmest of waters and gracious god-given winds. I plan not to anchor at one of the central islands

along this immense trek as an old challenge exists to sail between Jarifa and Imab without stopping once to restock, just like the people of ancient times. I am no man to back down from a challenge. God has given me the courage and the devil has given me the craving to complete this task.

Entry 5: It seems that I have lost my way. How could I have possibly lost my way?

Entry 6: I'm not going to die out here, am I?

Entry 7: No, I simply can't die. I am the master of my own destiny. I control my fate. I will survive even when those of around me choose not to. Action, I need to embrace cold calculated action if I wish to live on. Unfortunately, no islands or even the smallest chunks of land, my potential salvation, are visible around me. Only the water, the "glassy infinite" which I used to so highly admire, exists in an endless army around me, steadily turning black as night arrives.

Entry 8: I broke my flashlight on the side of the boat in a fit of frustration. As the glass shattered the light trapped inside began to whizz around my head like an enraged gnat. I began to swat at the orb of white and yellow brightness desperately, eventually achieving a direct hit which sent the light spiraling down into the water, letting up a puff of smoke. I stood for but thirty seconds, silently celebrating my victory, when the orb returned as a color similar to crimson. The light darted directly towards my head, passing straight through my flailing arms and into my eyes. All I could feel was unadulterated agony as my lovely brown eyes began to boil, steam coming off them in slithering wisps. I lacked the fluids to cry so I resorted to screaming, eventually lacking the strength to do even that. In a final burst of energy, straight from the man upstairs himself, I struck myself on the head with the smashed flashlight, allowing myself to enter the gleeful world of unconsciousness.

When I awoke, both the smashed flashlight and menacing orb it once contained had vanished into the night, perhaps down into the depths surrounding me. Without the additional light, only the dreary moon illuminates the objects around me, giving everything a ghostly look, bleaching my own flesh stark white like a corpse. I hope this does not serve as an omen.

Entry 9: I shredded my map. It's no matter though. I am a man of great wisdom and memory; I recall that Imab lays directly to the west of Jarifa. I will merely wait for the rising sun and go in the opposite direction. Thank God for blessing me with such wits; any man would be lucky to have me as his doctor.

<u>Entry 10:</u> Curse God! He has sabotaged my brilliant plan! How foolish it was for a sinner to enter such a beautiful place, God's domain, God's own garden.

I awoke to something terrible this morning, something truly despicable. Water remained around me on every side, the only constant in this chaos. No, the thing that troubled me was was the reinforcements which have come to assist the water in their endless purpose of suffocating me.

Light, gallant blinding rays, ram into me from four directions. I awoke to four suns, one in each cardinal direction! What nonsense! What utter malarkey! Of course only God himself would be the one able to best me.

<u>Entry 11:</u> All remaining scraps of food have been consumed. I brought solely four days-worth of food and water for this trip; I had not anticipated God's mischief. Crevices, small canyons, have begun to form in my flesh from lack of fat; the urge to rip off my skin as to even up these cracks is more than persistent. Skin lies in shredded traces all over the boat; I have even begun to eat this skin in thin rolls, additionally removing strips of flesh when I need more substantial nourishment. At this point, the flesh itself looks more like bone than muscle due to its paleness from decreased blood flow. I fancy myself a cannibalistic skeleton, sailing in the depths of hell.

<u>Entry 12:</u> I attempted fishing today. A solid chunk of meat, straight from my lower stomach, was placed on a makeshift hook of hardened dead skin with hair to serve as a line. After a long period a fish finally took to my flesh. I pulled up multiple times, jerking the line, and something finally gave

way. I had hooked the eye of the fish; the orb dangled like a slimeball, taunting me for my failure to capture the fish itself. I need real food, not an eyeball for God's sake! I am a proud, noble doctor; I would never succumb to eating this revolting fleshy sphere, even if Death himself would come for me otherwise.

Entry 13: I decided to eat the eyeball. I brought the cursed object to my lips, closed my eyes, but just as I was about to bite down into the mushy substance, a sudden wave rocked the boat. The eye fell out of my grasp and plunged into the ocean, its place of origin. In a moment of pure panic, I plunged in after it, momentarily cooling my searing, sunburned skin.

In the water I saw something I do not wish to recollect, but yet my pen pushes onward. In the water, this crystal, beautiful water, rested the devil. His curvy horns crowned an ebony body oozing bright green sludge like a reanimated corpse. His most striking feature however were his eyes or really the lack of one; his left eye socket was empty, with only a bottomless pit to serve as a poor replacement. He smiled as he saw the now pulsing eyeball sink down into his grasp, and he shoved the sphere into his head. A sharp clicking sounded as tendons secured the eye in place.

Around the devil now emerged two new figures of pale and dissolving flesh; they could have been my twins. Similar to the devil, they each lacked an eye. Bulky seaweed, long overgrown, wrapped around their bodies, chaining them to the ocean. Upon closer inspection I realized one of the figures was a boy, while the other was a girl; both were teenagers, late teens to be precise. They were my son and daughter, or at least what remained of my despicable children. They pointed at me, my head in particular, with a smile and began to swim towards me with unnatural speed and a singular motive. My children, being the greedy punks I knew them to be, wanted to pluck the eyeballs from my skull and make them their own.

I swam upwards as fast as I could in my shriveled form; my arms pawed at the water as if I was digging myself from a grave. I perceived their icy hands gripping my feet and then my legs when I finally broke the surface of the water and crawled into the boat, gasping for any morsel of air. My children's faces rested just below the waterline; for some reason, they would not go above it.

At this point I fainted from pure exhaustion into a long-needed sleep.

<u>Entry 14:</u> The number of suns has increased from four to uncountable. A circle of pure light scorches the sky, enclosing me in a dreadful heat as blistering as hell itself. I am ashamed to say I can no longer continue.

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My children's faces rest just below the water, smiling at me. My daughter's hair is wiry and jagged. An assorted group of crabs and fish lay strangled in its depth; she calmly takes a struggling fry - an angelfish if my wisdom holds - and shoves its body up to its fin down her gaping oily throat. As she chomps down, the sound of the cracking of bones and mutilation of flesh is distorted by the water, creating a noise akin to a crackling scream - the sort of scream one makes while begging for an end to the pain, a plea for death. I frequently heard this sound in the operating room. After chewing for a minute or so in the slow deliberate fashion that had matched my daughter's personality, she opens her mouth to reveal a slimy orb, the fish's eye, tucked between her tinted green teeth, covered by the remnants of her once hot pink braces. I picked those out for her myself, getting quite the deal I must admit. She ferociously spits the grimy sphere out of the water directly towards my head. From pure instinct, I take a step back and instead of finding its mark square on my forehead, the eye hits what's left of my right foot (the flesh has rather an earthy flavor after being left to soften in the suns). I stop for a second, gazing at the eye resting on my foot which in fact gazes at me as well. Suddenly, an explosion of earth shattering pain erupts from the remaining nerve cells of my foot as the eye burns straight through it, creating the odor of burnt old flesh. (Is it wrong I find myself peckish in this

moment?) As a result of this searing torment the devil's newest henchman bring upon me, I once again act in instinct and jump back, getting flipped over the backside of the boat into the water with my children. Before I can even breathe I feel motion in the water as my lovely children come to greet me, beautiful smiles as always.

Both my son and daughter wrap their arms around me in a choking embrace, forcing their faces close to mine, revealing how the tendons of their empty eye sockets are now pulsing, causing the voids to enlarge and then shrink. They begin to tighten their grip to an inhuman extent. Of course, bones soon shatter. My doctor's arms - arms that saved many worthy and noble lives- now lay limp and useless at my sides. My ribs pop one by one, starting from the middle and then up and down, almost creating a melodic tune with the sharp precise sound of their crunching, an honestly sickening Minuet in G. In my final moments, from the sheer pressure, both of my eyes shoot out of their sockets like joyful brats bursting from school. I hear the gleeful laughter of my children as they receive the one present I have ever given them. God has successfully converted me into a charitable man. Hopefully, I will carry this respectable quality into hell.

# **Lindsay Vanover**

Age: 13, Grade: 8
School Name: Platte City Middle School, Platte City, MO
Educator: Kelly Miller
Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# Alexander the Great (and that one chick that looks a lot like him)

Little sister: the annoying little pest that "gets everything they want." The one who never gets in trouble, the one who bugs everyone. The one who is constantly asked, "Oh, are you Alex's sister? He was such a good kid. Practically a genius." The one that gets years of teachers saying, "Vanover. I know that name! I remember Alex, such a bright kid." But me? I'll always just be "his sister." Constantly being compared to him and his greatness. You know how there's always that one brilliant kid who wins piles of awards and is good at everything? Yeah, I'm his little sister.

Studies show that the older sibling is more likely to turn out successful. Meanwhile, their little brother or sister is constantly having to fight to get out of their shadow. I work, and I work, and I work, but no matter what, he's always better than me. Oh, you think you're good at math? You took a high school math class in 7th grade? He's already done that. And done better than you. Plus he skipped a grade in Comm Arts too. You think you're good at acting? Looks like he just got the lead in the musical.

What makes it even worse is that we're so similar. Same face. Same hobbies. Same actions. Same interests. But we couldn't be more different. He's like an artist, and I'm just the awkward intern. The intern that's never going anywhere, stuck on the merry-go-round of coffee cups and "yes boss"es. Just standing by while the artist works his magic. And then you get that feeling.

I know that feeling all too well. That gut wrenching feeling when you work your butt off, only to realize he's still better than you. It's hard to describe. It feels like someone's tying your stomach in a knot. It feels like someone just stepped on top of you, crushing all of your bones. All the blood rushes from your body, leaving you with nothing but a sad-puppy look on your face. Tears burn in your eyes, but you have to force them back. Because if you cry, you're just even worse than him in another way. Just swallow back the tears and plaster a smile on your face, because you're supposed to be proud of him. He's your brother. Meanwhile, a chorus of voices scream in your head. You're not good enough. You're terrible at everything. You have no talents. You'll never be as good as him. You'll always be "his little sister." And there's nothing in the world you can do about it. Unless you want to sell your soul to the devil. Which wouldn't even work, because you're worthless.

Imagine feeling that 24/7. It's not like it's his fault or anything. He's a great brother. Well, when he isn't kicking me and shoving me around. I know he doesn't mean to make me feel like crap. It just kind of happens.

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I slip into the car, escaping the pounding summer sun.

