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Scholastic Art and Writing Awards



Missouri Youth Write
2017
Honorable Mention

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Editor: Erin Small

This edition is available online at:

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

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Hailey Alexander

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Mother

A daughter is most fun
for a mother.

A daughter does not mind
the powder-pink-lace-polkadot-poodle skirt.
She will ignore
the course nature
of its poor stitch work
to please Mommy.

Mother knows best,
so she gets to choose
when you must pick
between a pair of cleats
and ballet shoes.
Your eyes strain
through stage lights
into the third row where she sits.
You stand on pointe-- flawless.
Maybe this
will please Mommy.

Mother knows a dentist.
He is perfectly wealthy
and his perfectly white teeth
shine through his perfect smile
and he is perfectly perfect
for you.
You accept his invitation
to dinner and a movie,
and he is perfectly dull.
But a year later,
you accept his perfect ring.
You are sure
this will please Mommy.

Mother snips and Mother clips
shaving off parts
that bring shame
to her cookie cutter sham.
She glues on pieces
of a self she never became
and pins on buttons
that announce your future.
She is your mommy,
she made you from scratch
so you sit on the shelf to dry,
as Mommy's greatest craft.

Hailey Alexander

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Transcending

I thought the forest was celebrating
when the canopy snapped
and clapped, when the
frenzy of burning embers
fell humbly on the grass.

I thought the woods were
proud, as they embraced me
in their warmth, sparks
exciting the slumbering sky,
igniting a soul, opening eyes.

I thought the trees invited me
to join in their escape-
to crawl into the charred soil or,
to fly far away.

Their branches carried me
gently, our blackened limbs
blowing, dusting the summer sky
with a thousand ashy shades
of a scarlet lullaby.

Hailey Alexander

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Alternate Realities are Rarely Attainable

Another day
behind the glass
and secured pathways
catching up
with the few loyal members remaining
from a life sacrificed
for just one last burst of sweet ecstasy
that only my needle knew how to provide.

We speak through pay phones
as our hands search for a nostalgic warmth
through the icy cold barriers
built by judicial action

Seven-hundred and seventy-six days from now
my daughter will hardly remember
her father's loving grasp
starting kindergarten in May,
she will not remember me
warming up her mother's milk
or the way I raced beneath her
on the playground swing

Today they will all attend
a funeral of the living,
but already dead.
I tell each of them I love them
one extra time
before I set the phone in its respective port
and struggle to remove my hand
from its proper place against hers,
but she pulls away
and my eyes search her fleeing hand,
and our sparkling promise
cannot be found.

We arrive in cell 139

and I stare at the room
that will hear my last confessions
and the jokes I wish I had told,
the guard leaves,
the lock snaps,
I begin the task at hand.

Emptying the sparse stuffing of my pillow
I reveal my collection of tools:
1. A needle taken from the medical ward,
where my withdrawals were neglected
2. A pen from the office
where my early release was rejected and
3. A worn towel from the hook on the back wall
for the janitors convenience

Sitting in the middle on the unfinished floor
the towel fixed neatly beneath me
I rub the wrinkles
out of my good uniform.

I pick up the needle
and prick my finger
to find the required pressure.
I examine my thin wrists
searching for the green rivers
that were so long poisoned
and with one swift motion
I carve a straight line
opening healed wounds

I am welcomed with a blur
of another reality:
Pushing my baby on the community swingset
Her mother watching tentatively
on the adjacent bench.
but the rivers flow too fast.
the towel cannot absorb the blood.
and alternate realities are rarely attainable.

Meghan Amos

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Flash Fiction

We're Two Different People

It was a cold Sunday in November, just like any other. Mom was in the kitchen baking while dad was in his office answering phone calls. My older sister, Caroline, was upstairs in her bedroom just laying there, that's all she ever did anymore. Me, I was in the living room reading because it was the only thing that could take my mind off all the other crap in the world. If was a month ago then my sister and I would be up in her room talking about boys or something else I needed advice on, but not anymore.

"Care, come on downstairs, your favorite meal is awaiting you." Mother called upstairs at the foot of the steps. Dad ends his call a few minutes later and that's when I mark my page and head toward the dining room. Caroline trots downstairs with a blanket wrapped around her like a burrito. She has no makeup on with her very short hair brushing over her eyes.

"Mom, I can't eat right now." Care said as she entered the dining room.

"Honey, you can't stay in your room forever without eating." Mom said smiling.

"What's the point of eating if I'm going to die anyway." Care said as she became teary eyed and her voice weakened.

"Oh baby girl, your not going to die, you can get through this." Mom said rushing to Caroline's side with dad right behind her.

"Yeah, whatever!" She screams as she runs back upstairs with a loud bang.

I can't stand to see my sister like this, she has given up. I wish that I could do something that would end all of this so she wouldn't be suffering anymore, and if she wasn't in pain anymore then neither would my parents or I. No treatments were working on her and everyone was losing hope.

The doctor has given Caroline three months now. Family comes to visit from all over the country. Our kitchen is filled with food from strangers trying to help. I would say that the food is the only good thing to come from all this.

My parents always made time for us on our short clock with her. We always went to places over an hour away because Caroline didn't want to see anyone from school. My parents hated this because if something were to happen while we were out then they couldn't do much. I didn't mind though because she seemed happier when she was away from it all. She also liked going far away because she could drive. When we were home mom and dad wouldn't let her even though it was the only thing she actually wanted to do. So when we were out of sight of the house I pulled over and switched sides with my sister. I knew it was wrong but if you would have seen her face light up, you wouldn't have the heart to tell her no either.

The next week we had planned our weekly trip to the movies. On every Thursday I would leave school after lunch and come home and get Care. But this time it was different. I was greeted by an ambulance parked in the driveway. The next thing I saw scarred me for life. My sister was the one on the gurney. When my mom saw me she pulled the cover over the rest of my sister and

bawled even harder. I ran to my mom and screamed.

“No, mom, it’s not possible.” I sob into her shoulder.

“I know honey. It’s going to be okay.”

“It’s never going to be okay again.”

My dad joins our bear hug. Even though it’s warm and somewhat comforting, it still feels empty and will forever.

People expect me to be able to replace her. How am I ever going to take her place if I was always the odd child. I was never the pretty one. I was never the one with a boyfriend. I was never the one that everyone loved. Why couldn’t it be me, why was it her? I was ready to die because I had nothing to live for. No one would miss me but everyone would miss her. My parents were trying to keep a positive attitude towards her. I had never known how to comfort my sister though, she was always the comforting one. I didn’t know what to say to her anymore, it was just so awkward between us. I was always afraid to say the wrong thing that set her off. But I didn’t have to worry about comforting her anymore. At least not until we meet again up in the sky. It will not be long till I see my sister again because it should have been me, and I can’t leave her alone.

Brittany Armstrong

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

I Can't Get What I Need

I managed to take a shower today.
I know that doesn't sound like much,
but for a girl who can barely stand to stand
It means the world.

The world,
the world keeps spinning,
but I wish it would stop.
Just for one day, or a month or for long enough for me to catch my breath.

My breath,
air in my lungs.
It doesn't feel like air, it feels like flowers,
Beautiful but not what I need.

I need,
what do I need?
I'm no longer sure of what I need, I need sleep that's for sure.
But if my dreams are continually plagued, I will never sleep.

Sleep,
I need sleep.
Someone, please help me,
I'm screaming but the flowers in my lungs pour out my mouth.
Beautiful but not what I need.

Kayona Avalo-Bradley

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Poetry

The Day He Came

The day he came,
I was rejoicing.
Well, Kind of.
The day he came,
I was broke.
Broke from the past.
The day he came,
I needed someone.
I thought you were that "someone".
The day he came,
I was single.
It should have stayed like that.
The day he came,
I was desperate.
Desperate to be someone I wasn't.
The day he came,
I was young.
Young enough to be a fool and fall for him.
The day he came,
He saw me.
And now I wish he hadn't.
I never thought that,
The day he came
Was the worst day of my life.
I should've listened to the voice inside of my head.

The Next Week

The next week,
I was overjoyed.
And I still can't remember why.
The next week,
I felt true happiness.
Or at least I thought.
The next week,
I couldn't feel pain.
But now I do.
The next week,
I was actually hopeful.

My hope was not found in him.
The next week,
I felt like dancing.
I guess that's why I don't dance anymore.
The next week,
I felt like singing.
But, I sing no matter what.
The next week,
I couldn't sleep.
It wasn't healthy then but now...
The next week,
I wanted to see him again but,
I'd never imagined that it was never for my own good.

I Saw Him Again

I saw him again,
I felt so happy.
I'm happier without him.
I saw him again,
We talked for hours about the most stupid things
But now I've grown up.
I saw him again,
And we went out for pizza.
I couldn't even eat in front of him.
I saw him again,
And we talked even more.
I was wasting my breath.
I saw him again,
And he sat right across from me.
I sit right across from my mom... Doesn't mean anything.
I saw him again,
And he was a perfect gentleman.
He was trying to seduce me.
The worst part of it is that,
I saw him again
And I gave him my number.
I changed my number.

He Texted Me

He texted me,
And I felt wanted.
My Mom texts me everyday now.
He texted me,
And he cared.
Or at least I thought.
He texted me,

And I wanted to respond right away.
But I didn't.
He texted me,
And I smiled.
I smile when I hear my favorite song.
He texted me,
And I felt warm.
I feel warm when I'm under my blanket.
He texted me,
And I loved it.
I love my brothers.
I still can't believe that,
He texted me
And I texted back.

He Said He Loved Me

He said he loved me,
And I got nervous.
I get nervous when I take a test
He said he loved me,
And I was scared.
I'm scared of spiders.
He said he loved me,
And my heart was racing.
My heart races when I run.
He said he loved me,
And my cheeks were flushing.
My cheeks flush when I get nervous, so what.
He said he loved me,
And my fingers turned cold.
He said he loved me,
And I couldn't believe it.
I can believe that he was a jerk
I know I shouldn't have but,
He said he loved me
And I said "I love you" back.

Our First Date

Our first date,
Dinner and a movie.
I go to dinner and watch movies all the time.
Our first date,
He leaned towards me.
I should've slapped him.

Our first date,
He closed his eyes.
Yes, that was the perfect chance to slap him.
Our first date,
He puckered his lips.
His lips were so chapped.
Our first date,
He kept coming closer.
I should've known better.
I know my dad will kill me but,
Our first date,
I didn't back away.

The First Kiss

The first kiss,
Felt so good.
Eww. I can't believe I let his lips touch mine..
The first kiss,
And I was drowning in love.
Or what I thought was love.
The first kiss,
My arms were tingling.
They were probably just asleep.
The first kiss,
And I felt his perfect lips on mine.
I had to rinse my mouth out with soap.
But I would have never guessed that,
The first kiss
Was sent from the Devil.

The Late Night Call

The late night call,
We talked for hours.
I hate talking on the phone.
The late night call,
We were laughing nonstop.
It hurt my stomach.
The late night call,
I couldn't talk quietly.
Got into trouble with my Dad because I was talking too loud.
The late night call,
I stayed up all night.
It was really unhealthy.
The late night call,
And we were a couple.
Yeah, a couple of hooligans.

But that
Late Night Call,
Was the last late night call of our relationship.

Our last date

Our last date,
We didn't know.
I'm so glad it was.
Our last date,
We had a picnic.
And there were ants galore.
Our last date,
Our lips weren't apart for a second.
Ew, I just want to puke now.
Our last date,
I knew something was wrong.
It kind of felt good.
Our last date,
Was our last date.

His Mother Found Out

His mother found out,
He got in trouble.
I thought she liked me.
His mother found out,
She told him to do it.
I'm feeling thankful she did.
His mother found out,
And he balled for hours.
Or so he said.
His mother found out,
And I guess that's the end of Us.
And I'm glad it was.

"We are Over"

He said,
"Babe, we need to talk."
Finally.
I said,
"I already know what's happening."
I should have said it first.
"It's not you, it's your age."
"Age is just a number."
A number that helps guide you to "the one"
"A number that could send me to jail."
"But, love... It's dangerous."

I'm glad I didn't go that far with him.
"I have my whole life ahead of me."
"And so do I. I don't see how you're thinking like this."
I don't see how I could think like this.
"I'm sorry. I need you to understand that if you were older.."
I cut him off and said,
"If I was older, what?"
"We would still be together."
Not for long, things change.
"If this was love, it would know no number,"
"But," I cut him off,
"Love has no age limit. I am the same as you."
No I am not, I'm better.
I state,
"Maybe it *is* a good idea that we break up.
I'm glad I saw this side of you. I'm done"
"I have nothing left to say."
"Bye. And don't bother calling."

Hurt But Not Heart-Broken

Hurt enough to be sad but not enough to be mad.
I don't know why I was so attached.
Hurt enough to be wounded but not enough to be broken.
I can get over it just like the sun got over the hillside
Hurt enough to think crazy but not enough to think insane.
But hey, Einstein was insane.
Hurt enough to feel loss but not enough to feel pain.
Loss comes with everything.

I Saw Him In The Hall

I saw him in the hall,
And I felt melancholy.
More than I normally felt.
I saw him in the hall,
With a smile on his face.
What the hell? What could possibly make him smile like that?
I saw him in the hall,
And I wished,
just for a second,
that I could kiss his perfect lips again.
Dude, snap out of it.
I saw him in the hall,
And I felt like I needed to hide.
Hide from what? He's the one who should be hiding.
I wish I could tell him that,

I saw him in the hall
And I wanted him back until
I saw a gorgeous girl under his arm.

The Moment I Realized I Was Moving On

The Moment I Realized I Was Moving On,
It felt good.

No, better than good. It felt like a whole new side of me was coming out to play again.

The Moment I Realized I Was Moving On,
I was scared.

Scared that maybe it was too soon.

But,

The Moment I Realized I Was Moving On,
I felt hopeful.

The New Guy In My PE Class

The New Guy In My PE Class,
Is hot.

So hot I need a glass of water.

The New Guy In My PE Class,
Is a great conversationalist.

I could talk to him all day.

The New Guy In My PE Class,
Is **REALLY HOT**.

Man, did I step into a desert?

The New Guy In My PE Class,
Is a catch.

I'd go fishing all day just to catch him.

As you can tell,

I have a crush on,

The New Guy In My PE Class.

I Don't Know His Name

I Don't Know His Name,
So Imma ask him.

I was too shy.

I Don't Know His Name,
And it's killing me.

Slow and painful.

I Don't Know His Name,

So his nickname is, "The Blonde Hottie".

Oh my, I was staring
I Don't Know His Name,
So, I need to find out.
As fast as a cheetah chasing his prey
The good thing is,
I Don't Know His Name
And that's an excuse to talk to him.

His Name Is Jarret
His Name Is Jarret,
And it sounds good with mine.
I'd know because I've written it a thousand times.
His Name Is Jarret,
And his name goes good with his looks.
Again he's keeping the room hot.
His Name Is Jarret,
I hope he notices me too.
And he did.
His Name Is Jarret,
And, oh God,
The rollercoaster of romance starts again.

Oh, I Can't Wait.

Oh, I Can't Wait,
Until the day I actually talk to him.
That day was sooner than I thought.
Oh, I Can't Wait,
To fall in "love" again.
Love is a cheesy word.
Oh, I Can't Wait,
To see him tomorrow.
Oh, Lord.
I Can't Wait!
To see if he likes me back!

When The Bad News Hits
When The Bad News Hits,
It's unbelievable.
Why me?
When the bad news hits,
It's frustrating.
This is the thing that chokes me up everytime.
When the bad news hits,
I feel it coming.
Oh no. I can't do this. No! I can't do this right now.

I'm not ready.
Oh, crap! Here it comes.
When The Bad News Hits
I can't believe what I have done.
He asked me out and I said no.
Ugg, When the bad news hits,
I Totally regret my stupid feelings.

I Don't Know
I don't know
Why I said no.
I guess it's a thing now.
I don't know,
Why I have these impulses.
Impulses that get me into trouble every time.
I don't know
Why I am such a fool.
A fool for disappointment.
But all I do know,
Is I don't know what Love is.

Moving On
I know I need to
Move on.
But tell me why I feel this way?
Tell me why I'm such a Brain dead fool.
Tell me why I do this to myself.
I'll never get over it. I guess that moving
on isn't moving on until you deal with the problem.
I mean I asked for it.
So I get what I get, right?

Megan Baker

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Flash Fiction

A Paris Cafe

A cool breeze flutters my wispy blonde hair, tickling my shoulders. My beret, that's a raspberry hue, keeps my head some what warm from this chilly day. I gaze out across this little cafe and stare at the two wrinkly old hands clasped together; tightening each second never letting go. The gray haired man puts his hand against his lover's face rubbing his thumb across her delicate skin, you can see his love for her radiating from his eyes, his happiness makes her bashful and she slightly sinks away. It makes me a bit jealous, How could one love someone so much? I slide the stem of my glass into the crevice my ring and middle fingers and tip back for the last drop of the bitterly flavored red wine that slowly trickles down my throat giving me a shudder from the burning sensation pooling down to my stomach. Setting down my glass I start ripping open that dante cream puff that has been staring at me for the past couple of minutes. It's fluffy crispy exterior easily comes apart releasing the over sugary creamy filling. Closing my eyes I let my muscles cease and savor the delicious heaven exploding over my taste buds. I flicker my eyes open ,greeted by hazel eyes peering into me.

He giggles retreating, his curly beard rubbing against my chin.

"You petrified me, how dare you." I whisper to him.

"Sorry, forgive me for being late." He uttered whiling snatching up the rest of my cream puff shoving it into his mouth. I grimace at him and he emits a cheesy grin. I accept his apology, he positions his hand into my palm. I grip his fingers as he withdrew me from the metal wired chair. Our interesting adventure awaits us, I rapidly jerk him towards Swallow Rd. We bolt down the cracked sidewalk emitting jollity. I slam to a stop and peer through the glass window. I gaze over aged broken down books with discolored pages and gold sans serif font stitched into the cover page.

Miseur's book nook, is our favorite spot to curl up and spaceout. He doesn't care for reading but he adores it when I am content. We open the door and take in the familiar jiggle of the shop bells. Monsieur summoned us over since we are his usals, he beams with gratitude as we stroll towards him.

"I have a new book for you, WW2 historical romance your favorite."

Gasping I slide the book out his grip and hold it close to my chest doing my pathetic happy dance. I dart to my secret reading nook. When he pops his head in he gives furrowed brow.

"You ditched me, how rude."He nags.

"Sorry honey, I was thrilled about this novel."

He sneaks in and sprawls out. I reposition and nuzzle up next to him. He instantly recedes into a catnap as usual and I settle into my book.

Two hours later my man stirs a trifle and I knew it was time to go. I recline back and kiss him on his bearded cheek which makes his eyes fly open and a wide smile spreads across his face. He clutches my hand and tugs me out of our cramped position.

Misieur bids us a goodbye and we waltz out the door. He leans down and leaves a cutaneous

sensation against my ear when he murmurs.

“We have one last place to go.” He wraps his palm around my fingers and quickly tugs on my arm leading me to an unknown destination.

Gazing up at the wrought iron bars forming the eiffel tower I am in awe, I should have known he was bringing me here.

We sashay over to extended amount of flights of stairs,I peer over at him and then back to the steps. He shuffles in front of me and squats down.

“Your ride miss,” he declares.

I snicker and tightly loop my arms around his neck jump onto his back and he plows up the stairs. We finally reach the top and he is heaving, I cackle and peck his cheek. I slide off his back then curl my arms around his midsection and snuggle into his chest. We raise our heads admiring the bright yellows burning into orange which melts in the horizon, illuminating the Paris skyline. A rush of coldness swarms me as he lets me go, a wave of loneliness overcomes me. I spin to find him and get surprised to find him on one knee,propped open in purple velvet box was a brand new silver ring with three diamonds two white and in the center was a light baby blue one. It was absolutely breathtaking. Tears start forming and fall off my cheeks dripping into the iron bars.

“Yes a thousand times yes! I shout.

He slips the ring onto my ring finger then picks me and spins me around. At least I know now how someone can love somebody so much.

Adam Banga

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

From Man to Mole

October 22, 2016

Gothic Tale

From Man to Mole: The Transformation

I hated the dark; I hated everything about it. I couldn't stand the feeling of not being able to see where I was or where I was stepping. I hated the eerie feeling which the darkness gave, that feeling of not knowing whether someone is watching or not, that feeling of something crawling down your tingling all your senses, that feeling of venturing off early into the woods on a damp and foggy day. Would something jump out at me? Would someone attack and abduct me, causing me to vanish away into the darkness, never to be remembered again? Would all memory of me slip away and be enveloped by darkness, with not even my dearest parents remembering? The dark always made me feel cold and alone, like I was locked away some place where I would never see the light again.

As a result of my extreme phobia, I reveled in light. I loved the sun and its gorgeous luminescent rays shining down upon me, lighting my path both in reality and mind. To me, light represented the strongest, most indestructible, and eternal force in my life. It was my most trusted friend and companion.

I could never sleep, unless I had a light shining on me, assuring that I was not forgotten or lost. Light was the food for my mind; it nurtured me; without it, I feared that I would not be able to survive.

It was June 21, 2018, the brightest and best day of the year. Every day except for the dark and cold winter months, I ventured into the eden-like forests in order to walk and bask in the sun. No matter where I was, the sun would always find its way through the myriad of branches and shine its light and warmth onto me. The ponds were buzzing with life. There were birds with magnificent plumes of colorful feathers, chirping, resembling kites as they zipped across the sky. There were bright bees buzzing gayfully, and dragonflies engaging in their exotic dance mid air. All these animals savored in the glorious beams of the sun, yet all were greedily competing to attain more light for themselves. For me, light seemed to be my partner: it would always be with me no matter where I went. However as I continued walking, I approached a section of the woods which I had never entered before. As I curiously ventured into the mysterious wood, my dearest friend, light, vanished and left me alone and cold. It was almost as if someone had just switched off a light switch. The light was gone faster than I could humanly perceive. The buzzing sound of life along with light had also dissolved into thin air. It was a surreal moment, and I couldn't fathom how my most dear friend would let this happen and betrayed me in this way. Our pact of trust was breached by our enemy— darkness.

This sudden shift in my sense left me my sense dizzy and sent my mind into a fluster. With all my sense suddenly being flipped on its head, I felt like I couldn't breathe. My vision was suddenly covered by a black curtain, almost like I was blind. All my senses had failed me; I felt

like a powerless child with no sway over any of its decisions or thoughts. Every unsure step to what I thought was light and happiness sent me further into darkness it was almost as if I was in quicksand every effort I made to gain independence and freedom sent me further and further into the sand. I then stumbled into something; I groped around with my hands to understand what the object situated in front of me was. As I was tracing out the features, I realized it was the cold clammy face of a man.

Suddenly I was ripped from my own support and thrown into a cold light-less box. Enclosed on all sides by both darkness and cold metal, I hit my head on the side and was knocked out cold.

When I woke, I was confused as to where I was, but then the recent events dawned on me. The blood drained from my face and my seemingly weak body crumpled under me again as I passed out from fear.

I woke to something warm sitting in my lap. I reached out to feel many furry animals crawling all over me. Their sharp little claws pinched and pierced my skin as they scurried up, and down my body, and their wet noses left trails of oozy snot on my skin. I jolted to my feet as fast as I could and shook all the frightful beings off of me. As I heard the little animals scurry off to the opposite side of the room, I endeavoured to compose myself and find a light switch so I could get out of this wretched darkness.

I traced the perimeter of the wall until finally my hands found their way upon a switch. My mind swelled with hope and accomplishment. I flicked the switch on ready to bathe in the glories of a light as powerful as the sun, but instead a dull yellowish light peered down on me barely illuminating me at all. This light resembled the cold treacherous color of the eyes of watching nocturnal animals. This was not the light I had known. It seemed as if the darkness had twisted the light's spirit and tortured all its luminescence away, until all that was left was a gray decaying corpse emitting the few rays it had left to shine.

I tried to take in my surroundings, squinting at the small room in which I was trapped. I could barely make out windowless gray walls of cement covering three sides, with the fourth side shrouded in what seemed to be soil. The ceiling was extremely low, barely clearing my head, as if it was trying to squeeze and crush me.

On the dirt wall I was able to see a hole; I assumed this was the place to which the vermin had raced off into. The room offered no other door or opening through which any human could enter or escape, only this hole. A hole to hell, to eternal suffering and strife, a hole to the very domain of darkness itself.

These creatures represented the opposite of me; they ran into this pitch black hole and reveled in it and lived for it. I knew that I would never succumb to the corruption of this endless black hole. This hole sucked all the light into it and in favor only emitted a dark and unsettling aura. I thought about what these creatures could be, but remained stumped at the present time. There was no light here to show me the way or to alight my mind with ideas of hope. I vowed to never forget light and capitulate to the putrid darkness, in which these infestations thrived.

While staring endlessly through the dark, I perceived the only thing the light shone on completely, a mirror. I looked at myself to see a scared human staring back at me fighting for survival.

Every time I woke from rest, I would stare at myself through the mirror and watch as my body slowly changed and changed. To one time, after what seemed like nearly a week without eating or keeping myself clean, I proceeded towards it to see my haggard frame reflecting back upon me. My once shining luminescent face was transformed into yellow, dull, and sulking features. My fingernails were growing longer than ever before and would soon, I thought, start to look like

claws. My once clean-shaven face began to grow fine whiskers. Something was happening. I didn't know who I fully was. The darkness was clouding me and rooting out all the light that was remaining within.

Although I had seen myself changing in my appearance, that day marked the time when I no longer fully knew who I was. Out of fear from perceiving the animal in the mirror, I quickly scampered off to a corner where I curled into a ball and finally drifted asleep.

I woke up, not remembering when or how I fell asleep, and stood up to hit my head against the ceiling. I was perplexed. I swore that the ceiling just before was taller than me; since it was impossible that I grew a significant amount over what I perceived to be a short time, I was led to deduce that the ceiling was lowered. My heart began pounding for fear that the ceiling would at any moment drop and crush me. To make matters worse I also saw that the already dim light bulb began to slowly fade away to a small sliver of pale yellow light. I began crying and weeping kicking everything around me and screaming till my throat went hoarse, and no more words would exit from my aching body. I felt completely dejected and forgotten; I felt like I was losing myself.

I woke again to find the ceiling lower still, forcing me to crawl on my hands and knees, and the light fading to nothingness, rendering my eyes useless. The only thing seemingly lit was the mirror, which mockingly stared back at me. I saw in it an animal, scampering around on all fours, covered in its own filth and hair, with its nose twitching with the purpose of picking up a scent of food. This creature was wholly different from who I was. Terrified I scampered away vowing to never look at that piece of vermin in the mirror again. With my energy having been drained from the lack of food and my incessant screeches of fear, out of exhaustion I collapsed near the place I had vowed to never reside, the dirt wall, and fell asleep.

I woke to an the perpetual animalistic hunger of not eating for what seemed like two weeks, gnawing away at my stomach. I peered around for anything to eat and on that day actually observed a bowl sitting in front of the mirror. I crawled over to it and found earthworms, and larvae squirming around in it. Repulsed, I kicked the bowl sending the foul insects flying and scattering the floor. As soon as the insects made contact with the floor tens of animals scurried out of the black hole in the wall, clutched the food, and scampered back down into their abyss in the dirt wall. I was able to recognize the animals as moles. Many different kinds of moles of all sizes, with eyes blind to light and accustomed to darkness. I fell asleep with moles pervading my dreams.

After *a couple days* of falling asleep and waking back up, although of my raging hunger, I refused to touch the bowl of grubs under no circumstances. However as time went on, I became less and less repulsed by this bowl. I began to go up to the bowl and stare at these bugs, fantasizing about them. I would crawl up to this bowl and incessantly sniff at the bugs. My body grew animalistically along with my infatuation with this bowl.

One day I, lightheaded and dizzy, woke to my stomach roaring at my brain to eat something. I found again a bowl situated in front of the mirror with various grubs writhing in each other's slime. I quickly through starvation gulped the whole contents of the bowl down my throat. I felt these insect squirm down my throat, and felt their slimy bodies coat my esophagus.

The following days I found more and more grubs to be placed within the bowl each time I woke. At first I would quickly swallow the whole contents like a pill, but soon I began constantly taking smaller and smaller bites savoring each mouthful, and letting it rest on my tongue, giving the full feeling of ecstasy to my tongue. From then on, I grew to enjoy and revel in that bowl. Sometimes the moles would come from their holes and dine with me on this ambrosia.

I began, through disgust of my cold space to gather up various moles and allow them to sleep with me in order to keep myself warm. However, every time I awoke the moles were gone, presumably I thought down into their warm comfortable earthly domains of darkness. I thought to myself that I should make a hole, just like all my mole friends.

As I began to dig with my claw like nails, which were filled and coated with dirt and insect remains, I traveled deeper and deeper into the earth.

I performed a ritual of eating with my fellow comrades and then digging till my paws hurt and stung from the dirt and rocks.

One day, contrary to habit, I peered into the mirror, something my new found instincts told me not to do. In that mirror I saw a creature. A creature coated in hair, with small claws rooted in its paws, naked and bare without modesty, and dirt, mud, feces, and insects matted in its fur and nails. I saw a mole from the hole, no man. I saw a servant of the domain of darkness, a mole with a yellow, sun deprived face and body. My voice had forgot the intricacies of past human language and was now diminished to various snorts and groans. I was an animal, who hated the light and relished in the darkness of my home. On that same day, as I, a mole, was digging, I unknowingly approached the surface of the earth. I was digging farther and farther, extending my vast empire of dark tunnels. I then found my paw go through a surface, into an emptiness. As I curiously clawed my way into this emptiness, a bright light was switched on and hit my eyes blinding me. Out of unparalleled fear, I recoiled in fear and began flailing as I fell down the black hole.

Mahryn Barron

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Chris Odam

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Ancient Roots, New Blossoms

My sister was estranged from me when I was a child, a vision who danced among the columbines in my front yard. I longed for her, fourteen years my senior and of a different father. I lived with my disabled single mother in small-town Colorado and she lived with her arthritic father in inner city Pittsburgh, dialed 10 digits into mystery. My sister had no known number at which to call her, no address at which to find her. One day, when I was fifteen, the phone rang. Her voice permeated through the speaker when I picked up, a tentative hello on the other side.

A fear bloomed in me then that we couldn't fulfill our dreams of each other, but I knew that a sibling whom I could hold when I felt stranded in the wind outweighed the risk of discomfort in the embrace. I asked Vivien if we could all live together, and we decided we'd meet in the middle: Kansas City, Missouri. Three months later, my mother and I drove to Pennsylvania to pick up Vivien. When she came out her front door, she was familiar yet new to me. Her laugh sounded like the buzz of hummingbird wings - in a thousand years, I couldn't have imagined a detail like that.

The next day, Vivien guided us to her father's home on the other side of town, and Jem answered the door with a jovial smile and a hug. I remember the feeling of his dreads on my hands when I wrapped my arms around him. The darkness of his skin against mine was like roots of an ancient tree through sand.

Vivien interacted with her father differently than I did with our mother. She talked with her hands like he did; they told stories of Vivien's childhood and laughed when they noticed my mother and me nodding in tandem. I shared how mom and I gardened in our front yard, creating living art by the unpaved dirt roads of my hometown. We beamed through our tears, our hands held like bridges between her family and mine.

When Vivien drove back to Kansas City with us, we played each other our favorite music and sang along to the songs we had in common at the top of our lungs like declarations of unity. We slipped up on words like we did navigating each other and our differences, smiling anyway because, in those differences, too, were treasures. She showed me math's congruence with nature and art in the Fibonacci sequence, and I shared fantasy's power to turn our experiences into creatures that we can face through extended metaphor. When we found each other, it was like a miracle. We had sanctuary in each other and a garden of untold memories which we could share. Words floated between us like blossoms on the breeze between two trees but, below ground, our roots were entangled.

Middle ground exists between every two people, awaiting unearthing. I cast aside my

preconceptions that families were people who looked and acted similarly; that, once a family was split apart with miles of land distancing them, nothing could reconnect them. With every distance bridged comes discoveries of wonders beyond imagination. In every person is a revelatory parallel which transcends race and blood. My family is one forged by narratives and discoveries and comprised of people of multiple races, bloodlines, and heritages. Their warmth cultivated my roots: thirsting, ever-reaching, and intertwining.

Mahryn Barron

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Chris Odam

Category: Flash Fiction

Raspberry Red

Zenia picked raspberries from the bushes, crimson succulence like a messenger from the sun sent to hold her hand with the juice of childhood. She scabbled on her knees, carefully inspecting each berry, debating their ripeness. She glimpsed a berry just the shade of her mother's lipstick when they went dancing at the local dance hall. She remembered when her mother spun her into infinity, laughs on Zenia's lips brighter than even mother's lips.

She delved her tender arm further into the bush, longing to taste the color and revive the memory. She plucked the berry, snaking her arm from the grasp of the bush, and pricked her palm on the spindles of the branches. The berry dropped to the ground, caught up in the briar and lost to the dirt. In frustration, she huffed and abandoned the fruit – after all, she would always find another.

Porcelain cup filled to the brim with berries in hand, Zenia waltzed across the dirt. She placed a berry between her lips and popped it so they'd be as red as her mother's. She danced 'til she reached the only home in the woods, long abandoned and two stories tall. Majestic, she thought, but left completely hollow all the same.

She went to the second floor every day, painting the walls in berry juice. She glowed as the color revitalized the wood and weeds and whispers in the walls. Zenia swept the room, delicate like a blossom, twirling and twirling 'til the walls dissolved into a blur and her world was veiled in pink. The red blurred with the plaster in the daze 'til it was like she were dancing with her mother again.

Then there was a deafening creak. Zenia stopped still in her dance. Her mural split down the middle. The floorboards snapped, falling to the floor below. Zenia slipped through the split like a petal through the cracks in her wooden front porch.

She hit the ground.

With ginger fingers, Zenia touched her forehead. The dirt enveloped her. She looked up as saw the crater in her world. She stroked her lips. A bruise bloomed across her arms. Blood painted her painting hands. Her sanctuary was collapsed from the inside down.

A bout of hope seized Zenia. She bolted up.

Her childhood cup lay smashed beside her, and she was in the ruins. The blood across her lips overwrote the bright of the berries.

She could never taste the color red the same.

Mahryn Barron

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Chris Odam

Category: Poetry

Atheist's Prayer Beads

[Verse 1:]

Statuary,
gargoyle garden.
Arms intertwine like vines
in a jungle of bodies in stone.
Inside your eyes
you are so alone,
frozen in time
taunted by the still chime,
without hope
like an atheist
clutching prayer beads.

[Chorus:]

I can't study a statuary
and hope to glimpse a lost memory
for eternity.
I want to hold you,
I want you to feel me.
Don't turn to stone,
break free,
gargoyle girl.

[Verse 2:]

Flick of a finger,
the turn of the heel,
a flash lost in your eye.
I see you linger on what's real
under a glass sky,
spend eternity
deciphering
every word of your body
without hope
like an atheist

clutching prayer beads, but

[Chorus:]

I can't study a statuary
and hope to glimpse a lost memory
for eternity.
I want to hold you,
I want you to feel me.
Don't turn to stone,
break free,
gargoyle girl.

[Bridge:]

Statuary.
Let the skin of world
crack apart and flourish
into the noise of a crowd alive.
Break from your clay,
break away.

[Verse 3:]

In morning light,
I see your feet crumble.
Clay can't hold when the grounds
rumble, and nothing stays still for long.
Seashell fingernails
and hands of sand.
Your palms slip through
my fingers, and I parse
through the dust
for a shell to keep
and find prayer beads.

[Chorus:]

I can't study a statuary
and hope to glimpse a lost memory
for eternity.
I want to hold you,
I want you to feel me.
Don't turn to stone,
break free,
gargoyle girl,
statuary escapee.

Kendall Battle

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Frazier

Category: Critical Essay

Physician Assisted Suicide Research Essay

In 2015, Oregon became the first state to legalize assisted suicide; 991 people died from lethal drugs legally prescribed to patients that suffer from incurable diseases, such as cancer. (“Physician Assisted Suicide Fast Facts” 2016) These 991 people from Oregon were able to die with dignity. Suicide is a topic that is generally avoided in conversation. The thought of someone wanting to die can make people uncomfortable. Suicide is also considered to be an extremely controversial topic. But why avoid a topic that so obviously needs to be discussed? No matter the various opinions and laws for or against the topic at hand, patients with an incurable disease should be allowed the choice of physician assisted suicide.

Countless individuals believe that a law for physician-assisted suicide should not be passed because of the ethics and morality in question. Marilyn Golden, writer of “Why Assisted Suicide Must Not Be Legalized,” however seems to think differently. “We must separate our private wishes for what we each may hope to have available for ourselves some day and, rather, focus on the significant dangers of legalizing assisted suicide as public policy in this society as it operates today. Assisted suicide would have many unintended consequences.”(Golden, 2004) Marilyn Golden, is convinced that there are more than religious conservatives who are opposed to the idea of assisted suicide. In Marilyn’s article, she claims that, “The very small number of people who may benefit from legalizing assisted suicide will tend to be affluent, white, and in possession of good health insurance coverage. At the same time, large numbers of people, particularly among those less privileged in society, would be at significant risk of harm.”

(Golden, 2004) Her reasoning behind issuing laws that prohibit physician-assisted suicide is that it will prove beneficial to few. Her claim is that many people will be ineligible to apply for the lethal medication used in assisted suicide. However, the only requirements to apply for assisted suicide is that the patient must be at least eighteen years of age, mentally capable of making judgments concerning their health, and have a terminal illness that will lead to death within six months. Additionally, you must be able to ingest the medication, and must be able to provide proof of residency (“How to Access Death With Dignity Laws”, 2016). All of these requirements seem obtainable, even “among those less privileged in society.”

Infamous Doctor Kevorkian, better know as doctor death, headlined many National publications in the 1990’s for assisting the death of pain stricken Americans. Kevorkian is reported to have assisted at least 130 people in ending their suffering. It is reported that 40% of those people truly were suffering terminal illnesses, thus he reduced the amount of time that they suffered (Gupta, 2016). Many have accused him as “playing God.” Those that he helped “kill” were not terminally ill, but maybe just depressed. In Kevorkian’s eyes, it was possible that the patients were terminally ill. That is why now, it is a requirement for two physicians to verify that all the criteria have been met. “*That the rights of the masses should not impede on the rights of a few.* Someone once told me that was the “gist” of the Ninth Amendment, and it is something that has helped inform Dr. Jack Kevorkian's thinking and his life.” Kevorkian was a believer in

people having the right to do what they want, when they want, without interference of doctors, laws, or citizens (Gupta, 2016). Kevorkian referred to assisted suicide as Patholysis. Patho meaning disease or suffering, and lysis meaning destruction. Patholysis, by definition of Jacob Kevorkian is the destruction of suffering (Gupta, 2016). Kevorkian assisted these deaths within the 1990s, causing the right-to-die movement to gain strength within that time. In September of 1998, Kevorkian was unfortunately found guilty of killing a patient who was not strong enough to do it himself. He only served eight years before he was released in 2007. (Gupta, 2016) Kevorkian is a hero in the eyes of many who have suffered and want their suffering to end. He seemed to be the most obvious catalyst of the right-to-die movement. He managed to spark interest and put a positive light on the idea of assisted suicide.

From a federal perspective, "...the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously upheld decisions in New York and Washington State that criminalized assisted suicide. These decisions overturned rulings in the 2nd and 9th Circuit Courts of Appeal, which struck down state statutes banning physician-assisted suicide. Those courts had found that the statutes, which prohibited doctors from prescribing lethal medication to competent, terminally ill adults, violated the 14th Amendment." ("The Law on Assisted Suicide") The U.S. Supreme Court found that there is no constitutional "right to die," but has left it up to each state to permit or prohibit physician assisted suicide. ("The Law on Assisted Suicide") As of today, the only state's supreme court that has legalized physician-assisted suicide is Oregon, Vermont, California, and Washington. ("Physician Assisted Suicide Fast Facts" 2016). Meaning, that within the United States, forty-five states still have a law placed against physician assisted suicide. Oregon was the first to give patients the choice in 1997, followed by Washington in 2008, then Vermont in 2013, and finally California in 2015. Montana placed their only legal by state supreme court in December of 2009. ("State-by-State Guide to Physician Assisted Suicide" 2015)

Britney Maynard, a strong woman who suffered from terminal brain cancer, has personally taken the lethal drugs to end her suffering. Maynard had been married for a year when she found out she had terminal brain cancer. "My quality of life, as I knew it, would be gone." (Maynard, 2014) She searched for a solution to her problem. The family and friends of the victim also have to be taken into consideration when debating the legality of physician-assisted suicide. Nothing could be more painful than witnessing a loved one cry out in pain, or slowly lose who they are as a person because of a terminal illness. Not only is the victim being put through the pain and suffering, but also the loved ones.

She did not want her family to witness her inevitable death as she slowly lost her mentally capacity. Maynard was diagnosed with six months left to live. She then found out about assisted suicide and quickly moved to Oregon so she could become eligible. She acquired the lethal medication, but was in no rush to take it. "Now that I've had the prescription filled and it's in my possession, I have experienced a tremendous sense of relief. And if I decide to change my mind about taking the medication, I will not take it." (Maynard 2014) Maynard is relieved to have control of her time of death. She also stated how having the medication relieved all the fear that came along with death. Maynard's reasoning for the support of assisted suicide was simple, "I would not tell anyone else that he or she should choose death with dignity. My question is: Who has the right to tell me that I don't deserve this choice? That I deserve to suffer for weeks or months in tremendous amounts of physical and emotional pain? Why should anyone have the right to make that choice for me?" (Maynard, 2014). Britney Maynard is a first hand example of the benefits and the great things assisted suicide can give a family under the circumstances. Plus, Britney Maynard managed to make a good point. Who has the right to tell her that she does not

deserve the choice?

Assisted suicide in many ways is very similar to an abortion; Pro life vs. Pro choice. On January 22, 1973, the Supreme Court case Roe vs. Wade made women having an abortion legal under the 14th amendment. On this day, women were granted a right to do as they please with their bodies, so what is the difference when it comes to assisted suicide? Abortion being passed does not mean that every unwanted child is to be aborted. It means that every woman has the right to that choice. Meaning, that if assisted suicide were to be legalized in all fifty states, it would not mean that every person with an incurable disease is to be given the lethal drugs to end their life. It is giving the people who would be interested in assisted suicide the option. So, with women having the right to their body, victims of terminal illnesses should have the right to do as they please with their body.

Victims suffering from an incurable disease should have the option to be involved in physician-assisted suicide. Kevorkian sparked the interest of the right-to-die movement, and managed to give a positive outlook on the idea of assisted suicide. Britney Maynard's miraculous story displayed the peace of mind given by having a choice. The requirements to apply for assisted suicide are within reach of many people, contrary to the beliefs of Marilyn Golden. Physician assisted suicide is the same idea as abortion; Pro life vs. Pro choice. In reality, the real argument of assisted suicide is the humanity behind it. It is not considered humane to let an animal that is sick or suffering continue to live that way. They are put out of their misery. With that being said, what is the issue with giving humans that same courtesy?

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Beguine Beauchamp

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Congress Middle School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Ashley Evers

Category: Poetry

Young With Wide Eyes

Young with wide eyes
Innocent and free
She doesn't know
What they expect
Her to be

Time moves on as does she
Her wide eyed innocence replaced
with worries, anxieties

Each day her reflection taunts her
Telling her she's unworthy
of any affection

she hates her body, and doesn't know what to do
she turns to the only solution she knows how to

the only thing that matters to her
are the numbers on the scale

she is trapped in a mental jail

the love that once filled her
is replaced with overwhelming pain
that kills her
her bones start protruding
she thinks she's winning but she's losing

her mind can't function
she's bound to malfunction
finally, she can't take it

her body can't make it
she lays lifelessly
her soul wishes to be free
they find her laying there
passed the point of gasping for air

one, two, three

she's trying to be strong
she's trying again
this time, maybe it won't go wrong

she learns to ignore the beauty standards
that attempt to dictate her life
no longer is she overwhelmed with
and flooded with

strife

Beguine Beauchamp

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Congress Middle School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Ashley Evers

Category: Critical Essay

Dress Codes: Degrading and Dehumanizing

Imagine you are walking down the hallway at school, just trying to make it to class on time, when the principal stares directly at your chest and points out the unbuttoned button on your flannel. Suddenly, a wave of self consciousness settles under your skin, and you're overwhelmed by discomfort... until that self consciousness is pushed out of the way and stepped on by the fire of a burning rage. Dress codes are a system used to monitor students clothing choices. Schools should not have a disturbingly biased set of dress code rules because dress codes promote rape culture, single out minorities, target those who are culturally different from the norm, pick on LGBTQ+ students, sexualize girls from a young age, hetero normalize students, and enforce internalized sexism.

Dress codes promote rape culture. According to Ryan Stanley, vice principal at Congress Middle School, dress codes "have more issues with girls," and "are enforced because clothes distract boys". This promotes rape culture because it teaches boys that if a girl isn't covered, then you are practically expected, even by your superiors, to make a move on her or get distracted. It teaches boys that just because a girl shows a few inches of thigh, she wants sexual attention.

Additionally, dress codes across the US single out minorities. For example, a 12 year old African-American girl who attends Faith Christian Academy was dress coded for wearing her hair in a natural way. Another case of how dress codes target people with cultural differences is the issuing of a dress code violation of a Navajo kindergartener for having long and culturally significant hair, because it was decided that his hair was a distraction. Schools shouldn't punish students just because they have cultural traditions, instead they should educate students on other cultures.

Furthermore, dress codes across the US single out transgender students. According to Time Magazine, a transgender boy was dress coded for wearing a tuxedo to prom. Not only does this hurt the transgender student, but it shows cisgender girls that them simply wearing a tuxedo is unacceptable. Moreover, speaking about the unjustifiable prejudice toward transgender and 'cross-dressing' students, the NY Times reported that in October of 2009, administration at a high school in Cobb County, Georgia sent home a young man who wore 'feminine' clothing (wigs, tight jeans, makeup.) Wearing girls clothes boils down to just wearing clothes that are marketed to girls, and if a boy feels comfortable in them, he should not be disciplined.

Dress codes also sexualize girls from a very young age. Most dress codes begin getting serious around middle school age (11-14). Girls at the age of 11, wearing shorts that expose a few inches of thigh, or a tank top that shows her bra strap, should not be made into a sex object. Teaching a girl who is just beginning to become a woman that as soon as that happens, she's nothing more

than a sex toy at the age of 11 is insanely disturbing and if a girl at 11 is usually not considered old enough to be competent due to the 'adolescent hormones' then why is she old enough to be sexualized?

Also, dress codes hetero normalize their students. By telling girls that the reason they can't show thigh is because boys will be distracted, teachers and administrators aren't acknowledging that not all of their male students are heterosexual. Creating an environment where homosexuals aren't even recognized is where homophobia and the non acceptance of homosexuals begins. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are 4 to 6 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth. (Facts About Suicide)

Dress codes also enforce internalized sexism. When asked her opinion on dress codes, Melissa Dedonder, vice principal at Congress Middle School states "Cover it up, I don't want to see your skanky bodies." Most people would think that as a woman, or even someone with any respect for women, that Dedonder wouldn't use the adjective "skanky" to describe her female student body... It builds up internalized sexism and disdain toward your own gender, as shown by our very own Mrs. Dedonder. Girls are sexualized and obviously taught to think sexistly. By telling a girl she is a distraction, eventually that is how she will think of herself.

Although it could be argued that dress codes create a more effective learning environment without distractions, this is clearly wrong because the whole process of stopping someone in the hallway, or at lunch, etc, and announcing that what they're wearing isn't appropriate is far more of a distraction than whatever the person was wearing.

Dress codes should be eliminated or marketed as preparation for the workplace because now they are simply another way our society degrades and dehumanizes women into nothing but distracting sex objects who mold themselves to serve males.

Henry Behlmann

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Frazier

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

The Runner of Death

Living on the streets is tough in ancient Egypt. An unnamed boy, alone since his parents died when he was young, steals to stay alive. He doesn't know much, not even his age, he assumed it to be around sixteen but he doesn't really care. All he thinks about is to steal, run, and stay alive.

"Hey! Get back here!" an angry shopkeeper says. The boy runs off with melon. He steals from this shopkeeper everyday. It's always hard to spot him because he looks like an average person under his cloak.

The boy is tall and lean. He has short black hair with tanned skin. His skin is rough and covered with scarring although none of it is shown under his his tattered cloak. There is no real defining feature to him except his crystal blue eyes.

While running off eating his newly acquired melon, he saw a small building on fire. In this city, anyone caught in a fire is dead. Only those who could afford treatment from the gods received it, everyone else just dies. Normally he passes it up anything that would draw attention, but he heard a scream from a familiar voice.

He stopped quickly looking toward this lady screaming and crying, held back by others around her. After being abandoned, this lady took him in until he was able to be on his own. She had nothing but gave everything. He couldn't quite hear what she was screaming.

In a moment of realization, he ran into the burning building without hesitation. She was screaming Lula, the name of her daughter. Lula was born around the same time he was taken in. In the building, he found Lula terrified. Picking her up, he carried her out of the burning building. He protected her the entire way out. Something sharp fell on him and scraped his back leaving him in terrible pain, but he was able to bring her out. Upon handing her back to her crying mother, he collapsed. He knew running in there would kill him, but he did it anyway.

He died, alone and without name. But for Egyptians, death wasn't the end. He woke up at the Hall of Truths. He was about to start his journey to the afterlife, but he didn't want to go there. He wanted to continue living. He wanted to see Giza finished. He wanted to continue to look up at the stars every night. So he did the only thing he know how to do, he ran.

Anubis, the jackal-headed god of death, came out to greet the boy, like he does with everyone who dies. He was surprised to see that the boy was running, no one has ever ran from the afterlife. Intrigued, Anubis chased after. At first Anubis had fun, but then he started to struggle to keep up with the boy. A god being outran of a mortal, this is unheard of. As expected though,

Anubis caught up with him.

“Gotcha,” said Anubis as the boy struggled to get free of his grasp. “I would like to know the name of the person who could outrun a god.”

“I don’t have one,” the boy said as he stopped struggling. “I exist and nothing more.”

“No name? Well we can’t have that,” Anubis said. “We will call you Anpu, even the dead should be named.” Anpu approved the name. “Now tell me child, why do run?”

“I run because it is the only thing I know how to do,” said Anpu proudly. “It is not my time to die. You know it to be true don’t you?”

“I’m not supposed to resurrect the dead, but I’ll strike a deal with you.” Anubis goes on to talk about how Giza’s progress has come to a halt due to Apophis, an evil serpent, who has outrun the gods for years. He is preventing the progress on the pyramid and needs to be stopped.

“I will grant you rebirth if defeat him for me,” Anubis said handing Anpu a locket. “Wear this locket. It holds the power for you to travel through the Duat unharmed and will give you power to defeat Apophis.”

Anpu sets out into the Duat, the barren underworld filled with demons and evil. Anubis warned him about all the evils that lurk around, but thanks to the locket, he was protected. Running through the Duat was weird, Anpu felt like he was running in circles until he saw this strange building.

This building was large, red, and looked like a temple. Anpu felt an evil aura coming off the building, as if it was made by evil itself. Unafraid, he enters the building and walks down a hallway. Immediately he hears whispers.

“Hello boy,” a whisper says. “I can tell there is power in you boy, in your whole family.” Anpu holds the locket in his hand. “I can tell you about your family, that is what you want. Just take off the locket and come with me. I can give you power and knowledge. Join me.”

Grasping onto his locket tighter, he focuses on continuing through the temple further. “What did the whispers mean by I have power? How do they know about my family? Maybe I should go with them,” Anpu thinks to himself. “No! I need to stop thinking this, defeat Apophis that’s what I need to do.”

The hallway finally opens into a large room. In the center of the room was a huge serpent. Apophis’s red glowing eyes stares right into Anpu’s crystal blue eyes. Although being a serpent, Anpu could tell it was grinning.

“Welcome,” Apophis spoke. It was the same voice as the whispers Anpu heard before. “Speak your name.”

“Anpu!”

“Anpu?” Apophis repeated looking displeased. “So Anubis sent you. You know you’re not the first person to be sent to me. Your father tried to defeat me, as did his father before and his father before.” Anpu was shocked. “I assume Anubis forgot to mention that fact. Your family is of nobility, but I see no nobility in you. What makes you so different.”

“My parents died when I was at a young age, I presume you’re the reason for that,” said Anpu angrily. Crying, he looked to Apophis, “You’re the reason why I live on the streets! You’re the reason why my parents are dead!” Anpu charges Apophis without hesitation and Apophis hits him with his tail.

Anpu’s cloak is ripped and falls off as he flies back and hits the wall. His scarred chest is revealed. Everyday there was a fight for food, those scars reminded him of all the fights he’s been in before. He stood back up, Apophis was the toughest enemy he has faced. One simple hit and it left him bleeding.

Blood dripped from his mouth, a drop hit the locket he had been given by Anubis. It started to shine. Suddenly Anpu saw a man and a woman appear before him smiling. They were hovering in front of him as spirits, they looked like him but older. He realized that he was looking at his parents. More people started appearing around him, it was his family.

“Son,” his father spoke. “I am so sorry. I love you. I thought I could defeat Apophis so you could live a happy and normal life, but I, like my father, was defeated. We are the defenders of the Egypt. The family that has been fighting off Apophis for centuries, stopping him from whatever evil he was doing. It is your time now, kill him. Kill him for all of us.” Him and the rest of Anpu’s family disappeared into the locket. There was a flash of light and Anpu was suddenly wearing golden armour with a golden helmet shaped as a jackal-head.

Anpu looked at Apophis who was now had worry on his face. A golden axe appeared in his hand. Smiling, Anpu leaped toward Apophis. Anpu swung the axe with all of the power imbedded in him and his family. Apophis was dead. Anpu returned to Anubis.

“I see you have returned, and Apophis is dead,” Anubis said as he tapped the locket still strung around Anpu. The armour and axe disappeared into the locket “You held up your side so as promised, you may return to the living.” A portal appears next to them.

“Thank you for everything,” Anpu said going towards the portal. Before stepping through, he looks back at Anubis and says, “One last thing though, why Anpu?”

“Anpu means Anubis. You reminded me of myself,” Anubis said. “Goodbye Anpu, the runner of death.”

Arabella Below

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The Last Two And A Half Years

April, 2014

“Are you ready?” My mom asks excitedly while I enter the car. I ignore her as I slam the door shut, looking out my window at the landscape I will never see again. We are moving away from the only home I know, because my dad had gotten a job in Kansas City, Missouri. My mom is thrilled for the move, always wanting to get away from the small town we call Clinton. She had said that we would move during summer break, but that was a lie. Instead, she is making us move the start of spring break.

“You know that Missouri is supposed to have some of the best barbecue,” she states, trying to raise my mood. Missouri, more like Misery. I don’t want to be a KU fan, or an MU fan. I don’t want anything to do with the state. I just want to live in Clinton, Michigan until I graduate, in peace.

I hold onto my backpack and my smiley book, and face towards the window looking at the terrain one last time. Finally my mom starts the engine in silence. We tiredly start our 12 hour decant to Misery.

April, 2014

We pull up into the driveway, finally seeing the house for the first time. It’s small and crowded, but has a ton of acres, a pond, woods, and a creek. It’s not what I was expecting.

It has been raining for the last two hours. I jump out of the moving truck, sliding on the slick pavement. I’m glad to finally have my land legs back. I wobble towards the house, with the pitch black night blinding the path before me that was once visible. The rain pounds onto my shoulders. The sky cascades its charcoal blanket over the moon. The stars, holes in the once perfect blanket, shine with all their might. It’s not enough to lead the way to the door. I wait for my dad to take out a light, waiting a slow eternity until finally it ends and I can see once again. I shuffle towards my new home with dread.

April, 2014

I enter the school with my brother by my side. It’s our first day at the new school, and my heart is pounding like a drum. My stomach churns at the sight of my classroom. My brother slowly leaves my side to enter his new class and I drag myself towards mine. Somebody cuts in front of me and opens the door. I slip inside silently, trying my best to be invisible. I have no idea where to sit; it’s the middle of the school year. They all frisk around me, knowing I’m new. They take me to my seat and bombard me with questions. My brain feels like it’s inside out, it can’t process all the information. At last, the teacher walks to the front of the class, which

silences my fellow classmates.

She requests the one question I had desired most to not answer, “Would you like to tell us something about yourself, Ardella?” Heck no I thought, but knowing this could not be my answer I sought the depths of my brain, looking for something interesting. Sweat glistens my eyebrow as I realize how sore my throat is from my not so long ago days of crying.

I clench my fists in anticipation and croak out, “You can call me Dell, if you want to. I’m from Michigan and I like to play basketball.” *Imbecile*, is the only thing I think. Who cares if you went to Michigan or like basketball? Oh right, nobody. Stop acting like you’re some cool girl, you can’t even speak a sentence without losing your voice or it cracking. Get your crap together and stop acting like a crybaby.

“Hi, I’m Kylie,” I hear a high pitch voice from behind me say, and it halts my darkening thoughts.

“Hi, I’m Dell, but you already know that. Sorry,” *Stupid*, why do you always apologize? Who cares if she already knew that. They can see right through you, they know that you are some boring, fat, ugly, polite girl. Not anybody worth thinking twice about.

I turn towards the board and cover my pimply face in shame.

May, 2014

I take my lunch and walk to the table I now call home. They watch me stride across the cafeteria, tray in hand. Their eyes others would call hawk like, are welcoming to me. I slink into a seat at the table fellow students would call horrible names. I eat my lunch in silence, listening to everyone’s conversations. Somebody broke up with somebody, somebody hates another person, somebody is stressed for a test. The normal chatter.

I look at the tables around me and meet eyes with others. The normal new kid stares. I let out a sigh and rest my chin on my hand. I look at the people sitting at my table, and I know the reason why deep down everyone hates my new friend’s guts. They assume that we are all rotten. I sit at the popular table, and I’m okay with the disapproving stares.

June, 2014

I walk through the front door, mail in hand. Sorting through it before my mom can even notice I’m back inside the house. Bills, paycheck, bills, letter addressed to Ardella, bills. I pick up the letter addressed to me and hide it behind my back, while setting down the rest of the mail on the island. I run to my room and quietly lock the door behind me. I tear the envelope, oh so gently open, and slide out the letter waiting inside. It crosses my mind that I might want to tell my mom that the letter had arrived before opening it, but I had waited a month for it to come. So, I take a seat on my bed, slowly open up the folded letter, my heart skipping a beat. I unfold it and scan the lines of her handwriting. The letter asks if I want to go to Karlee’s Birthday/Slumber Party.

I jump off the bed, with the biggest grin on my face. I rush to my mom without a second thought. I throw open her door, it slams against the wall beside it.

“Mom, can we please go to Michigan on June 27th?” I shrill ecstatically, hope shining throughout my voice.

“Honey, you already know that we aren’t going to Michigan until the 30th.”

“But I want to go to Karlee’s birthday party.”

“If you go then the party will be more focused on you coming back to Michigan and less about Karlee.” I roll my eyes at this suggestion.

“Can’t it be my birthday present?”

“No honey, end of discussion.” I storm out of the room, slamming the door behind me. I shuffle back to my room to write an apology letter. Things would be a lot easier if Mom would just get me a phone.

July, 2014

The sky is pitch black, the stars fraying in the night’s sky. The fresh cold air hits my lungs, they suck it in, in relief. I throw open the trunk of the moving truck, my arms sore from the hours of packing and moving furniture. We are moving once again, now to a better house. It’s another new home, new school, new city. It’s a town called Weatherby Lake, and is in the Park Hill District. I’m going into 6th grade this year at Plaza, supposedly one of the best middle schools in the state. I pick up a box, and start unpacking the truck I had just finished packing two hours ago.

August, 2014

I wake up to the sound of my phone’s alarm screeching. I pick it up and turn off the alarm before it can do anymore damage to my hearing. I drag my feet to the floor and gently lift myself off my bed. My head spins, not ready to finally be awake after four hours of sleep. I shuffle towards the bathroom, sliding through the door quietly. Trying to not wake up my siblings. I pick up the brush and start pulling it through my hair.

I’m standing outside waiting for my mom to take the annual first day of school pictures. When I hear the sound of an engine that sounds way too familiar. I glance at the source of the sound, and see that it’s my bus speeding down the hill. It screeches to a stop in front of my neighbor’s driveway, I sprint down the hill and jump over the ditch. I catch my breath as I step up the stairs of the bus that I will ride for the rest of the year.

I walk out of my last class to the crowded hall, surrounded by unfamiliar faces. The sweaty tweens push me towards my locker. As I finally reach it, I open it with ease others around me can not. It’s been a long day, and I haven’t said a word since I got on the bus this morning. I’m starting to get tired of this new kid thing. All of my teachers are trying to be bring me out of my shell, a place I’d rather stay in for now. I take my backpack out of the locker, and slam it shut. I start walking towards my bus.

But what’s my bus number? I search the depths of my brain, nothing. I look around the unusual

place for my bus, it's nowhere to be found. My heart sinks, what am I supposed to do? I can hear the buses start their engines and I can tell they're about to leave. I sprint back into the school to the office, and call out, "Can you please help me find my bus number. I forgot it."

The lady at the front desk gives me an exasperated look, before asking what my name is. "Ardella Belle," I croak. She scans the page until she rises out of her seat. She takes my arm and starts rushing me to my bus, shouting into her walkie talkie. When she finally reaches our bus, the driver looks at me in disappointment. I step up the stairs in shame and take a spot in the front, in silence.

November, 2014

I'm sitting at a table with some friends, I can hear the whispers from the table behind us. I pick up my fork and start eating in silence. I strain my ears to make words to the constant whispers. It's all gibberish until I make out one word, "Dell". They laugh in their shrill voices. The laughs I've heard so many times about others, now about me. I never thought that I would be one to judge the popular girls, but this school is insane.

November, 2014

"It's here!" My mom beckons.

I sprint out my bedroom door and down the stairs. It's finally here, my first phone. I hop down the last step and grab the box out of my mom's hands. I dash into the kitchen and grab a knife. I open the box as fast as I possibly can, still not fast enough. I grasp for my phone, and hold it to my heart. Now, I can finally text my friends from Michigan.

December, 2014

I text, "I'm here," while stepping out of the car, I shove the door shut. I walk towards the door nervous, it's my first time seeing Karlee since I've moved. I walk through the doorway, and hold open the door for my dad. I scan the restaurant, for a trace of Karlee. I see her standing next to a table in the middle of the restaurant. I run towards her and we embrace in a hug. It's the same hug as every other day, but it's different. We talk while our parents talk, but it's different. I have to keep dragging the conversation along, when we once would talk with ease. We are 2 feet apart, but it feels like hundreds of miles of distance. My heart breaks a little as I notice we might never be as close as we once were.

April, 2014

I shut the door to my bedroom and plop onto my bed. I take my phone out of my pocket and call Karlee, it goes to voicemail. I send her the daily, "How's your day going so far," text. People at school have started to say this is my catchphrase, because of how many times I say it in a day. I toss my backpack off the bed and lay my head on my pillow. I tug my blanket over me and drift asleep.

I wake up to the sound of my phone dinging, I pick it up and glance at the screen. It's been four hours since I've texted Karlee. I enter in my password and look at the text, it reads, "Sorry, I'm busy doing homework." I sigh, what's that supposed to mean? I've been getting this same text for a while now, at least it's better than her not texting back at all. I plug my phone into the

charger, and slump out of my bed.

May 2015

I'm surrounded by a group hug from friends I think I know. It's the last day of school, and it's different than all the other years. I don't feel like crying, I'm not sad to see my friends go. I'm ready for summer, summer means going to Michigan without worrying about missing too much school. I don't feel like I fit in here, it's so much different here than in Clinton. It's so hard to make best friends when everyone has known each other since kindergarten.

August 2015

I walk into my first class to see that I only know one person there. I walk towards the seat next to them, and slide in. It's my first day of 7th grade and I'm at the same school. Just, at Plaza I knew 100 of the 950 people there, at Congress I knew maybe five people on my team from the year before. So, of course class was fun. I mean what's not fun about being surrounded by unfamiliar faces. I ask, "How was your summer?" To the one person I knew last year, but never talked to.

She smiled and said, "Good," She seemed surprisingly nice for one of the popular girls. I smiled back and looked up at the board. It seemed that our teacher's name was Ms. Evers. I rested my chin on my hand and slipped into my depressing thoughts.

It had been three months since Karlee had texted or called. I was starting to think she was ignoring me. I still texted her everyday the same text asking how her day was going, never one response.

April 2016

"Why are not eating lunch?" My friend asks me. Well for starters, I'm not hungry. Also, eating makes me feel worse about myself. What else, oh yeah I'm too depressed, I think. Knowing that this can not be my answer, I say, "I'm not hungry." I get the same look everyone else gives me, the look where they feel sad for you because they think there's something wrong.

"What's wrong?" She asks. I sigh, sometimes I wish that I had never moved.

"Nothing." I answer, as I turn away.

August 2016

I walk into my first class, and scan the classroom for an open seat. The first thing that catches my eye is a beautiful girl, who looks friendly enough. I shuffle towards the seat next to her, and sit down. This is my first day of 8th grade, and I was hoping I would never say these words again, but I moved.

"Are you new?" she asks. I smile relieved that she was the first one to talk.

"Yeah, I'm Dell." I answer.

"I'm Kaelyn." She replies. I grin, happy to make a friend. I turn towards the teacher, and do a

victory dance in my head.

I shut the door to my room, and jump into my bed. Satisfied with how well the first day of school went. I take out my phone and text the only friend I'd stayed in contact with from Michigan, Amy. I send a quick text asking her when her school starts, and get the crazy idea to call Karlee.

It rings, and rings, and rings, until I finally hear someone's voice. This is the first time she has answered in almost two years. I say, "Hello," and hear the same back. I ask how things have been and we talk for an hour. She tells me that she wants me to know that she hasn't been ignoring me, and says goodbye. At that moment my stomach sinks, I could tell when Karlee was lying even after two and a half years. I say goodbye and we agree to text tonight. I turn off my phone and lay down. The tears start to roll.

December 2016

I swallow the Tylenol pill, before going down to the basement. I know that it's going to be a rough night. It's New Year's Eve, we're in Michigan, and I don't get along with half of the people here. It's the first time, I can't wait to go back to Missouri. Thanks to the help of Kaelyn and other friends, I have the best friends that anyone could ask for. They have taught me what real friendship is, and I couldn't thank them more. I am glad for the friends I have and they're worth the years of pain. Even though these two and a half years have been rough, I am glad for where I am now. This is the best I've been in a while, and I'm ready for the punches life is going to throw. I wouldn't of changed a thing in my life.

Oh, and those texts Karlee promised. Never came.

Kayla Benjamin

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Changing the World Around Me

The brush of my stack of papers sliding across the table's polished wood sounded cool, crisp, and official. I sat straight, made direct eye contact, and spoke clearly while Harry S. Truman stared down at the conversation from his sharp-edged picture frame. I knew my subject matter perfectly and, propelled by a just cause, I felt as unstoppable as the ocean.

"Just to clarify: this appropriations bill has just passed the House?" The man across from me, a staffer for Senator Roy Blunt, took meticulous notes as he asked me about the issue.

"Yes, exactly," I told him emphatically, excited that he had followed my explanation.

"And it takes away all funding for an existing Securities and Exchange Commission rule?"

"Yes, rule 13(p), as set by Dodd-Frank section 1502." Here, in a Senator's office, was one of the few places where these details would matter to anyone besides me. "It requires companies that use conflict minerals to report on their supply chain methods and locations."

"And militias own the mines."

"Yes, many of them. The militias are committing obscene human rights atrocities, like mass rape, mutilation, and genocide, as well as preventing the DRC government from establishing order or lessening poverty."

The staffer nodded seriously, tapping his pen on a note he'd already written.

"That's why I ask you to urge the Honorable Senator Roy Blunt to vote no if House Bill 5484 gets to the Senate floor in its current form, with Amendment 34," I concluded. "Thank you."

I, the citizen, possess so much power, I thought cliché-ly as the meeting came to a close. I can just make an appointment, walk through some metal detectors, and inform the government about things that matter. Wow.

After I got home, I sent the offices of Missouri Senators Claire McCaskill and Roy Blunt emails to remind them of what I'd said, including many more arguments and links to evidence. I thought the notes sounded very professional, and as I clicked the 'send' button I once again felt immensely influential.

I've spent much of my life doing research on big topics and telling people about them. Racial inequality, recidivism, gun violence, education funding inequity, conflict minerals—my list of

crusades goes on and on. This little meeting displayed the crest of a wave of belief in my ability to *change the world*. That phrase stood as the most prominent buzzword in my life for years.

Bzzz! Bzzz! Bzzz! My phone appeared as excited about the reply from McCaskill's office as I was. In the two weeks since the meeting, frequent inbox checks had become the norm and I had even started scouring my junk mail folder. Tapping my fingers excitedly on the kitchen table, I opened the email.

"Thanks for raising this issue. Fortunately, it is doubtful that this spending bill will be passed in this form. The full Senate has not been able to pass these narrower bills and lately has been rolling everything into a big omnibus spending bill."

I breathed a sigh of relief: they couldn't pass the bill that might have set my latest cause back several years.

Then I reread the email, once, twice, three times, and it slowly sank in that my meeting with them had not mattered.

My tapping slowed, softened, stopped; my fingertips felt numb, my hands shaky. The bagel I had just finished turned to lead in my stomach. Congress, one of the world's most important policy-making bodies, would not have managed to do anything whether I visited them or not. A bitter taste flooded my mouth and I realized my teeth had begun to savage my lips. If Congress couldn't do anything, my appeals to them meant nothing; if they were powerless to fight the tide of the status quo, I was even more so. Glancing out the window dully, it occurred to me that fall would come soon; the sky held a flat curtain of light-grey clouds, the trees casting stock-still shadows on the browning grass. I pulled the blinds closed and flicked the lightswitch, but the glare of the fluorescent bulb didn't seem any brighter.

* * * * *

About one week after that bittersweet email, I went to Ferguson Municipal Public Library, and I worked with a first grader on reading. Holly, one of my favorite students, embodies excitement about reading—and also about her new backpack, and the color pink, and gel pens, and just about everything else. She attended tutoring every week over the summer, at the insistence of her grandfather, to learn how to read.

"What's this word, what's this word?!" Holly crowed at me, pointing at the second word on the page. The first one had been "to." I raised an eyebrow at her.

"Who's reading the story, hm?" I teased. "*You tell me* what the word is."

"I don't *know*," she sulked. "I wanna read a different book."

"What do you do when you don't know a word?"

"Sound it out," she answered sullenly.

I nodded and then waited, looking at her expectantly.

“S-T-E-A-L,” she spelled. “Suh-tuh-eee-ul.”

I held up my hand for a high-five, and she clapped hers against mine confusedly, knowing she hadn’t figured out the word.

“So close!” I cheered. “And you remembered what we learned last week--when two vowels go walking...”

“The first one does the talking!” she practically yelled. “That’s why the E-A just make eeeee!”

“Yep. Today we’re going to learn about consonants--all the other letters--that do almost the same thing.”

Along with much cajoling, chastising, coaxing, and eye-rolling from me, she struggled through words like “steal,” “train,” “plane,” and “crawl.” Afterwards, as Holly contentedly colored with the glittery gel pens I always brought just for her, I handed her grandfather a piece of paper on which I had scrawled “sh,” “th,” and “ch.” He promised me to point out words with those sounds to Holly.

In that hour we spent reading, *one* more person became *one* step closer to knowing one of the things she will need to reach her own potential. Her grandfather would make sure simple labels and street signs added to her growing knowledge, so that she didn’t forget. The weeks built on one another, like waves gently carrying a sailboat across a sea of possibilities. Each session I found a slightly more capable and confident Holly at the helm.

Walking out of the library, I noticed that the sun shone very brightly, the sky looked almost overly blue, and the flowers seemed more beautiful than I’d thought when I had walked in.

Within just a few weeks, I drifted back and forth in my own current, my importance to the world constantly yanked up and down, towing my drive and purpose with it. I discovered that things that cause or require large-scale change—like laws and wars—do not occur through one ordinary person, and maybe not even through lots of ordinary people. I’ve come to make a distinction between the elusive concept of “changing the world” and the concreteness of “changing the world around me.” I can impact individual lives, and these experiences have shown me that that will have to be enough.

Mannon Bigus

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

The old House

A sharp pain hits my side and I jolt awake. I open my eyes to see Charlie standing with two flashlights and a camera. "Did you have to punch me with such force?" She smiles and says "c'mon! Mom and Dad are finally asleep." I move quickly and creep down the stairs. The old wood of the stairs groans and creaks beneath my socks. Its 12:47 AM and I'm sneaking out of the house with my crazy sister. I have never snuck out of the house. I have always been the straight A, goody goody in my house. It feels weird sneaking out without permission. As I close the back door, a rush of crisp October air hits my face. "Where are we going again?" I ask Charlie. "That old house down the street. We pass it every morning and every time we pass it, the more I want to go look around."

From the street, it looks like nothing. Double doors painted red. They're both closed, which means nothing. One of the doors has some bullet holes in it, that's not so good. The house had been built by an eccentric billionaire. It had been unapologetically modern, with a series of concrete cubes with floor to ceiling windows and a swimming pool. Charlie walks on up the stairs like she owns the place. I carefully follow. The door creaks open, moving open a centimeter at a time. She peeks her head in and motions for me to follow. Dust layered the floor, like a thick carpet. Cobwebs hang off the walls, their owners nowhere to be seen. The smell of mildew and mold make me cover my nose and mouth. "This is so cool!" Charlie yells. "SHH! Dont yell! There could be someone in here," I said. "The only thing that is in here is spiders, bats and most likely rats." She said walking towards the kitchen.

The kitchen could rival any magazine spread anywhere. The cabinets were white. The counters were black and white marble with a coat of thick grey dust hugging it. The tile on the floor was green and dirty. The green and brown moss pushing the tiles apart. I went into the hallway. It was dark and gloomy. The flashlight relieved the large portraits in gold frames that were mounted high on the wall. Charlie squeezed passed me and walked up the rough, wooden, spiral stairs. The perfectly untouched, gold spindles still lined the steps. The railing was gold with designs engraved into it. There was no creak or sign of rot, they were as solid as the day they were made. Each stair was like a deep walnut, but with a thick layer of undisturbed dust it was hard to tell. The inner edge was painted an antique cream.

The attic door was wide open with cobwebs hanging like streamers. Charlie walked right through them letting them fall back on me when I walked through. I expected the attic to be the worst part of the house, but it wasn't. It had a musty smell. The walls were perfectly painted red. There was an old T.V. sitting in the corner. There were a few boxes, which Charlie was already going through them. I glanced at my phone, 1:32. I was so tired and I wanted to go home. "Let's go home. I'm tired." I said. Charlie ignored me and kept going through the boxes. I told her was

going downstairs to look around and walked out. As I was walking down the stairs, I hear a noise. It sounded like someone was opening a door. I figured it was just Charlie so I kept walking down the stairs. When I got to the front door, it was open. I know the door wasn't open before because I was the one who shut it coming in. A million thoughts raced through my head and I told myself to calm down. I quickly walked up to the attic. When I got there, Charlie had her flashlight out looking at pictures in a photo album. She jumped when I started talking. "Charlie, we have to go, NOW. When I got to the bottom of the stairs the door was wide open." She looked at me with this ridiculous look and said, "You probably forgot to close it when you came in." "No! I remember I closed it!"

The sound was loud. It scared both of us to death. I looked at Charlie and her face was pale. She quietly put the album in the box and took my hand. We went down the hall to the stairs. There was another sound. This time it was a high pitched screech. We were running down the stairs. A door slammed and Charlie screamed. I looked over the banister to see the back of a figure walking into the kitchen. I pointed to the kitchen and Charlie nodded. We reached the front door, which was now closed. I reached for the brass door knob and turned it. There was another scream and Charlie took my hand and we ran down the stairs.

Trying to catch our breaths we stopped at the end of the driveway and looked back. There was a black figure standing on the stairs of the house. I looked at Charlie and said "I told you so." She rolled her eyes, smiled and said "Let's go home." We jogged the rest of the way home. I opened the back door and took off my shoes. Charlie was right behind me. The microwave read, 2:13. I walked up the stairs, passed my parents closed door and got into bed.

The next morning at breakfast dad asked how I slept. I looked at Charlie and smiled. We started laughing and was interrupted by our dad, "Were you scared?" Charlie and I looked at each other and then at him. "What do you mean?" I said. "When you ran out of the house like a couple of babies?" he said. Charlie laughed and said, "That was you dad?" He laughed and then got a serious look on his face and said "Next time, just ask." I looked at Charlie and she mouthed "How about tonight?" I winked at her and finished my breakfast.

Caleb Bishop

Age: Unknown, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Boys Will Be Boys

My first lie was when I was seven years old. Well, of course I had told lies before then, every child does, but they were typical things. Small things that were easily forgiven and forgotten. No, I'm talking about a real, flat out, never give in, take it to my grave kind of lie. It was picture day, my mom had bought me a new ivory sweater and had put every strand of my long hair through searing hot metal to warp the waves into neat rows so that I looked up to her standards, and I had just come home from school. My mom discovered that, while playing kickball with the other boys in my grade, I had ruined my new sweater. It wasn't that I didn't like it-- it kept me warm and was soft against my skin when I wore it and I enjoyed that-- I just didn't see it as a big deal that I had gotten mud all over it. My mom, after a rigorous lecture that I was surprised she hadn't damaged her voice during, suddenly turned to me with an angry, accusatory expression. Only, there was something else there, something I couldn't put my finger on. It wasn't until years later that I realized it was the smallest amount of fear. She stared for the longest second I've ever felt, searching me.

"Do you want to be a boy?"

I hesitated, that part is still clear to me, for a moment. I had taken that precious second to look at her. I knew then what she wanted to hear, I could tell by her nearly blatant disgust with the question, but part of me considered a different answer. I rejected the idea, then adamantly denied. Ever since then, I always wondered what would've happened if I had answered truthfully, maybe my life would be different. Maybe it wouldn't. Either way, it remains to be one of the only lies I still regret to this day.

Regrets and lies seem to be a common theme for my childhood. I regret every chance I had to tell someone about my confusion. I lied to my mom every time we went shopping for new clothes for school.

Yes Mom, I like that one.

Yes Mom, I'll take her old clothes.

Yes Mom, I'm okay.

Meanwhile, I was fighting a war in my mind I didn't even know was happening. Try telling an eight year old they have "internalized transphobia" and see if they understand a single syllable. Spoiler alert: they won't. I thought I would be better if I grew my hair out like my sister. My sister was always a good kid, never in trouble and did well in school. I was, academically, pretty advanced. I was ahead of everyone and I caught on to things quicker than most. Logistics and facts, that was my strong suit. When it came to behavior, I had quite a record. I can't count the number of times I was in and out of the principal's office. Hitting, yelling, fighting with other kids my age and sometimes even older; I once even went for biting a girl because I had thought she cheated in a game. Teachers thought I had an easily agitated temperament, my mom insisted I was normal, and my peers saw me both as weak and frightful. Half of them sought fun in poking the bear, riling me up to watch me blow, and the other half wouldn't dare to cross to my

side of the playground. Teachers and children alike called me a monster, a menace, and insisted I needed medical help.

I was the exact opposite of my sister.

My young mind thought that if I looked and acted like her, people would like me. So that's what I did. While I grew my hair long, I only got more and more confused. Why didn't the boys grow their hair out? Why did it feel wrong when my mom called me her daughter? Why didn't I like what other girls liked? What was wrong with me? That was why, I see it now, I was so angry. I hated being confused, hated not having answers to any of my questions, and I lashed out at others because I hated myself. I loathed the fact that I wasn't normal, and I forced myself into something I wasn't in order to try and solve the problem.

My mother's attempt at help was signing up for taekwondo, which actually was very enjoyable. I kicked and punched my way for four years to a black belt. She insisted I just needed an outlet for my energy, and it seemed to work. I'd tie my hair back and out of the way, and it was easy to forget that it was there behind my head as I worked. Once, during a class I helped teach, I was aside with a few small kids no older than six, teaching basics. One of the kids called me mister. An innocent slip, I could tell he wasn't trying to make fun or be disrespectful, so I wasn't mad. In fact, I didn't even correct him. A part of me enjoyed it, which added just another thing to a growing pile of confusion. A large thing that took up space in that pile was an odd feeling I had developed towards one of my friends. Sure, crushes among friends are awkward, but not unusual. But my friend was a girl, there had to be something wrong with that, right? I explored the Internet for answers.

Homosexuality: The attraction to persons of the same sex.

I found that one day, and for a while it seemed to solve everything. I brushed my usually chaotic hair and went to school that morning happy with myself. Gay. I was just gay. Gay was okay. That was how gay people felt, it was the only explanation. Gay people just thought they weren't a girl and that's why they liked girls and that was it and that was the answer and I found it... Only I didn't. Soon after, the anger came back, only I was tired of throwing it at others. I kept it in. I dropped out of taekwondo and into a state of existence where I merely survived. Showered to keep up appearances, my hair becoming damaged from the mistreatment. I went through the motions, kept a smile on my lips, all the while I spat venom in my own face.

Dysphoria is nearly impossible to explain if you have never felt it, but I'll attempt a poor analogy. Imagine you get a new pair of shoes, and you ask for size 4 lace-ups. The shopkeeper gives you a 3½ slip-ons. You ask for lace-ups, but you aren't allowed to trade them in. You wear them unwillingly, and they technically they still work as shoes, but they never feel quite right. You reach for laces that aren't there and feel disappointment, you find yourself wondering why your lace-ups don't look the same as other lace-ups before you realize, once again, that you don't have them. You try and tell other people you want lace-ups, trying to get help to get the right shoes. Some people tell you that wanting laces when you have slip-ons is wrong, others tell you that everyone has a laces phase and that when you're older you'll realize you wanted slip-ons all along. Sometimes you get frustrated with them, sometimes you get upset with yourself, and other times you give up and think that maybe there is no hope in finding the right shoes. Except, the shoes are your body, and that struggle is daily and constant. Do you see now how that can overwhelm a young person's life? How big of an impact it truly has? I didn't have a grip on what was happening to me, much less how to explain it to someone else. I didn't know anything, and I was scared and alone, and ever still isolated from my peers as I carried my reputation into middle school.

Then, in the middle of eighth grade, I made the most important discovery of all. A simple word that I had heard before, but never bothered to consider because I didn't really know what it meant.

Transgender: A person whose gender does not match their biological sex.

That wasn't me, was it? I couldn't be. That was for people who had too many organs or something... Right? I wasn't that, I was normal!

In these sorts of stories you usually hear that they cried at this moment, finally finding something that fit them, but this isn't one of those stories. At that moment, the only thing I felt was confusion and fear. Because of all the misconceptions I had been told and had listened to, I feared that I was even more alone than I had thought. I refused to look into it anymore. And I didn't, for a long time. It wasn't until months later that I decided to really understand what it was, and figure out how wrong I was.

The first person I came out to was myself. That seems strange, doesn't it? Coming out means informing other people that don't know, not figuring it out yourself. Well, that is both right and wrong. Yes, coming out is not figuring out or finding out that a certain term describes who you are, but, in my case at least, you can still deny it. Yes, transgender was the perfect term to fit me, but I had yet to admit to myself that I *was* trans. It took me weeks, but after a while, I sat in front of my bathroom mirror and took a long look at myself. My obviously female body, my feminine face and my long hair down my back, and admitted I was a guy. I must have been a sight. I then spent that summer and a few months of freshman year perusing through probably hundreds of baby naming sites, trying to find my new name. Something that was me, the real me.

Caleb, meaning bold or whole of heart. (It also means dog, but we're not going to talk about that right now.)

And in November of 2015, I cut my hair. I shed the first piece of the me I created for others in favor of the me that I am.

It would be a lie if I said that everything was completely fixed from then on. I still have days, even now, where my own bad thoughts make me second guess myself. I still reach for laces that aren't there, I still have dark days. And you will too, we all will have our days where it seems easier to just give in and be who everyone wants us to be.

I don't share my story to make you feel bad for me, or to shove who I am down your throat. I tell you because of what I took nearly 15 years to learn, something you don't have to gay or transgender to know. If you have ever been told you are wrong, been rejected or ostracized by those you know or love, if you've ever been torn down or shamed for who you are, if you've ever felt alone, know this: you aren't. Someone is out there that cares. There are other people like you. You belong. You are unique, but by no means abnormal. You are worth it. Be who you are, and let your hair down.

Sarah Boland

Age: 12, Grade: 7

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Kelly Rebhan

Category: Short Story

The Escape

I walk aimlessly, no longer able to run, my collar swinging back and forth and thumping against my neck with every step. My feet are sore and I need to rest, but I can't bring myself to do it. I have to focus on the nice, cool day and fresh air. On the streets that surround me, I'm free to wander, without a leash holding me back, keeping me prisoner.

I'm glad I escaped. Sure, my Peoples were kind, but I can't stand being trapped. I could wander in the backyard, but there was always a fence there, keeping me locked in.

Now I wander free, away from the awful place where they act like I'm not prisoner. But I know I am. Why else would there be a fence locking me in? A leash holding me back? Why else wouldn't I be able to walk outside like them, with nothing holding me in? If it's not a prison, why don't I go to dinner with them? Why am I always left behind?

So I escaped.

Enjoying the fresh air and the feel of soft dirt under my feet, I trot along and take in the sight of house after house, not caring where I'm going, as long as it's away from there.

When night begins to fall, it becomes colder, and I find myself shivering. I tuck myself in between two bushes that stand side by side, the cold, rough dirt floor making an uncomfortable bed.

I close my eyes and try to ignore the feeling of the prickly bushes that press uncomfortably against my skin, the occasional rumble of a nearby car, and the hoots that come from birds in a tree high above me. Eventually darkness comes, and I'm pulled away into a fitful sleep.

I was standing on cool wood floors and staring out a window when a gush of wind pulled open the door that one of my Peoples forgot to close all the way. Unable to believe my luck, I tentatively walked over. Green grass stretched out in front of me, ending abruptly at a cement road that lead to other houses, and beyond them to, well, I don't know. I'd never been out of the neighborhood. Except, that is, to go to the dreadful place called The Vet.

Excitement filled me. I could do it! I could run free! Before I had time to think about the consequences, I was running free, my feet flying beneath me. I sprinted across the yard, which seemed to go on for miles in my desperate flee to freedom.

My feet hit concrete and I zoomed down the pavement, dodging car after car that veered out of the way trying to avoid running me over.

Cars crashed against each other, and it became impossible to drive down the road, where cars lay hapardazly in the street and neighbors rushed out of their houses, phones in hand, all calling 911 on their phones at the same time. Aredlina rushed through me, and I was overcome with happiness. Unaware of the wreckage behind me, I continued running and running, loving the feeling of freedom.

A car horn blasts, and I jolt awake, hitting my head against the thorny bushes. While I slept, the neighborhood had come alive. Little Peoples run with backpacks thumping against their backs to a bus that sits at the end of the street. Cars pull out of driveways to head to the place called work,

wherever that is.

I pull myself up, stretching out. My legs are numb from lying on the hard dirt all night. I come out of the thorny bushes that scrape against me as I walk when, suddenly, I hear a Peoples, one of the little ones, call, "Puppy!"

Puppy? I look around. Where is this Puppy? Is it one of the Peoples? I've heard Puppy before, but I don't know what it means.

I spot the little People that had called Puppy, and realize the little People is pointing at me. What? I am not the mysterious Puppy! No. My Peoples call me Copper! And Boy. Am I Copper or Boy? Oh never mind. That's not important.

The little People, who I hear someone call 'Riley', starts running towards me, dropping her backpack, seeming to forget she has a bus to catch. The Riley People keeps running towards me, feet pounding against the ground and pigtailed flying behind her in the wind, still screaming, "Puppppppy!" even as the bus pulls away.

Suddenly I'm aware of the gnawing hunger in my stomach. When was the last time I ate? Thinking that the Riley People might have something for me, I close the distance between us, and the Riley People grabs me by the neck, pulling me into a hug.

"Mommy!" screams the Riley People, turning towards a blue car pulling out of the driveway. "Mommy! I found a puppy!"

An aggravated Mommy People gets out of her car, engine still rumbling, stalking over to the Riley People, who still has her arms flung around my neck.

"Riley! You missed the bus!" says the Mommy People angrily.

"But Mommy!" the Riley People complains, "I found a puppy! Can we keep him?" The Riley People makes her best pouting face, her bottom lip sticking out.

The Mommy People isn't fooled. "That dog's a mess! Let go of him! He might have rabies." Reluctantly the Riley People's grip on my neck loosens. I shake my head back and forth, my neck stiff from the Riley People's desperate cling around it.

"I still wanna keep him!" the Riley People pouts.

The Mommy People examines me, then says hesitantly, "We'll take him inside and give him food. I'll have to talk to Daddy about keeping him though."

Oh no. This can't be happening! It's gone too far. Sure, it seems I'm getting food, but keep me? No. That's not okay. There's a reason I ran away. I don't want to be kept! And still, what's with this Puppy business? And now Dog too? That's not what I'm called! Strange Peoples.

The Mommy People scoops me up, seeming to have forgotten her 'let go of him, he might have rabies' business, whatever that means. She carries me inside a white house with yellowing grass and toys that litter the front yard, placing me down on a worn towel that the Riley People gets from a nearby closet.

Searching my surroundings, I notice a dog looking back at me through a sheet of glass, and start to talk to it. The dog never answers me. The dog does, however, copy my every move. Angrily, I start to yell at the dog, "Stop it!" I scream, "Stop mimicking me!"

The dog continues to mock me, lifting it's arm when I lift mine and I find tears threatening to spill out of my eyes, why is it being so mean?

Suddenly, a thought comes to mind. Is this one of those, what the Peoples call a mirror? Looking at the mirror, I see a thing with dirty, matted hair, the original copper color seeming to have vanished. The thing has cuts and bruises covering it's body. Was this really me? Maybe this wasn't a mirror. Maybe the People's just have a really strange taste in art? I look closer. No, it is a mirror. Definitely a mirror. How did I end up looking like this?

A bowl of water is placed in front of me and I slurp it, gratefully. But I can't take my mind off the image I saw in the mirror. How did that happen? How had I not noticed earlier? Is it from the cars I ran by? It wasn't all that dangerous, was it? I mean, the cars all tried to avoid me.

The Mommy People's voice travels through the walls, and I hear her talking with another People, who has a deep voice.

"Riley wants to keep the dog," says the Mommy People.

"That dog's a mess! We can't keep him!" says the other People with a deeper voice. "We'll get her a dog. But we can't keep that one."

"What should we do with it, Don?"

There's a pause. Then, "We'll take it to a shelter," says the Don People.

A shelter? Noo. Noo. This is not okay. No. It is common knowledge among us, what do the People's call us? Dogs? Maybe that's what they meant calling me dog and puppy. Well it's common knowledge among us 'dogs' that a shelter is the worst kind of prison, the cruelest of the cruelest of the prisons. There is no way I'm going there.

But before I have the chance to plan an escape, I'm being forced into a cage by the Don People, against all my struggle and barks of protest. Why don't they understand? I want to be free! I don't want to go to a shelter! Why are these Peoples being so cruel? They seemed nice only moments before.

I wiggle around in the tight blue cage, barely able to move a muscle and still hungry from lack of food. The cage bumps against object after object, causing pain to course through my body as my various cuts and bruises slam against the cool, hard plastic of my cage.

A thought so sudden and unexpected it startles me makes me jolt upwards, my head painfully banging against the top of the cage. My People never treated me like this. Even when they took me to the dreadful Vet, I was never, not ever, put in a cage. Sure I was on a leash, but that's much better than this awful thing, in where I can barely move an inch.

Through my limited vision of the cage, I see a car door opening, the Mommy People and the Riley People getting in and driving away.

I'm forced into the back of a bright red car with what looks like a checkerboard surrounded by a circle on the front of the car. The sound of the trunk slamming behind me makes me cringe. Now I'm even more trapped.

The car pulls out of the driveway, my head slamming against the top of my cage every time the Don People hits a bump in the road. Why didn't he let me out of the cage? Does he not care that I am in pain being in this cage? That it is extremely uncomfortable?

Through my limited vision of the outside, I find a window and look out it, surprising myself when I find that I'm thinking of home and my Peoples, instead of just being free.

The outdoors is scary. I realize that now. Afterall, my escape caused the cuts and bruises, not my People. I'm going to a shelter now, not because of my People, but because I wanted to be free. But don't get me wrong, I'm still angry at them, I am. It might be my fault this happened to me, but I never would have run away if they'd given me a little more freedom.

I continue looking out the window, and see a picture taped to a pole. Is that me? I try to look closer, but the car moves past and I'm unable to check.

I stare intently out the window, hoping to find another picture. A few minutes later, we pass another one.

I almost jump with excitement, before I remember exactly where I am. It's me! My People have been looking for me. But why? Why do they care if I'm gone? Do.. Do they, do they actually care about me? But then why did they keep me locked up, if they cared?

I think about what happened, after I ran away and how they always tried to keep me away from cars. Were they actually trying to protect me? Trying to keep me from hurting myself, like I did when I ran away?

The Don People drives on for what feels like hours as I'm thrown around in my cage, nothing securing me to the ground.

The car comes to a stop in front of a large grey building. A chain link fence at least twenty feet high surrounds it, and I know, without doubt, where I am. I am at a shelter. I'm at my worst nightmare.

The car's engine rumbles to an end and the trunk is popped open by the Don People. I burrow as far back into the cage as possible, whimpering.

He carries my cage into the dreadful place, the Don People dropping it onto the counter before he goes and talks to the front desk People.

"Can I help you, sir?" asks the Front Desk People. I hear the sound of shuffling papers and the distant sound of others barking, but I'm unable to hear what they are saying.

"Yes. I found this dog out in the streets." Then, hesitantly, the Don People says, "You can keep it, right?"

"Is it a stray?"

"Umm.. I'm not sure. I didn't get a very good look at him, to be honest."

"Okay. Can I see the dog, sir? We can only keep strays."

We can only keep strays. Those words echo around in my head over and over. We can only keep strays. I'm not a stray, at least, I don't think I am. I bend my head down, peering at my collar.

It's dirty and torn, barely staying on. But, it just might be my ticket out.

Footsteps echo around me, and I crane my neck, careful not to hit my collar against anything as I try to get a glimpse of what's happening.

The cage is lifted up, and I watch through the bars as I'm carried behind the counter, through a door, down a long hallway, through another door. Eventually I give up, unable to keep track of where I'm being taken to. One last door opens, and I'm set down on a counter, the door slamming behind the Front Desk People.

She unlatches my cage, and I crawl out, stretching my body, which has become stiff from being in the cage so long. I stand in a bright blue room, full of scary looking equipment with everything polished so brightly it hurts my eyes. The counter I stand on lays in the middle of the room, surrounded by bright white cabinets. A single chair is pushed into a corner by the door.

The Front Desk People looms over me, her grey hair pulled back in a bun and her pointy nose giving her a severe expression. She wears a purple shirt covered in hearts and green pants, which does not go well with her stern look.

The Front Desk People peers down at me, and I find myself cowering. She pulls me towards her and unclaps my collar. Walking over to a sink, she washes the dirt and grime from my collar and leaves the room.

I slump down onto the counter, and after what feels like hours later, she returns. She walks over to me and hefts me up without a single word. Against my protest, she carries me out of the room, and I'm taken into an even larger room than the first one.

Some Doctor Peoples surround me, and I find myself trapped in a circle of blue and white. A white glove forces some sort of liquid in my mouth, and I am unable to focus on the room around me. The colors blur, and the voices dim. I'm pulled into a sea of blackness.

Sometime later, I open my eyes to find that I'm no longer surrounded by the Doctor Peoples. I lay in a bright pink room with no windows, very much like the first room I had been in when I

arrived. Except, this time, there is no stern Front Desk People. Instead, my Peoples hover over me.

I yelp in delight, and my first thing I say is, "I'm sorry."

They just smile, no 'It's okay, Copper,' or, 'It's okay, Boy,' or whatever. But one of my little Peoples, the one they call Sarah, has tears in her eyes. "You had us so worried, Copper!" She scolds, "Don't ever do that again!"

She flings her arms around me, and I'm wrapped in a hug.

I try to get up to greet all of my Peoples, but find myself unable to do so. My legs are wrapped in a thick, white, paper-like thing, what the Doctor Peoples called a cast, and I can't move a muscle. Noticing my struggle, my Mom People picks me up and hugs me, saving me the trouble of doing it myself.

I am back with my Peoples. They came to find me. They really do care.

I smile, my head tucked into my Mom Peoples arm, "I love you, guys."

There was no 'I love you' back, but then again, they never seem to respond to me when I talk.

Madison Boos

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

The Bomb

I hear screams of children and men. It's that time of year again. Every year it's different. And when I see the smoke or hear the showers I always get frightened and start crying. I don't know if they are going to catch me or not. But it's been three years now and they still haven't found me. Sometimes I just hide in the sewers or in the boats that have been abandoned. I'm surprised that they haven't caught me yet because they sometimes see me while I'm trying to find another hiding spot. I usually hide every one to two months depending how good the spot is. Sometimes I go to the same places, except one: the one place where I lost my brother. But it's too sad to talk about it.

I was only nine and I didn't realize how much I would miss him. Now I'm thirteen and I have to take care of myself since I have no one else. He always took care of me, but at the same time he disagreed with everything I did or said. I started to remember all the great memories that I had with him and I look down at my shirt and I see that yellow star on it. I fill with rage and start to try to tear it off, I get most of the stitching of it off but not all of it. I spend a few minutes trying to tear it off, it finally came off with all the force I put into it. It almost flew out of my hands.

My heart starts to race as I hear screeching of tires and then I hear a creaky car door open and slam shut. I listen closely to hear any footsteps or any voices, but everything is silent. A few minutes later, after listening for any slight noise, I see feet a few meters away. My heart starts to race even more and beats faster as they get closer. Then I hear the car door open and slam shut again. The car engine starts and I see the car drive away. I wait a few hours for Ruth. I hear high heels in the distance. I listen for anyone to call out my name. A few seconds later, I hear my name being called out. It's my neighbor.

"Mary?!" she calls out.

"Yes, I'm over here," I whisper from around the corner. I don't want to give up my hiding spot.

She pokes her head in where I'm hiding and extends her hands, "Here is some food." She brings me food every week. Even though she isn't a Jew she's at least not a hypocrite Nazi. Sometimes she asks me to live with her, but I've always been reluctant. Someday I know I will, but I don't want her to get executed for housing someone like me. She's too nice to get killed.

"Why do you take care of me?" She opens her mouth and doesn't say anything. She looks at me and I can see that her eyes start watering.

She looks away and just says, "You're welcome."

She starts walking away so I make my final plea, “Wait!”

“What?”

I don’t know how I got the courage, “Yes.”

She gives me a perplexed look.

“I said yes to live with you,” I can’t believe the words slipped from my mouth.

I look up to see her running towards me and she picks me up and spins me around. She hugged me so tight that I could barely breath. I have never been filled with joy so much in the past three years. I started to cry a little and I guess she felt my tears because she asked me why I was crying.

I said, “ Because.

Once we arrived at her house, I was astonished to see how big it was on the inside. It was at least a three or four story house, which is something that I had never seen before. She had a big garden filled with flowers and trees, and in one of the corners, she had a little pond. She let me roam around in the house. After a few hours, she led me to my room. Soft lavender overtook my senses. A little balcony in the back of the room led to the back yard. Then she told me to my bathroom so I could wash up.

Once I got settled and comfortable, she went to the store to get some cauliflower for dinner. I decided to get in the shower and clean up before she came home. Once I got done with my shower, I got dressed and started for the stairs. I was running down the stairs and I tripped on my foot but I caught myself on the railing. I heard the door opening and I panicked a little. I ran back upstairs and went to my room. I heard Ruth call my name “Mary?”

“Yes?”

“Come down stairs please,” she said.

“Okay,” I replied. I started to walk down the stairs and I saw a man standing in the entryway. I got a little nervous,

“Yes?”

“This is my brother Sergeant Hans Johnson, he will be staying with us for a couple of days.” I was a little worried that he was a Nazi, but I had a feeling that he wasn’t. After she introduced us to each other, she had a little talk in the library with me about her brother. She said that he was on business and that he was a soldier but he wasn’t a Nazi. A wave of relief washed over me when she said that. She added something that I wouldn’t think she’d say, that he is kind of peculiar. She said at night he would sometimes talk to himself but it was sometimes loud or quiet where you couldn’t hear him. I thought that she was just kidding, but I didn’t question her. I just

had to see for myself, or in this case listen for myself.
I snickered and she asked, "What?"
showed her the paintings.

"No my heart dropped, "Nothing."

She left the room and I thought back to what I said before. I went to my room and sat down on my bed. I looked around for a while noticing more and more. As I was staring at the painting in my room, I noticed that none of the people in the painting had any fingers. Although the painting was very detailed, they had no fingers. I went to go ask, but then I noticed that all of the other paintings had no fingers too.

I looked at more and more and there were no fingers. I was searching for the signature but there wasn't one. I went to ask about the painting but then I heard someone talking it was probably her brother talking to himself, I was starting to walk away then I heard, "Mary."

I stopped and questioned why he was saying my name. I decided to stay there and listen some more, but I started to hear the door handle turning. I started running as quietly down the hall as I could. I saw him look out the door and him starting to walk to the bathroom where I was but then he turned around to go down the stairs.

I got up and went to ask Sarah what was wrong with the paintings.

"Which paintings?"

It confused me a little, but maybe she's never noticed them. I went out to the hallway and thing's wrong with the paintings."

I turned around and looked. The hand it had very detailed fingers. I was at a loss for words.

"They didn't have fingers before they were just molded together."

"No they weren't."

"But, but, I saw them like that, with just molded hands, and they were just like that I don't know what happened, they were like that when before when I went to go show you."

"Sure."

"I'm going to be in my room."

She said and turned to pull out the brownie pan,"Okay."

I went upstairs to my room and tried to find a flashlight to go upstairs to the fourth floor. I rummaged through the drawer. Ruth came upstairs and saw me rummaging through the drawer. She just quietly walked away, I had to do more investigating before I were made to make myself look crazy...again. I walked up the staircase to the third floor. When I got up to the top of the

stairs, I saw a huge window at the end of the corridor. I walked up to it and saw a different part of the backyard. A secret part of the backyard. And it was like kilometers and kilometers away. I tried to see where an entrance was, but all I saw was a tiny black gate that only a troll would have fit through.. I asked if I could go outside and see the backyard but she said no. I had to go to where the gate was, but before I did that I had to finish exploring the third floor.

I went back upstairs and I didn't find anything which was disappointing. I went to the kitchen where the back door was and I checked to see if anyone was around. There was nobody downstairs so just walked out to the back. I saw all the things like the pond, trees, flowers and the garden, but that's it. I didn't find the little small gate. I decided to go back inside and just sit in my room a little more to get all this through my head. Although it was fun to explore, it's also tiring and kind of confusing. I went back upstairs and sat down on my bed. And then I layed down. I must've fallen asleep because Ruth woke me up for dinner. My hair was a mess and I had drool on me when I sat up.

I got up and headed for the bathroom. I brushed my hair and started for the stairs. I heard Ruth say my name and walked down the stairs a little slower, as I was walking down the stairs she must have saw me because she told me hurry up. I ran down stairs and sat down at the dinner table.

When I sat down right away Hans asked me, "How was your day?" Like any parent would, but I just answered that my day was good, but then he kept on asking me other questions about my age and siblings. I just ignored him and answered the questions. I ate the rest of my dinner and I took my plate to the sink and started to head out the kitchen. Ruth stopped me and asked if I wanted dessert.

I got a little excited because I haven't had dessert for a long time. I said, "Sure." I sat back down at the dinner table.

"Do you like brownies?"

I said in a delighted voice, "Yes."

"Okay they will be ready in an hour."

"Okay, will you call me down when they are ready."

In the nightstand drawer and didn't find anything. By the time I was done looking through the nightstand Ruth called me down for the brownies. It took a long time just looking through the on drawer. I thought about how much time it took and it only felt like fifteen minutes. I sighed and went downstairs. I sat down at the table and she gave a little plate with a big brownie it was so big that it was almost the size as the plate. The smell overcame my whole nose. It was like a chocolate dream. When I bit into it it was so good it's like caramel inside of fudge then coated with chocolate.

I felt a little dizzy after I ate all of it. I went upstairs to go lay on my bed. While I was walking up the stairs, I fell down, I must've hit the edge of one the stairs because I woke up in a

hospital with my head was throbbing. I turned my head and I saw Ruth sitting in a chair next to me. She saw my eyes opening because she started to smile really big. I was starting to ask her what happened then she interrupted me and started to say are you okay. I said I feel a little light headed and that my head was throbbing. I asked again what happened to my head? Ruth said that it had cut open a little because how hard I hit the edge of the step, they had to stitch up the wound because it wouldn't stop bleeding. The doctor came in the room and said, "She has a minor concussion and she got a some stitches but she will be fine, she will have to take it easy though and her head will hurt for a day or two."

"Okay," Ruth said.

Right before the doctor left I layed and said, "Can I go home?"

He stepped back into the room and said, "Yes."

I got up out of the bed and got out of the johnny gown. I had to put all the clothes on I had on earlier and getting the dress on was the hardest part, because of my head was throbbing. We got into the car and went back tot the house. I opened the front door and the house smelt different, I asked Ruth, "Does smell different in here?"

She started to sniff the place but she said, "No not really but I do smell some type of gasoline." My chest tightened when I heard say that. I started to look around the house and outside after words with her. We don't see anything and head inside. It was getting pretty late so I decided to get ready for bed. As I tell Ruth goodnight she insists that she tucks me in. So I get into bed and she tucks me in. After a few minutes I fall asleep, I wake up to see Hans standing at the end of my bed. I wake up and turn to the foot of my bed I don't see anyone there and I feel relief wash over me. As I try to fall asleep I hear footsteps in the hallway. I wondered who it could be but I just lay there motionless, until I see someone outside.

I the courage to get up and get up out of bed and go to the window. I try to make out who it was, finally I see that it was Hans outside in the garden. I saw him setting up something and it was facing towards the house. Then all I saw him light a lighter and set it off. Then all I remember was that it went black and all I could hear was a loud ringing sound. I got up as fast as I could and went to Ruth's room, on the way there she bumped into me and the next thing I new the house caught fire. Ruth then picked me up and ran down the stairs, I could hear the ceiling creaking.

We ran to the front door and tried to open it but we couldn't. We were locked inside. I ran to the back door and Ruth followed me. I saw the ceiling fall and as I was watching it fall my life flashed before my eyes and I started to shed tears. The ceiling crushed me like a foot crushing a peanut shell. My life was over and going up to the gates of heaven felt like defeat. I had no experience with the real world and me an adult, I had not accepted me dieing. I lived in heaven feeling like no one cared about me even though Ruth probably did. When I looked back to it I knew it was Hans, I could see the craziness in his eyes. When I first met him I scanned his body with my eyes, when I is eyes they felt like they looked through my soul. It was an icy cold stare.

Aubrey Boren

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

A Puzzle

A Memoir of Adoption

She was a cheerleader and he was the quarterback. It was the kind of story that belongs up on the big screen. Except that it wasn't. This was my story. This *is* my story.

I have never known what my story is. I knew that I was adopted, and that has always been cool with me. When you're young and cared for and loved, you don't think about what your history is because up to this point, you just don't really care. You live in the moment. Do you ever watch those old home videos? Like ones from when you were a kid? And you think, "aw I was so cute!" And you see all the pictures and have all these memories with your family, and your siblings, and you know that you're absolutely and entirely loved? Yep, that's me to a T.

But you always wonder what could have been if you hadn't been chosen. I mean the feeling never goes away. You sort of feel like a puzzle that's missing a few pieces. You're OK. You're not broken by any means, but neither are you whole.

Life is a beautiful thing and everything happens for a reason. But what if that's not true? You wear nice clothes, you eat good food, you have good friends, and great opportunities. But you always wonder. You wonder what California would be like, and you wonder what having teenage parents would be like. You wonder what siblings you could have had. What if they forget about you and they never want to see you. But you put those negative thoughts away and put a smile on your face. Because that's what you do. For eighteen years that's what you have to do. You wait to meet the people who could have loved you and cherished you forever.

Today is my birthday. It comes every year, one special day for myself. One day of the year where I get presents, and everyone at school says happy birthday, and I go to dinner with my dad, and everything is happy. But what about them? What about the people who miss me, and care about me, and want to know how I am and might love to go out to dinner with me? Do they remember it's my birthday? Are they out celebrating with each other, looking at a picture of me when I was first born? What are they thinking about knowing that I am turning fourteen and they have never once seen my face. They don't know how the 12 year old me looked, or the 5 year old little tot me looked. They don't know about me. Are they ever going to know that I like soccer? Or that I'm in Delta, the gifted program at our school? Or that I'm in student council? What about graduation? They don't know me, and they never will truly know who I am.

I wonder if, on this day, my biological mother is sitting somewhere quietly, holding on to the memory of the day I was born, the day she signed me away with a flourish of her girlish signature? I wonder if, on this special day, she regrets, just a little bit, sending me away to live with a family that she can never know. I wonder if, on this special day, she wishes to just meet me once, to see what I look like, to hear my voice, or to hold my hand. I wonder if, on this special day, she wishes that she would have kept me.

On my end, I wonder where my raven-dark hair came from? My biological mom, maybe? In my eyes, family is like a puzzle. You have the big piece for your dad, because he's always there to protect you and care for you, eternally. Then you have another piece for mom. And you love mom's piece. She's the piece that can never be lost and makes the puzzle complete. She is the center of the puzzle, the one that holds everyone else's pieces together. Then there's your siblings that have the puzzle pieces that you wish you could forget about, or lose, but you know that if you did then your puzzle would never be fully complete or beautiful ever again. And then there's your piece. Your piece is the one that fits just in the right spot. You're surrounded by all the other pieces and you're a complete, and beautiful puzzle. I have my irregular puzzle. I have the puzzle that I was given from the start, and it's the most beautiful, un-perfect, oddly-put together puzzle you will ever see. But where's my real puzzle? I feel like there's a puzzle piece that just needs to slide back into place and then they'd be there. Waiting for me, to fit us all in the puzzle together. But what if they already have their puzzle pieces together. What if they don't need my puzzle piece to make them complete? What if my puzzle piece will just always be around. It'll always be there. But maybe it won't always be wanted. But I know it's there. It's there for them if they ever want to make our puzzle complete again.

Then you have the real life scenarios. You have the fights with mom, and the screaming matches with your brother, and all the tears that dad catches. You have the dogs barking, the big backyard, the moving, best freinds, relationships, hard times, easy laughs, late nights, and family love. Your family. Of course there's fights, but you have them. You always have them to turn to, if you feel out of place. But then there's the teenage years. The years when mommy isn't your best friend anymore, daddy isn't your superman, and bubba isn't your favorite little boy anymore. Mommy starts getting angrier easier which makes you annoyed. Then you start saying mean things, "I hate you!" "You're not even my real parents!" "I wish you would've never adopted me!" "You're the worst mom ever!" You don't mean it the first five or six times, but then you do. You wonder where your real parents are, and if they take runaways. Especially runaways who were once their kid. Even though to you, they could never be strangers. You're given a good life. You get the opportunity to move around to different places. You ride elephants in Thailand, and you eat lunches under the Eiffel tower, you make best friends in North Carolina, and you make your best friend in Missouri. But the more you move, the farther you feel. It's like they're actually gone, you look for anything that can give you more information about them so you can find them and just see what they look like.

As far as you know, you just look like you because you just do. You have brown hair because as Mr. Feterson said, your two parents had the brown hair alleles. You can't roll your tongue because you parents didn't have the alleles to roll their tongues. You are who you are because of your parents. You learn that. You learn about heredity, and genes, and ethnicity in school. But you never have a guarantee. You never have a for sure clue of where you're from. I mean, how do you think a 4 year old girl feels when all her friends can roll their tongues and you can't. Or how about culture days. The day that everyone has their grandparents come in and bring enchiladas, or german chocolate, or something that fits in their culture. But then you have me. The German, Hispanic, White, and who knows what else, Anne Elizabeth Lee Bradley, on culture days you were supposed to find your "group" of people with the same culture as you. I would always get put into the white group because I had no idea where I came from. I mean, how do you take a pass on your cultural ethnicity?

So to the cheerleader and to the quarterback, to the love of two star-crossed lovers that produced a healthy, 6 lb. 7 oz baby girl and handed her over to two of the most caring individuals on the

face of this earth, your little girl is doing just fine. At times, she's an ill-fitting piece of the family puzzle, but most times, she's the piece that slides right in, the piece that they were always looking for and found.

Aubrey Boren

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

For My Dad

Seventeen years old and I already know what I want to do when I grow up. Soccer. One word, six letters, but six letters that define my very being. I love soccer. Love it. Play it, watch it, you name it. I can even sense when that black and white ball is near me. Nobody loves soccer more than me. Except for him. My dad.

My dad was amazing. Thirty-four years old when he passed. Military trip to Iraq didn't end so well. My dad always used to get asked, "Why did you join the military?" Most of the time he would say back, "I want to inspire people. I want someone to look at me and say, because of you, I didn't give up." My dad always put others before himself. When I was three years old I was diagnosed with stage two leukemia. My dad would spend every night beside me. He said he did it because he wanted to be the first person that I would see as soon as I woke up.

This year is my senior year. Which means no more varsity girls soccer team captain after I graduate. My mom always says, "You need to focus on the more important things in life, like school, soccer..." She pauses. "College." She echoes out. She knows exactly where I want to go to college. Well at least where I used to want to go to college. Now I'm not really sure. I always thought that I would go to Oklahoma State, graduate, and have my dad be crying his eyes out at my ceremony and cheering so loud that I can't even hear them call my name to come get my diploma. But now I have no clue where I want to go to college, or if I even want to go.

I'm sitting on my couch when my two best friends walk through the door. "We're here!" Shouts Chaise. "And we brought Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough ice cream!" Says Taigen.

Today is my dad's birthday. They come over every year to try and cheer me up, but this year is going to be different. Tomorrow is our first day of senior year and we have to walk into school looking like leaders. "Hey guys. Thanks so much for coming but you need to get back in the car because we're going shopping." I exclaim.

"Wohooo!!!" They both shout so excited to spend the day walking through clothing racks, but I would much rather be on the field.

"First day, Oh yeah, Oh yeah!" Joyfully exclaims my mother. She's downstairs cooking eggs, bacon, and waffles. (My classic first day breakfast.) "Come on down sweetie-pie!" shouts mom.

"Okay mom. I'll be right down." I reply sleepily.

Before I head downstairs I take one last look at my outfit in the mirror. Sperry's, jeans, and an Oklahoma State t-shirt. In my opinion, Oklahoma State orange is the best color of orange there is. It's that type of orange that you see right when the sun is about to go to bed, but still wants to get one last look at the Earth, before it says goodnight. My mom gives me a huge hug. It was kinda like one of those big bear hugs that every parent is awesome at giving but their kids will never ever admit it to save their lives.

It's the middle of the first half and we're winning, three to one. I can see my mom sipping some gatorade over by the other parents. One of the girls that I have played soccer against for a few

years approaches me quickly. I know her weaknesses and I pounce on them.

She puts her left foot out to the side and that's the moment that I nutmeg her. I kick the perfectly round, black and white ball between her legs, and quickly run around her and get it from the other side. "Damn it." She scowls. "Ha." I think to myself. Dad's number one rule was always sportsmanship. I left foot pass the ball to my teammate and swallow hard. That was the move Dad and I worked on in the backyard for hours, perfecting it every summer night after our scrimmages. When he was here, I could never could get it quite right. When he passed, I worked on it for hours, everyday, until I perfected it.

I look up in the stands and see my dad, standing a cheering me on with his goofy grin and his "GO LADY TIGERS!" sign held above his head. I make quick eye contact with him as he gives me the secret signal for success, one hand in a thumbs up, the other in a peace sign... Abruptly, I jolt out of what seemed like a perfect game in my head only to be greeted by harsh overhead lighting and strangers walking around me in scrubs.

I wake up after what seems like only five minutes, but turns out to be three days. The nurse notices my fluttering eyes and grabs my hand.

"Piper, my name is Margo and I'm your nurse. You were in a bad soccer accident during your championship game. You are in the hospital and you are okay. Don't worry, I will get your mom and doctor."

Apparently I had fallen into a pain-induced coma. My mom rushes in with a hot coffee in hand, but leaves it on the table to grab my hand.

"Honey, honey, you're okay. Thank goodness you're okay." She begins to cry and turns away quickly. You can see the pain in her eyes, most likely remembering the pain and memories from when my dad was in this very hospital. Two losses would be too much for one woman...

Soon, the doctor comes in and tells my mom that he needs to talk to me alone for a bit since I had finally woken up. "Rude doctor." I think to myself.

"So Piper Rose. Very pretty name you've got there. Reminds me of a spring day..."

He tapers off in his conversation. Immediately, my mind drifts to spring soccer games - when the trees are just blooming, bringing color to the grass we play on.

"Thanks." I say, finally coming back to the conversation but still confused. "So are you here to talk about my neck Doctor.." My eyes examine his coat to try and find a name tag. Spotted. "Doctor Phillips?"

"You're one smart cookie. Yes I am. You have a broken cervical fracture. This is a very easy bone to break but can be very dangerous. You're very lucky, Piper. You need to rest for 3 months and then we will try to get you back on the field. I know playing again is what you want, but rest is what you need to heal."

"Are you being serious right now?" I ask, so angrily that I feel like my head's about to pop off my body. "Do you have any clue when college scouts are coming? Five months. College scouts are coming in five months and you expect me not to practice for three-and-a-half months? That's not gonna happen. I'm just letting you know right now that I am not sitting around on my butt for three-and-a-half months waiting for you to give me the 'all clear'." I feel my face getting warm and tears rest on the brim of my eyes.

"Piper, I know you love soccer, I have heard that. I also know what I am doing. So if you just trust me and let me do my job, I think that there is a possibility that I can have you up and playing again in about three months." By now I have gotten so angry that I don't say another word and just pretend to be asleep. Some Doctor he is. Three months? How can he expect me to not play soccer for three months.

The road to recovery is long and tiresome. Who would have thought that laying in a bed and watching ESPN, dreaming of my soccer days would be more exhausting than actually being on the field? This is the day that I will be released and able to go home. I have received very specific instructions that I am unable to leave my house for a week. I need to rest so I have the greatest chances of being able to play for the college recruiters. Now home, I hear the doorbell ring. I look through the glass door and see my soccer coach.

“Hi Piper! How are you feeling?” He asks, sitting down on the couch next to me.

“I’m doing better now, I’m glad to see you! How is the team? Any word on what scouts will be at the tryouts?” I ask, hope ringing through my voice.

“Well, actually Piper, this is what I came to talk to you about... The soccer board has talked and we don’t think it would be in your best interest to try-out this round.” He said, looking down at his clasped hands.

I don’t have any words to say anything back, so I just turn my head. I think the message was delivered and Coach gets up to speak to my mom in the kitchen. How could this be happening? My world came crashing down in a quick 3 seconds. There is no way that I can just quit, stop trying, and leave my dreams. I have come so far only to be told I can’t continue on.

College recruitments come in two weeks. Mom has been taking me to physical therapy more frequently at my request. My coach told me no, but if I get doctor approval, I am going to make the tryout. Therapy has been a wreck on my body. Not doing any real physical activity in 3 months, then jumping into hardcore PT isn’t an easy job. It is making me feel like I haven’t done any exercise in my entire life. My physical therapist doesn’t exactly make things easy for me either. I still need to talk to my physical therapist about going to tryouts this weekend. I’ve been wanting to do it while she stretches me after running, or when we get water, but I’ve been too scared.

“Umm... So I have been wanting to talk to you about soccer...” I trail off.

“What’s up, Chica?” The physical therapist asks back.

“I think I am doing better and I really want to make it to the soccer try-out. I know it’s risky and I know it might hurt me, but I think I would be worse to not even try.” I lack confidence as I give my speech, but determined nonetheless. I see the therapist shake her head slightly, but then she looks up at me with light in her eyes.

“You know what? I think we can make that work.” She says back to me.

My alarm blares in the background, but I have been awake for hours. Sleep came and went in waves of minutes throughout the night, but the tossing and turning won in the war of sleep.

Already dressed, I grab my soccer bag and throw my cleats in on top. Today is the day.

I walk onto the bright green field and inhale the sweet smell of turf. The white lines on the field make me smile. You never know you could miss something so much until you’ve almost lost it. For a second I feel like I’m the only one in the world. That feeling is suddenly washed away by some girl knocking me in the shoulder blade.

“Sorry dude.”

“It’s alright. My fault honestly.” I sound like such a nerd. Why am I such a nerd?

That little piece of excitement makes my confidence shoot through the floor. If I wasn’t already nervous, I definitely am now.

As if things couldn’t get any worse for me, I see my coach standing over there talking to the OSU recruiter. Lord only knows what he’s talking about. I see him look my direction so I quickly turn the other direction and keep walking.

The whistle blew and the tryout officially began. The feel of the ball between my feet reminds

me of the game I love again. The ball is moving so freely, reminding me of what I once felt like before the accident. We start up with foot skill drills. Dribbling, foot skills, and dynamic stretches. The same drills that me and my dad would do in the backyard warming up for soccer games. I flew through the tryout as my body remembered every move just as I had practiced before my injury.

The recruits started to walk over to the line. I'm so scared. My whole life has been leading up to this moment, this one moment where some stranger a hand me a piece of paper and tell me I'm good enough. My mom says that whatever I do she'll be super proud of me anyway, but that doesn't cut it. The only thing I am accepting is victory. That may sound harsh but that's the only thing my dad would want me to accept too. They all split up, which makes me even more nervous. (I don't really know why.) I see two recruits walking towards me. Then they make a hard cut to the left and hand their letters to the girls who I overheard talking about tryouts before they started. Trying to make everybody scared. Well it worked I guess.

I've been waiting for the news for ten minutes now. There are only three recruiters left and they each have one letter in their hands. I need a letter. My heart is about to explode out of my chest. The recruiters all start to walk away except for one. She's a fairly young woman, with golden caramel brown hair like mine. She's wearing a OSU tee shirt, with black Nike shorts, and running shoes. I can already tell that I like her.

She walks over to me and hands me a letter but that's not all. She tells me how thrilled she is that I have decided to come, and that she was at the game when I got hurt. "I figured you were just gonna get up and be fine but no, you stayed down."

"Once I saw the gurney come out, I knew there was trouble in paradise. I came and visited you in the hospital while you were still in your coma. Although you had been out for a while, you still had your uniform on and your mom wouldn't let them take it off. That's when I knew you would be perfect for the Cowboys. I could see it in your eyes. You are a hard worker, great soccer player, and have a kind heart. I appreciate all of those things. Never lose that."

"Oh my gosh. Thank you so much. I've been wanting to play soccer at OSU ever since I saw my first game there with my..." This made me choke up a little. "With my dad."

That went downhill quickly. I turned into a giant tornado of emotions. The OSU recruiter quickly grabbed me into a giant hug.

"I know how you feel kid. My dad died when I was three. He overdosed and killed himself. He thought that by doing that, all his worries would be gone. Little did he know, that would be the beginning of a life long of sadness and anger. My dad was anything but a good father. But he was a good man. He had a kind soul just like you, but fell into some bad things along the way. Don't ever let yourself fall into bad things." Mrs. Biggins said. She gave me a small hug and made me feel loved.

I saw Mom pull up and I couldn't wait to tell her. "Thanks, Mrs. Biggins," and I took off for our car.

"I did it Mom." I exclaim happily. "I made it into OSU for soccer!"

"I'm so very proud of you. Hey, it's only four-thirty-five. What would like to do Miss Oklahoma State University?"

"Can we go visit dad?" I ask quietly.

I don't think she can hear me but she does. "Mom?" She still doesn't say a word. All she does is drive.

We drive into the cemetery. Both of us staring straight ahead, lost in our own thoughts. "Robert Barrett Johnson" It says on the tombstone. "1970-2003"

I walked up to the marker with Mom. She hung back as I made the last few steps on my own. "I made it dad." I pause to take a breath. "I'm going to OSU next year and play soccer. My dream and your dream. This is for you dad."

I say and set my acceptance letter down and walk away. I walk back to the car and don't look back. As soon as I get into the car I grab my mom tight and we sit there crying together. We sit there crying for so long I don't think I have any tears left. I say to my mom really proudly, "Thanks."

"Thanks for what exactly?" She asks very confused.

"Thanks for never giving up on me, even when some others never thought I would never have chance."

"Well of course my love. That's what I'm here for." She drives away leaving the two greatest things in my life behind.

Danielle Boyle

Age: Unknown, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Heidi Mick

Category: Short Story

Story Time

“Please grandma, tell me a story!” Begged my grandson. As he jumped up and down in front of me, his golden locks bounced uncontrollably. His bright blue eyes looked at me, full of wonder and youth.

I laughed and picked up the child and sent him in my lap. “Ok, my little child, only a quick story. Dinner's almost ready.”

He nodded and his eyes were looking at mine, waiting.

“Ok, let your grandma think.” I put my hand to my chin and thought of a good story. When I got one in mind I turned my head back to my little grandson.

“There once was a Roman king. He was very powerful and have the undying trust of his people since birth. His name was *Vir Fortis*.”

“Oh!” My grandson squealed. “That’s latin, right grandma? Does it translate? What does it translate to?”

I patted his head. “My little child, you are so smart. It translates to ‘man of courage’.” His eyes widened with excitement. “Now one day he decided to take over unclaimed land, but his troops went a little too far. They started taking land from Parthia. The king of Parthia soon got word and sent troops to his new border to keep his land. Tensions were risen and there was a huge question that circled the lands. Was there going to be war?”

That earned a gasp from my grandson and I just patted his head.

“One day the guards came to the *Vir Fortis*, pulling 2 women in chains with them.

“‘They demanded you.’ said the guards.

“*Vir Fortis* waved them away and they went back to their posts.

“‘What do you need of me in my desperate hour?’ Asked *Vir Fortis*.

“One woman was hunched, had skin darker than a slave's, her body was burnt and ugly. Her eyes tho, they were a light blue.”

“Just like mine!” exclaimed my grandson. I smiled.

“Yes, but her's had white in them, they looked like the sky with clouds.

“The other woman was so pale white, almost radiant. Her hair was bleach blonde, almost white, her beauty left people wordless. Yet, her eyes, they were black with sparks of red.

“‘We have been sent to you.’ said the ugly woman.

“‘One of us is lying.’ said the pretty woman.

“‘It is your choice who to trust.’ said the ugly woman

“*Vir Fortis* just looked at them. After a moment he asked, ‘Who are you?’

“‘My name is *Demon*.’ said the pretty one.”

“Oh grandma, is that latin again? What does it translate to?”

“My little child, it is what it sounds like. *Demon*.”

“Now the ugly woman said, ‘My king, my name is *Angelus*.’”

“And what does that mean?”

“It means Angel, my little child.

“*Vir Fortis* then asked them, ‘who sent you to me?’

“They answered at the same time, ‘God.’

“*Vir Fortis* was astonished. He just sat in his chair for a moment looking at them. When he found his words he asked, ‘Are one of you lying?’

“Both women nodded their heads. Instantly *Vir Fortis*’s eyes slid over to *Angelus* but he said nothing.

“*Vir Fortis* called over one of his guards and told him to unchain the women. But he whispered into his ear ‘Make sure to stay close to *Angelus*, I do not trust her.’ The guard nodded and did what he was told.

“‘Now, can you guys help me with my situation?’ *Vir Fortis* asked.

“‘Yes, we know all about your situation.’ Said *Demon*.

“‘Then please, give me your advice.’ He asked, almost sounding like a plea.

“‘Well, *Vir Fortis*, God demands blood shed!’ Says *Demon*, the reds in her eyes lighting. ‘They have denied you what is yours, think of everything that you have done for them, and in an instant they are ready to turn on you, and for what, a mistake? If anything, they owe you land. You need justice. You need blood shed, this is no time for words, this is time for action, in God’s name.’

“*Vir Fortis* nodded his head, liking the idea, considering it. He turned his attention to *Angelus*.

“‘Well, my king, I believe kindness is the way to go. Though anger is understandable, wrath is a sin. Do not hurt your brothers for what, land? This is something that can be discussed through words and understanding. With God’s help and love, all will be resolved without blood shed, but with words.’

“*Vir Fortis* stood up. ‘You say wrath is a sin, are you calling me a sinner?’ He asked *Angelus*,

“‘No sir, what I’m saying is choose wisely, or you just might become one.’ His eyes narrowed on her.

“‘Give me a moment to talk to my sons about this matter.’ The King said.

“Both ladies bowed to him as he stood from his throne. Thing was, *Demon* only gave a half bow and she left her head up with an almost sinister smile on her face. While *Angelus* even with her humped back, bowed all the way down, keeping her eyes down so not to offend the king.”

“Oh no grandma! What is going to happen?” My grandson exclaimed with a horrified expression on his face.

“Hush my little child and I will tell you.” My grandson slumped back, but his eyes looked at me eagerly.

“*Vir Fortis* has 2 sons, their names are *Cor* and *Ingenuim*. It translates to heart and brain. The king asked his sons about the matter.

“*Cor* agreed with *Angelus*. ‘Words are better father, a compromise, so no one is lost.’

“But *Ingenuim* agreed with *Demon*. ‘It’s ok to loose a little father if it is to gain a lot. Especially if that lot is rightfully ours. You heard what *Demon* said, they owe this to us. Also, how can you trust the other woman, she looks like a corpse crawled out of hell.’

“‘Do not judge her by her looks!’ Exclaimed *Cor*. ‘She brings great advice from god, I can feel it father, she is the one, she is the path. God’s kindness and words through us will fix all.’

“*Vir Fortis* looked at his sons. ‘I am so sorry *Cor*.’ *Vir Fortis* walked back out to his throne and stood in front of it. He told all of his guards to round his top men and leaders. Once everyone is there he made the announcement.

“‘The time has arrived, it is time for battle!’ He showed and everyone followed.”

My grandson gasped and put his hands over his face, but i could see him peek through his

fingers.

“The plan was put through, the troops went to war and *Angelus* was thrown into the dungeon until it was time for her to be killed.

“Everything was going smoothly, the troops won battle over battle for land, and it seemed like victory was in sight. Then one day, *Vir Fortis* got a letter. The letter said how 5 of his troops were captured. The next day another letter came in, 7 more troops were captured, day after day for a week he got letters.

“He want to *Demon* and fell to her feet crying, begging her to tell God that he was sorry and to fix the wrong.

“When *Vir Fortis* opened his eyes, he no longer saw pale white skin. He was latched onto Black coal feet that had scars from burns. He looked up to see that *Demon* had transformed into *Angelus*. Behind *Demon*, *Angelus* stood weeping into the letters.

“‘You, you are the demon!’ He said crawling away from her.

“She laughed at him. ‘You finally figured out the truth.’

“Suddenly she pulled out a dagger from her sleeve and lept at *Vir Fortis*.”

A gasp came from my grandson.

“As she was about to stab him, *Angelus* jumped in the way and was stabbed. As she fell, she took the knife with her so that *Demon* would be unarmed.

“*Vir Fortis* called for the guards and they took *Demon* away to be executed. As *Angelus* layed bleeding in *Vir Fortis* arms, he apologized a thousand times to her over and over.

“*Angelus* reach up and caressed his cheek. ‘God’s love saved me, it will save you too. For forgiveness is given when asked for.’

“*Vir Fortis* bust into tears and cradled her in his arms as her eyes closed.

“After a minute, *Angelus*’s eyes opened and she stood. She walked over to *Cor* and smiled at him.

“‘You will grow to make a great king.’ She said.

“From those words, *Vir Fortis* stood and walked over to his soon. He took *Cor* into an embrace. ‘You will make a great king,’ he pulled away from his son to look at him. ‘I can feel deep down that you will.’

“*Vir Fortis* turned around to his guards. ‘I am no longer your king, your new leader is *Cor*, and you answer to him now.’”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!” My grandson jumped off my lap and started dancing.

“Go *Cor*, go *Cor*, go *Cor*!”

“Come my little child, I am not done.”

He stopped his dancing and sat on the floor and looked at me, waiting for me to finish.

“*Cor* looked at the gaurds that were now his. He raised his hand and said, ‘Spread the word, there is no longer war between us, stop it and let us make peace with our brethren.’

“The guards shouted with agreement and left to spread the news.

“*Cor* and *Vit Fortis* turned to thank *Angelus*, but she was not there, she was nowhere to be seen.

“That was the last day anyone saw *Angelus* and *Demon*. *Cor* the next day wrote a letter to the king apologizing for everything and the 2 came to an agreement on land.”

I looked at my grandson and smiled. “The end.”

“Wow grandma!” He shouted and bounced up with excitement. “That was such an awesome story!”

“Thank you my blonde lamb, I love that story too.”

“I hope one day I can come up with stories just as good as yours!” He said.

I just looked at him. Then i leaned forward and looked him dead in the eyes.
“Little lamb, when did I ever say I made up that story?”

Danielle Boyle

Age: Unknown, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Heidi Mick

Category: Short Story

Tub of Memories

I pulled into my mother's driveway, her front door open and welcoming. I didn't move, I stayed in the car for a few seconds and just sat there. Finally, I stepped out and went to the front door. I knocked even though I knew I could just walk in. I couldn't bring myself to do that. Even though I grew up in the house, I didn't feel familiar with it at all and I would like to keep it that way. I saw mother step around the kitchen corner. She walk over to the door and open it. As soon as the door was open she threw her arms around me.

"Oh Baby, I missed you so much." She whispered into my ear, hugging me as tight as she could with her frail arms. Her light brown long hair was noticeably turning white at the roots, and she looked skinner, like a stick now.

I patted her back, not wanting to be rude. "I missed you too mother."

She let go of me and looked into my eyes. I instinctively looked away. She didn't comment, she just took my arm and led me into the house.

"Thank you for coming Baby, I can't really climb the ladder to the attic with my back. I appreciate you cleaning it out for me. Normally your da- I mean, Richard cleans it but that was a long time ago and I haven't gotten around to getting someone since."

I asked, "What's up there?"

She walked me to the hallway, holding my hand the whole way like I was gonna run out the door and never turn back. Like before, and I feel like doing now.

"Just some old junk that no one uses, I'm thinking of holding a garage sale and if there is anything of value by now, I'm gonna add it to my antique store."

Mother let go of my hand and reached up to grab a string in the middle of the hallway, and pulled open the trapdoor bringing a ladder down with it. It was the one leading up to the attic.

"How's the store going by the way?"

"Business it great! I got some great workers." She looked down at her old boney hands. I didn't answer. "Well good luck in the dusty thing. If you need anything just call me and I'll be here in a flash."

"Gotcha." She just smiled and left me to climb the ladder.

There was dust and cobwebs everywhere, including dirt layered objects. I reached up and pulled a string. A light came on that was bright enough to light the whole attic, with a little help from a window at the far left side.

With that thought I looked over and saw the large circular window. It looked different from the last time I saw it, no longer shattered. I looked away, memories flooding back. *I hate this house*, I thought, not even knowing why I came back and helped Mother.

I started grabbing things and bringing them over next to the attic's hole leading down to the hallway.

When I went to pick up an old rocking horse I bumped into a dark blue tub and knocked the lid off. I went and put the horse down next to the attic hole and went back over to the tub. I picked

up the lid and went to put it back on when I got a glimpse of what was inside. Clothes, little kid clothes, my old clothes.

I set the lid down and sat next to the clothes and started going through them. I picked up a t-shirt and recognized instantly. It was a pink barbie shirt. I looked at the tub and realized something.

These were the clothes from *him*.

I tried standing and backing away from the clothes, as far as I could get from them, but I couldn't move, I couldn't blink, I could barely breath. Suddenly, it felt as if the tub of clothes was sucking me in. Then, I wasn't in the attic anymore. I was down stairs in the living room.

I looked around, startled at what was going on. The living room looked different from just a few minutes ago. It had toys laying around and the couch was a dark green other than the normal brown.

I recognize that couch, it's from- Before I could finish my thought, the front door that was opened before opened up and I walked in, but it wasn't me as I am now. It was when I was eight. *No. It can't be...*

Mother walked in after me, her long light brown hair pulled back into a braid and she looked younger and healthier than just a few minutes ago. A few seconds after mother, *he* walked in. I still remember the cigarette smell that lingered around him and his flannel t-shirts with worn and ripped blue jeans. His blonde hair was slicked back with grease, and he had a light stubble on his cleft chin.

I just watched, frozen. Mother went into the kitchen to cook dinner while he sat on the couch and started flipping through TV channels. I just sat on him and he didn't have a problem with it. But why would he?

"Hey Baby, I got a surprise for you." From his back pocket, he pulled out a t-shirt with my favorite movie character on it, Barbie.

I squealed and hugged him tightly. "Thank you so much, thank you, thank you, thank you!"

I tried taking it from his hands, but he wouldn't let go. "If I give this to you, you have to promise you won't tell mommy about something."

"What?" I asked. His large hands reached out, one towards my chest and the other made its way under my skirt. "Papa?"

Suddenly, images started whisking by, but I could tell what they were. They were every time dad gave me a 'surprise gift' as long as I didn't tell Mother about him playing with me. But the images started slowing down and then they stopped on another memory.

I was now 12 and I was laying in bed reading a book that I couldn't make out the title. He slowly crept around the door and sat down next to me.

"I have a surprise."

I put down the book and looked over at him, no longer amused by the gifts. He looked down at his jeans and I followed his eyes seeing a bulge in his pant's pocket. He reached in and pulled out a new high tech cell phone of that year. I looked at the grey block, then looked at him, and then looked back at phone.

"Mine?" I asked, looking at him now.

"As long as you promise not to tell anyone, not just your mama, you can't tell anyone."

My eyes got sad, at that age knowing now what was going on between us was wrong. But my eyes slid down to the cell phone and I knew him touching was worth it.

"Ok, I promise." I closed my eyes and stuck out my chest for his hands. Instead I got a rough push and I flopped down. My eyes opened up in surprise.

"W-what are you doing." He didn't answer, just started undressing me and kissing me up and

down my neck. I fought against him. "I take it back, I don't want it, stop, please papa stop it!" I cried.

I looked away as my 12 year-old-self lost her virginity. Then I heard the chimes of the clock in the hallway, 8 chimes meaning 8 o'clock. I instantly looked over at the cracked open door and, like I remember, there Mother was standing there just watching. There was no expression on her face, not surprise, not disgust, just there, staring at me while he raped me.

Then, she walked away like she didn't see anything, like she was walking through the hallway like every other night. It wasn't like the thing she 'loved most in the world' was being brutally raped and assaulted in front of her.

Then images started whizzing by again, but all were again recognizable and all the times were me getting rapped by him, over and over and over never stopping. But then they started slowing down for another memory.

I was laying in bed, naked and 16. He was sitting on the side of my bed buttoning up his flannel red shirt. He looked at the door as I looked at the wall, wishing I had a window in my room. *Maybe I can get him to get that for me next.* I thought.

"I think we should stop this." He said, not making eye contact.

My head snapped over to him. "What?"

He finally looked over at me. "You're getting too old for my taste, I get no pleasure of love with you anymore."

I sat up and took him by his shoulders. "You have raped me since a kid and you think you can just throw me away like- like- like this! That's complete bull!"

He pulled my arms off of him and pushed me down on the bed and layed over me, pinning my arms down with his hands and my legs with his. "I haven't raped you, I've made love to you, I've turned you into a woman, perfect for the next guy to take. And I'm your father, you will love me and respect me no matter what and I can do whatever I want to do to you."

He got off of me and walked out of the door and left me there crying in my bed.

After 3 hours, I got changed and started walking to the living room, hoping to escape the house from the front door, having nowhere else out. I stopped in my tracks when I saw him and mother sitting there cuddling. I didn't know how to get out of the house, so instead I went to the attic. I pulled down the ladder, climbed up. I looked around, seeing what I could do. Then I spotted the window that was right next to a tree I climb almost every week. I broke the window, climbed onto the tree, climbed down, and sprinted to the police station. I never looked back and I never stopped running, afraid that he figured out that I broke out and was going to the police.

When I got there, I told them about what had been happening. They swabbed me and then they wrote down, recorded, and taped my story and then left to arrest him.

But I didn't stick around, I was too scared. I snuck out of the station and went to the house where the police were towing him away. Mother of course chased after him.

I ran into the house and broke into his office and went over to the safe he has under his desk. I typed in the code and the safe's door popped open and I reached in and grabbed out several wads of 100\$ bills.

I left the house, planning to never return, and I got a good paying job, an apartment, and lived out my years. But when I turned 25, for some reason I started getting homesick. I wondered what happened with him, with mother. One day my heart couldn't take anymore and I called mother up to realize she was still alive and he was in jail.

Tears were leaking from my eyes and I closed my eyes to wipe them away. When I opened them and I was back in the attic. I couldn't help my feelings, I had to get out of the house.

I climbed down the ladder quickly, almost tripping and falling. I ran into the kitchen where mother was.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” She asked, setting down the mug she had in her hand.

“I’m taking a breath, getting some fresh air. I’ll be back.” Before she could say anything, I walked swiftly to the door and she followed.

I unlocked my car while she just stood there. “B-B-But-”

I opened the car door and looked at her. “I promise, I’ll be back.”

I hopped into the car and drove off with a destination in mind. I arrived in 30 minutes flat and got out of the car and went into the large brick place. I went through scanning and sat down at a chair in front of a window.

I saw them walking with him towards me. The closer he got, the more the pit of my stomach grew. But i swore I wouldn't regret this. He sat down across from me, anger in his eyes when he saw me. His hair was still slicked back, but he had a noticeable receding hairline and his eyes looked droopy and he looked like death was latched onto his shoulder and was sucking life out of him.

He picked up the black phone on his side and I picked up mine, neither losing eye contact.

“You b***** Baby.”

“Papa.”

Benjamin Brown

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

The Flood

“Get the buckets!” his mother shouted over the pounding rain. His mother’s voice startled him. Takeo lives next to the Yellow River, in a very poor part of China. He lives in a wooden house with scraps of sheet metal nailed into the roof to keep the majority of the rain out. There is no electricity or running water in his house. Takeo is 8 years old, but doesn’t have enough money to go to school. He lives with his mom. His dad lost his life three years ago due to suicide.

The next day, it was a nice, warm, and sunny June day. After his mom went to work, he went on a walk to the river bank to play. It is only about half of a mile away.

After a few sandcastles built in the damp silt, Takeo went up to a tree about 20 feet from the river to take a nap under its shade. He couldn’t get comfortable, but he finally fell asleep in the cold silt. Takeo woke up about two hours later. Groggy, and slightly disoriented, he noticed that the river was up closer to him. He rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn’t seeing things. Still, he thought the the river was closer. Takeo didn’t think much of it. He walked home covered in dirty silt. At home, he had some chicken and noodles leftover from last night.

After lunch, he decided to go back to the river to investigate. He got stopped by an man, in his 60s Takeo was guessing. “Are you going to the river?” The older man asked in a rushed voice.

“Yes,”

“Are you trying to get yourself killed, haven't you heard?”

“Heard what?”

“The war against the Japs, the government was opening the river dikes but they dug up the wrong dike or something. No one knows what is going to happen. For now the river is not the safest place to be.”

“Oh, okay. Thank you sir.”

“No problem, now run along and be safe.”

Takeo turned around back to his house at a brisk pace. Instead of playing in the river, he decided to play soccer in his backyard. He can't afford to be on a team, but he is quite good.

At about 7:00 when his mom got back from her ten hour work day, he informed his mom. "I'm not too worried," Said his mom. "We're a good half mile away from the river and I'm sure the government has this all under control." Takeo couldn't tell if she was trying to comfort him, or herself.

"You hungry?" She said trying to change the subject.

"Yes." He said with a hint of a guilt, feeling bad for eating a few of those noodles.

After dinner, Takeo changes into a pair of shorts and a plain white t-shirt that has about a hundred stains on it. He fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Takeo wakes up to the sound of rushing water. He thought it was a dream, but he tried to pinch himself and nothing happened. Even though it wasn't a dream, his worst nightmare was starting. He sprinted down the hall as fast as his little legs would carry him. His mom sleeps on the couch because the other room was for storage. He saw the water rushing through the house and seeping through the walls on all sides. He felt surrounded. He knew that if he went to wake his mom, it would be suicide. But he also knew that if he didn't wake his mom, that she would be swept away with the house. He tried shouting, but being the heavy sleeper that she is, he had no luck. Finally after a few tries, she woke up unaware that she was just seconds away from her death. She looked back and let out a blood curdling scream that gave Takeo goosebumps. He jumped out the only window in the house knowing that his mom was a lost cause. After running for about a minute, knowing that he couldn't outrun the flood, he found a tree and climbed it, trying to avoid the water. He knew that wood floated so if the tree broke, he could hold on until he found a better flotation device.

The water came rushing over with a deafening sound, but the tree stood. In the midst of all the confusion, he saw part of his house, but he looked away, not wanting to see his mom's body.

Takeo saw a small boat, probably from the dock along the river, but it would do for now. He climbed down the tree as fast as he could, not wanting to miss the boat. The murky water came rushing to his legs as he waited for the boat to get just a little closer. It was a shade of dark blue and brown. He wondered how many houses have been destroyed or how many people have died from this already, replaying his mom's scream in his head. He was brought back to reality when the boat crashed into his leg and sandwiched it in between the boat and the tree. He climbed into the simple, wooden, two person dinghy crying out in pain, but knowing that the little boat could save his life.

Once in the dinghy, Takeo looked around to see any other signs of civilization. He couldn't see anyone else, but he figured he was traveling away from the river, so away from town. He reassured himself that he was just ahead of the crowd because most people lived in town.

Takeo found a single paddle in the bottom of the boat. He had never been in a boat up until this point, but he figured out that you had to push the water backward to be pushed forward. He directed himself to a couple trees, so he could catch his breath.

He took about a ten minute breather and started to drift asleep. The sound of the water reminded him of normal days at a normal river. He let his guard down for too long though, because before he knew it, the boat had a log impaled through the side of it, and it was flooding with water. He abandoned ship and jumped onto one of the nearby trees. Until another log came past, he was marooned on a single tree.

It was getting dark, so Takeo decided to try and sleep. He took his soaking t-shirt off and tried to tie himself to the tree. But after that didn't work, he decided to leave those off and take off his shorts as well to try and get as dry as possible.

He never realized how beautiful the stars and moon were. He didn't know when he went to sleep, he just remembered looking at the stars.

He was shaken back awake when a log ran into the trunk of the tree. He went back to sleep, annoyed that he woke up. But then, the log started talking. He was so startled, he didn't know how much weirder today could get. He squinted at the talking log and realized that it wasn't a talking log at all. It was a gruff looking man in his 30s he was guessing. "Are you coming or what?"

"Sure, let me get my clothes on first though." He said embarrassed that he was caught in just his underwear.

After Takeo got in, the man decided to break the silence. "What's your name boy?"

"Takeo, what about you?"

"Mike, I'm just visiting from America, I guess I picked the wrong day to come."

Not knowing how to respond to that, he just said "Yup." Agreeing with the man.

"Help me out here." Mike said handing Takeo a paddle.

After about an hour of a steady rhythm of paddling, both of our arms started to get tired. We took a break at a couple of trees about like the ones I slept at. "You thirsty boy?"

"Yes."

"Here ya go, I've got plenty to spare." He said showing Takeo the impressive storage box built into the canoe, filled with water, some cans of food, and a first aid kit.

After three more days of floating on the river, more and more trees started to show. The water was still fast enough to pull you under, but it was shallow enough to walk in if there wasn't a current. At sunset that night, the road was completely dry so they got out of their canoe. It was just a narrow dirt road, but after walking for about ten minutes they could definitely see signs of civilization. They saw a few fresh footprints and tire tracks.

They followed the tracks until they couldn't even see their hand in front of their face. Takeo finally collapsed into a heap in the middle of the road. "Can we take a rest?" He complained.

"Yeah, we can set up camp here for tonight, but we'll get going at sunset tomorrow." Mike decided. Mike wheezed and lied down, realizing how tired he really was.

In the morning, Mike woke up first with the sun burning through his eyelids. He sat up and gathered his bearings and decided to wake Takeo. He didn't wake up at first, but then he finally jumped up. "I had the worst nightmare." He said with a shocked tone to his voice. "I relived the whole scene of my mom's death.

“Sorry about that big guy, but if you want to get a warm place to sleep and a soft bed and some real food, we’ve got to get a move on. Five more minutes and then we’ll leave.

After about an hour of walking, they started to see some small houses on the outskirts of a small city. “Just another hour at maximum.” Said Mike as hungry as Takeo was.

They saw the city hall after about an hour or so. “Wanna race?” Takeo challenged, fueled by hope.

“It’s on.” Mike said already in a running stance.

“Ready, set, go!”

Mike ended up beating Takeo. “Did I ever tell you I was a track star in high school?”

“Track?”

“Nevermind, I forgot you didn’t go to school.”

They walked into the building and told the lady at the front desk their story.

“Ummm, there’s not much I can do for you, but the flood is almost contained and you should be able to go back to your house in a week or so.” The lady explained. “Is this your son?”

“No, he lost his mom in the flood.”

“I’m so sorry dear, would you like to see the list of deaths so far?”

“Yes please.” Takeo said in appreciation.

The lady picked up a long list off her desk and handed it to them.

There it was, Chin Wang, on the first page. Takeo dropped the paper and cried into his hands. “Is there a place we can stay until we can go back?” Mike asked?

“Yes, there is a building a few blocks down for survivors.

“Thank you ma’am.”

“Your welcome.” She smiled as they left.

Mike half dragged Takeo to the shelter for the survivors. Sadly, it was almost empty. Each of them got a small cot next to each other in the back of the building. It wasn’t ideal conditions, but they got food, water, and shelter.

A week passed until a bus came and picked up Takeo, Mike, and about ten other survivors. It was about a two hour trip until they got to their first stop. It was a neighboring city. The second

stop was theirs. Mike woke up Takeo and they walked out of the bus. About a ten minute walk until they were at the driveway of what used to be Takeo's house. It was a concrete foundation and a couple splintered boards sticking out of the concrete.

Takeo dropped down to his knees and started bawling. "Hey big guy?" Mike asked.

"Yeah?" Takeo said between sobs.

"How about you come home with me."

Takeo didn't even answer, he just ran into Mike's arms.

They waited for the bus to circle back around, and then got on another bus to go towards the airport.

They arrived in Mike's apartment in New York. All of the sounds frightened Takeo, but he got used to it after a while. Mike got Takeo cleaned up with some new clothes and a shower. Takeo started school and had a tutor to catch up on missed years while living in China. Although he lost his only family member, he gained a lifelong friend, which is like family in Takeo's eyes.

Cameron Brown

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

A New Life

The final bell rings and a great weight is lifted from my shoulders school is out for the day. I go to my locker grab my stuff and head for the door. My mom pulls up in the silver van with Brett in the front. He gets picked up first since the high school gets out earlier than ours.

The door opens and I get in the car. "Sissy" Bec screams. I roll my eyes as Bec opens his hands for a hug. "be nice"mom exclaims. I loved Bec but I wasn't in the mood for him today. It was a long day. "You have Basketball at four so you need to get ready" . "Okay" I say with a tone that's not going to go over well with my mom. " You better lose the attitude or you won't be going to the dance tomorrow night!" mom professes. " Mom", I moan. The car is silent for a minute then the high pitch scream of Bec draws everyone's attention. He somehow got his hair caught in the zipper of his winter coat. "Awe bec " mom says as she turns her blinker on. We turn into the grocery store and park. Mom gets out and opens the van door "hold on Bec" she says in an irritated voice. "Hi Nichols Family" says a familiar voice. I look up to see who the voice belongs to, Its Nancy. Oh great I think. She is probably here to ask mom to sign up for another PTA event. She was good at persuading people she always finds a way to guilt mom into signing up for something. Mom turns around with a fake smile and says, "sorry Nancy but we are in a rush, We will see you some other time". I could tell mom was not in the best mood today. I was always inspired by the amount of patience she had. I never saw her like this even if she was having a bad day she put on a brave front and pretended everything was fine. She wasn't hiding it very well today something was off and I needed to figure it out. Mom gets in the car and the rest of the car ride was silent. We pull into our driveway and everyone hops out of the car. As mom types in the garage code I notice she doesn't have her wedding ring on I don't think anything of it mom gets her wedding ring cleaned quite a bit. We walk in and I go straight to my room. I hear mom and dad talking in the kitchen. I can't help but to eavesdrop "when are we telling the kids ?"she asks dad. "I don't care just do it soon." dad replies. "Listen we are still married and you're still their dad so we, will be telling them". Mom exclaims. I feel the tear running down my cheek and sniffle forgetting that mom and dad were at the bottom of the stairs I run to my room and slam the door. I crash on my bed and the thoughts overwhelm me. This is not happening it can't be not to our family,our perfect family, our family that plays monopoly every friday night. Our family that wakes up at the crack of dawn on sunday morning to make it to sunday school on time. This is not happening. It can't be. I hear footsteps coming up stairs. "What's wrong?" mom says as she walks in my room. I say nothing I don't even look at her. "Kelc you can tell me " she says in a soft voice . " I don't need to tell you, you already know. "Oh no", she says realizing I had overheard her and dad's conversation. "It's going to be ok."

Even though I bet in the back of her mind she was completely stressing out. She was an over thinker, plan maker type of mom. She would always have a plan. I could tell she didn't this time. I

could not get over this I never saw mom and dad fight. They didn't even argue they were the perfect couple. My dad was laid back and my mom was the complete opposite. "Why?" I ask. We aren't happy together anymore.

I knew that wasn't the truth. They were best friends pretty much they always were laughing and smiling when they were together. I stare at her with a disbelieving scale covering my face. "Really?" I say with a tone that I know is going to make mom give in and tell me the real reason. "Ok that's not the real reason." she says. "Yeah obviously" I say. "Then tell me the real reason." I exclaim. I think we should wait for your father, to tell you that. "No tell me!" I scream. "Ok." she replies with a weak voice.

"Your father" she says as I see a tear glide down her face. "Yeah what about him?" I ask "He, he, he had an affair" she mutters. "No!" I yell. I was a daddy's girl. We did everything together; went on hikes, went to karate classes, watched football. I was in denial, this wasn't right moms not telling me something. "Rachel we agreed to wait" I hear my dad say. "I hate you!" I scream I get up and grab my shoes and fly through the door. I was going to Ella's house. She was my best friend. I practically spent as much time at her house as I did at my own. She was the only one I wanted to talk to. I get there and ring the doorbell. Lacy her mom opens the door and says, "come on in" in was always welcome there no matter what time or what day it was. I walk in and run upstairs straight to Ella's room. "Oh hey Kelcey, Why are you here?" "I need a break." "Ok" she exclaims. I walk in her room is spotless, like always. "Do you want to talk about it?" "NO!" I exclaim that's why I came here. I walk over and plop down on her bed, as I lay there my eyes get heavy. I wake up, confused on where I am at. Then I see Ella and I regain my memory. I get up refreshed and look outside it was pitch black. Panic sets in oh no my parents were probably worried sick.

I rush back home to find my parents sitting at the table with a nicely dressed lady with them she had papers. They all look up to the sound of me. "Sweetie" my mom says I ignore them and run up to my room. I plop down on my bed and begin to resume my sleep. "Wake up" I here my dad say in a soft tone which is unusual normally his voice scares me in the morning. I jump out of bed and start to get ready. The bus gets to my house around six forty five. I get ready and eat the usual oatmeal and an orange. I get on the bus and take the first empty seat I see. After a thirty minute drive we arrive at school a little late so I go straight to my first hour, which is science. That's my favorite. Next math, the day was dragging on as usual. Until I hear over the intercom in a shaky voice "attention please go to lockdown".

Oh my gosh what is happening. This is bad. My teacher grabs the magnet and turns the light off. "Hide". He says we all rush to the back corner and sit in silence. We wait and wait and wait. Something was seriously wrong you could hear a pin drop. Everyone was scared to death. I was playing out scenarios in my head of what could be going on. After what seemed like forever the intercom turns on "All clear" she says. We all get up and Mr. Hatch turns on the lights. Everyone shrieks as the light blinds them. We go to our seats and we hear the last hour bell rings. We all grab our stuff and head for the door. Like nothing had ever happened. I hear everyone in the hall saying it was just a drill. I didn't believe that we sat there in silence for over thirty minutes I have com arts last hour which is my favorite because I have a lot of friends in that class. I walk in and the class is silent which is very abnormal. We are typing argumentative essays for our final mid term grade. We all log onto our laptops and start to type. The announcements turn on School is over and no one has said anything to me about the lockdown. I get home and mom is waiting for me she says "We need to leave" what why I think whats happening now? "Why?" I ask. "Did

you go into lockdown today”? She asks. “Yeah why?” “That was your dad, he was in your school threatening employees and asking where you were.” she exclaims. “Why would he do that? He knows I was there.” “He took the gun and he has the van and the police are looking for him now. “What i was in disbelief my dad there was no way way this was happening.” “get in the car we are going to visit grandma and grandpa.” she says. “Why is he doing this?” “Idk” she replies. “Yes you do stop lying to me.” “Okay, well me and your dad went to court today to figure out custody I wanted full and so did your father. I was granted full custody and he was not allowed to see you because of what happened last night after the lawyers left. He held a gun to his head and threatened to kill himself. I should not be telling you this”. She struggles to say without tearing up. I give her a hug we get in the car. Bec and Brett are waiting they look clueless. We drive to grandmas . It's a short drive.

Chris Brown

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Delta Woods Middle School, Lees Summit, MO

Educator: Linda Brock

Category: Flash Fiction

Restart

When I arrived back from the psychologist's office (my first of many appointments to fix my now changed mental state), the first thing I did was pack. I tossed my clothes and other necessities into the solo suitcase I had brought with me when I came to this boarding school six months ago. Tears were clouding my vision, but I rubbed them away. Now wasn't a time to get distracted by the emotional breakdowns I had been trying so desperately hard to overcome. As I got everything together in a mindless daze, it hit me like a freight train. Memories danced through my mind, reminding me of the unspeakable horrors I had witnessed mere days before. I remembered waking up to see him just... lying there. Not moving. Dead. I had fallen asleep, and while I was snoozing away, my best friend was dying, being brutally murdered, because of some mentally unstable killer.

I got snapped back to the present when I stubbed my toe on my bed. A shriek of pain escaped my lips as I fell back onto my bed's mattress. I rubbed my damaged foot, eyes wandering to the photo I had been keeping on my bedside table for months.

It was of me and Su, before he had died. It was taken three months ago at an amusement park we spent the day at together. I took the photo from the table and clutched it to my chest. I bit my lip to keep from being too loud in my agonizing misery. I would hate it if somebody heard.

I don't know how long I sat there before getting back up. My stuff was all together now. A text made my phone vibrate. It was from my brother, saying that he was outside waiting for me. I rose to my feet and stuffed the device into my pocket.

I thanked my lucky stars that nobody had seen me on my way out. None of my classmates had wanted to see me. I was close with them at first, but after I was diagnosed with a split personality due to the trauma of Su's death, they stopped talking to me. It's not like I expected anything different, especially after the police had told me that my newfound mental companion, who named themselves Midnight, had a personality almost identical to the killer's. That was why I had been forced into a visit to the psychologist; to get some therapy regarding Midnight and their sudden appearance inside of my heart and soul.

Knowing that a being that acted the same as my best friend's murderer lived in my head, my own body, hurt. I couldn't face any of my friends with the thoughts that I might hurt them haunting my existence. That being said, my only choice was to leave. I had to turn away and never look back for their wellbeing and for my own mental sanity.

A car came sliding into view. My brother rolled down the window so I could see it was him. Neither of us said a word as I lugged my suitcase into the back seat and sat in the passenger's place. He already knew I wasn't going to be in a mood to talk after the incident.

My mind started to wander. I didn't know what I was going to do with my life from here on out. What could I do? I didn't want to let this loom over me forever, locking away all happiness I could ever experience in the future.

Not long after imagining this deep and unbreakable despair, a thought swirled in my mind. I

didn't want to face myself every morning in the mirror knowing I hadn't done anything while my best friend was being murdered. I knew that I couldn't do it without breaking down. But maybe there was a way I didn't have to think of it when I met my own reflection's eyes...

The idea sprang quickly. I could just change my name, dye my hair, and act like this whole ordeal never happened. Act like my existence as Kari never happened. My big brother could help me since he was always deeply involved with legal affairs and the like. The thought satisfied me, allowing my first smile in days to appear.

Believe it or not, I rather liked the concept of changing myself for the better. I could become somebody new and forget about it. Happiness took over my mind and soul. It would be almost like... Like a restart.

Taylor Browning

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

Educator: Carole Bunse

Category: Poetry

My Illness Controls Me

One time, I tried to
Wear a crop top

But

Everyone told me
I was too big for that
It didn't hurt then
Because

I

Didn't understand
In sixth grade
I didn't know
How to handle
Things, thinking

was

I ready for the pain
I was about to endure?
The next few years
Spent in my room
Crying as the blood
Went everywhere, me
Trying to control it
I thought it would
Be easy to get out
Of this obsession

wrong

So wrong
The times i wished
For that angry itch to stop
Leave me alone
All the times

I

Succumbed to that
Beautiful feeling of being powerful
Finding new ways to
keep my head
Afloat

Loved

The way it stung

Never completely stopping
The way they looked
Each unique

The

Way putting a flame to
My wrist brought a moan
Never complete without the pain
I could not stop

Thrill

Awaits me every time
Making the habit unbreakable

15

Locked away because the
Pain
Became too much
Wanting it all to just

End

Almost killing myself
Slashing at everything
Not breathing
Why did I start this

Me

Begging for a relief of some kind
Getting none
Wanting death more
Than wanting life

Never

Being able to see
Life beyond this
Sadness

Being

A cutter was just my thing
My trend
My happiness

Alive

Was never an option
For me

I don't want to live

My

Life being controlled

By a stupid feeling

Life

Was already difficult
Top it off with a
Monster in my head
Saying that I should be dead
This is not something
A teen needs

Was

This punishment for
Never listening?
I never understood why
I picked up the knife
That night
Was I being

Controlled?

The need of something
To burn, ache
Too great
11
This started

By

15 I couldn't handle
Myself
Always looking for a way
To be hurt
The pain of having
Someone angry at me
Was thrilling
I loved pain
More than myself
Pain was all I could
Think about
I enjoyed it

A

Bug was in my head
Wanting me to scratch
Cause myself to bleed in anyway
I had no more control
I could not feel
This itching in me a

Monster

Was controlling all
I am scared
Of its power

Maddie Burton

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Pius X School, Moberly, MO

Educator: Christy Forte

Category: Flash Fiction

Promises

What's the best gift you have received? Maybe it was a brand new toy or maybe even a new laptop or iPhone. When I was thirteen years old I asked my father what gift he was going to get me for my eighteenth birthday. My father loved me so much and he promised to get me an amazing gift. He just didn't know what it would be.....Father and I became very close.

When I was ten years old I lost my mom. She died of cancer, I really don't want to get into detail about it though. It was very hard for my father and I. My father was depressed for almost a year. He lost interest in doing things he used to like to do like watch football or play cards with his friends. Sometimes he would seem happy, but then he would hear my mother's favorite song, the one her and my father got married to. He would find a note written by my mother, or pass her favorite restaurant and fall into grief. At work it took him longer to finish tasks and he had trouble managing his time.

Losing my mom changed me as well. I felt empty and lost, like I had nowhere to go in life anymore, no more goals to accomplish. There is nothing that can prepare you to lose a parent. My mom understood me the most. She was the most forgiving person I know. She made me a better person everyday.

I decided to go back to school as soon as possible. Both my principle and father gave me permission to miss as much school as I needed. I decided I would go back though because it would keep my mind off my mother. I also thought it would be a good idea to get out of my dad's way for a bit. He needed a break and so did I.

I didn't have trouble at school. My classmates never mentioned my mom. They treated me normal, like nothing ever happened.

One thing that always makes me crazy is hearing my friends complain and whine about their parents. It makes me want to give them an earful of gratitude.

My father and I helped each other get through my mother's death. It was hard for him and I to accept what happened. I soon realized that I couldn't have changed what happened. I can change what happens in my life though.

My father and I grew much closer through the process of getting over my mom. We started to learn more about each other. We soon became best friends. We would go see movies, and go out to the park, or go eat dinner. We would have so much fun with each other. We were definitely inseparable.

One day, when I was 18 years old, on a Sunday morning I fainted unexpectedly. I had no idea it was coming. My father took me to the doctor to make sure I was okay. My doctor wanted to know more about why I fainted. So him and the nurses ran a few tests.

Nothing was wrong with my brain, but they saw a problem around my heart and lung area. They told me that I might have a damaged artery in my heart and that I would need to go into surgery for a heart transplant, if I wanted to live.

Before the surgery my father and I hugged, he wished me a good luck and said he would see me soon. He told me he was going on a very important business trip the day after my transplant, but my aunt would visit me.

After the surgery, I rested in the hospital for 1 and a half weeks. I was constantly monitored. Finally I was set free. I rushed home super excited to see my dad. I didn't find him so I went to my room to rest only to find a note on my bed. It was from father, and it read:

Dear Kendall,

“Remember when I promised you a gift for our birthday? I didn't know. But I figured it out. A year ago I was diagnosed with brain cancer. Incurable. I decided to give you my heart.”

Corbin Campos

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

A Work in Progress

Social Studies - F

band - F

Science - F

Math - F

Computer Lab - F

P.E. - A

I'm so tired of seeing these F's every day. I worry about how my life will turn out either "good or bad". I go to school every day telling myself I'm going to live up to my full potential...but I never seem to succeed getting those F's to A's or at least a B-. Most of my teachers have given up on me, but I try to make one teacher happy and one teacher only, Mrs. Martin.

I always looked forward to going to her class. Mrs. Martin saw something in me from the first day of school. All of my other teachers just let me be, but she wouldn't just let me quit. She knew what I was capable of doing. Things I didn't know I could do. One day a few months ago, Mrs. Martin told the class that we would be writing a story. Not just any story, but a story about us. I remember her telling us to "dig deep" and look inside ourselves and we would find the story that we needed to write. I hadn't ever written before, I mean not really. Silly things before this. Meaningless things that I never even turned in. Mrs. Martin look right into my soul when she said to write something important, meaningful. She was talking right to me. I didn't want to disappoint her in any way, so that night I went home and started thinking of ideas to write about. It got me to thinking about how people really see me. Do they see me as that "guy who is always messing around in class" the "screw up"? Or did they see me for what I really am?

I'm about to get real here. With you and with myself. I'm pretty sure I've never said any of this out loud and I definitely have never put it in a story. This might be a test of how brave I really am. We'll see.

All of these F's started in 6th grade when I really started not even caring about how I did in school, but back then I was the kid who always got the best scores in class and in reading. I knew how to do everything, and I was the kid that every teacher wanted in their classroom. There was no popularity class when we were little but I'll tell you this; popular or not, I can still get a laugh outta you. I replaced working in class with trying to make the teacher laugh. They would argue with me about turning in my work and I would make a joke out of it -- not mean or anything or disrespectful and they would laugh and just go on. That's how I got to slide by. Mr. Charisma. Mr. Charming. I charmed myself right onto the D and F list every quarter. At first the teachers would try to make me work but then it seemed like their stamina just faded away and they gave up. I knew I could hold out longer than they did. It worked. Homework? Never. Test to study for? Nope. Monday Night Football? Hell, yea! I never ever felt bad about getting bad grades and I never worried about them until I knew that life might hold some great possibilities for me but the only way that I would ever get there was to go to college.

And don't even get me started on the consequences at home. My mom took the TV away, my phone, xBox, outside privileges. The one thing that she didn't take away from me, was my football games. Man did I love football. All I could do was to go to practice, go to games, and come home. I don't know. Maybe Mom thought I had a future on the field.

That following day at school, I was actually excited for my Communication Arts class. I had my idea and I was ready to go. I hadn't felt this way about school since fifth grade. I counted down the hours, 4th (Social studies -- snooze time) followed by a delicious hot lunch in our cafeteria (kidding) 5th (Science-- forgot my binder and laid my head down on the desk, 6th (PE -- kickball, favorite class), 7th (Math--don't get me started) and then 8th (yeeeeessss.), I could finally share my ideas with Mrs. Martine hoping that my interest in my story will make her happy.

"Hey, Mrs. Martin, how's it going?"

"Good, how about yourself?"

I knew something was up because she wasn't as bright and happy as she normally was. She told us all "to settle down and be seated" because she had something to say to us. We were all a little anxious about what she was about to say. A few minutes later she dropped a bomb.

She started out like she always does, "You guys know that I care about you, right?"

We all replied, "Yes." Slowly because we didn't know what was coming.

"I have decided to retire after this year."

You could have heard a pin drop. Even though it wouldn't affect us, we all had brothers and sisters in lower grades and she had been around here so long that we couldn't imagine what our school would be like without her.

That was what we all needed and most of all, what I needed. I was going to do this for her. She made me want to write for myself, too. It was the first time in a very long time that I cared about an assignment.

We started typing on our computers. I looked around. I've never seen everyone so involved in what they were doing. I started a story and vowed to work on it that night at home.

After practice, I came straight home and started typing a story about a girl that I fell in love with who was using me just to get good grades in classes. Hmmm, pretty sure that was unbelievable so I erased it and started over. I started writing another story that I started out liking but then it just got to be stupid. Erased.

And then I had an idea.

I started typing and I couldn't stop. Some kind of weird magic took over and it seemed as if the keyboard came alive. This story started spilling out. Let me tell you a little bit about it.

My story is about a kid who used to be awesome in school. All his teachers loved him and everyone wanted him in their class. He made everyone laugh, including the teachers and he skated by for years making D's and F's. He didn't really care about his grades anymore. It upset his teachers and his mom, but he just couldn't get himself to care anymore. It was more important to be the class clown, the cut-up in school. Then one day, he walked into a classroom where someone saw him for what he truly was--saw in him some potential, a spark of the student that he once was. She was a teacher who reached out and took a chance on him, believed in him, and still laughed with him. He started doing his homework, started studying at night, put away his phone, turned off the TV and started working. Really working on his grades. It wasn't easy. He had been out of practice. It had been three years since he really studied or worried about

school. His mom started believing in him again. His friends saw a change in him. The teachers started seeing him change and began to work with him to start earning better grades. The best part about the story? This kid starting believing in himself.

It is a great story. I'm still working on it. I haven't written the ending yet, but I know where I want to go with it. I'm pretty sure it's the story that Mrs. Martin wanted me to write all along.

Yosil Cano-Castillo

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Alta Vista Charter High School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Katherine Laird Kimbrell

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Dear Mother

Thank you mother for working so much after I was born, for you were only a child when you had me. Carrying me back and forth from daycare to home. You were working and going to school just so you could take care of me.

Thank you for leaving me when I was four years old to live miles away, because times were tough and money was short. I used to sit on the bed watching TV as you screamed through the phone for my attention. I am sorry, I was too distracted to have an actual conversation with you, for I was only five years old and my attention span was short. I hoped that you knew how much I wanted you to return to me.

Thank you for finally sending enough money for me to come see you after four years of your absence. The whole way here I stared out the window watching the snow cascade down. It was my first time seeing so much snow. Sitting on the bus felt like an eternity. When our stop finally came, I spotted you right away, with the bright pink vest. You were prettier than I remembered. I finally had you in my life after four long years. I was happy, until I was given the choice to either stay or leave.

Thank you for putting me in a school where you thought was best for me. I was trying to fit in but it was hard to communicate and my broken English wasn't of any help. I kept quiet about the times I felt excluded, for I didn't want to give you any more trouble. I was already another mouth for you to feed.

Thank you for trying to include me in the new family that you were now a part of. Going to parties with your new family felt a lot like I was alone. Sitting, comforted by the four walls around me. I understood the language on the TV more than I understood why I was sitting alone while people drank, sang, and danced until they could not anymore. I was excluded and mistreated, for I was the bastard. I didn't know how to handle it, so I thought isolation was the answer. I knew I didn't belong there, but you insisted that I made an effort.

Thank you for taking care of me while I was with you and trying to discipline me for I was a troubled child. Although it was my way of getting your attention, I wanted you to open your eyes and see what was going on while you worked in the evenings.

Thank you for not defending me from the man you love when he wanted things done his way, like when he wanted me to tie the trash bags a certain way. I never understood why the way I did it was wrong but maybe it was just his way of trying to feel like the man of the house. You never stood up to him. Whatever he said, was done. I couldn't believe that you, my mother, the role

model that I expected to look up to, would bend her knees so willingly for a man.

Thank you for ignoring me when I told you the things he did. I was scared to say anything for I was only a child and didn't know what to say or do. I was afraid of you not believing me and I was right. You sat there folding laundry with your lips pursed ready to confront me. It had only been four years since you had reappeared in my life. I really thought you would take my side. Even my grandma believed me, but why didn't you?

Thank you for calling me a liar when you finally found out what the man you loved was doing to me. For making me face him and looking like a fool when he refused to admit what he had done. You decided it was best for me to leave and never tell anyone why I left the house, for it was easier for you to ignore it and forget it ever happened.

Thank you for refusing to talk to me for the next six months. I was in bed for the whole summer, for it was hard for me to understand what had happened and why was I the one you had kicked out. I have no memory of those months, for they were so painful my brain refuses to acknowledge them. The few memories I have are of me laying in bed with puffy eyes, an ongoing migraine and a undernourished body. My grandma took me to a psychologist because she did not know how else to help me. I didn't talk to her for the first five sessions, for I would cry before any other sound came out of my mouth. You never bothered to ask if I was okay but you did send me a letter accusing me of many things, things the man you love poisoned you with, like when you asked about the boy's name that I wrote in my journal. Was that really necessary?

Thank you for when it happened a second time, while you were there, you just drove me home and told me not to tell my grandma what happened. The first time it happened you pursed your lips the way you do when you are mad and accused me of lying but after it happened the second time you were even afraid to talk to me. You wore guilt on your face. You were mad at me for I did not have any proof of the first time it happened but now that it happened in your face you still did nothing. You asked me what I wanted you to do but if I told you, in the end, you would just blame me for your other children would grow up without a father just like you and I did.

Thank you for making me feel like an orphan. I have no father for he left after you got pregnant, and I have no mother for you didn't act like one when I needed you. You say I stole your mom but she was the one who was there to raise me. She was the one who took me in when you left, she took me in when you kicked me out.

Thank you mother for I have learned how to ignore this stupid need to try to make you proud. You have a huge hunger I can't satisfy. I am not worthy of your love, or so you have made me feel. I am not a doll you can control.

Thank you for now I have learned that not having a mother's or father's love should not stop me from being the person I want to be. I know you want me to fit in this cookie cutter you've made but I will not let you cut parts of me out just because they don't fit into your ideal daughter.

Taylor Carlyon

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Frazier

Category: Critical Essay

It Doesn't Need to Be Animal Activists Versus the Rodeo

In October 2002, the animal activist group SHARK, Showing Animals Respect and Kindness, took John Growney, one of the stock contractors for the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, to court. They accused him of using an electric prod on a horse in the San Dimas Rodeo in California. SHARK had video evidence of this abuse and used that to try and prove Growney's guilt. To their dismay, Growney was found innocent. After the court reviewed the tape presented to them by SHARK and the tape from the San Dimas rodeo they came to the conclusion that it was necessary for Growney to use the cattle prod in order to get the horse to leave the chute. According to California's state laws, it is perfectly legal to use a cattle prod on rodeo animals if and only if it is deemed necessary in order to protect both the rider and the spectators (Schonholtz, "Animal Rights").

Bernard E. Rollin, a professor of philosophy, animal sciences, and biomedical sciences at Colorado State University, claims that throughout history the cowboy has been portrayed two very different ways. The cowboy can be viewed as a fearless protector who will stop at nothing to ensure the safety of those around him. On the contrary the cowboy can also be viewed as an emotionless, gunslinger, who does not care about anything or anyone. Over time the negative view of the cowboy has become more and more prevalent in people's minds (3). With this horrific view of the cowboy it is no wonder the rodeo is constantly being attacked by animal activist groups. Since these people already have preconceived ideas of cowboys, they don't stop to talk with the rodeo participants about the problems within the rodeo. Instead, they just assume the cowboys do not care enough about the animals to actually do something about the problems at hand. With these animal activist groups coming in immediately attacking the rodeo participants, the participants automatically feel attacked and refuse to listen to anything the animal activists are saying. Plato once said, "When it comes to doing ethics with rational adults, you cannot teach, you can only remind" (Rollin, 4). So in other words, if the animal activist groups would just stop and talk to the rodeo participants they would get much further in their mission to stop the abuse they believe to be taking place within rodeos.

Two of the most popular events in the rodeo are bull riding and saddle bronc riding. Saddle bronc riding is where a person rides a horse that is attempting to buck him/her off. Bull riding on the other hand, is where a person attempts to ride a bucking bull for eight seconds. In both events a flank strap is cinched around the animal's waist in order to entice it to buck. PETA, an American animal activist group, has spoken out about the negative effects of these flank straps. PETA believes as a result of these straps being used the animal's hair is rubbed away, causing open wounds and burns ("Rodeos"). They also believe that irritants are occasionally placed under the flank straps in order to get the animals to buck higher. However, according to the PRCA, Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, every flank strap must be lined by fleece and neoprene before it can be used in the rodeo (Schonholtz, "Professional Rodeo"). PETA also believes that the flank straps are often tightened too tight in order to get the animals to buck more

vigorously. This concern is a result of their ignorance of the rodeo. According to Cindy Schonholtz, the Director of Industry Outreach for the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, if the flank strap were to be fastened too tightly around the animal it would restrict the animal's movement, causing the animal to buck less vigorously, resulting in a lower score for the rider ("Professional Rodeo"). Vets that are familiar with the rodeo support the use of the flank strap, because they know it causes neither pain nor injury to the animal (Schonholtz, "Professional Rodeo").

Many animal activist groups believe that in order to get the rodeo animals to buck more vigorously, the people within the rodeo use electric prods to scare them into making more exaggerated motions ("Rodeos"). This is another place where animal activist groups' ignorance of the rodeo can be seen. Since they were not educated on the legal use of the electric prod they believed that Growney was abusing it at the San Dimas rodeo. Many laws are in place to restrict the use of electric prods. The only time an electric prod can be used while the animal is in the chute is when the owner of the animal, the judge, and the contestant all agree that it is necessary to use it (Robertson). Spurs are another device commonly criticized by animal activist groups. They feel that spurs are used to hurt the animals, further enticing them to buck higher and more frequently, resulting in them gaining a higher score. However, according to the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association it is illegal for anyone to use spurs that are not dulled or are unable to roll across the hide of an animal. Furthermore, any contestant that causes harm to an animal due to the use of spurs, is disqualified (Schonholtz, "Professional Rodeo").