- "So how did the auditions go?" Mom cooes.
- "Meh. The music for Phantom of the Opera is amazing, though," I mumble.
- "Do you know what parts you got?"
- "I got the Phantom," Alex grumbles from the back seat.
- "Wow, that's amazing! Congratulations! I'm so proud of you! What did you get Lindsay?"
- "I'm the auctioneer."
- "Oh." Her face plummets and disappointment drips from her words. "I bet that'll be fun!" she chirps,

trying to mask that little falter. But I don't miss these things. I don't miss the "YOU DID AMAZING" vs. "that was nice." I'm not deaf.

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I try to tune it all out. Tune out all the praise he gets. Tune out the voices in my head, telling me I'm not good enough. Tune out all the people at school, saying I'm too smart. To bad my brain and ears aren't a radio. It doesn't work like that. I can't just "not hear" everyone else. Because I know they're saying something. I know it's not good. But I still listen, because I have to. No matter how much I know I'll regret it, I always listen. And it always turns out bad.

"How are you so smart?"

"Ugh, you always get 100%."

"This isn't fair. You always get everything."

They act like I can't hear them whispering. Like I can't hear them talking about me. Their voices pound on me like rain drops made of lead. Every time, bringing me down more. Making me feel worse. Until I feel like bug guts smashed and crusted into the carpet. I know this sounds really stuck-up, but it isn't my fault that I learn quickly. But people always act like I'm an alien, just because of those three numbers. 1. 0. 0. They act like I don't try. Like I haven't struggled to get here. Like everything in my life is perfect. Well guess what? SURPRISE! It's not.

And then all the people who I used to laugh with slowly start to blow away, like they're made of dust. They leave me at the faint sight of someone better. I'm just that piece of tape stuck to your sock. And tomorrow, when you put on a new sock, I'll just be thrown into the washing machine. Tossed into the swirling mass of other lonely clothes. Until all the adhesive is stripped off. So now I'm even more useless then I was before.

It's even worse when you feel it coming. It's barely noticeable, but I notice everything. All the inside jokes that I don't get. The group chats I'm not on. When we're walking down the sidewalk, and I'm the one who has to walk alone behind everyone else. It really shakes you to the core. And soon the people you used to talk to every day stop talking to you. They leave you behind and forget about everything. All the late night conversations, all the laughing and crying. All gone.

When darkness crashes down, so do my thoughts. Tremendous tidal waves of thoughts and emotions pummel me and ricochet through me like tremors. I kind of like laying in bed and just thinking. Finally tuning back in to everything. Then again, I hate it. Because when my mind wanders, it isn't all sunshine and rainbows. Now don't get me wrong, it's not all death and depression either. I'm a relatively happy person (when I'm not hangry). Sometimes I just need a break from all that Barbie-like smiling. So I think. I think about the day, about everything that happened, good and bad. Sometimes I think about the hot foreign exchange student that rides my bus. And sometimes I think about how crappy of a person I am. (As you can see, I'm not very consistent when it comes to my emotions.) I just lay there while everything comes crashing down on me. The words, both spoken and unsaid, the pitiful glances, the silent glares. Until my brain refuses to work a single second more. Then, I can finally sleep. And then start it all over again.

So I just clap along with the thunderous applause of the audience. I smile when his name booms over the intercom, telling him he won gold. Telling him how good of a writer he is. How good of an actor. Mathematician. Friend. And no matter how good I am, no matter if I also win gold (which, let's be honest, probably won't happen because nobody cares about some girl rambling about her sibling while she sits in a huge house with an amazing life) he'll still be better. Because he's him. And I'm me.

# **Evan Williams**

Age: 16, Grade: 11 School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO Educator: Megan Zmudczynski Category: Flash Fiction

#### **Strings Attached**

Her pale, veined face lay over the arm of the sofa, her body slumped lifelessly along its urine-stained cushions. On the backs of her cadaverous hands were embedded threadlike wires, poking through her porcelain skin, then vanishing. A similar phenomenon could be observed on the top of her head, the wires protruding gracefully through her ghastly white hair. So too, did the wires penetrate the tops of her feet, slicing through a thin layer of dead skin, and latching themselves firmly around her metatarsals.

The room itself was rather bland, its nearly uninterrupted expanse of black flooring was impeded by the couch upon which the woman had been laid. The long stretch of black floor was marred by an innumerable number of scratches and chips, an almost beautiful imperfection which seemed to fit the scene quite nicely. Blinding spotlights looked out over the floor, striking the sofa with white-hot light. A deafening silence hung in the air, almost as if someone were watching, waiting for something to happen. The opening notes of Dock Boggs' Pretty Polly broke the silence, the hollow ring of his banjo giving rise to chills on the woman's wrinkled body.

Four counts into the song, her wrist snapped upward, audibly cracking. The woman's fingers snapped along in perfect time to the beat of the song. Her head popped off the arm of the sofa, a drop of saliva falling from her open, toothless mouth. Her shoulders slowly rose from the cushions, caving in on themselves, then correcting their posture when she became fully upright. Her head drooped down for a moment before it too was violently jerked back into position. Her jaw snapped shut, eliciting the dull thud of gum striking gum. As the spotlight followed, her eyelids slowly raised themselves, revealing two white spheres, red streaks striking through the middle from the sides, all the color drained from the irises. The wires pulled taut as the bag of bones was lifted off the couch, hovering over the scarred wooden floor for just a moment. The music crescendoed as the tips of her toes touched the cold ground. The tension in her feet increased as she was forced to tap her toes. As the beat grew faster, so did her movements, dragging her lifeless body across the floor. The holes from which the marionette strings protruded began to bleed, the drip drip of the crimson liquid hitting the floor, eerily close to being on beat. As the music reached its climax, so too did the harrowing choreography. A complex ritual of tap dancing intermingled with a variety of hand gestures reminiscent of the roaring 20s filled the corners of the stage.

Her motion came to an abrupt halt as the music slowed. Her gaping white eyes fell closed, her wrists relaxed, and her feet dangled downwards as if broken. Her mouth returned to its original position just as the closing notes of the song played. The lights began to dim as the distinct sound of applause rang out from just beyond the edge of the fading light. The strings attached to her head and hands released their steely grip, and the corpse fell to the ground with a thud. The curtains began to close as the woman's fingernails dug their way into the floorboards, clawing for a grip as the strings attached to her feet reeled her away from the remaining light.

**Kylie Williams** 

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: David H Hickman High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Nancy White Category: Flash Fiction

#### **Picture Book**

When the noises around can't be heard and the words can't be read, you must make up stories through what you see in the pictures. 18 years old and infatuated. I had the most stunning man holding my hand as I walked. Love at first sight wasn't real till I laid my eyes on him. His name was John. He was my first kiss, my first "I love you" and now my first heartbreak.

Growing old together had its ups and downs. We both never learned to read because education was hard to get in my time. To make it even more difficult, we were both deaf. All we had in our silent world was each other. That was all we needed. It was good enough for the both of us.

We laid next to each other, in an empty room, with nothing but a few blankets and a small chair in the corner of the room. The only thing that kept us company in our hidden world was a book with no words. And every night we would read a different story.

I'll never be sure if we were imagining the same fairytale, but we seemed so in sync. Gasping and laughing at the same time. Gripping our hands in suspense and letting go in relief. Our heartbeats were marching to the same beat. There was nothing quite like it.

As we sat in the chair, my legs crossed over his, we would read a different story out of the same book. There's this one picture, it's of this girl brushing her horse. Hair loosely falling out of her braid and a boy watching her from the side. So simple yet so meaningful. Every time the page was turned to that picture, I would think of the way John looked at me. Growing up I thought love would be a one way street, but John looks at me with the same eyes as the boy in the book. He was in love with me and I, with him.

After three years of being together, we decided to start a new journey of marriage. We didn't have family or friends around. In fact, there wasn't even have a minister. But love to us, was choice, not a document, and we chose to dedicate the rest of our lives to each other. With the cheapest rings and the simplest setting, we vowed to always accompany each other in our rather hushed lives. That night was one I'll never forget. It was no different than any other, but the fairytale I read at bedtime was my very own. It was ours.

I can remember the lengths of his breath. As I laid my head on his chest, with every inhale, and with every exhale. I can still feel the pulse of his heart. While I fell asleep to the smooth drumbeat. I imagine it being the most beautiful music. Falling in love with someone, means learning every inch. The flawed and the beautiful. The beginning to the end. His story was engraved in the palm of my hand, yet I discovered more every second. Yearning to learn more. My story was tattooed onto him, he knew every twist and turn, but saw new colors every day. We were so effortlessly connected.

This morning, at the crack of dawn, I awoke to no more music. Gone so peacefully, in the arms of someone who loved him so dearly. This fairytale will forever be my favorite. It was ours. One I read every day and hope to relive when I see him again. While I wait a short while for my time to come, I will continue to create fantasies from this picture book. And tonight, I will read the most somber story of them all.

# **Emilia Wisniewski**

Age: 13, Grade: 8 School Name: Platte City Middle School, Platte City, MO Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

#### The Boy with the Golden Leaves

I sit comfortably on the park bench and it seems like the world around me has fallen silent. The leaves stay still and don't cooperate with the wind and the birds stopped chirping their high melodies. I looked at the landscape around me and I felt at peace. My ruby, flowy coat, hand-knitted mittens and wool beanie kept me toasty in the bitter September afternoon. Poland has never looked as beautiful and enchanting as it was in this moment.

I jolt out of my quiet wonderland and spin my head towards a squirrel who's feet cracks the multicolored leaves, breaking the quiet atmosphere. For a minute, I was angry with the woodland creature. How dare they disturb my peace?

"Go! Please!" I whisper while making frantic hand motions, signaling the squirrel towards the lavish oak tree, the true centerpiece of the park. The animal only looks at me with soulless eyes, seeing right through me. It runs off into the bushes past the tree as I take meager steps toward it, relieving me greatly.

I hear three grand bells chime the town and hear fast-paced footsteps coming towards the enclosed park. I swiftly get out of the park as the students were piling in and head over to the mossy bridge, my second most favorite place in all of Strzegom. The bridge crossed over a little stream that now has autumn leaves riding with the current, but is usually a crystal clear stream that you can see the colorful pebbles underneath. The deterioration of the bridge just adds to its beauty, as well as the vines wrapped around it.