Another controversial event in the rodeo is calf roping. In this event a calf is yanked into the air by its neck and slammed to the ground. Animal Legal Defense Fund, a not for profit law organization that works to ensure animals' safety by improving the laws in place, believes that as a result of this event many of the calves face neck injuries, death, and increased fear and stress. At one point the Nevada State Veterinarian denounced this event because the resulting death rates were so high ("Rodeo Facts"). Peggy Larson, a former rodeo participant and veterinarian for large animals, has been actively working against this event for years. After witnessing numerous calves being choked and injured during this event, she started in her mission to put an end to calf roping ("What does"). At first glance it seems like it is impossible to ever be able to consider an event as barbaric as calf roping as ethical. However, if one stops and looks at the issues with the event, it can be seen that all the issues brought forth by this activity can be easily fixed. The issue many people have with calf roping is the high injury and death rates that result from the calves being yanked too forcefully by the rope. If the PRCA were to increase the penalty for jerking calves, then it could decrease the amount of injuries that take place. If the rodeo contestants knew they would have to pay a large fine and face disqualification, the number of calves that were yanked would decrease greatly. If this change was made it would affect all the contestants equally. Every contestant would have to be more mindful of the safety of the calves.

The most controversial event that takes place at a few rodeos is steer tripping. Steer tripping is where someone riding a horse violently jerks a steer's legs out from under him. Many people, including people involved in the rodeo, are against steer tripping, because it is very likely that injury will occur. This event has resulted in broken backs, and the death of the steers used. This event is so horrific that it is illegal in all but a few states (Rollin 9).

For years animal activist groups continuously harassed the circus for what they felt was cruel treatment of the circus elephants. Animal activists wanted to ban the circus, so they could force the circuses into no longer using elephants as a form of entertainment. After facing years of

harassment the Ringling Bros. succumbed to the pressure put upon them by these animal activist groups, and they retired all of their elephants. Instead of getting rid of the entire circus, they simply made the changes needed in order to make the circus ethical. Likewise, instead of abolishing the entire rodeo, changes can be made to make the rodeo more ethical while preserving the rodeo culture.

Although many people automatically jump to the conclusion that the rodeo participants do not care about animals, this could not be further from the truth. The vast majority of rodeo participants come from a ranching background, which means they were raised with the ethics of animal husbandry (Rollin 7). During the twentieth century, agriculture changed greatly. The traditional values of animal husbandry were replaced with technological advances in the field of agriculture. Although these technological advances caused the agricultural process to go faster and were much more efficient, the interactions between the animals and the humans became less common. Today, farmers are the last people who still practice animal husbandry. They believe that if they take care of their animals, then the animals will in turn take care of them (6). If animal activist groups simply talked to the rodeo participants about what they felt to be wrong and reminded them of the ethics of animal husbandry, they would get further in their goal to stop the unethical treatment of animals in the rodeo.

The unethical treatment of animals in the rodeo must be stopped. The rules put forth by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association have put an end to most of the issues within the rodeo. However, in order for the rodeo to be deemed completely ethical the PRCA needs to increase the penalty for jerking calves, make steer tripping illegal in all states, and to proactively find ways to improve the safety of the animals. If these changes are made it will decrease the number of deaths and injuries that occur while preserving the culture of the rodeo.

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Cristian Casillas

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Alta Vista Charter High School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Katherine Laird

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Hope Is What We Dream For

On my drive back home there wasn't anything I hadn't heard today about this election. Something seemed to bother me about today, and I knew it was going to be a life-changing matter. When I got home, it was same topic: the election. I knew Donald Trump was winning states and that he was in the lead. I decided to go to sleep and forget about this night that felt so uncomfortable. I still can't find ways to explain how I felt; it's as if I knew harm was approaching, and I just felt it and had to get away. I woke up the next day and checked my Facebook to discover that Donald Trump had become our next president. I couldn't believe it. I'll admit that I was impressed that a guy with no political background had somehow taken charge of this country. At the same time, I was disgusted by Trump's rhetoric and hate speech during his campaign. His comments about immigrants and Muslims were oppressive and racist. But hey, I guess in America business knowledge can get you anywhere, including the presidency. I can't stand how I see the country after the election. I began to question my relationship with every white person in my life. When I sat in class that next day, I wanted to ask all of my white teachers, "why did you vote for Trump?" The media had me playing this crazy mental game where I believed all white people voted for Trump, but I knew this wasn't true. Yes, I am an immigrant in this beautiful country, and my family brought me here at the age of three. I did not come here illegally, but my family and I did overstay our 2-week permit. My family decided to stay in pursuit of a better life, the American dream. I have faced the struggle of being an undocumented immigrant ever since. As a senior in high school, I'm reminded daily that I'm not eligible for financial aid as I apply to colleges and scholarships. I'm not afraid to get insulted by racist people or even face deportation due to the fact that people may not want me here. I just want them to know that I'm a strong person and not an "illegal alien" as I've been labeled by the government and media. No, I am not a rapist or a drug dealer as Donald Trump called me and other immigrants. I am a smart, hard working immigrant. I don't plan to hide my identity of being undocumented, and I won't let a birth certificate or not having some card with numbers prevent me from being successful in this country. I have been here for 15 years and all my family and I have done is be respectful to this country, its people, and its laws, like a citizen. Many of the families I know face the same problem, but we are not looking to harm this country. Rather, we just want to feel a connection to the society that we live in. We want to feel wanted. We want to feel loved. Just because taxes are not enforced on us and we don't have a social security number does not mean that my parents are unwilling to pay taxes. They want to be a part of this country and experience what it feels like to be an American citizen. The problem is not paying taxes; the problem is conservative Republicans not facing the fact that immigrants have helped this country economically. What do they have to fear? If they want to "make this country great again," then they should help immigrants realize their dream of becoming U.S. citizens. Many Americans take their citizenship for granted. To them it's just a stupid piece of paper. However, to undocumented immigrants, it means achieving success in this country. It

means access to many opportunities. It means we can finally have good jobs, reasonably-priced traffic tickets, home ownership, and loans from banks. It means we won't have to struggle economically. It means everything to us. I just want the chance to pursue my American dream. I want to attend and graduate college, and I want my family to do the same so their American dream can be different than mine, and so they won't have to know what it's like to have a dad who doesn't have a work permit. They won't have to experience the fear of their father facing deportation like I did.

This is a reality many people do not encounter because they are not part of the minority. When we come to this country, our first steps are cold and harsh. Our bodies shiver as we labor during the day and at night as we lose sleep with the fear of deportation, not fitting in, and not being successful. On the contrary, oppressive people like Trump step into their daily routine with no fear as the bright sun shines upon them and as they commute to their white collar jobs.

Meanwhile, immigrants are feeling the cold as their toil in the fields or working for their sins on hot rooftops and on a sunny day of work to many immigrants that's a burning hell working in the crops or in constructions looking to fulfill a better life. These people don't know what it's like to be an immigrant who fears to drive in Arizona because she fears to be detained for looking undocumented. As a kid whose dreams get crushed in the state of Missouri cause the in state tuition is no longer an option for him. The hard work they put in the hours they put in to become a better student all the tutoring days they stay means nothing now.

Now as I look back, I've finally realized what that feeling was as I struggled to sleep on election night. It was hopelessness. This election made me feel hopeless because Trump's discrimination on the campaign trail has empowered white people to discriminate against other non-white people. Hope is the wish we dream upon to now as our dream doesn't become American as we thought it would be as everything starts fading away.

Anastasia Cesaro

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

A Man's Land

A familiar body lies beside me. Calloused finger tips trace a line down my spine. Quick warm breaths pierce my neck and every part of me trembles as barron lips press against my skin. My body stares into the bedroom wall and I close my eyes tight, gripping the mattress sheets. I let it happen. I always had. Choked back tears hide the pain. I was bound to get it if I had been seen wet faced. Each time he forced himself upon my frame, he let out a disturbing long moan and gripped my waist so tightly as to gouge a hole in my side. Nothing is in my control; not even the skin I walk in is mine to command.

Myriam slept in the empty room tonight. She had been stricken with sickness, and spent most of her near days heaving into a metal basket laid at her bedside. I envied her. Kamal would have nothing to do with her sickly body and instead insisted on pouring himself onto me. Although he was forced to appease himself with my likings for the time being, I well knew that he admired Myriam much more than myself. In the house, he often made sport of Myriam's figure and would slide his thick sullied hands up the back of her abaya. In this case, Myriam would reply with a half-hearted chuckle of posed affection, and then continue to prepare Kamal's daily chores. Her eyes glued to the task while she fantasized a dull blade slowly inserted into the chest of Kamal and left there. She despised the boy, who left her to lashings in prison for three months in response to speaking with a male tradesman for an undesirable length of time. She could've been released days after her arrest for the irrational charge, but Kamal refused to grant her release, and left her there to suffer for his own sick amusement.

Myriam had been wed to Kamal four years before my papa offered me as a second wife on my year of 15. I was young and oblivious to the indisposition carved into each crease atop Kamal's crooked smile. I thought nothing of his hand resting placidly on my lower back as he guided me through household chores. I thought nothing of the way he spoke in soft tones so close that I could feel his last meal on my neck, or the way he eyed my body up and down with a yellowing tooth nipping at his lower lip before I had pulled over my burqa and hijab. I thought nothing of it all.

"Yasmine! Come ya sharmouta!"

"Yes, Kamal?"

Rushing my way into the bathroom, I found Kamal standing pressed against the sink, a clear plastic container in hand. Amidst the inside of the container laid various cosmetic products.

"You pig!"

“My face has grown wrinkled with age.”

“All should see not more than your eyes! You’d bring shame upon your father, and the shame upon me is the weight of a thousand wives!”

A stern palm came across my cheek and stamped a pink outline through my hijab.

“I apologize, Kamal. Forgive me. Escort me please, to fetch some ice from Nona’s shop.”

“I cannot allow you anything of the sort after this! Dinner will be prepared by dusk’s time, or I preach of your behavior to the authorities, you hear?”

“Yes sir.”

Steam rose steadily from the greasy sauce pans piled to the tip of the faucet. The boiling water splashed off the pans and onto my sleeves. I rolled them to the crevice of my elbows and looked back towards the bedroom, hoping Kamal had already drunk himself to sleep. After filing the last handful of cutlery into the kitchen drawer and dusting the china shelves, I slid an eye into the master bedroom, finding to my terror, nothing at all.

Just then, a silent ballad of sobs arose from Myriam’s bed. I flung open her bedroom door and the knob collided with the wall behind. Kamal kneeled at Myriam’s side, clutching an assortment of pills. A froth of bubbly foam coated her face, and two large doe eyes stood open facing the high ceiling. Skies of blueberry cream suffocated two trifling pupils as they slowly faded to nothing. I caught my tongue in my throat and lifted my palms to cover my lips agape. Kamal motioned a finger my way, and shooed me towards the hall. Through the door, I could hear the quick dial of three numbers and an endless ringing clouded my head.

“Papa? Sir?”

A small child strode through the halls in bare feet. She walked slowly and made not a sound as each heel kissed the floor. Three knuckled taps echo throughout the house and the girl calls again.

“Papa? Are you crying? Why are you sad?”

Two small feet pushed through the door. Papa held an empty pill bottle in his lap, and his head hung down towards the body strewn on the floor. Papa’s eyes glanced towards the girl, but she was already out the door, balled against the wall.

In a matter of minutes, three men in dark blue shells arrived at the front door and rolled Myriam away on a table of white sheets. Her skin was cotton. And her eyes were marbles of glass. I watched as my one friend was carried out of my life forever.

“Sleep in the common room tonight.”

And with that, Kamal swung his body around and sulked down the hall.

I boiled a half kettle of water and leaned against the kitchen counter. Across the tabletop, I spotted a shiny green carabiner with a dangling pair of silver keys. I glanced towards the door and thought of how easy it would be to leave. To walk out that front door, start the car, and just drive. Then, I thought about how I had nowhere to go, and how I knew I could never make it out of the country, alive at least. I had never learned to drive, and I would be arrested if I were to be seen with the wheel. When I looked at it all, the odds were stacked against me. I removed the kettle from the burner and poured the contents down the drain. I had lost my appetite.

The next morning, I awoke to an empty house. I'm sure Kamal had left early to deliver the news to Myriam's father. Dismounting the couch with a sore back, I made my way to the bathroom and opened the mirror cabinet searching for ibuprofen, Tylenol, anything. Lines of prescriptions and over the counter medications walled before me, right there in my reach. I ran my nails across their labels and gazed upon the face of a prisoner standing before me. I plucked two doses of ibuprofen and quickly left the room.

In the kitchen, I couldn't help but notice the metallic glow of paring and butter knives protruding from their marble block. One by one I drew them from their posts and pricked my index finger on their tips. I lifted one to my lips and scored a line down the middle crease. Drops rolled back onto my tongue and I sampled the taste of surrender. With no further thought I ripped through my hijab and brought the knife to my neck. One clean slash and that was it. Eight inches of chocolate thread fell to the floor. Eight more. I stripped down to nothing right there in the kitchen. My burqa, my hijab, my shackles, gone.

I raided Kamal's closet and draped myself in a large tee-shirt to hide my chest. His khakis were long, and bunched up at the bottom, but I admired the feeling of free skin, and I could hear the white noise much clearer without layers of cloth over my ears. A duffel full of food and bare necessities slung over my shoulder as I trudged out the front door, not looking back for a second.

The city was a maze to me. I hadn't gotten to go out often after moving in with Kamal. People crowded the streets and talked loudly to the merchants, saying hello or bargaining for cheaper produce. I kept my eyes on the cobblestone and tried my best to become invisible. However, my plan was not well thought out, if you could even call it a plan. I would get myself as far away from here as possible, and find a place to sleep through the night, all while pretending to be something I'm not.

“Where is your escort? Get out of here before I call the police!”

A young girl in a red patterned hijab ran from the tent and disappeared into a sea of bodies. A short merchant came out after her raising a clenched fist in the air. I slowly picked up my pace, following the child, until I was running after her. I could feel the eyes of men around me, analyzing my frail feminine legs as I ran. She reminded me of myself as a girl; continuing to test the will, and not hatred, but assumed superiority of men. She reminded me of how lost I used to be, questioning why I was treated the way I was.

I hit the street's stop, a dark dead end alley, and I had lost sight of the red hijab. I cannot really say why I ran after the girl, but it hurt me to see her gone.

“Smack!”

A pounding in the back of my knees with a full deposit bag of glass, sent me to the hot ground. The girl with the red hijab stood over me, bag in hand, ready to strike again.

“Why are you following me? I'm not going back to jail. If you even try and touch me, this won't be the only trash I'm taking out today. “

“Eermph. Pl-please. I'm not..ugh trying to-to hurt you. I promise.”

“Sure, of course not. You just want me to marry you, please you, serve you, entertain you! Taking in a woman and treating her as if she's a possession is our culture, so it must be right!”

She lectured me in screams.

“Lo-ok I'm not what you-you think.”

I lifted the baggy shirt to show an artwork of bruises painted on my torso. The girl also lifted her abaya up past her thigh for show of identical markings.

“I thought your voice was too high....”

I gave a toothless smile and the girl assisted me to my feet.

“Anja. I'm so sorry.”

“Yasmine.”

We nodded in each other's direction. We both knew what we wanted. We both knew it couldn't be done alone. We both needed to leave. She broke the silence.

“So... ever thought about trying to you know, escape?..I mean, what else could a women like you be doing out here on the streets all alone.”

“Well I suppose so, yes, but it's very dangerous.”

“Better than spending your whole life being tossed around by a twelve year old boy, and constantly married off to horny, abuse, old men...”

She spoke to the street, and I yearned to comfort her. She was so young and what she was going through, I would never wish upon another soul, especially a child of her age. Her clothes were tarnished, and her face fostered so much pain. She wanted freedom. She wanted to feel safe

and welcome somewhere. She wanted an escape. I stood a foot's length away and tilted her head towards my own.

“We are getting out of here....tonight.”

Maybe I was crazy to try and flee the country with a child I've never met. I like to think of myself as brave.

Before I left the house, I had snatched Kamal's hidden stash of booze money. He kept it under the daylilies in a hollowed out mum seed packet. I discovered it two years ago in a desperate search to find my mother's locket, I would later realize was sold for Irish whiskey. The packet now held over four thousand riyal.

“If we're lucky, that'll be just enough to get us on the water, just not legally.”

“I'm in.”

The sun was starting to fall, and we had caught a few buses down to the coast for a small smuggling business. Anja posed as my wife, and me her guardian. I knew well that we had very little time before Kamal came in search of me. I had known these men and their work for years, but I've never had the guts to leave. Contrary to their business, these men are not supporters of women and women's rights. They are dirty men working for money; it does pay well. Why else would anyone here want to help a woman flee? Culture is culture, and our culture isn't great for women, but men put that aside because it's what we've always done.

We stood in a desolate dock. We must have waited for hours, but time felt like like a block of ice. Slowly melting away, but striking little notice as drops hit the dark wood. Anja's knee bounced beside me. I slid my fingers between her own and looked out at the starless sky. Just then, two men arose from below the deck of a small fishing boat and greeted us.

“You two here for this?”

One man extended a hand towards a small orange motorized raft and lifted his eyebrows in questioning. Looking at each other for a final confirmation, Anja and I nodded in unison.

“You're gonna want to put these on..”

We were handed two bulky life vests with seatbelt-like strapping from front to back. The unsettling danger of our trip sank into my stomach as I slid it on and fastened it tightly.

“Ya sharmouta!”

The crack of a revolver came from behind, and Kamal came stumbling our way with a slur of nonsense, shaking a gun in the air. I pushed Anja onto the raft and spat at the air for one last final goodbye to Kamal, to my father, and to this country. Unknotting the raft from the dock's pillar, I shouted for Anja to start up the motor.

“What are you doing? You can’t do that! Where’s my money?”

“Yasmine! God dammit!”

Kamal shot at the air. The two ship men cursed at the water, and turned to each other yelling and throwing their arms in the air. The whirl of the motor sounded and we were pushed from the dock.

Everything we had grown up knowing was left behind, but we both knew that was the way we wanted it to be. Leaving a life where everything we do and say is controlled by men, and there was simply nothing anyone could do about it. But here we are. Anja and I drifted away on an endless sheet of blue, off to turn a new page and start a new story; a story we could write for ourselves.

Sally Chen

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Battle High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Olivia Latendresse

Category: Poetry

Requiem of Hope

The girl hides
under the soft blanket of dark
her phone illuminating her tiredness
as she type in the words
Major arteries of arm
she trace the radial artery
her arm feels as soft as fresh bake cookie
she imagines
sinking and twisting the tip
like using the screwdriver
She pictured
the blood spraying everywhere
like a bag of chips overfill with air
crimson flowers against thistle wall
a watercolor painting by a 6 year old
the knife lays on the side
as if it's a fake weapon in a movie set

Lives don't end with an explosive bloom
it's a whisper into the inky room
I just want a second chance
life and death hinged onto the balance
of the tilt of a knife
she's not scared when the world blows and jabs
when the punches become downpour rain
even if it feel as if she won't get up again
she's not scare of the growing weight on her shoulder
stacking up like undo homework
waiting to be procrastinate
she's not scared of being alone
a lone figure among laughters and chaos
an island in the middle of Pacific Ocean

You can say she's pretty brave
But no
She's a coward

trap in the revolving door of loneliness and constant frown
afraid to be caught between panes of disappointment
a robot that's left forgotten
continue going around and around
on her track to self-destruction

Coda

Remove the angel of hope
and let's toast to the demon of tomorrow
dreams, memories, worries and sorrow
all sink to the bottom of the sea floor
once they were woven into a tale
once they were taken care of with great detail
now they're just remains that are randomly scatter
a diary, a photo, a post-it note
skeletons of someone who's done with the world
ends the waiting for life to say no more
and we all restart again from zero
back when we still believe there's such thing as hope

Sally Chen

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Battle High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Sally Chen

Category: Poetry

DĀŠĭĀ vu

A careless question thrown your way
you rifle through the stack of thoughts

Snap

*gossips and secrets tumble out between puffs of breath
mix with a whiff of humid grass that squished under my feet*

“Number eleven!” a voice called
and your hands froze

*“How are you, number eleven?” the blue eyes teased with affection
a warm, familiar scent accompanied by the too loud country music
but happiness don't require perfection*

“Never been better” I grinned

A joke that left you laughing non stopped
you hadn't laughed like this since

the sound trail off into the past

the read aloud of Romeo and Juliet

the corner of my mouth felt sore at the end

and it felt as if my gut's going to spill out

from laughing so hard

snap, twist, backtrack

They are the golden streaks across the sunset

memories that hadn't dry into concrete past

and still dripping with

embarrassment, joy, desperation, nervousness

seperated only by mirror of days and years

as if you're just an arm reach over

what used to be forever

Overtime

Some had became ships with no cargos

taken by the angry sea of

remembered only by snippet of their names,

the frail skeleton photos

and the words scrawled hastily on a journal

While no words can describe the monochromatic of life
from the gap-tooth grin to a harden scowl
where is the child who had wished for the age of 16?
the answer is buried beneath
the lights and shades of no turning back
all the different tones of goodbye

Yet

You wonder, you think, you yearn
of those familiar faces that had exited the story
you asked if they look at the vast sky
that you all shared underneath
you fantasize, you breath, you wish
somewhere in the corner of the world
the story is just beginning
someplace in the parallel infinity
time are just tricks of magic that never exist
and someday maybe you'll meet them again
under the crossroad of present and past
trigger by the smell of coffee
or taken by the sight of a Shakespeare classic
sometime maybe beneath the starry canvas
you'll catch a glimpse of them
on the edge of the cliff of reality
pull by the caress of imagination
and the cries of your longing

Hannah Claire

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

Charming Places

I tried to run, but I couldn't. The nightmare seemed like it was growing by the minute! And then, the most horrible thing was about to happen until I screamed and sat bolt upright in bed. Once I finally calmed myself down, I realized that this was no dream it was reality. Four days ago my mom really did depart from this life, and not a minute goes by that I don't think of her. I knew it would take some time to get used to her being gone, but she no longer has to battle the cancerous virus that sickened her from the start.

After getting dressed for the day, I decided to look through old pictures of my mom. I pulled out a flower printed shoe box from the back of my dusty closet. Looking through the pictures did help to remove the pain, but I just couldn't stop thinking about my mom. Memories of her kept popping into my mind left and right. After an hour of looking through old pictures of her, I came along a soft, folded paper. As I slowly opened the mysterious paper butterflies soared through my stomach with. Unfolding the paper, I read the words "Anna's Will" marked at the top in black ink. Skimming through the page the words, "Charm bracelet" and "Sage" stood out to me. After I had processed everything, I found out that my mom wanted me to have her special charm bracelet. I remember her telling me so many stories about each unique, and individual charm. My mom had started collecting charms when she was my age, and I have always wanted to do the same.

I grabbed the crumbled paper and walked downstairs hoping to catch my dad before his conference call later this morning. I caught my dad at the kitchen table eating jelly toast with a glass of orange juice while he read the newspaper.

"Morning, sweetheart. What do you have there?" dad asked as he swallowed his last drop of orange juice.

"Well, I, Um..." I was too nervous to spit out the words so I just handed my dad the paper.

My dad pulled out a chair next to him and patted down for me to sit, "Honey we need to talk. On your mother's will she wrote that she wanted you to have her charm bracelet, but sadly I can't find it. I am truly very sorry. I know it meant a lot to you just like it did to her, and I promise I will keep looking."

I slowly closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I knew it wasn't my dad's fault, but the bracelet just meant so much to me. "Don't worry about it dad, I will find it. I have to."

I kissed him goodbye and walked up to my room. Once I had got back to my room, I fell back onto my big bouncy bed and let the tears flow out of my stinging eyes. It took about fifteen minutes for me to completely relax myself but I immediately felt better. I had been a complete emotional wreck ever since my mom died and I just couldn't handle the lost bracelet on top of it.

After a short cat nap, I regained my strength to get out of bed and decided to search for the missing charm bracelet myself. I slid on a clean pair of dark blue jeans and a white tank top and walked to my mom's closet. I tried to be as quiet as I could walking past the office where my dad was sitting at his computer. I did not hear the firm sound of my dad's voice, or the clicking sound of my dad's finger tips hitting the keyboard.

"I thought he was supposed to be working." I whispered to myself.

I peeked into my dad's office with worry. The sight was heartbreaking, my dad was bent down over his desk with his head in his hands. He was completely silent except for his heavy breathing. At that moment I finally realized what my dad was going through, four days ago he had lost the love of his life and since her death he has been nothing but strong and comforting to me. I had never even asked my my dad how he felt. How could I have been so selfish?

Part of me wanted to walk right into the room and comfort my dad, but the other part of me wanted to run as far away from this whole problem as possible. I tried to forget the terrible image of my dad crying out of my head but I just couldn't. Once I got to her room, I went straight into her closet and pulled out my favorite sweater of hers. I gently slipped on the sweater then took the back set of stairs downstairs. I slid on a pair of muddy converse and disappeared out the door, shutting it quietly behind me.

Minutes later I was riding down the gravel road towards town. For the first time, I felt relieved. I let all the worries fall as I glided down the hill and let all the sad moments blow away like my hair in the wind. I pulled into town to the sweet smell of pie, bread, and coffee. My rumbling stomach reminded me that I hadn't eaten breakfast yet, so I decided to follow the delicious smell. Coming to a skidded stop on my bike, I read the words "Hattie's" above the doors to the bakery. I set my bike on the porch and walked in.

"Welcome to Hattie's, the best bakery in town! I'm Marlee and I will be your server today, please go ahead and follow me to your table."

The polite waitress led me to a small two person booth in the corner and handed me a breakfast menu. The plastic sheet had only a few options, so I went with something simple and ordered two pancakes, a side of bacon, and a glass of orange juice. I took advantage of the time alone and scribbled down my idea on a napkin. The only thing I could do was buy my own charm bracelet and hand it down to the next generation like my mom planned to do.

"Why was this meaningless charm bracelet so important to me?" I decided to scratch out the idea that I had written on the napkin. A few minutes later I saw Marlee, my waitress, walking my way with a tray of steaming hot food.

“Here you go miss. Is there anything thing else I can get you?” she questioned, setting huge plates of food on to the table.

“ No thank you,” I mumbled.

I spent about twenty minutes eating my breakfast and staring out the window. I watched many families walk in and out of every store smiling and laughing with one another. I decided to get on with my day and walked up to the checkout to pay for my meal. I noticed a fresh banana cream pie with a mountain of whipped cream set perfectly inside the glass window behind the checkout.

“How much for the banana cream pie?” I asked, pointing behind the cashier.

“\$13.50,” she handed me the pie in a cute red bag that said “Hattie’s Bakery.”

I gave her the exact change and walked out the door hoping to find a shaded bench to sit down and eat the first slice of pie. I opened up the bag and found a tiny teal box sitting on top of the pie container. I paused for a slight minute and then decided to go ahead and open the present, inside was a sterling silver charm in the shape of a pie. I couldn’t believe what I saw, it was like my guardian angel heard my idea and made it come true. Earlier that morning I came up with the idea of making my own charm bracelet, and all of a sudden I was given a pie charm. Instead of eating my delicious pie, I got back on my bike and drove over to “The Golden Lodge,” where my mom got her charm bracelet. I knew I would never find a bracelet as beautiful as the one my mom had, but I figured there could be something to use for my new charm. The ring of a bell greeted me as I walked into the store, inside were tables filled with racks of gorgeous jewelry.

“Hello, welcome to The Golden Lodge. What are you looking for today?” The employee asked.

Without even giving me time to respond she told me to follow her to the bracelets table. “I saw the charm in your hand and figured you were looking to buy a bracelet for it.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but again before I had the chance to speak, she was out of sight. I hoped that I would find a sterling silver charm bracelet like my moms, but there was a very limited selection. I thought about just buying the cutest one I could find, but then I remembered that my mom didn’t just buy random charms. She bought ones that were important to her. I walked out of the store and beside my bike was another teal box, instead this gift was a little larger in size. I opened the box excited to hopefully find another charm. Unlike the last present, this one was not a charm. It was a sterling silver charm bracelet, exactly like the one my mom had. I couldn’t believe I had gotten another gift. Who could be sending me these?

The ringing of my phone pulled me back into reality, I answered my phone and heard my dad’s voice.

“Hi dad. I’m sorry I’ve been gone for so long, I promise I will leave town now!”

“Your fine Isabelle. I just wanted to check on you, but since you're in town do you mind picking up my order at the bike shop?”

“Of course, see you soon. Love you, bye!”

I got on my bike and road across the street to “Cycle City” to quick pick up my dad’s order.

“Welcome to Cycle City, I’m Frank what can I do for you? The old man behind the counter asked.

“ I just need to pick up an order for Dan Ryerson, please,” I answered.

“Here you go miss, and don’t worry about paying, it was already paid for over the phone.”

“Thank you.” What a nice town today, I thought.

I opened up the bag Frank gave me and expected to find another teal box like the other stores had done, but all that was in the bag was my dad’s bike chain. I walked out of the store and sure enough set perfectly on top of my bike seat was the same exact teal box as the two before. I opened it slowly and pulled out a second charm, this one was different than the one before, it was in the shape of a bike. All I wanted to do was admire the beautiful charm, but instead I got on my bike and pedaled home as fast as I could. I loved all three of the gifts I had received very much, but it bothered me not knowing who they came from. My plan was to get home as soon as possible so I wouldn't run into anymore mysterious teal boxes.

As I pulled into my driveway out of the corner of my eye I saw another teal box sitting on the bench outside. I dropped my bike immediately and dashed to my front porch. Ripping open the box I found a silver charm in the shape of a heart with the words “mom” engraved on it, along with a carefully folded piece of paper beside it. I unfolded the note and read it outloud.

*My beautiful daughter,
Keep being the smart, kind, wonderful person you have always been. And don’t worry about me.
I am much better up here in heaven watching over you. I hope you enjoy your charm bracelet
and keep collecting more charms. I love you with all my heart.
Love, your guardian angel. and I will always be your guardian angel.*

Once I finished reading it, tears glided down my checks. I was happy for my mom, but I just wish I could have shared one more moment with her. This whole time I knew it was my mom giving me each of the gifts. I still don’t know how she did but it doesn't matter anymore, since this morning I have become closer to my mom and that is what is most important. The death of my mom has been a very tough obstacle in my life, and will hurt me forever, but knowing that she is up in heaven watching over me helps a lot. Someday I plan to pass down each of these memories from my charm bracelet down to the next generation, just like my mom.

Shyla Cohen

Age: 15, Grade: 8

School Name: Bode Middle School, Saint Joseph, MO

Educator: Josie Clark

Category: Poetry

Like A Flower

The beautiful, jubilant flower gently twirled with the wind,
To a melody contrived for only they,
So joyous and insouciant,
Like a child that had been newly born,
Nothing to bring it

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n.

Then the white, frosty flurries arrive carried by the cruel, biting wind,
And the flower, oh, the flower, will never be victorious from this onslaught,
It begins to wither, its once winsome petals crumbling away
Under the strain of the incessant snow
Until one remains.
Scarcely holding on, on the brink of finally letting go,
Like a child struggling to persist.
How will it ever overcome these tribulations?

But then the once detested white flurries cease their foray,
And the unwieldy weight no longer holds it down,
For the flower had risen above its subduer,
Never to be held down again
Because it has experienced things that no other flower has survived.
No longer will it be subject to the strain that the callous snow brings.
No longer will it fall victim to the sadistic, wintry wind.

No longer.

I, like a flower,
Will **Rise**.

Rachel Colligan

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Pembroke Hill School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Piper Abernathy

Category: Flash Fiction

Good Country Sunbathing

The sun was high in the sky so that Mrs. Harmony enjoyed cool shade on her front porch as she sipped orange juice. She could hear her daughter Clarity's footsteps in her room above the porch. Then, she heard the tell-tale window latch and quiet tread that meant Clarity was on the roof. Mrs. Harmony was so angry that she accidentally broke the glass her orange juice was in (it didn't matter because her dress was also orange.)

"Get yer self in-doors this instant, you devil-child," yelled Mrs. Harmony. Clarity was allergic to the sun, a sure curse from God for a pretty girl like her born in the South.

Clarity jumped off the roof, falling to a soft landing in an orange flowering bush. She already had hives on her ankles and underarms from being in the sun for thirty seconds.

"Darn it, ma. Life in the dark ain't worth livin'. I need the sun."

"True good Southern Christians are made to be in the sun. God has punished you for your sin and now you must be content to live in the shadows."

Clarity stewed.

"Mama, I can see your bra through that Gawd-awful orange dress."

"I spilled orange juice on it."

"Darn stupid that was, ma."

"I'll not forgive you for that remark, young lass."

The next day, Mrs. Harmony brought a folding chair from the porch onto the lawn and sat in it. She faced the house, sipping orange juice, glaring at Clarity's window all day. That night, she was sunburned real bad, but she didn't mind. Sitting out in the front facing the house all day offered advantages. The house was surrounded by woods on three sides, so Clarity could only escape into the sun from the front. If Mrs. Harmony sat in the front, watching Clarity's window all day, Clarity would never escape. The mother could spend all day in God's light while her daughter was contained to the devil's darkness.

For ten days Mrs. Harmony sat in front of the house under God's magnificent sun. Her orange dress became two shades lighter, and her orange skin became two shades oranger. Her skin blistered and bled, but she still sat in the sun.

The pain reminded her of her husband, who lived two states over in Alabama. She knew Clarity's sun allergy came from his side and she hated him for it. She flung off her wedding ring, leaving a band of white skin surrounded by orange. At noon that day, she died of widespread second degree sunburn.

At 12:02, Clarity climbed out her window into the sun. She kissed her dead mother and slipped on the ring from off the grass. After walking two hours on the road to Alabama, she died of an allergic reaction to the sun.

Mr. Harmony, having decided to return to his wife and daughter after two years, found Clarity on the road. He kissed her and took the ring he had given his wife off his dead daughter's finger. When he reached the house two hours later, he did not kiss his dead wife. She was too well baked. Instead, he went inside and finished the last of the orange juice in the bottle. Smacking his lips, he said, "That hit the spot or my name ain't Perfect Harmony!"

Katherine Cordova

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Soccer Tryout

A sudden jolt of energy rushed through me. I scanned the field, scoping out all my competition. My mom and I walked over to the sign up table, where many of the boys looked at me. A couple of them scoffed as if saying she's a girl, there is no competition. I felt my confidence stutter, but quickly regained my composure. My hair was in a slicked back ponytail held so tightly at the crown of my head that I was starting to get a headache. The cleats on my feet gave me blisters, but I felt like no one could touch me. At this point, making the boys team was the only thing on my mind.

The autumn leaves crunched underneath my feet. I looked up at my mom, making eye contact with her. She wiggled her eyebrows as we walked over to the coach. A big grin spread across my face. My mom pushed me in front of her as she extended her hand to the coach.

"Hi, this is my daughter Hannah." My cheeks turned pink when I turned away.

"Hannah is Nate's older sister. She would like to be on the team with the guys," the coach looked over at me, sizing me up to see what I was made of.

"My name is Oliseh Chuks, or better know as Coach Chuks. Hannah you can go over and join the boys. They are just warming up." I stole one last glance at my mom before jogging over to the team. In the mix of the boys, I found my brother talking to some of his friends.

"Nate, do you want to pass the ball with me?" I asked. I hoped my brother would make me feel less alone.

"I will, but it's only because you're my sister." My brother kicked the ball, forcing it forward. We passed the ball back and forth, each time making me feel more comfortable. It was in the middle of a pass when the whistle blew.

My coach shouted for us to gather around. We all jogged, making our way to where coach was standing.

"Thank you to all that are here. The only thing I ask of you today is to try your best and have fun. We are going to start by doing some simple drills."

Everybody looked around to find a partner. I looked at my brother, but he shook his head no. Who was I going to partner with now?

I made my way over to Coach Chuks.

"Is there someone I can partner with?" He scanned the field and shook his head no.

"I guess you will have to partner with me."

We started to pass, but he soon realized that he needed to watch the other groups. He said that I was better than he thought I would be, and I could go join another group. A smile appeared on my face. I had proven one person wrong, but there were still many more to go.

I ran over and joined my brother's group. At the sight of me, they groaned. I stifled a laugh and hopped into the drill. This was my turn to to prove myself.

We started by practicing volleys. We took turns going back and forth. I've never been good at volleys, so I struggled a little bit. I kept having to remind myself to just relax. On the field, it's best to be relaxed and that's what I wanted to show. We finished and moved onto headers. These came a lot easier for me. I had previously worked on them when I was on the girls' team. My body shrank in at the thought of them. I missed that team so much. I thought back to the good-old days. I had so much fun. One moment stood apart from the others. It was my last soccer game.

"Keep your vision sharp and your head in the game," was the last thing my coach said before I left. With that thought, I snapped back to reality. The boys were hustling to the center of the field. I did a small skip and I was off to join the team.

"We are going to separate into groups to scrimmage," Coach counted us off into 3 groups.

"1,2,3,1, Hannah you are in group 2," and the counting went on. I ended up on the same team as my brother.

"Lucky me!" I grumbled sarcastically under my breath.

We faced Group 1 to start off. That team consisted of a couple really good players and a lot of decent players. I felt like we were going to lose, but to my surprise, we won. Unlike the other team, we worked together like a well-oiled machine. We were able to pass and talk on the field as if we had played together previously.

The second team we faced was not as easy of a win. They worked well together too. We continued to work really hard, and even though we lost, you could tell that we worked our butts off. We continued scrimmaging, every time getting better as a group. Coach blew the final whistle and we gathered around.

"You guys did a great job today. I want to thank everyone again for coming to the tryouts. You will get a call very soon if you made the team." We all murmured a quick thanks and went to find our parents. The butterflies were still in my stomach, but I felt good. My family stood around waiting to talk to coach.

"Your kids did a great job today. They work together really well. Hopefully you will get a call soon." That day, I walked away with a smile on my face. I had tried out for a boys team and did great. I will always remember the lesson from the tryout: just because you are different doesn't mean you can't prove them wrong.

Abigail Cottingham

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe South High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Cynthia Roth

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Listen Longer

Concerts are my drug
The pounding bass in my ears
Is the cocaine
The rhythmic crowd
Is the LSD

I raise my hands up above my head
To set myself free
And enjoy the music
The drums a viable heartbeat in my chest

My first “real” concert
Is sweat, and sore legs, and waking up with no voice
Set on a Thursday night and
I’ve got school the next day
But it's senior year
And it’s time I lived a little

I scream lyrics in outdoor venues
My voice drowned out
By overbearing speakers
And a thousand other singers

Those around me chug beer
And smoke just about everything
Their exhales swirling with the stage fog
Gyrations of haze shining in the lights

An ever present stark contrast
To the last concert I attended
Selena Gomez at Starlight Theatre
When I was twelve and afraid
Of even uttering the word ‘crap’ around my parents
Now here I am
Screaming the F-word next to my dad
And giggling the whole time

My dad's excitement may outshine mine
He's dreamed of seeing CHRVCHES live
Ever since he discovered them
And here we are

I take a thousand pictures on my phone
Capturing the memory in 8 megapixels
To look back on and share with my friends
They say phones have ruined concerts
But they've only made the memories last longer

In the climax of their show
Lauren Mayberry closes her eyes
And turns her microphone to the crowd
Installing her trust in the audience
To lift her lyrics from their minds
And carry them up to the sky
On false notes and bad pitches
Without a care in the world

The band thanks us for being a great audience
And ends their set
The harsh house lights come up
No one noticed it had gotten dark
Rush to the merchandise stand
To spend last week's pay
In a cotton statement to the world
That I've just had the best night ever

Hurry back to reclaim your seats as
Anticipation buzzes as ten o'clock grows nearer
We complain about the bad reception to pass the time
The lack of wifi slowing our attempts
To add the songs we've just heard to our playlists
In hopes to recreate the concert tomorrow
In our headphones

Soon we're standing for a chance to see
Over a sea of height advantages
Suddenly the lights go out and
A familiar guitar riff resonates in the air
One heard over radio waves a million times
Heard live for the first time

A pageantry of lights:
Blue, yellow, purple, white

Sweep over the audience to let them know
The show has begun

I notice the people around me
A sorority to my right
Drunk and having the time of their lives
Swaying to the music and laughing
One will bump into me during the show
And invite me to dance with them
A group of middle-aged men to my left
Headbang and pump their fists to the rhythm

And it's then I realize
The social perception of rock concerts is all wrong
It's not always angry young adults
With piercings and tattoos and reckless dancing
(Though a mosh pit has definitely formed at the front of the stage)

Sometimes it's a group of coworkers in their mid-40s
Or a sorority, or a seventeen-year-old girl
Who's at her first concert
Not performed by a former Disney star
Concerts are a place for all of those people to come together
And enjoy something they all share in common:

Ben Gibbard, a Neil Diamond in the rough
Who introduces us to his band
And takes us on a musical journey into the night
They finish their set and say goodnight and
The people who leave first must be new
Not knowing what comes next

But the rest of the crowd knows there's more:
If they haven't played their most popular song
There's always an encore
We scream and clap and chant
Until an acoustic guitar is brought out
And a rippling silence
Unspoken etiquette fallen throughout the audience

A lyrical mastermind up on stage
Singing of lasting love and inevitability
Pulling couples and friends together
A virtual hug in F Major

The magic is broken at the end of the song

Cheers and applause louder than thunder
Echo throughout the emptying venue

The band leaves for real this time
And the crowd floods the parking lot
Flashing police lights guide cars out
My throat hurts and my ears are ringing
But I can't wait to do it all again

Shakira Cross

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Poetry

Sleepless Nights

On weekends, when you were 6, you would come into my room begging to sleep in my bed
We would watch cartoons on the tv until you fell asleep and I went along with you
During the week, you would sleep with our father and found comfort there
Until a bruise on the side of your face and the grips of his hand around your neck became
excessive

We left...

At 6 pm I held you in my arms and I wanted you to know how much your sister loves you
I couldn't stand looking at your face as you would say to me "will we ever be home?"

And all I could say was "everything is going to be just fine"

When we came to the door, 12 in the morning

My eyes were dried up from the tears I cried

Holding your hand as you stood in your confusion

That night we slept on the couch

With my arms wrapped around your body as if you were shield of protection until dawn

Three weeks went by and you still were confused

"Will we ever be home?"

Every night

I tuck you into bed on the blowout mattress on the floor as I lay with you until you fall asleep

Hearing your cries at three in the morning because you couldn't stand sleeping alone

Getting up to tell you "everything is going to be just fine"

Nights I couldn't sleep because you weren't okay

Nights I wish momma was here to tell me "everything is going to be just fine"

I wanted you to know that your big sister cares and that your big sister will save you and that
your big sister will give you love

So I will risk my sleep every night to let you know that it's just like home.

Spencer Cupp

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

I Knew You'd Come Back

I was running. Adrenaline was coursing through my veins, and I kept hearing that awful crunching. That's the last thing I remembered that night. It wasn't hard to conjure up the images in my mind, all I had to do was go near that place. Go near his house. That Godforsaken house where things have gone unspoken, unheard of, things unimaginable have happened there. I never knew what would happen to me after that. I still don't know. But he's out there, somewhere in this world.

It's been five years since then, and now I'm going back. Thomas was his name. He was a friend of my dad's, they served in the military for 15 years together. My dad said he no longer stayed in touch with Thomas after he was released with a dishonorable discharge. I was 12 then, I didn't know what it meant. I didn't know any better when he told me he was my dad's friend. I didn't know any better when he said my dad had sent him to pick me up from school. I didn't know where I going. All I knew was that he was "taking me home where my parents were waiting." None of that happened. My dad never sent him to pick me up, he never took me home, and he left me with these scars. People say they can't see them. I don't expect people to find them on my skin. They're beneath the surface, only visible to me. Others only see it by looking into my eyes. I don't like it when they do that. It's as if you can see what happened that night. As if you can see him but not see him at the same time. You're looking into the eyes of someone who's seen death before. Of someone who's experienced things no child should have experienced The eyes of someone who learned to grow up fast and make walls of steel around their mind so nobody else can see inside. I see him when I'm lonely, I hear him when it's silent, I feel his presence no matter what I'm doing. People say everyone has a guardian angel sitting on your shoulder in times of need. But even angels aren't immortal, aren't invincible. My angel died that night and was replaced with this man. It feels like he's always watching me. Always drawing me towards that house. Beckoning me with the the fake smile that every psychopath can conjure up. The smile that chills you to your bone marrow and curdles your blood when you know the true meaning under it. It's not hard to find, you just have to know where to look.

All the events kept playing in my mind and I don't see the red light. I slam on my brakes to save my car from totalling the one in front of me. "Damn it." I say under my breath. The people look at me through their rear view mirror and give me a finger that nobody likes. I chuckle and take a sip of my coffee. As I look back at the road my phone buzzes. I look down, it's Haley.

I pick up the phone and immediately get blasted with questions and concerns. "Haley, Haley. Calm down. Please take it slow, I'm in the car and would rather not die from my friend pestering me and cause havoc on the road."

"Well I think all the girls want to go to a movie. Have a girls night out. Maybe even meet a couple of boys."

I can hear the smirk on her face. "I would love to." I say. "But I can't, I have to do a couple of things today. Clear up some old ties. Maybe tomorrow night?" I ask.

“Anna, is this about your past again?” She asks.

“So what if it is, Haley, it's my choice.” I reply. “Look, the rain’s getting really hard and it's getting difficult to hear you. I'll call you back later.” Before she says anything else I hang up. I'm nearing the dead end. This dead is the gates to my living hell.

I start seeing it again. The whole night playing out in front of me. Thomas walking with me, leading me into the woods. Staring at me like a hungry lion waiting for its prey to make one wrong move. At that moment the lion will pounce. At that moment the trap will be sprung and the prey will have nowhere left to run. The lion feasts on these things, it aches for this type of prey to come along. These stupid little animals that know nothing of the existence of animals larger than it, stronger than it, faster than it. It's the little animals that think they're invincible that are the easiest to catch. Very few of them make it out alive. People say I'm lucky to live, I disagree with them. I put on a rain jacket and slowly walk along the path. Trying to stay aware of everything around me. I stare into the woods, scanning for something.

I said I see him when I'm lonely, now everywhere I look he's staring right back at me. Wearing the same things that he was wearing on that day. A plain white t-shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. That shirt no longer looks white in my eyes. It's red, splattered with blood no matter where you look on it. It's all mine, nobody ever knows how much a human can bleed until they see it for themselves. That night I thought I had nothing to live for, I thought it was over. There was lots of screaming, but the house is buried deep in these woods. So deep it's almost as if I can still hear my screams trying to escape. The cries for help, the screams of agony, they eventually stopped. Replaced with the crunching of leaves beneath my feet as I ran away. I could hear him behind me for a while. For a while I thought he would never stop coming after me. He did eventually, realizing if he kept going he would be caught.

There was an investigation. There was no trial, no jury, no verdict. He disappeared from the face of the earth or so it seemed. What kind of justice is that? What good does that do to me? It leaves me haunted with his presence. No matter where I go,

I kept wandering aimlessly towards the house. Wait, what was that? I stopped dead in my tracks. Did I hear footsteps? I quickly sheltered myself behind a tree from where I thought the footsteps were coming from. I peeked around the side, nothing. Must just be paranoia, I'm starting to have flashbacks. I see him, leading me to the house. Not a single thought crossed my mind as to why this wrong. *You idiot, you should've been smarter. How could you have fallen for that?* I screamed in my mind at my twelve year old self. I just wanted to pick her up and strangle her. To somehow just send her a sign of what was going to happen. Moments later they disappeared into the trees and faded from my mind. I slowly removed myself from the tree and cautiously walked in the direction of the house once more.

I neared the house, my heart started beating faster. I started second guessing this. Should I do this? Everything looked the same. The swinging chair on the porch, the slight crookedness of the window pane directly above the door, the willow tree whose branches scraped the paint off the side. I didn't really want to be here anymore. But I've got miles to go before I sleep.

I raised my head and saw the room, the window, where everything happened that night. I grimaced and looked away, I still saw her handprint. The handprint of my twelve year old self. I'm no longer this stupid twelve year old girl who was sheltered by her parents for too long. That was her, this is me. I remember putting my bloody hand against that window, just waiting for some hero to come bounding out of the forest. To run into the house and save me from this nightmare. He didn't let me look out the window for long, just long enough for me to realize I was doomed, forgotten, no help was coming. I was on my own in that house full of madness, but

only one monster.

I slowly neared the house. I didn't know what I was going to do if I saw him, I didn't make it that far with my plan. I walked to the porch and stopped, my vision started going into a spin-cycle. I grabbed the rail for support and waited for it to pass. As soon as it did I slowly made my way up the stairs and to the front door. I tried turning it, nothing. I walked around to the back door and tried the knob, nothing. My journey couldn't end here, it's too early. I haven't come all this way to end up empty handed, have I? I remembered a window being by the front door. If I can break that I might be able to make it inside. I walked back to the front door, took my jacket off, wrapped it around my fist, and punched the window with all my might. The glass broke and I quickly stuck the rest of my arm in to unlock the door. As I pulled my arm back out a shard of glass cut a deep gash on my forearm. I yelled out in pain and quickly muffled it with my jacket. You never know who's watching you, who's listening to you.

As I walked in the house, a chill came over me. Funny, it's as if that same chill came over me when I walked into this house five years ago. I didn't want to go up to the room where it all happened again, it didn't feel right. It felt like something was missing from my memories, I didn't want to find out what it was. But my friends deserved better. They, and I, needed to know what really happened. I slowly walked up the stairs and turned left down the hallway. The hallway looked so long, the room so far away. If walking into the woods was my hell, I'm at the gates and I've got a first class ticket. I opened the door and took a deep breath, everything was the same. The creaky wooden floorboards, the twin-sized bed on the left side of the room, the recliner on the right. In between the furniture were bloodstains. It looked like a Jackson Pollock painting with only one color, red. I sat on the floor and closed my eyes, remembering everything now. The blood, the screams, everything. Tears started streaming down my face, I wiped them and looked around. It's funny how I still think I'm being watched in a room when I'm alone. I looked at the foot of the bed and saw a teddy bear. I picked it up thinking that it would give me comfort. I looked into his plastic eyes, they're broken like mine, scarred like mine.

I picked up the bear and held him, thinking it would make me feel better. It didn't, I threw the bear across the room. I was still broken, still hurting, still scarred. I sat there for a moment, collecting myself and collecting my thoughts. The last light of the setting sun was pouring through the window. The room was drafty and cold and I shivered and pulled my jacket around me. I took one last look and sighed. I reached for my phone and texted Haley.

Hey, Haley. I'm coming over, I think I've figured a few things out about my past. See you soon.

I got up, picked up my purse, and threw my cell phone inside. I reached for the door, opened it and was starting to step through when I looked up.

Oh God. No.

"I knew you'd be back." Thomas said.

Cassandra Daniels

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Marnie Jenkins

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

I Am Who I Am

names have been changed to protect real identities.

“Do you have a boyfriend yet?”

“What boys are you interested in these days?”

“What boys are you crushing on?”

“Don’t you think he’s cute?”

“Why don’t you date him?”

“Why haven’t you had a boyfriend yet?”

These are the questions hurled at me constantly, by my family. I know they all mean well, but I wish they would just understand, I wish they would just shut up and realize - *I do not like boys.*

I came to this realization in fourth grade - I vividly remember writing in a Junie B. Jones “do-it-yourself” notebook, when it asked you to list your biggest secrets - *“I don’t think I like boys.”* I remember writing about the girl in my fourth grade math class, how I think I liked her but didn’t understand how this could be possible because, as far as I knew, girls liked boys and boys liked girls and that was all there was to it. I remember writing about the boy in my classes who had confessed to liking me, how I had tried my hardest to reciprocate those feelings but that I simply could not. How that boy, when I told him I didn’t feel the same way, got angry with me and screamed; “what is *wrong* with you?”

My classmates were always confused by me - all throughout elementary and middle school, they were “dating”, they had crushes, everybody was infatuated with the idea of love and dating. And then there was me - who had never dated a boy, who had never even liked a boy. I had been crushed on, I had been asked out but I always declined. I didn’t understand why I couldn’t like any of the boys that liked me back. I eventually came to the conclusion that I was simply cold-hearted, that I simply could not love. And I grew to be fine with it. I grew comfortable with the idea of never getting married, never being in a relationship. A ten, eleven year old girl should not have these thoughts running through her head.

Then came eighth grade. The year I realized I was not incapable of loving - I was simply incapable of loving a boy. On the very first day of school, in social studies class, we were given a seating arrangement and I was seated next to a girl named Sarah. I had never really associated with Sarah - I knew who she was and what she looked like, but I had never had a conversation with her. All I knew was that she was very loud and, admittedly, a little obnoxious. In middle school, she was the complete opposite of me - I was very quiet, very reserved, very shy. I had friends and was comfortable with them, but when on my own, I kept to myself. So when I was seated next to this loud, boisterous girl, I was quite disappointed. But I quietly obliged, murmured a hello. I never expected her to become my first love - I didn’t expect to even speak more than ten words to her all year. But, as the cliché saying goes - opposites attract.

Throughout the year, Sarah and I grew closer. We became great friends and at first, I never

thought about her in a romantic way. She was simply my best friend. But as time went on, I found myself thinking about her almost every single day. I found myself looking forward to the classes I shared with her, I found myself wishing to just catch a glance of her in the hallway. I denied, for the longest time, that I loved her - I convinced myself that she was just my best friend, that I simply cared for her very deeply because she was such a great friend. But deep down, I knew that wasn't the case. Deep down, I knew I loved her - and it terrified me. The thought of being gay absolutely *terrified* me - I had conservative, religious parents. My entire family was conservative and religious. I didn't know if my friends would support me or understand. So, I denied it and kept the thought shoved down, way deep down, inside of me. I refused to let myself even think about it. I continued telling myself Sarah was just a great friend, and that it was normal to be so fond of friends.

This friendship continued - until it became more than friendship. I eventually come to the realization that I was gay and in love with this girl. We eventually confessed our feelings for each other and we began dating. We were utterly obsessed with each other - we were each other's best friends, we spent almost every other night together during the summer and when school started, almost every weekend. At the time, I didn't realize how unhealthy that was.

My parents strongly disliked Sarah. She was extremely dominant over me, I did and agreed with everything she said. She had complete control over me. It being my first love, I of course didn't realize how toxic the relationship was. My friends hated her, my family hated her. Sarah cheated on me several different times - all of which I forgave her almost instantly. She forbade me to cut my hair because she liked it long, she wouldn't allow me to be friends with other girls due to her jealousy. But I didn't care. I loved her, and to my naive fourteen year old mind, that was all that mattered. She was my life. Until one seemingly normal day in November.

Sarah's mom worked at our school as a lunch lady. She, like my own parents, was unaware of Sarah and I's relationship. Sarah had been hiding it from her as she was extremely homophobic. I was hiding from my own parents as well, as I had convinced myself they would be angry and unsupportive. So we kept it a secret for the most part. That is, until that day in November. A friend of ours went and told Sarah's mom about us during the school day. They told her how we had been dating quite a long time, that we were sexually active, and that we were both lesbians. All hell broke loose. Sarah's mom immediately left her job in the cafeteria, stormed into Sarah's classroom, screaming that she knew "her little secret." They went home and soon after, my mom got a phone call from Sarah's mom. She outed me to my mother - told her that I was a lesbian, that Sarah and I had been dating for months. She was furious and hysterically screaming at my mother, wanting her to be just as angry. But my mother ignored her outrage, hung up the phone, and waited for me to get home.

After school, I rushed home, planning to fake an illness and hole up in my room. But as soon as I walked in the front door, as soon as I spotted my mother waiting for me at the dining room table, I knew she had been told. I completely lost it. I rushed into my mother's arms sobbing, she stiffly held me as I cried.

Eventually, she pulled away to look at me.

"So. You're a lesbian?" I nodded, avoiding her gaze. She went on a wild tangent - how could I not tell her, how could I have had sex under her roof, why didn't I *tell her*. I explained that I knew she was religious, that I thought she would not support me so I hid it from her. She was shocked - she explained to me how she wasn't upset that I was gay, that she still loved me but that she was angry because I hid it from her, because I kept such a large secret from her. She was especially furious about the lascivious acts that had been committed under her roof. She

expressed her worries and fears for me - that I would be discriminated against, bullied, that I would be unsafe due to my sexual orientation. That day, while one of the worst days of my life, was also one of the most relieving - my mother still loved me, she supported me. A huge weight was lifted off my chest that day. But I still had my dad to worry about. My dad, who, unlike my mother, had always been openly homophobic. He believed, and still does, that homosexuality is a sin and is disgusting. I begged my mom to not tell my dad but she refused - she planned to tell him as soon as he got home.

Eventually, he got home. I was sent to my room while my mother told him everything. I waited for him to come scream at me but he never came. I waited, and waited - eventually, I left my room and went to go see what the delay was. He was sitting in his armchair, drinking a beer, watching the television - he didn't say one word to me for two days. My mother grounded me for a week due to my secrecy and sexual activity but our household resumed as normal. The same could not be said for Sarah's family.

Her mother smashed her phone against a wall and completely shattered it, she tore her closet apart and threw her clothes and things everywhere, she ripped her clothes to shreds, she tore down and crumpled her posters, she hit Sarah and yanked her hair. Both her parents spent hours screaming at her - that she was going to Hell, that she was absolutely forbidden to see me ever again, that she wasn't truly gay, just confused. Her mother even called me, screamed at me that I ruined her and her family's life. That I had destroyed their family, that I "forced" Sarah to date me, that her daughter wasn't truly gay. She didn't allow Sarah to come to school for two days.

I spent those days wondering what was going to happen with us. My parents disliked her, but I knew they wouldn't forbid me from being with her. When Sarah finally came back to school, we talked and she told me that she was forbidden to so much as talk to me, but that she wanted to continue our relationship in secret. I agreed. So, our relationship continued. Obviously, we couldn't spend time together outside of school so we spent every possible moment together inside school. We skipped classes, we were late to classes, we didn't care. All we cared about was seeing each other, no matter what we had to do to do it.

Our relationship only lasted another month before I broke up with her. It devastated me but I was tired of the sneaking around, I was tired of skipping class to see her. I had finally realized how much of a horrible girlfriend she was to me - she cheated on me, she would not allow me to do anything, even as simple as getting a haircut, without her approval, she was manipulative and knew I loved her more than anything, and used that against me. Words cannot describe how horrible she was to me - if I wanted to fully explain everything she did and said to me, this memoir would be novel sized. But I finally realized the true content of her character, I finally realized she was no good for me and that I deserved better, and I ended the relationship. She was dating somebody else one week later.

I don't want this entire memoir to be about Sarah - yes, she's a very important part of my past and story, she was my first love. But if I solely wrote about Sarah and our relationship, I would be completely betraying myself and my values - I am strong and independent, and there is so much more to me than some girl who hurt me. But that girl made me realize something so incredibly important - I am capable of love.

Lots of kids have tragic stories about their parents kicking them out, disowning them but my parents have never done anything so extreme. It bothers my mother, she believes homosexuality is a sin but she loves me, she supports me, she just wants me to be happy. However, my dad never warmed up to the fact that I am a lesbian - to this day, he entirely ignores it. He speaks about me getting married to a man, about me having children naturally, about boyfriends. He has

told me that I am choosing to be this way, that I just want attention. I love my father and I know he loves me, but I wish I could make him understand. I am not choosing to be this way, I am not choosing to make my life more difficult - and denying my sexuality is not going to change it, it is not going to make it disappear. I wish he knew that his denial, his disbelief hurts just as much as it would if he disowned me.

I wish I could say the rest of my family has been supportive but that's not the case. I have several aunts and uncles who have blatantly told me they will not attend my wedding, they will not support my "lifestyle choice." I have grandparents who have said the same thing. My family does not understand - they constantly bombard me with questions about boyfriends, about crushes on boys, even though I have told them, time and time again, that I am gay. They refuse to accept it.

I also wish I could say I have never experienced any bullying, any discrimination. But again, that's not the case. I live in a small town, where the majority of the population is religious, conservative, racist, and of course homophobic. There are several boys in my high school who find it absolutely hilarious to torment me and ridicule me simply because I am a lesbian. I'll be minding my own business and walking in the halls when I hear their cries of dyke, carpet muncher, gay cunt. These words barely phase me - I know those boys aren't going anywhere in life and that letting them get to me does me no good, and only benefits them. But the thing that truly irks me is that the teachers who hear these things being called out, who witness this bullying - they say nothing. They hear it, I know they do for I see them cringe and turn the other way, pretending to not have heard. But I know they hear it and they do nothing. Other kids in the hall don't do anything either - they don't laugh, they don't join in but they don't defend me, they keep silent. And I'm not the only one, there are several kids who are constantly berated and all teachers, all the other kids - they don't say a word. That's what truly bothers me. Not being called derogatory names, not being harassed - but the fact that my teachers, my classmates, are okay with it.

I have had teachers harass me, grown adults who are supposed to be caring and kind towards children, and not let their personal views get in the way of that. But unfortunately, I have had several teachers who, once they became aware of my sexuality, strongly disliked me. I've had teachers deliver low-blows and snide comments regarding my sexuality, I've had teachers tease me about it and try to convince me that I'm just "in a phase."

To me, it really doesn't seem like I've been through a lot when it comes to my sexual orientation. There are thousands of kids who have been through far worse - being kicked out, being disowned, being beat up, being severely bullied, and even being murdered. But when I really think about it, when I re-read what I've wrote so far - I've been harassed and bullied by both kids my age and adults, I've been screamed at and preached to, I've lost the love and support of several family members. Children should not have to go through any of those things. I should not have had to go through any of that. But does that mean I'm going to hide who I am, that I am going to pretend to be somebody I'm not? Absolutely not. The intolerance, bigotry, and hate of others is not my fault. It is not my fault that some people are hateful, that some people decide they dislike me because of my sexuality, something personal that does not affect them in any way whatsoever. It is not my fault.

I wish I had full support of my parents and family, I wish my classmates and teachers accepted me for who I am, I wish I did not have to be terrified of my future, especially now that we have a homophobic president and vice-president here in the United States. But I cannot let any of these things hold me back. I cannot let any of these things prevent me from being who I am. I am who

I am and I will not apologize for it. I love that I am a lesbian, I love myself and I love those who support me, as well as those who don't because they are the ones who need love the most.

Delaney Danner

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

The Worst Day of Eighth Grade

People might think I'm crazy, but who really cares. A girl with a personality unlike any other, a girl not too many people pay attention to - a girl like me.

Dancing is my best sport but, not everyone likes a dancer with a unique personality. You always see the poised ballerinas on stage - straight faced, controlled, and strict with their movements. Me? Not so much.

Most kids in my school are athletic and already have their own cliques formed. I'm not the new kid, but more of a chip off the old block kind of kid. I've known everyone in this district for so long and yet they still ignore me. I don't know what is wrong with me that people don't like, but I know there has to be something.

A dancer. A model. A good friend. But, what most people don't see me as is a lonely teenage girl fighting to be noticed, to be liked, or to even be loved. The girl everybody overlooks. The one who always plasters on a smile and fights through her loneliness. Yeah, I have great friends at dance, but they don't go to school with me. My best friends, the friends I long to see daily are all spread throughout the region and only come together for weekly dance classes. I might be a unique personality on the outside, but on the inside I am a lonely teenage girl, fighting to keep friendships that aren't good for me. What I want is a friend who will support me through it all. Who will love me when I make myself unlovable. I want a best friend, but for some reason, I just can't find one.

The only friend that has come the closest to a best friend was Calista. I met her on a cruise over Thanksgiving in 6th grade. We became instant friends because we felt like we had so much in common. We both danced and had unique personalities. We both liked the same music artists and of course, we had many differences too. Such as, Calista lives in California while I live in Missouri. Before the cruise ended, we exchanged phone numbers. I gave her my phone so put her number in and she gave me hers. She put her picture and number like I did, but I also put my birthday and address. We still text occasionally but, not that much.

Sometimes I feel as if I'm just one girl that nobody wants to be friends with. But, they don't see my potential.

December 5, the worst day of eighth grade. It was a beautiful morning with only a slight breeze of cold air. It was around 60 degrees outside, making it feel like a heat wave happening in December. I got on the bus at 6:45, as usual. I said hello to the bus driver and then we were off. I sat in the fourth seat back from the front on the left side of the bus. It's always too dark to read at this time in the morning so I pull out my flashlight. I turn it on and begin reading.

Somebody behind me shouts angrily, "Turn that flashlight off, it's too bright."

"No." is the only word that leaves my mouth.

The bus ride goes by quickly. We get to the middle school and I hop off the bus. I walk into the school to see everybody leaving the gym and heading to their lockers. Of course, I'm late again. My bus driver takes forever to get here so I run to my locker and fumble with the combination. I

get it after two times of trying. I hurriedly put away all of my stuff and grab my math binder and book. I run to math, which is thankfully not too far away. I fully step inside one second after the tardy bell rings.

“Late again, Ms. Danner. I will see you in detention.” snarled Mrs. Hathaway.

She gave me a pink slip and I took my seat. I pull out my math homework from last night and passed it up to Mrs. Hathaway. Math goes by without anymore trouble, so does the rest of the school day. I grab my things to leave when Mrs. Hathaway pulls me aside.

“You have detention, remember.” she states.

“I was just bringing my backpack to detention so I could work on my homework.” I said.

“That’s not necessary, Ms. Danner.” she says.

So I give in and put my backpack away. I didn’t want to be on her bad side even more than I already was. I walk to the detention room and I see the devil staring at me. The teacher in charge is the devil of detention, Mrs. Parker. She’s even worse than Mrs. Hathaway. Mrs. Hathaway is just mean but Mrs. Parker is *evil*. There’s not even a slight chance that I will survive detention. I walk into the room and say, “Hi, Mrs. Parker.” while she just stares at me with her devilish look.

“Mrs. Hathaway told me you were going to be here.” she says while smirking wickedly.

I knew she was up to something so I asked, “What am I working on today?”

“Oh, I have something very special for you today.”

I can tell that this is a very bad situation, not including that everyone else in detention is staring at me. Their stares burning holes in my back.

“Follow me.” Mrs. Parker commands and I notice that she pulled out some random items from her desk.

When we step outside the room, she hands the items to me. A razor sharp pencil, some pens, a notebook with hate messages on it, and some other stuff.

“You are to write all of these three hundred sentences into this notebook and then come to me for your next task.” she states and then asks, “Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I pause, “How many tasks do you have for me?” I ask.

“Many,” she snarls at me, “this will teach you not to be late again.”

She walks into the detention room and I begin my horribly long task. It takes me a full two hours to finish and I watch the other students leave as I’m left with the devil.

I walk into the detention room, my hand cramping up. I gave her the items and she gives me a sinister look.

“It’s too late for your other tasks but the next time you come here, have no doubt that you will do these tasks. But, for now, you can go.” she said in an angry way.

I walked out of the room, leaving the devil to herself and walked back to my locker to grab my stuff. I open my locker, first try, and grab my backpack and my bulky pink coat. I put on the coat and head for the front doors. I push the doors open but they won’t budge. So, I try the back doors. But they’re locked also. I can’t believe I’m trapped in this Hell of a school. I heard the alarm go off throughout the hallway and I rushed to the nearest classroom. It was locked, and so was the rest of the doors. An intruder in the building after hours and I’m locked outside of any rooms.

I see a door open right next to me and I freak out thinking that it’s the intruder. But, I hadn’t noticed that I was right beside the detention room. It wasn’t the intruder but merely the devil herself. Mrs. Parker pulled me into the detention room and she looked shaken. I’ve never seen her like this. She’s always so confident in herself, even when she’s wrong. But in this instant, I

see fear on her face. She's afraid of the intruder and I'm not sure why. She pushes us to the corner of the room, away from the door and whispers, "Are you okay?" "Yes." I say a little louder than expected. She immediately covers my mouth and whispers, "We're in terrible danger. So, whatever you do, stay behind me. Okay?" She keeps her hand over my mouth but I manage to nod. We stand there for a few minutes and then she uncovers my mouth. "Whatever you do, don't say a word." she whispered violently. I nodded in answer and she looks away from me and to the door. The screams from the alarm making every second feel like a lifetime, I hadn't noticed the sound of a locked handle jiggling around, waiting to be opened. I was scared to death that the intruder was jiggling our doorknob only to realize that the sound was from a few doors down. The rattling sound gets closer and closer until it finally reaches our door. The handle rattles and I wait for him to move to the next door, except, he doesn't move to the next door. Instead, our door opens to his last attempt to open it. I freeze, not able to think. I analyze him. Or at least I think it's a him. He has a ski mask on over his face and is in full black clothing. My eyes drift to his giant black M16. I start to whimper and I clamp my hands tightly over my mouth. He hasn't seen us yet, or at least I don't think he has. But I realize that my whimpering had given us away. Maybe only a few people are here since it's after school hours. At least there aren't hundreds of kids, that would be really bad. Instead it's just a few of us here. He looks me in the eyes and I realize that I was wrong the whole time. It isn't a he, but more a she. The worst part of knowing, is that now I have to resort to fighting a woman instead of a man. While I was thinking of how to defeat her, she went into action. She looked straight at me with her eyes level with her gun. Oh no. I realize that she's going to shoot me. I'm too young to die. So, I start running at her. She starts open firing on me and I try my best to dodge the bullets. I successfully dodged her bullets and grabbed her gun from her hands. But while I was separating her from the M16, I got shot in the side. The bullet passed through my flesh and I watched as it hit the intruder in the stomach. I could tell that it had pierced at least one vital organ. I took this opportunity to take her M16 away from her and I threw it across the room. I backed up and looked behind me, only to see Mrs Hathaway with a pistol. She must've shot me in a very precise place so that she didn't hit my spine or one of my organs, so that she could massively hurt the intruder. When I saw the pistol in her hand, I walked over to her. She pointed it at me, her finger on the trigger, and my hands flew up. She soon realized that it was me and then I saw it. A massive red stain on her right shoulder. She was hit. I was terrified of losing her. She placed the pistol on the teacher's desk and collapsed to the floor, tired and weak. She held her left hand over the bullet wound. I knew that it hadn't pierced something important, so she most likely wouldn't die. But what I didn't know was that a bullet had plummeted itself in her back and hit her heart. She was having trouble breathing and I felt as if these would be her last words. "Look out for the Black Vises. Stay safe. Find the Teachers Of Reality. They will keep you safe. You are the omega of all the schools throughout the world. You are the Golden Girl." My feeling was right. Those were her last words. But what does she mean by I am the Golden Girl? My future can only tell what she meant, so I have to look for the Teachers Of Reality. That's my only hope of survival. So, that's what I'll do. When I finally get up and turn around to leave, I see the intruder dead. When I walk over to her

to pull the mask off, my injury starts causing me pain. But my discovery of who it might be made me forget about my pain and focus on the face beneath the mask.

I can't believe what I see. It's my best friend from California, Calista. That's where I break down crying. My only best friend was trying to kill me. That means that she might have just been my friend to get close to me without me realizing it, and what's worse, she found me using the "Find My Friends" app on her iPhone. Or at least that's the only reasonable explanation for her knowing my exact location. This was leading to a new adventure, my biggest one yet. Now, I wasn't afraid, but more like determined.

Katie DeMonbrun

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Molly Runde

Category: Poetry

Animal King

Captain Pollard said, "We are earthly kings."

Owen Chase answered with, "Do you feel like a king?"

When a beast of ivory is brought down by the pull of your finger, are you not a king?

But, when you see their child toddle after them do you not feel sadness in your blood?

Do you not feel a sense of awe when great buildings of steel loom and glitter in the night?

Do you not feel the same awe when standing beneath brown and green hands that reach for the same stars?

Is there not relief swelling in your breast when the little creatures eating your garden are gone?

Is there not regret when you see their broken bodies, a piece of greenery still stuck in their mouth?

Are we kings?

Are we not the ones who hold the power to say when man's best friend must step into the light?

Are we not the ones who decide which are family and which are served next to a bowl of gravy?

Are we not the great hunters who bring down beasts and savage creatures?

Or are we simply animals?

Do we not protect our young with flashing teeth and fierce howls?

Do we not run with packs, herds, families?

Do we not digest the same delicate fruit that the earth offers?

We bring down the king of the forest and smack his crown up on our walls to display our power.

We are earthly kings, we feel.

We look into the deep brown eyes, the ones that may be the same color as our, the ones that see the same world.

Do we feel like kings, we ask.

Maddison Dimick

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Struggle and Strength

“Hey, my name is Kacie.”

Those few words changed my life. Kacie is my best friend and this isn't the typical “best friend” story. She has helped me in ways that nobody ever could, even if she didn't realize it. I've always had a really hard time at home because of how my mom had raised my sisters and me. Well, she never really did much to contribute to our growing up except feed us really. For a really long time when I was little she didn't even get up in the mornings to help us get ready for school. She would wake up and go back to bed, and my grandma that lived in the next town over drove to the house, brushed our hair, and took us to school. Sometimes she couldn't come get us so we just didn't go to school; from me not going to school, I almost failed the first grade. I had a really hard time learning how to read and do math. I was behind in every subject.

When I moved to Wyoming, she finally got a job and helped out. She worked at the high school for the time that we lived there. We moved again to a slightly bigger town only an hour and a half away and she didn't even try to get a job there. We lived there for almost two years and then moved to Missouri. At first, she tried to get up in the mornings with us and help my sisters out for school. Then she started getting up earlier than us, but she stopped helping. We started to come home to an extremely clean home in which I've never actually had. I thought that she was turning a corner and actually doing something, but she at the same time she became more distant.

I had a hard time talking to her. Every time I tried, it took her a good two or three minutes to respond to the simplest questions. It looked like she was literally in a different world in the distance. My parents would fight for a while, then they would just ignore each other for days at a time. I had basically become “mom.” She didn't help do much with my sisters. They would get in trouble she didn't do anything about it. If they made a mess they would leave it and someone else would clean it up later. When we wanted to go do something, she would say, “Oh that sounds fun. Yeah let's do it.” However, she would start to get ready and never finish.

“Yeah it's okay, I'm not going to be ready on time.”

“Just hurry we can make it.”

“No, it's fine. I don't want to go anymore anyway.”

“We don't want to go without you, so I think that we'll just stay home for today.”

This conversation replayed on repeat.

That's how it was for a really long time until we finally gave in and just left. When we return home one day, my dad leads us inside our old musty home. We trail behind like a small pack of

animals. All of a sudden we hear his voice,

“Girls go downstairs!”

My heart races with curiosity and a little bit of fear, but we follow his orders. My right foot makes contact with the top step. My dad doesn't usually act like this. A racing heart is nothing compared to what I was feeling when I watched the ambulance and a million police cars show up in the road in the front my house. That's when I break down, tears starting to wet my face, my sisters' faces are already soaked from when dad told us to go downstairs, then they all come rushing in the house. Most of this I can only hear. There's a window downstairs so all I actually see is the front yard and cars up front. But they are making enough noise on the old floors for me to know what rooms they enter. I hear a mix of shouts and calm voices from my parent's room. As we stand at the bottom of the stairs, we watch the paramedics carry my mom out on a stretcher and the three of us freak out even more. We all get off the couch and just all sit there crying together. After the most of the cars leave, one of the cops comes down with my teary eyed dad.

“What happened?”

“I'll tell you guys later,” my dad says his eyes get more watery.

“Is mom okay?”

“No, she's not,” that didn't help us in any way, we start crying worse. The cop that came down with him turns to my dad

“Would you like me to drive you to the hospital? It's about 30 minutes away in St. Joe.”

“No, it's okay I can drive. I need to talk to the girls anyway.”

We are on our way to fill up on gas and we finally get my dad to talk.

“So what happened to mom?”

“You know how mom has been so quiet guys?”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” he had a hard time saying it, “mom tried to hurt herself.”

“I knew it!”

I yell as I start to cry harder than I ever had. It took me a long time to stop the water works. I was filled with so many emotions: confusion, anger, sadness, and mostly just pure frustration with all the questions that couldn't be answered. When we finally got to the hospital, my dad was on phone call after phone call. First, calling her mom and then getting a call from her sister after my grandma told her what happened. After all the calls and crying, my dad comes and sits with us. The pastor from our church finds out and he comes down to check up on us and say a prayer together. When they leave, they give us some motivational scriptures from the good ol' Bible.

We decide to go find something to eat and I have to say, hospital food is pretty good. When we get back to the waiting area, my sisters go to use the bathroom. I ask my dad how she did it and what did she use. At first he refused to tell me.

“Please dad. I want to know, she’s my mom.”

“Okay fine, well Maddison she tried to use a gun.”

And I felt even more dead inside. We had a lot of guns. If she would have used the right one, she would have successfully killed herself, I wouldn’t have a mom, she would be gone, no matter what has happened along the road she will always be my mom. I’m leaning on my dad as all this is running through my head.

“Don’t say anything about it to your sisters, please.”

“Okay I won’t,” my words are muffled in my dad’s shirt.

We finally go home and I cry myself to sleep. I wake up late the next morning and I remember that it’s a Monday so I go try to find my dad. He’s in the kitchen on the phone, of course. When he gets off, I ask about school.

“Isn’t it Monday?”

“Yeah,” he says it like it’s no big deal.

“What about school?”

“I thought I would let you guys stay home after what happened yesterday.”

“Oh okay.”

I go to get dressed because today probably won’t be any better. I feel really groggy and I have a massive headache, my bed is a disaster, all the blankets kicked around from my restless sleep. I go talk to my dad and I find out that there is some good news for today. Once my aunt found out, she made arrangements to come down from Colorado. She knew it would be hard on my dad especially. None of us really slept good which made it hard for us all to get along with all the stress.

The next day she was here. Only eight hours away made it easy for her to get here in a reasonable time. She brought her three sons too, at five, four and three. They definitely lifted the mood. They even got to go visit my mom a few times. But one time specifically there was so much crying that the ladies that were supposed to make us leave exactly on time let us stay until we felt better, which was probably a solid twenty minutes.

A few days later my aunt had to leave. My dad got me a key to the house. He wouldn’t have to leave work so early. We finally got into the swing of things. Got a schedule. One day, I come home and there she is. She finally came home. She looked better, she was smiling, part of me

thought I would never see it again. She actually looked happy.

Fast forward a few months and it's October. I had just come home from Kacie's house and were about to go to the Oktoberfest when my mom does the whole "you guys go I'll stay here" thing again. But this time it was worse. She hid in the bathroom and just sat in there and cried. When we asked her to come out, there were no tears on her face and no red in her eyes, a fake smile on her face.

"Why were you crying in there?"

"I wasn't, I'm fine."

"Then what was that crying noise?"

"What noise?"

She walks into the living room and starts to say the most random things to my dad. All I could hear was my dad talking but this is what he said happened. She started to say she could see his sister, which who has been dead for about three or four years. She starts to mumble and she goes outside. My dad, not wanting to leave her, texts me and tells me to come out back behind the shed and trees. She's just standing there and when I come around she starts to sit down. She is shaking. I sit across from her and she grabs my hands. She starts moving our hands around like she's doing some kind of ritual with our hands. Her whole body is shaking. My dad made the call to get an ambulance and police for the second time this year. When the paramedics get to the backyard they try to talk to her. At first she ignored them and just stared at the grass. She then hugs me and is mumbling into my ear. I can't understand what she says and when she pulls away she looks offended that I didn't say anything back. They take her to the hospital, not near as far though, just the one in Kansas City. This is when Kacie comes in. she was the first person I texted when all this happened. She helped me and when we hung out that weekend she made me laugh and was there for me. And I will always love her for that.

When my mom got home from the hospital, my dad let us talk to her but then he said he wants to go on a drive with her so they can talk. When they get back, she doesn't have a smile on her face anymore. She went to take a bath because she could only take showers at the hospital. My dad then tells us that we need to start getting shoes on and out phone chargers with us. I ask him why and he kept telling me that he'll tell me later. When my sister comes with me to ask he finally tells us.

"Your mom and I are getting a divorce."

Epilogue:

The divorce is still in process and things are working out. My mom has an apartment and a job, she's more stable and is making friends. We haven't gotten to see her yet, but we still talk to her all the time. One of my little sisters it taking it pretty hard, blaming herself, and being really stressed all the time. Christmas is soon and it's gonna work out better than we thought it would. Financially and emotionally for the most part.

Ryan Dye

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educators: Kelly Miller

Category: Flash Fiction

Battlegrounds

“What the hell Parker! You wanna go? I’ll kick your hairless hide,” Jack screamed.

Time seemed to slow as I surveyed my options; groin, eyes, temple, ears, and of course, run. In the last second, I ducked to dodge Jack’s thrown punch and decide the groin shot was now or never. The crybaby squealed in pain and dropped, only momentarily before his henchmen began pounding me into a pulp.

I lay there on the ‘well kept’ school linoleum floor, breathless and bleeding, staining the floor red. *Where the hell are the hall monitors? Is anyone brave enough to call off the beast and come to my rescue?* Obviously the answer was no. Jack hopped on my back and relentlessly punched the crap out of me. *I can’t even defend myself.*

That’s just how it goes when you are the only mexican ‘beaner’ of your grade. You have no backup, no friends, you can’t even speak fluent english. So what words did I utter to piss him off this bad?

This whole fight really started 3 years ago. We were in 6th grade and we ended up having the same social studies together. At first, I was petrified that the biggest bully in school was in his most hated class with me, but then I realized he would take out all of his anger on the teacher. He would mock her behind her back and shred his papers with the hole puncher. Life was great, I had the biggest bully on my side, at least for a little while.

One day in February, I made the biggest mistake in my middle school career, I embarrassed Jack. I remember it all to well. He came up to me to pass me and said “Um. Excuse me,” in the most sarcastic voice imaginable.

Me, thinking he was being funny, said “What? Did you fart?” and chuckled at my snide remark.

His eyes welled with tears as the surrounding crowd started cracking up and covering their noses. A quick jab to the stomach and a grimace is all you need to know that Jack is mad at you.

For the rest of the year and the years to come I would seek shelter at the mere mention of his name. The bathroom was only safe in the middle of class and the passes I lost for it scored me many talks in the office about being prepared before class. If only I hadn’t ticked him off so bad.

On this particular day, I had already been woken up early by the crying of my baby sister, and had to ride the bus because my brother was sick. And in math we had a test that I probably failed. So on this cursed day, my life turned to crap, but I should have kept it too myself and not done anything. I definitely should have not tripped Jack in the hallway after he sneered in my direction. But I did, and he decided now was the time to pay.

It was only seconds before the crowd assembled, feeling the tension in the air like flies drawn to dog crap. It would be the fight that would get blown out of proportion and talked about for weeks, the one that would put me in that stupid ISS room with the all-too-happy-to-work-in-the-ISS-room teacher. Then someone yelled fight.

Stella Erickson

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

The Perfect Role

Dance, discipline, dedication, and determination had been my life since I was a little girl. The tiny pink skirt, pristine sheer tights, and miniscule ballet slippers from my childhood transformed into a brutal regime of dieting, training, stretching, and rehearsing every day. I had been working for years... endless hours of blood, sweat, and tears went into my art every day so I could become a prima ballerina. My bones stress-fractured after pounding on them eight hours a day. My shoes were stained red from the blisters that burst. My muscles strained to elongate with a fire that ripped through every fiber coursing through my body. My body struggled to go one more step, but I fought through it every day for years with one goal in sight: the perfect role in the perfect theater, followed by perfect reviews and a perfect life!

As I walked out of the studio one rainy day, exhausted, I saw a flyer pinned to the old hollow tree around the edge of the building. It hadn't been there the day before, and no one had mentioned it. I slowly walked up to the tree and was shocked to see that it was an audition call for the Theater Erie in New York City, which never had open auditions! Even better, the auditions were for a role that fit me perfectly! The description read: "Female. 17-23. Tall. Blond or brunette. Dedicated to dance and willing to rehearse endlessly." It was for a new production called "Winter Solitude" and looked marvelous. I had heard that this was the next big hit! Had my big break come? I knew I had to go, because wasn't this the moment I had been waiting for since I was five? I ran home in a frenzy, collected every penny I had for a ticket, and after a long, cold, and draining train ride managed to get to New York City by morning.

I arrived at the theater at 6:30 p.m., just like the brochure prescribed, full of excitement and anticipation. The fog hung over my head like a damp blanket, getting denser as I walked closer to the theater. The building seemed much more enormous than in the picture, and I was captivated by the spiraling vines and minacious gargoyles that peered into the city. I almost fell backward craning my neck to see the very top of the building, but it vanished into the fog. The marquee was swathed in the same cloud as the trees, the lampposts, and myself. Dim and diffused light made the lamps look as if they were floating in water. A sudden gust of wind blew me back a few steps, but I saw it was just a girl rushing past me like a blur. The makeup streamed down her face and her eyes were red and dazed. Her cheeks were deathly pale under the stark crimson of her rouge. Her bun was disheveled and her clothes hung out of her bag, as if she had left in a haste. I shook my head and continued to the doorway. While standing on the stoop of the theater, I glanced behind me and noticed two women just a few feet away, their blank stares paired perfectly with their sad faces stained with faded theatrical makeup. More faces drifted in from the viscous fog, but before they could reach me, I told myself I was just imagining these people, whipped my head around, and hurried through the doorway.

I had to blink several times to adjust my eyes to the dim lighting of the theater lobby. All along the walls, the faces on the wrinkled production posters seemed to shift their eyes to follow me as I shuffled across the floorboards. In the corner of my eye, the massive grin of one poster

man with a spiraled mustache seemed to widen. In shock, I jumped to the side and almost sprained my ankle as I just sidestepped a hole in the wood flooring. Nothing could get in the way of me nailing this audition!

Much to my surprise, there was no one in the lobby. I expected the bustling movement of tutus to flash in bright lights and to sense anticipation flying throughout the room. But silence was the only sound that pierced my ears, silence from the webs that hung in the corners, silence from the posters staring back at me, silence that beat in my ears with every step I took across the vast floor. I couldn't see to the edges of the room, but a stairway seemed to appear before my eyes, and I decided to ascend it. Maybe the audition room was upstairs.

I hiked up the winding staircase, every step heavier than the one before, and after what seemed like an eternity, I was led to a long, stark hallway with nothing but two doors. My knees crumpled slightly, my heart pummeled against my chest, and my spine cemented into a frigid rod as I questioned if I was in the right place. I forced myself to move, and peeked through the partially open first door. My eyes filled with awe when I saw the magnificent stage and hundreds of rows of seats. It seemed like a blanket of soft, luscious velvet continuing as far back and as far up as the eye could see. A magnificent, glimmering chandelier shimmered from above, twinkling with the lights of a thousand stars. The light danced upon the seats and floor like tiny, graceful ballerinas, inviting you to sit down and enjoy their dance. I turned my gaze to the stage, the place where I would hopefully perform sometime soon. The floor of the stage was a sleek mahogany brown. The curtains were made of an identical red velvet as the seats, and they draped across the stage like a harbinger of wonder. It was breathtaking! Before I could take it all in, the door slammed in my face. I dropped my bag and stumbled back into the middle of the hallway. Feeling uninvited, I shook my head, scooped up my shoes, and continued down the hallway.

The door at the end of the hallway had a sign that said *Auditions*. Was that sign there earlier? I hadn't seen it before, but I didn't give it much thought because I had finally found the room! I heard music grow stronger as I approached, drawing me in like sirens attracted sailors to the rocks. I took a big inhale, swung open the door, and sighed loudly in relief as I saw the familiar sight of a row of five judges sitting behind a table in the front of the room. A young lady, only a few years older than me, was jotting down some notes as she twirled her blond hair around her finger. Next to her, a middle-aged gentleman, in a suit and tie, was humming and tapping his pencil on the edge of the table. His identical twin sat next to him, but was reading the newspaper with a frown on his face. Right next to him, a kind-faced, elderly lady was sipping her tea and chatting with the judge at the edge of the table, a young man with a stack of sheet music in front of him. All movement stopped the moment I opened the door, and I quickly said, "I'm so sorry I'm late! No one was in the lobby and I didn't know where to go!"

"Just show us what you you're made of," the older woman said to me, gesturing to the bench at the side of the room so I could put my shoes on. I hurried over to the bench and slipped my pointe shoes on as I had done thousands of times before, the adrenaline rushing through my body. Out of nervousness, my fingers slipped as I tried to tie the ribbons. This could be it! This could be my big debut! As soon as I possibly could, I stood up and walked upstage left, settling into my starting position. The music trickled out of the speakers as I glided across the floor and floated in the air. Cabriole, développ , frapp , tour jet , assembl , all nailed perfectly. The wide grins on all of the judges' faces pulled at the corners of my mouth and I smiled back at them, beaming with pride.

"Fantastic job! Beautiful! Such elegance and grace! Your lines are just perfect. Just one more thing...can you put on those shoes and dance again," asked the first man with an intrigued look

on his face. At the mention of shoes, all of the judges slowly raised their heads in unison to look straight at me, and an icy stream slithered throughout my body from their piercing stares. I looked over to the other side of the room and spotted the most magnificent pointe shoes I had ever seen in my life! They were in a glass case and I couldn't resist dashing over to them. The red satin flowed smoothly around the box all the way up through the heel, ostensibly seamless, and as I touched them, they felt like liquid perfection. I had never held such beautiful shoes in my life, and I couldn't wait to put them on. Sitting quickly down, I unlaced my shoes, and threw them to the side. I picked up the scarlet shoes and tried to shove my foot into them with haste, but they wouldn't go on. Three more times I tried, and each time they could not slip over my heel. I looked up at the judges in a half-panic, and saw that they were all still staring at me. They looked much older than before and the intensity of their stares gouged into my soul, searching for fear and weakness. "They don't fit," the young girl, not seeming so young anymore, observed. I shook my head, biting my lip to keep from crying. How could this be happening? Would I not qualify? "There's a solution," said the older lady with a glacial voice. "We can just cut off your toes." I gasped and took a few steps back in horror. "Take some time, think about it, and come back when you've made up your mind," all of the judges said in an macabre unison. Their voices surged together and spun about me, the icy trails of a whisper's end enveloped my body.

The tendrils of their words that pirouetted around me made my head whirl with confusion. I regained a little of my senses and broke free of the invisible ties, darting out of the room, not even stopping to pick up my bag. The hallway had changed; this time there were many doors, several of which I tried to open without any luck. I turned the corner, and there was a staircase. I decided to climb it just so I could get away on a different floor and clear my head. As I climbed the stairs, a cold finger seemed to caress my ankles, but I violently jolted my foot and continued climbing. I reached the rafters that went above the backstage of the theater and found old props, posters, costumes, and fabrics strewn everywhere like a portrait of the past. This image calmed me as I thought about the reputation of the theater and the ravishing productions that had been performed throughout the years.

I was holding and admiring a beautiful, impeccably crafted porcelain vase when the thought of the decision I had to make tore into my brain. The glossy glaze slipped through my fingers as if I had melted it, and the silence was penetrated by the crisp sound of my gasp and the vase shattering on the floor, shooting shards all around me. I started sobbing hysterically, feeling lost in this huge theater in this large, unfamiliar city. I had come to New York City to become a prima ballerina, and yet my worst nightmares were coming true. Loneliness, disappointment, failure, fear... I couldn't take it. I leapt over the broken vase, and ran along the rafters even though they shook under the pounding of my feet. Out of breath, I sat down and looked in between my legs at the theater below. I scanned the room and now noticed again the luxurious scarlet curtains, but this time I saw that they were covered in enormous gashes. The twinkling chandelier shone light upon the streaks of black bubbling in the seats. The stage splintered up like icicles, waiting to trap an oblivious foot. How could I not have noticed these details at first? I closed my eyes, then drew my feet close to my chest to inspect them. I saw my toes melting through the rafters, and rubbed my eyes. I looked for my shoes, but remembered that I had left my bag in the audition room. The bag contained all of my precious shoes that were beautifully broken in and fit me perfectly. I had to get them back!

Leaping to my feet, I hit my head on a clothes rack. The blinding sparkles of the various costumes snagged my attention. Running my hand along the delicate tulle, the costumes breathed

under my touch and beckoned me to pick them up. I plucked a forest green, intricately laced tutu from the row and held it up against my body. When I turned to the mirror, I gulped as I saw the leaves of the costume wrapping around me. The image of me front and center, dancing a solo at opening night with an entire chorus of dancers behind me, flooded into my head. I beamed with light as I struck my final pose. The thunderous applause of the crowd roared. What a wonderful sound to hear! The clapping gushed through my ears, my chest, my arm, and finally my hand. The hanger suddenly seemed to rip from my hand and fly to the floor. Standing in shock for a moment, I sighed and stepped over to a clear spot of the rafter floor. I decided to try something, to curl and uncurl my toes. I grabbed onto the railing and tried to go on pointe without my shoes with my toes curled. After a moment, I winced and fell to the side. Impossible. A couple jumps, a hop or two, and I fell onto my knees. How could I make this decision? I shook my head, trying to clear it, and started to retrace my steps to the audition room, sliding my sweaty hands across the rail. A trail of sparkles followed me to the room, urging me to go forward. They enveloped my hand, embracing it with their dazzling aura. My fingers slipped against the cold brass before the door clicked open...

Eyborit Esquivel

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Alta Vista Charter High School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Katherine Laird Kimbrell

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The ride of my life

My mother tells me I was a baby when it happened. I don't remember any of it. She says she crossed with someone else's papers. She tells me that the man was white. How he looked at the paperwork, and how he looked at me, cradled tightly into my mother's arms. How he lowered his eyes to see my sisters at either side. She tells me that she knew he knew. She tells me that this man simply raised his hand, letting her pass, just like that. And she did, she walked, and walked, with every step letting everything she had ever known go.

The American Dream. You see this has been the topic in my english class throughout my whole senior year of highschool. It was so engaging for me at first, learning people's different perspectives on it, and whether it was dead or alive. It was interesting because no one ever talks about things like this in fear of not saying the right thing or hurting someone's feelings, but I soon found myself sick and tired of talking about it. I found myself with conflicting viewpoints, not sure where I stood amidst this whole mess.

The American Dream. What is it? It's a misconception for the working class and lower class people who are told that if they just work hard enough in life, they'll make it. But what does making it even mean? How do you know when you have reached the peak of the mountain? Or is it all just an illusion meant to keep everyone in a loophole? Some people think the american dream is complete bullshit because it fails to acknowledge that opportunity is not the same for everybody, especially to us people of color. It fails to consider that the majority of us minorities live in poverty. It fails to realize that the majority of my people work hard labor, low-income jobs, and we rarely ever see success in abundance like white people do.

The American Dream fails to realize that there are so many people who have a lack of education due to lack of resources. It fails to realize that without these resources it makes it extremely hard for anyone to "make it." All these are things that I've learned, either by reading articles, conversing with someone, or simply through personal experience. Some believe that the american dream is just that, a dream, and I can understand why my people would feel this way, simply because I myself am one of those who lacked resources too. Although it's true that the American Dream does not offer equal opportunity for everyone, it doesn't mean that you can't make it. I have come to believe that I myself embody the American Dream.

You see, Logan is the poorest county in West Virginia. It is home to miners and their families, and because of this, they casted their ballot in favor of Trump. They were unable to provide for their families because they had no jobs, and Trump came along, promising to bring back the mining industry. Tell me, who wouldn't vote for him? Who wouldn't do whatever they believed was best for their families? I have yet to meet a parent who doesn't want the best for their kids.

It's almost an instinct, always searching to find the best for them, and doing everything they can for them, like becoming their servants, and many times, even sacrificing themselves. To do what was best for their loved ones, some people voted for Trump. Some, on the other hand, left everything and everyone they had.

My mother was about the age that I am now when she crossed over. I find myself unable to even imagine myself capable of gathering up all the courage to do what she did. And these are the reasons why I myself embody the American Dream. I remember my mother and father always pushing me to do my best in school. I remember asking my mom what she wanted for her birthday, or for Christmas. "*Quiero que te portes bien*". That was always her answer. Although it had a deeper meaning to it. "I want you to behave well" was not speaking about being good or bad. It was more of a, '*I want you to be good. I want you to do good. I want you to prove to me that all my sacrifices were not meaningless.*' And that is all I have ever wanted to do.

You see, I hear people always saying that life is like a roller coaster, with ups and downs. I learned in my sociology class that since a very young age, there are many factors that mold you into who you are. Some factors which you have no control over. And all this is true. Life is a roller coaster, and those factors are the safety belts. If you had a stable home for example, that was a strong strap. If you grew up in a broken home, your strap wasn't of much support. It's all about how strong your straps were, that determined whether or not you survived the ride or fell off. And I believe that this is the reason why I embody the American Dream, because despite those straps that were weak, despite those resources I lacked, I was one of the lucky ones who had one strong strap because of the love and support from my parents. But I also understand that there are people whose straps were of no use, and I can understand why they believe that the American Dream is dead.

Kelsey Evans

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

Surrounded by Time

The cold wind lightly feathers over me as I move towards the school. The old brick building, crumbling at the edges, is surrounded by swarms of students. They all rush to the front door, trying to escape the cold. I follow them, hoping that today will be the one good day out of this entire year. As I enter, my headache already starts to build, as it has everyday this year. The slow ache hits me and I know today will be terrible. Three hours later, I'm moving between pointless classes, with no one to call a real friend. "Only one more year left," I have to tell myself every morning. As I walk through the halls, I smile when needed, nod at some people I know and glance at the clock on the wall, trying to judge how much time is left in the day. A sharp pain hits me, as my headache worsens as I turn away.

I whip my head around again, and as my headache starts pounding, I study the clock. For a couple seconds nothing happens but then the big hand barely moves backwards. "Now I know I've been reading too much," I mumble to myself, thinking about the latest book I conquered last night. Clocks don't move backwards. Shaking off the weird hallucination, I head towards my next class. As I sit in chemistry, I glance at the clock one more, feeling like I need too. Once again a sharp pain flashes through my head, over the dull pounding and the minute hand of the clock moves back three minutes.

"Did you see that?" I ask the boy next to me, whose name I forgot at the beginning of the year. "See what?" He turns to look at the clock too. "The clock?"

"The minute hand moved backwards by three minutes," I answered him without looking away from it. I could hear him glancing between me and the clock.

"I can see it telling time like it's supposed to Lea." I turned my eyes away to look at him and all I can see is the expression of "She's crazy". Embarrassed, I stared at my desk, resisting to peek once more. I could see the boy next to me shrug his shoulders then face the teacher again. As the teacher begins to speak, I can hear the clock ticking, louder and louder until it's all I can hear. It seems to tick in rhythm with the pounding of my headache. Suddenly, the pounding isn't something I can just feel, I can hear it. The noises of the class fade away until all I can hear is the pounding of drums and the ticking of the clock. Both echo across the room, and are so loud I cover my ears and plant my face on the desk. I try my hardest to keep from whimpering because it feels like the ears are about to explode.

Then out of nowhere, it stops. I can hear people talking and laughing as if nothing happened. My headache returns by the drums pounding and the ticking are gone. I uncover my ears and only hear sounds of ordinary life. The bell rings, and stunned, I continue to sit in my desk until my

teacher says my name. I straighten quickly then realize that the students for the next class were already beginning to enter.

Gathering my stuff up, I race out into the hallway, ignoring the clocks on the wall until I get to my locker. I throw my stuff in it and then head straight for the nearest bathroom. The door bangs open and I nearly run over the other girls leaving. I run to the nearest sink, leaning over it to splash some water on my face. As I manage to calm my mind, I glance up at my reflection. Balking at my pale complexion, I try to get my emotions under control.

“Calm down, Lea. You’re not going crazy like the rest of your family. You’re different. The clocks just seem like they are moving backwards, but you know that’s not really true.” My words echo out into the empty space. Combing my hair with my fingers, I accidentally, on habit, look at the time on my wrist. The digital clock is moving backwards, first slowly, but the longer I look at it, the faster the time is moving in reverse. As time is in reverse, I hear the ticking again. The pounding starts again, in time of the ticking and now I know I’m going crazy.

This time, it’s so much stronger and deeper. The pounding seems to shake the entire room. The mirrors rattle and the stall doors swing while I continue to watch my wrist as the clock flies backwards. A flash in the mirrors has me whipping my eyes away from my wrist to look at my reflection. Something is happening to the surface of the mirror. The glass seemed to be rippling, like it was water. I take a step closer, drawn for some reason, while my brain is screaming at me to run away. My fingers flutter closer to the rippling surface as the pounding reaches a whole new level of loud. The change in sound has me clutching my ears, stumbling away from the wall of mirrors.

That’s when the glass on all the other mirrors begins to shatter. I couldn’t hear it over the ticking and drums, but I saw as each one cracked and then shattered into millions of pieces. The doors were swinging wildly now and even the walls seemed to be shifting slightly. I turned to look back at the rippling surface when the drums and ticking stopped. I held my breath, waiting for whatever was coming. The silence seemed to drag on and without the drums, everything seemed louder; my breathing, the squeaking doors and the air conditioning.

A hand appeared out of the mirror, glowing and sparkling like the moon. I stood in shock as the hand grabbed the side of the wall and pulled. A beautiful girl, covered in all silver dustings came out of the mirror. Everything about her seemed to perfect, her white silver hair, piercing blue eyes and glowing clothes. She landed on the floor in a perfect crouch, reminding me of a cat. Then her eyes met mine and she smiled.

“Hello Lea. It’s good to see you again.”

Kaylee Faddis

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Oakland Middle School, Columbia, MO

Educators: Mary Beth Faulhaber, Danielle Johnson

Category: Short Story

The Words In The Letter

It happened again. The skin on my face is still shrieking and stinging, just like all my bones. I won't accept this anymore. I swipe my flute from my room, and I begin to shove random items down into the crevices of my backpack. I leap down the stairs, and my sweaty hands fumble with the slippery doorknob as I try to thrust the door open. I'll survive without him. I don't need him, nor do I want him as my father. I hope I never see him again.

“Ah!” I shout suddenly, gasping and huffing for air. I look around me, but all I can see is the drowsy darkness stretching lazily for miles. I can relate to that, I think quietly. The time is a mystery to me. No peachy happiness blooms across the sky yet. But the stars are still dancing on the stage, which is the night sky. After gazing quietly at the sky for some time, I realize that my belongings are gone! I desperately search only to find them resting on the park bench beside me. I look down at the ground to try to organize my jumbled thoughts. Then, I see my journal splattered lifelessly on the ground. I snatch it and slam it down beside me with great force. The pounding in my head starts to beat in sync with my terrified heart. I flop back like a fish onto the rain-soaked bench and fall back to sleep.

The next morning, I awaken to a warm sun hugging my face. I smile and greet the sun with great pride, and it beams back at me satisfied. I yank my belongings off the bench and stroll down to the busy NYC subway station. I find an abandoned spot and set off to claim it. Then, my sheets of music start to blow away! “No!” I exclaim, diving and crawling all over the disgusting subway floor. My shouts echoing off the heavy walls, mocking me rudely.

“Hey!” says a mysterious voice.

I hurriedly glance up, breath taken by the deep voice echoing off the inner walls of my ears. I stutter and look away. I can feel the warm red glow of a blush climbing up my cheeks. I hold my nearly roasting cheeks in my freezing hands to calm them down.

He bends down gracefully and picks up one of my sheets written and scrawled with music.

“Is this yours?” he questions.

“Yes,” I say breathlessly. I avert my gaze quickly and clumsily bend down to pick up the excess pieces, but when I look up to gaze into those beautiful amber-golden eyes, he has vanished.

I sigh sadly. Another person to forget. I continue setting up my music on a bench nearby. Then, I touch the head joint of my flute to my lips and start playing effortlessly. Out of the corner of my

eye, a cluster of people abruptly stop and gaze in awe as waves of sweetness and comfort soothe their ears. I also notice people exposing small grimaces, probably because my hair isn't washed or because I have scratch marks on my face. I'll always know who they were caused by, but they won't.

All the sudden a flash back comes to me worse than ever before. I stop playing, which people take as their cue to applaud and stuff crumpled bills into my hat. I groan and wail silently, as a sudden white world comes over me and swallows me whole.

"You big IDIOT, DO YOU EVEN TRY?" He shouts.

"Dad, I'm sorry, PLEASE. I'm sorry!" I sob, hoping the tears will just drown me.

We had just finished dinner, and I had to admit that I failed on one of my assignments. He held a dinner plate up in the air and pitched it. As it collides with the floor, some of the broken shards fly up and cut my face. I yell, sprint to my room, and slam the door. Tears fill in my cuts like band aids. I whisper under my breath to my abusive dad, "I hate you."

I breathe heavily as the world comes back to me. It's night time; a hush comforts the busy, never-sleeping city. I look down at my worn-out hat when a folded piece of paper catches my eye. I pick it up and unfold it. It reads:

Lily,
Blooming like a flower,
What a coward I would be if I didn't pick you.
You turn the world from depressing black and white to lavishing color.
You would make my world if you gave me just one kiss.
You're a memory that I can't miss.
Lily, please search for me.
I know about your past but forget it. I'll make you happy.
Lily, my flower, each petal is perfect.
Meet me at the park at 10.
Love, Landon

Wrapped up in the letter is a small necklace. A single heart hangs beautifully from a delicate silver chain. My heart begins to soar higher than any bird could ever fly. Could this possibly be true? The subway boy with the beautiful eyes? I gasp in excitement. I lay back on the chilled bench, but my mood is the total opposite. I feel warmth coursing through me as I drift off to sleep, twirling the tiny heart through my small fingers.

The next day, I rummage through my backpack for my best clothes. I find something suitable and take off toward the subway bathroom to freshen up.

I arrive at the park at dark. The stars are warming up to put on a performance. City lamps line the park romantically. Each little fire flickering and dancing, just like my heart. I can't wait to see him. My heart leaps a mile when I see a tall silhouette cut through the ashy darkness. I silently

wait for him to walk toward me. Every step he takes, I take. Until suddenly, we are so close, I can feel his fiery breath on my neck. He leans down in one fluid motion and whispers in my ear.

“Hi, Lily. It’s so nice to finally gaze upon your beauty again,” he says quietly.

I shiver when he whispers those appealing words. Why can’t I see his face? Suddenly, I feel sick. My legs encourage me to walk away, so I do.

“Where are you going, Lily,” he says smoothly. I can feel the words dripping from his mouth desperately.

All it takes is one signature grin. A grimace that could only be plastered onto one devilish person.

“GET AWAY FROM ME DAD!” I try to scream helplessly. Then, I remember my throat is hoarse.

I start to run. He corners me with a knife in his hand. It gleams in the moonlight. Help! Someone help!

Send
H L
 E P

pLeAsE

“You will NEVER leave me again you worthless piece of nothingness,” he cackles madly.

I kick him in the chest. He huffs heavily, but he is still balancing on his two feet. Then, I’m knocked to the ground, gazing at the stars helplessly. That’s when the world starts fading away, and I lose consciousness.

I hear her breathing heavily. I’m thinking she might still be in her state of unconsciousness. I praise myself under my breath for finally tracking her down. After I trapped her at the park, I knocked her out. Then, I took a thin, but strong, strip of metal and twisted it around her hands tightly. I did the same with her ankles. Finally, I took a thin towel and used it to cover her eyes while I got her back to the house.

While I’m making dinner for myself as a reward, I hear her scream. I’m not talking about a little yelp, I’m talking about a loud, piercing shriek as if someone is slowly stabbing her heart. I sprint to the door and unlock it.

My head is pounding. Where am I? I try moving my hands, but they’re pinned behind my back. I feel something sharp dig slowly into the first layer of skin on my wrist. I groan loudly. I smell the strong odor of blood mixed with metal. Is it metal? I sit there clueless. I can’t see. I start shrieking, “Help! I’m blind! Someone help!” Through all my shrieking, I hear a key go through

the hole of the doorknob, and then a door being slammed against the wall. I hear a scary voice shout, “SHUT UP!” I curl into the smallest ball possible and obey.

God, she won’t stop screaming! Finally, I decided to go and scream at her to shut up. It was so annoying. She sounded like a crazed monkey. I take another swig of my drink and march to the door, unlock it, and almost break it down, “SHUT UP!” I yell at her. She finally stops.

“Now, LISTEN! You’re here for a reason, Lily,” I shout.

She starts sobbing again. I roll my eyes and sigh tiredly.

“Anyway,” I resume, “You’re my prisoner, and you will remain here until I’m finished with you.”

I need to escape, but I’m trapped here with my psychopath dad, yelling in my ear. I need to find a way to escape this living prison. What happened to my mother has always been unknown to me, but I think I now know. I remember little fragments of her. My mind rewinds like a tape, taking me back to my mother’s death. I was only five at the time when I awoke to the sounds of arguing. The most horrifying sound was when I heard her make contact with the ground. Then, I heard my dad pounding his fists against the wall. Our family was broken. That’s when I knew he’d gone too far, and I knew even then that I was next.

I’m going to give Lily worse than she’s ever imagined.

I’m going to give my dad the worst he’s ever imagined.

My dad removed the mask when he came in the room to stop me from shrieking. Probably because he didn’t want the police to come. I try to remove the metal that’s keeping my hands pinned tight. Since he put me in a bedroom, there is a small window. It might be small, but it could possibly be my only way of escape and survival. I painfully weasel my way out of the sharp bindings. Okay, with my hands free, the only thing left is to release my feet. When I try removing the lead ankle cuff, my shoes come off with it. I don’t have much time. I have to leave the shoes here. I climb onto the top of the bed, grimacing in pain. Then, with as much power as I have left, I use the bed as a trampoline to propel myself toward the window, only to miss it and slam face first into the wall.

I heard a slam. I get up from the sofa and start jogging fast to her room.

I need to hurry! I hear footsteps; I hear him coming. I must hurry, I keep telling myself over and over. I propel myself again. Once again, I slam into the wall. The footsteps are getting louder.

One voice in my head says, “You’re going to die anyway, so just give up and stay here.”

Another voice argues, “You still have strength! You can do this Lily! Try one more time!”

I propel myself to the window, and I make it to the ledge this time. Now, I just have to shimmy through this tiny space. Then, all the sudden, I hear the door creak open.

The door creaks open slowly, and I find Lily hunched over the window sill. Half of her body is outside, and half of her body still inside.

I hear him! I try to wiggle my way through the small ant hole. Then, I feel a tug on my legs pulling me back into the house! I fight his octopus-like tentacles and make my way through the window.

I hear him scream loudly, “GET BACK HERE!!!”

I scream both in anger and in pain.

I start running.

I’m in a blind rage right now. She got away! Should I go after her or just let her get frostbite and die? I REALLY want to get revenge on that dirty little brat. My gut tells me to go with my first option, so I do. I grab my coat and one of my revolvers.

Heart beating rapidly,

Colors flying past

M

E

Tripping over my own

F

E

E

T

Hoping he’ll just

F

O

R

G

E

T

The forest is mildly

L

I

T

I’m fleeing for my

L

I

F

E

My feet are frozen like

I
C
E

I'm dashing through the smoky forest, gun in hand, looking for a dark outline of a girl's silhouette. I can't believe it's come to this, but I can't let her slip away again.

I gulp.

I stop suddenly.

He's Here!

I've gained on her!

I'm crouched behind a tree. In my head, I beg, "Please don't find me."

I hear silent breathing other than my own.

He's coming closer. My life is

O
V
E
R

Here comes my wrath. My gun readies to give her a bloody bath.

I can't move, or he'll see.

She's got to behind one of these trees.

Bang! My heart nearly stops.

I groan. She's not behind there.

BANG! BANG! BANG! They all ring out in chorus, singing that death is near.

I start limping toward the last tree, and I smile my mega-watt smile.

"Lily, come out," I mutter sweetly to myself.

I need to hide! Then, in the ash darkness, I see a big gap in the oak tree that I'm hiding behind. I slowly squat down, carefully and cautiously so I don't make any slight sound.

I creep closer, ready to pounce.

I shimmy my skinny body through the gap in the rotten oak tree. I hear the gun bang again, only it's closer now. I hear a piece of skin peel off the tree.

I stomp forward, praying to still find her.

I sit still in the chilling crook of the tree, not bothering to move. And I silently recite to myself...

I
Will
Never
Forget
The
Words
In that letter
They'll
 Haunt
 Me
 F
 O
 R
 E
 V
 E
 R

Landon was a fraud, a fake, a coward.
It was my dad. He tricked me. I wasn't anyone's flower.
My feet are burning, and my legs are hurting.
Exhaustion settles over me.
I'm wishing and praying and hoping for the better.

But
I'll
Never
Forget
The
Words
In
That
L
 E
 T
 T
 E
 R

After what feels like an eternity, he stomps away angrily, and I realize that I'm finally F

R
E
E

I feel like I'm a lost soul that's escaped from Hell. This is one story, forever burned into my brain, that I know I will someday have the courage to tell.

Gracie Fish

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Jefferson High School, Festus, MO

Educator: Natalie Fallert

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Becoming An Only Child

Today, August 17, 2016, my life will change; it will never be the same. Maybe if I stay in bed and wrap myself up like a cocoon, then she won't leave. I can hear them walking around in Hilah's room. I don't want to go; I don't want to say goodbye, and I don't want to leave her in that place. She belongs here, with me as her little sister, the one that helps me with homework, and cheers me on in sports, the one whose clothes I steal. "Gracie, wake up; we have to get on the road if we are going to move Hilah in today!" She has to move in a week before all the other freshman because she is playing volleyball at college. The trip as a whole only takes forty-five minutes, which is the perfect distance, not too close and not too far away from home.

On the way there the only thing I can think about is how much my life would change. No more fighting over who got the remote, singing to the radio on the way to school, or even just eating dinner with the family, all these things would be different now that she was gone. The once a month fish fries at our grandma's house would never be the same. She says she will make it to them, but we all know that Hilah will be too busy and eventually she will start to miss them and then it may be a few times a year that she makes it.

Hilah and I always sit at the "little kids table" when we eat at my grandma's. We sit in the tall chairs and have our mountain of fish on the table. Since they separate us from all the adults, we watch kid movies and tv shows that we want. We eat all the fish that we can; then Grandma Fish hands out the ice cream along with some other dessert she just whipped up in the kitchen. After stuffing our stomachs to the max, we dart downstairs and play ping pong. Hilah almost always wins, but sometimes she lets me win. The basement at my grandma's is like our hideaway from all the adult-talk upstairs. We have tons of toys that we love to play with like a play kitchen with all the fake food anyone could imagine. Sometimes we pretend we have a little restaurant and make calls for deliveries and even dine-in orders. We serve all kinds of food from pizza to french fries. But now Hilah is moving away; she is becoming one of those adults; she will not longer find solace with me at the kid's table or in the basement playing ping pong.

We arrive at the college and park the car near the sidewalk. Everywhere I look, there are trunks open filled with bags of clothes and other dorm necessities. Hilah and my mom walk in to get the room key, leaving dad and me to get everything out of the trunk and into the lobby of the building. Thankfully she was only on the second floor, so it wasn't too bad making all 15 trips with bags slung across my shoulders banging against my legs or pushing the cart piled with a tv and mini refrigerator on top.

"It is going to be impossible to fit all this junk in this tiny room!", I said when walking through the dorm room door. When you walk in the door, there is a short, miniature hallway then a bathroom on the right side. In this small room, there are two twin extra long beds and two medium sized desks and two small dressers that fit under the beds. The closet was so cramped after all of Hilah's clothes were hanging and shoe boxes cover the carpet on the inside.

"It feels like we have been here for hours!", I said as my mom was putting the pet fish in his

final spot. Since our last name is fish, we each bought a goldfish, or sister fish as we call them. Before we left Hilah to fend for herself, we all took her out to one last family dinner. Since Applebee's was just down the road that is where Hilah picked to eat. We walk in, and the hostess seats us right way, I look at the menu and decide what to order. As we wait for our food, my dad and sister start talking about Hilah's upcoming volleyball season. Hilah is attending St. Louis College of Pharmacy and playing volleyball there. The students in pharmacy school are mostly all brains and little bronze. The volleyball team doesn't win much because playing a sport is more of a stress reliever for the pharmacy students. Then all of the sudden our food comes out and smells delicious.

We ate in silence. The sadness was starting to set in as we came close to finishing our meals. I kept my eyes focused on my chicken tenders, knowing that the eye contact with either my mom or sister would unleash the floodgates. Then it happened, totally forgetting why we were there and looked up as my eyes scanned up my mom's face and saw gentle tears effortlessly rolling down her cheeks; I tried to look away, but caught myself in a similar reflection of water soaked sockets and wet cheeks flowing down into my sister's hot wings. That's when I knew I needed to lighten the mood. "Hilah you need to clean it up so I can enjoy my chicken strips." Hilah takes a deep breath, wipes her tears away, and looks up at me with a grin. Finally, all the silence was lifted up into thin air. As the waitress comes by to give us the check, she looks at us for a minute. Her facial expression says it all: these people are crazy.

As we head back up the street to leave Hilah for good, the tears came flooding again. At this moment I realize that my big sister was not going to be living with me anymore. My whole life is changing right in front of my eyes, and there was nothing to do to make it come to a halt. Hugging her on the inclining steps to the lobby door, "See ya' later." we both said. Saying goodbye was too hard. See ya' later meant that this was only part time and she would be back at home with me soon.

Megan Fowler

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Marnie Jenkins

Category: Poetry

Abused, That's why I Hated you/That's why I Loved you, What Does Pain Smell Like, What's Eating Her, All the Ways I Fall Asleep

Abused

It's battered love.

Don't ever read it any other way.

It's not the love you stay up at night and wish to be with them,

it's complete dread,

never wanting to see him,

let alone hear his name.

I do not love him with a pure heart,

but with battered ribs,

and bloody lips.

That's why I Hated you/That's why I Loved you

Again.

It was your smile, the way it dances across your face

Your long arms outstretched towards me

The way you could hang on every witty comment that passed my lips

Like I was a drink and you had to get every last sip

I loved you.

Even when it was your claws in my hair.

But if I should say that

I hated you,

Even with your elbow on my shoulder.

It was you.

Dark hair,

Brown eyes,

Chlorine on your skin.

It was you,

I loved you.

I loved every detail you caught in your perfect heart shaped mouth

And the way you tilted your head

Every time you saw me

The subtle comments

made into crowded rooms

That you and I

only completely understood

that's why I loved you.
And maybe I still do.

It was the late night comments.
Your terrible tongue and the stories it told.
It was your fists of rage,
the body that didn't seem like me anymore.
it was all the things I'd do,
just to try to fix you.
that's why I hated you.
And maybe I still do

It wasn't me.
It was you,
it was the place you were in your life.
it was rejection and anger,
it was confusion and desperation.
It wasn't me.
It wasn't me
it wasn't me
it wasn't me.
You could have hurt anyone.
It just happened to be me.

It was me,
a sweet girl with fake tattoos
It was me,
small and awkward,
always slouching.
It was me
with little lips
and high hopes.
You destroyed every part of me.

What Does Pain Smell Like?

If anything smells like him it's the ending of a season.
The inbetween stages of summer and winter,
the leaves changing or the melting of snow.
If anything smells like pain it's football nights,
chlorine bleached sunsets,
And zooming cars in silent neighborhoods.
He smells like graduation,
toasted over bitter sweet smiles,
like prettier girls,
late soccer nights,
and twisted cruel orders.

If anything smells like her it's sweet pea and vanilla sugar,
pumpkin pie straight out of the oven,
and the somber thick intensity
that lingers in the air at Thanksgiving.
If anything smells like pain it's homemade burgers,
a fenced in backyard on a warm summer's day,
and the perfect sized grapefruit.
She smells like blood curdling screams at midnight,
math homework,
scales straight out of a cardboard box,
like father's tears,
and bloody fingernails.

If anything smells like pain,
it's them.

What's Eating Her?

A soft shelter I once called my home
No longer safe, no longer warm
Over thinking, staying alert
Ready to run and help the hurt
Xenacious near hearing her brew
In her mind, there is no room
Consumed by ED she will not move

All the Ways I Fall Asleep

She's crying,
I swear to god she's crying,
but I can't.
I can't breathe for her.
I can't eat for her.
And I'm 12.
I'm 11.
I'm all the youth of an age
that can't hold the image of the kind of hate she has
biting at her thighs,
her hips.
So I'll cry too,
cry till the soft rock puts me to sleep.

Keturah Gadson

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Frazier

Category: Critical Essay

Food for Thought: A Critical Essay on How McDonaldization Impacts Public Schools

In 1961, Ray Kroc franchised McDonald's with the dream to serve buns, burgers, fries, and beverages just the same in Alabama as they were in Alaska ("Our History"). McDonald's is now as, if not more, American than apple pie, and its reach extends even into the realm of education. Last year, there were 14,259 McDonald's restaurants in the United States ("Our History") and close to 98,300 public schools (Tucci), resulting in more McDonald's restaurants per public schools (1:7) than there are teachers per public school students (1:16). While the teaching profession certainly has room to grow, the more intimidating and demanding predicament is that with the prevalence of McDonald's restaurants, the principles of the fast-food industry are influencing the most revered, dated, yet indispensable system in society. This is part of a larger cultural phenomenon observed by George Ritzer in the late twentieth century called McDonaldization, or "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world" (Ritzer 1). In adopting the same rational, or optimized principles that led McDonald's to prosperity, the modern public school system substitutes the student for the chicken nugget, moving towards curriculums as one-size fits all menus and pushing students along at the same pace on the college-ready conveyer belt like Big Macs. As with any rational system, unintentional irrational consequences that undermine the underlying purpose of the system are spawned: today's schools do not produce the innovative, independent thinkers evermore required by a post-industrial society.

Mark Twain is thought to have once said; "Education is what you must acquire without any interference from your schooling." The underlying purpose of any school system should be to educate in the true sense of the word, where education is understood as the pure act of learning and schooling as the institution permeated by many agendas. Agendas include but are not limited to indoctrination, bureaucratic methodology, methods of assessment, and evaluation ("Bureaucracy and Education"). In order to fulfill its obligation to the nation's youth and to democracy, school systems should seek to maximize students' education as much as possible. However, McDonaldization greatly interferes with this duty in its effects on schooling.

According to Ritzer, McDonaldization has four main components: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. Efficiency is "the optimum method for getting from one point to the other" (Ritzer 13). Efficiency concerns how to get from being hungry to being full and requires streamlined processes for achieving desired ends. Calculability is defined as the emphasis on "quantitative aspects of products sold (portion, size, cost) and services offered (the time it takes to get the product)" (Ritzer 14). With calculability, quantity becomes the greatest indicator of quality and processes that take less time are deemed more efficient. Predictability is defined as the "assurance that products and services will be the same over time and in all locales" (Ritzer 14). Predictability requires formalization, accountability, order, and routine. Finally, the fourth component is increasing control of humans through utilization of nonhuman technology. For

Ritzer, technology is both that which can be controlled by humans, like computers, and that which controls humans, like skills, bureaucratic rules, regulations, procedures, and techniques. Together, these four tenets form the basis of social control in the McDonald's franchise.

It is imperative to note that McDonaldization was not an entirely new social trend, but was the culmination of preceding rationalized social and economic developments occurring throughout the twentieth century. These socioeconomic developments such as scientific management (centered on the one best way to perform a task), Ford's assembly line (made workers robotic-like), and ultimately the McDonald's chain, led to the structure of the traditional public school system students go through today. The roots of these developments lie in Max Weber's theory of formal rationality. In Weber's theory, "the search by people for the optimum means to a given end is shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures" (Ritzer 30). For Weber, the model paradigm for rationalization was bureaucracy (a non-human system to control humans), which he defined as a strict method of rational organization for large-scale enterprises. Between 1890 and 1920, the prevailing business model of the time led to the transformation of one-room schoolhouses into a system of school districts (Mehta). The influence of bureaucracy can easily be observed in the resulting public schools. First, bureaucracies require a clear hierarchical order. This is perfectly laid out in the food chain that begins with the district superintendent and ends with students on the bottom. To achieve greater efficiency, which is a core value of bureaucracy, the hierarchy of the grade level system was established in the late nineteenth century. With students divided into grades, the purpose of education became geared toward advancement to the next grade level, and the larger goal of schools became to produce the highest number of graduates. A side effect of the latter was that if a student performed well enough, they could advance on to the next grade level regardless of how much they actually learned.

In the late nineteenth century, the pressure of a population growing at an astonishing rate brought on industrialization. Industrial systems required strict bureaucratic methodology rather than the former agrarian methodology of farms that more highly valued the individual and did not require rigid order. In order for society to shift from agrarianism to bureaucracy, a social realignment was required to teach the norms of the new social system. Thus, schools had a new agenda and became the vehicle of social change. Schools trained workers for factories and schooling became "a way of producing (and reproducing) bureaucracy" ("Bureaucracy and Education"). As independent thinking was not a concern for the robotic-like workers who repeatedly performed a specific task in factories, it was not a concern of schools. Out of a desire for predictably efficient workers, schools began assessing students with written exams to measure their skills. Since bureaucratic systems value objectivity, anything that could be was translated into calculable, quantifiable information. For example, students were replaced by a grade, resulting from their performance on tests. This is an important shift to be noted as "it is much easier to mis-educate a number than a face" ("Bureaucracy and Education"). Calculability introduced an impersonal aspect to the teacher-student relationship even though education is not impersonal. Altogether the implementation of bureaucratic methodology benefited schools in many ways, but it also carried fatal flaws. While bureaucracies are centralized, focused systems with clear purposes, they can also be dehumanizing and impersonal: if the goal of a bureaucratic system is met, then the individual is not important. Further, as industrial systems were means of production, schools, which were designed with the same bureaucratic methodology, were means of production as well. This social reproduction meant that faults introduced into the educational process, such as racial disparities, could not be easily eradicated.

Although the aforementioned developments were precursors to McDonaldization and largely

affected public schools, McDonaldization started to produce its own impact in the 1980s and 1990s when it began to spread into other areas of society. Ritzer's book, *The McDonaldization of Society*, tells of how bookstores, childcare centers, and even newspapers like USA Today (which was even called McPaper because of its one-page news stories) reflected the increased McDonaldization of society. But an area underemphasized in Ritzer's original thesis, and which is the focal point of this essay, is the public school system with an emphasis on secondary schools. Correlating with the time period of McDonaldization's sweeping of society was also the increasing demand for tougher education standards in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education's famous report published *A Nation at Risk*, a stinging report that decried mediocrity and idleness in American schools, which were being surpassed by foreign nations. The report issued the imperative that schools must be improved so the promise of "all, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost" could be achieved (National Commission on Excellence in Education).

Thereafter, education reform quickly ensued with the standards movement in the 1990s, a clear mark of the desire for more predictable and calculable educational outcomes, such as the percentage of students scoring "proficient" on state assessments (U.S. DOE). By 2000, almost all states had drafted standards in the areas of math, English language arts (ELA), science, and social studies. Shortly after in 2001, the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act epitomized the standards-based education reforms of the 1990s in a mighty effort to increase standardization and accountability in public schools. The NCLB Act required annual yearly progress toward states' math and ELA standards and introduced a rigorous testing schedule for grades three through eight and ten through twelve to ensure students were achieving proficiency with the goal of reaching 100% proficiency by 2014 (Hiler and Hatalsky). NCLB seemed to echo how "the heart of McDonald's success is its uniformity and predictability, . . . its relentless standardization" (Ritzer 89). Now in the twenty-first century, one can observe even more ways in which McDonaldized reforms have gripped the public school system. Efficiency is evident all throughout schools through wide use of multiple-choice exams, scantrons, machine grading, and continued pressure to have the highest graduation rates. Calculability has become common through GPAs, test scores, ranks, and accountability standards for schools and teachers based on quantifiable results. Predictability has put more pressure on schools with the Common Core standards launched in 2009, strict accountability systems, and the proliferation of standardized tests. Finally, control is partially congruent with its earlier form with students still sitting in rows, the school day still being dictated by the bell, teachers and students still having limited autonomy, and bureaucracy still reigning. But control is also evermore increasing with the use of technology in schools and the discouragement of spontaneity and creativity in favor of having students obey rationalized procedures, even starting as early as kindergarten where students who follow rules are "good" and those who do not are "bad". All this builds up to a shocking climax that should not be ignored: what is supposed to be the most trusted and honorable system in society in many ways is set up like a McDonald's.

The fact that a system is McDonaldized is not inherently bad; after all, McDonald's is a global icon and is a multi-billion dollar franchise due to Kroc's management. However, public schools are not for-profit businesses. Students are not commodities to be packaged and sold into the world no matter if they are the perfectly golden brown or slightly undercooked. In accordance with Ritzer's thesis, a rationalized school system, like any other rational system, inevitably spawns irrationalities. This is called the irrationality of rationality. Ritzer stated:

“Irrationality also means that rational systems are disenchanting; they have lost their magic and mystery. Most important, rational systems are unreasonable systems that deny the humanity, the human reason, of the people who work within them or are served by them. In other words, rational systems are dehumanizing” (Ritzer 123). By the irrationality of rationality, the same tenets that are McDonaldization’s strength can be viewed as a weakness in their opposite form (i.e., efforts for efficiency can cause inefficiency such as when one waits in the drive-thru line longer than it would have taken them to go in and out of the store).

The rationalized public school system has not escaped this paradox of rationality and reasonableness. Schooling is becoming a disenchanting, dehumanizing institution that is not fulfilling its purpose to educate its students insofar as possible. Efficiency fails students when tests identify gaps but the class charges ahead while the gaps accumulate in the student’s learning. It fails when schools do not teach for mastery. Predictability failed students through NCLB and instead brought harsh, unforgiving consequences on many schools, as 100% proficiency was not reached by 2014. In addition, standardized tests and overemphasis on standards has shaped curriculum in devastating ways. According to the Huffington Post, the Common Core standards are failing tests and students as test scores from a representative sample of the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress tests showed slightly lower scores overall in math and stagnant scores in reading in comparison to scores from 2013. Although the Huffington Post concedes that scores improved in reading for some students, these students were in the highest percentile and Common Core was supposed to help students who are less well-off. Instead, for the latter, curriculums are often narrowed. In Los Angeles, art programs for elementary students have practically disappeared (Walker). While the STEM movement has helped science escape endangerment, Brian Crosby, a STEM facilitator for Nevada, notes how other endangered subjects are merely being integrated with major subjects (such as when social studies and art become part of reading). But Crosby hits the danger of this move of efficiency right on the nail in saying, “. . . tossing a ball with numbers on it isn’t really physical education, and writing about Van Gogh isn’t the same as developing a passion for color or practicing brush technique” (Walker).

Further, calculability fails students when quantifiable results diminish the value of qualitative ones. This is seen in how much schools lose when there is an overuse of high-stakes testing. A survey of large districts by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Council of the Great City Schools found that students take an average of 113 standardized tests between pre-K and twelfth grade. The study also found a lot of overlap in the information collected by the tests. The resulting cost to teachers’ instructional time can range between 60 and 110 hours, according to a policy research brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English in 2014. Even more, instructional time is also occasionally reduced when teachers are required to use scripted lessons and prepared materials teachers to help students prepare for tests. Ultimately, control fails students by continually reminding them, especially those in low-income and disadvantaged school districts, that their place is at the bottom of the very system that is meant to serve them.

Just as in 1983, our country is at risk. The risk of our time is both moral and economic. Foreign nations are passing America in PISA test results (Hunt). Although it has been pointed out that American schools with very low poverty rates score the best in the world, 51% of American students are impoverished (The Washington Post) and in 2013-2014, 24% of traditional public schools were high-poverty schools (National Center for Education Statistics). Our society cannot merely ignore those students whom educational bureaucracy has pushed to the bottom since its inception, nor can our fixes to McDonaldization as a whole continue to treat

schools as industrial, rather than human systems. The Every Student Succeeds Act, NCLB's successor to go into effect for the 2017-2018, is not enough a departure from our broken ideology. ESSA keeps the same test schedule mandated in NCLB and even allows states to opt to use the ACT and SAT in place of the government funded PARCC and Smarter Balanced Tests (Gewertz). Although some states have already taken this option, they should proceed with caution and consider whether the ACT and SAT can be double-duty tests utilized to both measure content mastery and college readiness and whether socioeconomic status still indicates likelihood of success with standardized tests in their states.

Fortunately, there are de-McDonaldized ways to approach education. Jal Mehta of Foreign Affairs argues for an alternative model to McDonald's for the education system: America's stronger professions such as medicine, law, and engineering. These professions have a different four components: "human capital, which involves attracting, selecting, training, and retaining the people who work in the field; a core of knowledge that guides the field; effective organizational structures; and overall performance management and accountability". In our top professions, these components exist in balance and more emphasis is placed on building strong foundations than on holding practitioners accountable (as Mehta notes, there is no such thing as No Patient Left Behind). Other countries such as Canada, Finland, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, have built education systems that look more like our stronger professions. Finland even turned around its education system using classroom innovation researched in the US such as cooperative learning and portfolio assessment (Thomas). Interesting to note is that Finland only has 66 McDonald's restaurants (McDonald's Suomi), resulting in half as many McDonald's per person in Finland than there are in the US. These countries may have drastic differences from the US, such as how many are strong welfare states, but they all make teaching a desirable, expert profession, which enables teachers with more autonomy. It is no surprise that increased freedom yields remarkable results.

While the rest of society is advancing forward deep into a post-industrial age, traditional public schools largely follow their original blue print. Our McDonaldized public schools have become disenchanting test prep factories where students are not valued as individuals, where, in the words of NEA President Lily Eskelsen García, teachers "have to teach in secret and hope they don't get into trouble for teaching to the Whole Child instead of teaching to the test." Schools were not designed to produce students with the advanced skills and creativity demanded from our innovative society. To fix this, minimally effective reforms can no longer be layered on like condiments. The entire "eatery" of education—what's on the menu, what ingredients are required, whom the meal is being made for—must be reevaluated in light of who is being served: students, and by extension, our future. While anything, even McDonald's fries, may be good in moderation, the best education for our children can only be secured when quality is not determined by how many fries go out the door, for we fail to recognize the individual pieces dropped on the way.

Keely Gaeddert

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Tom Holland

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Twenty-six Steps

Left swerve, right turn signal, and halt. We're home. My younger brother's even breath calms my erratic heart beat as my mom stumbles out of the car. My older brother, Luke, follows her. His face is a mask of calm determination as he quietly opens the door and gently carries Mitch up the stairs to our little, three-bedroom apartment. I watch from the safety of my still-intact seatbelt as his figure disappears behind my mother's. I urge myself to get up, to follow them, but fear nestles itself into my muscles, making it nearly impossible to move. I can almost taste the salt of my tears as if they were steaming across my face. Almost. But I know I cannot cry. I know I have to be strong-- for my father, for my brothers, for myself. Crying is a sign that she has won, and she will never beat me.

Gradually, feeling returns to my legs and I am able to withdraw from my previous state of immobility. Digging deep, my desire to persist is restored and I find myself moving in the direction of my family. One step: the loud thump of the door shutting rings in my ears as it echoes in the stairway. Two steps: my ears are attacked by the silent cries that interrupt the eerie silence of the apartment. Three steps, five steps, six, seven, eight: the inaudible wails of my eldest brother call to me as I creep further and further up the stairs. Eighteen steps: I reach the top, and in that moment, I hear nothing. No quiet cries or hushed breaths, but rather the unmistakable muteness of pure suffering. I contemplate walking past, ignoring the voiceless pleas my brother unknowingly sends my direction every night. I could overlook his pain, and I have almost every day for the past two years, but not tonight. Tonight, I walk towards my brother's door. Nineteen steps; the loathsome snores of my mother slice the artificial facade of peace that has settled over the hallway. Twenty steps: a stench invades my senses drawing my attention towards the spilled drops of wine, leading to my mother's bedroom. Twenty-one steps, twenty-three steps, twenty four, twenty-five, twenty-six. Finally, I reach his door.

Time escapes me as I stand there, unmoving. Suddenly, I am afraid. I know that if I open the door, I will also be opening myself up to the suffering that the room encompasses. It acts as a barrier between the harsh realities Luke, my brother, faces every day, and the peaceful disguise I've let myself fall for. In that moment, nothing else exists besides me, the door, and the impending doom. The urge to allow myself the indulgence of ignorance tempts me as I contemplate my options. Refuge comes in the form of a small breath. I turn to see my youngest brother, Mitchell, standing behind me in silence. His presence offers more than love or courage, his presence bestows a promise. A promise that despite what is behind that door, we will face it together, as a family, a unit. I am done being a coward. I step to the door, turn the knob, and face reality.

Souradip Ghosh

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Reality Check

I jogged out to the car looking forward to an hour-and-a-half road trip for the first time. I perused through every note of the piece in my mind, recalling if I had played with the proper texture and shaped each phrase with the best dynamics. I could vaguely remember slipping up on a couple keys, but everyone has those - *Did I really do that?* - moments; I pushed that thought aside.

All I could care to think about was my audition. I had to have played better than the other competitors. Sure, the ones I heard before my performance were good, but were they great? I didn't think so. There were a million ways I could have tweaked a sequence of staccatos in one competitor's piece or brought out a subtle change from the bass tone to lighten the mood in another. I could have gone on and on until I exhausted all the possibilities. Maybe I thought too pretentiously, or maybe I was just confident.

My father eventually made his way to the car and we set off for home.

"So, what did you think of your audition?" my father asked.

"I thought it went really well. There's no way that I can't be in the running to win," I responded ecstatically. I poured out all my thoughts about the other participants and their performances and their tiny errors, explaining how I would have played them differently, knowing full well he wouldn't understand most of it. However, my father heaved a long sigh as I finished my rant.

"Let me tell you a story," he said slowly.

Oh no, this is going to be one of those 'when I was your age' talks, I thought to myself.

"I spent so much extra time in school before I came over to America for a reason," he started. "I realized that the career I wanted to pursue was more than getting degrees left and right and landing jobs. So, I dedicated myself to studying and working in what I loved to do best."

I dropped my head against the window, hearing my father droning on about his conversations with his professors, experiences in the lab, writing about his research. I let out a sigh and started to doze in and out of my father's lecturing. I wasn't about to let this ruin my mood for the day, listening to a story that had no application to my life at all. He wasn't even mentioning today's competition.

"So, this is about dedication isn't it? You're saying I'm not as dedicated to the music? Is that what this story is about?" I blurted out, hoping I wouldn't have to hear his life story for much longer.

"Not exactly," he continued. I rolled my eyes, anticipating a long half hour for his talk.

"Dedication may be the first step. I never thought that was all, though. In my field, it wasn't just about doing well. I knew that if I wanted to do anything with the degree I was pursuing, I'd have to find a career in America. That was everyone's dream, and everyone knew that the best opportunity to get out ahead was in the States. So, I applied to hundreds of open positions, hoping for the best."

“Did you ever think you had a really good chance at any of them?” I asked, as I sat up to face him.

“Maybe I did. Maybe I didn’t. But, one thing that I never thought to myself was that I was sure of getting a certain job. I knew all of the applicants were strong in their own ways. So I took every opportunity that came my way with that mentality.”

He smiled at himself as he continued: “My colleagues were something else, though. They all looked for the easy way out. They thought that graduating early, staying young, and being foreign was good enough to land a job overseas. So, they applied to only the best of the best, the few state-of-the-art institutions in America. I would ask them how they were so sure of getting any position they pursued, and each time of my colleagues would respond with the same point: ‘Well, we already graduated and you’re still stuck in school.’ I never thought too much of it. Then, the tables finally turned in my favor and I became the first graduate to immigrate here.”

He turned to me as we drove along the empty highway, “You’ll probably not think too much of my experience. It may be a bit outlandish and out of the blue. But, it’s always a good idea to keep a sense of reality.”

I sat there, with a sudden realization of that very reality that I had almost lost sight of that day. As I glanced out the window, I looked back on everything that my parents had *made* me do because it was the best for me. I slowly learned at five years old that earning allowance let me have some money to spend. Getting a job at fifteen wasn’t just to help out the family and start saving up, but to grasp the idea of independence, even if it was in the tiniest sense. Pushing me to finish my chores in a timely manner when I was six years old was the basis of building my work ethic for high school. Everything they said really did seem to have a purpose. Perhaps this day, my father saw humility as the next trait in line to shape the person I will be years from now.

We pulled into the driveway as the sun started to set. I stepped out of the car and walked through the door to be greeted by my mother.

“So, how did it go?” she asked.

“I think it was alright. I hit a couple of wrong notes here and there but nothing too shabby. There were a bunch of people with strong performances, so everything is up for grabs,” I responded.

“But ... do you think you have a shot at first place?” my mother inquired.

“Maybe. Maybe not. We’ll see,” I replied without any hesitation.

Samantha Goepfert

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Are You Up?

Hey, can I ask you something? Sorry
so sorry, to bother you but I was just thinking about that one time
when we looked for glory in the snow and I know you never
loved the cold, but did you hate it?

And, I really hate to keep you awake like this but why
would you text me happy birthday four days before
my birthday, were you thinking of me?

And I've been wondering lately about the
bandages you always ripped right off for me, and if there are any left
on top of that old rusty bathroom shelf where your tooth brush sat and if you
caught me searching, would you stop me?

Oh and in case you were
curious, I am doing just
fine but sometimes I get sick when I see
the sticky peeling packing tape on my car door, or
the box in my closet because I know you are in there and
I am too frozen solid to go back to last winter
without one of your dirty button downs
that you asked me to give back to you, even though
a few days later you were
trembling through everything I wrote to you and I couldn't quite
see it on the screen when you said you were sorry but
were you sick, too?

And I guess I will let you go and I'm
sorry for annoying you I'll leave you alone but, just one last thing.
If I were to
run my car off of the road, tonight, fly
through the windshield into a
comatose hospital room
would you come?

Samantha Goepfert

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Motherhood

I feel, as though my veins have unravelled
poured my blood on the floor for
everyone to walk through, staining the
tough heels of their feet and the
web of their toes
forever, with me and my spider eggs, my
sweet, venomous babies.

I think, that my bones may be crumbling
under the weight of this
malevolent pregnancy, ever protruding
from my head and my
heart and every focal
point
of me.

I feel, as though my subconscious has been
pounding on the walls of my core, rocking
this cold child of mine to miscarriage.

I think, that I have made the mistake
of trying to
kill
what kills
inside of me, rather than
giving birth to this silent
pulse; burying it
with my raw and quavering hands.

Samantha Goepfert

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Young Woman

It is hard to describe, this numb heat
Budding as a rose from my
Heart into my lungs and
Breathing me in; and because the stems
Twirl 'round my white blood cells
And because the thorns, they prick
And because I do not feel it.

Every moment is a repression a
Regression. I burn my bones so that
They cannot break on their own
I keep the ashes in an urn in my chest.

I pray this rosary tied to my neck
Choke myself and love myself until
I am once again a child, running
Through my mother's chrysanthemums
Never stopping to dress the
Wounds on my knees, loving the dirt on my cheeks
Always crying at the sight of
Blood, and lightning kissing thunder in the sky.

Samantha Goepfert

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Athena

I know that you
need space.
It's just that I
am terrified
that
our
little planet
might develop into a universe,
miles from me.
You, Dis
I, Artemis—drowning in my own
abandoned craters—longing
for you to touch me.
It has long been
a fear of mine, that I may
twirl
among the satin ribbons
of Jupiter
watching my love
burn
to ashes on Venus.

Because, I am no Aphrodite.

But,
my eyes pierce shadows
with spears
and owls sing as I ascend the stars—
it's not enough.
It's not
enough.

Jessica Goldberg

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jim Lewis

Category: Humor

Queen Bee

Theft. Trespassing. Destruction of property. Intentional infliction of emotional distress. These are only a few of the criminal acts with which I could charge my little sister, Queen Bee Meredith. Although nearly three years younger than I, standing at only 5'1", and weighing a mere 80 pounds, Meredith can be a formidable enemy. Like the fastest animal on land, the cheetah, Meredith invades my room with unparalleled stealth and speed. Earrings are MIA, never to be seen dangling again. Nutella fingerprints appear on my favorite white jeans. The last remains of my mother's matzo ball soup, which we refer to as liquid gold, have suspiciously disappeared. I begin to sketch "Wanted" posters and hang them around the house.

Meredith, fulfilling her role as director and consummate manipulator of middle school students, is too busy with her flourishing social life to respond to my angry accusations. The typical endless parade of her friends streams into our house and the smell of a dozen bags of microwave popcorn soon engulfs me. The deafening giggling invariably leads them to break out messy makeup palettes and curling wands in our shared bathroom. I think to myself, "don't you have homework to do or a book to read? I hope you flunk your *Lord of the Flies* test tomorrow."

It wasn't until the last week of my freshman year that I realized how wrong I was about my sister. My elementary school is famous for its end-of-year awards assembly, where two coveted honors are bestowed. Overly involved parents begin gossiping about predicted recipients as early as junior kindergarten. In my narrow-mindedness, the only prize worth receiving was the academic honor awarded to me at graduation as valedictorian of the class. When I returned to the nurturing environment of my elementary school to attend Meredith's graduation awards assembly, I remember shifting in my seat with obnoxiously visible impatience. How dare her graduation impinge on my time preparing for tomorrow's biology final?

"It is my great pleasure to announce Meredith Goldberg as this year's recipient of the Rossman Citizenship Award," bellowed the headmistress, Mrs. Shipley.

Her words jolted me out of my deep meditations regarding a comparative analysis of mitosis and meiosis. I listened intently as Mrs. Shipley described the selection of my little sister for this prestigious honor. She described Meredith's congeniality, optimism, and genuineness.

"We are all better people for having known her," Mrs. Shipley explained.

In that moment, I began to slowly understand that I had wrongly labeled Meredith as superficial and frivolous. As I digested all the stories the headmistress recounted about my sister's magnetism and uplifting presence, I discovered that academic achievement was not the only meaningful yardstick. On the contrary, Meredith's natural skills in cultivating friendships and her uncanny ability to connect with people were just as important - if not more so - than rock-star test scores or a list of As on a report card. As we headed to Meredith's favorite Italian restaurant to celebrate with fettucine immersion, I committed myself to becoming less judgmental, more accepting, and increasingly open to appreciating our differences.

Meredith is gorgeous. Athletic. Class president. Students flock to her at lunchtime and battle

to sit next to her and bask in her aura. My prescience suggests she'll surely be voted prom queen. I now understand that her magnetism is the product of her kindness and bottomless generosity of spirit. While I pour myself into my studies with hair in a disheveled ponytail and fuzzy Dr. Seuss slippers warming my feet, Meredith invests her time selecting a lip gloss shade matching tomorrow's runway-ready outfit. I now embrace our differences and learn from them. I take more time out from my studies and academic endeavors to socialize with friends. To listen. To cultivate relationships with people and collaborate. I even partnered up for Chemistry lab with the Queen Bee of my own class. I know now that there are areas of sameness to be discovered, and that I can learn a great deal from her.

Jessica Goldberg

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Critical Essay

The Road to God: A Journey of Uncertainty

In Cormac McCarthy's disturbing novel, *The Road*, the theme of religion and testing one's faith in God is thoroughly explored. The protagonists, a mutually loving and devoted father and son, confront cannibalistic barbarism in a post-apocalyptic world. As they scour for any remnants of food and struggle to make it through each day, their journey along the bleak road alternates between glimmers of hope ignited by God and plummets into desperation. They are guided by their belief in God despite their inability to remotely understand or accept God's ways. In a seemingly godless world replete with insurmountable devastation and unthinkable inhumanity, God still exists, and their enduring faith in God is essential to the father and son's survival.

During some of his most despairing moments, the father reveals his faith in God by vehemently expressing his anger toward God for subjecting him and his son to senseless, painful suffering and tragedy. When the father cannot control his debilitating, bloody cough and fears his impending death and the fate of his son, he turns to God in confrontation:

Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? He whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God. (11-12)

Rather than renouncing God during times of adversity, the father instead articulates to God his feelings of frustration, disappointment, and anger. In this way, McCarthy illustrates that belief in and respect for God does not require blind acceptance of God's plan. Harboring anger toward God and the "[b]arren, silent, godless" (4) universe that God permitted is not only consistent with the father's faith in God, but itself constitutes an act of faith. The father's challenging of God's will provides the spark for the father's continued quest to survive and his ongoing commitment to the moral goodness and spirituality embodied by his son. For the father, his son represents all that God has created in his image, and by protecting the boy, the father is also safeguarding the values of God. McCarthy further underscores this notion by contrasting the father's faith with the lack of faith exhibited by the mother. Rejecting the father's proclamation that "we are survivors" (55), the mother decides to commit suicide and explains:

You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I've taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot. Death is not a lover.

Oh, yes he is . . . I am done with my own whorish heart and I have been for a long time

. . . my only hope is for eternal nothingness. (56-57)

Survival, life, and hope are inextricably intertwined with faith in God, and the mother's abandonment of God and capitulation to nihilistic nothingness results in her embracing death and tragically ending her own life.

The little boy's unadulterated altruism serves as a foil to that of his father's selfishness and reveals that God's goodness lives within the little boy. Despite the father's repeated protestations that "we are the good guys," his commitment to a moral code is tempered by the overriding idea that helping others in even the smallest of ways will disadvantage him and his son. When they cross paths with a man struck by lightning, "as burntlooking as the country, his clothing scorched and black . . . one of his eyes burnt shut and his hair a nitty wig of ash upon his blackened skull" (49-50), the father ignores his son's sobbing, repeated pleas to offer aid to the dying man. The father's insensitivity to the man's suffering is juxtaposed with his son's powerful desire to show kindness toward the man, regardless of whether or not the man could be saved. Through this striking comparison, the boy evinces God's desire that man show his fellow man unwavering compassion and rebuild humanity through acts of kindness. This notion that God lives within the boy is reinforced in the father's conversation with the haggard old man who calls himself Ely, whom he encounters on the road and offers aid at his son's insistence:

How would you know if you were the last man on earth?

I don't guess you would know it. You'd just be it.

Nobody would know it.

It wouldn't make any difference. When you die it's the same as if everybody else did too.

I guess God would know it. Is that it?

There is no God.

No?

There is no God and we are his prophets . . . When I saw that boy I thought I had died.

You thought he was an angel?

I didn't know what he was.

What if I said that he's a god? (169-172)

Here, the father confirms his belief in the existence of God by revealing to Ely how he views his son. Like an angel, the boy is uncorrupted, innocent, and comprised of pure goodness. The father's heart knows this truth. As Ely observes, the boy is a "prophet," inspiring his father to persevere in the face of ultimate darkness. Indeed, the father is spurred on to survive because his child has been chosen by God to uphold morality. With deep commitment, the father explains to his son, "[m]y job is to take care of you . . . I was appointed to do that by God . . . I will kill anyone who touches you" (77).

When over six millions Jews were tortured and murdered during the Holocaust, the Jewish people's faith in God was not extinguished. The response to Hitler's Final Solution was for victims to pray that Judaism would flourish and for surviving Jews to heal by building meaningful lives of purpose centered around traditional Jewish values. Godlessness did not

follow Hitler's attempts to annihilate the Jews; rather, a renewed commitment to the Jewish values of devotion to family, education, loyalty, and kindness, all rooted in a belief in God, resulted. Analogously, Cormac McCarthy's gripping tale of post-apocalyptic barbarism illustrates that in the face of unimaginable inhumanity and depravity, one's faith in God is tested to its limits, but nonetheless endures. The nameless father and son's harrowing experiences do not obliterate their faith in God. Belief in God is evidenced by the father and son continuously "carrying the fire" of God's goodness and mercy, which ultimately provides the very foundation for their perseverance. The son's unwavering commitment to morality, compassion, and benevolence is what allows him, even after his father's death, to communicate with his father through God and continue his journey on the road to salvation.

Georgia Gordon-Mills

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: katie weber

Category: Poetry

i don't remember him

Mum says he was the first person to make me laugh,
But I don't remember him
Dad says he would lift me as high as a giraffe,
But I don't remember him
He used to sing me sweet lullabies,
But I don't remember him
He would bring me close to his chest so I could hear his heart beat,
But I don't remember him
Mum says I cried when he died, shaking his motionless body,
But I don't remember him
Dad says I wouldn't smile after that
But I don't remember him
Mum says I would still dial his number on the phone out of habit
But I don't remember him
Dad says my memories of him etched away day after day
But I don't remember him
Mum sometimes still talks about him
But I don't remember him
Dad would ask me about him
But I would say, I don't remember him.

Liv Greer

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Central High School, Saint Joseph, MO

Educator: Kyla Ward

Category: Poetry

World of Paint

It was her love of art that was taken too far
She couldn't control herself
The urge to swipe blues and yellows over every surface that beheld her gaze
Strong impulses beat through her hands and out her finger tips
Harmonies of pigment waltz through her brain and out her ears
Her eyes only capable of seeing glossy coats of design
Galaxies of black and pink flow through her bones
Bristles grow from her lungs and out of her mouth
Images, Images running through her mind
She can't control herself
There's not enough paint
There aren't enough surfaces
There's not enough time
Obsession grows stronger and her body becomes weaker
The wrinkles on her hand packed with paint
A back that used to be straight, now humped like a hill
The visions that were once clear now fogged and stained
A wrist bone that could gracefully caress a canvas, now hollowed like a log
As time ticks faster and faster
A once strong, colorful heart ticks slower and slower
The war between an imaginary world and the real one comes to an end
Paint brushes stop painting
Water becomes still
Canvases lie blank
And a soul...escapes
No prayers to be spoken
No coffin to be made
No words from loved ones
And No hearts broken
Only a body left behind to this imaginary world of paint

Cassandra Griffing

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

"Starry Night"

I peer out at the night sky
sparkling behind the sleeping cityscape.
The gentle bristles of the paint brush
tickle the tightly woven surface
of the blank canvas.
Testing.

Only the star-speckled sky is the limit.
Gentle strokes of soft night blues
and luminous yellows
are swirled among the naked canvas,
sculpting and shaping the flat surface.
Billions of shimmering diamonds float in the sky.
The moon gleams,
like an opal on fire.
The night sky spirals and swirls around my mind,
consuming every sight in the distance,
and the universe is visible now.

But the slightest glimpse of sunlight peeks among the horizon,
creeping through the cracks between buildings,
and it is again time for the brushes to find their home
back in the tattered cup on the table.
When nightfall comes again
they will be awoken.

Cassandra Griffing

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

"Coffee Shop"

Warm air embraces me
as I stroll through the door
next to the window labeled "open".
The welcoming temperature
battles with the bitter cold outside
nipping at my fingertips.
The rich aroma of coffee
floods its way through my nostrils,
coaxing me to the counter.

Voices—
High, low, young, and old
blend together as one.
They rise and fall
like waves lapping smooth sand.
The click-clack of saucers
and the mumble-jumble of voices
speaking of their everyday lives
offer something better than music.

A caesura from their usual bustles.
One by one they retreat,
back to their usual lives.
And off they go to the
hustle of the cold city.

Cassandra Griffing

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

"Piano"

Watercolor-painted notes
dance through the air
and blend together through
gently flowing strokes.
The light melody paints a story,
carefully crafted from each note
plucked by the keys.
Black and white keys
are transformed into
crystal-refracted rainbows.

But suddenly,
the notes darken and fade black.
It is the battle between dark and light.
The monster growls as
chords are struck
and a roaring darkness
facades the room.

One can be taught to play the notes
and rhythms in a pleasing way,
but the taming of the beast
is something self taught,
a characteristic of a true musician.
It is black and white,
and everything in between.

Cassandra Griffing

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

"Jewel of the World"

A cluster of blues
reflecting the sky in all different hues.
The sun smiles down
on the seascape.
Water calmly crashes onto
the barnacle-cluttered rocks,
causing the emerald seaweed to wave in the current—
a bitter-sweet good bye.
The salted winds whisper
sweet nothings into my ear.
No ounce of crafted words,
no amount of carefully painted strokes
could capture the awe.
When I wave goodbye
I'm left with only a living
jewel in my memory.

Cassandra Griffing

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

"Dreaming"

I dream of sleeping next to you,
the lullaby composed of your steady breaths
rocking me to sleep.

I dream of strolling through the garden
by your side,
the same garden that proved
humans to be imperfect.
Imperfect you are
but imperfection makes this dream,
and us, feel real.

I dream of running through
a grassy meadow
frolicking like gazelles,
sunbeams peering through the branches,
leaves gently bending the
golden light that streams from above.
We are unaware of the
shadows behind bushes
where light doesn't dare to shine.

I dream of approaching
the heart of your darkest fears,
chilling you to the core.
I dream of our souls, intertwined,
laced like satin ribbon.

I dream not to be seen,
but to be sensed in all entirety.

Mara Gullett

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Where Did I Go Wrong?

Maybe I'm only exaggerating, blowing this thing out of proportion. I open my eyes, but it's still there- the liquid in small, rectangular pouches, needles stuck in my arms- proof I'd done something I shouldn't ever have. I'd gotten caught up with the wrong people, the ones who smoke, drink, and break laws at the mere age of fourteen. *What was I supposed to do? They asked if I wanted a drink. I thought it was water!* No, my parents would never believe that lie. I knew what it was. I knew what kind of trouble I was getting myself into. Was I going to admit to that? Heck no, I was enjoying myself, my "bad-girl" personality. Now, lying here half unconscious, I wish I could go back in time and change everything.

It all started in seventh grade. Some kids in the grade above me, of whom I still don't know their names, crowded around me on the bus. They seemed so *cool* at the time. I was tired of being the "smarty-pants" of the seventh grade. Could there have been a better way to change?

They brought "stuff" to me every day, told me how to use it, and acted entirely innocent when the bus driver came back to give us a stern look. "No food or drinks on the bus," she'd say. There was always a part of me that was afraid of the consequences, but I quickly learned to shove that feeling down my throat and all the way to my toes. *You wanna be tough? Show those kids, Adelaine. Show 'em you're not who they think you are.* I told myself I could be just like them if I tried, and unfortunately I succeeded.

The first day they sat by me, I questioned their intent. *Are they trying to kill me or change me?* "Wanna drink?" One of the boys had asked.

"It tastes *delicious*," The girl looked sinister, yet persuading. I took it; I actually thought it was some non-alcoholic flavored crap. *I should have known better.* After only a sip, I realized what it *actually* was, and regret took over my body. The trio cheered for me, as I had just gulped down my first alcoholic beverage. *Why did I go along with it?*

Day after day, missed homework assignment after missed homework assignment, I told myself I enjoyed the feeling, only because I wanted to be "cool" for them. In actuality, I hated what I was doing to myself, but it wasn't something I could just stop. I felt worse each day, but what would *they* think if I told them I just *couldn't* anymore?

It moved from the bus to the park after school. We'd meet up at 3:30, after we had gone home to say "hi" to our mother and father. I'd abuse the substances, only to make myself a different person. I was tired of being the good girl who always turned her work in, had good manners, and was in all the higher-level courses. For too many years, people nominated me for "most likely to succeed" and "most likely to win a nobel prize." Although it was nice that people thought so highly of me, I wanted change. And I wanted it so bad that I didn't care what it took or the toll it would take on my body.

The sad thing was, nobody realized what I was doing. Counselors, administration, even other students, didn't think it'd be me who would be stupid enough to do these terrible, terrible acts. They could have helped me, could have saved my well-being. I was always too under-the-

influence to do it myself. My teachers just thought I was having a bad day each time I flunked a test or assignment. I shouldn't blame them, though; I didn't think I'd do this to myself, either.

Why couldn't I accept myself? It's good to be kind, caring, and intelligent. I could have been a businesswoman, living in New York City. Or real estate, that pays well. "*No, Carey, I don't want forty-three stocks of Google, I want forty-two of Apple!*" I'd bark into my cell-phone. Did I think about the consequences this would have on my future? Of course not, I wanted to be a "cool" middle schooler. If anything, this was the lamest thing I'd ever done.

I smoked and drank every single day for five months, even on weekends. After that almost half-year, however, I started to sense something in those eighth-graders' eyes- fear.

"What's up guys?" I'd said while feeling a bit more woozy than usual. I don't remember their responses. They ran away then- I know that much- and the next day they didn't sit by me on the bus, didn't meet me at the park.

By the time I was certain the three of them weren't coming back, I started finding my own ways to feel the sensation I did when I was with them- the sensation of flying, of feeling like a totally different person. What I didn't know was that those eighth-graders would only give me enough to make me *start* to feel high or drunk. I guessed at the amounts I would take in, and it landed me a place in the Emergency Room.

I ended up with alcohol poisoning and was diagnosed with drug addiction. *I'm not addicted, I'm not addicted*, I would tell them over and over. But the way my speech was slurred and my breath smelled more of alcohol than breath itself was a sure sign of the truth. Throughout all my denial, I only wanted more, more, *more*. I couldn't get it. I even tried to run to the nearest convenience store because I desperately wanted a pack of cigarettes. My family held me down in the hospital chair.

How addicted was I? The fact that I felt I couldn't live without a *cigarette*? That's so *unlike* me. I guess that was the point though, wasn't it? I achieved my goal; what more did I want?

The clear liquid continues to *drip drop* into my veins. Nobody is in this cold, sterile room. No family, nurse, anyone. *They left me*, I think. "*Adelaine, you disappointed us!*" I could hear my father scolding. My mother crying, my sisters and brothers looking confused and sad. Not only did this *thing* ruin my life, it ruined everyone around mine, too.

I'm still sitting on this uncomfortable hospital bed, four days after I was driven here by my parents. The nurse checks on me once every hour; my family, never. I still don't feel quite right. My mind is foggy, thoughts are spinning. I am unaware of my surroundings half the time. I don't know what's going on and nobody will tell me. *Where is my family, where are my friends?* All I want to do is go back to being *me*. Smart, quiet, low-profile me.

Mara Gullett

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

DĀŠjĀ Vu

There she was, waiting for him, just as he'd hoped. Her long, wavy blonde hair shone in the sunlight; the wind created a dramatic effect, catching her dress in its breath, causing her beauty to knock the air out of him. They stood there for awhile, staring at each other as if they knew they were soulma-

Roger hovers over me. "What the heck are you writing, *lovebird*?" I quickly slam my laptop shut, startled. My brother was never one to appreciate words or any of the emotions that came with them. "Why write when you can *climb*?" he'd often ask. Roger could rock climb as swift as a cheetah, graceful as a hawk.

My response to his un-appreciativeness is always some terrible attempt at a comeback, like, "Writing makes me happy, okay?!" Cringey comments like that are what makes me the "lame" child in the house. Oh, how ironic it is that I can write masterpieces but can't seem to form words with my own mouth.

My parents were the typical high school jocks. Dad played football, wrestled, and was a state champion in the 800 meter dash. Mom was the cheerleader every guy wanted, and the track and field queen they thought they couldn't live without. Roger ended up as the rock climbing, basketball-playing heartthrob of his high school. I, however, am frequently asked, "Are you adopted?" and "Wait, *they're* your parents?"

They have only just met, but he is head-over-heels in love and she can already imagine a future with this man.

"Hello, how are you?" What a gentleman, *she swoons.*

Amazing, now that I've met you, *she wants to say. Instead, to sound a little more dignified, she repeats his question.*

"Great, how are you?" The man does not answer. "Take a seat," he says. And so she does.

"Two coffees!" he says as he raises two fingers to capture the attention of the waiter.

As I drink my own cup of joe- dark roast, hazelnut creamer, pinch of sugar- I tap my un-manicured nails against the worn kitchen table. My laptop sits in front of me, craving new ideas. The cereal bowl from this morning has been pushed a few inches away, almost out of reach. *Coffee, coffee, coffee. What comes after coffee?*

As a girl who's never been on a date, writing about one is tough. I'm trying to get in the mindset of the couple, but I don't know what being a couple *feels* like. That's the problem; how am I supposed to make the *reader* feel all these emotions when I can't even feel them? This is crap. I wish I could crumple my idea into a ball and toss it out the window. Instead, I continue typing, because I haven't any better ideas.

The waiter brings the coffees to the couple. "Sir, we would like two cranberry scones, as well?" The nameless man flashes a bright smile; the waiter returns a grim expression and nods, then hurries away to grab the sweet, crumbly pastries.

"So, where do we begin?" and there shines that smile once again.

I get up from the uncomfortable wooden chair to stretch my back and grab a snack. The once-steaming java is now too frigid to enjoy. After pouring it out in the sink and placing my mug in the dishwasher, I peel a clementine and tear the juicy sections apart, one by one, to eat. After procrastinating a few minutes more, I finally head to my bedroom. There, I peel off my flannel pajamas, throw on some fresh clothes, and brush on a little makeup.

I fit my laptop into its case and head off to the bookstore; I need some inspiration and a few new ideas. While there, I thumb through the many, many magazines until I find the one I'm looking for: *Writer's Digest*. The one publication reserved solely for the grammar freaks, aspiring writers, and those who are already writing to their heart's extent.

I catch sight of a young man looking through the construction and hardware magazines. He blushes after I notice his staring- *Guys still blush? That's adorable*. We both go back to our reading, but I can't focus on anything other than his stare.

As I'm reading blurbs and story outlines, ideas flow through my brain like rivers through the earth. *Small talk, food, laughter, magazines*. The story seems to set up itself. *Ralph's Books for Rooks* never fails to inspire. I sit at a corner table near the front windows of the store, pull out my most prized writing tool, and get to work.

The duo continue the quiet chatter as each lick the last of the sticky cranberry sauce off their fingers and the final drops of coffee touch their tongue.

"What now?" Her sweet, soothing voice rattles the comforting small talk to pieces.

"I don't know, madam, any ideas?" He had a voice like a mid-1900s man, fit to envelope any woman with warmth and affection. What were they to do?

Rather than answering the question, the maiden was overcome with a sudden curiosity. What is this gentleman's name? "William," he then pronounced, almost as if he could read her mind.

"My name is William, Madam. I realize I never did mention it."

"William," she repeated, the name sending doves fluttering in her mind. "I'm Annabelle."

I look up then, just for a moment's worth, and find the same man from the magazine aisle sitting across from me. "Hello, my lady," he says, and gazes in my direction, displaying a sweet, innocent smile on his face. "So nice to meet you." *Why is he sitting next to me?* I can't help but feel self-conscious; I've never been approached by a man before.

"I'm Ashley," I say reflexively. *Oh my God, Ash. You're a wreck.* "What's your name?" I relax a little too much, causing my voice to sound like a kindergartener's. *And the award for most awkward around a guy goes to... Ashley Carter! Slow claps take over the almost non-existent audience.*

"Hello?" His voice shakes me awake from my daydream. "I thought I'd lost you," he says jokingly.

"Annabelle and William, what a wonderful couple," she wants people to say. They're now strolling on the boardwalk, his hand reaching for hers. Though they met only an hour ago, Annabelle feels as though she's known William for years. He buys her cotton candy; she says 'thank you' and enjoys the spoiling.

"My name is Matthew, by the way," he says with a smile. *I can't believe someone like this would purposefully approach me, I think with awe.* Matthew and I talk for a while, my laptop shut so not awaken me from this dream-like reality with its blinding screen. Finally we walk outside into the bitter cold of winter. He hands me his coat and I willingly accept. We walk through the small shops and swoon over the little toys and trinkets.

Matthew, while I'm looking at the wooden animal sets, wanders off to the other side of the store. Out of curiosity, I walk over to him and find that he is purchasing the cashmere scarf I'd pointed

out earlier.

“Aw, you didn’t have to do that for me,” I say to him after he’s checked out. *How did he remember?*

“It’s my pleasure.” He loops the scarf around my neck and we exit the store with my heart feeling full and happy.

The pair continue to walk for what seems like hours, passing closed carnival ride after closed carnival ride. The fall chill causes Annabelle to shiver, and neither one of them brought a coat. Annabelle wishes William would have thought to bring one just so that he could wrap it around her shoulders and hold her in his warmth. Instead, they sit on a bench near an abandoned ice cream shop and huddle together like penguins.

Snow begins falling then, heavier and heavier, until a blizzard is in full force. I can’t see farther than two feet in front of me, and Matthew is shivering so much he can barely walk.

“Let’s go in here,” I yell, gesturing to a stationery shop. The biting wind is *whooshing* so hard that neither of us can hear a thing. We duck through the doorway and into the cozy store. About five other people have already crowded in here, and there are bound to be more.

It’s forty degrees, so nobody has their boardwalk shops open. Annabelle and William are still crunched together on the bench, as the nearest heated building is over two miles away. They both walked here mid-morning, when it was a bearable seventy degrees. The beach is never this cold; why is it now, when all they want is to enjoy each other’s company?

The fifteen of us that are now cramped in the store are snowed in. Ice pellets threaten to shatter the thin, fragile windows. I would email or Skype my family, but my laptop battery has died from the below-freezing temperatures. I forgot my cell phone at home, and Matthew’s has no signal.

A golf cart stops in front of them. A probably fifty-year-old man steps out and asks, “Would you like a ride back into Portsmouth?” Agreeing, the couple hop inside and the man speeds toward the city. Once there, the driver drops them off with a little wave and a nod.

Annabelle and William continue along the cobblestone street, back to the corner coffee shop where they first gazed into each other’s eyes. After stepping inside, Annabelle feels a smile forming on her face as she thinks of the fluttery feeling she felt a few hours ago upon seeing William. William, however, is saddened a bit by the familiar surroundings.

“Annabelle, there’s something I need to ask.”

“Yes?” *The twinge of excitement in her voice causes William to feel horrible about what he is going to do, but he knows it will be much worse if he waits.*

“We’re not-” *he can’t complete his sentence; nobody has made him feel so happy, yet awful, at the same time. “You wouldn’t count us as a ‘couple,’ would you, Annabelle? I mean, we only met today.”*

Annabelle’s hopes are shattered. The butterflies who once floated delightfully in her stomach are suddenly pushed down, farther and farther, until Annabelle feels as though she is carrying a three-pound weight inside her.

“I’m sorry, but I have to leave,” Matthew sounds sincerely apologetic, but I can’t help but wonder where he has to run off to during probably the worst snowstorm we’ve had this century.

“We’re snowed in; there’s no way to get out of here,” I say.

“Ashley, I really have to go. There’s no way to explain this to you without hurting you, but I was in that bookstore to take a break and just find someone to talk to, without strings, without attachments.” I look at him, not saying a word, trying to keep my own emotions in check. He pulls my hand from my pocket and lifts it to his cheek. It’s then that I notice what I have either

been too blind to see or what he hid from me at the beginning- the glint of a wedding band. I can't believe I thought there was anything more between us. Of course there wasn't; who would want to date the innocent, geeky writer who always sports a messy bun and sweats? A tear threatens to sting my cheek. I'm not sad as much as I am completely embarrassed.

"Just leave." I scrunch my knees up and let the tears roll down my warm, reddened face.

"Why do you ask?" Annabelle hopes she isn't wrong about William; he was such a gentleman when they were in this very spot just a few hours earlier.

"I thought we had something, but we don't, Annabelle. You've got to be feeling that same thing, don't you?" He seems hopeful that she'll agree and they will go their own separate ways, no questions asked.

"I don't, sorry. I thought you actually cared enough to-" Annabelle is too hurt to continue her sentence. Tears swell in her eyes, threatening to force their way downward. Her bottom lip trembles and she covers her face, still standing there.

Matthew couldn't get out; there was no way to push the doors open through the snow. Rather than hiding in the crowd, he moved across the store. Seeing a regretful young man standing next to glittery, pink stationery sets broke apart the dark clouds in my heart just enough to let a laugh escape. Soon after, though, I went back to my pitiful sorrow. My first "relationship" didn't even last a day; one of us didn't even plan for it to.

When she pulls her hands away, she sees that he's left the shop without a trace. The tears begins to slow. Annabelle walks out of the hazelnut-scented building silently, a hole left in her heart. She thought he was the one.

Olivia Hamlin

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Tubes

She went to bed at 6
And woke at 3 in the morning,
Taking naps on the couch religiously
A bottle of lotion, scented of baby powder and aloe;
And backscratcher at her side,
Every visit was a chance to examine her scrapbooks.
I analyzed every photo there:
The pictures when the tubes were absent,
When her smile stretched a little wider
And her posture, straighter,
I remember the most.

Rising up to eat her frozen meal
and take her pills,
The long, clear cylinders followed her.
Snug beneath her nose,
They wrapped around her feet,
Dragging behind;
Connecting her to the earth-
And us.
At times, I saw her on the patio with Grandpa,
Her laughter and coughing was muffled
Through the smudged glass door,
I could taste the smoke at the back of my throat
From the cigarette poised between her fingers,
a glowing amber, giving her life,
Yet stealing it at the same time.

Her oxygen tank, like a grey lump of trash,
Sits forgotten in the corner.
The tubes piled beside it,
unhooked from her body,
Freeing her,
now,
Forever

Evan Handke

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

A New Beginning

“OK, I’ve had it with you!”

I knew that my mom was serious this time because she said it in a really low, quiet voice. My brother and I had been fighting all summer. It was hot, we were agitated and school was a long way off. My brother and I were sent to our room but, we could hear her talking downstairs.

“OK, sure, tomorrow afternoon? Do they need to bring their own clubs? We’ll see you then.”

When we heard mom coming, we ran from the door of our bedroom and threw ourselves on the bed like we had been there the whole time. We could hear her walk up the steps slow and methodically. The world-weary steps of a mother who has just had it with her two boys.

I saw the door creak open and my mom stormed inside.

“OK. I’ve had it with you two. I just called the course and I’ve signed you up for the next youth golf camp. Oh and by the way, it starts at 7:00 a.m. so you two need to be ready to walk out the door in the morning at 6:15 a.m.”

John and I just looked at each other with our mouths open. We were not morning people.

The next morning I rolled out of bed and got dressed. My brother and I jumped into the car and waited. Mom was taking us to play the most boring sport ever. By the time we got to the course I was so mad; I couldn’t even see straight.

“Why did I have to do this.”

“What did I do to deserve this.”

My mom pushed my brother and I on to the course

“Be good!”

About two minutes after my mom left, the camp leader yelled for us to all get in a line and share our name with the rest of the group. “This is going to be fun,” the kid next to me said. I was thinking the same thing. The leader then divided us into groups. He sent my group to putting first.

Our group putted for about fifteen minutes before heading off to chipping. Fifteen minutes later we switched groups again. I couldn’t wait to drive! I really felt like crushing the ball and watching it soar past the third flag. It felt like we had only been driving for two minutes when the director told us that we did a good job and we would all meet at the same time and the same place tomorrow. At first I thought I would hold my ground with Mom and continue to hate golf but, by the second day all I wanted to do was golf. I loved driving the ball almost to the green and then chipping it onto the green. Most of all, I loved the sound of the perfect putt.

The week flew by! On the last day of camp, I was eager to get out on the course. Unfortunately, we had to work on fundamentals one more day. At the end of the hour, the leader asked us to line up near the putting green. I wasn't really sure what we were doing. Maybe this was the time they would be congratulating all the kids in camp. They told us they had been watching our progress and they would be dividing us into three groups based on how many holes we would be playing. Three holes were for the little kids, six holes were for the kids who could drive the ball

at least a 100 yards and 9 holes were for the kids who could walk long distances and handle golfing some of the more challenging holes.

Now hearing that information, I started to get nervous. The teachers started to hand out envelopes; I nervously waited for mine. I decided to wait until I got in the car to open my letter.

I opened it and saw 9 holes! I was so happy! Now that camp was officially over, I would have to wait until next Wednesday to get back out on the course.

Beep. Beep. Beep. My alarm clock was so annoying. How could it be time to get up already? I got up and got dressed to go golfing. My mom had to drop me off at the course a little before 7:00 a.m. We were almost there when I started to get nervous. What if the other kids were way better than me? What if I messed up?

When we got there, I was even more nervous than I had been in the car. I got my golf bag out of Mom's car and walked down to the putting green. At the same time that I arrived, a few of my friends showed up too. About ten minutes later the instructors gave us our groups and told us to head out on the course. We were the last group to reach Hole One so we had to wait for the group in front of us. I watched the other group to scope out the competition. Most of the kids were at the same level as me. I was relieved to know I wasn't going to be kicked around the whole day. When the group in front of us finished, it was finally our turn. Most of the kids in my group missed and shanked the ball into the pond. I was lucky and hit the ball right down the fairway. After about three hours and 8 more holes, we were finally finished! By this time, I could barely walk. Unfortunately, we had to walk over the biggest hill on the course just to get back to the clubhouse. Thank goodness Mom was waiting and ready to take us home. I continued to wake up at six in the morning every Wednesday for the rest of the summer. The summer had been great but, it was all about to end. Mom told me to sit down so we could talk.

"Your father got a promotion which, means we have to move to Ohio."

"Are you serious? All my friends live here."

"I'm sorry." "It's not up to you, I'm sorry."

Everything was going good and now we had to move. After dinner I laid in my bed thinking about what my new life was going to be like. I started day dreaming about a big town and a fancy house. I bet my parents would even build a putting green for my brother and I. Now I was starting to get excited about the move. I went to sleep still dreaming about how fantastic my new life was going to be.

The next morning I got most of my stuff together and loaded it into the Uhaul truck.

"Did you grab everything out of my room?"

"Yes Mom I grabbed everything."

"Ok." "Tell your brother we are leaving."

I took a last walk around my home and grabbed the remaining boxes and shut the door to my past.

The next nine hours felt like the longest hours of my life.

"Wake up we are almost here."

I looked out the window only to see a couple of small broken down houses and tumbleweeds rolling by our car.

"What do you think?"

"What do I think?" "Are you serious this is where we are going to live?"

This place doesn't even have a house that is complete. All I knew was this is nothing like I thought my new life would be like. I didn't talk to my family for the rest of the drive. When we

finally pulled up to our new house, it looked like our old shed in the backyard of the old house. I was hoping the inside was better than the outside. Unfortunately, that was not the case. It was the complete opposite. Right when you walked in, the smell of death and mold hit you hard.

The more I explored the worse it got. There were only two rooms which meant that I had to share a room with my brother. Now I was mad.

“This is the worst,” my brother said as he walked into our room.

After we brought everything into the house my brother and I started making jokes about the new house.

“I sure hope no rats crawl on us and eat our brains tonight.”

“That’s enough,” my dad said.

“Go upstairs and get ready for school tomorrow,” mom said.

The next morning my mom told us that she would take us to school or if we wanted, we could ride the bus.

“They have buses here.”

“I thought we had to ride horses to school.”

“Nice try but, there is a bus.”

We got into the car and waited anxiously to get to our new school.

“This is our school?”

“Yes.” “Isn’t it nice?”

“Seriously.” “I thought the house was bad.”

“I love you both.” “Have a good day.”