I hear hushed footsteps behind me and I spin around to see a sandy haired boy, who looks to be younger than me, maybe grade four, with a yellow shirt with dust and dirt all over it and sharp blue overalls prancing towards me. I went to say hello, but he merely passes me. I turn my head with his movement and he stops and looks down to the leaf infested waters below.

"Hello," I blurt out trying to make conversation with the boy. He kept looking at the leaves in fascination. Maybe he doesn't understand English? Oh goodness, my Polish is absolutely out of practice and I can't say a single sentence without forgetting a word or stuttering. I muster up all the knowledge and courage I could to introduce myself as well as get his name.

"Czech, Nazywam sie Julia, a ty?" Hello my name is Julia, and you?

He shifts his eyes toward me but looks down at the leaves again and his eyes widen beyond compare. He speeds off the bridge and around to the stream and runs through the water. What on Earth was he doing? The boy is going to catch a cold if he doesn't get out of the freezing water! He plants his feet in the middle of the wide stream, cupping his hands to catch a limp leaf. He looks at it with joy and

examines it for a solid minute. I only gaze at him and the leaf, trying to uncover what special qualities it had.

The boy reaches the bridge with his legs shaking mildly from the frosty stream. His glimmering green eyes were filled with wonder and were glaring at me. He pulls out a dirt covered pouch that has been used quite frequently from behind him and unties the string that was tightly wrapped around the mouth of it. I peek inside and it is mesmerizing. The bag was filled with shimmering golden leaves that shine like the dazzling sun. There are about twenty leaves in the measly bag, which was a surprising amount for its small space; it was no doubt able to light a gloomy room. "These are truly spectacular. Where did you find them?"

The boy's smile flattens and he looks at me with confusion. That's right! He doesn't understand English.

"Przepraszam. Er... Nie jestem swietny w m-mówic po polsku." Excuse me. I'm not great at speaking Polish.

He nods, understanding.

"Skad-d te pieknosci?" I ask slowly, still getting the hang of speaking this much Polish. *Whence these beauties?* He makes a circling motion with his index finger, which I understood it as that he found it around town.

He turns his bag to the other side and points at his name faintly written on the bag. It read Michal.

Michal handed me a note he had just wrote that said "Nie moge mówic," which translates to, "I cannot speak."

I nod respectfully. I was now aching to know why he couldn't speak. Was it from birth? Did he somehow get into a freak accident, coming out with the curse of having no voice?

"Poznaj mnie na moscie jutro." Meet me at the bridge tomorrow.

Michal's face glimmered brightly once again, his head violently shook up and down.

I stroll across the bridge, opposite of the park, and he the other way. What an interesting little boy.

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I roam to the bridge, eager to learn more about Michal and about his shining leaves. He was there early, his eyes scanning the glossy stream for more leaves. I'm glad I wasn't the only one who was thrilled about the meet up. I walk strongly towards the bridge, the light wind breezing through my hair and my favorite coat. He whirls his body away from the water and grins pleasingly. He scavenges behind his back with his hands and obtained his ragged pouch and pulls out two sparkling leaves, which he found that day.

We glared down at the flowing stream in complete silence. I've been teaching myself Polish for the last

7 hours since I met Michal and I've been pumped up to strike up some small talk.

"Zylem w Ameryce przez wiekszosc mojego zycia, ale przeniósł sie do Polski kilka lat temu," I speak confidently, stringing my words together perfectly, getting every pronunciation right. I have lived in America for most of my life, but moved to Poland a couple of years ago.

Michal looked impressed and nodded his head, making me giggle.

He whips out a blank sheet of paper and a cheap blue ink pen with a crushed cap. He scribbles down words too fast for me to read properly. When he finished, he hands me the paper and it translated to, 'what part of America did you live in?'

"New York."

Once again, the quiet came over us and Michal went skimming through the stream with eyes. I got tired of looking at him with hopes of finding new glowing leaves to keep, so I proposed a sort of quest.

"Moze moglibysmy znalezc lisci w parku?" Maybe we can find leaves in the park?

His green eyes grew bigger and his grin expanded to his cheeks.

We head off to the park and found countless of leaves, at least fifteen. The park had been an absolute goldmine! We go near the school and the closest thing we found to a gold leaf was a torn up leaf with spots all over it. We pursued the town for hours and I finally wore myself out.

"Do widzenia!" I speak, waving like a madman. Goodbye!

Michal gave a tiny wave back at me and we went our separate ways. I skipped across the bridge but everything stopped when I heard heartless cackles and heavy steps behind me. I hesitantly rotate myself around and in the distance I spot three muscular boys strongly kicking something I can't make out. One of the boys moves to the right and I see the tangled blond hair that belonged to Michal.

I want to bolt to him, help him. For some reason, I just keep staring in horror. The boys find Michal's dirty bag filled with leaves. My eyes widen and my hands cover my mouth. One of them runs to the bridge and dumps them into the river like trash. The other two boys howl with laughter while Michal wimps with sorrow, not by his bloody nose or his bruised arms, but because he lost the thing he worked for most: his leaves. I'm too damn afraid to do anything to help my friend when I have a clear open window to do so. I sprint the other direction, my tears welling up my vision, and I don't dare to look back.

I lay motionless on the small park bench, deciding whether I should go to the bridge today or not. What an idiot I was, letting Michal get injured by those god awful boys. I need to see him. I get up quickly, which makes my head dizzy, trotted to the bridge... and he wasn't there, searching for leaves like usual.

I was mildly upset when I shouldn't have been. First, I didn't help Michal when he needed me there the

most, and now I expect him to be here all cheery for my selfish needs? I'm pathetic.

I'm going to stay here until he comes back, which isn't the brightest idea, but I need to stand by hope. I make my way to the ancient bridge and sit down with a thud, looking to my left and right so often I started getting nauseous and occasionally got a headache.

The sun starts to set, casting an amber glow on the town and its bright shine makes the autumn leaves more filled with color than uniqueness than ever. I hear noisy footsteps come to my right and I see Michal frowning heavily, his left eye swollen, his right hand was bright pink and his legs had a purple tint with even darker spots on some areas.

He comes towards me and falls next to me ungraciously. We don't dare look at each other. Michal broke the stillness in the air when I hear the crumpling of paper. I glance at Michal and he pulls out a wadded note and slams it onto my lap. I open the note and it read, 'Czy nadal dbac o mnie?'

#### Do you still care for me?

I couldn't believe he said it. I glare at him and see tears stream down his face. He tries to hide it, but fails. I rip the note in small pieces that goes through the thin cracks in the oak wood that the bridge is made of and hug him tightly. Michal hugs me back and sobs uncontrollably into my shoulder. God, I couldn't understand why I didn't help him. We let go of each other and he immediately got out the bag that once held his marvelous leaves and opens it up for me to see. All that was left was two leaves, shimmering with pride, beckoning me to grab it and feel its smooth texture. Michal seizes both of the leaves and offers me one. I grasped the bright leaf and it relieves me of all my negative feelings. He lifts me up to my feet and leads me to the edge of the bridge and holds out his leaf over the ledge. I do the same and he lets go of his golden leaf, letting it dance in the cool breeze until it landed calmly on the surface of the stream. I take a deep breath and also let go of my leaf. It makes twirls in the air and it seems so free and joyful. The two radiant leaves ride next to each other with the water and Michal and I stare at them with satisfaction.

"Teraz inni moga patrzec na pieknych lisci," I comment. Now others can look at the beautiful leaves.

He nods with pride and we continue to overlook the thousands of leaves in the flowing water. The sunset still shone with passion, warm colors casting its bright beams to the stream, making it ripple beautifully and the world has fallen silent yet again. The sun finally saying its goodbyes as it left with a ravishing atmosphere consisting of purple, pink, and orange colors, mixing together so wonderfully it was incomprehensible. Michal looked onward, his pale skin turned blotchy from tears, keeping a solemn face. The gold leaves continue to run alongside the other dull leaves, shimmering for the final time before it disappeared into the horizon.

# Lauren Yoksh

Age: 16, Grade: 11 School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Short Story

#### T1me 2 Danc3

One, two, three. One, two three. One, two, three more steps, and he was out of the house, past the floral furniture in the family room, past the front hallway closet, past the kitchen with the green walls. One, two, three steps down the wooden porch, past the swing his father made for this mother's birthday, past the potted plants, past the window he broke with a baseball when he was nine. One, two, three. One, two, three more steps, and he was at the end of the driveway. There he stood still, a leather-bound suitcase in each hand and a scowl as deep as the ocean on his face. "Please don't go," he heard his father shout from the front porch. "We will miss you." But the boy was sick of his father and his mother and all the floral furniture and sick of the driveway he stood on. He looked straight ahead to avoid his mother's gaze, and without even the softest utter of a "goodbye," the boy was off. One, two, three steps into the shuttle and a *click* of the door shutting behind him, and he was gone.

"Where to?" asked the pilot with a kind smile. He seemed almost as excited as the boy felt to be leaving. "To Saturn," returned the boy, and the pilot didn't ask any questions. Soon enough, the shuttle landed, and the boy took one, two, three steps off the shuttle, and the next thing he knew it was gone. The boy dropped his bags by either side of him and looked down at his feet, which were floating on the gaseous soil. He looked out at the Saturn landscape in front of him. The pitch-black sky around him seemed to swallow anything else in sight, and Earth was a distant memory. It was always night on Saturn; always dark, always quiet, always lonely. The only audible sound the boy could hear was Saturn's icy rings whipping around the planet, which was so loud it almost seemed to not be there at all. The boy's lungs tightened when he tried to breathe and he fell to his knees, which dipped into the cold gaseous dust. He brought his chest down to his knees and silently waited near the shuttle stop for the next shuttle to arrive.

Three days later, a shuttle came, and the boy stood up and grabbed his bags, and took one, two, three swift steps up into the shuttle. He sat down on the cold, metallic seat and glanced at the pilot. Her blue eyes seemed to glow in the darkness and she had a familiar scent that the boy could not place. "Where to?" the pilot asked. "To Jupiter, thank you," said the boy. The shuttle was off, zig-zagging through the imploding stars, past black holes and meteor showers. Soon enough, the shuttle landed, and the boy waved "goodbye" to the pilot. He then took one, two, three hops off the shuttle and landed in Jupiter's cool soil. The boy dropped his bags by either side of him and sighed with relief; he could breathe again. He sat down on a bench nearby and surveyed Jupiter's landscape. It was dark and vast, and the only thing in sight was rust-colored sand blowing through the thick air. The boy began to feel a headache forming in the back of his head, getting worse by the second, until it became unbearable. He held his head in his hands and rested his forehead on his knees and began to scream, and continued to do so until the next shuttle arrived.