It was nothing like our old school. Every kid in 4th grade up to seniors in high school went to this school. There were only three rooms in the whole school too. After a week of attending our new school, the principal told us that there would be golf tryouts for the school team. Finally, one good thing happened out of this horrible move. I called and told my mom that I was staying after school to try out for golf.

“Great !” “I am glad that you are finally accepting that we moved.”

When I got to tryouts, I was pretty nervous. I looked around the room and saw a kid walking towards me.

“Are you ready for the tryouts?”

“Yeah, I am just a little nervous.”

“Don’t be!” “The tryouts are super easy.”

“Really?” “Is anyone here any good?”

“No.” “Not even the coach is any good.”

This all made me a little less nervous. When it was my turn to run through the drills I did ok but not that great. When I got back to the room where everyone else was waiting, everyone was staring at me.

“You’re amazing.”

“Yeah, you’re great.”

“Thanks.”

I wasn't sure what they are talking about. At my old school I wasn't that good. Two days later the tryout sheet came out. I was at the top of the sheet. I called my mom immediately to tell her the great news.

“Great job!” “Your father and I are so proud of you.”

“Thanks Mom.”

“We will celebrate you making the team when you get home.”

“Alright.” “Bye.”

When I got home we went out to eat. As soon as we got back home, I went out to our wasteland of a backyard and started to drive a few balls. I

It wasn't long before our first official meet. I got on the bus with my fellow team members. I slept through most of the ride because I was nervous because the coach and team already had high hopes for me. When we got to the course I saw the team we were versing. They looked pretty good but I thought we could beat them. We teed off on a par 4 and the game had begun. I drove the ball about twenty feet from the green. Next shot, I chipped the ball two feet from the flag. Finally I putted the ball in the hole and ended up with a score of -1 or one under par. The next hole wasn't as good I finished +1 or one over par now my score was zero.

Our team was in the lead as we got to the last hole of the round. I was up and it was a straight fairway to the hole. I hit it perfectly on the end of my driver. At that very moment, I saw the ball fly through the air and I knew that it was going to be close or maybe even a hole in one shot.

I finished my follow through and saw the ball drop on the green with a thud but, it continued to roll until it dropped into the hole. Everyone on my team lost it when the ball dropped into the hole. The other team sat in disbelief. They still had to tee off though because it was still possible for them to get a hole in one and tie. They hit the ball just a few feet short of the green which meant our team had just won.

I called my mom as soon as I got on the bus.

“That is amazing,” she said.

The next day at school everyone was congratulating me. At my old school no one knew me and I certainly wasn't popular. This school year was going to be different. I was the star of the golf team and I had recently won the academic achievement award.

The next few matches went the same as the last. I won the game for our team every time.

Things were also starting to look up at home. My dad was starting to renovate our house. He already renovated my brother's room and my room so, it was actually pretty nice. This was only the beginning of our new life.

Madelyne Hartleroad

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educators: Angela Perkins, Rebecca Stallard

Category: Poetry

The Cherry Tree

I noticed the cherry tree waving to me
Her gnarled fingers tossing, spinning
their petaled prawn rings
round and round
They jingled in the breeze
And her eyes were gazing upwards
towards a sky I had never seen before
Because I had been too busy gawking down
at texts, at cursors, at pics
To ever tilt my head up
And watch the spiral of droplets
Parachute onto Earth's flowing green gown
And I had never stretched back and absorbed
her sunshine smile, her lilting song
I saw the cherry tree waving to me
and I felt her loneliness
and her life
I saw myself reflected in her solitary mind
And I walked to join her, amidst the sun
And watched the clouds float by

Madelyne Hartleroad

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educators: Angela Perkins, Rebecca Stallard

Category: Poetry

The Golden Realm

Death has never opened broader worlds
Tearing down red, orange, yellow
Curtains that call twinkling rays entwined in a dance
With the chipper October's swooping breaths
Singing down in rains of velvet, sheets of brass
Revealing fields of earth's finest gold
That stretch to the edge of the harvest moon
And to it the turkeys cock their heads
Snuggled into quilts with acorn corners
Listening to the lilt of crunching hooves
And counting splashes of persimmon
As proof that robins still roam the woods
In their everlasting search for sun
The trees unravel their gnarled knuckles
And mushrooms sprout from their finger-like roots
Giving sanctuary to the button snails
Who nap as the day floats by
Their dreams swirling with voyages over musty logs
And trails of earthy scents that waft
From the forest floor's crimson cloak
Death has made this world visible
This golden realm called "Fall"

Megan Hartleroad

Age: 15, Grade: 9

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

Educator: Hillary Kisker

Category: Humor

Felix the Fabulous

“I’m still not sure about this.” I stated, my hand stopping a few inches away from the car door’s handle.

My mom turned her head away from the car’s ignition to face me. “About what?”

“This.” I repeated, opening my arms towards the building behind us.

“Sweetie, you just gestured to the entire school.”

I shook my head and opened the car door, not wanting to risk her giving me her famous speech about how “I just need to make friends.” I slammed the door shut before she could start running her mouth again and headed off towards the minefield ahead of me. Ok, maybe school wasn’t as bad as I kept pegging it to be. Today, I could turn over a new leaf. Maybe everyone would stop seeing me as the little weakling I was. *Sure. Keep dreaming, Sweet Cheeks.*

My hopes may have been a little high, but I thought I still had a pretty good shot at a better life. My scrawny bones, silver eyes, and out of the ordinary name might make it easier for me to be picked out but I wasn’t the only weird one at Staley. There was always Felix. He stuck out like a sore thumb. *Felix... Don’t remind me.*

Felix was the only guy I knew that could get away with plastering pictures of cats to his locker wall and toting around the monthly starbucks drink. The way his silver eyes danced with happiness at the sight of anyone (whether he knew them or not) sickened me. Somebody could threaten to kill Felix’s family and he would just smile at them with his freckled face. I seem like the only one that has a problem with Felix though. Everyone else loves him, he’s practically the school’s celebrity.

He’s not that bad. Remember the dodgeball incident?

Oh, that’s right. A few months ago, a girl had hit me in the head with a dodgeball. Being the scrawny weakling I am, I had fainted as soon as the ball came in contact with my face. Felix, being the “kind” guy he was had volunteered to carry me to the nurse. I was grateful that he had helped me get to the nurse. That was, until I found out that if he had brought me there, he would have seen me before I got a chance to put makeup on over where I got hit. He would have noticed that I didn’t get any type of bump or bruise.

I don't know why but I’ve never coughed, sneezed, or gotten injured. I’ve tried to ask my mom but she always insists that it’s not true and then proceeds to tell me false stories of the time “I got

a papercut.” I may not be some super soldier the government experimented on, but I know for a fact that I’m not a normal person. So far, there’s only two other people that know for sure. (My mom and the nurse.) And I’d like to keep it that way. Every time I get “injured” I go to the nurse’s office and cake makeup on to resemble a scar or a bruise. It takes quite a bit of time and effort, but it pays off in the end.

“Hey, Daiduris,” somebody called.

I slammed my journal shut and looked up, only to come face to face with Felix. “Don’t call me that.” I hissed between my closed teeth. I’m sure a crowd of students would have encircled any two hostile teenage boys by now, but Felix and I were different. I was a pacifist and Felix would only slap someone if they were talking trash about his favorite soap opera. (Yes, I said slap. I doubt Felix is man enough to actually punch somebody.)

“But that is your name, isn’t it?” Felix’s eyebrows knitted together as confusion dawned over his face. “What else am I supposed to call you? Person wearing a purple hoodie number three?”

This was going to be a long day.

“Daiduris!”

Twice in one day? Is Felix trying to piss me off? I clutched my binder closer to my chest and picked up my pace, hoping I’d lose him in the sea of students.

“Wait!” Felix called, shouldering his way to the front of the school. *Persistent. What does he want?* I could’ve slowed down to find out but I really didn’t feel like putting up with anymore of his nonsense. I pushed my way through the school doors and began my journey home.

“Daiduris!” How is he still behind me? I kept walking, hoping he would leave me alone.

“I’m starting to think you’re ignoring me, Daiduris.” Felix exclaimed, his voice laced with hurt. *Oh, really? You just picking up on that, Mate?* “And I don’t understand why, considering that I’m the only person in the school that talks to you.” *Yes. Yes, you are. And if you would stop bothering me, I wouldn’t have to ignore you.* “If you would stop and listen to me, you might be interested in what I have to say.” *Rubbish. You’ve lived here since the start of the year and you’ve never said something that caught my attention.* “It’s about your real parents.”

I stopped dead in my tracks. How did he know I was adopted? It might look like I don’t have the same genes as my mom but how does he know I don’t just take after my father? And why does he care that I was adopted? “I’ve moved on, Felix. They aren’t my family, Laura is.”

“This isn’t about your parents, Daiduris.” Felix insisted, his hands going up as if he was surrendering. “It’s something else.” He nervously fidgeted where he was standing and his face bore a pleading look. “I know you may not trust me at first but there’s a prophecy-”

“Oh, a prophecy, Felix? Am I Harry Potter and my adoptive mother forgot to tell me?”

“No- but just listen to me, It’ll all make sense, I swear.” Felix cautiously took a few steps towards me.

“No! Stop screwing with my life, Felix. Just leave me alone.” I turned away from Felix and ran as fast as my legs would let me. I knew Felix wouldn’t leave me alone. I’d see him the next day at school, and the day after that.

Or, maybe not. When my mom got home from work, she told me the “horrible” news. Apparently the school had somehow caught on fire a few hours after dismissal. I was glad I wouldn’t have to deal with seeing Felix in all of my classes. My mom however, took this as her daily opportunity to panic. We didn’t have enough money for a private school and Staley was the only public school district we had. Like a broken record, she repeated the same few sentences of worry over and over again. That was, until we got a call from Staley saying we’d resume school in a different building in three days.

Once again, I find this question plaguing my mind. *Why me?* I cringed from the sofa while I watched my mom beckon Felix inside. Felix grinned from ear to ear and waved at me from the doorway. “Hey, Daiduris.” I sunk lower in the sofa, hoping he would get the hint and leave me alone. He didn’t. “Wanna chat outside?” *No.*

“No, it’s brass monkeys outside.” I mumbled, pulling my knees up to my chest. I would’ve started yelling at Felix if my mom hadn’t been there.

“Brass monkeys?” Felix repeated.

“Is Daiduris using those British slang words again?” Laura asked, pausing from her cooking to look at me and Felix. “Brass monkeys means cold,” she translated. “Daiduris had a nasty habit of using British slang when he’s steaming hot with rage. Wait, why you mad at Felix? He seems like such a sweetie.”

“Let’s go outside.” I said, shooting up from the sofa. I lead Felix outside, not wanting to be around my mother any longer. “What do you want?” I asked when I had deemed us far enough away from the apartment.

“I know that you didn’t want to listen to me the first time, but know that we have a few days before we have to go back to school-”

“Hold up, were you the person that set the school on fire?” I narrowed my eyes at Felix. How far would he go just so I would listen to him? “How?” I questioned when he didn’t deny it.

“You know that science project we did today?” Felix asked. I nodded and he continued. “I asked our teacher for some of those chemicals after class. Turns out they explode when you mix them together.”

“Are you telling me he just gave you explosive chemicals without even asking why you wanted

them?”

“Yeah, people have a hard time saying no to me.” Felix replied, his left hand automatically stationing itself at his hip. *I’m pretty sure our school’s celebrity is some type of psychopath.* “About that prophecy, they said the demigod that last joins us would go on a quest to slay some beast. I was sent out to find more demigods, people with silver eyes, and I found you here!”

“Who sent you out? And-”

“Come with me, and I promise I’ll explain everything. Just trust me.” Felix smiled his usual grin and winked at me.

Felix and I stood at the bottom of a ravine, leaning against a boulder. “Before we go in, there’s something I should tell you about this place,” Felix started. *Go in what? There’s nothing here.* Maybe I was wrong to trust Felix with the rest of my life. (Which could be ending sooner than I anticipated because of him.) I was still at least ninety percent sure he was delusional, and possibly a psychopath. And yet, I still trusted him for some reason beyond my comprehension.

“Ok, what is it?” I asked when Felix didn’t continue his “emotional and moving” speech.

“The people here are different than the ones back at school.” Felix stated, looking down at the ground. *Really? That’s funny, because I was expecting them to be exact duplicates of the people at school.* “Nobody over there likes me.” *Oh.*

“Well I was the only person in the school that hated you,” Felix smiled as I continued. “And that didn’t stop you from bothering me, every single bloody day of my life. I’m sure it won’t be any different with the people in there.”

“No... “ Felix’s smile vanished. “It’s really bad. They really, really don’t like me.”

Ok, maybe he isn’t that bad. Even if everyone at school loved him, nobody where he lives likes him. I kinda feel bad for him. Something still didn’t match up. “Why did everyone at school like you so much if no one here does?”

“Well, all of us demigods have some kind of talent no normal human could have.” Felix explained. “I’m the son of Aphrodite and-”

“Wait, hold on. I don’t think I heard that right. Your mom has an aphro?”

Felix just shook his head. “I’m the son of Aphrodite.” *Oh, good. The thought of a greek god with an aphro is strangely terrifying.* “The ability I got from her doesn’t work on demigods. I call it my attraction level.”

Please tell me I heard him wrong again. “Bless you?” There, I just gave you a chance to redeem yourself. You better take it.

“My attraction level,” Felix repeated. “Every normal person likes me because of it-”
“Can we please just go?” *I take back every positive thing I said about Felix, I hate him.* Felix straightened his posture before walking straight into the ravine’s rock wall behind us. Instead of colliding with the wall or stopping a few inches in front of it, he literally walked through it. *He’s insane, I’m insane, this is insane. I’m starting to see a pattern.* Shaking my head, I followed Felix through the rock.

As soon as I made it to the other side, my jaw dropped open. “Cool, right?” Felix asked, smiling. I simply nodded at him, not wanting to distract myself from the scenery. I knew we were in an underground cave system but it wasn’t what I would’ve expected. There was a lot of space and instead of long skinny tunnels leading to another cave, there was a huge gap in the wall with another room on the other side. There were holes in the roof of the cave with sunlight peeking through and a huge patch of grass in the next room. “I knew you’d like it.” I could hardly hear Felix over the waterfall in the corner of the cave.

“It’s amazing. I just didn’t expect it to be underground.”

“Yeah, well if there were a lot of demigods in a camp above ground, we would’ve been attacked by monsters by now. Even if we had a magical barrier surrounding us, it probably would shatter, leaving us to defend for ourselves.”

“Wow, that was really specific. Good thing you guys made camp underground.”

I had only been in the camp for a few hours, yet here I was, sitting in the smallest building the cave had to offer. Despite only knowing me for a few minutes, the other demigods had looked at me like I was some plague. I assume it’s because I was with Felix. They shoved me into the male demigod’s Aphrodite house, (which was only occupied by Felix, apparently he was the only son of Aphrodite.) claiming that it was just until they found out what god my father was. *Super healing? Could that have been Apollo? Or if sweat counts as water, he could be Poseidon.* I didn’t really want to ask them about that one, though.

At least I know that my father is a god, and not my mom. If it had been my mother, I’m sure Felix would have been insisting that she’s Aphrodite and I healed quickly because it was keeping my skin in a perfect, beautiful condition. Oh God, just the thought of that sends shivers down my back. Wait, I forgot to tell Felix that I’m Catholic. I’m pretty sure this whole Greek Gods ordeal is against my religion.

“But I want a kitten too...” Felix whined in his sleep. My train of thoughts ran off the rails and crashed. *There’s no way I’m going to put up with this for the rest of my life. I better get my own tent, if these people expect me to cooperate with them.* Shaking my head, I closed my eyes and drifted off into sleep.

Sooner than I had hoped, I felt Felix's hands shaking my arm. "Wake up, Daiduris. It's time to find out what god your father is."

Jokes on you, there's no way I'm getting up this early. And have I mentioned how small and dainty Felix's hands are? They're perfectly manicured and everything... *If Felix tanned, would his freckles blend in with the tan or would they get darker too? No, he's probably one of those people that can't tan and get more freckles instead.*

"If you don't get up, I'll be forced to sing a reverse lullaby. One that would wake you up instead of helping you sleep."

"Felix, I left my cozy apartment to come live in a cave. I think I deserve a few more years of sleep." My eyes shot open when I felt cool air blow onto my bare arm. Felix had pulled my blankets off of me. "You're dead," I growled, shooting up. Felix dropped the blanket and bolted out the door, running for his life.

"Chasing another demigod around camp," a demigod I recognized as Spencer cooed when Felix and I ran past him.

I finally stopped pursuing my target when I heard someone in the middle of the cave clear their throat. "Settle down, we don't have all day." Camri, daughter of Athena said, glaring daggers at me. "After consulting the Welling Stone," *The Welling Stone? That's so lame.* "I found out what god the newest recruit belongs to. His name is Asclepius" *That has to be the worst name I've ever heard of, it's even worse than mine.*

"Isn't that the god of Mexicans?"

"No, he's the god of medicine." Camri corrected.

"God of Mexicans, really? This guy doesn't even look Mexican. He doesn't have a mustache, or a sombrero." Somebody, probably a son of Ares replied.

"That's so racist."

"You're racist!" The son of Ares retorted.

I was still having a hard time believing that my father was the Greek God Asclepius. I mean, the minor god of medicine? Really? He didn't have any other kids here and I find it hard to believe that I was the only kid he had. At this point, I'd be more convinced that my mother was Aphrodite. She wasn't one of the top three gods by any means, but she was at least one of the major ones.

"Bull." I called.

"See, bull is a Spanish term."

“No, it’s not! Bull is el toro in Spanish.”

“This has to be fake,” I continued. “Nobody else here is the son of Asclepius, why would I be? This is all some big prank Felix got you guys in on, isn’t it?” My eyes widened as Camri grinned at someone and gave them a nod, one of the Ares kids cracked their knuckles, taking a threatening step towards me. They raised their fist and brought it down on my face. Swipe after swipe came. My face was stinging ever so painfully, but there was no hint of a bruise or scar. Like a snake, I wriggled out of his grasp and ran back towards Felix’s tent.

“I believe Asclepius has just claimed Daiduris,” Camri stated, gesturing to the snake that was slithering after me. Asclepius’ symbol was snake wrapped around a staff. “But when should we tell him that his supposable dad has been dead for centuries?”

Carly Hassenstab

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley Northwest High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Ted Fabiano

Category: Short Story

Not Knowing

The cement floors give my feet blisters and calluses. Dried blood is encrusted on my skin and there are spots on my clothes where years of Tide haven't been able to wash away. Dirt has permanently settled in the deep crevices of my nails.

I glance at the clock. 23 hours 40 minutes and 39 seconds. I refuse to take my medication and since everyone knows what will happen to me today, they allow it. I need some clarity.

For the last day I will be alive on this earth I want my mind to be clear, unlike the fog that washes over me once I push the tiny red, orange, light blue, and white pills down the back of my throat with my tongue. Clarity. That's what I need today, well that, and to be breathing tomorrow, but we all know that won't happen. I might not have been able to control much since I've been here, but clarity, I can give myself that.

I didn't sleep last night. I'm not gonna waste what little time I have left sleeping. I'm not even tired. I reach in my pocket, pull out a piece of chalk and look over to the last section of the wall that is not yet buried behind vertical white lines of chalk that is so faded you can hardly tell it's there. ***

"Wait!" I yelled as they pushed me in the cell and closed the gate. "You're making a big mistake please you gotta believe me! I didn't kill her, please! Please!" They ignored me.

I'm cold. Is it always gonna be so cold in here? Who am I kidding, that's the least of my worries. I have to get a re-trail; I have to go back in there. Some of the questions were confusing I can answer them better and without even realizing it, I was crying. Through my blurry vision I saw a piece of white chalk in the one of the corners.

I walked over to it and picked it up. They can make me stay in here but each day that goes by I will know how long I've been here, how long this injustice is lasting. I walked over to one of the corners where the previous lines were almost completely invisible to the naked eye. I drew a fresh vertical line down one of the previous ones. One. Please don't let me get to one thousand. 9130 lines. I go and draw another next to yesterday's. I look at the clock. 21 hours 13 minutes and 19 seconds.

I order eggs and toast for breakfast with a side of sausage and the others look at me through jealous eyes. I can't believe it; I would take the brown mush they call oatmeal for every meal of my life if that meant I could see the sunset tomorrow. If only they knew how lucky they were. I take it back to my cell, not having nor caring to say any goodbyes to anyone.

My taste buds rejoice at the taste of something actually edible yet are saddened by the thought that after today, they will no longer taste anything as good. I look at my last patty of sausage. ***
The hairnet lady looked at me with disgust as she slopped a spoonful of gray mush onto my plate with a grunt. I looked at her as if she were playing some kind of cruel joke that only she thought funny.

"What the hell is this shit?" I almost said but stop myself short. I solemnly walked back to my table and sit down. I picked up my spoon and put a big chunk in my mouth. Well, that was a

mistake. I instantly ran to the trash and spit it up.

I sat back down and started to put little spoonfuls in my mouth. So little in fact that I could almost get away without chewing it and just swallow it whole.

I looked around. Others were eating it like no problem so what the hell was wrong with me? Did I get a bad bunch? Will every damn meal be like this? Unknown to me I accidentally asked that part aloud and the person next to me whispered, "Yes, every damn meal." I tried to laugh at his joke but he didn't seem to find it funny at all.

19 hours 55 minutes and 28 seconds. My stomach is satisfied for the first time in years. I pick up Gone with the Wind and open it to where I left, though it doesn't really matter I've read it about 100 times over to cover.

"In the dull twilight of the winter afternoon she came to the end of a long road which had begun the night Atlanta fell. She had set her feet upon that road a spoiled, selfish and untried girl, full of youth, warm of emotion, easily bewildered by life. Now, at the end of the road, there was nothing left of that girl....." I must have fallen asleep because when I awoke it was already three. 15 hours 4 minutes and 56 seconds. I missed lunch but that's ok, I'm not really hungry anyway.

Still half asleep I stand up using the wall to push myself up and I wince as I feel a sharp point run along my back. What the Hell? I turn around and that's when I remember the nail.

*I forgot it was still there. Well, I don't think I ever truly forgot. It's a part of me, just like the scars that decorate my wrists. My subconscious comes flooding back to the front of my mind as I'm drowned, and almost suffocated with the memories that have come up for air. ****

I waited until the night, hoping, praying by some miracle I would get out today, but I finally gave in. I drew another line, 1,000 and I knew what would happen tonight. 1,000 days.

I screamed with every ounce in my soul, the loudest scream I've ever made. It was a silent scream to everyone who heard, but to me it was the loudest sound in the world.

"Why, why did you let me get to a 1,000 days?" I asked God. "What? No answer you're just gonna let your child rot in here like some piece of trash you can throw away?! Damn it! Damn it you son of a bitch! Screw you. Screw you!" I punched the floors with my curled up fists, and hot tears spilled from my eyes. And the world became blurry.

I wept for about two hours and my body shook violently with the sobs. During those two hours I didn't say anything. I didn't even think about anything.

After I was drenched in my own tears, and my eyes were dried out, I picked myself up and walked to one of the walls. There was a nail sticking out of it. I had discovered it about a year ago when I brushed my hand against the wall and accidentally pricked my finger on something. My finger started to bleed, not a lot but enough that they gave me Neosporin on my Band-Aid. I knew I could make my finger bleed more on that nail if I wanted to do it on purpose and that's when I promised myself that if I get to day 1,000 in here, I would use that nail to end my life.

The nail was stuck in there too hard to take completely out of wall, but I could still use it for my needs. I wrapped my left wrist around it and rubbed back and forth on the nail until it started to cut my wrist. I kept going at for about 10 minutes until the surrounding skin was raw and red, and blood dripped to the floor.

I took my right wrist and did the same thing, biting my lip to keep from screaming. The pain was bad, but not unbearable and as I laid down in my "bed" I continued to push my open wounds together, bringing up more blood.

I knew where my veins were and I could've made sure to cut on them, to bleed faster, but I didn't want to die right away. I don't know why I wanted it to be slow, but I did, and so it went.

First I started to feel dizzy, then my vision started to get real hazy and I lost track of where I was and what I was doing. I started to feel really tired, an exhaustion I've never felt before, and the last thing I remember that night, was closing my eyes, hoping I would never wake up.

Ever since then, I've never again tried to kill myself. I don't give up, but that day I did. And I've never been more ashamed of myself or hated this place more than I did that day.

Some people say that what's in the past can't hurt you anymore. But I call bullshit on that. The past haunts you, and never lets you go like a leech sucking the blood out of you. Only instead of blood, it sucks life. And when you think you've finally forgotten the past, it crawls from hibernation out from the back of your brain and seizes you until you can hardly breathe. So, yes, I might be crazy but to me the past can kill you as fast as a bullet and as painful as one too. Over the years, I started to believe that I really did kill her. After one goes through constant therapy and psych evaluations and is constantly told contrary to what they believe, they start to doubt themselves. Think that maybe they've got a screw loose.

I think what people didn't realize was how much she meant to me. She was my friend and I miss her every day. I use to try to remember our last day together. But I don't try anymore. It's too painful and so I've stopped remembering.

They tell me that I was the last one to see her alive, well obviously I wasn't. Her killer was the last one to see her alive. But then again, maybe I'm the killer. What if I am? What if I deserve to die? Maybe I do. Either way, I'll be dust tomorrow, carried on the wind. May my soul rest in peace.

My time here has been spent with regret, guilt, anger, sadness, almost every emotion I've felt right here in this cell. Except for joy, happiness, and laughter. If you asked me the last time I smiled I couldn't tell you. Because all the good memories I had got overcrowded and pushed out by all the new bad memories I kept experiencing here.

But the not knowing, well that brings me more pain than this hell ever can. It's the not knowing that's slowly been killing me all these years. It's not knowing if when I look in the mirror, if a killer is looking back. It's the not knowing how I should feel about myself. Should I hate or love myself? Should I forgive or is there nothing that needs forgiveness? So yes, they can put me in this little hole and lock me in, strip me of clothes, and dignity, and torture me as hard as they can, but nothing will ever hurt me as much as not knowing. And to live with that, well, there's not enough strength in the world. I look at the clock. 12 hours 34 minutes and 7 seconds.

I ask to go to the dining hall to get myself a late dinner and they allow it. They ask me what I want, tell me that I can even order from my favorite restaurant. I tell them I would like McDonalds and I order a Big Mac, large fries, a coke and a medium chocolate shake.

After about an hour I'm finally sitting down by myself enjoying my food. I picked McDonalds because when I was a kid my mom was a major health nut and she would never allow me to get any fast food. But once a year, for my Birthday dinner, I could pick anywhere to eat and I always picked McDonalds.

I bite into the burger and my mouth is satisfied. I hadn't had this in over 25 years. At first my body tries to reject all the foreign food that seems to be going down into my stomach. But I force my body to obey with me and I go back to my cell feeling full.

I glimpse at the clock. 9 hours 2 minutes and 51 seconds. I lay awake my last night here in this cell. I stare up towards the ceiling. I never sleep very good, rarely waking up rested. My first couple months here I use to have nightmares almost every night. And I was the monster I wanted to run from. ***

"Why did you do this to me? Why? I was your friend." She looks at me with dead eyes and blood

spilling out from her throat. Her body is covered in dirt. She has crawled up from the ground where I stand watching her with the shovel still in my hand.

My back pocket holds a steak knife, which is also covered in blood. "I'm sorry!" I yell to her. "I didn't mean it; I swear I didn't mean it!" "It's too late. You took my life from me. I can never get that back!" I start to cry and I fall to the ground. It's raining and everything is muddy.

She walks over to me, grabs my knife from my pocket and tells me I will know how it feels. I look to my left and there is her family standing at her grave putting a fresh bouquet of flowers down. Her mom, dad, and two little sisters hold each other weeping.

I look back at her and she gives me a devilish smile, raises the knife, and slits my throat. I woke up, screaming at the top of my lungs.

Two of the night guards came running in with the nurse following shortly behind. I thrashed my arms as they grabbed me, trying to hold me still. The nurse grabbed my left arm and injected me with a medicine foreign to me as it flowed through my veins. They kept holding me until I started to feel cloudy and tired. They helped me lay back down and as soon as my head touched the pillow, I was out like a light.

The nightmares have stopped now and I don't dream anymore. I go to sleep and wake up, and there's nothing in between.

I didn't sleep last night. I get up slowly as two guards enter my cell. I look at the clock. 1 hour 2 minutes and 44 seconds. They don't say anything as they each grab one of my arms, cuff me, and walk me out of my cell.

I tell them to wait and they stop. I turn around and look back at my cell. I've slept, cried, hurt and lived in here for over half my life. But this place was never a home. I swish my mouth around and spit at it, the saliva landing just inside the bars. I quietly speak to the room, mouthing my words, "To whoever may live here next, have mercy on their soul."

We seem to walk for a long time when finally, they usher me into an enclosed room, like the ones in the doctors' offices. They tell me to wait and close the door. The room is white and barren, pristine with the smell of chemicals.

I glance at the clock. 45 minutes and 11 seconds. My breathing starts to get shallower. *I can't breathe, I can't breathe!* I sit down in the chair and put my head down between my legs. *In, out, in out.* Slowly my breathing returns to normal. I sit there and wait, watching the clock as the minutes go by. 39 minutes and 12 seconds. Right then, a lady comes in.

She sits down in front of me and starts to fill out paper work for what seems like ages, but that's ok, let time go slow. Right before we leave the room I look back at the clock. 30 minutes and 25 seconds. We walk down to the execution room. I sit down and they strap me in tightly so I can't move. I killed her. I had to have killed her. I've lost the time.

They finish getting everything ready. For the first time I've been here I wish I really did kill her because if I did this would be justice but if I didn't this would just be inhumane and I don't think I could bear the thought of that. They ask me if I have any last words. I look them in the eyes, "I hope you got this one right."

Darkness covers my sight and I can feel the cloak as it wraps around my face like a snake about to suffocate its prey. Somewhere in the deepest crevice of my soul I believe that I did not kill her but the part of me that thinks this has gotten crushed down by the weight of 25 years and the stronger part me believes that maybe I did, maybe I could've killed her and my mind has suppressed those memories or my psychosis is taking over like so many of the doctors have told me so maybe I did really kill her.

I silently wince as the needle pushes through my veins and it's fast I can feel myself starting to

fade. My breathing is shallow but I don't feel any pain and somehow that makes me feel lucky, lucky that nowadays people don't use electric chairs or lynching but rather a fast killing drug that causes no pain and I seem to smile at that and there's something else that I feel I'm not sure how to describe it but it's almost like relief, relief from 25 years of imprisonment and hell and I pray for the first time in 25 years that when I take my last breath I will find peace and happiness and I will not be engulfed by the fires in hell but rather rejuvenated from the joys of heaven.

And all of a sudden that tiny crevice inside of me starts to grow stronger and stronger and I feel tears streaming down my face though no one knows but me and God. And no one knows but Him and I that the tears I shed are not from a place of self-pity but from the place in my soul that knows I didn't kill her.

I think back to earlier when I told myself that I wasn't even tired. I was lying to myself. Because I am tired, physically no, but emotionally and mentally, yes, I'm very much so tired. And something that I want most right now is to rest. I want to rest. And I smile at that very thought, knowing that I will finally get to. The tears I shed are for her and I exhale for what I know will be the last time.

Hannah Hedges

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Flash Fiction

Tattoo

It wasn't an easy life, it wasn't the most contented life, it wasn't even the best life; but it was mine. My on the run, up at dawn, get it to-go, stay down life. No one told me it would be this hard. Not my mama or papa, or even my memaw. They said once you killed, that was it. You would just have to simply run. It seemed I was always running now-a-days. In fact, I'm running right now. They had caught me at a McDonald's in some dink-hole town called Platte City. Now I was running to find a train, a bus, anything. Unfortunately dink-hole towns don't have very much public transportation.

My lungs were burning and I didn't think I could hold the weight of my backpack anymore, even though it consisted of nothing but loose change, a hoodie, and some peanuts in the shell. I should have listened when my papa had told me to hide the tattoo. It's what gave me away at the McDonald's. That tattoo appeared every time you killed someone until the poison set in and killed you yourself. Some think you're insane for thinking you have a tattoo because only those who have killed can see it, so those who don't have a clue what it looks like are lucky. I've never met another person with a tattoo except for my family. I've never met another person who could see mine, either.

As I was running through the small town I noticed a sign for an airport. I bolted in the direction it told me to. Faster faster, harder harder. I could hear sirens behind me. "Don't look back," I told myself. They thought I couldn't out run them, boy were they wrong. I was practically inhuman. It seemed like hours before I finally reached the airport. There were terminals full of people, but overall it wasn't busy. Like I said, dink-hole town. Running past people I only got a few second glances, that was before the cops got there.

One pulled over and got out quickly saying, "Everybody down!" Then he took out his gun and shot at me. I dodged every bullet like a ninja.

"What makes you think you can catch me?"

"We've got the place surrounded. No planes leave or come in until we've got you."

The cop was the one who noticed me because of my tattoo. That means he must have killed sometime in his life. You can only see it if you've killed, but he was a cop. It was part of his job. We were in a place outside that was by a railing blocking off easy entrance to the runway. If a human jumped over it, they would surely die. You're forgetting I'm not human. Climbing up on the rail, I held my hands up in surrender. The cop looked surprised, yet pleased as he pulled out handcuffs and advanced toward me.

"Like I said," I remarked, "What makes you think you can catch me?" I leaned back falling off the edge until I was falling. SMACK! I hit the pavement with a jolt of pain, but then it was gone. The cop walked away from the edge talking into a phone saying, "He's not a threat any longer. We can open up the airport again, just close of runway 12." Then the sound of a car door shutting and driving away echoed through me.

That's when I got up and ran. Once more I was running from my life, from my consequences. Hopping on the nearest luggage cart, I rode it until it stopped. The plane I would be taking was ready to be boarded. When the loaders weren't looking, I ran up the conveyer belt and into the plane. Next, I made my way up to 3rd class where I sat in an empty seat next to a girl my age.

"Are you ok?" she asked.

"Fine, why?"

"You're really out of breath. Is it your first time flying?"

"Um no, I mean yes. Yes I'm nervous."

"It's ok. I fly all the time because I have divorced parents on opposite coasts."

It was more personal information than I needed, but her voice was calming and so I kept the conversation going. "Where are we going again? I mean, what state?"

"Oh, um, well I had a layover here in Missouri from California. Now we are going to South Carolina."

I heaved a sigh of relief.

"What, you thought you got on the wrong plane or something? It would be too late anyway, we are already moving."

Just then I noticed we were turning and approaching the takeoff.

"Yeah, no. I am just really excited for South Carolina."

"You know," she started, "You're a strange boy. Oh, and nice tattoo by the way."

The plane accelerated and we were off the South Carolina, but it was too late. She could see my tattoo. She could see my freakin' tattoo.

Hannah Hedges

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Flash Fiction

When Darkness Consumes Me

Every night I lay awake, darkness consuming me. You know that feeling when your brain won't shut up? Yeah, that was happening to me a lot lately. The people who were studying me told me to sleep, told me to just let my mind take over. They wanted to see how I created them, the monsters. At first they were just little demons trying to get me to get up and be reckless. Now that I'm finally 18, they creep up at surprising times, chanting encouragement for things like suicide, or homicide. The monsters only came out when I was asleep, when the darkness was upon me. Now I'm here, locked in a pitch black room almost 24/7. Some say that long hours in the darkness causes blindness, hallucinations, and insanity. I've got news for you all, I ain't blind, they are real, not hallucinations, and I'm already insane.

My eyes fluttered close, smile on my face. The familiar sound of a grown man's voice echoed over the speaker in my black room. "It's time to sleep now sweetie. I know you don't want to, but it's the only way you can learn to control them."

I cackled, "You can't control them. You can't control me. I'll sleep for you, but you can bet that these things will come out and there's no stopping who they take with them to Hell." I didn't know if they could hear me, I didn't care. All I knew was that I was drifting, miles away, until I saw it.

It was almost as if I was still in reality. I was in the same black room, only now a door had swung open illuminating the space for the first time.

"We've been expecting you." A deep, bone-chilling voice had echoed.

"Oh, have you?" I asked, masking my fear fairly well.

"Haha, of course my darling. You have always been our favorite." A man dressed in a suit and tie appeared at the door. He was pale, thin, and had unusually good posture. His hair was slicked back with grease and his shoes were polished so shiny I could see my reflection. I never realized I had long, brown hair and green eyes. Last time I looked in a mirror was 11 years ago, before they took me away.

"Now," I whispered, "Don't go lying to me. I know you always loved my mother."

He walked over to me, "Your mother was the best damn feeder we've ever had. We expected you to be the same, but with a human father we realized that wasn't likely."

"Hey, I have thought up some pretty scary things. At least give me some credit." I smiled and the door closed to my mental command.

A shaky panic arose in the man's voice, "We don't have to do anything reckless, now do we?"

"Please, you're only scared I'll get rid of you."

"Now, I know you can't. But you know who you can get rid of? That man who makes you come and visit your dear ol' monsters."

"Yeah, I know. I could get rid of him whenever. Without my mother, however, my father is making them "fix me". If only she was here."

Just then the door swung open and a beautiful young lady walked in. She was a brunette with

green eyes, just like me.

“Mom?” I croaked

“Honey bunches! Oh, how I’ve missed that smile.”

I couldn’t help but notice the knife she was holding. “Mom, what’s the steel for?”

She held it up into the light from the entryway. It sparkled and then she walked closer saying, “A gift, for you.”

I took it and admired its beautiful blade. My mother and the man stood side by side as the man said, “Now, we can get rid of that man once and for all. Then you can come with us, forever.”

I smiled because I wanted nothing more than to kill a man, but it wasn’t the one they wanted me to kill. I plunged the knife into the man who had haunted my dreams, telling me to kill. He fell to the ground, but his smile never died. Something gave me a shock and I could tell I was back in reality, but I still had the knife. Instead of having it in the man I thought I killed, I had stabbed someone completely different. I recognized him as the man who tried to help me through this. The man who told me to sleep, who told me to just relax. The same man my father hired to “fix me”. Horrified, I dropped the knife and slammed the door, enclosing myself once more in the darkness.

You see, we all have things that keep us awake at night. Maybe it’s the monsters under your bed or in your closet. Maybe it is the man who always looked like he wants to hurt you. Maybe in the end, we are the monsters and sometimes, we just don’t see who the real monsters truly are.

Gea Henry

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Francis Howell Central High School, Saint Charles, MO

Educator: Matthew Schott

Category: Short Story

Misty

There is a place where everything is black and white. Flowers are dead. The air is poison. Hope is lost. The people have newspaper opinions and monochrome perceptions. There are flames and screams and cries scattered all over the town. Poverty-stricken people complain about being poor, and then do nothing for their fellow men. Nobody hardly comes outside except maybe to see what the fuss was about this time. Families do not talk. Food is scarce. The government does nothing, except participate in deceit and wickedness. War has been tattooed into the mind. And in the midst of all the sickness, the polite, defeated soul of Crystal Pavati waits. She refers to this land as “The Abyss”, where the people are abusive and the morality is crumbling before her doe eyes. Her pale skin and lilac-pink lips are but an outward manifestation of her transparent and cold opinions. The only source of amusement is finding a flame to watch it burn, or creating one, or watching the other people live in discontent, or dreaming about escaping. But in this story, dreaming is not the only way of escape.

Crystal peeked through her doorway, looking out into the Abyss. Taking in a deep, shallow breath, she slid outside and trudged down the porch steps with hunched shoulders and frightened thoughts. The world looked especially grey today, and she could hear a baby screaming in the distance. She wondered why anyone would bring or want to bring someone into this horrible life. A life filled with physical and mental torture. Despite her usual rudely attentive perspective, Crystal longed to find even the smallest bit of happiness. Just as this quiet longing bubbled inside of her, the smell of death fizzled into the air. Crystal knew what was coming. It was Misty. The source of all horribleness in this world. Soon enough, Misty came around the corner of a broken building and kicked at the crumbled rocks. Her hair was matted and moldy, and her physicalities were crusty: crusty eyes, crusty ears, crusty mouth. Despite her downright ugly appearance, her cool and straightforward walk made her seem like she knew what she was doing. Crystal shifted her stroll in a different direction, but Misty had already caught up to her. She stood in front of Crystal with an intimidating glow in her eyes.

“Long time no talk,” she said, her voice surprisingly clear and toneful, in contrast to her outward raspiness. “How’s the family?”

Crystal tried to walk around her, but Misty side-stepped into her way.

“Haven’t you missed me? My, my, Crystal, it’s like you’ve forgotten how important I am.”

Misty’s face turned menacing and she balled her anger into her fist, which slammed into Crystal’s gut. Crystal felt like her eyes were about to pop out of her head. She held her hands to her stomach and collapsed forward. Her eyes traveled to Misty’s feet, which wore no shoes; her toenails were filled with dirt and mud. Crystal regained her strength ever so slowly, but continued to look at Misty’s dirty feet.

“Hopefully you remember now,” Misty said without a smile. Her eyes were dead. How mean and abstract she was. She began chuckling to herself, that soon growing into bright laughter.

Crystal looked up and noticed a few people had opened their windows or were peeking out their doors, trying to find some source of entertainment but remaining unamused. She realized she must have cried out at the punch, but she was so focused on the pain she didn't hear herself. Stumbling back a bit, she slowly tried to turn around to go back inside her home. Misty took hold of her shoulder and walked in front of her again, blocking her.

"Hey, hey... focus on me," she said.

With an appearance like that, you're not hard to focus on, Crystal thought, biting her tongue. It was true, though. Every so often, pus would ooze from Misty's skull. She wore an old, torn sweater, which was infested with lice and bugs of all sorts. She had dark bags under her eyes, probably from staying up and thinking about ways to humiliate Crystal. Misty actually looked similar to Crystal, but her face was scarred and she was dusty.

Crystal could hardly keep her frightened eyes on her though, and she couldn't stop leaning from one leg to the other. This was making Misty angry in a most satisfying way.

"Focus on me," Misty repeated.

Crystal looked past Misty's shoulder and barely heard her repeat it a third time when she saw him. A boy Crystal had seen maybe twice before.

The moment she laid her eyes upon his angelic features, the wind began to blow comfortably. The nastiness dissolved and the corruption melted away. This light seemed to radiate from him, giving the world color and beauty and everything good. Her hair lightened and became chestnut-colored, and pulled away from her face, revealing rosy cheeks and a bright smile.

And best of all: Misty had disappeared.

Crystal delicately straightened her posture and moved forward a few steps. The ground was cotton and the sky was pink and blue and so many other light colors. She kept her focus on the boy though, worried that a small glance away would break her from this jovial place. The silence was almost deafening, but nonetheless pleasant. Any words that were spoken were covered by pastel colors and cotton candy tones. She could feel springtime pulse through her veins. The people were rich with happiness. There were rainbow relationships everywhere. Those who had come outside to witness Crystal's pain were now smiling and enjoying life. Because life was finally good. This is the world she refers to as "The Dream", for that's all she thought it could ever be, a dream.

Crystal felt a slap in the face, but no pain. Her head turned to the side at the force of the hit, and the colorful sensation of the Dream transformed into the dark hues of the Abyss. Misty looked down at the pathetic girl.

"Crystal, where's your focus?" Misty asked, cocking her head.

"Who was that?" Crystal asked quietly, rubbing her cheek but not feeling the sting. "That boy... Where did he go?" He had completely disappeared.

"A boy?" Misty asked, sounding confused but not surprised.

"You wanted to know where my focus was, I'm just telling you," Crystal said.

Misty's face fell and she straightened up. She seemed to grow a few inches taller in that moment, looking down at Crystal. She said, "You're not worth it."

Crystal stared blankly at Misty. This wasn't the first time she was told she wasn't worth it, that she'll never be worth it. Usually, Crystal would agree with her, but now she felt like running.

"Am I not?" Crystal asked, turning away and following her instincts. She didn't know why she was running, but she wanted to get away. The boy appeared before; she had witnessed the emotion and new world that came with him. Why did she *now* feel the urge to find him?

Crystal ran home and slammed the front door behind her. In the kitchen her family sat picking at

cold food. At the head of the table, Crystal stood panting and gazing at her family in a new light. *Smiling*. When no one looked at her, she took initiative and piled her plate with food. Her mother flashed a look of haughtiness; her father moved awkwardly in his seat; they were shocked at Crystal's obvious desire to eat. Usually Crystal would pick at her food and fiddle with her charcoal hair until she'd leave without being excused. It wasn't to be disrespectful. There's just no emotion behind any actions in the Abyss. And although this was a hungry world, the people could care less about living through the next day. Seeing Crystal eat was like her saying she wanted to continue living this life.

The next day, Crystal didn't bother peeking through her front door in hesitation. Instead, she left the door wide open and sat on the porch steps. The smell of death rose into her nostrils, but she didn't care. Misty came strolling around towards her, but Crystal kept looking into the streets for the boy.

"Crystal," Misty said, taking a seat by her and throwing her arm around her. "I feel like today should be about how we perceive ourselves, hmm? Come with me." By the time she finished, she was already gripping Crystal's shirt and dragging her down the porch steps. Crystal's mind became foggy and her thoughts wandered.

No! she begged herself. *I have to find him! I can't be controlled like this forever.*

The will to fight weakened. The Abyss seemed to obliterate even the smallest bit of goodness. Hopelessness filled her. The two met a pile of damp wood and sticks.

"Crystal, yesterday I really saw the fire in your eyes, especially when you talked about your stupid boyfriend. But he's not here, okay? He's long-gone. Why would he want you?" Misty was tossing a sharp stone in the air and catching it, and Crystal noticed a pile of stones, ranging in size and sharpness. "Anyways, your goal here is to start a fire with this damp wood. Every effort that fails earns you a stone in the back. Got it?"

Crystal immediately picked up two cold, wet sticks. She rubbed them together weakly and tried to create a spark, a sad little droop in her eyes. The weight of Misty's glare as well as words on her shoulders hurt. Is what Misty said true? Was the boy truly long-gone? The thought of the boy living in such a horrible place all alone upset Crystal. She had to do something! She needed to find him!

A sharp pain in her back broke Crystal's thoughts. A stone falling by her side said Misty threw it at her.

"I don't see any friction between those two sticks. Is that all you got? Quit being pathetic and just do it. Start the fire."

Crystal tried to ignore the pain and return back to her sticks, rubbing them harder against each other, hoping and praying a spark would happen. She slowed, which resulted in two more sharp pains in her back.

"Work harder!" Misty yelled, the next stone in her hand, already ready to throw.

More stones tore Crystal's shirt and broke her skin. She had patches of blood and bruises. Fighting but not stopping tears, Crystal thought maybe she should give up and let Misty stone her to death. After all, death seemed better than life in this world... But then she heard a spark. She wiped away her tears to see the proof. A flame had started. Small, just barely flickering, but it had started. It slowly spread to the other pieces of wood. Crystal kept rubbing the sticks together. More sparks flew.

Misty smirked, saying, "Good. Now try one of the sticks on your skin." Crystal looked at her in surprise, even though it wasn't shocking. Wouldn't be the first time Misty burned her. "We wanna make sure the flame is real, don't we?"

Crystal stared blankly. "It is real."

"Prove it."

Crystal lifted a piece of wood with fire burning on one side, resembling a torch. She slowly looked at Misty with hurt eyes, extending her other arm out. She'll never understand why she did what came next. Maybe it was fear, or the boy, or revenge. A courageous impulse took Crystal in that moment and she threw the torch at Misty. Whatever the cause, it didn't stop Crystal from running as fast as she could from the situation. Misty's screams faded as Crystal ran with a sense of purpose.

Her mind was focused on one thing: the boy. She had to find him and fix everything. Avoiding the smell of death, she searched into windows, around corners, and down alleys. Soon becoming exhausted, muddled, and confused, she slowed to a walk.

Then she saw him, hands on his head, eyes up.

It came again, the separation from the thick darkness of the Abyss that seems to silently and slowly suffocate her. There was so much love and acceptance. She had to grasp the small bit of contentment this world had. The clouds beneath her feet made her bounce ever-so-slightly as she ran, reaching forward. Crystal smiled to greet him.

She stumbled, her teeth coming down hard on the inside of her cheek. The Dream faded. Misty stood above her, blocking her view of the boy. Crystal shook and tasted blood, something she was far too used to. Before she could process her thoughts, she spoke.

"You're only real in the Abyss, which only justifies your run-down, broken spirit."

Misty leaned down with gritted teeth. Crystal stared into her careless eyes, which resembled a never-ending void of darkness. Misty stomped on one of Crystal's hands with her disgusting foot. Crystal's wrists began to bleed; she wasn't sure why. Standing with all her might, she tried to create a deep void within her own eyes as well, so as to intimidate Misty.

"You are nothing," Crystal said into Misty's eyes. "Nothing can break you. Nothing can transform you like I've been transformed." Her face got hot. Warm tears streaked her cheeks.

"Misty, I want you to go away."

Misty didn't look shocked, just startled. Crystal glanced past Misty to where the boy stood looking at them. When they met eyes, a warmth brushed over her as the Dream world began to form. She advanced towards him and felt the pain go away.

Loud crashing sounds distracted her. Misty stood on a pile of trash, banging pots and pans, screaming at the top of her lungs. "FOCUS ON ME! Stop running after him, Crystal! Focus on me! Me! ME!" she jumped like a child having a tantrum, fear in her eyes. For a split second, Crystal felt bad for Misty. Obviously, Crystal finding the boy was tearing Misty apart. Nobody deserves to feel torn. But that feeling went away when Misty yelled, "You are a pathetic little girl! You deserve to die! That happiness will never be real. You've seen what I can do. You've seen what we have done together. This world is not because of me! It's because of you!" With every sentence, a spit sprinkler went off. The fat under her torn sweater shook with frustration as she hit the pots and pans. The bags under her wickedly satisfied eyes looked demonic. People sitting on their porches or walking the streets hardly noticed these actions, but Crystal did. Crystal shed tears, and did indeed wish herself dead from the embarrassment she felt. But determination stood strong, and she found her way past Misty's intimidating eyes. Then Crystal Pavati said something she never had the courage to say before:

"No."

An earthquake erupted. Buildings began to crumble and windows began to smash. The sky peeled like wallpaper. The Abyss was breaking. There was no time to waste. Her hands tightly

blocking Misty's bloodcurdling cries, Crystal's eyes were like bullets, quickly looking for her target. Where was the boy?

People were running the streets, crying, dancing, falling to the ground, waiting. It was like Crystal had entered into insanity. Crystal kept searching, though, and found him searching the people for her. The world brightened when Crystal saw him, but the screams didn't vanish. The Abyss was still alive around her, fighting against the Dream, just barely holding on. Crystal's family came outside and looked to Crystal with hopeful faces, feeling something for the first time. Maybe love.

Crystal was moving forward. The ground beneath her bubbled into clouds. Even though she covered her ears, it was as if Misty was screaming right into them. Crystal was so... close... A huge weight held her back. She stretched out her arm and it felt free. The boy saw her and seemed to feel the Dream within himself. He reached for her hand. Crystal thought she wasn't going to make it. Surely Misty would come stop the two of them. But the world had crumbled so much. There were patches of good fighting against patches of evil, flames burning against light. She needed to focus. She turned on her eyes and pushed herself past the Abyss. The invisible weight holding her back loosened. She grabbed his hand.

A gush of wind flew over the world in that moment. It was almost silent, nothing but the sound of wind. The Abyss and the Dream found their median in a new world: Reality. A colorful place with a variety of people and personalities and experiences. The grass smells fresh. The birds sing. The people, always chatting. The sky, always changing. The government tries to be the best it can be. It's not perfect, but it's not imperfect either. There is good, bad, everything in between. Misty did not exist.

The couple looked around at their new life. It was breathtaking. Surprisingly enough, the people around them looked unphased, like the changing of worlds did not happen.

Crystal didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. All she could do was admire. Something told her she would never feel truly sad again, at least not like she did in the Abyss. All of that was over now. No more asking why. No more feeling like a failure. No more fearing the demons inside and wishing they would just go away. All of that was over now. Him.

She heard quiet sobs to her side and broke her gaze from Reality. The boy who held her hand so tightly was looking at the ground, silent tears sliding down his perfect cheeks, his shoulders shaking. Crystal wiped his tears away. "All of that is over now," she said to him in a soft voice. In this world, there is war, but also peace; cruelty, but also care; hell, but also heaven; hate, but also love. There is Crystal Pavati, and there is him.

Emma Hessefort

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Short Story

Five Years

It's hot. It's really fucking hot. It's the longest day of the year. I'm walking to a party I don't really want to go to. It's a themed party. I thought those ended in high school.

The door to the building is propped open. I take one of the masks stacked on a table. It's a creepy looking clock face. I follow the music. People litter the hallway wearing similar masks dancing, talking, and falling to the sides with white powder on their fingers. I grab a drink and squint in the dim light. I make faces under my mask at the people I pass. The windows in the apartment are open. People hang out of them singing to the strangers on the sidewalk. I spot a girl. She's leaning against the spotted wall. She doesn't have a mask on. She talks to the captivated boys and girls surrounding her. She doesn't look very invested in this conversation as her sleepy eyes move about the room. They land on me. I stare at her behind the hands of time and start my way towards her. She stops talking so her crowd disperses. I hear one ask where the lines are to another tilting at an angle. I hand her my drink. She has beads of sweat on her brow.

"James." She hands my cup back, empty. "Jude." She acts like the mask isn't there keeping her eyes on mine. Her hands trail down my neck slick with sweat. "I want to melt ice on you." I hold out my hand to her. She takes it. We walk through the people snorting and injecting, tipping back their glasses, dancing to the Beatles. She hands me a little white pill. I swallow it dry. She takes one too. We walk down the stairs hand in hand. She holds up her free hand shaping it into a gun aiming and shooting to kill. Masks turn to watch us leave. Some fall with bullets lodged in their sweaty bodies.

We don't talk. I open my door letting it hang open. We haven't let go of each other's hands. She stares inside. It's too dark to see any detail just black shadows of my life. She looks back at me. She lets go of my hand and pulls off my mask. She lets it drop to the floor staring at me. My sweaty hair and skin. My dilated eyes and crooked grin. She has dark eyes, almost black, bigger than the whole fucking world. Pale skin surrounded by black hair. Jude grins back stepping sideways into my apartment. I follow forgetting about the door. She sits on the window seal beckoning me with her outline. I take her waist in one hand and lay the other against the window. I dip my head and lick the sweat off her neck. She leaves her hands where they are. And then I kiss her. Hungrily, hiding behind nothing, standing with my desire in front of her sweaty skin. Jude spreads her legs letting her dress ease up her thighs. My hand digs into her inching her dress up and up. She unbuttons my shirt. And stands up. I let my shirt fall. She stares again letting her dress fall with my shirt. I stare, grinning again. She takes a step forward. I pull off my pants. Music is playing somewhere. She sways her hips letting her hands rise. She doesn't stop staring as I pull off her underwear. And then her bra. She stops dancing and then grabs at the back of my neck kissing me with soft lips. I grab her waist pulling her close and carry her to the bed. Her feet ease my underwear off. And then I lay her on the bed running a hand down her cheek kissing her again.

We fuck and she disappears at some point. I pull on the same cloths and head out for coffee. I don't know what she gave me but it hasn't worn off completely so the walk to the coffee shop feels like eternity. It's still dark. There aren't many people here. Someone says my name. I turn around slowly trying to keep the world from spinning. It's my brother. He's older than me, but not by much. He's married, but she must be out of town. He's drunk.

"You smell like sex." I buy him another coffee.

"And you are drunk." He shrugs at me, smiling. He doesn't look very happy. He takes a long gulp of coffee.

"You have a girlfriend or was it just some random ass girl?" His eyes sag. He has never been able to hold his liquor very well.

"No, I fucked Jude." I drink my own coffee. A cat walks up to me and tells me to have a good night. "Who's Jude?"

"A girl I met at a party earlier." He looks around the empty coffee shop. "She's already gone?" I shrug. "What do expect? Me to get her number and ask her to marry me in three months? So, I can fuck her every other Friday until she is contently pregnant?" He sighs and shrugs his shoulders back at me.

"Fuck you." I down the rest of his coffee. "No, fuck you. Why are you here? Go home and take care of your kids or pack up your shit and fuck random ass girls."

I leave him passing out at his empty table.

I lean against a building for a second regaining my ability to walk in a fairly straight line. I did get her number. She wrote it on my phone case. I saved it to my contacts as she closed the door thinking I was asleep with cum on my dick. It's still fucking hot. I remember what she told me at the party. I look up at the moon. It's crying. And smiling at me. I wave to the moon. And almost fall down.

I keep walking avoiding eye contact with the moon. I hear something. It's not music. Not people. Then something splashes on me. I look at the black water reflecting the moonlight. I'm still really hot. And the water doesn't look so hot. I climb over the railing. I sink to my knees and let the water splash up on me. It isn't that cold. It actually smells like shit. The cat from the coffee shop rides up on a wave and sits next to me.

"You could fall in." The cat's eyes glow in the moonlight. The moon is a son of a bitch for making this cute cat so fucking creepy.

"I could." I look at the water and wonder if drowning would be the worst way to die. "Then no one would know where you were." The cat seems white, but could possibly be a different color.

"When are you going to call Jude?" I look at the cat. The cat looks black now. "I wasn't going to ever call Jude." The cat laughs.

"You saved her number. Of course you were going to call her." I finger my phone.

"Was the sex good?" The cat raises its eyebrows. I didn't know cats had eyebrows. "Yes."

"Do you think she's pretty?"

"Yes."

"Do you like the sound of her voice?"

"Yes."

"Do you like what she said to you?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to see her again?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to call her?"

“Yes.”

“Are you going to jump in?”

“No.”

The cat smiles and jumps on another wave disappearing. I climb back over the railing and start walking. I hear music again. And see people with masks on again. But I don't know if they're real or if it's the drugs. People with the masks and the music crowd an alley. They are dancing. So I start to dance. I sing along. “I kiss you. You're beautiful...” I spin around, faster and faster so everything blurs together. “Five years!” I bang my head around. I grab hands with a well-dressed boy about my age. We spin around together. He kisses me and I kiss him back. I like kissing this boy.

Something soft brushes my ankle. I don't look down though. I really like kissing this boy. The music gets louder and the people with masks look at me. I break away and the boy disappears behind a mask into the crowd. The cat cackles at me and disappears too. I try to go after the boy but the crowd pushes in. I start pulling off their masks only to find another mask lying beneath. I want to kiss that boy again. I want to talk to the cat again and ask him what we talked about by the black ocean. I crawl out of the alley and lay in in the street. The moon tells me to get out of the fucking street.

I start down the street again. The music fades. And it gets darker out. I want to tell someone that I liked kissing that boy, but not more than I liked kissing them. But I liked kissing the boy. Something crunches under my feet. I look down and find pieces of the ground reflecting the moonlight. I bend down and cut myself on the ground. I pick a piece of it up along its jagged edges sending lines of blood down my fingers. I run the sharp ground against my right wrist until more lines of red appear. They too shine in the moonlight. Then I run the ground over my other wrist. More red appears. It keeps coming until it drips onto the ground. I walk past a white brick wall and fling my wrist so the red jumps onto the white in a splatter. I keep flinging my arms until there is enough red on the wall to run my fingers through. I write in my blood ‘I kissed a boy’. I run away laughing into the night. The cat comes up alongside me keeping my pace. “Why'd you do that?” The cat's voice reminds me of my blood on the wall. “Because I've never done that before.” I laugh again and look down at my wrists. I can't see my skin only red. I feel an inch below the red.

“What will happen to you?” The cat asks all melancholy now.

I trace my hands along my wrist and answer with, “What usually happens when people do this.” I go back to my apartment. Where the black shadows are. I close the door and sink to the ground against it. Blood pools around me looking more black than red, making me think the void has come to swallow me up. The cat laps at my blood getting some of it in his fur. “I cut myself. I cut myself deeper than I thought. I think I'm going to die.” I stroke the cat's head until he disappears. I close my eyes and rest my head on my chest. My chest begins to tighten. And I begin to shake. I start to get tired. So tired... Like I told the cat, I think I'm going to die. I have finally done it. I used to think about it a lot. More so a couple of years ago. But now I have finally done it. It doesn't hurt as much as I thought it would. I remember the first time I cut my wrists, it was quite shallow barely giving lines of blood, but it didn't hurt either. I got so upset that I locked myself in my bathroom and ran the razor over and over my wrist. My tears dried up and I kept going and going. I couldn't do it because I thought I had something to live for in the future. I was wrong. I think. I wouldn't be against dying tonight. I chuckle to myself. It's good I don't mind dying because I am dying.

Something bangs around in my head forcing my eyes open. The banging floats out of my head

and into the door vibrating against my back.

“Hmmm?”

“Open the goddamn door, James.” The voice is somewhat familiar. A girl’s voice. I like girls. And boys, maybe. I try to lift my arm to the knob but it won’t move. I don’t think I locked it so I let my body flop forward. I land harder on the floor than I thought I would making a loud thump make the banging at the door faster and louder.

“It’s open,” I mumble. The door swings open and a shadow sinks to the floor sliding in my blood. I laugh at it. I feel the shadow’s hands on my skin. They feel hot. The shadow turns into the light and I see that it’s Jude.

“Why are you here, Jude?” I say, my voice all scratchy. She gives me an annoyed look.

“You called me, you asshole. What the fuck did you do to yourself?” Her words don’t match her face. Because her face looks very worried and scared. Her eyes look glassy in the light. I think she’s either still high or crying.

“I slit my wrists.” I wonder if it really isn’t that obvious. I don’t ask her that because I don’t want to come off as rude.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” she whispers to herself.

“Jude?” Her head whips so she can look into my eyes. Something lights up her face, she holds it to her ear.

She talks in a rushed voice saying my address two times over, saying that there is a lot of blood, saying I slit my wrists, saying she won’t leave. Then the light goes out and I feel her hot hands on my face.

“Jude?” Her thumbs rub under my eyes.

“Yes?” Her voice sounds soft and sweet.

“I kissed a boy tonight. But I liked kissing you better. I liked fucking you, too. I came really hard. And I think you did, too. I think I want to fuck you again. But I might die, so I apologize if I do.”

Jude makes a strangled little sound in her throat and dips her head kissing me. I get a hard on, but it doesn’t last very long. She kisses me again when I kiss her back. Then the banging starts again and she whispers in my ear,

“I want to fuck you again, too.”

Kara Hill

Age: 13, Grade: 9

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

Educator: Whitney Webster

Category: Poetry

Portal

My writing is the closest you will ever get to seeing inside my head
Not the essays forced out of lead
But the real stuff, straight from my soul

I go to school, peck out letters on a screen but they mean
nothing to me, nothing to me
They are not stories, poems, truths but corpses forced to spit out facts that history told them they
created
Words never came easy to me
I feel sick with all the unsaid things I swallowed,
Left in my stomach
I feel like I'm going to throw up
But nothing will come up,
So i don't try to yank them up
Straighten my teeth
I let them dance in front of my eyes
I use blood
The magic in my veins to paint a picture for you,
Every brush stroke a slice in my skin
My sins
Laid bare
These words are not forced past my lips, they flow from my fingertips
I trim my nails so they don't stem the flow
I don't paint my nails so they they don't soften the blow
They are a gift from me to you
Look at the words on a page
Written, typed, on a screen in front of your face
See them, hear the, taste them,
I will not force you to swallow, to choke on syllables
But please, I plead with you, trust me
They might just be the sweetest thing you ever tried.

Kara Hill

Age: 13, Grade: 9

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

Educator: Whitney Webster

Category: Poetry

My Internal Monologue While Playing the French Horn

The case clips click
I look at all the holes that music picked in my bag
Picked in my brain
The strain
Of a thousand melodies
Whispering to me
Or maybe screaming
Or maybe I'm screaming
No wait
My C is just really sharp
Sharp like every other note
Every other note
Note undone not done out of pitch sanity picked
My third key still clicks
I should probably get that fixed
My horn is cold my fingers are cold my horn is cold because my fingers are cold
My fingers are cold because my horn is cold
My fingers are always cold
My horn warms up warm touch
A story behind a glass wall wrapping me up in feeling
Warm
Perfect fit everything sings
I feel like I have wings
Warm
Mess up mess up
Wrong note ripped tote pitch falling failure calling
Too warm too warm
Over heat cant beat
That single freaking note out
Over heat cant beat
My fingers fast of enough to the beat of the song
Press press click press click press click click
Wrong wrong
I messed up the song
Wrong wrong
I don't deserve to be here
Im too tired i'm tired

My lips are too numb to speak so instead I just scream at myself

For a glorious moment everything is silent and my horn is warm and my fingers are warm and music wraps me up

Right note right cord I understand what I'm here for

Right pitch right key this means too much to me

A story that only I can see

Only I can feel

For a moment

I never want to leave

The moment leaves

That's okay I'll spend every day trying to get it back

Work hard it's not that hard

Why can't you get it it's not that hard

Not that hard very hard too hard not hard you can get it

You can get it you can do it you can see it a sea of beautiful music

Just out of reach

Now I'm drowning

Why can't you swim

Why can't you do this

You don't deserve this

You aren't good enough for this

Not great not bad not good

Not good not good

Too bad too bad

Not any good

You missed another note

Not any good not any good

You didn't play an entire page

Not any good not any good not any good

They know you don't belong here

Not any good

You know that you don't belong here

*Notanygoodnotanygoodnot**anygood**notanygood NOT ANY GOOD*

Every note is a nail in my brain

But somehow

Those nails are the only thing keeping me together

Kara Hill

Age: 13, Grade: 9

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

Educator: Whitney Webster

Category: Poetry

Girl

Girl

Noun

Definition: a female child; a young or relatively young woman

I am not a girl

It's not my fault no one else believes that

You call me girl

I tell you I am not girl

You do not believe me

You say I have all the right parts for it

I say all of them except the part where I believe it

Why else do I feel sick when someone calls me a beautiful young woman

Why I can't look at myself in the mirror topless without wanting to cry

How it feels like there are thousands of spiders crawling beneath my skin whenever I am forced to wear a dress

And I want to rip the hair off my head because I have been guilted out of cutting it too many times and it's long enough to strangle me with

When the only times I have ever wanted to take a knife to my skin are when it feels like a demon has an iron grip on my intestines and I am bleeding out of ungodly places and I am so so tempted to carve my uterus out with a knife

And they dare call this nightmare womanhood

And you dare call me girl

Say I am girl

I always have been girl

Will always be girl

Am only

Girl

Emma Hohenstein

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Frazier

Category: Critical Essay

Blending Healthy Living into the Country

We can decrease the number of food deserts by planting gardens, encouraging grocers to have locations within certain radii of one another, and by decreasing the number of unhealthy ‘shops’ that are overtaking the food industry. We can eliminate food deserts as a whole by working together to overcome what the food industry is and create something better and healthier for all. Food insecurity is one of the leading causes of malnutrition and hunger throughout the United States. Twenty-three and a half million people live in food deserts (11 Facts About Food Deserts) and of those people nearly two and a half million of them come from rural, low-income areas with more than ten miles in distance to a supermarket with a decent amount of healthy food from their house.

Paycheck to paycheck, fast food lines, and long walks carrying loads of groceries or possibly nothing at all. Those are just a few things that living in a food desert will impact you with. If you are a low-income family barely able to keep your heat on, how can one expect to pay for substantial and healthy food when there isn’t even a supermarket near your home? Millions of people struggle with living in food deserts each and every day. Parents send their children to school not having had any breakfast in hopes of the child being given some sort of food at school because the family simply cannot afford the extra cost (McMillan). Families are living on frozen meals and processed food and it isn’t enough. One in nine people on earth are to be considered starving and the majority of the “world’s hungry people live in developing countries, where 12.9% of the population is undernourished” (Hunger Statistics).

The excessive usage and distribution of energy-dense snacks, nutrition deficient foods, and fast food in food deserts is a very large concern. The consumption of such products can lead to obesity, cancer, and cardiovascular diseases (Whitacre). Eating nutritious foods will make you healthier so when there is no available health foods or foods with the proper nutrition you need, problems arise. People who live in food deserts have the chance of becoming sick and there is a higher mortality rate as well (11 Facts About Food Deserts).

If there is no access to fresh meat, vegetables/produce, whole grains, and all other dietary essentials that everyone needs to receive their daily nutrients, that area is most likely considered a food desert. In rural areas, if there is not a supermarket within ten miles it is considered a food desert. On the other hand, urban areas are considered food deserts if they do not have a supermarket within a one-mile radius. Many low-income families live in food deserts and most of these families do not have cars or access to one, so their only mode of transportation is walking or using the bus. This reverts back to the distance from the supermarkets to the consumer’s home. If a person has to walk ten miles to get a fresh apple, they will be less inclined to do so when they can buy fruit snacks at the gas station near their house. People do not have the money and resources to travel far distances for food that is so much more expensive than the food that is right at hand.

There are so many ways that could aid the extinction of food deserts. Public gardens could be

planted throughout neighborhoods as well as traveling supermarkets. There are so many ways to help rid the world of such a terrible thing, but the world itself and the people in it have to find ways to implement the new ideas. Community gardens do not only bring the community together as a whole, but they find ways to increase: access to fruits and vegetables, the consumption of fruits and vegetables, food security, physical activity, mental health, neighborhood safety, and a decrease in obesity weights (WWFH). Having a community garden allows everyone in the neighborhood to come together as a whole and spend time planting and cropping their fruits and vegetables, as well as the distribution of all of the crops. People care about their health so the idea of a garden peaks many interests. It is also a good outlet because it teaches children how to maintain and share with others while aiding themselves. Gardening encourages an overall healthy lifestyle by promoting physical fitness, strength, and it shows that as a community if everyone comes together and puts their contribution of money in the beginning then the community as a whole can maintain that garden for a very low price for the rest of its span. By having a garden, communities will save money of groceries, and travel costs reducing the cost of living and reducing the consumption of unhealthy foods from their local corner stores. Traveling markets are becoming a very large trend and are affecting the food industry like nothing has ever done so before. The government is allowing farmers markets to become traveling markets travels from neighborhood to neighborhood weekly to allow customers to buy fresh produce and healthy options through the market. Many states are implanting this program in hopes of reducing the insecurity of food in the area and by doing this, not only do the farmer's markets get a wider variety of customers but also the consumers are able to stay near their homes without traveling a long distance for an overpriced piece of fruit. The fruits and vegetable from these traveling markets will be healthy and of fair price.

One in five adolescents are obese with a rising trend in most age groups (Mui). The world is becoming an unhealthy place to be. How to fix it? Reduce the number of corner stores in gas stations and put limits on how many there can be per neighborhood or region. Although corner stores are where most families buy their 'substantial' food, real grocers would be more inclined and have a bigger business opportunity if the corner stores had limits as to how many stores are allowed to be opened within a certain radii of one another. Having a reduced number of corner stores would increase the grocer store amount and people would have a better chance of getting the healthier options they need to get their proper nutrients. Grocery stores follow USDA rules and guidelines better than most corner stores which ensures the health of the food they sell is much better. The implementation of grocery stores would allow citizens of each neighborhood or even county more healthy options and this would also decrease the time, effort, and money spent on getting healthy foods, as well as increased access to those goods.

Riding the world of food deserts would increase the health of people everywhere. Food deserts are not necessarily locations where food is scarce but it is an area where healthy food is unavailable which then causes people to resort to unhealthy options which then cause them to either eat large sums of unhealthy food or possibly nothing at all. If food deserts became eliminated the world would become a much healthier place to live and the standard of living would increase. By doing small things such as planting gardens or buying vegetables as frequently as possible, the world could become so much healthier. If everyone came together and acknowledged the problem and if the problem was brought to light to those who do not know what a food desert even is then the problem could be addressed even faster. Citizens of food deserts need to share their stories and tell everyone about the horrors they must go through to get fresh produce. Food deserts cause people to either starve or to become obese. How will you

blend healthy living into the world to decrease obesity and starvation to better the world one step at a time? Will you be a bystander or will you help make a difference?

William Howlett

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

The Certainty of Nothing

My Dearest Candide:

I had the utmost pleasure of seeing you last week. I am deeply impressed by what you shared regarding your magnum opus "The Triumph of Reason" that you are writing at your manor. You embody the principles you extol, and are one of the most industrious, rational, kind, and virtuous men I have ever met. Your beautiful writing will continue to enlighten the world with wisdom. I sincerely hope your presence may again grace my salon.

*Yours,
Louis*

Candide folded the letter from his friend, blushing with humility. He stood up and admired the beautiful view of his sweeping estate as it rippled underneath the onslaught of a thunderous storm. Rain drowned the fields, hail peppered the buildings like bullets, and lightning bolts erratically attacked the landscape. Yet he did not fear; rather, his expression twinkled boyishly as he marveled at the complexity of the storm—a natural mystery reason and science were decoding. A smile warmed his face as he turned away from the window to walk to his conservatory and play a celebratory piece on his violin. His nose twitched at the smell of smoke, and he reached for the door to investigate. Pulling it open, he recoiled immediately.

A vengeful tongue of flame groped for his cowering figure through the doorway, filling the room with fire. Candide crawled toward the wall as the blaze enveloped him in its wrath. He turned for the window and climbed through. A devil's cackle grasped Candide's heart in terror, but when Candide looked back he saw only a sudden whoosh in the inferno and the popping of flames. A parchment-like pallor gripped his face and his muscles froze. Like a great tree struggling to resist the blows of an axe, Candide slowly wavered on the edge of the casement, until finally the last strike was dealt and he plunged to the ground—a felled timber making itself heard for the very last time. As the fire burned on, he came to, but remained still, petrified by his inability to act. His heart fluttered. The wind shrieked. The storm clouds parted, bathing the hell that engulfed the castle in a blood red tinge. Great stone blocks fell as the structure collapsed around Candide. The blazing hand of the inferno threw javelins of fire, shooting through the night sky as if to celebrate the triumph of destruction over creation. As Candide gazed at the horrific scene, he watched a fiery spear fall towards him. He waited for his impending doom frozen. He told his body to move, but it did not comply; it lay still as if strapped into a torturous contraption. The projectile grew in his field of vision until it reached through his eyes and wrapped his heart in its suffocating grip. Poom! The javelin missed the trembling scholar by inches. The stifling grasp on his heart slowly unwove itself, allowing him to summon the energy to prop himself up on his hand. Immediately, he crumpled as waves of pain swept through his hand, wrist, arm, shoulder, and swamped his body like a tsunami. He had not been as fortunate as he had thought. His mind fled, locking itself behind the door of unconsciousness as it gazed at

the charred knot that had been his right hand.

As the rising sun revealed the landscape, Candide's eyelids slid back slowly. Grunting, he turned to stare at the ruins. Massive stones that had once constituted the magnificent structure were strewn about the scorched earth. Fallen buttresses lay in pieces, covered by the rubble of the walls they once supported. Wrought iron gates wrenched into despicable shapes hung dejectedly in the frames they once guarded. Tears dribbled down his cheeks, only to turn into a flood when he saw his hand. After what seemed to be an eternity, Candide rose up and looked out over the plain. He trudged to the skeleton of his old mansion and began to comb through the remains like an archaeologist desperate for a find. Upon reaching his study, he sank to his knees and began to wail: "It's all gone! All my writings! My work of so many decades, ready to illuminate the world. Gone!" As if these works were the only substance inflating his being, he collapsed. For hours, he muttered to himself as he picked through the burnt pieces littered throughout. Yet the charred slivers held no hope. One by one, he tore them to bits with his remaining hand, until there was nothing left but the shreds of greatness. At last, he dropped to the ground in despair and fell asleep.

As the sun reached its zenith, a vulture alighted upon a rafter above Candide to examine the carcass. It swooped down to feast, but its peck roused the man, who cursed at the bird and began to hike out of the barren shell towards the still intact stables. There, Candide found only one working wagon, the funeral carriage used in his family for generations. He attached two of his horses to the old buggy and began the journey to the city.

For two days the lonely carriage and its tired steeds traversed the countryside. Finally, the dark black vehicle and its driver arrived in the city. Passersby shuddered and walked quickly by, sensing a dismal bleakness that permeated the air surrounding Candide. Arriving at his building, Candide hitched the horses to a post and left the carriage in the street. His footfalls rang heavily yet ploddingly in the stairwell as he climbed to his apartment. He reached into his pocket for the key, only to remember that it had been melted into nothing more than a pool of metal during that dreadful night. Candide gritted his teeth in anger and violently wrested a pipe off the wall with his hand and the stump of his right arm. Water began dripping, but he continued unconcerned, flailing as he struggled to grip the pipe. By swinging his hips, holding the pipe with his left hand, and using his right forearm to hold it flush against his stomach, he slowly battered down the door. After several minutes of these awkward contortions, he dropped the pipe, stepped into the dwelling, and kicked a table at the door to hold it closed.

The apartment served as both his refuge when he stayed in the city and visited with the other great minds and also as a writing studio. It consisted of a bedroom, small kitchen, bath, and a large study with nothing but a writing desk, upon which was placed a tub of ink, a quill, and blank paper. This beautiful desk was where Candide had written many of his best works. He had spent years of his life seated at the desk with pen in hand, words flowing onto the page, and the pure joy of reason in his heart. Now all those writings were gone: every word burned, evaporated into the ether, never to be condensed again. When Candide sat down at his desk, his place of comfort and peace, he reached for the quill. Yet instead of gracefully grasping the pen, his disfigured stump knocked it over. He attempted to lift it, but only succeeded in grinding the delicate quill into the polished wood. The efforts shredded the raw flesh marking the end of his brutish club, tearing apart the last remnants of skin and wringing out fresh spurts of blood and hideous oozings of unidentifiable fluids. A furious bark of anger lept from his quivering lips. His red face straining, he picked it up with his left hand, dipped it in ink, and placed the tip on a fresh page. He tried to write. His breathing stopped and his body went still as he focused on this one

task. But no longer did ideas flow out beautifully onto the page. Instead, his left hand could only fashion crude shapes vaguely similar to letters, but impossible to decipher. After hours of intense concentration, Candide began to cry in despair. He snapped the quill in half on the edge of the desk, then threw the ink well at the wall, shattering it. The ink dripped slowly down the polished wood panel. First, it pooled in a large splatter that stared from the wall like the face of a man falling off a cliff. Next, its tendrils separated; one continued down, forming a midsection, while two slid to the flanks, creating arms. Finally, two more tentacles stretched towards the floor, producing legs. Candide gasped at the apparition, then cursed the lifeless body. He flipped the desk towards the wall, tossed the chair at the form, shut the curtains, and kicked his lamp to extinguish the sight of the carcass. The fallen lantern lit the carpet, which exploded in flame until Candide stomped it out with heavy jumps and water. Exhausted, he toppled down onto his cot.

“It is not that we have so little time but that we lose so much. ... The life we receive is not short but we make it so; we are not ill provided but use what we have wastefully.” Candide angrily tore Seneca’s words off the worn tack that held them to the wall which greeted him each time he awoke. He next disposed of Benjamin Franklin’s thirteen virtues, then quotes from Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire, and others. Candide muttered in disgust at the uselessness of it all. Using his left hand, he grabbed a scrap piece of weathered vellum and tediously scratched the last bit of philosophy he would ever write: “Reason is but a thin facade.” From now on, he resolved, he would be reminded of this every time he awoke, not the hopeless optimism of flawed thinkers trying to reason themselves out of the practical misery of reality.

Proceeding to a bank of cabinets, Candide had a breakfast of liquor and bread. He then removed *An Essay on Human Understanding* his extensive collection and placed it in the stove. While lighting the apparatus, he snickered at the thought of the money he would save on heating by burning this useless fuel. He selected another victim, but dropped it when he tripped over his fallen desk. He reached to pick it up, but hesitation crossed his face and he paused for the smallest instant. His brow lowered once more, and Candide tossed the book in the stove and slammed the door shut.

Afterwards, Candide approached a different section of his bookshelves in a dark corner of his apartment. Shadows hung upon the books, which seemed to absorb the light around them, and the shelf itself seemed like a raven ready to pounce down upon the unwary bystander. The works filling the section did not beckon the reader, but instead brooded with pessimistic indifference. They filled the air with a vague scent that unsettled and turned the stomach of any wanderer accustomed to the fresh and invigorating air that characterized the rest of Candide’s library.

Candide had never read anything from this section. The collection of books that filled it were willed to him by his brother, whose death resulted from an unfortunate suicide. Candide carefully browsed the section, examining each book and choosing ones to remove from the shelves. His face was covered in a sheen of sweat that glistened in the candle light, and his eyes darted with impatience and fear. After an hour of searching, Candide placed the books down on a mahogany table next to his favorite reading chair. Their worn covers were inscribed with medieval lettering that spelled out titles such as *The Fall of Reason* and *The Uselessness of Effort*. He closed the blinds and extinguished all light except for a lone candle whose gloomy light he read by. Draped in a veil of darkness like a mourner at a funeral, Candide began to read. His posture started as one of dignity. As the reading wore on, he slowly lost structure until he was nothing but a gelatinous mass that oozed down the chair. His expression metamorphosed: a seed of despair rooted and grew into a dark bush of hemlock which pervaded his entire being. Finally, his head dropped into his hand and he fell into a fitful sleep.

As the sun clawed its way above the horizon, Candide suddenly stiffened and rose from the chair. He strode into the kitchen with the confidence he had exuded before the fire. He carefully removed a goblet from a cabinet and set it down on the table. He then picked out a bottle of vodka and a black bottle filled with a purple liquid. He poured a shot of vodka into the goblet, added a dash of the purple liquid to the vodka, and stirred with a measured reserve. He then placed the bottles back into the cabinet very deliberately, picked up the glass and walked to the window. He looked out over the expanse of the city for several minutes, which glowed red beneath the sun. Satisfied, Candide closed the curtains, strode into his dark bedroom, glass in hand, and shut the door.

William Howlett

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Critical Essay

Individuality Under the Foot of Society

An analysis of my original poem, "Flatland," found in Works Cited

In "Flatland," the author depicts conformity as a steamroller rolling across all humankind. Its victims are left flattened shells of their former selves, lacking vitality and individuality. Yet they lie before the steamroller willingly, grateful for the opportunity to cast off their individuality. The author argues it is up to individuals to actively resist conformity and unquestioning submission. He accomplishes this by dramatically painting conformity's effect on individuals, illustrating the feedback loop of conformity, and depicting the steamroller as an unstoppable, autonomous force humans cannot defeat, but only flee.

The author asserts that conformity erases one's individuality and identity and makes one surrender their destiny. He describes the flattening of the crowds, stating "Their sap is squeezed out by the steamroller, / And their husks are shaved to fit within their coffins." (20-21). The steamroller does not kill, but squishes out the fluid that imparts energy and vitality. Without this unique and vibrant core, people are nothing but "husks," the dry and worthless external coverings of their former selves, their three dimensionality flattened into facades meant to pass as independent beings. What force in society can do the same? Only conformity. Thus, the steamroller represents conformity sweeping across the masses as it squeezes out individuality. Not only does it sap one of their singularity, but by doing this it takes away one's control over their destiny. Once the core of one's being is lost, they become a wispy husk blown by the winds of fortune and whims of society. They can no longer control their resting place. Instead, conformity takes control of their fate and "shave[s]" them into the character they will be when they die. To surrender to conformity is to give away one's free will. The steamroller of conformity flattens the individual and leaves them adrift, yet the author portrays its effects across entire societies as being just as frightening.

The author argues that deference to conformity perpetuates it and suppresses dissent. Those who dare to oppose the steamroller "are drowned/ By the silence / Of the prostrate masses" (13-15). The submission of the crowd leads to a strict orthodoxy, in which dissension is silenced by the pressure of conformity and the proponents are submerged beneath the waves of followers, their impact smothered by the single-mindedness of the conformists. The messages of those who strive for uniqueness fall upon the deaf ears of those who seek to follow in silence, not lead in speech. As people lay themselves before the steamroller, others feel social pressure to do the same, launching a continuous loop of unthinking submission to conformity. By describing the masses as "prostrate" rather than "prone" or "lying flat," the author depicts the masses as lying in worship and submission towards the steamroller. Not only do they willingly let their "sap" be pressed from them, they exhibit adoration towards the ideal of conformity and actively seek flattening. The pervasiveness and social pressure that accompany conformity lead to a feedback loop of acceptance and willingness to conform as people seek to follow others and repudiate

their individuality. Faced with this barrier, it seems a force almost impossible to overcome.

The author contends that conformity is an unrelenting force that will always exist, and society can only defeat it by actively evading its pressure. He describes the cabin of the steamroller in the first stanza: “The footwell lies vacant, / Yet the engine bellows. / No steering wheel greets the hands, / Yet the machine doesn’t miss a soul” (1-4). The steamroller is autonomous, possessing neither controls nor driver. If the machine can neither be steered away from humanity nor stopped, there are no means to end its presence. Conformity will always exist within society, “Relentless in its pursuit” (8). Thus, the only way for society to avoid its influence is for the targets of the ever-present force to take action. They must command their agency, be willing to resist the draw of conformity, and pull themselves away from the steamroller. Yet they cannot stand still in their resistance, for the encroaching steamroller will catch up to them. Instead, they must actively flee their pursuer; resisting conformity requires consistent energy and vigilance, not simply a one-time decision. In the poem, the words of those who speak against conformity are ineffectual, and attempts to take control of the steamroller are futile. The failure of these forms of resistance leaves individual action as the last option to defend one’s identity from conformity.

“Flatland” is a vivid reminder of the perils of conformity within a society. Driven by social pressure and the ubiquity of conformity, this social phenomenon becomes a positive feedback loop that perpetuates itself indefinitely. Like a steamroller, it leaves adherents without real substance, “husks” of their former selves lacking individuality and vigor. The autonomous steamroller can never be stopped or avoided by stepping away. Instead, to defeat it individuals must be willing to constantly flee. Only through committed and constant vigilance can conformity be avoided. Yet no answer is given for addressing conformity on a society-wide basis. Perhaps this is intentional; the decision to conform is ultimately an individual choice, and one’s conclusion is an expression of their character’s fortitude and self-reliance. Conformity may be a societal occurrence, but the responsibility to escape its suffocating clutches falls to each of us.

Works Cited

The following is my original poem, which I am also submitting separately to the Scholastic competition in the Poetry category:

Flatland

The footwell lies vacant,
Yet the engine bellows.
No steering wheel greets the hands,
Yet the machine doesn’t miss a soul.
A serenity swaddles the cabin,
Muffling the view.

The cylinder trundles across the plain,
Relentless in its pursuit,
Efficient in its execution.
The steamroller

Flattens the fields of humanity.

A valiant few raise their
Raspy voices, but are drowned
By the silence
Of the prostrate masses.

The bravest wrest their way into the driver's seat,
Only to inhale sharply, their eyes transfixed
And their hands fumbling for nonexistent controls.

The crowds submit to the force,
Their sap is squeezed out by the steamroller,

And their husks are shaved to fit within their coffins.

William Howlett

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Critical Essay

Judgment: Hawthorne and the Puritans of The Scarlet Letter

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne depicts nature as a more just judge than the Puritans. Nature's judgment, seen through the sun and the earth, is representative of divine judgment. Hawthorne's God understands that actions cause sins, not birth, and that actions can also remove sins. In contrast, the Puritan society Hawthorne paints is both inaccurate and relentless in its judgment of sin. Hawthorne portrays nature as divine judge in *The Scarlet Letter*, contrasting the justness and mercy of nature with the unjustness and unforgiving harshness of the depicted Puritan culture and asserting that the Puritans' interpretation of God's judgment is mistaken and excessively punitive.

Throughout the novel, Hawthorne portrays the Puritans as imperceptive judges of sin. Hawthorne describes that individuals of "wiser faith ... were inclined to see a providential hand in Roger Chillingworth's so opportune arrival" (81). Despite the sinisterness of Chillingworth's intentions, the majority of the highest echelon of Puritans could not see through his facade of kindness, and their judgments of him turned out to be incorrect. However, the common people see him differently: "When, however, [the people] form [their] judgment ... on the intuitions of [their] great and warm heart, the conclusions thus attained are often so profound and so unerring, as to possess the character of truths supernaturally revealed" (85). Despite not having reason for their suspicion, the people could sense that Chillingworth is "Satan himself, or Satan's emissary" (86). While the highest Puritans are blind to Chillingworth's true motives, the people, guided by "supernatural" means, are more perceptive judges. By listening to their own nature, in this case their "intuitions" and "hearts," the people are better judges. Hawthorne is arguing Puritan judgment is inaccurate, except that of the commoners', who are guided by nature.

Hawthorne depicts many Puritans as unjust in their judgment of sin. This is revealed by the people's judgment of the scarlet letter seven years after its initiation:

"Lastly the inhabitants of the town ... tormented Hester Prynne, perhaps more than all the rest, with their cool, well-acquainted gaze at her familiar shame. Hester saw and recognized the self-same faces of that group of matrons, who had awaited her forthcoming from the prison-door, seven years ago" (Hawthorne 156).

Despite Hester's years of penance and charitable work, the Puritans are transfixed by her sin and refuse to let the subject rest. Those who watched her seven years ago still judge her as harshly as ever. No action will ever erase the mark, and no deed will remove the stigma. For the Puritans, sin and the harsh judgment of it lasts forever. While Hester is being judged, her partner in sin, Dimmesdale, is delivering a sermon to the entire Puritan community. Dimmesdale and Hester have both sinned equally, but while one is ostracized and criticized, the other holds the attention and admiration of all. This demonstrates a tremendous gap in the perceptiveness of the Puritans and the justice of their judgment of sin. Hawthorne is arguing that the Puritans' judgment lacks

the perception to see sinners clearly, is without mercy, and is far too rigid and severe, leading to injustices.