Seven days later, a shuttle came, and the boy stood up, grabbed his bags, and took one, two, three quick steps up into the shuttle and looked at the pilot. He was listening to a song from years ago, one that the boy's father used to play for him when he was younger. "Where to?" asked the pilot. The air about him reminded the boy of something familiar, but he didn't let it distract him. "To Mars, please, sir." Next thing he knew, the shuttle was off into space, speeding around the infinite darkness of the

universe. Soon enough, the shuttle landed on the dusty, red soil of Mars. The boy thanked the pilot and said "goodbye," then took one, two, three leaps off the shuttle, planting his feet in the barren soil. The shuttle left, and the boy dropped his bags by either side of him. He watched the creatures of Mars scurry about the red planet, just as his family was doing on Earth. But no one stopped to talk to him, and they all strode past him without the slightest, "hello." The air was frigid and made the boy's chest compress as snow began to fall. Cold and alone, the boy sat under a light post and waited for the next shuttle to arrive.

Two months later, a shuttle came, and the boy stood up, grabbed his bags, and took one, two large strides into the shuttle, so large he skipped the third step, and beamed at the pilots. There were two of them, a man and a woman, and they reminded the boy so much of his parents he could not resist staring. "Where to?" asked the female pilot. The boy closed his eyes and thought of his mother and father, and about how lonely he was, and how much he missed his home. "To Earth, please, kind lady." Soon enough, the boy saw the green and blue tints of his home planet out the window. Within minutes, the shuttle landed on the familiar concrete driveway of his parents' home. The boy thanked the pilots and yelled a sweet "goodbye!" as he took one giant leap off the shuttle and onto the pavement, and the shuttle was gone.

The boy took a deep inhale, his eyes closed in bliss, and spoke loud enough for his parents to hear, "Hello!" The boy walked down the driveway, one, two, three steps up the wooden porch, and noticed the swing his father made his mother for her birthday was gone, and the window he broke with a baseball when he was nine was fixed. The boy yelled out again, "Mother! Father! I *missed* you!" He took one, two, three steps and opened the front door. The floral furniture was gone, too. One, two, three more steps. "Mother! Father! I *missed* you! And this house!" One, two, three. The kitchen walls were no longer green, and the boy's family portrait was taken off the wall. One, two, three. The boy dropped his suitcases on the tile floor and sprinted out of the house. One, two, three, one two three. A man was jogging on the sidewalk, and the boy ran over and stopped him. "Excuse me, sir, but, the owners of this house, where are they? Did they move? Where did they go?" "The old couple that lived there? Oh, boy, they're dead."

# Claire Zickel

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Kirkwood High School, Saint Louis, MO Educator: Deanna Hempen Category: Flash Fiction

# Lily

We are three. Mom yells through the house, "...nine, ten! Ready or not, here I come!" Next to me, Lily giggles and I join her.

She whispers, "Your mom will never find us!" I nod my head.

"I wonder if anyone is behind this," Mom says to herself as she gets closer to our hiding spot behind the couch. I gasp, but Lily quickly silences me with a finger to her lips.

"Shhh, Emily," she whispers. I nod my head with wide eyes; Lily always knows what to do. Mom gets closer and closer until I see her head peek over the couch and stare down at us. Lily looks up and screams, but her surprise quickly turns to joy as Mom and I join her in laughter. Mom scoops me up and swings me around.

"Don't forget about Lily!" I cry while pointing to her crouching form. Mom turns in her direction, "How could I? Lily, would you like a turn?" Lily shakes her head.

"She says no," I answer.

"Okay, sweetie." Mom turns back to me and Lily watches us laugh.

We are five. It is the first day of school and I can feel Lily's uncertainty, so I grab her hand. She turns toward me and smiles. Mom walks over and grabs my other hand.

"Are you ready for kindergarten?" She asks. We both reply, "Yes!" at the same time and burst out laughing.

"Lily and I said yes at the same time Mommy!" I inform her.

"Well that's good!" Mom exclaims.

After Mom and all the other parents have said goodbye, class starts. Mrs. G has us introduce ourselves to each other.

"I'm Emily, and this is my friend, Lily." The other kids snicker and whisper to each other. I don't understand why; when I look over at Lily, she is frowning, looking like she wants to cry.

"What's the matter?" I ask her, but she just turns away from me. I wonder if I did something wrong.

We are ten. Lily and I have grown apart. I speak to her every once in awhile, but sometimes I act like she's not even there. We are eating at the dinner table and Mom asks us, "What did you do at school today?" Lily opens her mouth to answer, but I give her a sharp look. She retracts into her chair, making herself as small as possible.

Mom notices my glare. "What is it?"

"Nothing, Mom."

"Okay then." I'm no longer hungry, so I get up and go back to my room. I climb the ladder and sit on the top bunk. My bunk. After a few minutes, Lily walks into the room and tosses herself onto the lower bunk. I peer down at her and she meets my eyes.

"What is it?" she asks. I respond with nothing but a grunt and roll over onto my side. She pushes harder, "Seriously, Emily, what's the matter?"

"You!" She startles at my harsh words and the anger suddenly flashing in my eyes. "You're the

problem, Lily! Do you know how many people make fun of me because of you? They see me talking to you and think I'm weird! I wish you'd go away." I say the last words softly; it's a truth I don't want to admit. Tears form in our eyes, both of us broken by what I've said.

"I understand," she says. We both know she doesn't mean it.

We are thirteen. I have taken to writing. I used to share my stories with Lily, but now all she does is lay in her bunk. She has stopped going to school, but honestly, I don't think anyone has noticed. Some of my friends and I walk into my bedroom one day after school, laughing. We sit down on the top bunk and continue our conversation. I see Lily sit up and listen.

"Remember what you were like in 5th grade?" one of them asks.

"Yeah," I respond. "I was a total dork." We all laugh.

"And remember that imaginary friend you had? What was her name again?"

I sit up and stop laughing. I peer over the edge, into the bottom bunk. No one's there.

"Oh yeah, wasn't her name Lily?"

# Gold Key Writing Portfolios

# **Sophie Hurwitz**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Anita Hagerman

# **Sophia Marusic**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

**Educator: Missy Simonds** 



# **Sophie Hurwitz**

Age: 18, Grade: 12 School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO Educator: Anita Hagerman

Category: Poetry

#### **Inland Children Read The Ocean**

I learned the ocean as context in a book. I could not have understood it-- I'm a creature of the middle-continent, so dry land is all I know. I learned the ocean by description first, before I knew it real and living.

Ocean. Definition: a big book for grown-ups. The impassable expanse, the end of the world. The Odyssey, Moby Dick, Treasure Island. Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Hurricane Katrina.

I asked the question outright, when books weren't enough.

Ocean. Definition, given by my mother: water so big you can't see the other side.

Does it go on forever and ever?

No, but it looks like it does.

Why's it so big?

I don't know.

*Is it like my bathtub?* 

Not exactly. The ocean is full of salt. And it has waves.

What's a wave?

Wave. Definition: water so strong it can unstick you from the land.

*Then what?* 

You're floating, like an astronaut in space. The water takes you away, and you drown.

So now I knew the ocean. The ocean meant drowning, and drowning is what happened in the Nashville County Pool. The water was bright green and blue, and then green and blue was all I could see, and I tried to make noise but nothing came out.

Drowning: when all the people around you vanish, and just when you are burning green and blue your cousin's arms shove you up through the skin of the water again, and everything explodes with noise.

Ocean: drowning, and books too, and as big as forever. I saw it, and saw it was too much for me. I was sinking already at the sight of it. Ocean: untrustworthy. Ocean foreign, ocean wild, ocean waiting to pounce.

It's hard to know something that you've never seen. It's hard to trust something you can't see all the way to the bottom. You don't believe in things that aren't solid. You don't make friends with something that slips out from under your feet and grabs you and rips you away.

#### **Echolalia**

I first started speaking, my parents tell me, months before I could walk. I'd use the railing of my crib to hoist myself up to a shaky standing position, and proudly announce, "Walking! I'm walking!"-- clearly a phenomenal overstatement. Even back then, I had this idea that saying things would make them real for me, if I could just find the right words.

I am the daughter of two high-school English teachers, so it makes sense that my language would be fundamental to who I am. My parents met in their English graduate program, and had their first date at a bookstore. How could anything other than a language-obsessed child be the result of such a union? I grew up between the King-James-Bible English of my mother's family in Tennessee, and the Yiddish of my father's parents in Connecticut, learning family affection in two different sets of words. How could I not believe in words at least as much as in actions?

Back when I was too young to do things like multiplication, but old enough to know how to count by 10s, I had this need to repeat words I heard. Not all of them—only the ones that sounded particularly nice. I repeated teachers, I repeated my parents, I repeated the other kids in my class. I learned the work "paradox" this way in my second year of preschool. Walking out of the building with my dad, I asked, How is it that I'm so tired but I don't want to sleep? He said, That's called a paradox. I repeated the word "paradox," bouncing it around all the way home.

I Googled "kid repeats things after people" about a year ago and found out out that medically, it was "echolalia," a behavior commonly found in kids with autism and occasionally in neurotypical ones. My echolalia ended in the first grade, when my best friend Johanna and I were playing "fairies" during recess. She heard me repeating one of my own sentences under my breath, like a satellite delay. She asked me what I was doing. I didn't want to be the weirdest kid on the playground, so I learned to cherish the words I loved without repeating them aloud.

Fast forward about 6 more years: I was a newly-minted teenager. I knew I was supposed to be defining myself, and learning languages was the way I picked to do that. It started when I began learning Spanish, in seventh grade. I thought of it as a slap in the face to my English-teacher parents—the temerity of it all, me learning to speak words other than the ones they could teach me! I picked up a truly awful habit of muttering rude things under my breath that they couldn't understand. Although my rebellious 13-year-old self would've hated to admit it, though, this language thing might have made them a bit proud.

I kept collecting language: I taught myself Spanish II from the textbook the summer before 9th grade, repeating new verb conjugations to myself on the back porch. Then, I added French, Hebrew lessons at a local synagogue, and a summer camp's worth of Chinese.

A few days ago, my friend made something she called "lunch bingo". In each square was something one of us usually does during lunch. Mine was "Sophie says something in French or Spanish or whatever." She's not wrong-- I am a linguistic patchwork, and as of now, the parts haven't decided whether to cohere into a whole or separate completely yet. I still speak Spanish sometimes in French class by mistake, but when someone asks me how to say "cafeteria" in Spanish, the only word that

comes is the French word "cantine". Even in English I find it hard to keep the different voices in my brain from sneaking in--"¿Puedo ver?" comes out, instead of "Can I see?" Especially when I'm comfortable, when I'm unselfconscious, I don't keep the wall between languages up so high.

If/when I worry about these things, I remember "Song of Myself": "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" Multiplicity, in our culture, is often interpreted as fakeness. Even in ancient Greek mythology, duplicitous Janus, god of doorways and transitions, has two faces. But I don't think multiplicity is necessarily false. A person can be as many things as they have words to name. My languages allow me to "contain multitudes". And so I've come to think of myself as an ecotone— the area where multiple biomes combine. I talk like an ecotone, with bits of everything that has made me, all converging. By embracing and echoing other people's words, I create something that is new.

#### When It Happens to You

When I married Bridget, I didn't think this is what would happen. I mean--nobody admits it, but you always have that voice in the back of your head that wonders, what-if? Only in an abstract way, because the bad thing can't *really* happen, can it? You think about the what-if as if you're thinking about a soap opera, not like real life. You imagine the child--yours and Bridget's--you imagine the girl growing up-you imagine yourself, theatrically tearful, at her graduation, thinking boo hoo why'd the time go by so fast, look at this lovely young woman, etcetera etcetera.

You imagine yourself worrying once she's moved away, and hating her tattoos and things, like dads are supposed to do. She calls you on the phone once every few weeks, but not as often as you'd like, and you tell her so. But you know it's okay, it's developmentally normal, or some psych thing like that, and look at the wonderful person she's becoming!

You imagine your high hopes for her, you imagine the bright light of the future, and then--here's the part no one, ever, *tells* you they daydream about--you imagine the accident. Gory details, and everything.

Yeah. You picture your daughter dead.

Of course there you are in the foreground of the scene, all stoic, crying by the bedside. You picture yourself crushed completely, not sleeping for days, but in a tragic, Romantic-with-a-capital R way.

You know. I can't exactly say I never saw it coming.

So when they told me how they'd found her, I thought, it can't be real. I knew it was, but it couldn't be, so I ignored it. I've been working too late, I must be going off the deep end finally, I thought. I don't know. I thought, it's not funny anymore, Brandon, you need to get some sleep for once in your life.

But the pictures were still there when I woke up, and so was Bridget. Her mascara wasn't even smudged, how does that work? It's like it was superglued on, or done with sharpie, or something. I don't know, but anyway Bridget was crying as if--one time, Martha--my daughter--she told me that actors in movies, if they can't cry, use eyedrops instead to make the tears fat and sparkly. Bridget was like that. She sat there at her laptop, just sobbing every few minutes, making these little gaspy *barking* noises like

a terrier who needs to be let out into the backyard to take a piss. She was already planning her eulogy when I woke up the first day after, can you believe it?

She doesn't know that Martha--that is, the accident--it was my fault. I did this to her. I think I wanted to get rid of Bridget so much, I thought this into happening. And Bridget's still here, in the bathroom curling her hair all nice for the funeral photos. And I can't think of anything to say to her at all.

#### 7 lbs. (The Average Woman)

"You will eat 7 pounds of lipstick in your lifetime," says the headline.

You will, it says:

An oracle's grave, macabre proclamation. But it is followed by the line:

"Here are 10 organic, nontoxic brands that will not kill you!"

So, congratulations!

You WILL ingest 7 pounds of lipstick in your lifetime, you are destined for this, there's nothing you can do about it.

But hey. Buy now, and maybe your daily, gory, lipstick feast won't be fatal!

Conclusion: there are some statistics one desperately hopes won't be true.

A litany of numbers that you do not want to be: like,

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for U.S. teens,

Global warming will have New York underwater by the year 2100,

And the average woman will, inevitably, gorge herself with paint,

And stain her teeth a brilliant berry red.

So of course, you try to escape probability. So: you wear your face washed and ugly for a week or two--And so, you finally lose those last 7 pounds. So you can't see yourself so vulnerable this way,

And you can't escape the mirrors everywhere

So you hate it, so:

You put back on your favorite brilliant berry lipstick and you smile, Because you know that prophecies are unavoidable, and yes, maybe you're caving in, Maybe you've become just the average woman, But today, you look and you feel Like anything but.

# **Blank Page**

It's raining.

The windows are broken.

So: open another blank page.

It's easy enough to start again.

There's no need to look your old self in the eyes, tonight.

Blank page says you're made of possibility,

Says you're the future, that's all, no more

Is or was or could or shouldn't have.

So burn your old words!

Or if you're too tired for burning

Then cast them outside by the handful;

The rain will wash the ink away, I promise.

Better to stay suspended right before the prologue starts.

Better to be nothing-- Nothing, at least, is clean.

It's easy enough, when things get hard, to start again.

So write a whole book of blank pages!

# **Feeding People Makes This Home**

I probably never would have met Michael Brown if he hadn't been murdered. I've been thinking about that a lot these past two weeks, as the second anniversary of his death has come and gone. I never even would have noticed him if I'd passed him on the street, but I would recognize his face anywhere, now. I have protested for him; I've shouted his name till my voice went hoarse. "Turn up, don't turn down, we do this for Mike Brown! No justice, no peace! Prosecute the police!"

In two years, I have grown up. I'm almost the age that he was when he died. I've had two years to change, years that he should have had, too.

Mike Brown and I grew up 15 minutes away from each other by car. Before his death I had never heard of Ferguson, though I rode through it and saw it out my car window enough. St. Louis is redlined into so many different little municipalities. Who would've thought that one of them could become so known, even though most of us here hadn't heard of it before?

When people ask me where I'm from, they sometimes don't know where St. Louis is. Now, I just tell them I live a 15 minute car ride from Ferguson, and suddenly they understand.

Michael Brown died and my baseless teenage angst-hate of my hometown, the only place I've ever lived, turned into love. I love the people here. I've met friends at protests. I've learned the school system, and the transit system, and the insurmountable mountain of things we need to change. But I have not lost hope. If I were to do that I'd be betraying the people I've known.

Last August I helped feed people at a memorial event in a church basement, on the two year anniversary of Mike Brown's death. This--giving people food--is, I've discovered, when I'm most happy. It feels tangible, it feels like working towards some kind of healing. Carla and Kita and Mama Cat and I fed people meatballs and pigs in a blanket and fruit salad and regular salad and pasta salad. Standing in a line with our gloves on ready to go.

Afterwards, we went upstairs and people started speaking. The man who asked for an extra helping of meatballs--Michael Brown, Senior. The little boy who'd started a conversation with me about his favorite fruits: the little brother of another black man shot. The two girls who'd gotten bread and spinach dip and nothing else were his little sisters. Each of them told their stories, about how they'd been hurt, and about the ways they'd found to keep on living and keep on fighting.

I don't know if I helped. But feeding people is better than nothing. Feeding people and shouting NO JUSTICE NO PEACE in the streets. Food and anger and so much love.

Now, when my friends all tell me they want to move away from St. Louis, yes, I still understand them, but I don't agree with them anymore. I understand that there is plenty here to drive people away, but there is also so much here to bring people back. We have help and support. We have spinach dip and meatballs for the bereaved, and town hall meetings and protests and birthdays and memorials. We are good at telling our stories, and we are good at working towards a better version of ourselves.

Who wouldn't love my city? Who wouldn't love my people?

### **Sock Sonnet**

Written in gratitude.

My friend Elizabeth knits lovely socks
Which are made of the finest yarn around,
You might in fact say of these socks "they rocks!"
Because their socklike beauty doth abound.
Forsooth, I know not how they were created,
Or what strange work of genius brought them forth;
I only claim (this can't be understated)
The socks were conjured with a spell of sorts.
I'll try to tell you details of these knits,
But that I fear they beggar all description;
Their elaborate cable-patterns, and their fits,
And azure color all seem works of fiction.
And yet, by heaven, I think these socks as rare
As any they belied with false compare.

#### **Neighbors**

Me and my brother, we used to like the neighbor girl. Miri was her name. We used to like the neighbor girl so much, we'd repeat her name like a charm. Like wind chimes: *mirimirimirii*. Beautiful. We liked the neighbor girl so much, we shoved her face into the new white snow and called her a bitch because the word sounded new and fresh and clean in our mouths.

We grew older then, and bigger. Our mother said it was all the cocoa puffs we ate. Our father was proud of us, he said we were his big boys, his big grown-up boys. Miri got older too, we could tell, but she was tiny. Skinny bitch and bug-girl were the things we called her. At some point, she started riding her pink girly-bike around our dead-end street. Every day she would pedal until we thought her legs might as well snap like twigs. She circled over and over in tightly wound circles. She always went faster when she passed our house. Her whole body tensed up. I asked my brother was someone chasing her, or was she training for the Tour de France or something, and he shoved me instead of answering.

The same year she got her bicycle, we got our BB guns. EX-TREME POWER RAPID FIRE DESTROYER RIFLE pellet shooters, they were called, and they were wonderful. They were our babies. We were so careful with them, we wouldn't even let dirt get on the green and orange plastic. We polished them into oblivion, and used them and used them until our entire street was peppered with little red balls.

My brother killed a bird. He's 15 months older than me and at the time was almost twice as big. He always does things just before I can. He killed a bird, and it was beautiful. A robin, I think; those are the ones with the orange chest feathers, right? Its feathers shook and almost glowed. The sun shone through some parts of it but not others so it was like a jewel.

He'd shot his glowing bird, so I sat and shot at Miri's glowing bedroom window for hours and hours. *Pingpingping* against the glass, hoping not-hoping I'd finally make a crack. Picturing red bullets burying themselves in the skin of her cheek. Little red spheres poking a hole and making even more red flow out. (I'd never seen her blood.)

My brother had killed his bird, and kept it and paraded it around until it started to stink. The left leg was almost falling off when our mother made our father tell him don't be disgusting, throw that thing away. And I was out of bullets.