In contrast, Hawthorne depicts nature and its divine judgment as more just and fair than that of the Puritans. Hawthorne wonders about Chillingworth: "Did the sun, which shone so brightly everywhere else, really fall upon him? Or was there, as it rather seemed, a circle of ominous shadow moving along with his deformity" (114). Chillingworth's soul is so full of darkness and vengeance that the sun's rays either avoid him or are extinguished by him. To investigate the question of the sun's agency, one can look to Puritan Jonathan Edwards in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," where he states: "the sun does not willingly shine upon you to give you light to serve sin and Satan" (214). Edwards depicts the sun as having agency, but in this case being restrained, to not shine upon you in judgment of your sins. With this interpretation, it is clear that Hawthorne is using the sun's rejection of Chillingworth as a symbol of God's negative judgment of the man and his sins. This judgment stands in opposition to that of Puritan society. While Puritans see Chillingworth as an exemplary member of the church and of the town, God is able to see through this facade and judge the true man. While nature's judgment is not more merciful here, it is more just and perceptive. Hawthorne views the Puritan system of judgment as flawed and disconnected from true, divine judgment, as seen through the lens of nature in the novel. Chillingworth is both clearly seen by nature and given a second chance when Hawthorne asks: "Would he not suddenly sink into the earth?" (114) To understand this, one can look to Edwards, who states: "Were it not for the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you one moment; for you are a burden to it" and "if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf" (214). Nature represents an extension of God's will and His divine judgment. In this case, Chillingworth is only kept out of hell by God's will, and Hawthorne wonders if Chillingworth may at any moment plummet towards hell. This raises the question of why the Puritans' omnipotent God does not remove His hand and let the sinful Chillingworth fall into the pits of hell. That Chillingworth is judged negatively by God and nature yet is still alive indicates that Hawthorne's God is not as quick to infinite condemnation as the Puritans' view of Him. While God is not blind to his wickedness, Chillingworth remains alive because Hawthorne's conception of God sees a potential for goodness in him. In the novel, nature and God judge sinfulness far more accurately than the Puritans, but God gives one the opportunity to do penance, unlike Hawthorne's Puritans and traditional Puritans like Edwards.

Nature's divine judgment recognizes that sins are not inherent, but result from actions, which can both create and absolve them. As they walk through the forest, Pearl declares to Hester: "The sunshine does not love you. It runs away and hides itself, because it is afraid of something on your bosom. Now, see! There it is, playing, a good way off. Stand you here, and let me run and catch it. I am but a child. It will not flee from me; for I wear nothing on my bosom yet" (Hawthorne 119). Pearl understands that the sun judges Hester negatively for her actions, represented by the scarlet letter, but does not "flee" from Pearl, who is an innocent child who has not committed any sins. This indicates that nature's judgment does not define sin as being inherent to who we are or being inherited, unlike the Puritans. Instead, nature recognizes sin as coming from actions, in this case Hester's adulterous ones that brand her and cause the sun to flee. Because Pearl has never sinned, she is judged as innocent in God's eyes. Pearl's description of "catching" the sunlight demonstrates a new conception of judgment. Instead of judgment being unilaterally handed down, catching implies that humans can be an active participant in judgment and take part in the process through actions. In this case, Pearl actively seeks out the

positive judgment of nature, opening the door for all to have control over their own divine judgment. Hester does just this later in the novel, when she tears off the scarlet letter, throws it away, and decides to start a new life with Dimmesdale. Hester's actions trigger a change in nature's judgment: "All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest, ... The objects that had made a shadow hitherto, embodied the brightness now ... Love ... must always create a sunshine" (Hawthorne 130). Hester's decision to cast off her stigma has in itself "created" a positive judgment of her and caused "heaven" to "smile" down at her. This "creation" indicates that her actions were directly responsible for causing the reversal of God's judgment, symbolized by the rush of sunlight. Her actions have eradicated her previous sins, represented by her "shadow hitherto," in the eyes of nature and God. Now she is bathed in God's glow. In contrast to the permanence of sin within Puritan society, Hawthorne's God recognizes that humans are defined by their current state and actions, not their past, and He applies this reality in His divine judgment. By only negatively judging those whose sins are their own and by accepting actions as reason to forgive these sins, the natural judge of Hawthorne is more merciful and just than the Puritans, demonstrating the fallibility of societal judgment.

Throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne paints nature as a divine judge that reveals God's true will to the reader. The novel is at its heart a commentary on Puritan society, and Hawthorne uses nature to make a statement on their religion and its rigidity. He claims that the God they worship is a just and merciful one who gives sinners a path to forgiveness and recognizes their penance, while Puritan society, itself based on religion, is imperceptive in its judgment and unyielding in its punishment. In contrast to Jonathan Edwards' grim view that we are all condemned sinners destined for hell, Hawthorne gives the reader hope that sins can be atoned for and forgiven. Hawthorne's novel uses the judgment of nature to assert that while Puritan society is unjust and merciless in its punishment of sins, the Puritans' God is instead just, yet forgiving.

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Paige Hubert

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

The Weeping Willow

The root family is a weeping willow, blowing in the wind,
With silence but wiping the branches near,
The mother is the bark of the tree keeping in the pain,
Acting like the strong trunk keeping everything together,
The father is slaking branches with no strength,
Just wiping deep furrows into the bark,
The 4 children are the board flat leaves,
Going along with the ride,
No way of stopping.

The Lawn Mower

My family is a lawn mower, shearing the grass
while sculpting the lawn,
my dad's the blade always sharp and tough,
my mom's the loud annoying sound always disturbing the neighborhood,
my sister is the freshly cut grass,
always smelling good and beautiful,
my dogs are the sticks always getting in our way,
but they're there when you need them,
I'm the wheels always keeping us going and supporting on the way.

The Old Fence

We are all the fence, standing strong,
With weathered edges,
Few of us fall and never get repaired,
The rest of us pick ourselves back up,
We put nails back into the same spot,
With no chance of staying strong,
The nail gun not caring about the spot.

Alexandria Huntley

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Flash Fiction

A Rainy Day

DAY 112 “No Rain”

The sun sits low in the western sky over the corn fields which should be roughly eight feet tall by this late Summer July evening. A bead of sweat slowly rolls its way down the bridge of my nose to my dry, cracked and bleeding lips. Instinctively my tongue whips out lapping the brackish water from my sore skin.

“Ameeliiaa?” my mother calls faintly from the distance. Swinging my legs nimbly back through the french style loft doors I swiftly sever the string holding a bale of dry, crunchy, sweet hay in its tight little bundle. Taking the six individual flakes I shake them vigorously out the loft doors for our large Jersey milk cow and two plow horses. After scrambling down the old rickety ladder and out of the pleasant shadows of the ancient barn, I slowly make my way through the sweltering heat back up to the farm house. Thankful for yet another day that the war had not made it this far.

When the war began in 1914, I was 15. My father had promised he would not let the war change anything about our lives. When scouts came by demanding they take our horses for battle, he kept true to his word. Bargaining with the men, using the little money we had to feed and house the soldiers for the night. Life went on as it had when they left.

Jumping out of bed early one morning to go help my father in the fields, I found my mother sitting on the swing, silent tears rolling down her moistened cheeks. Trying to be strong she told me about my father leaving to go fight in the war. His promise...broken, was forgotten. That year I learned life would go on, things would be okay, even without him here.

It has been four years since the war ended, I am now 23. The news of my father's demise had come six months after he left.

I miss him.

A lot.

But life has moved on and there are more pressing matters to deal with. With the longest drought we have ever had, I am banking on all the tricks my old man taught me. So far, the crops have stayed green, but just barely they hang onto life, sweltering heat waves make the straight stalks appear to shimmer and lean thought there is not a breeze in the deadened air. Wish we could have just a day's worth of rain, just a simple wedding shower to dampen the cracked Earth, so we could make it through the rest of the summer with enough to pay off the rest of the mortgage on the farm.

Before entering the house, I glance over my shoulder at the last light of the setting sun. Taking in a deep breath, the inside of my sensitive nose is scalded by the desert like air. I glance wishingly at the nearly dried up lake, a small kayak nearly twenty meters from the low lapping water. The sun finally, quietly sinks on the horizon, behind the short corn stalks. With a small smile I push the hot air out of my mind, forget the dry paper like wind on my skin, praying, hoping for just an hours worth of rain to come in this unusually dry, desert like time. Silently, I

slip inside, the door thudding softly behind me as my feet pad lightly up the creaking steps to bed. That night I pray:

Please dad, bring me just a little bit of hope, just a little rain, just so I know you are here for me still.

I wake gradually to a soft pitter-patter in the background. Rolling over I expect the sunlight to burn through my eyelids, to help wake me up, returning me to this stark reality. Instead I am met with a nice cool darkness. My crusty eyes crack open as my lanky body stretches out. Gasping, I freeze mid stretch. The dust slowly washes away from the glass window as the fat drops steadily fall from the darkened, cloudy sky. I inhale, taking a deep, cleansing breath, the humidity a welcome feeling compared to the dry, sand like air. Springing out of bed my feet tangle in the bed spread and I stumble as I launch myself down the stairs, "MOOOM!!" My scream echoes through the hall. Excitedly shoving the door open I tumble out the door in a rush, a choked sob escapes from behind my sealed lips and silent tears stream down dry cheeks as my eyes search the brilliant, bright blue sky hungrily for a single cloud.

"Day 113, NO RAIN"

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.

Sophie Hurwitz

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Anita Hagerman

Category: Flash Fiction

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 gassy *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.

Josie Ihnat

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Friends Without Benefits

“You could be so great, and I’m trying to make you reach that. I’ve been waiting for you to realize what you could be, and I’m running out of patience.”

As the youngest of three girls, I was granted the opportunity to watch my sisters as they grew up, and learned from their mistakes. Trust me, they made a lot of mistakes. So, when I finally reached high school, subsequently got ready to start dating, and my mom gave me a stern talking to about abusive relationships, I dismissed it as something that would never happen to me. I knew the guidelines for physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, and the warning signs to look for in the person I was dating. I had heard the horror stories and had seen what my sisters went through. I thought I was prepared.

“I’m just giving you my honest opinion.”

My aunt’s car hummed down El Camino towards her house as I sat next to her, singing along to the songs lilting out of the radio and casually chatting with her about her work. My phone buzzed in my lap, and I glanced down, greeted by a text from one of my close friends.

“You’re only taking it that way because you have low self-esteem.”

I had met him nine months before at a debate tournament. He was two years my senior, obnoxiously smart, and incredibly charismatic. I had so much to learn, and he seemed so experienced. Why *wouldn’t* I want to be friends with him?

“No one will ever like you if you keep acting like that.”

That text was awful. It was hurtful. It was mean. It was exactly what I expected. It was a text that told me that I’m stupid. It was a text that told me that I’m worthless. It was a text like the ones I had received every day for almost a year.

“You’re so hormonal. You shouldn’t get mad so easily.”

Nine months of emotional abuse and manipulation led to me sobbing pathetically as my aunt’s car flew 60 miles an hour down El Camino Real. Nine months of anxiety, of self-doubt, of seeking validation from someone who would never give it, of being caught in the lie he had woven around me. Nine months was all it took for me to believe him when he told me that I was a disappointment, that I wasn’t good enough, that I couldn’t trust my own opinion. It took him nine months to break me.

“You can’t just get upset when you know I’m right.”

Air rushed in from the open window, smacking me across my face as I tried to fight back tears. My chest tightened and I gasped for air. Suddenly the walls of the car were too close, the music was too loud, my aunt was too chatty.

“You need to take my advice. I’m smarter than you.”

Emotional abuse is one of those things that sounds like its solution is incredibly easy. Like a screaming child, abusers often just want attention, and like a new mother, their victims will flutter around them, trying to appease them. If you ignore the child when he’s throwing a tantrum, they’ll learn that it won’t get them anything. All you have to do is stop paying attention

to the person emotionally abusing you. Stop believing what they say, tell them they're wrong. All you have to do is walk away...

"You're just gonna fail and make a fool of yourself."

The flashes of light from the headlights of passing cars pounded into my head, the radio turned into a whine, and time seemed to stand still as the world closed in around me.

"Your opinion is fit for a 5 year old."

Of course, walking away is never as easy as it sounds. My toxic friendship was more akin to a spider and a fly than a parent and child. Caught in his carefully constructed web, I was wrapped in his influence as he slowly sucked the life out of me. The harder I struggled or fought back, the tighter his grip on me became.

"You're too stupid to do that."

I burst out of the car as we pulled into the driveway, stumbling, sobbing, and desperate to breathe. My knees burned as I tripped and slammed to a halt on the concrete. Warm blood trickled down my legs but all I could do was sit there and cry.

"You shouldn't eat that. You need to watch your figure."

How did I get to this point? Why did I allow one person to have so much power over me? Here was someone who was supposed to be my friend and my ally, not my enemy or my captor, and yet he was smothering me. That night, sitting on that driveway with blood streaming from my knees, gasping between sobs, I knew something needed to change.

"Oh my God, you're so fucking pathetic."

When I ran out of tears, I laid back against the driveway, staring up at the glittery velvet sky. The cool air swirled around me, the crickets sang from the bushes, and all I could think about was how nice it was to finally be able to catch my breath.

"I don't care about anything you could possibly say."

I could say that this experience made me a stronger person. I could say that it helped me overcome obstacles or taught me to respect myself, but it didn't. His friendship destroyed my self esteem. It made me fear my friends. It turned me into a shell of the person I once was. He took a bright, bubbly girl, and broke her. He created wounds that took a long time to heal. He left scars. Looking at me now, no one would ever know what I went through. No one would ever believe that I once allowed someone to control me like that. No one would ever believe that I once sat on my aunt's driveway, and decided to be free.

Deniz Ince

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Anita Hagerman

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Stuck Stammering

“Hey, guys! The freshman has a lisp!”

The words still ring in my ears. This stinging comment marked my first experience on the high school soccer team. Surprisingly, having *only* a lisp marked one of my greatest accomplishments: speaking at all. In middle school, words still got caught in my throat, poised behind my Adam’s apple, eager for release, but far from being liberated from behind the cell bars that were vocal cords. No one noticed this problem because as soon as I hit a troublesome phrase, I’d switch languages—Turkish to English and back to Turkish. In times of real crises, I’d turn to Spanish. Throughout elementary school, I’d learned to speak in condensed spurts; I’d circumlocute the stubborn words I couldn’t speak and ended up finding spontaneous verbs and nouns. However, my evasive maneuvers didn’t fool my sixth grade teacher. She suggested I see a speech pathologist. After a short meeting, I was diagnosed with a stammer. Alarmed and disoriented, I turned to the Internet. Google did nothing to comfort me, listing me as a statistic and categorizing my plight as a “neurological disorder.”

Yes, I knew my speech was a problem, and the word “disorder” scared me into action. Too many times I’d seen the playful light in someone’s eyes slowly dim, turning to pity as I pleaded with my mouth to pronounce the emotions caught in my skull and throat. Determined to join a minority of people who have successfully overcome a stammer, I leaned forward in the swivel chair and asked my speech pathologist, “What can I do?” “Breathe from your stomach, reposition your chin, small coughs in between hard words, and if all else fails, sing.” Sing? Unable to improve the first few weeks with only breathing techniques, I turned to song. It worked! I would’ve been ecstatic, but my tunes made even the neighborhood dogs howl. By speaking conscientiously every day with my peers and my bathroom mirror, I slowly abandoned my hopeless Broadway career. After one year, I’d conquered the beast, no more stammer, mission accomplished... or so I thought.

I remember her careful touch on my forearm as my speech pathologist said, “Honey, you’ve got the hang of it now. You don’t have a stammer anymore, but you’ll have to go to someone else for a lisp you’ve acquired.” Rather than put my head down and accept a cursed life of never speaking with confidence, I left that beige, Febreze-scented office motivated to clear this next hurdle.

My lisp led me out of my high school’s door at 3:00 and through the heavy metal doors of Special School District by 3:30. After school three times a week, I sat in a classic blue plastic chair designed with four metal caps that perpetually maintained their ability to shock any exposed skin. In front of me lay a worn pocket dictionary’s compilation of “S” sounds with a cover that once had been cheery yellow. Every day, the final word would be “lisp.” The word both defined my dilemma and exposed my incompetence. In the back seat of my dad’s gray station wagon I’d whisper to myself almost maniacally, “She sells seashells by the sea shore.”

Repetition after repetition and static shock after static shock, I eventually relegated my stammer to merely another hurdle I had overcome. The stamp of the “lisp” soon lost its adjective. After years of dodging linguistic landmines, I could finally speak with a new level of confidence. I can now make announcements, answer questions, engage in debate, and call for a soccer ball without a puzzled look from my peers. I can even do what I had once thought impossible: triumphantly say “lisp” without a hint of hesitation.

Katie Jackson

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

No Resolution

Until this year, the only person I knew who had died was my great grandmother. I suppose it was sad when she passed away, but I was very young and her death had been expected for about a year. This year, however, one of my friends passed away unexpectedly at the age of fifteen. The unexpected deaths are often harder to deal with than the deaths that are seen coming.

JD, or John David as I knew him, was the type of kid that always seemed to be laughing at a joke no one else knew. His eyes always seemed to sparkle and his smile, made up almost completely of teeth, never disappeared from his face. He lived his life to the fullest, and no one I've ever met had ever had a bad thing to say about him. He was my first friend on our swim team, which I impulsively joined when I was six years old. He was the first boy I ever dated- although our childish relationship consisted mostly of him buying me gum and me splashing him with water during practice, but our bond was undeniable nonetheless. He died on Wednesday, February 3rd, after falling asleep Tuesday night and passing away peacefully in his sleep. News of his passing devastated many people in St. Louis who had been lucky enough to be a part of John David's life. I was at swim practice when my swim coach, who was aware that I had known John David, pulled me aside and let me know that he had passed away peacefully in his sleep. Denial was my first response to hearing about the passing of my childhood friend.

When I found out he had passed away, I could not stop laughing. It was my form of denial, because people only ever laugh at jokes. So, if I was laughing, that made this a joke, and jokes are seldom real. I'm sure my coach had been preparing herself for my reaction, and looked about ready to wrap me in a hug when I started laughing uncontrollably. I don't think that was the reaction she had been expecting. I didn't get back in the pool for the next morning because I was laughing too hard to breathe properly. Looking back on the moment, I suppose I was bordering on hysteria, but while it was going on I couldn't form any logical thoughts to realize what I was doing. The word 'no' kept running through my brain as I struggled to process that such an important aspect of my childhood was suddenly ripped from my life without warning. One of my teammates told me that John David and my old swim team had a moment of silence this morning for him, but I knew she was wrong. She was making this up to mess with me; she knew how much I cared about John David. I told her that she wasn't being funny and she shouldn't joke about that, all while laughing as if her joke had been the funniest one I've ever heard. I exhibited all the classic signs of denial as I refused to acknowledge what happened, and ignored the facts that told me John David was gone. It was five minutes before I remember having my first rational thought.

I remained in the blissful state of denial for the next five minutes, the last five minutes I would ever have where, to me, my friend was still alive. My brain started to function again, wild thoughts trying to rationalize how John David could still be alive running through my head. After all, he is only 15 years old. He was alive on Monday, and he had texted me Monday about plans we had on Wednesday the 10th. I hadn't texted him back yet. I hadn't texted him back yet but we

still have plans and he never was the type of kid to cancel his plans so he couldn't be gone because we have plans on Wednesday. It was perfectly logical in a simplistic and idealistic kind of way. Our lives hadn't yet diverged, he was still too prominent a figure in my life for him to just be taken away without warning. But, as I looked around into the concerned faces of my coaches and teammates surrounding me, and realized that no one was laughing along with me, I realized that no one had been joking. No one had been lying. Everyone had been telling the truth. I had thought that breathing was difficult while laughing so hard, but it was nothing in comparison to trying to choke down air through the sobs that wracked my body for the next seven hours. My coach, after realizing that I could barely understand the things she was saying, told me to go home, but I sat in my car for the next four hours. I only remembered to turn on the heater when I realized my hair had ice on it. I wanted to go home. I wanted to go home and hug my mom and cry with my sister and wrap a fuzzy blanket around me and look through pictures of John David and me until I fell asleep. But my mom and sister were out of town and my sobs were the choking on air, crying out my contacts, too scared to drive home type of crying so I just sat in my car. Eventually I called my sister, and we cried together over the phone for about an hour. She knew him too, not as well as I did, but well enough to realize how much the world had lost by losing John David. We were both grieving, but talking to her felt more like sharing grief than combining the two of ours. It made everything just a little bit more bearable, and she was able to calm me down and allow me to drive home. Later that night I attended a service for John David with my swim coach, and was able to share my grief with with even more people who knew him. With every hug, exchange of kind words, or memory that was shared I felt a little bit of the crushing weight lifted from my chest. The service marked the end of the denial, rationalization, and emotionality I had experienced earlier in the night.

Although my mind had accepted John David's passing, I was still struggling to cope with it. I fell back into the habit of biting my nails, something I had worked for many years to stop. It wasn't a conscious decision and I certainly tried my best to keep myself from doing it, but I woke up the following mornings with blood around my fingertips and short, jagged nails. I cried at the smallest mention of anything that reminded me of him. I had planned to visit my sister in Cleveland over the long weekend, and I thought spending time with someone who knew John David as well would give me the much needed opportunity to share stories, celebrate his life, and cry over the loss. I was surprised when my sister didn't mention him on the car ride to her dorm, and even more surprised when his name did not come up once that night. I knew I needed to talk about him, but the first time I brought him up, Liz told me that she didn't want to talk about it. For the rest of the trip, every time I would try to talk about John David or bring up something related to him, such as swimming, death, or even Stride gum, Liz would shut down. She and I were both trying to cope with this tragedy, but I realized during that trip that we were employing drastically different coping mechanisms. She used avoidance by refusing to talk about John David or anything relating to John David. I think it helped her in the beginning, and as time has gone by she has texted me occasionally asking how I'm doing and how it felt to go to Westminster and see the flag at half mast and memorial table set up outside the pool. If she avoided the issue of his death, she could pretend it didn't happen until she was able to deal with it. As I revised this essay I realized that I also have been using a bit of avoidance. I did not write the word death once, and sometimes turned what should have been a simple sentence into long run ons just to avoid saying the word. Avoidance, I found, is a way to put off having to deal with a tragedy until you're a little more prepared and a little more equipped to handle the fallout. John David's death was the first time I had a friend my age pass away, and the experience taught

me a lot about how I manage my grief. I did eventually move onto acceptance, after being able to grieve with his friends and share memories about his life. His death will always be sad, but I have learned to deal with his death in a healthy way, even though I still can't stop biting my nails. I realize now that coping mechanisms may differ greatly between two people. I felt the compulsive need to keep talking about John David, keep celebrating his life, and keep reminding people that he was *here*.. He was here, and he touched so many lives and talking about him is my way of ensuring that no one will ever forget him. My sister, on the other hand, needed the time to block his death out of her memory in order to prepare herself to deal with her grief. I have learned that grief is selfish. John David is fine. He doesn't know he's missing out on anything on Earth, he's not mourning the loss of his future, and he's not experiencing any pain. Grief is something each person feels for themselves, so each person experiences it a little bit differently. I went through the classic path of struggling with his death, and denying that it ever happened, to learning to cope with the pain and move on. The essay assignment sheet recommended talking about the resolution of the problem, but I don't think there ever will be a resolution to John David's death. He will always be too young and I'll always carry the grief with me. The grief never be the right size or shape to fill the hole left by his loss, but it'll get easier with time. I have my family, I have my friends, and I have hope. Those are the only three things someone really needs to move forward.

Caitlynn Jenni

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Wheeling Start

We were the legend. The empire in the state. But even the greatest fall.

Tears stream down my face as I slam the door. Ugh! How come life has to be so complicated?

This was so unfair. I will never fit in, no matter how many counselors or pep talks. I was always the last picked at anything. The whispers in the hall. I hear "I'm so sorry...." when a child blurts out a comment about my appearance. That's just how it was.

I sat myself on my bed. Rubbing my swollen eyes, my mom's figure emerges into the room. She must have heard me come in and wheel straight to my room. She said nothing as she sits on the foot of my bed. There really is nothing to say about these things.

We both sit there. I know what she's thinking. "Those kids don't know what they're talking about," or "What do you want to do about it?" The answer is always no, it's fine. But it's not.

Nothing can change the way they look at me. Not even my mom, the person I adore most.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"It's the same 'talk' every time."

Seeing that she was hurt, I continued. "It's just that.... I don't know why this had to happen. I mean, look at where I was, and where I could have been!"

We were the storm of the decade. So many awards, medals, and wins. I still remember the ice cream we would have after games. Our stupid little songs we would sing at recess. The games that got banned because they were too "dangerous". Yes, I remember it all. But it's gone now.

My mother was now the one in tears. "I'm so sorry this had to happen to you. You're right, you were amazing. But people didn't love you because of your sport. They loved you for your personality. You are caring, and you understand people. I love you for who you are. Your friends loved you for who you are. Even though the outside layer has changed, your center hasn't."

She paused, and let that sink in. I used the opportunity to tell her what I think. "Yes, but they are dead. And the other kids, who liked me because of my abilities, they're fakes. Now they just stare at me, or feel sorry for me."

It was true. We were all in our bus, coming home first place in the state. I was in my usual row, the back. The diesel hit the front of the bus, killing everyone. My dad, who was the assistant coach, my teammates, everyone. I was the only one. But when the bus rolled off the road, I slammed myself against the ceiling. Maybe if that lady didn't try to help by dragging me away, I wouldn't be paralyzed.

Word got around about the accident. Prayers were sent, sympathy and get well notes written, but even flowers and chocolate couldn't change the past. As the doctors confirmed, I was still a paraplegic.

Mom interrupted my thoughts. "Basketball does not define you. Your values define you. I know this has been hard for you. But it's been hard for me too." She continued in her own logical way.

"I was thinking that it would be best for you to see what my patients go through. Tomorrow at the hospital the staff are putting an activity together for patients in children going through the

same thing as you. Would you like to try that?"

I love the way my mom tries to help me. I don't want to make her feel bad. Even though I hate people feeling sorry for me and I would rather be alone, maybe this will be good for me.

"I'll try it. Thanks, mom."

Saturday morning I got up early so I could get ready. I did my usual dutch braid, a touch of mascara, and lots of prayer that this would not be a disaster.

Wheeling out of the bathroom, my eye caught on something I haven't looked at in weeks. All of a sudden I was on the court, still in shock we won the state championship. Grace laughs in front of me as we run through our parent tunnel. The medals passed out by my dad. Then the hospital, and the funerals.

I snap back into my senses when the door creaks open. "Are you ready to go, Hon?" My mom was wearing her usual nurses uniform and wore a bun in her auburn hair. When she smiled, all of the sadness disappears. She's the kind of person who everyone loves to be around.

She walked over to my cabinet, full of medals, trophies, and memories. I know she missed it.

She took in a deep breath, and said in that "let's be as positive as we can even if life sucks" kind of tone, "Ready?"

"Yup."

I could smell the hospital in her car, besides the fact that she had an air freshener at every air vent. Main street rolled by, and so did my school. But my heart skipped a beat at the familiar look of Graces house. I still remember the walks home from school, and her mom waiting for her honeys to have some lemonade and goldfish. But that can't happen anymore.

The hospital's smell was stronger. My mom wheeled me up to the front desk, where Chardell was. I can smell her pear perfume and hairspray iced her soft almond hair. "Hey, Sugar." She said in that bittersweet tone. "How are things holding up?"

"Things are doing fine." I replied. But things were not fine. I just want to be out of this wheelchair, away from the hospital, and on the court again.

"Well, the party is in the cafeteria, two doors down."

"Thanks, Char." I said as we rolled into the room. There were about a dozen kids here. From the looks of it, ranging from eight to fifteen. All turned to look at me when I entered the bright cafeteria.

"Everyone, this is Samantha." My mom said proudly. All the little kids ran up to me. Even the older kids walked over to say hello. So much love from these people who are going through as much as me-even more!

A boy about two climbed onto my lap. "Take me riding!" He squealed. I burst with laughter, and we began our journey. Weaving through people, and Charlie, what I learned his name is, shrieked with delight. Before I knew it, I had really worked up a sweat.

Charlie hopped off and thanked me, and I wheeled out into the hall to take a break. I went around a couple corners, trying to find some space to myself. This was so overwhelming compared to sitting alone at my house. I kind of liked it. All this got my mind off of the past few months.

I was rounding a corner and BAM! Suddenly I'm on the floor out of my chair and next to me is a boy in jeans and a Tshirt. He got up quick, but I stayed put. Realizing what he had done, he put my chair in position, scooped me up in his arms, and plopped me in my prison.

"I'm so sorry." He said, a bit embarrassed, but mostly ashamed that he knocked a girl out of her wheelchair.

"It's fine." I mumbled.

“No really” He sputtered, trying to change the subject. “Hey, did you know about the party?”

“Yup, I was just there.”

“Well, I will escort you there.”

He started pushing my chair. I was not going to argue. He’s probably the nicest person since the accident. As we were nearing the entryway, he asked, “What’s your wheelchair’s name?”

I was shocked. What a random question for this kind of moment. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, come on. You’re telling me that this chair carries you around and you don’t have a name for it?”

“Um.....no.”

“Well, we need to change that. Can I name it?”

Jeez, this kid was getting stranger by the minute. “Um...go ahead.”

“Cindy is it’s name. Oh, and what’s yours?” He asked, as if he hadn’t just plowed me in the hall a minute before.

“Sam.”

“My name is Asher. You can remember by ‘Always late Asher’. That’s what everyone calls me.” We shook hands, and that’s where our journey began.

Hannah Jones

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Frazier

Category: Critical Essay

Looking at the World with New Eyes

How the Myers-Briggs Personality Theory (and Survivor) helps you to have a deeper understanding of human relationships.

One of the longest running and most popular reality shows still airing today is the show *Survivor*.

It was presented as a social experiment, along with a series of physical challenges, and it caught a lot of attention. Sixteen years later, the show is on its thirty-third season, and viewership is still high. The gist of it is that a group of people are stranded on an island together, and they are constantly competing in challenges, which test their physical and mental abilities, in order to avoid going home. If they lose a challenge, they all have to go to Tribal Council and decide who should be “voted out”. I happen to be a big fan of *Survivor*, because it’s interesting to see how all of these random people that are thrown on an island together interact with each other. This season, I have been paying especially close attention to the relationships between the castaways.

In the fourth episode of the season, we were shown a conversation that took place between a man named Ken and a woman named Lucy. They’re planning on voting out another woman on their tribe, Jessica. Lucy says to Ken, “Don’t talk to anybody else. Don’t start to get paranoid. Don’t try to change the vote any other way. And please, *don’t* tell Jessica about this. Just trust me.” Ken later says in a confessional that he didn’t like Lucy telling him what he could and could not do, that he didn’t like having a “list of rules and regulations” to follow. So, because he was annoyed at Lucy, he got some of his allies together to vote her out instead. This particular scene stuck out to me in terms of social interactions. Lucy later said in a confessional that she didn’t mean to make Ken feel angry or annoyed. She just assumed he would go with what she was saying, and that he wouldn’t mind how blunt she was. But Ken obviously didn’t feel that way (Parsons).

After watching the episode that night, I went onto the website Reddit and started looking at certain threads about the latest *Survivor* episode. One particular one stood out to me. There was a user that was talking about all of the different Myers-Briggs personality types that the castaways from past seasons had, and how it correlated to what other people on their tribe thought of them (Jeffcoaster). I have been interested in the Myers-Briggs theory since seventh grade, so reading about how the castaways interact with each other in terms of their personality type really intrigued me. It made me wonder, how can we be aware of how other people see us, and how can we use that to evaluate our relationships with that person? Perhaps a good place to start is to have awareness of how we are thinking, and try to understand how the other person is thinking.

After watching the episode that night, I went onto the website Reddit and started looking at certain threads about the latest *Survivor* episode. One particular one stood out to me. There was a user that was talking about all of the different Myers-Briggs personality types that the castaways from past seasons had, and how it correlated to what other people on their tribe thought of them (Jeffcoaster). I have been interested in the Myers-Briggs theory since seventh grade, so reading about how the castaways interact with each other in terms of their personality type really intrigued me. It made me wonder, how can we be aware of how other people see us, and how can we use that to evaluate our relationships with that person? Perhaps a good place to start is to have awareness of how we are thinking, and try to understand how the other person is thinking.

There are ways to break out of one mindset and try to understand another person’s point of view, if you’re up to the challenge. Sometimes, you have to step back and look at the big picture. One way to do that is by considering the Myers-Briggs Personality Theory. In 1943, Katharine Briggs and her daughter, Isabel Myers, started studying Carl Jung’s Personality theory, and decided to create a list of questions that would help determine which parts of the personality a

person prefers. They created it at this particular time, during World War II, to help people understand each other better and avoid conflict in this time of distress (“A Mini-History”). What started as a way to help people understand each other and cope with suffering has now turned into part of an everyday picture of what people are and why they are the way they are. Knowing a person’s Myers-Briggs personality type, along with having some background on the Myers-Briggs theory, might change the way you communicate with them.

The Myers-Briggs personality types consist of four different parts, each represented by a letter. The first letter represents whether a person is “more comfortable in the world of people and things” and prefer letting themselves be energized by them, which is Extroversion, or if they are “more comfortable in the world of ideas” and prefer distancing themselves from the world for a little while to maintain a clear mind, and, sometimes, their sanity, which would be Introversion (Myers 56). That means that the first letter of the personality type will either be an E for Extroversion or I for Introversion. The next letter represents if someone prefers to “face life observantly” and tends to be more pragmatic and realistic, which is Sensing, or if they “face life expectantly” and like to be more idealistic and think about all of the possibilities in life, which would be Intuition (63). The second letter in the personality type would be an S for sensing or an N for Intuition. The third letter represents the preference for logic or sentiment, for either being analytical and rational when looking at a problem, which is Thinking, or looking at a problem and being value-oriented and driven by emotions, which would be Feeling (67). The third letter will be a T for Thinking or an F for Feeling. The last letter has to do with whether a person “aims to be right” all the time and likes to be seen as decisive and orderly, which is Judgment, or if they “aim to miss nothing” and would rather be seen as casual and spontaneous, which would be Perception (75). The last letter will either be a J for Judgment or a P for Perception.

Just seeing these letters and the explanations that go along with them might not really mean much right now. But in order to have a good understanding of the theory, you have to know how these four parts of the personality work together, and how different types interact with each other. The sixteen personality types can be put into four different groups, depending on certain letters in the different types being the same. But just because one personality type has one or two letters in common with another one doesn’t mean that they’ll get along. For example, if you put an ISTJ (like Lucy) in the same room (or on the same island) as an ISFP (like Ken), you’ll find that they’re not all that similar, even though they have two letters in common. Anyone who saw Episode 4 of *Survivor* would have seen that those two butted heads with each other. Why is that? Introversion and extroversion aren’t the personality traits that are mainly prominent in the way you act. They are definitely present, but most people are usually able to pick out certain parts of a person’s personality before they find out whether that person is extroverted or introverted. For an ISTJ, their most prominent personality traits are Sensing (S) and Judging (J). So they’re grouped in with the other three personality types that have S’s and J’s (which are ISFJ, ESTJ, and ESFJ) (Keirsey 23). For an ISFP, their most prominent personality traits are Sensing (S) and Perception (P). They’re put in the same group as the other personality types with S’s and P’s (ISTP, ESFP, and ESTP) (23). As for the rest of the personality types, types with N’s for Intuition and F’s for Feeling (INFJ, INFP, ENFJ, and ENFP) are grouped together, and types with N’s for Intuition and T’s for Thinking (INTJ, INTP, ENTJ, and ENTP) are together (23). The most prominent personality traits in a type are called the “leading function” (Pearman 25).

Something people notice when they look at data for the Myers-Briggs theory is that

certain types are more abundant than others. Types like INFJ or INTJ make up 1 percent or less of the population, while types like ISTJ or ISFJ make up almost 13 percent (Myers 31). Even though these might seem like small numbers, the distribution of different personality types in one place is normally relatively even. No wonder we have trouble communicating with each other sometimes. There are still a number of different viewpoints in any given place. There are plenty of opportunities for dissenting opinions on certain situations.

Also, according to a study done by behavioral analysts Susan Opt and Donald Loffredo, people with certain personality traits are more prone to have communication apprehension, or trouble conveying the words or message we want to give to other people. When a group of college students from the University of Houston-Victoria took the Myers-Briggs test, then a test that measures communication apprehension, introverts typically scored higher than extroverts, people with S's scored higher than people with N's, F's scored higher than T's, and P's and J's scored pretty equally (Opt). This information is especially interesting if you put it back into the context of *Survivor*. The definition of communication apprehension given by Opt and Loffredo is "fear of communicating with another person", and you could see this with Ken in the first episode. He didn't seem to really connect with anyone immediately, and some people commented in confessionals that he never really wanted to talk to anybody during the first few days. Based on the data Opt and Loffredo collected, Ken might very well have communication apprehension.

On the other hand, Lucy, who is also an introvert, but claims to "play many roles" in her life seems to have no trouble communicating with people. She would brag about her ability to "connect with everybody and know how to communicate with them" in confessionals. She went up to Ken and very bluntly told him that she would vote the same way as him, but he wasn't allowed to strategize with anyone else or "get paranoid". After the interaction, you can see that Ken is visibly frustrated with what just happened. He seems to be the kind of person that is not always comfortable in social interactions, and the fact that he felt like Lucy was trying to manipulate the way he thought just made him feel more uncomfortable. Does communication apprehension have to do with any of this? Probably, but also the Myers-Briggs theory also comes into play, as we see their personalities clash in this particular conversation.

Even though we might not realize it, we all have all of the personality traits that make up the 16 Types. We all have the capacity to be both extroverted and introverted; to be both sensing and intuitive; to think and to feel; to judge and to perceive. We just all show a preference for one trait over another. We all have the capability to understand each other, we just choose not to since we prefer the traits that we have. We basically "reject" all of the traits that we don't favor.

A typical personality trait to "reject" is Thinking or Feeling. They are two totally different ways of looking at a situation. If two people ever butt heads, it's more often than not because their preference for Thinking or Feeling is different. You can definitely see this with Lucy and Ken.

Lucy thought very matter-of-factly, "Okay, voting out Jessica will be the best thing for this tribe. I think Ken will agree with me, so I'll tell him what the plan is, and that he shouldn't worry anymore. He should be able to understand what I'm trying to say." Ken didn't receive the message that way, though. He thought, "I don't like the way Lucy made me feel. She's acting like a dictator, telling me what to and what not to do. I don't like that, and I don't want to deal with that anymore. I need to get other people to vote her out with me." This particular preference in the personality types can be very divisive.

Let's go back to the original question: How does the Myers-Briggs Personality Theory help you to better understand human relationships? A good place to start is having awareness. If you know about the MBTI, you'll hopefully be familiar with the preference for thinking or

feeling, and how that draws a lot of lines when it comes to being able to connect with someone on a personal level. If you're aware that you might have problems with someone that has a different preference than you, it might help if you try to look through their perspective and tell them what you know they would want to hear. In a confessional, Lucy said that if she had known Ken would react the way he did, she would have been a little more polite and respectful to him, because she found out that's what he seems to want to respond to more willingly. I like watching *Survivor* and thinking, "How would I react in that situation? Would I be the Ken in the situation or would I be the Lucy?" It's important to know that everyone is different, they think in different ways sometimes, and might react to something differently than you would. It's not like the MBTI will solve all communication problems, and you won't necessarily be a better person if you know about it. But if you have awareness of some of the concepts used in the Myers-Briggs Personality Theory, you might end up looking at the whole world through new, different eyes.

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Maya Kalmus

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Dianne Hirner

Category: Dramatic Script

Arsonist's Lullaby

Fire popping and leaves crunching beneath our feet we ran swiftly and gracefully through the forest. The heat of the fire ironically sent chills through my bones and so did he. My eyes snapped towards him as I ran but he was too focused to meet my gaze. I slid across the hood of his car and got into the passenger's seat and off we went. The car leapt and bounded through the field as we laughed together. We turned onto the gravel road and disregarded the scene behind us that seemed to collapse into the ground along with the setting sun.

My eyes drifted open as we rolled up to the toll booth. He fed the toll booth machine two dollars in exchange for a ticket. As he pressed the gas pedal to the ground my hand clutched the door sending adrenaline pumping through my veins and my heart pounding; a feeling I'd gotten very used to. I drifted in and out of consciousness but I awoke to the car rolling to a halt. We were in the middle of the woods. He squeezed my arm.

"We're here." he said

"Where's here?" I asked unaware of how long I'd been asleep

"I dunno... the depths of Kansas." He shrugged and smiled

I trusted him so much that his uncertainty could somehow serve as consolation. I jumped out of the car, he grabbed the water bottle and a box of matches and we took off running into the forest. I could feel the adrenaline surging through my veins and my legs began to move a little faster. I felt a pulling in my chest as though I was being drawn towards something.

When we got to the small cabin the pulling in my chest stopped. He kicked open the door and stormed in. I walked to the record player across the room as he smashed every vase, picture frame and overturned every piece of furniture. We pushed the mess to the edges of the room and left a decent space in the middle of the cabin. As the folk song played on the record he spun me around and we danced. We glided across the room the contents of the water bottle coated the floor the music seemed to drift around us. As the song wound down he pulled me towards the front door and without breaking the gaze I struck a match and flicked it into the house. Fire popping and hearts pounding we took off running back to our car, once again letting everything collapse behind us.

Grace Kertz

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: St Pius X School, Moberly, MO

Educator: Christy Forte

Category: Short Story

Ruby to You

A Journal Story

It was Christmas Eve and all I wanted to do was run. Not like in a race, but as far away from my life as I could. Away from my relatives, my parents, the burnt chicken stuffed with olives-- everything. I wanted to be away from everything, and that's all that mattered to me.

Without even thinking, I shoved on a coat, grabbed my sweet little kitten, and ran. When my teenage brother called after me as I ran, I just pulled up my hood and cuddled close to my mewing kitten. I ran as far as I could and as fast, taking turns I had never taken before. I didn't know where I was going, or what I would do when I got there. Although in all desperation, I kept on. It was past dark when I finally stopped my sequence of running, stopping to catch my breath, and running again.

I had stopped in a town highly decorated for Christmas. I recognized it as Phillysville. Strings of blinking lights on every building, towering inflatable santas, candy canes sticking out of the ground near the curbs, and an enormous, festive Christmas tree at the Town Square shouted "Christmas!" to bypassers everywhere. The striking Community Christmas tree had caught my eye from a great distance away, and I had gone there, seeking shelter. I stood before it, a shivering kitten in my arm, and gawked at the enormous (but empty) wrapped boxes sitting under the tree. Exhausted, I heaved my kitten in one of the huge decorative boxes and climbed in after the chilly little ball of fur.

I had gotten a good rest in the box, and woke up hungry with the intention of going into the kitchen and making a sandwich. I opened my eyes and my own hunger left me as I realized where I was. My kitten, my only friend, was cuddled up into the corner of the box, mewing restlessly for food. I felt so, so bad- and dismissed the thought. I just let it go like breath. Then I climbed out of the box and ran.

And I didn't turn back.

I ran for miles and miles trying to keep my breathing consistent, trying not to think of the kitten I took from its warm home where it was nurtured and well fed, to be bobbed around for miles in the freezing cold, and left in a box to die.

I stopped mid-afternoon on the side of a busy road between towns and ventured into the woods. There I laid on a log and thought about my horrible, messed-up life. I had messed up everything by then... my family, my friends, my kitten, my Christmas.

I then felt that I had no way to get food, no way to find home, no way to survive out there on Christmas day, or any other day, for that matter. I wondered why I had even done such a stupid thing as this in the first place. Then I remembered The Incident. The memory came flooding back as if the world's largest dam was broken with a sudden snap. I tried to push it out of the way. The memories, the pain, the dismissal.

As I am writing this story, back at home, sitting under the family Christmas tree years later, I still get tears in my eyes. I wipe them away when my older brother enters the room with my sister, a holiday board game in hand. Neither of them say anything, but they know what I'm thinking.

"The Incident?" my brother, Jack, asks me now.

"Yeah," I answer, choking on my words. My sister is busy setting up the card game, but she acknowledges the depressing mood.

"Do you want to play, too?" she asks me.

"No, I can't," I say. "I have to finish this. Maybe later."

So, on that afternoon in the woods, I was lost in thought.

Had I really thought that if I left, everything would be fixed?

"How different this is," I had whispered aloud, shivering on the icy log, and reflecting that so far, I hadn't fixed a single thing.

Very hungry by now, I ventured out of the woods and plodded down the highway, away from where I had come. After an hour of walking, a car pulled over, and two people got out a yard or two from where I was standing.

"Why are we pulled over, Mommy?" came the voice of a six-year-old girl, taking a bite out of a Christmas sugar cookie.

"Hmm.." I had thought.

As a lady bent down to inspect one of the tires, she answered her, "We have a flat tire, Ruby."

The name rang in my head as if I was surrounded by the sound of large Church bells.

Ruby.

It reminded me of The Incident.

Ruby.

I fell to the grass alongside the highway and moaned. My head hurt, my stomach was empty, and the memory of The Incident was stuck in my head like a chip lodged in your throat.

I tried to sort my thoughts. They filed as: Dead, crying, Mama, Ruby, not a big deal. So, basically, nothing made sense.

Slowly, carefully, I put my hands over my ears and replayed, whispering, what had happened during The Incident, trying to calm myself down.

"Once upon a time," I said, feeling the tears roll down my face.

This wasn't working.

The Incident didn't go like that. It wasn't a fairy tale. I switched approaches and decided to whisper only the dialogue of the Incident.

"Hey! Claire, get in here! Mom wants a family meeting," fourteen-year-old Jack had called impatiently.

"Just tell her to talk loud," I had replied from my place on the sofa, watching television.

My brother had shrugged and walked back to Mom.

"CLAIRE, GET IN HERE NOW!" Mom had yelled.

I scampered into the kitchen where my brother, Dad, Mama, and a stranger sat.

"Have a seat, young lady," the stranger had said. As I ran my eyes over him, I laid my eyes upon the badge of a police officer.

I sat at his command.

"We have some bad news," Dad said, putting a hand on his head as Mama wiped away her tears.

I didn't have any idea what it could be. I had thought for sure they were over-exaggerating. "Go ahead, Officer Smith," my dad said.

"I'm sorry to say that your sister, Ruby, is gone," he said, looking at my brother and me with stern and sure eyes. She's been missing for a week and we cannot find her. She is presumed dead."

My jaw had dropped. "I thought she was visiting Grandma! You said Grandma and her were having a girl's week!" I shouted accusingly at my parents. They had said nothing. But actually, that wasn't The Incident. That wasn't the reason I left. The Incident had happened two years later, when I was thirteen. On that night, Jack and I were busy decorating the Christmas tree, listening to Christmas songs, when "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" came on. That had been Ruby's favorite. She would jump up and down, throwing her arms in the air for every second of it, dropping whatever she was previously working on to do so.

A sad smile of remembrance had come across our faces, and I went to get Mom so we could have a mini remembrance party.

"Mom!" I had called across the living room, turning up the stereo volume. "Listen to what's on!"

I ran to the kitchen where Mom was busy preparing some dishes for the extended family Christmas dinner, which would occur later that week. "Come on," I urged, dragging her away from her cooking.

"No!" she yelled at me, pushing me away and striding toward the freezer.

"Come on!" I insisted, pulling her back. For some reason she was getting a large ice pack out of the freezer. Thinking that could wait, I pulled on her again. "Mom!" I had yelled. "Don't you want to dance to Ruby's song?!?"

Tears welled in my mama's eyes. "Forget it!" she had screamed in pain. I had wondered if it was really that intolerable to think about Ruby. "Forget you and forget Ruby!"

At that, the song ended and Mom stormed away into her room, leaving the ice pack on the counter where I had blocked it from her reach.

Mama stayed in her room for two whole days. And it took me two whole days to figure out that I had accidentally bumped her into the stove in my excitement and gave her a hideous burn.

When sixteen-year-old Jack had went to check on Mama, she said it wasn't a big deal. But it was.

To make matters worse, I got a "talk" from my dad. He was angrier than I've ever seen him before, scolding me for being so irresponsible and complaining about having to take off from work during his busy season to attend to the issue. I was in tears by the end of it, and rushed into my room, only to find Jack in there, stealing my favorite gum and assuring me that I owed him anyway. He said I shouldn't be crying about something as stupid as him taking my gum.

That I deserved it anyway.

That he didn't care what I thought he shouldn't be doing.

That it would be better if I wasn't even there.

When relatives came a few days later for the Family Christmas, they all asked about Mama's heavily bandaged arm. My mama tried not to make a big deal about it, but after being told what had happened, none of my relatives really wanted to be around me. Most of them acted like they did, but I knew they were just pretending. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I ran and ran and ran, taking my kitten, my only friend, with me. I even thought I might find Ruby somewhere.

She wouldn't be mad at me.

Anyway, I was on the side of the highway, whispering to myself and sobbing uncontrollably when that little girl named Ruby came over to me from the car pulled over.

“Who are you?” she asked.

I looked up, startled. Umm... Claire.”

She nodded. “I’m Ruby. My mom’s fixing a flat tire. You look hungry. Do you want to come home with us? We have lots of ham.”

I smiled as Ruby held out a hand for me. Bundled up in warm winter coats, this girl looked remarkably like my sister. “Would your guardian allow that?” I asked.

“Well, she’s my mom, but yes, she would allow that. She works for an organization that helps runaway children and stray animals. She used to be a vet. Come on.”

When we reached the car, the lady that was with Ruby looked at me. “So, you want to come with us for a bit?”

“Yes,” I said. I don’t usually go anywhere with strangers, but I thought I might’ve found Ruby, and I didn’t really have any better ideas as to how I could get food anyway.

“Okay, hop in,” the lady motioned toward her car.

“Is that really your mother?” I asked Ruby suspiciously after we had driven a few miles.

“Of course,” Ruby said. “Why?”

“I’m actually looking for my sister. She’s named Ruby, and she looks a lot like you.” I said accusingly.

“Oh.”

“*Bring!*” the lady’s cell phone sounds, and she picks it up, only to have a hurried conversation with someone on the other side of the line.

Closing her phone and placing it inside her purse, the lady announced seriously, “Girls, we’re going to turn around. We have to go Phillysville town square. They found a kitten near death from hunger and all the local nurses are out of town.”

Guilt washed over me. My kitten. My kitten that I left to die in a box at Phillysville Town Square. I sat through the car ride in silence, only answering Ruby’s questions with head nods.

When we arrived at Town Square, all three of us got out of the car in a rush and made our way through the twisting hallways of the Phillysville Animal Rescue and Vet Clinic.

A girl was already in the room, cradling the kitten and bottle feeding it warm milk.

“Hi!” she greeted happily. “Come look at this kitten, Mrs. Saftenbog. Isn’t she adorable?”

When I lived with my real family we had a long-furred cat that looked really similar to this one! It’s almost like she could’ve been this one’s mother!”

“That’s very cool, Ruby,” the lady that had brought me to the clinic, apparently Mrs. Saftenbog, said.

Ruby. Another confusion. Two “Ruby”s in the same room!

The Ruby that had been bottle feeding the kitten looked at me and her eyes locked. “Are you Claire!? You’re my sister, aren’t you?!” Ruby wrapped me in a hug, and I squeezed her tight. I could hardly believe that I was really, truly holding my little sister.

Well, that’s pretty much the story. I found my sister, my cat, and tracked down my house. When we got home, I gobbled down some leftover Christmas chicken and sweet potatoes while Ruby told Jack, Mama, Dad, and me a very confusing story of what she’d been doing for two years. Something about Sheriff Raxdy, a new court law in the county next to ours, Mr. Pine’s County Orphanage, a kind older teacher named Mrs. Hummingly, and some desperate lies.

“Yeah, and I told the sheriff that my name was Penncly! And you guys were Laura and

Claurette!” she said, looking at Mama and Dad excitedly.

“Penncly?” I wondered aloud.

“Like Pencils,” she said. “I saw them in a cup, and right then and there, I got the idea. Cool, huh?” she asks us.

I shrug good-naturedly.

Maybe she should write it down, like I’m doing with my own story. Or maybe that’s one thing that doesn’t really matter.

But all I know is that even if this was the craziest, loneliest, hungriest, most unbelievable Christmas ever, I did learn one thing: people are gems. Some are bright and polished, others are covered with dirt and grime, and more are sparkling on Christmas trees right at home. Many gems have the same name, but a different color, shine, or composition. And you can always find a gem if you seek out that very special, very distinct, very own shine. A shine that you can find even if you burnt your Mama, disgraced your relatives, abandoned your cat, and can hardly find yourself. A shine that means Christmas, means life, means Ruby to you.

Lauryn Klein

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

My life: An Elaborate Play

In this delicate home, I was born
The perfect child afraid of scorn
The challenges my mother did face
Caused me, a child to land in her place
Though just a girl of thirteen years old
I struggled to fill a mother-sized hole

The things in my life that no one knows
Down into my soul the secret goes
The high expectations I cannot bare
Have made me reluctant to ever share
The shadows I face and things I want
Only my mind they'll ever haunt

My life is a play that everyone sees
But acting away I'll always be
I'll keep up the image of a perfect girl
As a poor man protects a single pearl
And though she did return, my mom
As everyone says, the show must go on

Maddie Klippenstein

Age: Unknown, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Flash Fiction

The Man in the Navy Suit

Her bleach blonde hair covers her face as she dips her head down to the grave, tears running off her cheeks, staining the charcoal-colored stone in front of her. Looking at the name “Thomas R. Smith” brings back a flood memories. She places the same flowers that decorated the aisle she walked down ten years ago on the grave in front of her. I can almost feel her warm embrace as her head leans against the stone, like she used to lay her head against my chest. She steps back, the emotions too strong, and returns to her normal life, leaving me at my grave.

...

“I now present you, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Smith!” The pastor’s voice rings through the urban city loft as family and friends stand to cheer on the newlyweds. The man and wife join hands and face each other for a kiss, just as the best man in his navy suit pulls the groom in for a hug. Smiles cover their faces as they celebrate the happiest day of their lives.

...

“Thomas R. Smith”, engraved into the charcoal stone faces the man in the navy suit. Flowers sit next to the grave, fresh and full of life. Memories return of the happy day ten years ago, emotions too strong, as anger covers his face, and returns to normal life, leaving me at my grave.

...

The widow and the man in the navy suit stand side by side, facing the charcoal-colored stone. They talk like old friends, exchanging stories from my past. Hours pass and tears turn to laughter as he sees an opportunity for embrace. The wedding flowers placed next to “Thomas R. Smith”, once beautiful and full of life now fade like the memories from that special day. The man in the navy suit, leans in to kiss my bride. They step back, emotions too strong, and hands clasp over my grave.

... if only she knew that those very hands covered my mouth violently as I begged for mercy.

Ellie Knechtel

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Park Hill South High School, Riverside, MO

Educator: Idean Bindel

Category: Short Story

The Ghost of Who I Was

How do you ask someone for help if you don't even know how to explain why you need it? How do you say you're being dragged into a dark abyss, leaving you clawing at everything to prevent from collapsing? How do you tell someone you're depressed or even begin to explain why? You know that the first words out of their mouth will be asking you why and you just don't have an answer. The truth is that you don't think they understand how you feel, so you just keep it all inside.

I suffer in silence for years and no one even knows.

* * *

I grow up with a giant line dividing my family. My parents separate when I am three; by age four the divorce is final. Having two different lives and moving from house to house is the only life I know. I have no memory of my parents ever being together. Honestly, I'm okay with that because if I *did* have any memories, they would most likely just be of my parents arguing. That's no way to remember your parents.

For the majority of my childhood, my dad lives in a single family, split-level home in a small neighborhood. All my friends pretty much live on one street and, if they don't, it is a very short walk to their houses.

My mom becomes financially unstable and isn't able afford to keep a house, so she moves in with her mother, my Nana. The house is located in the country on 15 acres. You can hardly see the neighbors from the porch, it is so peaceful and serene.

My parents live about thirty minutes away from each other, so if we ever need something from one house, it is rather inconvenient to go and get it. This makes school a bit stressful.

I go to a Catholic school from pre-k all the way through eighth grade. Most kids have parents that are still together and they are big, happy families who live in giant houses with nice cars and fancy clothes.

I, on the other hand, grow up on hand-me-downs and moving to different locations several times a week.

One of the biggest challenges of school is trying to explain to my teachers that I had forgotten my homework at my dad's house over the weekend and I won't see him again until later in the week. The teachers completely blame me, and, while I am being a bit irresponsible, I am only a kid.

Despite the challenges, I have always had really good grades, never a C, and I try my best to

keep all As and only a couple Bs. At first, it had been because I wanted to achieve great things: become a vet; have a big house and lots of animals; find a good husband.

Even though I don't have many friends, the few friends I do have earn my loyalty. Life isn't terrible, it just isn't easy. I'm not starving and I'm not homeless, so I know to be thankful for what I have.

One of the things I am most thankful for is my best friend, Sarah.

Sarah is a few years younger than me, but we have a lot in common. Just about every day I am at my dad's house, we climb trees together, ride bikes, play with dolls, and in winter we go sledding. We have sleepovers all the time, too, staying up watching movies in little makeshift forts we build. Her little sister, Ashley, will always tag along. For the most part, Sarah is okay with that.

They have an older brother, too. He is always a bit distant and he likes to stare.

Looking back on it now, there were neon signs flashing. This boy would be the one who gave me nightmares for four years. This would be the boy who would cause me to need copious amounts of therapy sessions, even prescription medication I'd take daily. This would be the boy who would change my life forever.

* * *

School has just gotten out for summer. Sarah and I have already made lists of activities to do together during our short time of freedom. Most of the activities are playing outside, and first up is tree climbing.

Sarah's family has a sturdy but short crabapple tree in their front yard, one that is easily visible from the living room window, so her parents use it to keep an eye on us and make sure we stay out of trouble.

On this particular day, Sarah and I decide to make a tree fort, equipped with shade, comfy seating, and a bucket that can be pulled up by a rope so we can send secret messages to each other.

I bring out my bright purple Scooby Doo umbrella and strategically place it open in the tree so that it blocks the sun. She brings out old pillows from the closet in her house and we place them on our designated seating branches. To us, this is living summer to the fullest extent.

When it gets to be around noon, we decide it was time for lunch.

"Do you want to come eat with us?" Sarah asks.

"No, thanks. My dad has food ready," I lie. I hate eating at other people's houses. It makes me really nervous. Plus, I don't always eat all of my food and some families consider that rude.

We jump out of the tree and go our separate ways.

"Meet me back here after you're done?" she inquires.

"Definitely!" I say as I start down the sidewalk towards my house. After all, only one house separates us.

Once inside, I kick my shoes off and run up stairs. I grumble to my dad that I am hungry and he went into the kitchen.

"Chef Boyardee or Chef Boyardee?" he asks me jokingly. I'm obsessed with it, always devouring ravioli whenever we have it in the house.

"Chef Boyardee, please!" I said happily.

My dad takes out a pot from the compartment under the stove and gently places it on the stove top grate.

Within ten minutes, Dad hollers, "Food's ready!"

I skip down the hallway from my bedroom and pull out a chair from the kitchen table. I indulge in my lunch and then quickly get my shoes back on to return to the tree fort.

“Home by street lights!” my dad calls as I open the front door.

When the street lights come on, I had better be on my way home or else it means big trouble.

“There, over there!” she yells. Her hands form a telescope as she looks up the street in our game of pirates. With the tree as our ship, we are constantly on the lookout for enemies. Currently, they take the form of boys riding bikes in circles in front of their houses.

“Ready the cannons!” I exclaim in response.

“Boom, splosh!” she says for effect.

“Success, the enemy has been destroyed!” I say and give Sarah a high five.

In reality, the boys have just returned to their driveway to go inside but, in our game, we have claimed yet another victory.

We start to pick leaves off the branches and tear them apart, starting at the stem and working our way up. I turn around to get another leaf and there he is, Sarah’s older brother, staring at me from the living room window.

* * *

__Sarah’s family is rather large and complicated with full siblings, half-siblings, and various spreads in age.

Later that same night, I am at Sarah’s house playing with her and one full-sister Ashley. We decide to play a game where we are a family of wolves downstairs playing in the den that is her older brother’s room. His room is connected to the laundry room, and the only thing separating the two spaces is a bed sheet hanging from the ceiling.

We start playing the game in his bedroom. Sarah, Ashley and I begin walking around on all fours, like dogs. At one point, one of the little brothers wants to join. Now, we have to find some way to transition him in.

Sarah suggests that her older brother be the father and I be the mother of a new wolf pup. Of course, we have to create this wolf pup. So it was then, on that warm summer night, that her brother takes my hand and walks me into the laundry room.

Alone.

The basement isn’t finished. The floor is bare and the walls in the laundry room don’t even have dry wall, so the insulation is exposed. Sarah’s older brother’s bunk bed is against the wall opposite the door.

When he takes me into the laundry room, at first, all we do is sit in a moment of awkward silence. Then, he gently presses his lips against mine and begins shove his tongue in my mouth. I am only nine; I haven’t had my first kiss, only previously imagined what it would be like. This certainly doesn’t fit my imagination.

“Turn around,” he commands me as he pulls his head away.

I obey, and I’m not really sure why. Maybe because he is older than me, or maybe because I am in pure disbelief that anything bad could happen.

I am on my hands and knees. I am waiting for something to happen, maybe for him to scratch my back or something innocent like that? Instead, he thrusts his hips against mine and repeats this motion for a few minutes.

I have no idea what is going on. Is this considered normal behavior? I turn around and he pushes me onto the floor. He starts by sliding one of his hands up my sparkly blue striped

turtleneck. Then, he moves his hand down my abdomen towards my hips. He unbuttons my pants and tries to slide them off. With his other hand, he holds my arms down against the cold basement floor.

I stare into his dark, piercing, brown eyes, terror coursing through my veins. My arms turn red from his hands holding me down with so much pressure. The cold basement floor makes my back numb. A tear falls down my cheek.

I am frozen in time.

“You tell no one about this,” he whispers in my ear.

I am petrified. But out of nowhere, some part of me sparks alive. I kick him off of me and scramble to my feet.

“I-I have to go,” I stutter.

I pass my best friends, his little sisters, who are innocently unaware of what has taken place in the next room. I hurry as fast as I can manage up the stairs, quickly put on my shoes, and reach for the door knob. I hear footsteps and my heart races. I turn around to see him staring right at me.

“Remember what I said,” his voice cut through like a knife. “Don’t tell anyone.”

I nod, pull the door open, slam it shut and run. I run down the front stairs, through the yard connecting his yard and the neighbor’s, across their driveway until I reach home. I run across the neighbor’s yard not caring about their precious grass and not even daring to look back. I run up my front porch stairs so fast I almost trip and fall. I opened the front door quickly, kick my shoes off, and hurry up the stairs. When I get to the top, I see that my dad and sister are sitting on the couch together. My dad is smiling and laughing with my sister. He is completely oblivious that his little girl has just been assaulted.

I don’t quite know how to explain what has just occurred. At nine, someone you trust with your life shouldn’t take advantage of you. I can’t even grasp what has just happened.

I stand, still in shock, staring at my dad.

“Hey, kiddo!”

He is so blissfully unaware of my panicked state of mind. Should I really tell him?

“Can I... Can I talk to you?” I ask, hesitantly.

“Of course.” He gets up from his knees and follows me down the hallway towards his bedroom.

His bedroom is a safe haven for me, sheltered from all the evils of the world. Entering his room is fairly easy. The french doors don’t latch, and are only magnetically kept in place. He has a king size bed, overshadowed by a mural hand-painted by Nana. It is a desert-like scene, covering floor to ceiling in blues and yellows that make the room. That wall is my favorite thing about our house.

“What’s up?” my dad asks me as he sits on the edge of the bed.

“Um...” I don’t even know how to begin. So I just have to say it. “When I was over at Sarah’s tonight, her older brother touched me.”

The pupils of my dad’s eyes dilate, his face reddens, his hands fidgeting.

“Did he take your clothes off?”

“No, but he tried...”

I can’t even look at my dad, I am just so embarrassed. I stare at the tan carpet and my hands tug the sleeves of my blue turtleneck.

“Did he hurt you?”

“A little...” I pull up my sleeves to show him the red marks on my arms.

“Okay. Go take a hot shower; you’ll feel better,” he tells me as tears start streaming out of my eyes. He offers me a hug, but I shake my head. I had received enough human contact to last me a lifetime.

* * *

__I do remember that one night Sarah’s father, her older brother’s stepdad, showed up at our front door.

I stand at the top of the stairs as Dad walks down to answer. Stern and short, he won’t step outside to talk and only spoke through the crack of the door.

It is so cold that is my initial thinking assuming that’s why he won’t step outside. Looking back now, I know my dad didn’t want to risk punching the guy.

The man apologizes profusely, but stays so calm. It’s as if he is talking about the weather.

I don’t go back over to Sarah’s house for a couple of days. I’m not allowed to. Eventually, I can retrieve Sarah but must return straight home. And if we know her brother is home, there is no amount of visiting.

For years, the rule doesn’t change: I can go get them but never stay.

The first time I go over to her house after the assault, I am incredibly nervous. I debate walking home several times. *What if he answers the door? He has to know I had told on him, right? He must be furious with me.*

I finally work up the courage to ring the doorbell, and to my relief, Sarah answers. She invites me in, but I decide not to go any further than the doorway.

As soon as I reach the threshold, I instantly regret it. There he is, on their blue recliner, a blanket covering his face. Sarah later explains to me that he is no longer allowed to look at me.

Supposedly, he is also being punished with a belt. I can’t vouch for this last part being a true statement, but Sarah tells me that it is a common punishment for her brother.

* * *

Legal action will not be pursued until I enter the eighth grade. Only then will justice truly be served. Only then will I receive some form of closure. But that will not happen for another five, very long, brutal years.

I am out with Sarah one weekend when she confides in me about her own assault.

“You know what he did to you? Well...He did that to me. Only worse.”

“You need to tell your mom about this. She needs to know.”

I feel worse for Sarah because she has to live with him. He is the wolf and there is no escaping him.

I go with her as Sarah confronts her mom, nervous with the truth.

“Is it true!?” Mrs. Adams cries over the phone. “Did you really touch Sarah?”

He confirms a mother’s worst nightmare.

Sarah and I later testify against her brother. We are both too young to make an appearance in court, so instead our testimonies are recorded and used against him.

He is sentenced to 20 months in a juvenile detention center.

When released, he was not allowed to go back to living at home. He bounced around from various family members’ houses before finally settling in another state.

For years after my attack, I experienced horrendous nightmares, gut-wrenching flashbacks, and a pile of diagnoses mostly resulting from the effects of the attack. Depression, Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder are my main diagnoses. I live with these

every day, and, for a while, I let them get the best of me. I started seeing therapists regularly and have learned to take back control of my mind and body.

I no longer identify as someone who was attacked as a child. The victim of that crippling depression is now a ghost compared to me.

I am not my illnesses.

I am not my assault.

I have grown into a survivor.

Regan Koch

Age: 14, Grade: 9

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

Educator: Whitney Webster

Category: Poetry

Deep In the Mind

I walked down a path,
Deep in the Woods,
The trees Strong and Tall,
Feeding on the soil

The Leaves, Bright and Green
Full of Life, A thing so Pure,
Yet I could not reach them
Like I used to, Before,

The Sun was hidden,
Behind so much Life,
The Light was dim, the path,
Growing thinner and thinner

Deeper and Deeper I walk
The Light fading,
The Darkness pitch, the path now gone,
Lost, Deep in the Mind

The Green of the Leaves,
No longer visible,
Neither, the Strong wood
Once holding trees so High and Tall

Walking, now, slow
The sludge of the ground
Slowing all movement down,
Lost, Deep in the Mind

Trying to breathe,
The Air now gone,
Instead, a poison,
Too deadly, for a Cure.

Regan Koch

Age: 14, Grade: 9

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

Educator: Whitney Webster

Category: Poetry

The River of Music

Music, something strong,
A drug, so addictive,
Going straight to the brain,
Taking everything over

Opening everything up,
Filling with Thoughts,
So full, not even another
Drop, could fit,

The brain, now a river,
Throwing you back and forth,
Each Thought, a turn,
Swaying to the beat,

Further, the river flows,
Now, lost in the feeling,
The tempo, slowing down,
Thoughts flood in faster

A headache now,
Thoughts, so loud,
There is no resistance,
The current, growing stronger,

The River of Thoughts,
Now, a whirlpool,
Being pulled under,
Into the dark abyss

The Music stops, But,
It is too late,
The thoughts have come,
And will not leave

Eyes, now open,
The water, turning cold,

Biting, your skin,
Instead, a feeling, unfamiliar,

The water, calm,
The thoughts, welcoming,
A Peace, so serene,
Happiness flows in

The addiction, takes in
You stay under,
But you must leave,
For to live, you must Breathe

Sophie Krug

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

How My Deep-Rooted Fear of Humiliation Came To Be

Home for me was always a minefield, a place where you had to be careful with your footing and always had to tread anxiously. If I overstepped my boundaries or placed my shaking foot in a place where it was unwelcome, explosion and chaos would ensue without fail. I learned early on to speak softly, to put my head down, and to stay out of the way - not to say that I wasn't loved, because I was. It wasn't my parents whom I was taught to tiptoe my way around; it was my older, violent brother, who was always blinded by rage and solved his problems with a fist. My brother, a scarily skinny boy who wore glasses with frames too big for his face but too small to cover his large eyes, had knuckles as bony as his knees and a temper that seemed to ooze from his small frame. His rage exuded from his eyes, his nose, his ears, and most importantly, his mouth. He would let his terrifying and uncontrollable anger take over his tongue, and he could spew death threats and insults faster than a machine gun could fire off a round. His words left bullet holes in my family, littering our walls with blood stains and bullet casings. My house constantly smelled of gunpowder.

The pills that caused his rampant fury were prescribed by his psychiatrist, a woman whom I've never met but who I've heard to be short, plump, and extremely chatty. According to my father, who shared his own frustration with me often, she would barely let my brother get a word in, and even when she was asking him questions she would answer them all herself, scratch the name of a new antidepressant or antipsychotic on a slip of paper, and send them on their way. The pills, however, counteracted their intended results on my brother, and the small flashes of quick anger or annoyance became a constant throbbing of full-blown fury. My parents tried to convince his psychiatrist to revoke the medicine prescription, even begging her to allow him to try something, *anything* different, but she merrily refused. The pills continued to make their way down his esophagus each morning and night.

School was my safe haven, as it was the only time that I was free from the dangers at home supplied by my generously destructive brother. There I didn't have to walk with silent feet, though I still did out of force of habit, and only there could I put my guard down. I could converse without fear of letting a trigger word slipping out of my mouth, I could read without escalated screaming blocking my own voice from my head, and I could make a name for myself. *Myself*. I wasn't used to having a sense of self, so my reputation became very important to me. I wanted to be kind, I wanted to be open, I wanted to be loving. I wanted to give love and I wanted to receive it. I would do anything for it.

However, school couldn't always keep me away from my brother. He was two grades ahead of me, and while that should have been enough to keep our school lives separated, it wasn't always. He could manage to get himself into situations where his loud mouth could get him into trouble with teachers and students alike, and his flying fists attacked faster than any school official could rush to stop his outbursts. More than often, I would walk into a conversation between classmates in which they'd look at me with wide eyes, then look at each other, and finally say: "Did you hear that your brother got into a fight?"

My chest would tighten, and I'd feel nothing but exhaustion. I felt exhaustion for my parents, for what they had to deal with; I felt exhaustion for myself, for the shitfest that I'd witness at home; I felt exhaustion for my younger sister, too small and innocent to fully comprehend what was happening and whose tears fell steadily and frequently. But, after a moment, I'd let out the breath that my lungs had trapped and I'd say kindly,

"Yeah, I heard. It's okay."

Sometimes I'd witness the fights myself, though I'd never seen a physical fight between my brother and anyone other than my father and mother. I'd watch my brother spit insults to his peers faster than most fourth graders could read, and I'd watch his peers laugh in his face and insult him equally in return.

I remember a specific instance in which this occurred during elementary school breakfast in the cafeteria. Though my brother and I carpooled with our next-door neighbors in the mornings and usually had time for breakfast, sometimes we'd stop in for school breakfast to indulge in a chocolate muffin or small container of sugary cereal. During the mornings when I decided to eat breakfast at school, I'd walk into the cafeteria that smelled like weird ketchup and had white walls littered with Got Milk? posters and I'd hope that my brother wouldn't be there as well. I'd peek my little head around the doorway and scan the room, looking for a skinny black boy with a loud mouth and a baseball cap. Sometimes I'd be in the clear; sometimes I wasn't, and on those days I'd have to choose if I wanted to risk humiliation or if I really wanted that muffin. Typically I'd turn on my heel and go to join my second grade class sitting outside of our classroom, but on this particular day, I decided to risk it.

I slowly strolled into the cafeteria, picked up Frosted Flakes, whole milk, and a luxurious chocolate muffin. I paid for my food, picked a table as far away from my brother as possible, and sat down. I had taken one bite of my delicious chocolate muffin when a baseball cap came flying across the cafeteria. I recognized the baseball cap; it was my brother's.

I whipped my head around, looking wide-eyed at the table where my brother resided. I hadn't heard the yelling before, but now it seemed unbearably loud. Everything seemed unbearable. All of a sudden, the white of the cafeteria walls seemed too bright and the lights seemed too yellow and the smell became too much for my small nose to handle. I tried to squeeze my eyes shut and block it all out again, but I couldn't move. The yelling was so loud, my brother's insults were so cruel. Everyone was laughing at him. The laughter seemed like a roar, the kids like a pit of lions ready to chomp down on my brother, and then me.

"Do you see your brother?"

A voice snapped me out of my terrified psychosis, and my eyes focused on a girl. She was at my brother's table, standing on her chair, seeming as tall as a building. She was big already; she could have snapped my scrawny brother in half, and easily done the same to me, as gawky and shaky as I was. Her voice made her even bigger, as it seemed to fill up the entire cafeteria. All eyes were on me as the big girl spoke to me directly from across the cafeteria.

"Do you see what your brother is doing?" She continued. "He's screamin' and yellin' and we're all sick of it. Come shut your brother up! Come shut him up!"

I stood up and ran. I felt all the blood in my head pulse against my neck, moving fast through my veins. I felt my eyes bulging with fear and with humiliation.

I ran to my classroom and sat down in my seat, my hands shaking and my back trembling. I felt a small hand on my back.

"Are you okay?" My friend asked. My friend. I was not with my brother anymore; I did not have to think about him. He didn't have to be here. It was just me.

I smiled and wiped my running nose on my hand.

Madison Kunz

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Eggnog and Cinnamon Rolls

My grandmother is an amazing woman. Known as “Grammie” to all of us. Grammie is a little 5’0” church organist who can rock 4” heels better than anyone I know. Grammie always comes equipped with dozens of homemade, gooey cinnamon rolls for my brother and me to enjoy. She slips us the whole, regular eggnog, when my mom will only buy the “lite” kind. Grammie lives alone in her humble condo, and she drops everything to come see a performance or watch one of her grandchildren’s games. She once tore her rotator cuff while jumping on trampolines with us at SkyZone and had to have surgery. Last Christmas, Grammie generously took both her kids’ families on a fully paid, nine day trip to Costa Rica.

Grammie also had a stroke when she was only 23 years old. She had an aneurysm rupture in her brain while she was sunbathing next to her mobile home in the trailer park. She was rushed to the hospital and just barely made it out alive. Ever since her stroke, she has completely lost her short term memory and her hair. When I was little, she often acted as my babysitter and I got to watch her cope first hand. She always, always has her notes--a small notebook covered in scribbles of reminders of daily tasks. Grammie relies greatly on numbers. When we ran errands together, she would tell me she had a number. If the number was three, it meant she had three things she needed to get while she was out.

When I was younger, I never noticed how much Grammie struggled with simple things. Maybe it’s gotten worse over time, maybe I’m just becoming old enough to notice it and fully grasp it. Now, I’m watching the woman I spent so much of my life with slip. My heart sinks every time I say something about Costa Rica and her face shows no recognition. She tries to smile and agree, but I know she can’t remember any details about that trip.

The older I get, the more she tells me about how she deals with life. Recently, she took me to McDonald’s and when I brought back her chicken sandwich, she chuckled and said, “I don’t even remember if this is what I ordered.” I was taken aback at first, but she just started eating like this happened all the time.

My cousin, Kenzie, is her youngest grandchild and is only two years old. Grammie’s memory has been slipping more than ever these past two years. I’ve watched as she tries to help herself remember Kenzie. She is constantly trying to commit Kenzie to her long term memory. I can’t imagine what it must be like to have to work to remember your own family.

I can’t be sure how much longer Grammie has with us mentally. She’ll live for a much longer time, but soon, not all of her will be there. I think it is harder to watch someone live without really living than it is to watch them die. I know that it must be so hard for her to find herself losing a few pieces everyday. No matter when my time with my Grammie ends, she will always be my mentor who jumps off wall trampolines, and who slips me the wholesome, extra fattening eggnog.

Drake Lacina

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Winning His Heart

From my room, I could hear the ferocity in her voice. A slight pause. Probably him downing his umpteenth glass of whiskey. Then it started back up again. Muffled yet audible. The words finding their way to my heart and shattering it. My bedside alarm clock read 12:03 am. My birthday. A glass shatters downstairs, interrupting my thoughts. Followed by more yelling. *Already better than last birthday*, I thought. Mom said she had a big surprise for me but, with how strapped for cash we were, I was expecting something along the lines of a toothbrush. Underprivileged, poverty stricken, empty-handed, fortuneless, however you want to say it, my family was downright poor. My dad had been working as a lumberjack but was recently laid off. My brother, Connor, our biggest source of income, was a carpet cleaner and my best friend, and my mom was a kindergarten teacher. It was a struggle to get food for dinner. But, somehow we managed.

The door finally creaked open, I knew by the weight of the footsteps, it was my mother. She gently tugged at my blanket, getting my attention and handed me a wrapped box. "You thought I forgot, didn't you?" My mother's sweet voice was enough to make me relax. I didn't respond. I tore open the box to find a pair of odd looking shoes. There was a card inside. It read "*Thank you for always being there for me, I am sorry I couldn't give you more.*" I opened the card and a wad of cash fell out.

I looked at her and smiled, "Mom you didn't have to---"

She cut me off. "Take it and find something you are passionate about. Don't let people knock you down and never give up." She walked out of the room and closed the door softly. But before it shut she poked her head in and told me that she was headed to the store with Connor to get doughnuts for tomorrow morning.

The sound of sirens woke me. I looked at the clock. 3:00 am. It sounded like the sirens were coming outside of the house. There was knocking on the door downstairs. I figured my dad was too hungover to even get out of bed so I got up and walked downstairs. The person knocked again. "Coming" I yelled. I opened the door and saw two policemen standing at the door. Their heads were hung low and it looked as if they hadn't slept in ages.

"Are you Charlie Elize? The son of Ann Elize and brother to Connor Elize?"

"Yes" I responded.

"We regret to inform you, they were killed in a car crash at 1: 23 am." My heart sank lower than low. My face felt hot as a wave of nausea hit me like a semi. I fell to my knees and asked god "Why?" over and over again.

The funeral came and went. People stopped by. Friends and family bringing casseroles and cheesecakes. They acted like that stuff would bring them back. "Sorry for your loss" They would say. I hated those words. They only made the hole in my heart bigger. But my mom and brother would want me to stay strong. I remembered the last words she said to me. "I won't give up mom" I whispered while I cried myself to sleep.

The day I came back to school, everybody stared at me. I didn't have any friends. Except my brother. He was the light on my darkest days. At my locker, someone had posted a piece of paper with a picture of shoes that looked like the ones my mom had gotten me. It read, "Wrestling tryouts October 22nd at 4:00 pm." I knew I was going to go. They were tomorrow and I didn't have anything else to do.

That night I got home and grabbed the wad of cash from under my bed. I told my dad that I forgot some things at school. "Wait! Get over here" He yelled. I looked at him directly in the eye. I knew he was having trouble getting mom and Connor too. "You're worthless! At least Connor had a job! You piece of trash! Leave!" I looked at him stone cold in the face. "Leave!" "Yes sir." I ran out of the house. Tears welled at the corners of my eyes.

At Dicks, I grabbed headgear, a sweatsuit, and a bag. I checked out and ran home. I knew he wouldn't support me. He never had. So I didn't tell him about wrestling. About the wad of cash, about any of it.

The days of practice turned into weeks and before I knew it, it was the first meet. I had told my dad I was staying late to study. I had become toned and muscular. The morning and nightly jogs made my stamina grow. The weights made my biceps bulge. The veins on my arms popped with a blue-ish green tint. I could see a noticeable difference in my performance. Wrestling had changed my life, I wasn't the nerdy kid anymore. I could stand up for myself now, people were scared of me.

It was the day of the first meet. I couldn't quite explain what I was feeling. Happy to finally do what I love in public. Scared that I might get embarrassed in front of the whole school. My stomach was queasy throughout the whole day. The minutes ticking by, turning into hours. Finally, the dismissal bell rang and I headed to the locker room. I was completely freaking out and my whole body shaking. I got to the locker room, got on my hands and knees, and prayed to god. I prayed for my mom. I prayed for my brother. I prayed that I would make them proud. I poured my soul into that prayer. I stood up. Calm. Confident in my abilities. Not scared of anything. Even my father. I was a wrestler and nothing would change that.

Every sensation felt exaggerated. The tight singlet I slipped on. The snap of strap against my skin. I tied my shoes with dignity and laced them with faith. Nothing was going to get in my head. You could say I found my game face in that locker room.

Just then I hear my name called over the speaker. "It's time" I muttered. I kicked open the door and jogged to my mat. I put the ankle belt on, it felt like 20 pounds. My opponent looked good. Tall and muscular. He didn't scare me at all. I looked him square in the eyes and knew this match would come down to who had Mrs heart. It was me. It was me. We shook hands. It was me. The whistle blew.

I immediately took a shot but he sprawled hard. He was on top of me now, trying to spin for points. Luckily those endless nights in the weightroom had turned me into an animal with a hunger that could never be sated. I grabbed his leg and pulled tight going with him as he tried to ride. It was tiring but I knew he was feeling it too. Finally he gave up, letting me back up. But, he had set me up. As soon as I got to my feet he blast doubled me. Picking me up and throwing me back down as he fell on top. "2!" the official yelled. He put in the half nelson and started to walk me over on my back. This kid was in it to win it. He was going for the pin. I finally gave in to his strength and was on my back. I knew I only had 3 seconds before the ref called it. The whistle blew and I knew I had been saved by the bell. He was good, but I had heart. I chose bottom, knowing a quick pin would help me substantially. The whistle sounded and I switched him hard. "Reversal!" I put my hands on his forearms finding what I was looking for. I'm pretty sure I

smiled then and there because, I knew it was all over. I pulled his tricep across his body and rolled him over like a three legged table. He was done. He couldn't catch a breath. "Booooooom" the ref hits the mat and relief flows through! I won! I won! I won! I shook my opponent's hand and ran off the mat, as happy as could be!!

The first meet was a success and from then on I caught fire. Winning and pinning my way to state. I had to keep making excuses up for dad though. If he found out, I was scared of what he would do. I decided to tell him.

I found him out in the garage one Saturday morning. I walked over to him and conjured the courage to tell him. "" Dad, I haven't told you but I joined wrestling this year. He looked at me for a second comprehending what I had said.

"You did what!" he spat. "" Where'd you get the money for your gear?" I looked him in the eye. I could feel the burning sensation as blood rushed to my face.

"Mom." I finally choked out. "I worked really hard this year and won quite a few. I am competing for the state title in a couple of days."

My dad burst into tears. "I am so proud of you buddy." He squeaked. " I will be there for you. I am sorry for everything."

It was a year of hardships, a year of growing up, a year of becoming the man that I had wanted to be. Placing third at state was a bonus, but the real prize was finally realizing that my dad really did love me.

Erin Lamping

Age: 12, Grade: 7

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Andy Chen

Category: Poetry

Beautiful

Big Things Are Beautiful

Big things are beautiful:
The breaching blue whale,
Peaceful, proud redwoods,
And loud, freezing hail.
The bright setting sun
As it falls through the sky,
And white, puffy clouds
Like whipped cream on a pie.

And small things are beautiful:
Strong, hardworking ants,
Quiet and mini,
Like one stitch in your pants.
The veins in a leaf,
Or a hummingbird's mouth,
And the salt in the oceans,
To the north or the south.

The Goose

Some say
That hope is a thing
With feathers. Well,
So is peacefulness.
Fluffy feathers wait
For the wind to gently
Stir them. The goose
Sits, protective of her
Young. Observant and alert,
Yet calm.

Deep Within The Sea

A wide, flat tail breaks through the surface, slapping the water with such strength. It disappears along with the creature it accompanies, calmly drifting as if in slow motion. A presence like no other, big, proud and strong. Watching, waiting, peaceful.

The Swimmer

She waits. Her tentative eyes watch the Water, anticipating the plunge. Beep! Eight sleek, streamlined swimmers dive Into the chlorinated depths below. Her hands slice through the Water like blades. She Reaches towards victory, towards Hope, towards success. Thoughts Flash before her eyes. Of Her home, her family, the life she Once lived. With each breath She comes closer and closer to The wall. Slamming her hand into The tile, she finishes. Victorious, She looks up. Not to the crowded, Screaming stands of people, The brightly lit scoreboard, announcing Her accomplishment, or to her fellow Teammates. She looks only to where]her family is now. Where they Have been ever since the accident. Their eyes glisten with tears Of joy. Proud, pure tears of Joy. she smiles to herself, And climbs out of the Pool, wondering what tomorrow will Bring.

Buno

I was a dolphin.
My big, beautiful, grey tail
Glistened as I jumped, my
Eyes shining with each praising
Phrase from my trainer. In that
Moment, I felt at home. Opening my
Eyes in that murky water, I
Could see everything. I could
Breathe underwater. Chirping, I
Lept through a flaming ring,
A wide smile spread across my
Face. I was Buno. I could do anything,
And no one, not one person,
Was ever going to stop me.

Jaqueline Levario

Age: Unknown, Grade: 12

School Name: Alta Vista Charter High School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Katherine Laird Kimbrell

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

One More Wish

Imagine having to hold down a six ft-tall person when you are only five ft-tall, and this person is ten times stronger than you, gun in hand, trying to blow his head off. You are trying your hardest not to say anything wrong because if you do, you might just take his life away. So you push that person against the wall, and you do not know how you did it when you only weight 110lb and he is around 200lb. You are pushing his hands down, so he does not point the gun to his head or anywhere else on his body.

What seems like one minute pass by, and you are fighting him and making sure he does not hurt himself. You are crying and whispering all the great memories you have with him, even though there are not a lot. You remind him of the beautiful mirror that you had given him for his birthday which later on ended up splattered with sorries and regrets. Right when you are about to tell him how much he means to you, you hear a gunshot. Every single noise seems to mute when the gun drops. You are looking all around him trying to make sure he did not do anything stupid and hoping that he had hit the wall, but when you look down at the long white sleeve shirt he had given you with much love on your birthday you see blood on it, in the moment you realized that you really did not mean anything to him.

What seems like two minutes of silence pass by and you could not feel anything of think of anything except, "my father just shot me", so you drop to the floor and make sure that the gun is far away from him. As you move the gun away you remember feeling cold but the room was burning. When you finally look at him one more time in his eyes you see them sparkling and blood shot red. The last thing you remember hearing is him crying, yelling and hitting the walls, and you are still there just laying down bleeding. You are trying your hardest to put pressure on the wound and try to call the cops, but before you can even dial a number he knocks the phone from your hand; he starts calling random people, but at the point, you are just laying on the ground and no longer know what to do.

A couple hours later you wake up and you see yourself trapped in four walls and no one with you. You start feeling scared because you think that zombies are gonna come and attack you just like in the video games that you play.

A couple minutes pass by, and a strange lady wearing blue comes in and messes with all the weird things that are attached to your body. You already don't like this lady because she's hurting you every time she moves the needle. When she leaves, you see your mother outside the door of these four walls trying to get in but they do not let her. At that moment you feel scared and hopeless knowing that the one person whom you love the most could not be there to give you comfort.

Days pass by and you finally get to go back home with your mother. Every month you get a letter from your nightmare, you really want it to be over so you never opened any involve that came from him, after a year you stopped receiving anything and the nightmare seem to be ending, but you know you will never forget about what a bad dream all of this had been.

It's been a year now, and after all the sleepless nights, you finally build up the courage to go see the guy who almost took your life away. It kills you to know that he will never be able to teach you how to drive or how to deal with guys. He did not have to kill you for you to be dead inside. Months pass by and there is not a night that passes by without you crying, a Fourth of July without wearing headphones and hiding to not hear the loud noise, there is not a holiday that you don't cry in, and there is not a birthday that when you blow the candles, you wish that it was all a nightmare and you'd wake up from it.

At the end, all he did was take your childhood away from you. You could not go out to parties, skating or to the movies with your friends without having some type of weapon to protect yourself. You had to learn how to hold a gun before you even learn how to apply a lipstick. At this point you know that you can make it on your own and have learned how to get by in the streets. You learned that everyone will hurt you and won't come back to say sorry. You learned that you can not trust your own family. But you've been able to build yourself to a strong young lady that does not depend on anyone. And till this day you thank that monster for making the way you are today.