My 7th-grade year was the last time I ever saw Miri. That year was different because she went to school with us. We rode the same bus to school every single morning, though my brother and me sat in the back and she didn't. I made as much noise as possible, and I watched the back of her head (I could just barely see the sun shining off her hair from my seat, if I craned my neck). She never turned around. Not even once. I would've known if that glowing hair had moved. They don't let us bring BB guns to school, or anything. They have metal detectors. They have the Safe Schools Act and the School Resource Officers. But I did think about it, what that would be like.

We liked to follow her home from school. Not follow her, exactly. We lived next door. We *had* to walk that way. I guess we didn't have to walk quite so close behind her like we did, though. I guess we didn't have to whisper in her ear like we did. Every day we walked closer behind her. She would crouch down

and tie her shoes as the bus slowed to a stop and the doors hissed open. She said goodbye to the quiet girl with the matching velour tracksuits and long brown braid she sat next to (were they friends? Did Miri have friends?), and she put on her backpack like she was getting ready for a race.

My brother knew how to make his breath carry so it shivered down the back of your neck even when he was across the room. He used it. He'd hiss behind her so she almost couldn't hear--hey Miri, hey Miri, hey--she started running home. Maybe she said something to her mother about it (stupid bitch) and maybe her mother told our mother, because our father told us we were his boys. He told my brother he was his big strong boy, almost a man now, no matter what.

Every day we go outside and shoot the basketball into the hoop. Shot-shot-shot like the BB guns, then the ball rolls into the gutter and I go get it. My mother tells us come in for dinner, the NBA can wait. But it's shot-shot-shot until it's too dark to see where we're throwing and the cicadas are too loud for thinking.

We don't talk about Miri. Sometimes the ball rolls into her yard and we linger there. Sometimes when we're cutting the grass in our yard, we cut a little bit over the border to hers. (They could use the help, they don't cut their grass half as much as they should). We are helping her.

But anyway, I don't know. We're older now, but she doesn't come outside anymore. She has dark curtains covering her window now, and the fabric's all I see of her. Each time I drive past her house and swerve around the cul-de-sac, I take my eyes off the road and let the car carry itself forward, for a while. I have to watch the curtain. I have to see if it moves. (My brother's not bigger than me anymore, Miri. Miri I could keep him from you.)

I miss the ratted glittery tassels on her bicycle handles. I miss the helmet her parents always made her wear when she pedaled around and around. I don't know what we did that finally made her go away. I miss how everything used to be glowing. (Miri, if you come back, things will shine again.)

# Sophia Marusic

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

**Educator: Missy Simonds** 

#### **Here**

Finn crumples himself on the other end of the couch. Three sunken cushions slouch between us. His eyes are glassy, cracked marbles rimmed in pink. I imagine plucking them from his skull, letting them roll around in my hand, trading them on a playground for chewing gum.

Ava?

His voice sounds like cobwebs. I don't look up.

About Michael...I...

The letters of my father's name roll off his tongue like cut glass, the inside of his mouth is raw and red. He wipes his nose and inhales into his sleeve.

We'll have to bury him.

I know.

The ice cream in my bowl is a soft soup, it cries small white tears. I stand and put it in the sink. Finn stares at me, his nose dripping, unraveling.

I turn to go upstairs.

Here is what is like for your father to tell you that he is attracted to men. Or, not even that. You will learn that later. Here is what it is like for your father to tell you that he is leaving.

You are twelve and he picks you up from school four minutes late. You climb in the car and he hands you greasy french fries and a vanilla milkshake and drives you to the park. You sit on the edge of the fountain, next to a bust of someone known for dying, and run your oily fingers over their blank oxidized eyes. Your small hands smell like pennies when your done, taste like salt, are sticky with ice cream. He says he can't be happy in this life. There are things about love you just won't understand. Sometimes you just grab all the little pieces and even though they fit together, they fit together crooked and wrong. What he's trying to tell you, he supposes, is that he won't be around anymore.

You throw up into the fountain.

You want him to say Sweetheart, I love you still, or, Darling, everything will be fine or, Ava, you will always be important

to me

Instead, he hands you a napkin to wipe the vomit from your lips and says I'm sorry.

My room is stale with day old shadows when I wake up.

No one has said what is going to happen to me. I haven't asked. I try to call my mother again, but her voicemail has been full for the past few months. I listen to her recorded voice, press the phone tight to my ear until I can hear nothing else. My tongue is thick against my teeth.

In the bathroom, I run the bath and thrust my fingers into the stream until my skin screams red. The steam coils over the mirrors. I climb into the tub without undressing.

The water fills my sweatshirt and jeans, soaks into the fabric and grounds me to the white porcelain. It makes my body solid. Warmth creeps into my skin in stages, sealed beneath my clothes; I am heavy, I am there.

Under the surface, the light makes thousands of haloes. They fill my nose, my mouth, my ears, glaze over my eyes. I pretend I am Galatea, shaking off my stone, and seeing the world for the first time. I release my breath in shaky bubbles and count to ten over and over again.

Here is what it is like to watch your father leave. Your family is already a dichotomy of two, but now he has returned for the rest of his clothes.

Your mother left for the grocery store four hours ago, and you imagine her sitting in the car in the parking lot, sweating and listening to public radio. In the passenger seat, the milk gets hot. She won't return until you call her and tell her he is gone.

Your father's hands are familiar hands. They have held you, fed you, brushed your hair. Now they are helping him leave you. They fold his clothes neatly on his dresser, but then crumple them into the suitcase. You are silent. You sit on the bed with his socks. You are watching each starched shirt wrinkle in succession.

When he starts to zip up the suitcase, you thrust your hands into it and grab his wool sweater. You and your mother bought it for him three Christmases ago, and you know he will never leave without it, so you run and fold yourself under your bed. He calls to you. You can see only his feet, and they take three faltering steps in your direction and then stop.

The front door clicks shut and a car starts in the driveway.

You remain under the bed, nose pressed on hardwood, inhaling dust, tasting dust, until the tissues of your lungs become dark, scratchy wool.

The water is cold. The tips of my fingers are grey and swollen and wrinkled.

I emerge shivering and dripping, little pools of water forming around my ankles. The only sound is the hollow moan of the soap suds spiraling down the drain. It feels like the house is yawning around me. I open the door in degrees, watching the light spill from the bathroom and fan along the floor.

Creak.

Lighter.

Creak.

Nothing.

Creak.

Lighter.

Creak.

Finn.

I swing the door completely open, his face flushes from his cheeks back into his hairline.

I... I heard the water running and...and I wanted to make sure you were alright.

My lips quiver against my chattering teeth. A steady stream of water runs from the hood of my sweatshirt to the hardwood floor. Drip drip

drip.

Well.

He jams his fingers into his feathery hair.

Drip. Drip drip.

His skin is so white it is almost blue, and it looks like there's a rash reddening on the back of his hands.

Drip drip.

I don't say anything.

Drip.

An ocean is at my feet.

Drip.

I was just making sure—

Drip drip.

He shakes his head furiously as if trying to dislodge something.

I...I...just..., his voice catches.

Drip. I'm afraid he might cry. I don't want to see him cry.

Wordlessly, I move towards my room, careful not to brush against him; he's still shaking his head. I close the door behind me, but keep it imperceptibly cracked, and crouching in my wet clothes, I watch him. He stares at my door the way I see him stare at the shadows he can't quite figure out how to paint.

He walks toward the room at the other end of the hall. For a moment, it seems as if he will go in, his fingers poised stiffly on the doorknob.

My nose bumps against my door trying to get a better look and it rattles in its frame, a low thump. He glances back and shakes his head, walking away and flexing his fingers as if the handle burned him. He stuffs his hand back in the pocket of his bathrobe and turns off the hallway lights. I watch him take a towel from the bathroom and slowly wipe up my puddle in the dark, moving his arms in sweeping circles. I pull back from the door.

Still sopping, I wrap myself tightly in the blankets from my bed and press myself against the wall, alternating layers of cold and hot and wet and dry. The gentle creak of the floorboards echo in this cavernous darkness. I imagine his tears falling against the wood; drip drip drip.

Here is what it is like to watch your mother implode. But she calls it "self-realizing."

She tells you that her life is a string of empty pictures. She tells you that she is a flower and this is her second blossoming. She is choosing to be lonely, no, not lonely. She is choosing to be alone, and she is starting to become. Your house is suddenly full of books, of handwoven baskets, of kale based cooking of various ethnic origins. And then she is leaving to "find something that she has lost, and lose something that she is not." She's going to Australia. She's going to Tibet and to the mountains and to Spain. She thinks she could learn from being a migrant worker somewhere. You are quiet when she says these things.

The morning she leaves, the sun rises slowly like purple butter. You want her to say

Ava, my light, come with me

or, Ava, I don't want you to feel alone

or, Ava, you are my most important piece

Instead, she takes her bags from you and says Ava

be good for your father.

She doesn't look back at you when she drives away. You think she will later, so you sit and watch the street as it grows full with violet light. You will wait for her because you can. She says you can.

I shed my blankets and wet clothes, my stomach yawning and gnawing. Like a half-baked moth emerging too soon from its cocoon, I stand, naked, in the dark.

I peer through the crack in the door.

Finn is nowhere to be seen.

I wander to the staircase, and dangle the front half of my body over the banister, listening. The water downstairs is running, somewhere. The cold, steel railing presses into the soft flesh of my stomach. I can hear Finn humming to himself, something slow, something sad.

I hoist myself right side up and count my steps back down the hall until I'm at the door.

I run my fingers over the worn, brass doorknob. I press my face to the paneled wood. It is hollow against my cheek and for the first time, I am afraid. Afraid of what lurks in the stillness. I twist the handle and slide into the dark.

I feel as if I have broken something sacred.

The bed is made, white and unadorned. The side where my father slept is slightly messier, more wrinkled, and I picture them making this bed together; Finn, meticulous and neat, my father, hurried and manic.

I press my face into the pillow; I breathe in the scent of something deep and sharp, evergreen and fine leather and a little bit of lemon, and suddenly I am shaking all over because this is the scent of Finn, who is full of bed making and toothpaste brands and shared pillows and how my father like his socks folded, and here I am breathing it in, empty.

I walk to the closet. I see my father's loafers unmatched in a pile, like huddled, lonely mice. I see Finn's belts suspended evenly on the wall, each thin, leather snake uniform with the rest. There is a row of starched white shirts and I can tell which ones were my father's by the way the collar is creased. I knock every belt to the floor.

I tear every round, white button from the shirts.

I want Finn to know I was here first.

I snatch my father's wool sweater from the shelf and rip it over my head. The sleeves hang far past my wrists and the armpits come down to my ribs. It is scratchy against my skin, and I try to pull inside myself, a shell of a girl inside a man's sweater.

Here is what it is like to live with your father after he chooses to leave.

You sleep in a room that smells like chemicals because he painted and repainted again because he couldn't remember your favorite color and was too afraid to ask.

He settles on a shade called "Butterscotch Tempest."

You wait for him to ask you to do something before you move or breathe or blink. You clean up after yourself, you barely unpack your things, you are silent, you are contained. You are a guest. You are a ghost. This is not your home. This is not where you belong. You do not fit in this new life that drapes itself across your father's shoulders.

You hold your knees close to your chest on your bedspread that smells like spearmint and stick your fingers into the soft paint.

You meet his new friend, who belongs in this house more than you do. He has hair like feathers and paints watercolors and makes grilled cheese and is closer to your age than your father's but never seems to leave.

They kiss in front of you and you pretend it is okay. You have become good at pretending. Remember, you are a ghost now. You are an image of a girl.

You listen to your father tell you that he is in love with Finn. You think he does not remember that your turtle was named Finn, but you had to give it to the neighbors before you came to live with him.

Finn is sitting at the kitchen counter, a towel across his shoulders.

His head is freshly shaven, bleeding in a few places, his hair is spread in front of him. His scalp is sickly, a sallow ivory that looks like the underside of a blind freshwater fish. Where his eyebrows were, are now mere facial ridges covered in electric white skin. Beneath them, his marble eyes have sunken lower.

I picture him running the razor over his skull, slowly, methodically, with his artist fingers. Him, plucking his feathery fuzz with a knife, the way you would from a bled-out bird. Carving away his eyebrows, trying to become cold, unfeeling, beautiful marble.

The clumped hair seems to be alive. A pelt of something that shouldn't be hunted.

He turns as I enter, and his eyes widen at the sight of the sweater, but he says nothing. I say nothing about his head. Instead, I unfurl my fingers and deposit the buttons next to the hair, giving it tiny, white eyes. Finn does not acknowledge them.

I stand behind him for a few moments, watching him arrange his hair against the dark marble. Fluttery piles of faded blonde find form and line so that it looks like a wildfire, or something taking flight. He sprinkles in the buttons like pearls.

He doesn't breathe, for when he does, little flurries of hair rise and fall from their position. His lithe, white fingers fuss over every strand until I can see the face of my father against the black surface. I grab his wrist before he can finish shaping the mouth of hair. It looks like a furry wound.

The tendons in his arm tighten, and for a moment, I am uncertain whether he will pull away or strike me.

With the sleeve of his other arm, he wipes away his creation, and my father's face is reduced again to shredded strands. I release him, and he lowers his head to the table, little dots of blood trickling a path from the nicks in his scalp to the wrinkles on the back of his neck.

I make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I cut it into quarters, the triangle kind. I pour some milk, and watch condensation bead up along the sides of the glass. While Finn's head is burrowed in his arms, I sweep all of his hair off the table and into a sandwich bag and place it next to his shoulder. He doesn't move.

I sit two stools away from him and begin to eat, each mouthful tasting chalky and dry. I want to prod Finn, and tell him about the Summerian afterlife, where even the kings serve the gods in a house of dust, eating dust, and breathing dust, and coating themselves in dust until there's nothing left of them but dust for all eternity.

I think I feel sorry for him.		

Here is what it is like to watch your father's boyfriend receive the call.

You are tucked into the faded armchair, the only place you have claimed your own in the past two years. He is hunched over his desk, smoothing paints with his fingers.

The phone is ringing. You know he wants you to answer it, but he will never ask you to do anything, and you will never do anything without being asked.

He wipes his fingers on his denim shirt that he wears every time he paints. You like the predictability of him, the stability, and the way the colors on his shirt all run together. You will never tell him that. He answers the phone and there is static silence. He is nodding.

You want to tell him that the person on the other end cannot see his nodding.

He hangs up the phone. He is still nodding. There is no color on his shirt that can describe the one on his face.

You want him to stop nodding.

You break your promise of never being the first to speak to him, you say, Finn?

He nearly stops nodding. He looks at you, and his eyes are hollow.

He says something about a car accident.

He says something about confirming a body.

He does not break, but tears begin to run freely down his face. You speculate that he is not breathing in this moment. You speculate that the world is certainly not breathing in this moment.

You do not cry. You are a ghost, a stained glass image of a girl, you are good at pretending.

You want to tell him that there's no reason to go, you know it is your father, you know he is dead, you know because you can feel yourself being

completely alone in the world.

I make another peanut butter sandwich.

Finn doesn't move, and I watch the blood coagulate on his scalp, forming watery, crimson blossoms with scabbed over centers.

There is a silence like being underwater and we move accordingly. Everything lags.

A few times, I consider saying something to him, but the sweater tightens around my chest and my lungs grow thick in the wool. His hair in the bag next to him shudders as if it is breathing.

I brush the crumbs from my sweater and put my plate in the sink, turn on the faucet, saturate the sponge with dish soap. I used to always do the dishes with my father. When I was little, he would fill one of our pasta pots with bubbles, and I would play in the lather while he cleaned. He would take a handful of the white foam and smear it on my face like a beard and I would laugh and laugh.

I suddenly can't feel the water running over my hands. I look at them beneath the faucet and they look cold and stiff and dead.

I spin away from the sink and hurl the plate towards the wall. It wavers in its flight and hits beneath the window. The porcelain screams when it cracks. Bone white chips bury themselves in a graveyard at the baseboard.

Finn looks up from his elbows, looks at me, looks at the wreckage. His light eyes are fringed with foggy pink. His mouth is red and slitted. He looks like a skull.

I watch his lips, wait for them to grimace, wait for them to yell, tell me to clean it up.

We've surfaced now and we're both gasping for air, testing our bodies again as we move in real time. Finn stands, watches me watching him, and picks up the jelly from the counter. He tests the weight of the mason jar in his hand, flexes his wrist, and heaves it where my plate hit.

The sound of the glass shattering is violently delicate. Raspberry preserves weep down the wall, bleeding between the glittering shards.

I stand next to Finn. I pick up the peanut butter and fling it. He hurls the cutting board. I lob the knife. We fill ourselves with the horrible noise, painting the wall, littering the floor.

When we are done, we are panting, we are the destroyers and the destroyed. My face is wet. Finn notices.

He turns to me, says

Ava?

My body quivers. He says again, Ava?

My breath runs from me. I do not look at him.

Ava.

Here is what it is like to tell your dead father's boyfriend, what it is like to unravel yourself in front of him.

He is quiet and your face is wet.

You don't know exactly what you say, other than you can't stop saying it. You tell him about your father, your mother, the french fries, the sweater, the car driving away, and the paint. When you start talking, everything gets very big for a moment and then very very small.

When you are done, it is quiet. The air is naked. You don't know what you want him to say, you wish you had never told him anything at all. He makes you a glass of water in a clear plastic cup.

He sits down next to you, watches you drink the water, and says,

Ava, I am here.

# **Switchgrass**

In the prairie the stars are thousands of light moths. Love is an extensive constellation.

I would spend the rest of my life smelling the rain in the crescent of your ear with my tongue. You are entirely unfolded a midwest sky full of birds.

When the seasons changed, I hid the sun in my mouth like a yellow beetle mandibles pressing into pink gums and then I cremated all the fields without apology. Controlled burns are an advised practice.

This is how we grow up: quietly, in the the places we dig for ourselves.

## The Easy Guide to the Cultivars of After Eden

#### I. Grenadier

She makes herself small then a shell then undone. Her body is detonations contained. She will tell the police how his mouth tasted—like rotting

apples—and his hands—unhinged jaws that bit her all over. *c'mon sweetheart don't fight it just open*. She opened.

#### II. Mother

She wants to love it, but the baby's scalp smells like rotting apples. A sick consolation prize, a half of damnation

that isn't hers. She tries to name the baby again. She strings letters together like lights. They all sound like questions.

### III. Pink Lady

In the supermarket, her friend's mothers tell her about their daughters, and their babies. They always apologize, relishing

in the lazy long way they say tragedy. Eve invited back into Eden for tea, her own grime and blood clinging on God's vinyl covered

chaise. The frozen apple slices blush and sweat in her cart. She answers in stable and fine, hears *crawl on your belly and eat dust*.

#### IV. Saturn

Her parted lips skim the baby's sepal cheek and she imagines biting down. She imagines a rusty crunch and the flesh tasting

whole. She's been empty for so long. The juice runs like wet ashes. Maybe she would find paradise in the core.

## V. White Transparent

The spaces between her breast and the sleeping baby are all crooked, fragmented, smashed apples and shattered glass.

Ecclesiastes promised reasons, but she has nothing but the

random collisions. She is an equation for entropy; a chemical

mechanism two parts decomposition, one the slow step of synthesis. The baby coos, it reminds her of a lullaby

and it is almost just right. Tomorrow she will name him. She's started dreaming in rivers full of letters.

## **flurries**

a flurry is not a miracle have you ever seen a snowflake save a life before it burns?

but a flurry is now, cruising down the freeway doused in the darkest shade of dawn, and suddenly you roll into a stop.

we are a traffic of two.

you turn off the car,
sitting in that sleepless silence
until you point,
watch the snow in the street light,
suspended, hovering in this blink:
crumbs of iced, unwished stars
a congregation of light-winged moths
(fluttering before hurtling into the pavement)
it's a moment before i realize i'm holding my breath.

it's like hyperdrive in scifi movies or falling asleep in pieces or watching storms seep into the sea are we underwater?

and then we're moving again, the scratchy radio coughing chords, speeding into that snow curtain pinned up in the orange glow. swimming through it, the horizon looks like cool honey.

## **Warm Winter**

He touches me like dry snow, falling. He touches me like tulips closing at dusk. In December, the Mississippi is a white fever. The world is recklessly coming to life in this second crusade of summer. I find blossoms in the tongues of my shoes and in the drain of my shower, tangled with the discarded, damp hair. When the cold rain finally comes, it falls for three days. After, I can feel dusky puddles where he kissed me; plants stretch towards a false sun. After, he touches me like the first frost. Outside, everything begins to wilt.