Owen Li

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Aubry Bend Middle School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Debra Brockus

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

Between It All

As he walked down the gravel street, he could feel the light, cool breeze across his face. He put his hands in his pocket and rubbed a rock with his right hand. It was smooth and felt warm in his hand. Light scuffing could be heard from a distance and he looked up. Squinting, he looked ahead and saw nothing, so he casually looked behind and saw an old man. The old man slowly caught up with the boy. It was Ben. Ben stopped and pulled out a pocket watch.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he softly uttered.

The boy looked at the old man and said, “Ditto.”

He walked away, leaving the old man in the dust. Ben gazed upon the distance and saw a bright flash. He hoped this boy knew what he was doing.

James ran down the stairs, hoping he would make the bus today. If he didn’t make it, his mom would kill him. He had been tardy for the past four days, and things were getting ugly. He ran out the door and left the empty home for the day. He reached the edge of the street just as the bus arrived. The bus was a wreck, but he didn’t mind. He found his usual seat and took a breath. He was Gabriel and Matthew sitting in the adjacent seat. They quickly exchanged a nod and braced themselves for school. James’s day went normally except he saw the strange figure again in the background. Every day, a man in an old cloak would be roaming around the school watching James. This time, he walked up to James.

“Excuse me, do you happen to know where the office is?” he asked passionately.

“Go down the hall and turn left,” replied James. He looked at the man’s face and saw hesitation.

“Would you mind walking me down there? I always seem to get lost.”

James sighed softly and walked with the man. The hallways were the ghost town of the school after three. No one was in sight except for the janitor. Right as they reached the office, the man pulled out a notebook and dropped it. James kindly picked it up and caught a glimpse of his name. It was written down with other information about him. The man seemed shocked, but tried to keep his cool.

James ran home as fast as he could while thinking what had just happened. He opened his house door and slammed it as he ran up the steps. He picked up the note his mom left for him on the table. He didn’t bother reading it because it always said the same thing: Dinner is the fridge and go to bed at 9:30. He slid into his room and booted up his ancient PC his grandpa had given him for his 10th birthday. He looked up the man’s name in the search box. Ben Walters. He clicked the first result. FBI’s most wanted. James searched through this man’s past. James learned that Ben had stolen from a government laboratory and was going back in time, possibly the future, to disrupt and change certain events. It is unknown what his goal is. James wanted to get to know this man better, so he went back to school the next day. Nobody was there because it was a Saturday, but he witnessed a few kids playing on the playground. It took some time, but Ben eventually arrived. He tried opening the school doors, but they were locked. Ben slowly

pulled out a hand-held item and it magically opened the doors. James stealthily ran towards the door and caught it just as it was about to close.

James heard light breathing echoing through the halls. He saw a strange device on the ground and it made a slight ping every few seconds. He looked at the security camera at the door, but red led was no longer glowing. Ben had somehow shut down the school's security system. He followed the sound of the feet to find a tape recording of feet playing in a dead end of the hall. He looked behind him to find Ben staring at him melancholy.

"Why are you here?" he questioned.

James stared at his feet in embarrassment and answered, "I came to get my math notebook." He really did need his notebook, but he only told a half truth. Ben looked at him unbelieving and pulled out the notebook.

"This?" he asked.

James was in shock and wonder of how this mysterious man knew. Ben motioned him to follow. They went towards a closet and Ben led him inside. The floor seemed to drop and a huge force knocked James off his feet. He got up and Ben led him to a desk. Ben explained that he had been hiding under this school to get away from the FBI. He also noted that he needed to change history to bring the world back into balance. Since the new influence of crime, today's society became so clean that many jobs were lost. Policemen were laid off and the military was vacant. Ben explained that he needed to do this because he always was a troublesome child and it was in his nature to cause trouble. As Ben looked away, James grabbed the little rock and slyly put it into his pocket. It felt warm and smooth in his soft hands. When Ben turned around James noted that his mother would be looking for him. After Ben let him go, James ran to his house so fast, that he felt like he was already time travelling. He went up to his room and shut the door. Not that anyone would be home any time soon. He took out the rock and examined it for a few moments. It was surprisingly warm and he wondered how it worked. Does it transform? Do I have to wish upon it? His question was answered very quick. He started to wish he could go back to when he was born, but the rock vibrated in his hand. "Whoa!" he thought to himself. Maybe he wasn't being specific. So now he wished he could go back to September 5th, 2004. A bright light flashed in his room, and he was gone. Time travel was much different than he thought. It occurred to him that the process was almost instant. He looked around and saw he was in a waiting room with some other people. They didn't seem to notice his abrupt appearance. He looked for anything he may remember and then suddenly saw his mother with another man. "Wow," he thought. His mom was very pretty before he was born. The man with her had an athletic stature with deep features on his face. He looked calm, but at the same time had a timid appearance. His light brown hair looked like James's and he had the same soft, hazel eyes. The man looked up to where James was standing, and James realized he had been staring for a long time. The man walked over to James and said, "I thought you'd be here. Come, it's about to happen." James was in total shock, but did as he was told. After five hours of waiting, he was born. It was strange for him to witness his birth. The man pulled James into the hall after he got to hold the baby. They continued to walk down the hall until they were out.

The man sat down on a bench in the park across the street. James did the same.

"So, you're James at, what, 11? 12?" asked the man calmly.

"Um, I'm 12. What is your name?" answered James.

After a couple of minutes of exchanging chat, James learned that the man's name was Matthew and he was not married to his mom. He also found that he was an insurance man, but was not doing so well. Matthew looked very similar to Ben, but James put that at the back of his

head. Ben had glasses and grey hair, which Matthew didn't have. Matthew said he knew that James time travelled, so he told him in order to go back to where he came from, he needed to put the rock in his hand and think "home." James looked at Matthew one last time and did as Matthew said.

James appeared right where he was before he travelled. Only this time, Ben was here. James was so scared that he wished he could go to December 19th, 2020. He appeared in a room that looked exactly like his, but it seemed to be moving. He looked around and walked down the stairs. No one was home, but there was a strange whirring sound like gears or something. He opened the front door to see that he was floating. He fell out, but was soon stopped. He was floating too. Suddenly, he felt a sharp guilt from stealing the rock and decided to go back and face the truth.

Ben was not mad. He was not happy. He wasn't anything. He talked to James about why he let him do this. Ben could've stopped him anytime, but he wanted to let James experiment. Anything James did, he could reverse. But, Ben said he would allow James to take over his job as a "time keeper" soon. James needed to be apprenticed for 24 hours in order to take over. The air in the room suddenly changed as a new mood set in. What if something bad happened. Wasn't that what Ben wanted? James was unsure about this, but it was himself who got him into this.

Many days later, James decided to go on his own. He already had 20 hours of training, and Ben said he needed to practice. James decided to go back to the 1960's just to check out his grandparents. He looked around and saw his grandpa flirting with some other teenage girls. Wow, his grandpa looked like Ben and Matthew. James was starting to think that His grandpa was Matthew's father, but Matthew could quite possible be Ben. Maybe he was using an alias? He walked over to his grandpa when he was not busy and he learned that his name was Ben. So, was the Ben he knew now his grandpa? James decided to go to his father's birth. He learned that his father's full name was Matthew Ben Oscar. So maybe his father was using his middle name as his name. James's head started to spin. He decided to go back and talk to Ben.

When he arrived at Ben's hideout, he was nowhere to be seen. James checked Ben's history log and saw he was somewhere in 1987. James decided to go there and appeared in the middle of a street. He found out he was in New York. All around him, people were talking about the stocks. They had suddenly dropped as well as around the world. Ben must've done this, James thought. James was still confused why they had to do this. He went back to Ben's hideout and uncovered some old documents.

James knew he had to go back to that time. He arrived in 1976. He saw the man and stopped him unexpectedly. A rock fell from his hand and fell into a drainage pipe. James apologized quickly and ran away. He didn't even time travel, but now he was on strange farm land. He tried travelling, but it didn't work. He desperately tried to find out where he was and what the date was. He found a newspaper in the owner's mailbox and found out it was 1977, and he was somewhere in Iowa. He walked down a gravel road until it was pitch black outside.

As he walked down the gravel street, he could feel the light, cool breeze across his face. He put his hands in his pocket and rubbed a rock with his right hand. It was smooth and felt warm in his hand. Light scuffing could be heard from a distance and he looked up. Squinting, he looked ahead and saw nothing, so he casually looked behind and saw an old man. The old man slowly caught up with the boy. It was Ben. Ben stopped and pulled out a pocket watch.

"You shouldn't be here," he softly uttered.

"How'd you find me? I thought you wouldn't be able to get to me. I can't get out," replied

James.

Ben softly sighed and explained that he was his father. James knew it all along, but he couldn't face the truth. This man had abandoned him and his mother, and his family wasn't really family anymore. Ben explained that he had messed with the wrong type of history and he would be stuck in this time forever. He would have to live the same day every day and couldn't grow up. However, the gruff, old man pulled out another rock and said that he would take James's place here. James would now have to take the responsibility of time keeper, and he finally figured out the purpose of this. Without equal bad in this world, the good won't be good, and the bad won't be bad. He needs to even things out. It was like...like...yin and yang. He walked away from his dad and traveled back to his correct period of time. Ben stared off into the distance as a single tear trickled down his dirty face, clearing a path of white. He looked up into the night sky and saw a star twinkling brightly. He knew that James was in a good place

Simon M

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Flash Fiction

Smoke Clouds

How did I know he'd be out here? Well, I know this guy pretty well, and I know he doesn't do much. The only thing he will ever do, with absolute certainty, is take these long walks, at stupid hours of the night. The hours of the night where a lovely lady like me would be caught dead, literally, out here. But tonight was definitely an exception. Even in addition to it being a cozy thirty eight degrees out and snowy, I was out driving to the empty streets at 3am. I was driving to the bridge. He always goes to that bridge, probably because water adds a little, something, to him. He did grow up on the ocean. By the ocean I mean, not like on a boat or anything. Just a small little town in California, a little south of Santa Barbara.

The bridge was over this small creek at the edge of town, a lot closer to his house than mine. That's why I drove. I would have driven either way though. Too cold out to walk.

I pulled up, and there he was. Just where I expected him. In his army green jacket, smoking a long cigarette, leaning his arms on the guard rail under a street light. I pulled over. He didn't turn to look at my car, even after I slammed my door to get his attention. Adjusting my hood, I stumbled through the snow over to him. I sat on railing, a few feet down from him. I stared at him. He didn't look up. He took a long deep breath in.

"Good morning," he sighed.

"Good morning." I forced a smile.

He took a long drag on his cigarette. "How did you know I was out here?" He murmured, letting the smoke bellow out of his mouth.

"I know you better than you think" I turned away from him, and looked down, studying the way the snow fell and stuck in the cracks in the asphalt.

I came out here to talk to him. Help, maybe? I hadn't planned what to say. I just kinda thought it would come to me. Like I always do. But it never does. His cigarette was burned down to the little orange part you put in your mouth. He flicked it into the creek. Any other day I would have told him he was an asshole. Not today though. He didn't need my usual shit right now. We sat there for a minute after that. The streetlight flickered a bit. Another minute, a motorcycle whizzed by.

He went to grab something from his jacket. Another cigarette. He pulled one out of the box, and waited. After a moment, he asked, "Want one?" ,and gestured the box over to me, still not looking over at me.

Any other day I would have said “you know I can't stand those things.” Not today though. I pulled one out, struggling to get a good grip on one at first. He held up his lighter and flicked it open. It was one of those cool old school ones in the little metal box. That you flick open to light. I held the end over the tiny flame. He lit his off of mine. That's friendship, right there. The glossy papery stuff touched my lips and I was instantly weirded out. But i needed this. I breathed in deep from my lungs. I couldn't help coughing. A lot. I heard him snicker at me, glancing over to me out of the corner of his eye.

“Kch- Man, shut up- coughhhack! You know I haven-cokh smoked since high school.”

He laughed even more. He turned his body from that guard rail for the first time that morning then. It was to laugh at me. I laughed a little too.

He stood up straight, resting one wrist on his hip. He looked down at me, still recovering from that disaster.

“You have to be a little more delicate about it.” He sneered.

“Yea-kh, yeah yeah.” I took a ‘more delicate’ drag this time. Eugh. Gross, but also really nice. I held it in for a minute. Feeling the warm air in my body. It was nice in this cold. It had stopped snowing by this point. I had just realized it then, when I tilted my head up, releasing the gross cloud of dusty air up above us.

He turned to sit on the guardrail, like I was doing. He picked up his legs and stuck them straight out in front of him.

“Careful, you might fall.” I sneered.

“I would be so down for that.” He laughed.

“You wouldn't even die from that fall.” I said, turning to peer over the edge.

“I'd get hypothermia so fast though.” He raised his eyebrows at me.

“I'd drive you to the hospital.” I furrowed my eyebrows.

He turned up to the sky, squinting his eyes at the cold air. He was looking at the moon through the wispy clouds.

Kaylee Major

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Bugs and Dreams

The clicking of the keyboard, is the sound of my life. Words are the only people in my life, and ideas are my only friends. The coffee brewing, and the light from the laptop are the only things I need.

I smirk at the screen. The light illuminating my soul. I glance at the clock. 3:13 in the morning. Better get some sleep, if I want to harass the student body again.

I shuffle up the stairs, and to my room. I almost trip on a pile of books. After a few minutes of trying to get around them, I quit. The big pile of books in front of me looks nice.

I wake up to the sun throwing its light at me.

“Get out of here!” I yell at it. I give up on trying to get more sleep. I throw on a robe and fall down the stairs. If falling down a flight of stairs won't wake me up, then I don't what will.

Coffee is sitting in a cup on the island. ‘*Have a good day at school, honey. Love Mom.*’ I finally pick up the cup. Its warm. I throw things out of the cabinet until I find a travel mug. I put that back down, and run to the laundry room. Jeans and a hoodie. Just right.

I step out onto the porch. I run down the steps and to the car. My school is a typical school. You got your normal clicks. Jocks, cheerleaders, nerds, geeks, goths, and undecided. You can guess what category I fall under. Yep, undecided. Burrow, Nebraska is a pretty nice place, if you get past the wheat, and cattle. We have everything. We also have the bad things, like the people, and global warming. Everyone has that though.

I make my way through the student parking lot. Almost every spot it filled. I spot one right next to the doors.

“Yes,” I whisper to myself. I carefully drive my car towards the spot. Right when I turn the wheel, a cheerleader darts into the spot. She stands in front of my car with her hands on her hips. She stares at me.

“Um.. I'm driving here!” I yell through the window at her.

She rolls her eyes. “Deal with it Justin. There's spots in the back.”

We stare at each other a little longer. I finally give up on the staring contest. I think about running her over, but I don't.

I drive towards a spot in the back of the lot. Back here the yellow lines are faded. Most kids don't even follow the lines. They park wherever they feel is right. One minivan is parked in the middle of two spots. Just to make the person mad, I park right next to the car. I leave enough room so we can get in and out of the car.

I smile to myself as I get out. I walk over to the other car, and pull out my phone. I squeeze right between the two cars and take a picture. Evil Deed number one, completed. One hundred more before the end of the day.

I trudge to the back of the school. The whole walk I yell things like, ‘move pests’ or ‘hop along’. Its nice to be bad. Being bad doesn't mean you have bad grades. Infact I have a 4.2 grade point average.

When I get to my locker I sigh. The cheerleaders and football players have vandalized my locker again. They don't even bother to wipe stuff off from yesterday. They just write over it. Today's new quote was from me. It was one of my famous ones. 'Move it pests. This isn't a bug jungle!' I usually laugh to myself, and I still did this time. I use the sleeve of my hoodie to try and wipe it off. Permanent marker.

I turn around when I hear kids snickering. Alice Right, and Max Mason were hiding behind a trashcan. They try to shush each other, but they can't. Some how I make them laugh by not even doing anything. I roll my eyes and put my locker code in.

Fake bugs and snakes fall out of my locker. I look into my locker. Green slime covers my books, and binders. I bend down and pick up one of the rubber bugs. I drag it through the green slime in my locker. I glance back to make sure Alice and Max were still there. They were. I spin around and chuck the bug at them. Alice squeals and runs off. Max stares at me. He finally turns around and dashes off.

I sneer at the bugs, and slam my locker shut. Teachers will have to deal with me not having anything.

"All students report to the gymnasium for a school pep rally. Thank you. Principal Sue signing off."

I pull my bag up my shoulder, and trudge to the gym. By the time I get there kids have already claimed their spots. Instead of going to the bleachers I walk to the stage. The student council always has to sit on stage. Guess who's president of the stuco? That's right, old Justin Murray. I strut to the middle of the stage. Alice and Max are already there. Since they're captions of cheerleading and football they automatically get in.

"Excuse me ladies," I tell them. I make Max move so I can sit in the middle of the stage.

"Ummm... I'm a dude," Max claimed.

"Sure ya are," I slap him on the knee, "And I'm president of the United States of America. We can't have what we want." This just makes him mad. I smile to myself. Evil Deed number three done.

Principal Sue walks to the front of the stage. "Welcome ladies, gentlemen, underpaid staff. I welcome you to Burrow High's annual pep rally!" The crowd cheers. "To kick it off I will have the stuco president speak." Principal Sue walks off the stage. I take a deep breath. I don't remember any of this. At the last student council meeting I zoned out and started to think about my plan.

"Uh, let's go monkey face. We don't have all day," Alice whispers to me. I glare at her. I shrug off my bookbag, and stroll up to the stage with the most confidence I could muster. Only one person cheers for me as I get to the podium. Delany East. The only other person in the journalism.

"What's up fellow prisoners?" No one replies back. "Well it's dead in here," I look back to Principal Sue, she's shaking her head, "Okay time to get on track. Tonight's festivities include the homecoming dance, Tigers against Bulls football game, and the homecoming parade." I sounded like I was reading off of a card. Time to spice things up. "One more thing before you all fall asleep. The rest of today's classes are cancelled, Principal Sue told me to tell you guys. That is all." I step back from the podium. The crowd has gone crazy. Evil Deed number four, completed. Alice gapes at me like a fish. "Close your mouth, dear. You might get *bugs* caught in there." I strut off the stage feeling like a king.

Kids run up to me. They thank me, and hug me. I push them all away, and tell them to die in a hole. They get the message. Principal Sue marches right up to me. I smile at her.

“To my office now.” Is the only thing she says to me. My smile falls from my face. Sue’s office is bland. Beige couches, and walls. Brown chairs in front of the brown desk. Beige office chair. The only entertaining thing in here is her picture of her dog, who is also brown. “Sit Justin,” I do exactly what she says, “What was that about?” Whoa Sue gets straight to it. I pretend to think. “Well, I wanted the student body to feel like they don’t need to constantly work. If I’m going to be president of the United States, then I need to show my fellow voters that I am qualified for the job. So being the best student body president ever will help my campaign for president in 2036.” I’m out of breath after my long explanation. Sue stares at me like I lost my mind.

I sigh and lean forward, “Listen Mary, can I call you that? I need this.”

“Excuse me. It’s Principal Sue to you mister.”

“Yeah, whatever. Just see it my way.” Sue’s eyes go wide. She walks over to me.

“Yeah okay, you can finish this rant in detention. I’m sure Mr. Lone will love to hear about it.”

“Gladly. He will agree with me.” I pick up my backpack and walk out of the office. I hold my head up the whole time.

I push past students and teachers. My sneakers squeak most of the walk. Students give me nasty looks when they see me. Guess they heard the news. Sucks for them, they don’t have detention for it. Classes fly by. I push my chair back when the bell screams through the loudspeakers. I strut out of the room and to the journalism classroom. Sorry America, you’re going to have a president who writes more than stops war. Maybe my articles in newspapers will stop them from wanting to kill us. I am very persuasive.

I stop in front of the door. This is the one classroom where I feel like myself. I push open the door and smile. Delany is sitting on a desk with a magazine.

“Oh, hi Justin. I was catching up on today’s world problems.” She moves the magazine back in front of her face.

“Soon I will solve those problems,” I tell her. I walk over to the big desk attached to the front wall of the classroom.

“Delany, did anyone want to join Journalism?”

“Nope,” She says behind the magazine.

“Well I guess that’s a good thing because I have a plan,” Delany looks up from her magazine, “I’ll have to tell you tomorrow. I have detention tonight, so I can’t have Journalism after school.”

“Cool.” Delany flips a page.

“Great,” I whisper to myself as I put stuff back in my bag.

Detention is like a black hole. It only lasts an hour, but it seems like hours. The kids who tossed their friends after I said my announcement, are here. They would gather around my desk in the front. One person in particular wouldn’t stop.

“So what was it about, huh? You want to mess with our minds? ‘Cause it ain’t workin’ on me. No sir.”

“That’s because you are already messed up,” I mutter to myself.

“Whoa, what was that, nerd? You insulting me? Ya want to go there? Huh?”

“Yep I’m insulting you, and I didn’t know you knew big words like that, Jimmy. Your mother should be so proud.” I smirk at him.

“That’s it!” Jimmy lunges at me, but Mr. Lone stops us.

“Cut it out. You,” He points to Jimmy, “To the back of the room.” Jimmy mutters the whole time he walks back. Even though we are separated, it doesn’t stop us from mouthing names and staring at each other the whole time.

Today is even slower. I fell asleep at the same time last night. I woke up late this morning, and my car wouldn't start. I missed a quiz in calculus, and forgot my homework for advanced writing. Journalism was the only class where I didn't space out or forget something.

"Alright Delany, ya ready for the big news," I ask her as I walk into the room.

She nods, excited. "Lay it on me Justin."

"That is the spirit. You might want to sit down." Delany does. I breath in deep and think of a way to tell this to her.

"Okay, umm... well, I need you to get some stuff, but I'll tell you later. So I'm going to play a prank on the school."

Delany looks shocked, but recovers quickly. "Go on. I want in. I don't need to be here next year."

I smile at her before I go on. "Here's the plan. I'm going to school early on Friday, since it's the last day of school before spring break. I'm going to put green slime over the lockers, and gigantic bug in the lunchroom." I watch Delany write this all down.

"You should use living bugs," She suggests after a minute.

"Yes perfect," I tell her, "I will call you tonight with the details."

"Yay! The Murray-East Plan is in session!" Delany squeals as she walks out of the classroom.

"Hold up Delany," She spins around, "That name is perfect."

She winks at me. I smile.

Later that night I call her. She answers on the first ring.

"You reached Delany East. You may talk now."

"Hey Delany, it's Justin."

"Hi."

"I have details for the plan."

Friday morning we meet in the journalism classroom. Ever since I told Delany about the plan we've been constantly working on it. This morning we put the final touches on the rouch.

"Do you think the paper mache will hold?"

"Yeah I think so. We just need to put the final touches on." Delany nods and paints the bugs eye.

We load the bug on a rolling table, and sneak out of the classroom. The only other people in the school are the football players, swimmers, and band geeks.

We quickly roll the bug to the cafeteria which is empty. Delany helps me put the bug on the biggest table in the room. We both run up and down the room, throwing green slime and cockroaches onto the floor.

"These are dead right?" Delany asks as she pulls one out of the container.

"Positive. I'm going to the junior area, and office. You got the other areas?"

"Yep."

"Hurry, we need to be in the gym together." With that said, I run towards the junior area.

I run through the hall. I pull cans of silly string and slime out of my backpack. I spray it all through out the hall. It sticks to the lockers and drips down from the ceiling. I throw bugs into the slime. I find Alice and Max's lockers. I pull a marker from my bag. I uncap it, and begin to write.

Next stop the office. I do the same thing to the office as I do to the junior hallway. Slime, string, bugs. I walk to Sues office. Bland and ugly. Its needs some color. I dig for a green can of spray paint and get to work.

At 7:05 I meet Delany in the gym.

"We need to write, 'This is a bug jungle' in slime got it?" I ask her.

Delany nods. I notice she's gripping the can with extra force.

“Calm down,” I tell her. She just nods, and walks to the other end of the gym.

Ten minutes later we stand back to admire our work.

“Holy crap, put it away. People,” Delany announces. I glance through the doors. Kids are eagerly pushing to get in. I shove the evidence in my bag. I push Delany out of the gym and into a vacant hallway.

“Act like you were visiting a teacher or something,” I whisper to her. She doesn’t say anything. I take that for a good sign. The bell rings and kids file through the front doors. We walk out of the hallway and blend in with the crowd. We all shuffle to the gym. The first few kids stop and gasp. I smirk to myself. Jimmie shoves through the crowd.

“This is so cool!” He yells. I smirk again. “Yo this is so cool, it’s better the ice!” Now kids are shoving and pushing to look. They all have the same reaction. Ne one steps on it, they just stare at it. The go to class bell rings and everyone groans, but me. I can’t keep my excitement under control.

I open my locker pretending to look surprised. I really did a bang up job. I slam my locker and walk past Alice and Max’s locker.

“Bug Queen! Who the heck did this!” Alice screams at Max.

“Baby I don’t know. All I know is mine says Bug King.” I snicker to myself. At that moment the loud speaker goes off.

“*Justin Murray to my office now,*” Sue growls through the speaker. My classmates go dead, as they watch me. I walk through the hallway with my head up. I walk past Jimmy and he starts to clap. Soon enough the whole junior class is clapping. I smile when I hear Alice scream.

Sue’s office isn’t as boring as the first time. It found some color. Green I must clarify. When I get to her room Sue is turned around not looking at me.

Sit is the only thing she gets out before she loses it. Sue is laughing. Laughing at my prank. I can’t help but laugh back.

“Justin,” She says when she catches her breath, “I’ve had many pranksters in my day, but this is the best so far.”

“So I’m not suspended?”

“Oh yes you are, just after you clean this up. *You should be more green,* classic.” I look down in my lap. I twirl my thumbs and look back up at Sue.

Sue’s face gets serious. She walks over to me and bends down. “Justin, I’m going to have to talk to the school board about this.”

“Yeah okay. Whatever,” I mumble to myself. Hopefully this doesn’t ruin my perfect transcript. I need to be the first president with his own magazine. His own articles, he wrote in the magazine, and his own line of hair care products. I need to be President Justin Murray, ruler of America.

That would be perfect.

Perfect.

Kaylee Major

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Zombies

I pulled at a rail from the cart corral. It wouldn't budge.

"Crap!" I screamed. I tugged again. It popped free with a screech. The momentum followed through, and the rail hit me square in the forehead. I fell back onto the hot asphalt. A sound like bodies hitting a metal box, filled my ears. I looked back in horror. Gnarled limbs, of bleeding, rotten flesh, rounded the corner of the minivan.

"SHIT!" I screamed at no one in particular. I scrambled up from the hot ground, and readied the pole like I was gonna swing a bat. Brown hair filled my vision. Zombies that were once my friends moaned and grumbled. Some lifted their heads smelling the air. Immediately I smell my faded hoodie.

"It's me, it's me." I whisper. They were getting closer. Some of the zombies were a few feet away. Thousands filled the parking lot. With a cry I swung the rail at the approaching target. A thud sounded as the rail connected. I cringed as the head flew into one of the zombies mouth. I swung the rail again. Two more down. I started to back up. Slowly then faster with each step I took.

The doors of the mall were in my sight. The rail grew hot in my hand, and I almost dropped it. *You can sprint faster than this. Cody Smith, you were on the varsity football team.* My breath comes in gasps. Sweat and hair fill my vision again. I run into the door. I fall onto the concrete, again. I push myself up and whack the door.

"HELP! Please, please." I cry at the door. Salty tears well in my eyes.

A deep voice, with an accent scares me. "Millie it looks like there's a man-child outside." A woman's voice takes over the mans. "Should we let him in?" The man's voice doesn't respond. I pound on the door with my fists, the rail long forgotten.

"They're coming closer. I-I don't want to die." My voice cracks as I say this. I watch through blurry vision as two shadows pull on the door. It cracks open enough that I can crawl through. The women and man slam the door behind me.

"Get down, boy." A man steps out from the shadows. He holds a pistol. The other man unlatches the door so it's open a crack again.

"Ha-ha! Don't ever come back, you hooligans." The man with the pistol yells. The other man closes the door.

"When the world comes back to sanity, this video will be killer."

I whip my head to the voice. A girl with long black hair steps out the shadows.

"Man, you crying. What are you, fifteen?"

"Sixteen and why do care? It's not like you almost got killed two minutes ago." I snap at her.

"Ahh. So you can drive then. Cool. We'll need that when Bart, Thomas, and Millie are saving our butts."

I look around in confusion. Four people stand in semicircle around me. A woman, who looks to be in her early twenties. She holds a rag dripping with water. A man in a bright blue jumpsuit

and a tie, holds a gun. The other man dabs his forehead with a handkerchief. I study the girl more than I should. Shes pretty, with bright blue eyes, that look like the ocean. Tight jeans show off her curves, and a ratty old t-shirt, looks two sizes too big.

“Hey what are you staring at?” The girl asks.

My eyes widen. I barely shake my head when the woman offers me her hand.

“Honey, are you ok? We have medical supplies back at base, and it looks like something hit you hard in the head.” Now that she mentions it, I touch the bruise and winse.

“Oh yeah... I kind of did that.” I look down.

The girl snickers.

“Oh, sweetie. How did that happen?”

“It's kinda a long story.”

“We have the time. It's not like we have anywhere better to be.” The girl retorts.

She earns a glare from the woman. “My names Millie. The girl's name is Mikayla. Bart is the mall cop, and Thomas is the billionaire. Now we can get going”

I nod. That sends a wave of pain through me.

“I'm fine. Just my head hurts. That's all.”

Its Barts turn to speak up. “Why don't you let Millie fix you up, than we can go over the game plan.” Mikayla rolls her eyes.

Thomas leads us down a run down escalator. I look down as we walk and notice that all the plants are still alive. Sunlight streams down on them. Boxes line the walkways. We enter a perfume store. I blink as smells run up my nose.

“I suppose you're gonna being staying with us for a while, so here the rules. Men sleep on the floor, while women get the sofas. You only get food when you wake up, and before you go to bed. We work together to save each others butts. Deal?” Thomas says.

“Deal.” I repeat.

Millie guides me onto one of the sofas. I sit patiently. She grabs something out of a bag. Her fingers carefully rub whatever creme it is, on my forehead. A cooling sensation runs through my body.

“Thanks.” I say. Millie just nods. Everybody circles around me.

Mikayla starts, “Tell us how you ended up here.”

I blink in surprise. “Well, the apocalypse started three days ago. I was sitting my couch and all of a sudden I hear screams coming from my neighbors house. My dad says he's just gonna look outside and see what's happening. He never comes back.” I pause, thinking, “My mom goes out back, she never comes back. I walk over to door, and look through the window. All of a sudden, glass explodes from the back of the house. Zombies rush through the hole. I ran all day and night, only stopping to take little breaks. I've been slowly making my way towards the ocean. I know there's malls, so I thought this would be like a safe zone. I guess not.”

Everybody stares at me.

“Sorry.” I mutter.

Bart shakes his head. “So you ran for basically three days straight.” He whistles at the thought.

“I was on the varsity football team.” I reply, a little smirk on my face. I watch as Mikayla takes mental note of this.

“You must be hungry.” Millie questioned.

“Actually not really. I would raid people's homes for food.”

Millie nods, “It's turning night and we need sleep. Especially Mikayla and, uhh.”

“My names Cody.”

“Mikayla and Cody.” Millie walks off into the hallway marked bathrooms. I stare at Mikayla.

“Seriously again with the staring.” She calls to me.

“So, Thomas how did you guys get this place up and running.” I ask.

“It's always been running, but Mikayla here, figured out we only have a few weeks till it runs out and we're done for good.” His accent made it hard for me to understand him. I smirk at Mikayla.

“You're smart. Eh?”

“Shut up, brat.” She stomps out of the room, and into the bathrooms. I watch her disappear. As soon as she does, I get on my hands and knees, and run my hands over the blankets. They remind me of home. Just as I start to doze off, Mikayla kicks me awake. I groan, and roll over.

“Come with me Cody.” Burt says. He starts to walk out of room. I get up and dust myself off. I carefully pick my way over the blankets and bags strewn across the floor. As soon as I make it to the doorway, I have to jog to catch up with Bart. We walk into the food court. One of the chairs squeak as I sit down. Bart comes back with a hard bagel. He sits and drops it on the table.

“This is the food court,” He moves his arms around semicircle. “Everybody has assigned rations. Once you run out, you're out.”

I nod. I pick up the bagel and eat it.

“Boy, are listening to me?” I snap out of my trance. Bart was staring at me with a weird look on his face. I realized half a bagel was sticking out of my mouth. I quickly spit it on the napkin and smile, embarrassed.

“This is important if you wan-” He collapses to the floor.

“Bart... Are you okay?” I ask as I lean over the table. I'm laying on top of the table when Bart suddenly stands up and turns around. In my haste I manage to fall off of the table. Bart starts to shake. His hands curl into fists and he starts to hit his head. My eyes go wide as he picks the flesh off of the bruises he gave himself. Bart moves a battered arm up to where his eyes are. A squishing sound comes from him. Blood and green ooze mix together and fall on the floor. With a flick of his wrist a sphere falls to the ground. It rolls towards me. I screech as the eye looks at me. I back up and knock into a table.

“BOYY! Come here.” Bart beckens.

“Nope, I'm good.” I yell back.

“Get over here!” Bart screams. He turns around slowly. His eye socket drips green ooze and blood. Cuts bleed all over his arms. He charges at me.

I squeal, and throw the table off of me. I hurry to get up, but I'm too slow. Bart grabs me by the throat, and lifts me up so I'm eye level with him. He smiles. Yellow teeth reflect nothing but death.

“Hello boy. My eye watches you, it always watches you.” he laughs a terrible laugh.

“I-I-” Is all I can manage to get out before he tightens his grip on my throat.

“No. No talk for you.” Bart says. He lifts me up higher and tosses me over his shoulder. Bart grabs my leg and bites me. He tugs at the flesh. I scream.

“No, AHHH!” He tugs harder till a chunk rips off. My red blood mixes with his green ooze. The pain is crazy. Bart drops me on the floor. I suck in buckets full of air.

My voice comes out in rasps, “What the crap Bart?” He can't hear me over the sounds of him chewing. I use that to my advantage. I crawl over to where a kitchen is. I use a counter top to pull myself up. I cringe in pain as I put weight on my bad leg. A pool of blood has already started to form where I stand. I raid the drawer till I find a sharp kitchen knife. *You can do this.* I tell myself. I straighten up and run. It starts as a normal sprint, than it gets worse. Soon I'm just

limping towards Bart, thinking of nothing but the blood trail I'm leaving. I hide the knife in my sleeve. Bart's turned around again. I sneak up behind him, careful of every limping step I take. As fast as I can be, I stab him the back of the skull. Bart turns to ashes in seconds. I quickly drop the knife. I limp over to one of the tables not touched by blood.

A few seconds later everyone comes down the stairs.

Mikayla was the first to speak, "Holy... Cody! Hey, are you ok?"

It takes me a minute to realize she's kneeling in front of me.

"No sir, no. I can't...leg." I watch as Mikayla and Millie bend down and cradle my leg in their arms.

"Cody, who did this?" Millie asks, concern written all over her face.

"Bart." I start to laugh.

"Where is he?" I shrug with tears running down my face.

"I shouldn't have let him outside last night." Millie mutters.

"You what?" Mikayla yells.

"I wouldn't know if he got bitten."

"So Cody gets to find out. That's great," Mikayla moves my leg so she can show Millie the wound. Stars danced in my vision.

"Pretty stars." I say to know one. Millie and Mikayla pick me up and move me onto the floor.

"Thomas get you butt over here now." Millie yells. He walks over and asks what to do. Millie tells him to hold my arms, so they can carry me to base. Millie and Mikayla are careful with my legs while Thomas is holding my arms in a death grip.

"This might hurt." She whispers to me. The world goes dark.

I wake up to the smells of perfume.

"He's awake." Someone says. I sit up. The pains gone. I look down and see my leg bandaged heavily.

"We are so glad you're awake, but we have good and bad news." Millie says.

"Good news first please." I tell her.

Millie takes in a big breath. "The good news is we have a plan to get out of here. The bad news is you might be dead by the time we do get out of here."

I stare at her in shock. "Excuse me?" Mikayla just nods along with Millie. "Why would I be dead by then?"

"Well, we plan to leave the mall in one hour. We're gonna get the golf cart in the garage, and drive it till we get to the hidden boat we have at the ocean. We are going to an island called Paradise Cove. You know about it right?" I nod.

"Well it's closed at this time of year, so no one, should be on that island."

"Okay, why do you think I'm going to die? You didn't explain that." I tell her.

"It takes twenty-four hours to have the full zombie mutation. You already saw that. People turn into zombies by being bitten," She gestures to my leg, "It looks like you've already been bitten."

Mikayla speaks up, "If it makes you feel better we'll be praying for you to be immune." I just look at the ground.

"Better get moving. You need to be packed in an hour." Thomas says.

"So, what are we doing?" I ask out loud.

Millie says, "We're going to sprint down to the garage and get into the golf cart. Cody you're gonna drive. Mikayla's going to be lookout, while Thomas and I keep the zombies off our trail."

Got it?" We all nod.

"Okay let's go!" We run to the garage.

I jump into the driver's side of the cart. Mikayla next to me. Millie and Thomas throw themselves into the back. They shake perfume bottles.

"Hit the gas, Cody. Now!" Millie yells.

I slam my foot down onto the gas. The cart jerks forward. Thomas presses the garage door opener. Zombies of all kinds file into the garage. Millie throws one of the perfume bottles on the ground. The smell of gas and roses fill the area. *BOOM!* More zombies walk into the garage.

"GO FASTER CODY!" Mikayla screams from the seat beside me.

"Got it." I tell her.

I push on the gas even harder. Thomas quickly shuts the door behind us.

"Zombie to your left!" Mikayla warns me. I quickly turn the wheel to the right

"Now there's a building!" Mikayla yells, as she clutches my arm.

"Mikayla, get off or—" Another explosion lights up our surroundings.

"Mikayla more perfume, please." Millie cries.. Mikayla ducks under the dashboard and pulls out a box of perfume bottles. The liquid inside is almost toxic.

"This should do it." Mikayla clarifies. She shakes one up, and tosses it a few yards away from the golf cart. It pushes us to go faster.. The dock is only a few feet away. I quickly stomp on the break. Mikayla and I fall forward.

"Everybody run!" I demand. Millie tosses us a perfume bottle and we take off. I hold the perfume bottle like a football. I imagine I'm back on the field. I'm tackled. In reality I trip over my own feet and tumble down a hill. I'm still holding the bottle. Millie, Mikayla, and Thomas are urging me on. I sprint to the boat. Millie already has it started.

"Are you sure this will work?" I ask her, wry.

"Yes, now get in." She snaps at me. I throw my perfume towards the oncoming zombies. I gingerly step on the boat. Without waiting for me to sit, Millie switches gears and we zoom off.

"Why is the world so dizzy?" I mutter.

"Oh no. Cody?" Thomas whispers.

My eyes go wide and I collapse. Whispers start. Quite than louder. They yell at me to wake up and attack. I stand up so suddenly. My fists curl and I bang them against my head. *They need to be stopped.*

"What about that pretty one over there?" The voices say. *"She looks yummy. Must have it!"* They scream inside my head. I start to tear at my arms. It feels like millions of ants are inside of me. Green ooze falls from my temple and arms. Bits of blood drip too.

"Cody! No Cody! Why?" I hear Mikayla cry.

The voices win.

"Pretty one. The one with the dark hair. You!" I call out to Mikayla, "You look yummy. You're prettiness might earn you queen. Yes, queen!" I ramble on.

"This is nonsense. Cody fight it!" Millie yells at me.

"Tsk, ts." In one fluid motion I snap her neck.

"You're a zombie, and we do not team with zombies!" Thomas charges at me. I snap his neck too. Blood drips from my hand and I lick it. With each kill, I watch my skin turn green. Mikayla stands in the farthest corner away from me. I cock my head and walk towards her. She shakes, but won't say anything.

I kill her. The last living human, dead. I sit on the boat, and watch the island come into view.

Jaeyoung Martin

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Robin Dotson

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

The Pinnacle

A lizard darted out the thick foliage, snatching up an insect and disappearing once again into the forest. Some say they are descendants of the mighty dragon Ouroboros. I sigh, watching the scene from a hundred meters away. If only a being that powerful existed in this time. A being that could help relieve my loneliness.

I sit on a throne at the apex of the world. There no longer exists anyone who can match my power. Reaching this point was the only goal I spent my life to pursue, but that is the problem with being unrivaled. I have all this strength but no reason to use it, and it feels like my whole life has been wasted.

My thoughts wander to how I came to be here, the event that started my journey: the night my sister was taken from me. I held her cold, small, corpse in my arms. With trembling fingers, I brushed her hair off her face. I felt so weak, so powerless.

I could do nothing to protect her.

And so with tears streaming down my face, I made a silent vow. A vow to become the strongest, so nothing could ever be taken from me again. My sister and I were orphans, street-trash no one would even spare a glance at. With no money for a funeral, I could only send her away as ashes scattered in the wind.

On that cold night, a sister was murdered and a brother made a decision that would later shake the world.

I joined the army at the age of 12: right before my country went to war with a neighboring land. I was sent to the frontlines as cannon fodder. I was a child in a war for men. My superiors just wanted me to block an attack before I died.

Being at the frontlines, I was in the middle of the clash between tens of thousands of people. Massive fireballs flew over my head and crashed in the sea of enemy soldiers in front of me. Horrific screams echoed throughout the battlefield as men were burned alive.

The clouds parted and a massive bolt of lightning descended from the heavens, zig-zagging through the air until cracking down on a group of a hundred soldiers next to me. The hairs on my arm stood straight up and my back was covered in cold sweat.

That had been the first time I had seen a man obliterated.

Amidst the shocking brutality of war, I was given a glimpse of my future if I continued along the path towards power. But even as a 12 year old, my will was firm, my resolve, unbreakable. I did not run away at the face of death. I welcomed it with open arms.

It was in that life or death situation that I awakened my talent for the sword. I discovered my weapon felt like an attachment of my body, and even the most casual swing would take an enemy's life. With no training and no experience, I defied all expectations and survived the first battle.

Throughout the course of nine years, I tempered my skills in the flames of battle. I quickly rose through the ranks and even became a General. I was given the nickname "Crimson Cyclone", by

the way I tore across the battlefield, sending body parts flying around me and rivers of blood flowing behind me. Soldier or sorcerer. Commoner or noble. It made no difference. My sword had no eyes, and slaughtered indiscriminately.

After nine glorious years, the war came to a conclusion. I was announced as an integral part of my country's victory. I left for the war as an orphan and came back a hero. I was given an estate in the capital. The country was in jubilation. We had fought nine years and finally acquired a time of peace. But while everyone else was celebrating, I only felt discomfort. I felt as though the time of peace was empty. One night, while looking at the ashes drift in my fireplace, I suddenly remembered.

Nine years ago, I vowed to become the strongest in the world. How could I be content with the amount of power I had?

And so with firm resolve, I let go of my sword and left the kingdom, deciding to travel the land with only the aid of magic. I traveled another nine years, gaining insights into the mysterious art. I discovered ancient magic among the ruins of lost civilizations, learned dark magic from the shades of the Forlorn Tundras, and received guidance from the High Elves in the Northern Forest. After feeling that the time was right, I once again picked up the sword and traveled to the Infernal Mountain for my final test: to kill the dragon Azazel. It took me an hour to slay the King of Beasts, only because its orichalcum scales were reinforced with dragon magic and were nearly impenetrable.

Nearly.

After killing the self-proclaimed strongest being in the world, I turned my attention towards the reason for my journey. I began hunting down the man who killed my sister that night. I didn't know how he would still be alive, but I just knew. And after months of searching, I tracked him down to a small, wooden cabin in the center of the accursed Western Forest. I noticed that even though the Western Forest was regarded as one of the most dangerous areas on the planet, no monster dared to take a single step within a ten mile radius of the cabin. This area was a paradise in the midst of hell.

As I approached the cabin, a man around his 50's walked out, holding onto a beautiful orichalcum staff covered in intricate glowing inscriptions. I took a deep breath and observed the man who had murdered my sister so long ago. A mixture of emotions were surging throughout my body.

Anger.

Confusion.

Anticipation.

I raised my sword and pointed it at him. "18 years ago, you murdered my sister in cold blood. She, who was only eight years old at the time."

I fought back the tears welling behind my eyes.

"Someone who had committed no sins and was simply trying to survive in a harsh world without parents, had her pure, innocent, life snuffed out by you. Why!?"

The man looked at me with glowing eyes, filled with excitement. "For this very day."

He leaped towards me with indomitable force, the aura of a divine phoenix radiating from his body.

That battle was the most difficult I had ever faced. He maneuvered his staff with such versatility I had never seen before. I had mastered an immeasurable plethora of sword styles, but he countered all of them flawlessly. In addition to the adaptability of his technique was the force behind each swing. A staff has no blade and is a weapon used to simply decimate opponents with

brute strength. We were fighting in the Western Forest, surrounded by enormous trees that had grown hundreds of meters tall over the course of thousands of years, surviving the invincible power of time. And yet, they were reduced to mere splinters with only one swing from his tyrannical staff.

Our fight rampaged through the entire Western Forest, leaving only death and destruction in its wake. After nine days of dancing between the border of life and death, I managed to gain the upperhand and quickly took control. As my sword infused with chaotic shade magic hovered only centimeters away from his chest, I prepared to counter his final attack, some spell that would sacrifice his life to kill his opponent. But no, he did no such thing. All he did was smile, and say “thank you”.

I plunged my sword into his chest with the weight of 18 years of anger and frustration, piercing his heart and finally ending the life of the man who murdered my sister. The glimmer of life faded from his eyes yet on his face was the most blissful smile I had ever seen.

I was confused.

And now here I sit atop a throne at the pinnacle of the world, without a single creature near my level. It is so very lonely. Only after reaching the apex, have I realized how foolish I was. My whole life was driven by the childish aspirations of a little boy.

I gained this power so nothing would ever be taken from me again, but only after reaching this point have I realized I have nothing to be taken. I focused every fiber in my being to getting here, abandoning friends, love, and wealth for power. And with no opponents left to fight, no reason to fully present the strength I gained through countless years of blood, sweat, and tears, I can only begin to think that my life has been wasted.

Depressed over the prospects of my future, I spent a few years in isolation until deciding to travel back to the capital of the country I was born in. I walked through the streets of the city and eventually ended up at the estate I was gifted after helping win the war. It had been turned into a museum for the war after my disappearance. I looked at a golden statue of my younger self encased in glass. A wistful expression appeared on my face.

‘Sister, are you proud of how far I’ve come? I avenged the man who murdered you, am regarded as a hero by an entire nation, and have reached the pinnacle of power. If only you were here to see it in person...’

Those few years in isolation had allowed me to understand why he had killed my sister, and smiled as I took his life. He had wanted me to kill him. He had seen the talent I had within me, and took the necessary action to set me along my journey for power.

I suddenly jerked my head up. Something woke me out of my rumination. There was a young brother and sister walking through the museum, laughing and holding their little hands together. My eyes glowed as I looked at the little boy.

Revenge is the greatest motivator. The greatest inhibitor of a thirst for power.

I looked at a young brother and sister walk past me and leave the museum

Yes. He has potential.

Sophia Marusic

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Missy Simonds

Category: Poetry

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.

Colby Matthys

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

Just Eighteen

Right out of high school
Camo is a far cry from the football jersey he put on those cool Friday nights
The choice was tough but a family legacy was more important than college
But nothing
Not even a family legacy is more important than his duty to his country
The family he leaves behind
Is quickly replaced
With a bond of brothers in arms
A team
A unit
Reassurance from home
To some it may be just a bunch of ink splattered on a page
But to him
The words of his father
“I may not have told you son, you make me proud”
That's all he ever wanted was to make his family proud
To make his country proud
To have the courage to run toward the screams of danger
To some it may be just a piece of colored cloth that flows in the autumn winds upon a tall silver
pole
But to him and his brothers it was more than that
For a Marine it was a symbol of duty and freedom
For Uncle Sam
For The United States of America
His home

Ida May

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Central High School, Cape Girardeau, MO

Educator: Jennifer Weiss

Category: Poetry

Pattern

0 —
1 i
1 can
2 only see
3 your great clenched
5 Fist and you the same
8 for me; nothing ever seems to appear out
13 of the mist that blindfolds us, rising from the whispering swamp
beneath us,
21 except disembodied, distant bodies and the ever-present, glaring
fists that threaten, shaking and raging, to pummel the soft marsh
beneath the
34 Other one because it's always the other one when we're separated
like this, groping for some sign of egress out of the incensed fog
of malevolent incense that curls and rams its calloused fists
55 up our noses so that we can no longer breathe and no longer see
anything but those threatening, levitating fists still shaking in
front of our faces and tumbling closer and closer in our self-made
vicious pattern that spirals out even as we can only look in and
become fearful of the pattern we're creating.
34 Unless at some point, our huge fists touch just barely—if only barely—
and not even the mist of the swamp can force our eyes to lie because
we can finally feel an open
21 Palm instead of those fists that had lurked in the shadows but cannot
exist anymore like the fog that can't exist
13 in sunlight because we now understand what it was like on the other
8 side of the swamp and now know i
5 can see your great, story-lined
3 Face and you
2 the same
1 for
1 me
0 .

Megan McFall

Age: Unknown, Grade: 9

School Name: Park Hill South High School, Riverside, MO

Educator: Idean Bindel

Category: Humor

So Close!

“I can’t believe you actually fell,” my younger friend chuckles as I pull myself up to my trembling feet.

“Oh, shush,” I scoff as manage to balance upon my skates again. “It’s not like I fell more than you! I mean--seriously--you’ve fallen seven times from my count.”

“Well, it was funnier when you did,” she retorts while crossing her arms across her chest. “Besides,” she huffs, causing a small cloud of breath to erupt into the freezing air, “it’s not like I’ve fallen twice in a row.”

“What?” My voice lets a small squeak escape my winter-chapped lips. “What do you mean I fell twice!” I feel my face beginning to burn, knowing a rosy shade of pink is softly dusting its way across my cheeks and nose.

“That’s right, and that means I’ve won this little competition,” my friend's curly-haired sister interrupts while skating to us, before slowing to a halt.

The crisp air swirls its way past my friends and I as we walk on the sidewalk towards the skating rink. The hot cocoa I had previously drank before is left, stained on my tongue, giving me a warm feeling even though frosty air was settling around me. Pastel shades of pink, orange, and scarlet stretch across the sky, giving any clouds a creamy glow. Deeply, I inhale, breathing in the smell of the sweet air. The sun begins to sink below buildings, causing shadows to grow as swiftly as my anxiety.

For as far as my memory lasts I can only remember skating once, and when I did so I was deathly terrified that I would hit the cold ice and break a bone. So the whole time I would cling to the wall and not let go. But this time, I plan not to do that. I refuse to be the bum that doesn’t do anything the entire time. *I have to think of something to make me at least try to skate on my own.*

“So...” I begin while watching my steamy breath twirl its way through the cool air, “I bet I won’t fall down while skating.” Both my friends quickly cast shocked expressions at me.

“My friend,” the younger sister awkwardly begins, “umm... didn’t you say that you’ve never learned to skate before?”

“Yeah, doesn’t that sound a little too hard for you? I mean, you’re obviously gonna have to fall after some point, so wouldn’t you want to make it less embarrassing when you do?” The curly-hair girl chimes in with her iconic, snarky tone.

“Oh, please, I’m a quick learner, and both of you know it. Besides, I want to challenge myself. So what do you guys say?” I offer my two amigos.

Hesitantly, both sisters exchange glances and share slight nods, showing their approval.

Game on!

“Come on, Sweetie. You can do it,” my preschool teacher encourages. Terrified, I still keep

my death grip on the wall.

“I can’t!” I whine as I feel my legs start to slowly move in opposite directions, causing me to me to slightly drop towards the ice below. Using my arms I pull myself up so I can once again place my legs beneath me.

“Sweetie, the other kids are at least trying to get off of the wall.” I look up and watch as kids my age, and even younger, are shuffling their way past me and the teacher. I glance down at the ice below, imagining my soft skin hitting the hard surface of the ice, causing me to put a tighter on the grip on the wall.

“I am not letting go of this wall!” I sob, “I can’t even stand in one place on the ice, I’ll just fall. So what’s the point in trying this anymore? It’s all just pointless. I don’t want to ice skate anymore. Not ever again!”

“Hey, look she’s scared,” chuckles the younger girl while nudging at her sister. Quickly, The older sister twirls around to look at me and lets out a small giggle as she notices I am standing just before the ice starts. Courageous and bold, I make my decision to not let them get the best of me. *Just because I haven’t skated on my own before doesn’t mean that I can’t do it!* With sweaty palms, I step on to the ice. *Okay, this isn’t so bad.* I think to myself while remaining in one spot. Suddenly, I feel the urge not to move at all, even when oncoming skaters are trying to push by. I am a statue, my arms stuck bent away from me while my legs are stiff. It would take all of my energy to lift just one finger. *Well this experience is going to go by slowly.*

Throughout the time, I would slip, and lose my balance, but I would never fall due to me grabbing the side wall, something I had quickly become acquainted with. But from what I have learned, even the best of friends can get separated.

Eventually I decide it’s time so I begin to leave the safety of the wall and take a risk because of the consistent teasing I have been receiving from younger girl.

“Hey, friend, watch this!” I take in a deep breath as I push myself off of the wall. This time, instead of freezing, I keep moving. My movement isn’t graceful, big swoops like the average person, they are just small baby steps. Just enough to keep me moving on. I keep my feet in a steady rhythm, allowing me to glide wherever I want to go.

Throughout my time, I eventually begin to skate faster. In the rink, I watch as younger girl is skating with a quick pace just beyond me. *I can catch up to her to prove her wrong.* I look down and start to quicken my pace. I look up and see that she is a lot closer to me than she was before. Gaining confidence, I make the final few strides forward until I find myself right behind her.

“So you thought I couldn’t do this, and here I am!” I shout, making it loud and clear. She lets out a short scream and stops skating, causing her to fall back behind me. I let out a giggle at my victory as I turn back to help her to her feet once again. Eventually the younger sister tells the older one to check her phone and informs me we only have around ten minutes left. *This is it! I finally made it; I’m not gonna fall!*

Happily, I continue my skating, but then abruptly, I see it. Just feet in front of me is a pothole I know I can’t do anything about. I know I am doomed. Sure enough, once my skate makes contact, my feet slip out from under me and I find myself completely surrounded by air.

Thud! It’s all over.

Noga Melnick

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

A True Happily Ever After Story

I can't stop thinking about our trip to Asheville. Our time together glows in my memory and I miss you deeply now that you've returned to Israel. Time seems to have slowed down since you left. The hours drag on, but not a day passes that I do not think of you. I'm back at Princeton for the fall semester and my classes are stimulating. Organic Chemistry, in particular, is a challenging course that I nevertheless enjoy immensely. . .

They met in Israel one summer in high school, when Dan came as part of the USY Pilgrimage program. At the time, she favored John and Dan was dating Debby. They were not even friends.

When the summer came to a close, Dan made an effort to keep in touch with the other Pilgrimage kids. He drove up to Boston for Debby's homecoming dance and even sent letters to some of the Israelis who participated in the program. Soon Orit and Dan became pen pals.

Dan and Orit did not write frequently, but their correspondence was consistent enough that years later, when Dan took a year off during college to study in an Israeli yeshiva, Orit was one of his contacts.

Orit's family hosted Dan several times during his gap year, and Dan came to know the other siblings: Nitzan was always twirling a basketball on his fingers; Amichai could talk for hours about the places he had visited and the places he had yet to see; and of course, there was Tamar, the eldest of the four, whom Dan had also met on Pilgrimage several years before.

Dear Daniel,

What a joy to hear from you. I also cherish the time we spent together this summer. You must thank your parents again for me; they were so warm and welcoming when they hosted me at your family's lake house. Still, our road trip together was the highlight of my time in America. I didn't realize how much I'd miss your company upon returning home, but there's no mistaking the longing. I miss our talks, even as my life carries me onward. Now that I've finished my army service, I am studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. . .

One night during his year in Israel, Dan invited Orit to a philharmonics concert. She, however, could not make it and suggested that he take her sister instead. Dan hardly knew Tamar, and the only thing he could recall from their Pilgrimage days was that she had a funny hairstyle back then. Nevertheless, Dan agreed. And so it happened that Dan stood waiting, and waiting, and waiting, until finally Tamar showed up wearing the cutest little hat, having arrived straight from the army.

The following summer, Tamar was released from the army and decided to apply for shlichut to America. She was accepted and sent to Camp Tamarac in Wisconsin, where she worked as a counselor and taught about Israel. When the camp finished session, Tamar embraced the opportunity to visit her American friends before returning home. One of the people on her list was Dan.

Dan's family welcomed Tamar into their home with open arms. The days passed pleasantly, with splashes in the lake and picnics in the sun. Though Tamar was content to spend the whole visit at the lake house, Dan thought she would appreciate the chance to see more of America during her short time in the country. What he did not anticipate was falling in love.

Dan and Tamar embarked on several day-trips to Ash Lawn, Monticello, Cherokee, and the Luray Caverns. The many hours on the road provided ample time for conversation; they talked about all sorts of things, delving deep and discussing their beliefs. They found a common language, discovering that they shared many of the same values and ideas. When they returned home one night after a Shakespeare show, Dan and Tamar shared their first kiss.

The three-day trip to Asheville happened shortly thereafter. The first night at the hotel, the pair was asked if they wanted one bed or two, and before Dan could struggle through a stuttering response, Tamar cut in with an impulsive "one" before walking off. They spent the night hugging and kissing and talking. Neither was ready for anything more.

My Dearest Tamar,

It's so good to hear that the family is well and that you're enjoying your classes at the Hebrew University. Your work touring on the side sounds fantastic, much more exciting than anything here. Life at Princeton proceeds as usual. I'm excelling in my studies, though to be honest, it is sometimes hard for me to focus on the material; thoughts of you flood my mind in the most unexpected moments and I invariably stop working to compose myself. My feelings for you are real and true and as strong as ever. Still, I think we should continue with our lives, continue dating other people. So many miles stretch between us, only God knows if anything will come of this. . .

When the summer ended and Tamar returned to Israel, she and Dan moved on with their normal lives, but they did not forget each other. Every day, Tamar would run down four flights of stairs to the mailboxes in the apartment complex and eagerly flip through the envelopes, hoping to find a letter from Dan. And sometimes, she would stay up until midnight, Israel time, so that Dan could call the landline when he finished his classes.

Even as her pile of letters grew higher, Tamar began dating her high school boyfriend again. Elli was sweet, if a bit insecure at times, and he was very attached to Tamar. Tamar cared for Elli, but when he suggested marriage, she declined. Later he proposed again, and Tamar once more turned him away, breaking his heart.

In the end, Tamar chose the least likely man, the man who lived six thousand miles away, the man whose words she knew better than his voice. And she chose the correct man, for their love

continues to prosper as they approach thirty years of marriage, as they watch their four children grow into adults and find love of their own.

*From the depths of my heart,
Daniel*

Bruce Mena-Sierra

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Alta Vista Charter High School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Katherine Laird Kimbrell

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Elbow to Elbow, Knee to Knee, Heart to Heart

As the kettle begins to blow with steam, the whistle similar to a train's, my family yells, "bomba!" so that someone will turn off the stove. Usually, the responsibility falls on me, my mom busily cooking food for my family and herself, always making extra. She hopes to still help her newly independent daughter, who goes to school in the morning and works all night, and can be bad at eating if not reminded of it. My brother, still too young to pour the boiling water into the collection of mugs we've built over the years, sits on the couch doing things like playing with Shadow, the puppy my mom bought him, which she hopes can fill the void in his heart from where his father is missing because he had to go to Mexico after beating me with a cane, My brother knows very little about it, so while that man may not be much of a father to me, but he's everything to him. She also hopes that the puppy can distract him from the fact that everyone at home leaves at the same time to start the day, but she's not back till after 8:00 pm, when we finally have some family time.

Every night, after I've set the weight of the world off to the side for a bit, the norm is "un cafecito y un pan", a coffee with some bread. My mom never drinks her coffee without some bread to compliment it. I never questioned this tradition ingrained into her soul, into her veins, this tradition that she's had since before I was born.

I always hated Mexico. I'm not sure why. Maybe I was jealous that it robbed all of my family, leaving my mom crying every time her brothers packed up and left, content with what they'd accomplished here, heading home to see their parents. Or maybe, it was the people who I went to class with calling me "white boy" because I was born here and not in Mexico. Maybe it was the way the news portrayed it, showing me nothing but corruption and drug lords, not really knowing what it meant, except I knew that drugs were bad and murder was too. Whatever the case, when we traveled to Mexico, I kept an open mind for my mom, who was going to see her parents for the first time in the sixteen years I've been alive.

When we reached her childhood home of Culhuacán, Hidalgo, the mist covered the sight of her childhood home. She had always mentioned the extreme poverty there to me, the need there was for everything. I could hear the chickens clucking while we snuck up to the house to congratulate my grandfather on his 80th birthday, this man who I'd never met but hoped would be every cliché of a grandpa. As I walked through the stone path, my old blue Converse having no grip and nearly falling three times, I began to see this home where my mother was raised, and realized the advantages I take for granted. I sometimes felt like I was poor, not having the newest electronics, always looking for sales, trying to save my mom some money by not asking for much, unless the need was great. I was wrong. I am a king in my home. In this foreign home, cocoa puffs were a rare treat, my cousin never having eaten a bowl, though it was something

common to me. Here, where an old concert banner loaned by my uncle stopped the rain from pouring on the clothes hung on a string. Dryers non existent in this town with less than one hundred people. We reached the door and awoke my grandparents, and for the first time in a long time, I saw my mother cry. As everyone greeted each other for the first time, my grandfather hugged me tightly. I felt more at home than ever before. This man who had only heard my voice, seen pictures of me, held me in his arms and made me realize what I had missed my whole life.

As everything settled, my grandma walked into the kitchen to make some coffee, the coffee beans grown and harvested by my grandfather himself. Everyone crowded into this small kitchen, elbow to elbow, knee to knee, heart to heart. My grandma gave me some coffee, offered me several different types of bread, and I drank this coffee, assuming it would be bad because it wasn't my favorite drink from Starbucks, but I was wrong. I sat there drinking my coffee and eating my bread, everyone doing the same, and I realized that these strangers, these people who I knew nothing about except our shared blood, offered me coffee as if I had been there since I was born. Here, at 3 a.m, the mist still covering this land, we shared stories, learned about each other, cried for one another, and drank our *cafe con un pan*.

So if you're ever in Kansas City, stop by for some coffee. Here in my home, you'll find a mother who works harder than anyone I've ever known, never wanting milk in her coffee, only a spoonful of coffee grounds and two of sugar. You'll find a boy and his dog named Shadow, appropriately named for how close he stays with him. The boy drinks milk, sometimes with a little coffee mixed in, to feel included. If you're lucky, you'll see a girl, trying to be the first person to graduate college in her family, one of my role models. She drinks her coffee like her mother, neither avid fans of milk. And here, you'll find me. While everyone is finishing their activities, I shut my computer, make the coffee, add a spoonful of coffee grounds, two of sugar, and some milk to my coffee--and put them all at the table. There, the bread is first come, first served. As the guest, you're allowed first pick though. Here, you'll find a family who shares their struggles but for one moment in their busy days, take their time to be family and listen to one another, drinking coffee at the same time as our family in Mexico, connected in our traditions, de un *cafecito y un pan*.

Barbara Mercer

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

Seasonal Change

Frigid lay my hollow hands
Ghost of Breath engulfing my body
Shimmering gold, Scarlet accents
Joy, Hope, Love return home
Brutal Cold cannot match the cordial heat within

The rain falls like the teardrops upon my face
Lonesome petrichor miming his scent burning my nose
Tulips which once a soft pink divulge in a darker hue
A funnel cloud shadows behind, stirring the air around me
Changing winds pick up pace, the ruins left upon my space
At a distance hidden behind the rubble stand a single daffodil
You can make it. You must. You will.

Warm rays of sunshine reflect off chests
Wispy Cream Pillows scan from above
Anxious Toes dip in mountains of sands
Turquoise silk waters wash him away
Oh how the world melts the cold of days past
Alast I am free! Alast!

Alone fall a crimson leaf
Soft winds cradle to the ground
Stiff yet driven, I mark my path
Along with him, the memories pass

Barbara Mercer

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

So, This is Missouri

The unwinding pebble road pacifies
Soft hum of cicadas echo behind
Clouds of dust hug as you move along
Panting a portrait of paradise

Pebble turns asphalt
an array of orange and black sketches ahead
one becomes dozens, dozens to hundreds
difference unifies us

So, This is Missouri. A Friday
afternoon; September. Cheeks glisten in frosted air,
a friendly wave of innocence
connected by passion, warmth resides.

The uproar of the crowd rings
Intensity crawls into restless bones.
The world hangs on a moment
worries, fears, anxieties melt with the singe of a buzzer

Moments pass, crowds die down
Mass bodies divide, Hundreds to dozens, dozens to one
tires cycle to another journey of familiarity
soft winds dance upon fingertips, welcoming home.

As I lay upon my bed, thoughts rush
illuminating fields, bright faces, laughter
you feel like dancing, spreading those wings
Oh how sweet the song, amidst the ending

The passing days clump,
Crowds sound, breezes chill
Yet so far am I now. Memories hug from within
Oh, Missouri, Unity makes its imprint.

Kailey Mgrdichian

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Liberty North High School, Liberty, MO

Educator: Sara Turner

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

Apprentice to Mage in Just Ten Days

Be a potion maker's apprentice, they said. It would be fun, they said. It's not so fun on the top of this freezing cold mountain looking for snowroot while my fingers threaten to fall off. A six day round trip journey and for what? Another potion made for another noble? I spot some shining sprouts and climb over to them, slipping on every snowy step. Ice reaches through four layers of undergarments to stiffen my toes. I'm not even making enough money yet. Once my mentor passes on, I'll take her place.

I pluck the snowroot and stuff it into a small pouch on my belt. Only fifteen more plants to go. I longed for the warmer climate of my city, a two day walk from the bottom. I need to find all of them today to be halfway down the mountain by tonight, then on the road home tomorrow morning.

Top of my class in potion making and enchanting, accepted by one of the Royal League Mages, and now I'm here. Alone. Vigorously shivering on a mountainside. It's been a year of apprenticeship and I'm still taking orders. Finally I filled my pouch with enough snowroot to last us three orders and descended the mountain.

Three days passed, each one blissfully warmer than the next. I could finally shed a few layers down to my brightly patterned base wrap. Winter clothes are so dull, I felt like I shed a part of myself when covering my cultural wear with gray coats and pants.

I stop in a small town along the way home to send a message through Firebreath, the dragon postal system recently set up by the Queen. To my parents, assuring more money will come soon and ingredients they can put to good use in the meantime.

Back home in the local witch's tower, I lean against the open door with a sigh. One day this crooked tower would be mine, and I will be filling orders to whomever I granted the right to. The nobles treating me like an errand boy would be sorry. Well, I guess I am an errand boy. But they never said please. The Queen ruled the local wizard to be her own entity, so I can and will refuse some uptight nobles.

I call upstairs to my mentor, but she doesn't respond. I climb higher, expecting her to be too focused on counting the stirs of a brew to hear. I instead find her stuffed into a cauldron in the middle of the room. Dead.

Being a potion maker's apprentice was about to get fun.

I pause in shock and silence for a few beats; then run out onto the street screaming like an absolute madman. My sentences are an incoherent jumble and passerby take notice. I scream for help and only then do they rush to my aid.

"Mage Emerald! She's dead!" I screech between a sob and a cry. Down the street, a group of guards collect and rush towards me. I direct them towards the tower and collapse onto the street.

When I wake up, I'm in the healer's hut. Helen wrings a towel out beside me and replaces the one on my forehead.

“Oh, good,” She pats my face down and presses herbs onto my forehead. “You’re up just in time for tonight’s trial.”

“Trial?” I jolt up and the nurse shushes me back down.

“Yes, dear,” She hums. “You’re being called up as a witness.”

I sigh slightly. “Why put on a trial, though?”

“The guards think it was murder.”

“Who would want to murder a senile old witch?”

“Plenty,” She said, counting up on her fingers. “There’s Benny, who was overcharged for his regular potion, Samire for not getting her mentorship that he wanted and you took, me for not getting my potions on time, hell, even you could be a suspect.”

“Me?” I scoff. “Why would I want to kill her?”

Helen leans toward me. She squints and whispers just so, and my whole body shudders. “Power.”

I open my mouth to say something, but she only stuffs a pouch in my mouth full of healing liquid. I bite down and warmth floats around my mouth and down my throat. It’s so soothing I nearly find myself back asleep.

A guard knocks at the door and enters before permission is given. He’s a burly man, with a great uncombed mustache.

“The trial is beginning.”

Held in a dim room lit by candles and fog, the trial gathered in the Judgement Hall. I could already feel the hazy tendrils in my throat. The fog creates paranoia for the accused and holds a slight truth serum. It also masks the accused from the council of justice so as not to create any form of bias at all.

I move towards the witness hall but my escort pushes me into the fog, slamming the door behind me. I gasp and turn to slam on the door as if it betrayed me.

I could feel the council’s moving box above me; the witnesses were rising from their own closed boxes to speak. They received clear fog; I had thick white fog that seems to strangle me. I take a deep breath to calm myself down. They’re going to believe you’re guilty, Aerin. Calm down.

The first witness speaks. His voice is hazy in my mind; a result of the fog. Still, I recognize his story. Duke Aleno asked for the same heavy order every week, with the same heavy alcohol breath. Last week, I cursed him out when he spat at me. A self-control mistake on my part, but surely that couldn’t be used as evidence that I would kill the Mage!

Another push against me: I visited the dragon post on the way home. The opposer obviously speculates I could have mailed the poison, and my hands squeeze into fists. I burst out, interrupting the argument.

“That’s a load of warts! I sent money to my family!” I cry out, struggling to make out a face against the fog. This is it. The whole trial rests on this claim.

A councilman addresses my outburst. “What town does your family live in?”

“They live on a small farm ten wingbeats north of Yuuther!” I push as much truth as possible into my words. I can feel the councilman nod, and the trial continues. I sigh that my outburst worked in favor of my case.

More testimonies, more evidence stacked against me as time ticked on. Minutes in the fog took hours. Finally, the council called a break to converse over their ruling. The door opened once more and a new guard stood, my own personal bodyguard to show me to my guilter’s

quarters.

My guard for the trial is a lad named Johneth. His figure is intimidating, but his personality is as soft as a rabbit's rear. I exercise my right to remain silent: he does anything but. He jumbles on about his family, his farm, his home, all sorts of domestic crap.

"If you're trying to make me go soft, it's not gonna work," I interrupt him during an especially gratuitous story about his bless'd dog. "I'm not guilty."

"Huh?" He says, pushing off his leaning post with a genuine surprised look on his face. I read him and realize he actually was being sincere. What a sucker. "No, no, that wasn't my intention. I don't think you're guilty, anyways."

"Thank the gods," I sigh, leaning up against the bars. "At least someone is on my side."

"I know it may feel that way," Johneth hums. "But it's not. The council is completely objective and will only rely on the facts of the case. Speaking of, it's probably time for you to get back."

I take a shaky breath. The verdict will decide how the rest of my life will play out. If I am found guilty, it's off to the stocks until my muscles deteriorate too far to stand. Then, I am thrown into a dark cell to finish rotting; if I am found innocent, I will overtake my mentor's place and impact the world with my ideas.

I step into the fog and it clears around me. The council boxes come into view, though the people inside are still shrouded.

"Aerin Zelohn, the council finds you innocent in the murder of the Mage."

Perfect. I got away with it.

What's the average polite wait time after the previous witch's murder to ask for your promotion to Mage? Only two days and I was getting antsy. I got a letter from the Capital, sincere apologies about your mentor, funeral will be held within the week, speech speech speech. Blech. No details about inheritance or my promotion, just all about the poor old witch. She isn't getting any deader. I would know.

My "family" North of Yuuther sent me a letter, confirming they received the money and used it to buy a new batch of "weed killer". Y'know, to kill weeds. Beyond that, it was all acting. My return from the mountain was the happiest I'd been since my apprenticeship began. Let's replay the scene.

First, saying hi to the manure-eating Duke Aleno as I stroll to the tower, snowroot bag in hand. Then, opening the bottom floor windows, pausing inside to search for my assumed alive mentor. Trudge upstairs, spot the dead witch, pause. Long pause. Feign shock and confusion. Vague statement of denial, go.

"Oh no no no nonono," I slurred my words extra loud to reach a passerby on the street who would be and was called in as a witness. Cue the drop to the knees, blood curdling scream to reach the rest on the street. Stumble down the stairs, whip my head wildly around the street, screaming for a guard. Blabber on until someone understands, pass out on the street. Unconsciousness delivered by the tail of a yellorat brew, my own personal potion.

I'd practiced the scene several times on the mountain, where no one could hear. I honestly had looked forward to the trip, sighting my opportunity. If I'm going to be honest, the poison-while-away plan was actually plan B. Plan A was to kill her when I became her student immediately.

I was top of my class, damn it! I shouldn't be filling orders here and there like some common boy. I pass the time experimenting with the old Mage's secret ingredient stash. I'm neck deep in a new brew, literally, when there's a knock at the door. I sigh. I lay sadness thick into my voice,

soaking in a big cauldron.

“Who is it?” I stumble just enough to get the words downstairs.

“It’s Johneth,” calls the voice. I sink lower into the vat and sigh.

“Please leave me,” I call, sniffing if I can manage. “I’m mourning.”

“I just wanted to check on you, Mage, trials can be quite hard on the accused.”

Might as well. He already is calling me Mage, so I grin for a moment before putting a sad mask back on. “Alright, come in. I’m upstairs.” The door creaks open and Johneth tramps up the stairs, spotting me soaking in a vat. He eyes me in confusion. I lie, again. “It’s a vat to ward off bad spirits.”

In honesty, if my brew works, my powers strengthen telepathically. I can manipulate any event in the minds of others. I eye Johneth and send myself for a little test run. I push memories into his mind: how I have always been the Mage and he is my personal bodyguard. He clears his throat and I open my eyes.

“Johneth, how long have we known each other?” I ask, resting my crossed arms on the edge of the cauldron.

“Dear Mage, it’s been about six months since your Ceremony.” He recites.

I grin. My brew works. “Good. This is going to be fun.”

Yasmeen Mir

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Dianne Hirner

Category: Poetry

On Thin Ice

There is no shameless tremble to crown the shining brow.
No red hot mess of fevered hands, grasping, clandestine, in the pregnant night.
Here there is the biting wind, and the blinking lights, the grass creeping up through
the cracked concrete,
The endless stream of churches and billboards,
roadkill and fake hair, beer bottles and windchimes,
used up and empty, by the side of the road.
Oddities of decay, a crumbling shrine to the mighty destroyer,
who once courted the great River styx, and leapt headfirst into its icy depths,
seeking the divine rite of passage, onwards, beyond the dirt, and seed, and fevered
hands, and into the immortal,
but had only managed to be mangled by its current, and drowned within it's depths.
To all of his children,
To the the hum in the night when nothing else dare speak.

Now the flesh has stiffened, the face numbed, the name discarded. The ego, has been
beaten and starved, and the soul now only a whisper, is barely audible above the drone
of the machine, and the howls of the cars careening past, who only just escape the
twisting of metal, and bone, and blistering flame.
Onwards, Onwards.
Nothing now but a whisper, with no anchor, no weight.
The view of the land becomes plain.
And inescapable as it had never been before, was the thinness of the ice, and the
vacuum of the cracks over which we tread,
Onwards.

Ria Mirchandani

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Andy Chen

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

Save Our Souls

I remember when the war began. Man against man. Friend against friend. I remember wailing as the guards wrenched me from my parents' arms and bundled me together with other seven-year olds in the human transporter. It was the year 2157 AD, exactly one hundred and six years since the Devalok made contact with the humans. They came from the Triangulum Galaxy, 2.64 million light years away. Earth was on the brink of a nuclear war when they arrived. Their gifts of technology helped humankind eradicate hunger and disease and gain control over destructive natural forces like earthquakes, floods, droughts, and tornadoes. In return, the aliens sought peace among the factions on earth and the extinction of our weapons of mass destruction. The benevolent Devalok left us to continue in their travels of the universe trusting that we would not repeat our past mistakes. One hundred years of peace and prosperity followed. We used our gifts and resources wisely but never again heard from the Devalok. Memories of that first contact faded into history books, bedtime stories, and monuments etched with the phrase "PEACE Evolves Solo from the Aura of Dusk, HATE Won For None Too." These were words of unknown origin and sometimes attributed to the leaders who had negotiated with the Devalok. It now served as a solemn reminder of how humanity had once nearly destroyed itself but peace had emerged just before the darkness fell.

After that contact, with our new scientific knowledge and longer life spans, we quickly colonized the moon and Mars. As our power grew, so did our arrogance. And perhaps therein began our downfall. The virtues of temperance, wisdom, justice, courage, faith, hope, and charity gave way to the vices of pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. The human colonies on moon and Mars dazzled by the mineral riches of their new planets declared independence from Earth. They sought autonomy and self-governance. Earth's governing council was furious and swore to quell the rebellion with force. Therein began one of the bitterest wars in human history. A war of galactic proportions that dwarfed the World Wars and extracted vengeance in equal measure from the years of peace that preceded it. With each military strike, the misery of the people grew, but the feud deepened, as each side became entrenched in their hatred for the other.

Earth's governing council passed a resolution that all children seven to thirteen years of age would be trained to fight in the war. The leaders were convinced that a young army would be able to fight a prolonged war and, with the right training, be able to make quicker tactical decisions based on instinct. Training involved specializing in weapons and communications technologies, military strategy, and combat. It was to this military training camp that I was being taken in the human transporter, a hover train that traveled 100 times faster than the speed of sound. My sobs caught in my throat as fear gripped me with the realization that I was now by myself. It was a feeling I was unaccustomed to, having been doted upon all my life. I looked around and saw the terrified faces of other girls and boys. The guards who accompanied us looked stern, distant, and cold. There were no windows in the transporter. Its interior was stark white with rows upon rows of white benches. When the last group of children was brought

aboard, the doors swung silently shut and an eerie silence descended upon the transporter, broken only by an occasional sob. I do not remember how long the journey to camp was but it seemed like an eternity.

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“Ailia! Wake up! It's 0500 hours!” I suddenly jerked out of sleep. It was my Residential Hall's floor warden, a young red-haired woman named Jill, who on the first day had shown me to my bed, gone over my daily schedule, and explained the camp's rules to me and the nine other girls who shared the floor with me.

Six years have passed since then. The days are long and tiring. The training center is large and has three primary sections, one for each type of training - technology, strategy, and combat. It is rumored that the center is under the Himalayan Mountains, safe from attacks on the Earth's surface. Each cadet has their own personal schedule. My schedule is as follows:

- 0500: Wake up
- 0530: Breakfast
- 0545: Meeting
- 0615: STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math).
- 0815: Advanced Programming
- 1015: Critical Thinking
- 1200: Lunch
- 1230: Strategic Planning
- 1430: Communication Systems
- 1500: Prepare for Training Drills
- 1600: Training Drills
- 1900: Dinner
- 2015: Combat Simulation
- 2200: Bed

Some days are more hectic than others. The bells help us stay on schedule. On Wednesdays we have 15 minutes after lunch to compose and send a letter to our parents using the Mail Drop. The Mail Drop is a device which transports letters through a series of underground tubes to our parents. This way enemies won't be able to track the signals of electronic messages. This limited communication with our parents informs us of our birthdays and important holidays besides alleviating our homesickness. Today is an important day. I am going to get promoted at a ceremony after dinner. I am one of the few kids who is getting promoted since I am doing well in all my classes. I move through my day's schedule efficiently as it is now very familiar to me. In STEAM we are learning about graph theory so we can efficiently plan attack routes. We are also designing a graviton power generator for our fighter crafts. In Advanced Programming we reverse engineer the automated programs that maintain life support systems in our space stations. In Critical Thinking we crack anagrams. This is my favorite subject since I have always been fascinated by the arrangements of characters in words because my name “Ailia” is a palindrome which can be read backwards or forwards. In Strategic Planning we are put through a battle simulation which tests our leadership skills in a combat situation. In Communication Systems we learn about the *Wow! Signal* which was the first powerful radio signal received from outer space during the twentieth century, spurring human search for extraterrestrial intelligence. This strong signal was observed near the 1420 Megahertz frequency, which coincidentally is the frequency at which hydrogen atoms vibrate. Hydrogen is the most common element in the universe and thus this radio frequency should hold meaning to

any intelligent life in the universe. I am fascinated by this information as radio frequencies have not been used in human communications for over a hundred years in favor of the more efficient laser communication systems.

The rest of the day passed in a blur and soon it was time for the promotion ceremony. I glanced around the room and saw several familiar faces. However, I was puzzled as there were several more people in the room than in previous promotion ceremonies I had attended. Also, the camp's chief officer, Dr. Riley was conducting the ceremony rather than a teacher. "Congratulations cadets," he began. "Due to your outstanding performance in training, your teachers have recommended you for early graduation. You are the most battle-ready candidates we have and will be deployed to the war zone tomorrow. Earth is counting on you to bring this conflict to a swift end. Normally, before deployment we give you a week's time to spend with your families, but the war is at a critical juncture and so family leaves have been suspended. After dismissal, please pack your personal items and get a good night's rest. Your transporter leaves at 0600 hours. You are now officially graduates. Good luck, officers." The murmurs around the room slowly grew into a crescendo. My head was swimming with thoughts. War seemed distant while I was in training, but I would now see it up close including death and destruction. It felt surreal and I was not sure if I was ready.

.....

"Hi," said the dark haired girl sitting next to me in the transporter. "You're Ailia, right? I am Maya." I nodded, recognizing her from the Critical Thinking class. We had worked together on some team activities. Maya talked virtually non-stop all through the journey and I learned she was from Oklahoma, had two older siblings fighting in the war, and liked the music of a 21st century singer named Taylor Swift. I was grateful for the conversation as I had not made many friends at training camp, preferring to keep to myself. Moreover, the intense training schedule left little time for socializing. To my dismay, I learned from Maya, who had heard from her older brothers, that Earth was losing the war. The colonies on the moon and Mars had united their forces and inflicted heavy losses on our squadrons and even struck at our largest cities. More than 50 million people had lost their lives. Earth was now preparing for its final stand which was why even newly trained officers were being pushed into action.

Maya and I had been assigned to Earth Outpost 50, which was in the Asteroid Belt between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. This asteroid base was close enough to Mars and yet relatively safe from attacks due to the asteroid's fast orbit. We were junior communications officers in charge of monitoring enemy transmissions. As our weeks became months, the messages we intercepted and decoded continued to bode grim news for Earth but also heightened our awareness of the steep losses for the colonies. Maya and I became fast friends over these months, even venturing to share our personal views on the war, a luxury which was not afforded to us while we were training, when we were only presented a one-sided view of the war.

"I wish the war would end and the killing would stop," I cried. "There will not be a human race left at the end. Why don't people understand?"

Maya grimaced, "It's just like the time we nearly annihilated ourselves before the Devalok ended the madness. But there seems no turning back this time," she sighed. "Perhaps if the Devalok returned they could bring sense to both sides. But fat chance that will happen. We have not heard from them in 113 years and they did not even leave behind a means for us to communicate with them."

"Wait, maybe we can contact them," I said.

"How?" asked Maya

“They must have left some clue on how to contact them,” I said.

I could not get the thought out of my mind that there had to be a way to contact the Devalok. If nobody had tried to contact them then I would. All I had to do was find a clue. I decided to use my evening breaks to look through all the information I could find on the Devalok and their contact with the humans. I kept coming across the phrase that I had seen so many times in official buildings and monuments. I realized that I hadn't really looked at this phrase closely. “PEACE Evolves Solo from the Aura of Dusk, HATE Won For None Too.” Perhaps this phrase had a deeper meaning but what could that be? It simply was a positive message that peace would win and hate would lose. Weeks passed but my research did not reveal anything useful.

Meanwhile, the messages we were intercepting related to the enemy's plans were becoming harder to decrypt. Their science officers were using advanced cryptography, and Maya and I would spend hours trying to decipher even the shortest messages which seemed garbled to us. “What if they are using cryptographic anagrams?” Maya asked during one of our code breaking sessions. Anagrams? Why hadn't we thought of them before? True to Maya's suspicion, it turned out that the enemy messages were using anagram functions.

That night the wild thought entered my mind that perhaps the phrase from the 21st century was an anagram? Could it be that simple? I wrote it down on my screen writer which helped me move characters and words around while suggesting possible combinations: “PEACE Evolves Solo from the Aura of Dusk, HATE Won For None Too.” I had several questions. Why were the words *peace* and *hate* capitalized? Also, why did some words begin with capital letters and not others? Were they different from the others? I separated out the words that seemed different and was left with two groupings of words.

“Evolves Solo Aura Dusk”

“Won For None Too”

I then tried to unscramble the first phrase. I gasped when it translated to “Save Our Souls Devalok.” Perhaps this was the clue to contact the Devalok! Save Our Souls or S.O.S. was the message used by maritime travelers in the 20th century to signal that they were in trouble.

The second phrase was harder. It did not make sense. It was not an anagram. I kept repeating the phrase in my mind “Won For None Too”, “Won For None Too”. Was it a number? “One Four None Two.” 1402?

Then it hit me. 1402 could be switched around to 1420, the radio frequency which transmitted the *Wow! Signal* in 1977. Had it been the Devalok who had sent that signal? If they had, maybe I could contact them using that frequency. For the next year, with Maya's help, I sent an S.O.S signal on the 1420 MHz frequency. Since radio communications were considered antiquated, neither Earth nor the colonies detected our signal. However, two years later the Devalok arrived. They had gotten my message. Akin to our parents, as parents should do, they punished us. They took away the scientific knowledge they had given us and destroyed our settlements on Mars and the moon. They let disease and natural disasters back into our lives as a natural progression to our evolution. We were back to using the technology of the 21st century. All remnants of the alien technology were destroyed leaving us with only our wits and our ingenuity to fall back upon. The Devalok taught us humans a lesson. They showed us that parental love does not mean taking a child's problems away but helping the child learn to deal with them. We had created our own problems and they punished us, but they did it because they loved us, and that love saved us from destroying ourselves. Humans are a young civilization. We still have a whole lot to learn. We will continue to have our ups and downs, but can only prevail through them by working together rather than against one another.

Bailey Mitchell

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Dianne Hirner

Category: Flash Fiction

Gimme All Your Love

Wiping the blood trickling from his nose, Leo stares down his reflection in the mirror. As each crimson droplet free-falls from his nose and splatters on the floor, he sobers up. With each drop he remembers her long blonde hair. *Drip*. Her straight teeth, white and glowing. *Drip*. The way her deep blue eyes engulfed him. *Drip*. He remembers her enchanting smile as they waltzed in the kitchen after she agreed to give him all her love for eternity. *Drip*. He remembers her yanking his ring off her finger and hurling it across the room. *Drip*. The takeout Chinese food from Kin Lin slipped from her fingers, noodles spilling all over the floor, when she walked in and saw him laying with another woman. *Drip*. Her sun-kissed complexion turned white as snow. *Drip*. Snow. *Drip*.

Slamming his fist against the wall, Leo whips around towards his dresser. He rips his top drawer open. Rummaging his hands through his underwear, he finds the ring. *Drip*. Enraged, he wails and pounds his head against the dresser until he can take no more. He wipes his nose and slowly turns around. *Drip*

He stumbles over to the coffee table and falls to knees before his new lover, a passive means of escape, with a pale complexion, white as snow. With his eyes blurring, forehead bleeding, and his credit card scraping across the table, he carefully sculpts two more lines. *Drip*. A tear falls delicately down his sweaty cheek. He rolls up a two-dollar bill, desperately hoping to escape his biggest mistake. *Drip*. He bends over the coffee table, holding the dollar bill to his nostril. Euphoria lasts a second. The pain will last a lifetime.

Jolting his head up, he smacks the table and cries her name at the top of his lungs. Agonous veins jut out of his neck. Grace, the greatest victim of his self-destruction, tortures his thoughts. Withdrawal from her has nearly killed him. Her touch, her laugh, her smile, her scent, each memory from every aspect of her being inches him closer and closer to death. *Drip*. He wipes his nose, takes his chances and doubles his nightly rendezvous to seven lines.

Drip. Grace stares blankly at the leaking faucet, numb from the month's trials. She sinks so that her mouth is below the water and her breath creates ripples on its surface. *Drip*. She goes over her vows once more before twisting the stopper out from the drain. Forcing herself to stand, she cautiously steps onto the cold tile floor and reaches for a towel. *Drip*.

Grace sluggishly walks over to the mirror and inspects herself. She sees a somber woman, who no longer seems to know how to smile, suffering and without the will to go on. The stranger staring back at her, a distorted reflection of reality, taunts her, forcing falsehood into her brain. *Drip*.

Breaking away from the mirror, Grace plugs in her hair dryer. The woman in the mirror ridicules: *you weren't woman enough for him, that's why he slept with another. He never loved you, just like your mother never did. How could you have fallen in love with the same monster*

your father was? Bastard Grace, never loved by anyone, never to have a place in this world. Her body senses the dryer biting and burning her scalp, but her mind doesn't seem to care enough to move it. Drip.