# **Revelations**

In the end our bodies will burn. In the end we will be two ash outlines beneath bedsheets, sides shadowed grey, where black is soft like lips. There is no other outcome. You are afraid of the dark because your insides are separated from your outsides by a thin black line made of you. I press against the edge and listen. Isn't it strange to know it so well? One roar of everything becoming nothing, all the black water falling out of an ocean; the space it leaves behind is dark and empty like rotting mouths. Nothing stands still. Why can't it stand still? I dream that you open your hands and they are a dry twilight full of birds. I fell for your hands first. Let's run back into this hollow night until we forget we are running.

#### A Howl in the Void

for Howl by Allen Ginsberg

Day 2400 angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night

"How does our fuel supply look?" Samuel strides up briskly, his hands tense at his sides, as if he is prepared for a wild west duel. He does not look at me, he does not look at James, but above us and out, into the black vastness of space. His fingers caress the back of my chair, and I lean forward quickly,

"A twenty—"

"—three percent surplus," James interrupts hastily, as if he is protective of the very words that tumble from my tongue. He gazes at Samuel with resentful admiration, "It was a brilliant risk to slingshot off that moon, Sam, but I gotta say it paid off." Samuel says nothing, his stony stare fixated on some point in the distance that I cannot perceive. His hands still linger along the edge of my chair, and he very deliberately drums his fingers, his nails brushing the tip of my braid.

"Iron," he says finally.

"What?"

His eyes snap down to me for the first time. "Iron, Celeste." he repeats, "We need more iron."

"Well of course—" James starts to cut in, but I interject,

"What do you mean?"

"The nutrition reports." Samuel explains tersely, "we need more iron. Something about developing anemia."

"Oh," I answer simply. James doesn't say anything.

"We need meat. None of this...this," He picks up James's unfinished soy bar and crushes it in his meaty fist before throwing it against the wall. I will have to sweep it up later, but for now I remain silent and shrunken, the sound of Samuel's grinding incisors filling the bridge.

Gradually, our gazes drift to the window, each of us riveted by some unknown location in the inky blackness.

Day 2421 Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!

"Do you ever want to wake them up?" I'm sitting next to James in the Phase Two Compartment. His thigh is almost touching mine. Or maybe my thigh is almost touching his. I never feel so acutely alive than when I am surrounded by the nearly dead. James says nothing, his gaze unfocused over the cryogenic crypt. "I mean," I continue bluntly, "There's only three of us left. We could wake up at least one other girl—"

"Did you sleep with him?" His voice is measured, soft, cool.

My breath hitches in my chest, "What?"

"Did you," James repeats, slower, "sleep with him? Samuel? Did you—" his voice catches.

"James!"

"Celeste..." Somewhere, a vent has turned on and a whirring noise fills the chamber. James's voice drops another notch in volume, "I told you I loved you." His voice is barely audible now, gravelly and hoarse. The slight unevenness about his eyes becomes more pronounced as they droop.

After a moment's hesitation, I monotonously repeat the words drilled into us during training,

"There's no love here, only predetermined compatibility," but he's already storming out of the room. I sit at the bench a few minutes longer, letting the sound of slowed hearts fill my skull. When I close my eyes, I can almost picture the ocean.

Day 2437 who fell on their knees in hopeless cathedrals praying for each other's salvation and light and breasts, until the soul illuminated its hair for a second,

We eat breakfast in silence. There is a harmony in the scrape of teeth on spoons, in the clatter of dishes, and in the fleshy sound of chewing. Everything is full of white, hard light.

"1,563 days until." James says, not looking up. No one asks "until what." No one meets eyes. No one stops the furious action of forks against plates. I wipe my mouth with my napkin. It comes away streaked with blood. Only then do I unclench my jaw, to realize that I've been gnawing the inside of my cheek.

Day 2452 Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!

Breath comes in short painful gasps. The Wheel was designed to keep us in peak physical condition, but I suspect its true purpose pertains to harnessing the rodent mentality. A test subject. An experiment. My feet pound against it, finding purchase in the soft tread of the rubber. I move my legs faster, exulting in the cold burn. It almost feels like back home—

My foot skids across the track and I stumble. The safety restraints catch my flailing limbs, my nose landing barely above the still spinning surface. For a moment, I let myself dangle, let my lungs hitch, and my heart stutter. For a moment, I let that glorious mixture of sweat and tears trickle from my cheeks and pool at my chin, only to make black splotches on the dark tread of the track. With my vision blurred, it almost looks like space.

I throw up all over The Wheel.

Day 2461 who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or purgatoried their torsos night after night

Samuel's hands on my waist.

Samuel's hands at the small of my back.

Samuel's hands encompassing my own.

I let him have the pieces of me that I have forgotten. His fingers are like spiders, trapping the weakest prey. I can hear James's voice saying:

"Celeste.."

"I told you I loved you," and,

"1,539 days until." and again,

"Celeste I told you I loved you 1,539 days until I told you Celeste 1,539 days until I loved you Celeste until I told you 1,539 days I loved you I told you until Celeste I loved you until I told you 1,539 days. CelesteCelesteCelesteCelesteItoldyouIlovedyou1,539daysuntil. Celeste..."

"Celeste..." Samuel whispers into my ear, his rough hand now brushing softly against my cheek. His hand falters as he comes in contact with a rogue tear, but he does not acknowledge it. We untangle and lie next to each other in the dark. Neither of us care enough to feign sleep.

Day 2462 who drove crosscountry seventytwo hours to find out if I had a vision or you had a vision or

he had a vision to find out Eternity,

There's a pink pill with a smiley face engraved into it next to my multivitamin at breakfast. I turn it over between my fingers, letting the chalky residue powder my palms. An antidepressant. I try to catch Samuel's eye, but he is suddenly absorbed in his powdered orange juice. I put it in my mouth, but my throat grows into a nest of cobwebs, sinewy spider silk preventing me from swallowing. Coughing, I spew it from my tongue.

"What the—" I look up again, preparing to be reprimanded, but Samuel's nose is streaming with blood, "Goddammit, I told you we need more red meat." He stands up abruptly, holding his face and catching the blood in his hands. Kicking his chair over, he stalks off to his compartment. His orange juice remains in powder form, blotted with a single drop of blood. I add some water and swirl it around, but don't drink it. It's a deep, red orange color, like sunsets. I used to watch the sunset nearly every day back home. I drop the pill in and watch it dissolve bit by bit.

James does not come to breakfast.

Day 2465 They saw it all! the wild eyes! the holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street!

"Have you seen James at all?"

Samuel, who is poring over some complicated chart and filling it with red arrows and tiny yellow circles, looks up at me with some amusement. "He's been feeling a bit down. Had a bit of a fit." He draws a thick blue line and the marker sounds as if it is tearing the paper apart. "Understandable. We're too far from home, but also too far from where we're going."

I drum my hands against my thighs and parrot his words back to him, "A bit of a fit."

"Don't worry," Samuel says, stretching his forearms against the table, "I just hooked him up to the drip, he's with the Phase Two-ers. Get him chemically rebalanced, rested up, in a couple days he'll be back to normal."

"Yeah, I suppose."

"Go ahead, get some rest." He studies my face, "You look awful."

I remain there, silent, my knees clacking together. I want to ask him if he feels it too. I want to ask him if that's why we haven't spoken in days.

Samuel grimaces, as if he can hear my thoughts, but returns his attention to the papers in front of him, "Your nose is bleeding."

Day 2485 I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked

There are spiders weaving webs through my throat, through my eyes. It's the spindly legs that keep me from blinking. Always sharp, stab stab stab stabbing in the dark. And the whispering.

I reach up to touch my face. My nose is bleeding. I don't remember that starting.

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I reach up to touch my face. My nose is bleeding. I don't remember that starting.

Day? where you bang on the catatonic piano the soul is innocent and immortal it should never die ungodly in an armed madhouse

Everything is black.

This death feels like space sighing.

I almost laugh at that, but I've forgotten where my mouth is.

Is this death?

Day? who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual images and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus

They teach us about solar wind. How it's made of plasma and governed by magnetism. But they never say what it's like to drift, to let go and float.

Day 2500 where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void

The ship travels farther and farther away.

Drifting: it is like a star unraveling.

When they understand, when they find it, when they know what I've done, they will have to squint to see me.

I will be that spot far off in space. The star unnamed. Our Blessed Mother of the Asteroid Belt, Our Lady of the Dark Matter, Immaculate Madonna of Hydrogen Nebula.

I will be home.

## **Monday**

It is Monday, the true holy day. God appears in the coffee of a bus driver before dawn, but old eyes can lose sight of faith. In the fresh rays of a raw sun, he slips away in the steam, leaving exhaust fumes and a navy workman's jacket with cracked elbows.

A young woman enters her too small apartment wearing too small shoes. She flips the switch, breathing, let there be light. But she does not breathe, let there be groceries, let there be money for the bills, let there be rest. It is light that she breathes for, the first gift of a god she was trained to love and learned to doubt. The rest will follow, she murmurs. It is Monday, and there is light.

It is Monday and a homeless Jesus sits on the curb with a shopping cart full of thrown away clothes and a stray cat. He mumbles something of a creed, the words garbled in the ghosts of his teeth, and condemns a teenage girl in fishnet. A shop owner comes out of his store, telling him that he stinks, that he is frightening away customers, that he needs to leave. Wheeling his cart, he sings that there is salvation for sinners. Then he sleeps on a bench in the park until a policeman turns him away. It does not matter that he is Jesus.

A scientist looks at an ear on the back of the mouse. People ears don't grow on mice, the mouse says in his mother's voice, creation is the Lord's work. You leave it alone. But this mouse is named J-37 and he was born at the hands of a forsaken man. The scientist notes something in his book and, lying down, turns out the lights. It is Monday, and God has seen that light is good; separating it from darkness. But, the scientist wonders, what about the shadows?

It is Monday and a father stands in a hospital hallway, his tie rumpled and jacket forgotten in a forlorn corner. His son lies in the next room, in a tentative limbo between here and no more. He stutters to the floor and gasps for the tears that have not yet come. For the first time in years, he thinks of God and prays for light.

# **PANDORA**

only hope was left in her unbreakable house she remained under the lip and did not fly away -Hesiod

the first girl was forged at the blackened hands of a crippled man. she let him rake his sooty nails across her

shivery, new skin, let him brand her with the delicate names of lights and floras, let him call her

a beautiful evil. she was told the slope of her hips were a sin, she was told to house the world

within herself. when they left her alone, she waited in the dark, wondering how could she be

the temptress and the box.