With eyes streaming silent tears, her mind cranks permanent solutions to her unfortunate existence. Grace shuffles to her closet and pulls out her white gown, silky and magnificent. She carefully pulls it over head. She tenderly picks up her veil and places it atop her head, letting the combs dig into her badly burnt scalp. *Drip.* She collapses to the floor sobbing. She has reached the point of total devastation and she will not wait for her pain to subside. She crawls towards her medicine cabinet. *Drip.*

Chest heaving, and scorching tears blinding her eyes, she scribbles her vows on a piece of paper. "Leo, I fell in love with you the first moment I saw you. You rushed up to me, a stranger jogging in the park, seeking help because your niece had fallen and scraped her knee. You had no idea how to handle little girls, especially crying little girls. I fell for every fiber of your being that afternoon. You make me smile, you make me work, you make me dance, and you taught me how to love and accept myself. Patiently you helped me fix what my parents broke in me. I promise you to be faithful, to stand by your side, to hold you in the night, to cook Grandma's chicken soup when you're sick, and to be there for you. We will waltz through every milestone and every stormy day and we will laugh and bask in the sunshine. And for everyday for the rest of my life I will give you all of my love." *Drip.*

After swallowing a handful of pills, Grace lies down on her bed. Her dress the, color of snow, surrounds her and her blonde hair suddenly seems brighter, her skin clearer, her eyes more lively. She whispers his very words, "I have every intention of spending the rest of my life with you." She closes her eyes and smiles as she listens to her leaking faucet.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Lucas Moore

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Life Being Lived To The Fullest

We all have little secrets that we will never tell anyone, underaged drinking, smoking, eating cake while on a weight loss plan. Then we have the *those* secrets, secrets were you would rather be slowly tortured to death, slower than a rock in molasses, then reveal them, and let's not forget about the "open book" secret, where you think it's a secret yet everyone knows about it. This "secret" revolves around the middle column, you know, the area where no one on the internet listens to.

It was the coldest of months, not just because the weather but because a part of me died inside. Snow falling like a blizzard in slow motion with a backdrop of concealed moon, it was somewhat fitting, in a way. My grandmother lay on the bed, in the hospital's hospice facility, my family knew death was near for her. I don't think my family even remembers what hospital it was in, I for sure don't, but the memory of what happened there, to me, it is unforgettable.

I will never forget that look that she gave me, forcefully utilized her welded-shut eyes to give me a look that laughed, "Do me a favor, if COPD becomes a human, crush it's crotchal area with a sledge hammer."

Even though she knows she will not survive the week, she still had that burning, yet kindling flame, reduced to coals of the once was, yet still giving off light until all fuel is gone. Fortunately, that kind of fuel never fully goes away, it always just... lingers... in the background.

This time was a fragile and glazed moment in my family, because we weren't just losing a family member, we were losing a loved one, someone not afraid to lay an elbow down on anything that threatens her loved ones, someone that had a heart of pure, golden radiance and a soul of diamond, someone who knows death is sharpening the scythe with their name on it but... welcomes it with arms stretched.

I was about to break, with my grandmother's engine running on steam, I finally broke with the dams bursting open, down the gouges that makeup her face, she discreetly whispered what she wanted me to do and to keep it a secret, I promised myself to follow what she said to the latter, with... some minor detours included, I still hear her echoed whisperings of her promise to me.

I don't know how long we stayed there with her, I just know that once we got there it was midday and when we considered leaving, the moon was already nearing the end of its journey through the heavens above. Getting projected out of the hospital by grandpa, my family dreadfully climbed in the cars to drive to our homes.

By the next day, there was a call from grandpa, sounding raspy and heart broken, I found out why.

Because.

Her body was cold and stiff.

With a tiny smirk on her face.

Kaleb Mumma

Age: Unknown, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

The Prank

“Today is the day, Kaleb,” Allen said. I have grown up with Allen, ever since kindergarten we've been best friends. We're in 8th grade now. “I'll give you five bucks right now if you do it,” he explains. For a week now he's been asking me to take all of Mr. Stringers scissors and zip-tie the handles closed.

“Dude, he will know it was me. I'm the only one who does this.” I feel the slightest bit guilty because he's a nice guy. Despite that, at the end of the day, I know i'll do it anyway. I know, I know, what did he do to me? I get it, but apparently five bucks still means something to me. I think about it for another 5 minutes.

It's just morally wrong, he'll have to spend class time trying to get them off, but honestly, he's lucky he is on my good side. For the meaner teachers in my grade like Mr. Klogril... It's not even funny. I wasn't even dared to do anything to him, Allen isn't in my class, I just did it out of spite. One time I got home and photoshopped his head on the painting of “the creation of adam” where god and Adam are reaching out for eachother. In that painting Adam is naked so i put Klogrils head over adams'.

Anyway, I put it on a flashdrive and got to school early and set it as his background and his profile pic on all of his sites. Even his Gmail account.

So that sorta clears that up a little bit. Alrighty, back to the Stringer situation. Al keeps pressuring me to do it, until finally i give in. I grab his five dollar bill and a tube of zip-ties he had for me. I discreetly snatch the box of scissors he keeps on the shelf labeled “supplies”. As I'm tying them all together Allen is keeping watch giving me a quick “hide it!” every time we nearly get compromised. I finish tying and give a quick scan around the room before putting the box back on the shelf. This isn't a rare thing for us, we both pull pranks on our teachers and family.

That day i told him to fill the back of his parents toilet with old coffee so when they flush it, the water comes out brown. He needed an idea for a prank, what was i supposed to do? Let him figure one out? Friends don't leave friends behind.

The rest of the day was ehh so i went home, did my homework, ate, and then went to bed.

The next day Allen and I are in math when i have a brilliant idea: an M-80 in the toilet. It's the perfect prank, it will blow the water out of the bowl and go everywhere! Genius! So me and Allen are planning the date, time, and way were getting the M-80's. “We should hit all 3 toilets at once!” Allen exclaims.

“Good idea!” I retort. On thursday were planning on hitting two toilets and then Allen will jump over and get the third one. Allen has an uncle who has access to a large supply of fireworks. He brought some to my house on tuesday after school. Two days later, it's time to do the deed. We brought scrap hoodies too, so that after the prank is done we can't get caught by identifying our clothes. Were strolling down the hall after 3rd hour math class. We wait until the clear is coast to go in, and do a double-take before walking in all smooth-like.

Allen takes out the three red tubes and they're practically glowing. There they are, the M-80's. He gives me one and takes the other two and we step over into the stall. Allen takes the one farthest away and i take the closest one. I count out loud and light the M-80. I toss it in and jog out of the stall. One, two, POW! POW! The sound of both of our fireworks going off. And then it hit me, literally. The porcelain shards came blasting out of both stalls. Allen stumbled out and our eyes met, as big as golf balls... And that wasn't even the worst part.

The stench came before it did. Sewage and fecal matter spewed out of the broken toilet. We fled the scene almost instantly, before any teachers had the chance to come and check out the scene. We ran for the first few yards before stopping in the main hall to avoid suspicion. We never even hit the third toilet after seeing the effects of the first two. This is a terrible situation, I made allen promise me that he wouldn't tell anyone about what had happened.

We finish out the week extremely paranoid of every teacher that even says my name. I spend the night at his house on saturday, and talk about the incident. He tells me how paranoid he's been feeling too and now i don't feel so alone. Every time the P.A. system sounded the past week, i would have a mini heart attack. Word went around about the situation, some people saying they saw it happen. Some were saying that the sewage flooded out of the bathroom and into the hall. Some saying Klogril witnessed some kids fleeing the scene. But only two people knew exactly what happened, or so we thought

One day during fifth hour, the P.A. system sounded. "Would Kaleb Mumma and Allen Ainsworth come to the office please? Kaleb and Allen to the office, thank you." Allen and I saw each other in the main hall on our way to the office. There was no doubt of what they were calling us for. We found each others eyes and shared a look of despair. We walked in and saw Klogril sitting in a chair next to Mr. Milter, the school principal. Allen and I locked in place when we saw them both. Sweat beaded up on my forehead and my hands were stone cold. He waved us to follow him and we did. Each agonizing step making it seem like forever to get to our destination. I could picture my fate, being charged thousands of dollars and a huge lawsuit suing me for even more. My next couple years in juvie even. We walked down a long corridor and took a left. After miles it felt like... we see many familiar faces in a meeting room and... science olympiad meeting. A wave of relief swept over us both immediately.

We were never caught for doing that, but not a day goes by that i don't think about what i did. While I do regret it, I was so glad we weren't in any huge trouble.

Chase Murphy

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Poetry

Where I'm From

I am from the rickety box stand, waiting for the moment to strike.
From the deer ambling through the woods,
And the stands waiting with patience.
I am from summer camp with photographs covering the walls,
Celebrating everyone's first kill.
I am from the hauntingly quiet woods,
Where the sound of a shotgun sends a spook.
And from the peacefulness that follows a full day of hunting.
From the warm home of grandpas and grandmas,
Where the glowing embers bring comfort and light.
I'm from the lucky blood
And shotgun bruises.
From "eat your veggies"
And "watch out for ivy".
I'm from the chapel where I visit every Sunday
Where I fall on my knees humbly and pray.
I'm from the nightly sweet tea and slow cooker dinners,
From sloppy joes to prized venison gumbo.
I'm from setting the table with grandmother's old china,
Being watched by a deer head or two
As we bow our heads to say grace and dig in.
Where I'm from isn't where I am,
But where I'm from will always be home in my heart.

Chase Murphy

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

The Movie Killer

I hear the sound of thumping on the door behind me I start to panic. The creak from the floor boards sends a chill down my spine. I stand there for a moment in the darkness alone. My friend lay on floor above me, dead. It feels as though his blood is dripping on me from the cracked floor boards. In that moment I feel the breath of a murderer. I let out a blood curling scream as the killer pulls me into everlasting darkness.

I jolt awake sweating. Trying to keep myself calm.

It's only a nightmare I repeatedly say to myself. I get dressed rush down a bowl of Frosted Flakes and hop on my bike to get to school. I arrived and I start to walk into school. I'm about to open the door and the school bus screeches to a stop. That noise always make me cringe. My best friend Max hops off the bus.

"What's up", Max yells from across the parking lot. He is out of breath after dashing across the lot to catch up to me.

"Hey Tim." He says gasping for air he is not the most athletic. "I have to talk to you after school." Max says excitedly.

I roll my eyes. Every time something is this important is when he tries to beat my high score in Pac-man.

After school we met at the flagpole outside of school. (Our normal meeting spot on Fridays.)

"Remember the old theater that we always pass on our way to school?" Max questions.

"Yeah that old run down thing."

"My parents are out of town this weekend do you want to break in and explore the theater?"

"Sure." I said

But, little did I know that weekend was the weekend that I lost everything, and the night I found the theater wasn't abandoned.

The next morning mom said I could spend the night at max's house. At 12:00 pm we agreed to meet at the school and ride to the gas station for snacks and such. We sped back to Max's house a couple blocks away.

"Flashlight, sodas, gummy bears, Doritos, and cellphones." Max said making sure we had everything.

"We need to get going." I exclaimed

Five minutes later we arrive at the theater we reach the door. There was something I never saw before on the door someone had carved a message into it.

If you enter you may never return. Leave before I find you.

"That's not creepy at all." I say sarcastically.

"It's probably just a prank." Max says confidently.

We bust into the theater (which wasn't very hard). As we walk in we see the concession stand. Max jokingly stands behind the counter and says

"Would you like some popcorn?"

I start to laugh but I stop because the popcorn maker started to run. That delicate machine probably hasn't run in years but somewhere out of the blue it started run.

Pop, pop, pop.

Then I fell something I never felt before. It was as if someone was pouring water down my back.

I turn around and say to Max,

“We need to leave immediately!” We start sprinting to the doors. They slam shut with a loud thud.

“They won't open!” I exclaimed.

“We need to run.”

We go to the nearest room and hide amongst the rows of seats. When we get in there I'm horrified the color goes away from my skin. As if my soul was sucked out of my body. I look into the Projector room and I see a silhouette then it disappears. Ten minutes later the silhouette still hasn't returned. Max and I get up and head for the door. We are locked in. The projector starts to buzz and the screen flashes 3...2...1. The screen is dark then out of nowhere Max and I are on the screen. Then like a flash of lighting the images of ourselves lunge at each other. Mouths open like they haven't eaten for centuries and we are their first meal. Max and I plow through the door and run to the second floor we hid in a new theater this one still had popcorn and candy wrappers on the floor. We make sure we leave the door open and we try to catch our breath.

Ten minutes later my nightmare was starting to repeat itself. Max and I tremble in fear there is a man standing in front of us looked to be around thirty or so, he had several missing teeth, with a tub of popcorn in one hand and knife in the other.

“I see you met my little friends” He says I start to run and he lunges at Max and catches him. He holds him up by the throat and turns to me.

“Looks like you made it for the movies!”

He takes his knife it still glistens in the darkness. Max starts to whimper. The tip of the knife is pressed against his skin. He starts to bleed. The killer penetrates the knife through my friend's neck and his head comes clean off. Blood gushing from his body. It forms a lake around him the killer looks at me and smiles. Max's eyes have already rolled into his head. He throws Max's head into his popcorn tub. He starts to come after me I run back down the stair well and frantically swing open another door shut it and stop. Thinking I'm safe but then I hear the sound of thumping on the door behind me I start to panic. The creek from the floor boards sends a chill down my spine. I stand there for a moment in the darkness alone. Max was dead. It feels as though his blood is dripping on me from the cracked floor boards. In that moment I feel the breath of a murderer. I let out a blood curling scream as the killer pulls me into everlasting darkness. With my last thoughts I think. The nightmare was a warning. Then the knife that killed my best friend was pushed clean through my heart.

M N

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Lindsay Zimmerman

Category: Short Story

Over a Cup of Coffee

The soft recorded jazz music plays in the background of the crowded café down on Jefferson Road as the busy bodies of the world relax for one moment in the space time continuum by sitting with others they know, be it friends or acquaintances, and discuss insignificant tales about their lives over a warm beverage on the cool November day. The smell of the dark roast coffee wafts through the air and hangs in the atmosphere in the coffee shop. Dull brown walls with splashes of faded green and blue artwork line the café and add a soothing element to the aura. Sounds of the cash register ding after each order blends with the overlapping conversations that fill the air waves. People file in and out, as if hastening from place to place, without giving another thought to the people around them, completely forgetting the calmness of the previous environment as soon as they exit, the rushed feeling of the city reflecting in their behaviors. Surrounded by noisy groups and couples, a lone man sits with a pale green mug resting on a coaster. His muddy brown eyes constantly glance to his knock-off Rolex on his left wrist, as though impatient, waiting for someone to walk through the door or for something more interesting to occur. He straightens out his faded black blazer while loosening his bright blue tie around his neck that clashes with his burnt orange shirt. While he fidgets, he notices a woman wearing an old baby-yellow sundress and a tan faux-leather jacket walk through the door, and his eyes light up with recognition. He waves her over, but she seemingly ignores him as she walks up to the cashier and places an order. Only then does she walk over to where he is sitting and sits herself opposite him, placing her fake Prada purse beside her chair and shrugging off her jacket. The couple sits in silence, neither one willing to start the conversation, until the waiter brings over the woman's pale blue mug with a tea bag drowning in hot water and the end of the tea bag flung over the rim, placing it on another coaster before returning to his spot behind the counter. As the woman takes her first sip of tea, the man clears his throat, trying to get her attention. He reaches into his jacket pocket and grabs a set of papers as well as a ballpoint pen, probably the most expensive item he owns. He briefly looks over the papers and then slides them towards the woman. While the woman flips through the papers, the man seems to be collecting his thoughts, and he finally voices them when he notices the woman turn to the last page.

“Margret, we've tried so hard. I don't want this, but it seems we have no choice,” the man begins, avoiding eye contact with her and wringing his wrists, “Ever since... well you know, it just hasn't been the same. I think this is the only option we have left. We've drifted apart. We just aren't the same.” The man takes a slow sip of his coffee as he observes Margret's reaction to his announcement, but all she does is continue staring at the papers in front of her. The man glances over at her mug of tea and notices that it is still quite full and is cooling at a rapid rate. He looks back up at Margret and notices that she is now gazing at him with eyes filled with sadness, her indifferent façade falling from her face.

Perhaps meant to reassure her, he reaches across the table and grabs her left hand with his right hand, caressing the skin by moving his thumb in circular motions on the back of her palm. This

motion puts her over the edge, and she lets the tears that were resting on the edge of her mascara-heavy lashes trickle down her foundation covered face. Regret flashes in the man's eyes as he tries to reach across the table and comfort her by wrapping his arms around her, but he fails as the table shudders and almost falls to the ground before the man realizes his mistake, returns to his seat and steadies the table. The woman does not move as she continues to process what the man proposed. They, once again, sit in silence, neither one willing to start the conversation, letting it fizzle into oblivion as the other discussions in the surrounding area of the café fill the void between them.

At last, the woman decides to speak with a trembling voice, "Benjamin, how did this happen? When did you decide this, how, what?" She quakes, trying to get herself together.

His remorseful eyes meet her glistening sea colored ones while he shakes his head a bit before looking past her head, "I just... We aren't happy anymore. After last year, nothing was the same. We both shut one another out, and neither of us was able to help the other. Maybe it was sign, maybe a coincidence, but it made me realize that we aren't happy anymore."

"We don't have to do this because of a simple mistake! Look, I get that we don't talk as much and that we haven't been as open to one another. That doesn't mean that we have to give up! The doctor said it happens often, especially with couples our age," she exclaims, her stage of grief passing fleetingly as anger fills her tone. Benjamin glances around, making sure no one noticed her rather loud outburst, and luckily, nobody pays attention to the couple.

He reaches for the papers and tries to take them back, "Maybe we should discuss this in a more private place. Maybe later at home?"

The woman throws her head back and sarcastically laughs loudly, "You, you think that talking about this in private will make this discussion better? Well, Benjamin, you clearly did not think this through." The café has gone deathly silent and everyone's attention has shifted to the distressed woman and her nervous companion as they sit waiting for the other to make a statement to break the suffocating tension that has quickly filled the café. The rest of the people return to their conversations after a brief three seconds, trying not to disrupt the couple. The woman glares at the man while he attempts to placate her by whispering to her, but nothing works. Her anger rolls off her in waves and even people on another end of the café can feel her rage.

The woman takes a deep breath and exhales shakily, calming her emotions, "You know what, Benjamin? I'll sign the papers. If that's what it takes to make you happy, I'll sign them, but don't think that I wanted to sign these papers. You may say you don't want this, but you came to this decision all on your own. You didn't even discuss this with me. This is all on you, Benjamin. I didn't want this, YOU did." The woman hastily signs the papers with a shaky hand and throws them towards the man. She then gathers her things and rushes out of the café briskly, her tears falling freely and landing on the pavement as she hails a taxi. The man watches her drive away and then shifts his attention to the papers in his hand. He stares at them for a few more minutes before he grabs his wallet from his back pocket and pays for the drinks. As he exits the café, he notices a poster on the walls of the café, a man with an umbrella in the pouring rain. His eyes brim with tears as he quickly shifts his gaze from the painting and leaves the crowded café. Blending into the busy street life outside, he becomes another inconsequential speck of dust floating around in the universe.

Zahva Naeem

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Stolen Safeplace

A small smile flitted across my face, followed by a gasp of surprise. My heart raced and my fingers tapped out a rapid pattern on my leg, eager to find out what would happen next. I flipped the page. My eyes feverishly swiped left and right, left and right until I reached the bottom. Oh, no! How could he have died? You can't have a story without a protagonist! Unbeknownst to myself, a tear of salt dripped down my dejected cheek. My head swam with alternate endings to the story, with the shadow of his death looming over my sagging shoulders like a dark cloud. I cracked the spine of the still new pages shut, my eyes attracted to the happy and light-hearted cover. Wanting nothing more than to find that I had just misread the ending, I wiped the tear off with a sigh. Seven down, zero to go.

I added the narrative to my large pile of "Books Already Read" from the library, and snatched an old favorite of mine from the chipped bookshelf. I quickly climbed onto the bed I called home and threw the covers around me. Before I even had a chance to open the worn covers filled with dusty, yellowed pages inside, I heard the thump, thump, thump-thump of feet as everyone came back inside.

"Hey, you should've come outside and played with us; you're such a nerd," stated my younger brother, simultaneously flinging my door open.

Rolling my eyes, I got up to rebuild the barrier between my world and the world of those who couldn't appreciate the strength of ink on paper.

"Maybe you should try reading sometime," I retorted, "it might do you some good seeing as you've never read a book in your life."

"MOM! ----- said I was stupid! She said I've never read a book and that all I care about are sports and that means she's smarter than me!" exclaimed the snotty nine year old.

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did not!" I finally got a grip on the wooden door and struggled to push the door shut while my brother attempted the opposite.

After a few minutes of perpetual pushing on the wood, I was on my way back to the world that thousands of authors had created for people just like me. Snuggled in a blanket with a steaming mug of hot chocolate and book in my hand, I was tranquil. Content. When I was wrapped up in the words of the authors who would never judge me, in the experiences that I would never experience, and in the words of bold characters able to do what I never could, I would be the happiest I ever was. Inside each cover was a home for the story of new, unique characters and their distinctive story. They invited me into my own little crevice of this world where I could cease to hear the condescending words of those who just didn't understand.

I brought these pathways into my world with me everywhere I went, and everywhere I went, someone had something to say about it. I brought the pathways to parties, to brunches, to the dinner table, and, most often, to my bedroom. Books were my safe place; everyone has one,

that one place or object or state of mind that makes them feel at peace and happy with their life. In our worlds, nobody's opinions mattered but their own.

* * *

I carried the aged book down the creaky panels of wood and let my mother and aunt know that I was in the dining room, not that I had had much of a choice, they'd been calling me for the past thirty minutes. I nestled into my seat at the table and placed the book in front of me and read as much as I could before dinner.

"Come on, now" my uncle chuckled. "What kind of ten-year-old sits and reads at the dinner table?"

Cheeks burning, I placed the book in my lap. He nodded at me and shared a glance with my dad, who had a grateful gleam in his eye. I glanced around the table and recognized the all-too familiar derision on my family members' faces. I took a deep breath and laughed it off. I mean, I already knew it wasn't "normal", no matter how much I wished it was.

I mulled over the topic and came to the thought that they were after all correct. Who in their right mind would be reading instead of playing in the gorgeous, muddy, bug-infested outdoors? Who in their right mind would be reading instead of joining in on taking the backseat during some riveting, repetitive, routine conversation? But it didn't really matter what they thought. All in all, I was used to it; to the lack of understanding that often came packaged in the facial expressions of the very people who swore to accept me for who I am.

By the time I finished my dinner, I was itching to get back to my text. It was laying there, in my lap, like a siren beckoning me to open it and be sucked into the vortex it was. I gave in, and did my very best to hide the covers underneath the chestnut table. Not even having finished a single chapter, I acutely tuned into the raspy whispers of my uncle paired with the commonplace voices of my parents.

"Does she always do this? It's not common, I've never seen a kid like this. My sons are always outside, playing sports not sitting at home with their heads wrapped around a bundle of smelly paper", the owner of this remark was none other than my beloved, accepting uncle.

My dad followed up with an agreement and the additional notion that he'd hardly ever in his twenty something years learned how to wean his daughter off reading obsessively.

Ouch.

I scooped closer to my baby cousin and tucked my hair behind my ear.

"I love her so much, I really do. It's just that sometimes I wonder what it is about her. She gets so far sucked into these books that I can't even seem to reach her. Maybe you can talk to her, she just ignores our comments about it, but since she doesn't see you as much she might be more attentive to your opinions?" My mother phrased this question as a plea, sounding desperate to get her point across.

Blood rushed through my ears, the sea inside my mind rose, and I felt the warm, red splotches that erupted on my neck and collarbone too often. I couldn't fathom how they could even make these kinds of snide remarks knowing I was sitting just ten feet away.

The sea subdued. I took a deep breath. Everything was okay.

I began to read.

"How can you possibly read so much?" retorted my cousin. "My mom probably wishes I read but my brother doesn't like it either". A polite smile stretched the disobeying face beneath it, the face having realized the actual implications of this innocent child's statement.

Sure, he might have wished he could read more, but he said it was weird, weird to read as much as I did. It wasn't cool. It wasn't normal. His incredulous tone even went so far to imply,

in my young mind, that he did not believe reading this much to be normal, but rather weird, abnormal. I prepared to answer him when my attention was again called by my uncle.

“Beta, we’re just trying to help you do what’s best for you. Don’t take it personally, it’s just that sometimes people might be put off by the fact that you look like you’re more interested in books than real people who are actually in front of you!”

The long-dormant sea began to rumble.

I lowered my gaze until it reached the reason for my ridicule, the 400 worn pages that usually provided me with solace and a sense of peacefulness. Sprinting up the steps, I clutched the beloved book to my chest. My face heated and my mind swarming, an inner voice that I had worked so hard to suppress erupted out of the sea.

“Come on, now...you know they’re right,” she said.

“I guess so,” I responded.

“It’s not normal! Nobody finishes six novels a week, they just don’t.”

“I mean...I suppose.”

“Take a hint why don’t ya? They’re just looking out for you!”

“Well, my family would only want what’s best for me.”

“You wouldn’t want to be the weird bookworm in middle school, would you?”

“No, not really.”

“Exactly.”

“But-”

“Enough. No more excuses.”

And then, for the first time in years, I dropped my world and walked away.

* * *

My heart beating levelly I slowly turn the page and reach the so-called climax of the story. Hearing a faint noise somewhat resembling that of a whiny cat outside my bedroom door, I shut the ancient covers and rush downstairs only to find a movie playing on the flatscreen. Groaning, I trudge back up the companionway to my suffocating room and belly flop onto the bed. No matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to be able to block out the noises outside or in my head and refocus on the task at hand. I just want to finish these last few chapters and finally be done with the assignment. Apparently forcing myself to stare at a bundle of lackluster pages wasn’t going to work, so I decided it was time for a break.

My eyes trailed the perimeter of the room slowly, leisurely. A few moments later, my eyes fall on the old, chipped bookshelf in the corner. Taking a few half-hearted steps towards it, I cross my legs, mug in hand.

I felt my lips tugging up wistfully as I grab the age-old spine of a story long forgotten by myself. I run my fingers over the worn cover inscribed with the words that used to flood through my mind and fail to remember completely why I used to read this narrative so often. Following a few moments scrutiny, I notice the fetid odor coming from the pages and then the smudged ink and title. Sensing the lack of purpose in reading the two hundred pages for no other reason than that I was bored, I shut the door to the familiar world I used to travel to so often. Gently placing the aged text back, I grab the haphazardly strewn novel from earlier and force myself to read.

Gracie Neece

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Happy Holidays

Christ·mas

'krism?s/

noun

noun: **Christmas**; plural noun: **Christmases**

1. the annual Christian festival celebrating Christ's birth, held on December 25 in the Western Church. (Dictionary.com,2016.) Complete with seasonal sweaters, hot chocolate, warm fires, dazzling lights, and joy.

Christ·mas (North family definition)

'krism?s/

noun

1. the cause of all the fighting and all the arguing about the holidays. The doors bang, the windows shake, muffled yelling, and silent tears. It's the norm, the usual, it's the regular routine every year.

This is the definition of Christmas since she left Ever since my parents have gotten a divorce the holidays are never the same. The only time that it really affects is around the "holly jolly season". My mind just swallows my ability to control my feelings. The nothingness, the cold, the terrible shiver that run up and down my spine from the frozen tears.

"Good morning sunshine!", these are the words that a dread every Christmas morning. Sounds weird right? Not wanting to hear these words of a loving parent. It's either my mom or dad that say these words, but never both. On this day that everyone loves, I don't want to get out of bed. This is the one day where I feel as if there is a gaping hole in my heart. If it's my mom's year it's only the two of us and that can be a good or a bad thing but I never know how things will go. If it's my dad's year it's going to be my dad, me, my grandmother, and my grandfather.

Every little kid would love to have two or more Christmases but I hated it. I just wanted everyone to be together. I just wanted the arguing to stop. I just wanted to have my parents love each other as much as they loved me. But nothing I'd do could ever change that. It's just one of those things that you can never really get used to. I love my family don't get me wrong but sometime I hate how it is organized or something like that I guess.

"I always try my hardest to make you happy," this is something that my dad always says and I know how much he tries. He is my rock and I couldn't ask for a better dad but it's just hard to talk to him about mom.

“I know it’s hard babe, but it’ll get better,” yup, this is what my mom always says. I love her to death but you could say we don’t have the strongest of relationships. Yet again, it’s hard to talk to her about dad. It’s just awkward talking to someone about their ex spouse that they had a child with. I mean that’s pretty awkward right? Yeah I have it better than most kids whose parents are divorced. Some don’t even ever talk to one of their parents at all. But for me I still see both, but if I’m being honest sometimes the fighting isn’t worth it.

My brother has always been my go-to therapist. He’s one of the only people that I can tell all my secrets to. The one I can trust to not judge me. But he is currently 26,engaged, and he is going back to college. So in reality I hardly see him. All this anger, sorrow, and mixed feeling bottle up inside me and I feel like this is going to be the year I explode. But part of me feel like I’m going to be that one Coke bottle that never get opened because I was dropped. I don’t want to pour all my feelings onto the ones I love. It’s a very difficult feeling to explain but I hope you somewhat understand.

“Merry Christmas!”, I always hear this but it never sounds like the words that left that person’s mouth are genuine. They are those stupid words that sound like they have to be said. Like it’s a new rule, or a new law even. Because if you don’t say it you’re considered a grinch, or a grumpy old dude. No one wants to be a grumpy old dude. So of course I always plaster that big, fake smile on my face and say a cheerful, “Merry Christmas!”, back. I guess I’ve never really felt the “Christmas Magic” in the holidays. It’s the holiday I dread.

My hope for a merry Christmas? That December 26 can come sooner than later.

Megan Negus

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Cameron High School, Cameron, MO

Educator: Tonya O'Boyle

Category: Dramatic Script

Contained

A Short Film

RACHEL- 26. She's feisty, optimistic, smart, reserved, and a little selfish. She fears death.

HARVEY- 27. He's charming, collected, cynical, sarcastic, and blunt. He loves Rachel.

ELIZA- 26. She's bubbly, optimistic, caring, loud, and a bit eccentric. She's Rachel's best friend and a British researcher.

ADAM- 23. He's sweet, funny, innovative, naive, sensitive, and whiny. Today is his first day on the job.

TAYLOR- 30. He's calm, intelligent, serious, hardworking, and easily agitated. He loves his job and takes it very seriously.

Setting

The story is set in a laboratory at the Georgia CDC in the year 2014. A group of pathologists are working together to study and find a cure to the Ebola virus. So far, they haven't been able to succeed.

FADE IN

INT. CDC LABORATORY- NOON

Our researchers at the CDC are working diligently on finding a cure to the horrific Ebola virus. Everyone is wearing orange hazmat suits. TAYLOR runs tests at a corner lab station by himself while HARVEY and AUSTIN chat indistinctly off to the side. RACHEL and ELIZA are taking turns looking at slides under a microscope.

RACHEL

Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.

ELIZA

The most beautiful things are often deadly. Like poison dart frogs or Siberian Chipmunks

RACHEL

Siberian Chipmunks? (Chuckles) What's so deadly about chipmunks? They might steal food out

of your hand, but what else?

ELIZA

Well, Siberian Chipmunks are known to carry Lyme Disease via ticks and fleas, like most rodents in the world.

RACHEL

Oh, I see.

RACHEL looks up from the microscope at HARVEY and AUSTIN. ANGLE IN ON HARVEY, letting out a laugh. The two suddenly make eye contact, and RACHEL turns back to her work. ELIZA notices this, and turns to her friend.

ELIZA

You know Rachel-

RACHEL

Don't even start, Eliza.

ELIZA

You didn't even know what I was gonna say!

RACHEL

I have a general idea, and it's not about Ebola or Siberian Chipmunks

ELIZA

You should-

RACHEL

No! I don't have time for it!

TAYLOR snaps his head over to the girls, a look of annoyance on his face.

TAYLOR

Ladies, now is not the time for girl chat! Especially in this lab!

RACHEL ELIZA

Sorry.

HARVEY

Oh, loosen up, will ya, Taylor?

TAYLOR

Clearly, it seems that I am the only one who is actually exercising protocols that keep us safe and uncontaminated.

AUSTIN

Don't be ridiculous-

TAYLOR

If you'd like to keep your job, Mr. Jameson, then I suggest you do the same.

AUSTIN

(Defeated) Yes sir

TAYLOR turns back to his work. ANGLE IN ON HARVEY and AUSTIN.

HARVEY

Don't take it personally. He takes his work too seriously and it's your first day.

AUSTIN

I guess.

HARVEY takes a glance at RACHEL and ELIZA. ANGLE IN ON RACHEL, looking through the microscope. TIGHTEN ON her face, concentrating on the slides.

HARVEY

(Smiles)

AUSTIN

How long has that been going on?

HARVEY

How long has what been going on?

AUSTIN

You and that girl.

HARVEY

Who, Rachel?

AUSTIN

(Nods) Yeah. I may be new around here, but I can tell you like her.

HARVEY

I do not-

All of a sudden, buzzers start ringing. The group looks around and stops what they are doing. ANGLE IN ON TAYLOR, who takes charge.

TAYLOR

Everyone get out of here! To the decontamination chambers!

AUSTIN

What's going on?

TAYLOR

It's not safe here! We need to get out of here!

HARVEY

You mean you spilled something?!

TAYLOR

I didn't spill anything-

ELIZA

I'm sure there's an explanation.

RACHEL

We can debate about this later! C'mon!

All five of the researchers hurry towards the exit, where awaiting them are the decontamination chambers. ELIZA goes in first, and she is sprayed down. She quickly takes off her hazmat suit and exits. AUSTIN follows after her.

TAYLOR

Hurry up! We have about a minute until system protocols lock the doors! Go, go, go!

AUSTIN exits and then TAYLOR enters the chambers. ANGLE IN ON RACHEL'S face, contorted into fear. HARVEY stands in front of her.

HARVEY

(to RACHEL) You're next, okay?

RACHEL

(nods her head, but remains quiet)

A computerized voice talks over the speakers.

COMPUTER VOICE

Twenty seconds until Protocol Lockdown.

RACHEL

There isn't much time!

HARVEY

I know.

RACHEL

(Beat) Get in here!

RACHEL pulls HARVEY into the chamber with her, and he doesn't argue. The decontamination

cell is barely big enough for the two of them as they are sprayed down.

COMPUTER VOICE

Ten seconds.

TAYLOR

C'mon!

ELIZA

Hurry, Rachel!

COMPUTER VOICE

Eight seconds

The two scramble to take off their hazmat suits, but with a limited amount of space, they only manage to get in each other's way.

COMPUTER VOICE (con't)

Five seconds

They proceed towards the exit, but the doors suddenly close on them. RACHEL and HARVEY begin to bang on the doors.

RACHEL

No!

COMPUTER VOICE

Outbreak contained

ELIZA

No! Rachel!

TAYLOR

We can't stay here, we have to leave! We can't help them until the lockdown is lifted and they checked by doctors! Let's go!

AUSTIN and TAYLOR pull a devastated ELIZA away. RACHEL is in tears, fists pounding on the doors.

INT. DECONTAMINATION CELL- AFTERNOON

HARVEY leans against the side of the wall, a blank look on his face. RACHEL is standing up, frantic.

RACHEL

We've got to get out of here!

HARVEY

How? The doors are locked, and they're gonna stay locked until they deem it safe.

RACHEL
I'm not gonna die in here!

HARVEY
We're not gonna die, Rachel.

RACHEL looks up. ANGLE IN ON an air vent above them. She turns to HARVEY

RACHEL
The vent! I could lift you in, and you could pull me up-
HARVEY
Don't you understand what lockdown means? Nothing comes in, nothing goes out, including the air. Those vents are locked so that airborne illnesses can't escape. Face it, Rachel: We're gonna be here for a while.

RACHEL
(Sinks to the ground) I can't believe this!

HARVEY
Well, it is what it is, sweetheart.

RACHEL
You're just gonna accept this? You're not even gonna try to get out?

HARVEY
It's pointless! (Beat) There's no point wasting your energy on this! We're trapped, Rachel.

RACHEL
(Beat) Yea, I know.

There is a long pause between the two as they sit across from each other, not knowing what to do, not knowing what to say. After several seconds, RACHEL breaks the silence.

RACHEL (con't)
I guess we'll just have to be patient then.

HARVEY
The longer we stay here, the greater are our chances of getting infected.

RACHEL
We're not going to get infected! The Ebola virus can only be contracted through contact with bodily fluids.

HARVEY
(Scoffs) Like the cell residue on our hazmat suits?

ANGLE IN ON the hazmat suits, laying on the ground about two feet away. RACHEL's eyes grow wide. She knows that he has a point about the suits.

HARVEY (con't)

The decontamination sprays don't get rid of everything, Rachel, especially not as something as complex as the Ebola virus. So don't touch the suits.

RACHEL

I wasn't going to!

HARVEY

Don't even try to push them away. It's only a matter of time before the fever sets in.

RACHEL

(Scoffs) You know, you're so pessimistic!

HARVEY

(Chuckles) I'm realistic. It keeps me from having false hope.

RACHEL

(Disbelief) False hope?

HARVEY

If I don't expect a lot outta something, then it won't shock me if things hit the fan.

RACHEL

And if by chance, things do happen to go your way?

HARVEY

(Beat) Well, then it looks like my lucky day.

RACHEL

(scoffs)

The two grow silent for a moment. RACHEL takes a deep breath

HARVEY

Looks like the air is getting thin...

RACHEL

Shut up, Harvey! You said so yourself earlier. We're not gonna die in here!

HARVEY

I said it to calm you down-

RACHEL

(Angry) Liar!

HARVEY

(Beat)

RACHEL

You waltz in here with your tough guy act and talk about this ‘false hope’ bull crap, but I know that isn’t who you really are! You just don’t want people to see you get upset! The idea of anyone seeing you as someone with feelings is beneath you!

HARVEY

(Sarcastic) Hit it right on the nail. (Beat) Y’know, this is the longest conversation we’ve ever had.

RACHEL

(Beat) Is it now?

HARVEY

(Nods) Yep. (Beat) So, what’s your favorite color?

RACHEL

We’re, stuck in a decontamination cell about six feet wide next to potentially contaminated hazmat suits and potentially contracting the virus, and all you can ask me is what’s my favorite color?!

HARVEY

(Shrugs) Why not? We’re gonna be here for a while, so we might as well get to know each other. (Beat) So, what is your favorite color?

RACHEL

Bite me!

HARVEY

(Gasps sarcastically) Mine too!

RACHEL

(Bitter) Yay, now we know each other’s deep dark secrets! Lemme just make a toast to a long and happy friendship, oh wait! I can’t because I don’t have any alcohol because we’re stuck here!

HARVEY

(Chuckles) Someone needs a snickers (Beat) Boy, what’d I do for a glass of brandy right now!

RACHEL

(Beat) I’m more of a tequila kind of girl, myself.

HARVEY

Tequila? Really? I didn’t peg you as the type.

RACHEL

What type?

HARVEY

The hard alcohol type. I thought you'd be into those fru-fru wine coolers or something like most women are.

RACHEL

(Smirks at him) I guess some people are filled with unexpected surprises, huh Harvey?

HARVEY

Yea, I guess they can be.

RACHEL

(Beat)

HARVEY

(Beat)

RACHEL

(Rolls her eyes)

HARVEY feels that now may be a good time to ask RACHEL out on a date. He has to be smooth about it, but he doesn't want to get his hopes up or embarrass himself.

HARVEY

(Sighs) Have you ever heard of The Compass?

RACHEL

(Sarcastically) You mean the tool you use to find your way around?

HARVEY

Well, no, not that. It's a nice venue down the street. I'm tight with the guy who owns the place, and it's a quaint nightclub.

RACHEL

I've never heard of it.

HARVEY

(Chuckles) You must not get out that much then, huh?

RACHEL

What can I say. I come to work, and I go to my apartment. I mean, I've worked too hard to get this job.

HARVEY

(Chuckles) I see. (Decides to change the subject) So, did you always know that pathology was

you passion?

RACHEL

(Laughs) No. I wanted to be a dancer, way back when.

HARVEY

Then why didn't you?

RACHEL

(Shrugs) I didn't get a lot of support. My grandparents always told me that dancing for a living was for strippers (laughs), but I think they couldn't see the difference between stripping and performing.

HARVEY

What about your parents? I'm sure they would've supported you.

RACHEL

(Beat) My parents were traveling doctors. Most of the time, they missed my dance recitals when I was younger, but my aunt always filmed them so that way, they could see me perform whenever they got back. They used to tell me stories about the places they've been. (Beat) Wherever they were needed, that's where they went. Indonesia, Puerto Rico, Peru, Thailand,(Pause) Africa. (Beat) That was the last place they went.

ANGLE IN ON HARVEY, his expression is grim and sad. He's smart enough to know how RACHEL'S story ends.

RACHEL (con't)

Turns out, they were helping with a clinic in the south of the Congo. They contracted West Nile Virus. I was thirteen at the time. It... (beat) It took a toll...

HARVEY

(Sincere) I'm sorry that it happened to you.

RACHEL

It's okay. (Beat) I'm sure it would've happened to them at some point, with their occupations and all.

HARVEY

Maybe not. I'm sure they would be proud of you, whether you became a dancer or not.

RACHEL

(Smiles at him) Thanks, Harvey

HARVEY

(Nods and smiles back) You're welcome, Rachel.

There is a moment of silence between them. They take the time to enjoy each other's company. HARVEY feels content that RACHEL shared so much with him.

RACHEL

(Clears her throat) So, um, what's your story?

HARVEY

(Scoffs) It's a horrible novel about a boy who expected too much from people who had nothing to offer him.

ANGLE IN ON RACHEL, her eyes expecting. She hopes he will continue on, hopes he will open up.

HARVEY (con't)

(Takes a deep breath) While your parents were out there helping people all over the world, mine were too busy getting high and drunk to do anything remotely good. They were selfish and irresponsible. They worked jobs at fast food joints, but they spent most of their paychecks on booze and drugs. (Beat) As a kid, I just wanted them to go to one art show, one Christmas program. You know what they said to me? Every time I asked them to be somewhere, they gave a bullshit excuse. (Mockingly) "We're working that day!" or "We don't have the gas to drive down there!" (Beat) They didn't even attend my high school graduation ceremony! They told me that life wasn't fair, and that I shouldn't be so selfish! (Scoffs) Me, the selfish one?! All I had ever asked out of them was to just be there for me, or at least pretend to give a damn! (Tears are in his eyes) But I learned all about false hope back in those days.

ANGLE IN ON RACHEL, her eyes are wide and filled with sympathy. She feels sorry for HARVEY and is surprised by what he has told her. RACHEL scoots towards him.

HARVEY (con't)

What are you doing?

RACHEL

(Lays her head on his shoulder) Offering my sympathy. I'm sorry you had to go through that... It's... (Beat) It's not right... No... child should have to live a life like that...

HARVEY

(Surprised by the gesture, he's quiet for a moment) I'm glad you feel that way. I...

TIGHTEN IN ON HARVEY as he feels conflicted. Should he tell her how he feels or keep it a secret? WIDEN ON RACHEL looking at him.

RACHEL

You what?

HARVEY

(Beat) I... I was hoping that maybe, when this whole thing is over, maybe I could take you out somewhere.

RACHEL

(Surprised) Really?

HARVEY

(Blushes) Yeah, I've kind of have had this crush on you for a while, and now that we've kinda talked and said things, maybe we could see where this goes?

RACHEL

(Smiles) I'd like to see where this goes, too.

HARVEY

(Grins and rests his head on hers)

RACHEL

(Beat) Purple

HARVEY

Hmm?

RACHEL

Earlier, you asked me what my favorite color was. It's purple. But not like a lavender or anything girly like that. The purple I like is more of a plum color. (Beat) What about you?

HARVEY

Hunter green.

RACHEL

Specific.

HARVEY

Well, you asked. It's a nice color. Makes me think of the forests I used to live near.

Suddenly, the doors to the decontamination cell open up. RACHEL and HARVEY jumped at this.

COMPUTER VOICE

Lockdown Protocols have been lifted.

HARVEY

Well how 'bout that?

RACHEL

I don't understand. The spill-

HARVEY

I know. It's gotta be something else. (Beat) I guess I owe Taylor an apology.

HARVEY and RACHEL stand up, hand in hand, and exit the chamber. The two walk down the hallways. WIDEN IN ON the them as they make their way to:

EXT. CDC BUILDING- EVENING

Firefighters, ambulances, and the police are all outside along with the members of the CDC. RACHEL sees ELIZA and the two exchange relieved hugs.

ELIZA

I'm so glad you two are okay!

RACHEL

Me too (Beat) What happened?

ELIZA

Some schmuck in Lab Twenty-One wasn't paying attention, and he accidentally cross contaminated two strains of E Coli.

RACHEL

Oh, yikes!

ELIZA

Yeah. (Beat) C'mon! Let's go get some Ben and Jerry's and have a girl's night, huh, love?
RACHEL looks over her shoulder. ANGLE IN ON HARVEY talking to TAYLOR.

RACHEL

Actually, I have a date.

ELIZA

(Surprised) OH!

RACHEL

I'll see you tomorrow.

ELIZA

Okay, have fun! I want a full report tomorrow!

RACHEL

Okay.

RACHEL makes her way over to HARVEY. He wraps an arm around her.

RACHEL (con't)

So, how 'bout that drink?

HARVEY

I thought you'd never ask.

THE END

Megan Negus

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Cameron High School, Cameron, MO

Educator: Tonya O'Boyle

Category: Dramatic Script

The Wallflower Social Club

A One-Act Play

CHARACTERS

MR. REID: 35. School Counselor. He's kind, helpful, and innovative.

TINA WU: 16. Artist. She's creative, quiet, and shy.

SAMUEL WEISS: 18. Rebel. He's rude, obnoxious, and funny.

CERISE WILSON: 18. Rebel. She's sarcastic, secretive, and irresponsible.

TYLER MORRISON: 18. Loner. He's reserved, kind, and thoughtful.

ASHLEY BANNER: 17. Nerd. She's smart, studious, and confident.

LEO RODRIGUEZ: 16. Nerd. He's determined, loyal, and smart.

MAUREEN THOMPSON: 16. Hipster. She's bubbly, optimistic, and hyper.

ZACK LARSON: 17. Gamer. He's awkward, funny, and sweet.

SETTING

The story takes place in the high school basement. The talk group is held once a week. There are nine chairs set up in a half circle so the audience can still see each of the characters. The characters sit in the order they speak, starting with ASHLEY. This play requires basic lighting and no backdrops

AT RISE:

Lights come up on the characters sitting next to each other in a half circle. In the middle of it all is MR. REID, the guidance counselor. He starts the session.

MR REID:

Alright, look, I know some of you guys don't want to be here, but, it has come to my attention

that each of you need some social interaction.

CERISE:

(Sarcastic) And what better way to do that than to gather us all around the campfire?

SAMUEL:

(Sarcastic) Next thing y'know, we'll all be holding hands, singing Kumbaya, and making each other friendship bracelets.

MR. REID:

How about we cut the jokes and get right to it. (Beat) Ashley, how about you start? Say your name, grade, and something about you.

ASHLEY:

(Stands up from here chair on the far right end and clears her throat) Hello, my name is Ashley Banner, I'm a junior, and I like biology. (Chuckles) Obviously a little more than socializing, but small chat won't get me into Harvard.

MR. REID:

(Uneasy) Harvard? That's a big step!

ASHLEY:

Astronauts and six foot people take big steps! I'm just carving out a path for myself!

SAMUEL:

(Coughs) Nerd! (coughs twice)

ASHLEY:

(Scoffs) At least I'm not a simple-minded moron!

SAMUEL:

I am not whatever you just said!

MR. REID:

Samuel, how about you go next?

SAMUEL:

(Beat) Fine, whatever. (stands up) I'm Samuel Weiss, I'm a senior, and once highschool is over, I'm getting the heck outta this podunk town! Whoop!

MR. REID:

Where will you go?

SAMUEL:

I dunno, I haven't really thought it through yet, but anywhere is better than here, that's for sure!

MR. REID:
(Beat) Okay, Samuel. Uh... Tina! You're next!

TINA:
(Anxiously) Uh...

MR. REID:
C'mon, don't be shy!

TINA:
(Stands up slowly and looks down at her shoes) I'm Tina Wu, I'm a sophomore, and I, um, I...

SAMUEL:
Speak up, you chink!

MR. REID:
That's enough Samuel! (Beat) Since you seem to have so much to say, perhaps you'd like to stay after for a while and have a chat with me.

SAMUEL:
I think I'll pass, but maybe next time?

MR. REID:
(Ignores SAMUEL and turns to TINA) What were you saying, Ms. Wu?

TINA:
Oh, um, I was just um... (takes a deep breath) I like to draw.

MR. REID:
Interesting! Your art teacher has shown me some of your work, and I can truly say, you have a gift, Ms. Wu.

TINA:
(smiles) Oh, thank you, Mr. Reid!

MR. REID:
Of course (Beat) Leo, how about you go?

LEO:
Yes sir. (stands) Hello, my name is Leo Rodriguez, I'm a sophomore, and um, I have ADHD.

SAMUEL:
AD What now?

LEO:
Do I have to spell it out for you? A-D-H-D, genius!

SAMUEL:

(scoffs) I can spell, too! I'll even spell it out for you! I-D-G-A-F!

MR. REID:

(Glares at SAMUEL) Mr. Weiss-

SAMUEL:

(Sarcastically cringes) Ooh! Callin me by my last name! I must be in trouble!

MR. REID:

That's strike two, kid. Don't push your luck.

SAMUEL:

(Scoffs) There is no luck to push!

MR. REID:

(Ignores SAMUEL) Okay, um-

MAREEN:

(Jumps out of her seat) Ooh! I'll go next! I volunteer as tribute, Mr. Reid!

MR. REID:

Well, okay, um, looks like your were next in line anyways, so it works out.

MAREEN:

(clears her throat) Hello everyone! My name is Mareen Thompson, I'm a sophomore, and well, since everyone is confessing things, then I guess I'll play along! (Beat) I have an obsession with the Internet.

MR. REID:

Oh?

MAUREEN:

Yea (sighs) I know it seems a little mainstream, like hashtag first world problems! But in all honesty, I connect better with people from across the globe than with actual people.

LEO:

Maybe it's because most of the people here are idiots (looks at SAMUEL)

SAMUEL:

(Holds up index finger)

LEO:

What are you doing?

SAMUEL:

Ha! You think I'm a moron (looks at ASHLEY) you think I'm an idiot! (looks at LEO) but I bet none of you knew that this is the middle finger in Chinese culture!

TINA:

(Beat) It's really not.

SAMUEL:

What would you know?

MR. REID clears his throat. Everyone stops talking.

MR. REID:

Your turn, Cerise.

CERISE:

Ugh, this is stupid! (stands up) You already know me, I'm Cerise Wilson. I'm a senior. I (chuckles) I have so many problems, I don't know where to start! (Beat) Oh, I'm bipolar. Watch out, losers!

MR. REID:

I didn't know that, Cerise.

CERISE:

Yea, well, not many people do, but you gotta take what life gives you and suck it up.

MR. REID:

Those are some, uh, good words to live by! Thank you for sharing Cerise. (Beat) Zack, you're up!

ZACK:

(stands up) I'm Zack, by the way, I'm a junior, and, I'm addicted to gaming. (Beat) I like to play Call of Duty, Skyrim, and occasionally, Minecraft. (Beat) Um, it might be a problem, I guess? I dunno.

MR. REID:

(Beat) That's awesome, Zack, but has it ever occurred to you that the real action may lie past that computer screen of yours?

ZACK:

(Thinks for a moment) Hmm... Past my computer screen is a wall. Behind that wall is my parent's room. Does that count as action?

Everyone cringes and hollers in disgust.

CERISE:

Ew!

ASHLEY

Did not need to know that!

SAMUEL:

(stands up) That's it! I'm done! (gets ready to walk off stage)

MR. REID:

Sit down right now, Mr. Weiss!

SAMUEL:

(Goes back to his seat and sits down) Ooh. Okay.

MR. REID:

(Shakes his head and sighs) Ugh... (Beat, he takes a deep breath) Tyler, last one up! You haven't said a word at all! Tell us something about yourself.

TYLER:

I'd rather not.

MR. REID:

Just say something. Anything.

TYLER:

(Beat) Fine. (Stands up) I'm Tyler Morrison, I'm a senior, and I don't want to be here.

CERISE:

None of us do. (Beat) Not really anyways.

MAUREEN:

It's better than detentions.

CERISE:

(Shrugs) I guess.

ASHLEY:

I think this is pretty cool!

LEO:

Me, too.

SAMUEL:

You two just wanna hear our dirty secrets so you can gossip about us low-lifes!

LEO:

And you just want some attention because your mommy and daddy don't give you any at home, do they?

Everyone gasps and oohs.

ZACK:
Ooh, headshot!

SAMUEL:
(Clenches his fists) You are so dead, Rodriguez!

LEO:
(Holds out his arms) Do it. I dare you. Kill me! It's better than facing everyone at school!

ASHLEY:
(Concerned) What do you mean, Leo?

LEO:
(Sighs) For as long as I've been in school, I've always had to deal with my ADHD. I can't sit still, I can barely focus, and sometimes, it makes people uncomfortable. I can't help it! People keep teasing me, calling me a freak! They know something's wrong with me! (Beat) I-I planned my suicide once.

Everyone in the room is silent for a moment. They can't believe it.

MR. REID:
Leo, nothing is wrong with you.

ASHLEY:
Yea! People are just naturally judgemental when it comes to things they don't understand, but those people aren't important. Only the people who like you for who you are.

LEO:
And if there isn't anybody like that?

ASHLEY:
There is. Trust me (winks at him)

LEO:
Thanks, Ashley.

SAMUEL:
(sighs) You're right.

LEO:
(Beat) About your parents?

SAMUEL:

About everything. They don't really care about me.

MAUREEN:

I'm sure that's not true.

SAMUEL:

No, it is. They're too busy getting high in some shack in the middle of nowhere. I thought that if I acted up, said some horrible things, that maybe it would get their attention. (Beat) Status report: It hasn't been worked so far.

LEO:

Well, screw them! They don't know what they're missing out on! You're funny, Sammie, and maybe you could make something of yourself.

SAMUEL:

(smiles) Thanks man. (Beat) But don't call me Sammie.

TINA:

(stands up, she suddenly finds the courage to say what she wants to say) I find that art is a good way to avoid people. (Beat) I've always been discriminated because of my heritage, but drawing or painting about it helps me channel my feelings. Whenever I'm sad or unhappy, I create a picture. (Chuckles) I'm sure you can imagine how cluttered my room is.

Everyone chuckles.

MAUREEN:

You'll have to show us sometime. Or show me at least.

TINA:

Really?

MAUREEN:

Yea! I've always had a knack for art! I mean, I can't draw or paint, but boy, is it fun to look at!

ZACK:

Okay, so I have a serious question. Does animation count as art? Cause I know some people don't think it is.

TINA

(Smiles) Of course, silly!

ZACK:

(Grins) Okay, cool, because I think animation is art, and that it should be required to take a course in high school!

CERISE:

Why? So some of us can fail yet another class? (Beat) Not all of us are talented or smart.

MR. REID:

I'm sure you have a talent hidden somewhere inside you. You just have to find it.

MAUREEN:

I thought your poem in English was phenomenal!

CERISE:

(Disbelief) Seriously?

MAUREEN:

Yea! I love how you compared loe to cranberry sauce! So poetic!

CERISE:

(Half smiles) Thanks, kid.

TYLER:

(Chuckles)

TINA:

What is it?

TYLER:

It's nothing

SAMUEL:

Aw, c'mon man! Everyone's having heart to heart conversations! Tell us your angst!

TYLER:

Well, I'm not in angst, but I can tell you this. I don't think any of us set out to open up. Most of us go about our daily lives, hiding our feelings and stuff because we're afraid of what people think, or maybe we just don't wanna look vulnerable in front of strangers. Whatever the case may be, I'm just glad people are starting to feel better. No offense, but I probably would have never started a conversation with anyone here. Not even you Mr. Reid. (Beat), but now, that I've gotten to know everyone a little better, understand everyone better, I think I may actually come back next week. (looks at ASHLEY) It is pretty fun. Maybe we will make friendship bracelets.

Everyone laughs at this. MR. REID looks at the students. He feels accomplished.

MR. REID:

Alrighty then! Um, it's four o'clock. I hope I'll see each of you next week.

ASHLEY:

Of course!

LEO:
Definitely.

TINA:
I'll be here!

ZACK:
Yea!

TYLER:
I suppose.

MAUREEN:
Ooh! I'll bring cupcakes next time!

CERISE:
Well, if Mareen is bringing cupcakes then I'm in!

SAMUEL:
Hell no!

Everyone shoots him a glare. SAMUEL laughs.

SAMUEL:
I'm kidding, guys! (To MR. REID) No joke though, I'll probably be a little late.

MR. REID:
(Chuckles) Alright, Sam.

ASHLEY and LEO exit STAGE RIGHT chatting about homework. TINA, ZACK, and MAUREEN exit STAGE LEFT chatting about art an animation. CERISE and SAMUEL sling their arms over each other's shoulders and skip off STAGE RIGHT singing Kumbaya obnoxiously. TYLER waves goodbye to MR. REID and exits STAGE LEFT. The only person left on stage is MR. REID. He stands up proudly.

MR. REID:
You did good, Adam. You did good.

Lights go off with MR. REID still on stage.

THE END

Megan Negus

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Cameron High School, Cameron, MO

Educator: Tonya O'Boyle

Category: Short Story

The Horrors of Bellevue

He didn't know how long he had been in that room. His sense of time seemed just as lost as he was. The boy wasn't claustrophobic, but as he sat at the table, handcuffed to the chair, he felt as if the walls were slowly closing in on him. There was one window on the far left wall, but the glass was dark and tinted. He had nowhere to go, and nothing to do.

Moments passed before he saw the door swing open. Two men walked into the room dressed like detectives. Their gold badges glistened in the light. A Caucasian man with salt pepper hair and icy blue eyes took a seat in front of him. The other man, a portly African American stood in the far left corner, his arms folded across his chest.

"Alex Monroe," the Caucasian man began, his tone was just as cold as his eyes were. "give me one could reason why I don't lock you up right now."

Alex clenched his fists. "This wasn't my fault!" he exclaimed.

The man scoffed. "That's what they all say, you spineless murderer!"

"Hey now!" The other officer interjected, "We don't know the whole story yet! How about instead of calling him a murderer, we let him tell us *exactly* what happened, and we'll go from there, okay?"

The officer shrugged. "Whatever," he snarled. The other officer looked over at Alex. "Tell us what happened in there."

Alex sighed. "Okay. I'll tell you what happened."

24 hours ago

It was a chilly evening in October. As the month began to fade away, so did the last breaths of autumn. Leaves began to fall from the trees like silent tears as the weather grew colder. Alex hated fall, but he hated winter even more. He couldn't stand watching the despair unfold before his eyes.

"It's just up ahead," Damian called out, his voice was just as staggered as his footsteps from the alcohol. It took Alex and Soren to keep him up.

"We really shouldn't be doing this," Soren said quietly. Strands of his longish black hair waved in the wind as he helped Alex guide the drunk teen forward.

Damian shot him a look. “What, are you scared, Gray?” he taunted.

Emily rolled her eyes. “What are we even doing here?” she asked, her best friend, Penny Stallworth, stood at her heels, mimicking the same arrogant stride as her. She was just a copy of another copy. Penny flicked her blonde hair.

Walking slightly behind the girls was a petite girl with reddish brown hair. Her fingers fumbled with her Nikon camera. Alex didn’t know her too well, but he knew enough to know that her name was Rita Thatcher.

Their group stopped and stood in front of an old brick building, surrounded by fencing and an eerie aura that always drove trespassers mad with curiosity. The Bellevue Mental Institution. It was infamous for holding its patients against their will, experimenting on them, and treating them like animals. Damian thought it would be a good idea to investigate the abandoned facility to see if it was really haunted like people have been saying.

“Guys, there’s a sign that says, ‘Do not Trespass’,” Rita says softly, pointing at a sign.

Emily and Penny let out a unanimous laugh. “Those are the words a good little girl would say!” Emily mocked.

“Yea!” Penny laughed. “Why is she even here?”

Damian came in between the girls, “Because she’s gonna take the pictures of the ghosts!”

“How do you even know that ghosts *can* be in pictures?” Penny asked. “They don’t have a reflection!”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Vampires are the ones that don’t have reflections, Penny.”

“C’mon, guys let’s go!” Damian groaned, ushering the girls towards him. “There’s an opening here!”

Damian held open the fence so that Emily and Penny could slip under. He followed soon after and looked at Soren, Alex, and Rita. “Are you guys coming or are you gonna just stand around?”

Alex looked over at Rita. “Look, you don’t have to do this.”

Rita looked up at him, her green eyes stared into his. “Nah, it’s okay. It’ll be fun, what could go wrong?”

Soren raised his eyebrows. “Uh, what could go wrong? Hmm, let’s see, we could get arrested, someone could get lost, and hey, if by any chance this place is really haunted, we could be dealing with some pretty pissed off ghosts!”

Rita sighed and ducked under the fence after Damian and the girls.

Alex shrugged and slipped under the fence with Soren behind him.

The institution was just as Alex had expected it to be: dark, cold, and trashed beyond belief. Papers, glass, and articles of clothing lay across the floor in chaotic heaps, along with many other unidentifiable objects. Every corner, every hallway, every inch of this place reeked of mold and decay.

“Let’s just take the pictures and get out of here!” Soren advised.

Off to the side, Rita occupied herself with her camera, capturing the area around them. After taking several shots, she checked the footage.

“See anything?” Damian asked.

Rita shook her head. “No, not yet.”

“Well, let’s move on to a different section, then!” Damian insisted.

“Ooh, we could go to the wing where they did the harshest treatments!” Emily suggested, a sly grin on her face.

Damian smirked. “Good idea, Em! I bet we’ll find the most ghosts there!”

Alex felt his heart race with every step he took. Deep down, he knew that they shouldn’t be here, but what was he supposed to do? He grew uneasy and shook his head.

“You seem to know a lot about this place,” Soren admitted.

“Well, my great great great grandfather was a doctor here,” she explained. “Doctor Whitley Pierce. He was extraordinary. I’ve heard hundreds of stories about this place.”

With that, she lead the group down another dark hallway. Alex was reluctant to put his faith in the hands of the volleyball captain, but as he followed his friends, he realized that he had no other choice.

Emily’s boots clopped against the floor as she strutted along. “I know it’s creepy,” she spoke as if she were nothing more than a tour guide. “But this wing is promising. Here, the most severe cases were held, and treatments such as hydrotherapy, electric shock, and induced comas were conducted in hopes to learn more about the body and the mind. Some people think it’s cruel, but when you really think about it, without these experiments, we wouldn’t know as much as we do now. Wouldn’t you say so, Penny?”

Emily stopped and turned around, probably expecting an answer from her duplicate. Alex looked around, but the blonde was nowhere in sight.

“Where’s Penny?” Emily asked, her voice shook as the words left her tongue.

“Yo, Penny?” Damian hollered.

Suddenly, an ear-splitting scream shook the building. “Emily, help me!”

“Penny!” Emily called out. Without hesitation, she sprinted down the hallway.

“Emily, wait!” Soren called out.

A white light flashed from behind. Everyone turned around towards the source.

Rita’s eyes widened as she checked the results. Her face was stricken white, her fingers shaking as she gripped the camera.

“Oh my god...” she shuddered.

“What is it, Rita?” Alex asked. He quickly went to her side and peered over her shoulder.

The camera had captured the group, frantic as they called out for Penny. Emily was in mid step, darting down the corridor. Standing behind her was a shadowy figure with white eyes and wicked smile. Staring directly at the camera lense.

His heart stopped. He wished he hadn’t looked.

“W-We got a picture,” Rita stammered. “Let’s get Penny and Emily and get out of here!”

“NO!” Emily shrieked. “PENNY!”

Soren looked at Alex. “Let’s go!”

With no other choice, the four rushed towards the noise.

In the room on the left, Emily could be seen, kneeling on the ground in a hysterical mess. Damian came behind her. “Em, what’s wrong?”

Her head was in her hands. She peered up at Damian, her eyelids were black from the wet eye makeup.

She lifted a finger in front of her “P-P-Penny...”

Following her finger, Alex took in the scene before him. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t believe it.

The once lively Penny Stallsworth was now a bloody corpse, head drooping loosely, barely attached to her neck, a noose was wound tightly around her throat. She hung from a bed, which

hung from the ceiling.

“She wandered off...” a raspy voice snickered. *“A rookie mistake...”*

Everyone jumped at the sudden noise, the sudden voice of someone they did not know. A ghost.

“You may be asking yourselves why her?” The voice began. It sounded feminine, but Alex couldn't be sure. *“I needed to make an example out of her!”* the voice cackled. *“I don't appreciate a group of degenerates trespassing on these grounds. I suppose I will make an example out of all of you!”*

Alex and Soren exchanged identical glances of horror. Rita shuddered in place, now paler than ever before. Standing in the corner of the room was a dark shadowy figure, curved and shaped like a woman. It was the same figure in the picture, smiling.

“Jesus...” Soren muttered, running a hand through his hair.

The voice laughed wickedly, *“Tick tock, little ones... you better run...”*

Damian lifted Emily to her feet, a look of terror on his face.

The group took off in a sprint down the hallway towards the end of the wing. Suddenly, the doors slammed shut, as if by an invisible force. Laughter echoed throughout the halls.

“Nowhere to run!”

“In there! The door!” Damian shouted. He fumbled for the doorknob and threw the door open. One by one, the kids filed into the room, and when the last person was safely in the room, Damian slammed the door shut. He scoffed. “I can't believe this is happening to us!”

Alex took a look around the room. Faded green tiles decorated the walls and floors, reminding him of a larger version of a bathroom. In the middle of the room, there were five porcelain tubs, chipped and withering away.

“What is this place?” Soren questioned.

“A tub room,” Emily replied. She took a few steps towards the tubs. “They did hydrotherapy here. It was supposed to help insomniacs and psychotic patients.”

Upon further examination, Alex noticed that the tubs were filled with cloudy water. Soft shards of ice floated about the surface. Soren walked beside him and reached towards the water.

Alex stared at him in disbelief. “Soren, what are you-”

“There’s something in the water,” he whispered.

Rita and Damian came up beside him. Alex squinted his eyes, peering into the water.

Without warning, a pair of hands arose from the depths of the water and took a hold of his wrist. Soren shrieked, trying to free his hand. He pulled and tugged against its grip, but it was no use.

“Let me go!” he pleaded.

Seconds later, two more pairs of hands shot out from the water and took a hold of him.

“Soren!” Alex cried.

By the time he returned to the tub’s edge, the hands were pulling Soren into water. Alex dropped the pipe and grabbed a hold of the back of Soren’s shirt.

“You can’t save him, boy!”

Suddenly, Alex lost his grip on Soren as his body flew across the room. His back hit the wall with a thud and he collapsed onto the ground.

“Alex!” Rita cried, rushing to his side.

From inside the tub, the water splashed onto the tile. Soren was under the water, struggling for air. He was drowning.

Alex stood to his feet and ran back to the tub. “Soren!”

“What do you think you’re doing?” the woman laughed.

The next thing he knew, Alex was frozen in place at the side of the tub. From underneath the water, Alex could make out the form of his friend, being held under the bitter water by the ghostly hands. Soren stared up at Alex, his dark eyes were wide with fright as he tried to reach out for him. He had never felt so helpless before.

And all he could do was stand there, watching his friend drown.

After a moment or two, Soren went still. His hand went limp, and the water grew still.

“NO!” Alex cried out.

“Two down, four more to go!” The lady cackled. Her shadowy form appeared beside the bathtub, a wicked smile on her face. Her eyes bore into Alex’s, as if she was taunting him.

Rita took a hold of Alex’s arm. “We’ve gotta go!”

His heart felt empty inside his chest as the jock dragged him out of the room.

Damian lead the remaining teens around the corner and into a dark room.

“We need to call 911!” Damian exclaimed.

“I wonder why no one thought of that until now!” Alex snapped.

He pulled out her cell phone and groaned. “Signal’s jammed!”

“So we’re trapped inside without any way to contact help?” Alex concluded. “Great! Just great, Damian!”

Rita gasped. “Guys!”

Damian and Alex snapped their heads towards her. “What is it Rita?” Alex asks.

Rita glances around the room, her head swiveling from left to right as if she was looking for something. Finally, after a moment, she turns back to the boys. “We lost Emily.”

Damian’s eyes went wide. “Oh shi-”

“That’s not good!” Alex hollered. “We need to find her before-”

“Before *she* does.”

Alex opened the door. “C’mon!”

Damian followed him out. “Let’s split up,” he suggested.

Rita scoffed. “Are you serious?”

“No way!” Alex agreed. “It’ll make it easier for her to pick us off! The best option is to stay together.”

“We can cover more ground that way!”

“No, Damian!” Alex snapped. “I lost Soren. I’m not gonna lose you, too!”

There was a moment of silence between the two, and for a split second, Alex thought that Damian snapped out of his reckless ways.

Damian shook his head. “I’m gonna go this way.”

Before Alex could object, Damian took off down the hallway and disappeared around the

corner.

“We should go after him,” Rita advised.

Alex shook his head. “If he wants to be a stubborn and reckless idiot, then whatever!” he replied bitterly. “But I’m not gonna have you killed.”

Rita nodded. “Okay,” she said. “I think we should retrace our steps. Emily was with us when we left the tub room, so, she may be somewhere back there.”

Alex nodded. “Good idea. Let’s go.”

“Emily!” Alex called out softly. He and Rita had been searching for an hour, but they could not find any trace of her.

Suddenly, footsteps echoed throughout the hall. The footsteps were small, but deliberate, as if someone was taking small but harsh steps. There was something familiar about the boots, and that’s when Alex realized something.

“Emily,” he looked at Rita.

The two turned around a corner, and there, standing in the middle of the hallway was Emily, lurking in the shadows.

“Thank god you’re okay!” Rita exclaimed.

Emily didn’t say anything. She didn’t move. Alex glanced over her.

“Oh my god...”

Emily took one final step into the light. Sticking out of both her eyes were two long and narrow rods. Blood trickled down her face and onto her top. Her breathing was heavy. Emily was not the same.

She reached out towards Alex, and it almost looked as if she was looking directly at him.

“Help... me...” she sputtered out. Before Alex could come to her aid, Emily fell forward, and the rods receded deeper into her skull.

“Damian!” Alex called out. He knew that if Emily had been by herself, then Damian would suffer the same fate. He had to find him.

The two kids took off down the hallway in the direction Damian had went. Alex looked left and right for his friend, his neck felt stiff and sore.

“You’re too late!”

The two came to a sudden halt at the end of the hall. There, tied to a large wire chair was Damian Boone, his body was scarred with burns as he slumped lifeless in the chair. The electric chair

“Quite the shocker, I’ll say!” The ghost howled in laughter at her own joke. *“Four down, two to go! Four down, two to go!”* the woman chanted.

“Run Rita!”

Alex and Rita took off for the exit. Alex stopped in his tracks.

Rita stopped, tears staining her face. “Alex!”

“I’ll hold her off!” he decided. “You get the hell out of here!”

Rita wailed “But Alex-”

“Go!”

With that, Rita took off down the hallway.

That was the last thing Alex remembered before he blacked out.

Alex woke up in the hospital after that. The next thing he knew, two detectives had brought him in for questioning. He told them everything at least a dozen times, but it still didn’t change anything.

“I didn’t murder my friends!” Alex insisted.

“Your DNA is all over the place and all over the bodies!” The blue-eyed detective protested. “What are we to think of that?”

“Talk to Rita Thatcher! She was there! She got out! She’ll tell you the same thing!”

The two detectives looked at each other, their expressions were grim.

“Rita Thatcher is... missing.” the plump detective informed.

“And unless you tell us where she is,” the other detective began. “Then you better get used to the view from behind a prison cell!”

Deep within the walls of the horrifying Bellevue Mental Institution, lay an isolation chamber, padded from corner to corner in soft cushions. Residing within that chamber was a girl, arms strapped together by a straight jacket. Her face was stricken with panic. An all too familiar face.

“No one will ever find you here, sweetheart!” a voice hissed.

The girl began to scream in horror. “HELP! SOMEONE HELP ME!”

No one ever found poor Ms. Rita Thatcher.

Ella Norton

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Michelle Johnson

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

Swirling Colors

I take a deep breath and submerge myself in the water. The colors of the swirling water put me in a panic as the greens, blues and blacks all merge into one. At first, I'm fine, just suspended in the water. But as the minutes drag on, I begin to struggle and kick. I try and calm my mind by counting but nothing works so I come up to the surface. I gasp for air, feeling as if I've never breathed before. I cling to the side of the dark pool of water for support, slumping against it, and try to desperately fight the tears back. That's the only thing that could make this situation any worse.

Madrigal walks over immediately. I can't see her because I keep my head bowed but I can hear the heels of her white boots hitting the concrete. She elongates her stride so that the panic and anxiety can build up. The sound finally stops and I know she's standing right over me. I slowly raise my head to see her standing there, in all her terrifying glory.

"That was pathetic," she says nonchalantly. Madrigal is already terrifying with her short black hair and glasses that cover most of her face but when her tone is nonchalant and cold, it strikes terror in every bone of my body.

"I'm sorry, I know," I plead earnestly. "The water still scares me and I-"

"But you're pathetic aren't you Andrea? You are never going to make it past the first round and you're going to bring shame to the whole family." She begins to pace back and forth, her white dress blending in with the white wall behind her. Her face and voice remain emotionless. "Now you're going to promise to work harder but Adrugen is in three days and we both know that you won't improve anyway." I shudder as soon as she says that. There's no way I can master the water part in time. "Get out of the water."

"No I can keep going," I protest. "Please, Madrigal I need to keep working on this."

She bats this aside with a wave of her hand. "It's a waste of my time." She starts to walk away and then turns and looks at me. "If you continue once I walk out the door, I'll kill you before the water gets the chance."

My eyes widen and I climb out of the pool swiftly and lean against the wall. Madrigal may not be able to actually kill me before Adrugen, but she's not afraid to hurt me. My head is spinning just thinking about Adrugen. Adrugen, what I've been training my whole life for, is in three days. All of the hours and all of the tears will come down to the one night; it will come down to me failing.

Nobody in my family believes that I can win. I hear it through hushed whispers, dirty glares and direct comments from Madrigal. My breathing is too weak. Everything is too weak.

Adrugen is a big competition with the ten richest and powerful families in the country. Whoever wins, leads the country for the next ten years.

There are five pillars of the competition, strength, speed, skill, breathing and technique. The current family leading the country will devise a task that incorporates all of those elements and who ever completes it the best, wins.

I began training when I was three. I would be held underwater during my baths, my little face turned bright red and terrified, pumped with knowledge and forced to run miles if I wanted a meal. When I was little, I thought that this was how all children were treated, when I was a little bit older I was angry that this responsibility was put on me and that I was treated like this. Now I realize that it's life or death. If I fail, the task, Madrigal or the shame will kill me. I have no choice but to win. Unfortunately, I can't.

I leave the room and brush away the tears as I do. There's no room for crying in my busy schedule.

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The next couple days pass in a blur, with Madrigal hounding me in training, my family becoming faker and faker and my breathing getting worse and worse.

When we arrive in Novicia, the city where Adurogen is hosted, we are led to a grand, white house with intimidating tall pillars and an unfriendly cold light radiating from it.

My family files in and begins immediately bossing around the staff supplied to help us. I ignore everyone and go up to a white bedroom with only a bed and a trunk as the Kirstens are supposed to represent minimalism.

I flop down on the bed, my stomach a bundle of emotions. Fear of the outcome of the competition, nerves for the actual contest and relief that everything will be over by the end of tomorrow, no matter what happens.

I have about three minutes alone before Madrigal storms in.

"Why are you sitting around?" she demands, pushing her short black hair out of her pale, tiny face. Madrigal invites many a man's curiosities with her plump red lips and the mysterious black glasses but then she scares them off with her intimidating stance and cold voice. "Tomorrow you are going to be up against nine other children all the same age as you but better than you are."

"That's encouraging," I mutter without thinking and immediately begin to pulse with fear as Madrigal stiffens.

"It should be Andrea. It should push you to destroy the other families. You are representing the Kirstens, this is about honor and pride. We have won leadership three times in the past century and if you do not win, you know what will happen."

My mind flashes through all the threats Madrigal has used. Slapping me until my face is raw. Keeping me underwater until I actually die. Forcing me to run until I actually can't run anymore. The list goes on and on. "I know," I choke out shakily. "Should we practice anything?"

She scoffs. "It doesn't matter. At this point you are either going to win or lose."

"Then what was the purpose of you coming in here?" I say, feeling extremely brave in the safety that she can't hurt me before the competition tomorrow.

She leans in very close to me and whispers in my ear, "I may not be able to punish you tonight Andrea but you are worthless tomorrow, even if you do manage to somehow win."

I gulp as she leans back, my stomach fluctuating in fear. "I'm so sorry Madrigal, I spoke without thinking," I say as calmly as I can.

She leaves and I spend the rest of the night in my room, full of panic and fear.

The next morning, I am woken up at six. Maids brush my long, flowing brown hair into two boxer braids. They pinch at my pale skin to make my cheeks rosy and then help me into a tight wetsuit. It's black with a streak of silver on the sides, representing the family colors and minimalism. Madrigal stalks in ten minutes later and orders the maids to redo my hair ten times

until eventually having them go back to the boxer braids. My scalp is sore, but I push away the pain.

We leave the house at seven in a big carriage, containing me, Madrigal, my foolish mother, my cruel father, my innocent younger brother and haughty older sister. My stomach is a jumble of emotions and we have to pull over so I can retch, which Madrigal slaps me for. My family pretends not to see.

When we arrive I am amazed at the stadium. It's the biggest I've ever seen and everything is gold, from the seats to the platforms and railings. It's shaped like a dome with an open ceiling. The box for the current reigning house stands out with their big banners and flags. People have already began to flock in, all wearing colors and sitting in areas that represent their houses. Those who don't belong to a house sit near the very front, excited to see the show.

We reach double doors where I have to say goodbye to my family and Madrigal. I take a deep breath knowing that when I next see them, if I do see them again, everything will be different.

My mother pulls me into a big hug and pretends to wipe her eyes. I roll my eyes at the scene she's trying to make. "Just know I'm proud of you whatever happens." I try not to burst out laughing. My mother has never once cared about my well-being and doesn't have a maternal bone in her body.

My father shakes my hand. "Remember, you are representing this family."

"Yes, Father," I reply solemnly. I wouldn't expect anything else from him. He's always been the one to push family pride and the fact that I have to win the competition.

My siblings feign smiles. We don't even try to have any interaction or goodbye. They resent me because I get all the attention and I resent them because they have freedom. I would rather be the most ignored person but yet the freest in the world than be where am I now, with lots of attention but no freedom.

Last is Madrigal, who stalks towards me and pinches my arm. "You cannot mess this up. You have to win. You know what will happen if you don't. Die before you lose." She walks away and I pull my sleeve down to hide the mark.

I step through the doors, my heart pounding. The crowd roars as I step out and I remember Madrigal's demand to not look at the crowd or the other contestants, but to focus on what the task looks like.

I step onto my gold platform and wait. I am surrounded by swirling, sloshing black water. A hundred and fifty or so yards away is a massive black rock. The crowd hushes as the old leading family, the Vickers, step out and to address the crowds.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and others," the man says. He's a rather large man with a balding head and a tight red coat. He wasn't the son who won the competition, but rather the father who seized the power as soon as he had the chance, just like my father will do to me if I win. "Welcome to Adrugen. Today you shall decide what family will lead this country into the glory that we know possible for it. The task we have devised is simple. The contestants are allowed one breath to reach that black rock and then once they do, they have to clamber to the top and get the prize. Whoever gets there first gets extra points but don't forget that technique and skill play a very big part."

The crowd gasps and my heart begins to pulse. There's no way I can do this the fastest. I don't even know if I can do it at all.

"We shall begin the countdown," the man announces and I get into position to dive into the water. "Fifty. Forty-nine. Forty-eight..." The crowd begins to roar and everything blurs together

as I feel the tears begin to swell. I push them back desperately. “Twenty, nineteen, eighteen...” I take deep breaths but each one is shallower than the last. “Three, two, one!” A giant horn sounds and I dive into water and begin swimming immediately, careful not to tilt my head and take a breath. So many contestants have lost over past years from breathing because they thought that no one could see them.

I’m only about fifty yards in when the panic starts but I push forward. At around a hundred I take a gasping breath, but quickly continue until I reach the rock. I can’t help but feel a little proud of myself for reaching the rock in only one breath after all the nasty comments I’ve received from Madrigal about my breathing.

I finally reach the beach that surrounds the tall, smooth, obsidian rock. I chance a look behind me and see that there are still some people in the water, so at least I’m not last.

Other contestants though, are already at the rock and one girl with flaming red hair is already a quarter way up. I quickly survey it and see that there is no way to go up other than to climb the smooth surface. I gulp because Madrigal and I had barely practiced this and the times that we did, it always ended terribly.

I begin climbing. The cold, sharp rock cuts into my hands and feet but I ignore it, feeling the pump of adrenaline. I go a lot faster than I expected and I’m quickly catching up to the redhead. I reach forward, about to overtake her when my foot slips. I quickly latch on to the nearest available surface, trying to not let the judges see. I look up and see that this part of the rock is very slick. I look down and see a very muscular boy quickly gaining on me and begin to climb again, but more carefully this time.

I’ve almost reached the end of the slick part and the top of the rock. I feel a rush of exhilaration as I realize, for the first time ever, I could win this. The redhead girl has disappeared; I don’t know if she’s fallen or if she just gave up but I don’t care at this point. I realize with a jolt that I am in the lead. I reach forward but my hand misses and before I know, I’m falling.

People always make falling seem like such a slow moment, but it happened in a blink of an eye. One moment I was at the top of the rock and the next I crashed into the water and hit my head on a rock.

The world begins to swim and hues of black, green, blue and as purple begin to dance around me. I am deep in the water and I can barely see the sun. I know that if I really tried, I could make it to the surface and survive. But I would have lost.

Madrigal’s face appears in my mind with all of her threats and her last words echo around me. “Die before you lose.”

If I resurface I will be shamed, yelled at, beaten and abused. I don’t think Madrigal will be able to actually kill me but she would certainly be allowed to inflict pain. My father would too.

It was then that I made a choice. The first time I actually got to and it would be my last, too. How fitting. Normally my father or Madrigal would but this time it was up to me. Just before I had wished for freedom and now I was getting it.

I was not going to resurface.

I laid there, in the middle of the water for ages. I wish I could have said that it was peaceful but that would be a lie. Halfway through my body began to spasm out and fight and kick but I still didn’t surface. My lungs ached for air and I was in so much pain. Eventually the colors began to dim until they turned into an eternal black.

Kirsten Osei-Bonsu

Age: Unknown, Grade: 10

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Somewhere

A warm summer night somewhere in Kansas

A shadow sits, hidden by night
Life is attached to its feet
But they now both sit quiet
Staring at the blank in front of them.

No.

I talk
I talk about my feelings
About my deepest thoughts.
Sometimes they're profound,
Others irrelevantly irrelevant.
But thoughts will kill you,
Whether dull or sharp.
So I speak
Just until it feels like someone will listen
I pretend they do,
That hundreds to thousands do
And we talk for an hour
And sometimes I listen
But sometimes I wake up.
And stare at the wall.

A hotel swimming pool somewhere in San Francisco

They wanted to drown.
Not for the selfish ambition of death,
But for the waves catharsis that follow.
Cool droplets to blend with tears;
Not sad ones, but the hot, burning kind.
The tears that leave searing reds and bruises of
Blue.
They're blue.
They're soul drowned in the swimming pool with blue;
For blue is complacency, and nothingness, close enough to

Death without truly dying. Yet the tears, the singeing tears,
Made them lavender.
The color not quite lilac because they were completely alone,
Drowning in the swimming pool, for their thoughts, the blue,
Were drowning too.

An isolated mission somewhere in Purgatory

Standing in a corner side by side
Two anonymous creatures left for the night
One tall and thin their grey eyes sharp
Other small and quick like a fox
None was particularly better
Neither particularly worse
They were simply asked to slay the curse

The first raised an arm
Their chin tapping the sky
" The anathema is too great"
And he returned to hide
Rotting in the edge till covered black
Every soul decided to turn their back

The second's eyes sparkled
A glint of pride in their eyes
There's hope somewhere
And the war began
The days drew on for endless days
And concluded for weary nights

The anathema was beat

A cold Halloween night somewhere in Salem

Once each year at the brink of light
Shadows and monsters creep
Black voices wailing at houses
Until they see their homes

Mourning what once was fairy tale
Their white eyes become wet
Cracked knuckles graced the wooden door
The live and weary met

History cries in fate's unknowing arms
Future kissed past's cold cheek

They're embrace held for hours on
But meeting came to end

Year by year passes with distance
And kisses grow more chaste
Until one day knocking ceased sound
Fate's left past in the past

A windy Sunday somewhere in Maine

As I lay down amongst the earth's children
I wonder if you're okay, if you'd be okay
With me, and my back crushing your counterparts.
The shore below speaks softly, unlike you,
And I can't help but grow unnerved by the crashes beneath us.

Time passes quickly here
Though you cannot see it
Through the thickness of weary sky.
The sky speaks in low whisper,
Carrying its icy heart to the mortals below
And I listen with a twitch,
For the wind sounds too much like you.
And I will try to reach for your hand,
The dirt making room for you,
Only to catch nothing but the wind,
Who weeps endlessly.

Shruti Panda

Age: 12, Grade: 7

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Kelly Rebhan

Category: Humor

Pandemonium

Never go on a roller coaster with a crazy best friend. That's what I thought to myself when I turned down my friend for the fiftieth time at Six Flags that day.

“Let’s just not....”

“Come *on!* It’ll be fun!” Alex was jumping with excitement, her eyes shining.

“Look, I see an ice cream stand - let’s get some!”

“No, we can always get ice cream, but we can’t always go on a roller coaster! Try it, I’m telling you. It. Will. Be. Fun!” Her reply confirmed that she wasn’t going to let me back out of this. And that she saw through my weak attempt to distract her.

“Please....” Alex made puppy eyes, hoping I would agree.

“The puppy eyes won’t help, Alex,” I said.

“Just try it. Come on,” Alex was tugging on my arm, acting like a little kid asking for a new toy.

“Alexia.” my voice struck her as I had used her given name. Only her mom called her that, and she called her that only when Alex was in trouble.

I groaned. Just looking at the roller coaster made me feel sick. The line moved up, and she dragged me along, weaving her way through the people heading towards different rides. Children wandered around with their parents, holding ice creams, and popsicles. I sniffed the air a few times, and smelled coffee. I turned, and saw a small cafe; a vending machine, filled with frappuccinos was right behind the window. People were walking out, holding their drinks, and laughing. Alex tugged on my arm, and I looked above me. We were standing right under the sign:

“PANDEMONIUM : The Adventure Of Your Life”

I heard the people on the ride scream as the roller coaster sped over the incline of the track and dropped into a slow, twisting loop. My stomach turned, and I instantly regretted the two slices of pizza I had eaten an hour ago. I grimaced.

“Don’t you think you’re over-reacting? Just a little bit?” she asked, looking at my expression.

“I’m not over-reacting, I’m having a normal reaction towards a creepy roller coaster that twists too much and goes too fast. I’m freaking out!” I exclaimed.

“I promise it will be fun. Like, really fun. Trust me!”

A group of people who had just gotten off the ride crossed in front of us, two of them looking sick. I turned towards her, my face skeptical.

“*Fun?* Really? *Fun?*”

“Why is it so hard to convince you?” Alex whined. “Let’s just go- try it!”

“*Sure*, it will be *fun*,” I rolled my eyes, and tried my best to ignore the voice in my head that kept telling me that I still could run back through the line. Clearly, that was not an option,

considering how excited she was.

“Ooh, look! It’s finally our turn! Come on! This is going to be awesome!”

“Oh no....”

“Just come on. There’s people behind us,” she said.

Before I could say no, I was standing in front of the car for the ride. There were about five people in front of us. I looked over at one of the park employees, who was organizing everyone into the rows of seats in the car. There were two seats per row, and people were partnering up with their friends and family. The employee got four rows of people situated; she asked for more people to come up for the six remaining rows.

Alex tugged on my arm, and I followed. We sat down, and thanks to Alex, we were sitting in the first row. Could this get worse? A woman pulled the long bar that acted as the seatbelt over our arms. She smiled and said “Enjoy your ride! Get ready to speed through the adventure of your lives!”

I tried my best to glare at Alex, but my face slipped into a pout. I heard the machinery turn, and I squeezed her hand. She grinned at me as our car ascended the track. The car moved with exaggerated slowness. I made the mistake of looking down, the crowd below appearing tiny, the other roller coasters looking more twisted than ever, and once again the contents of my stomach churned.

It suddenly stopped, and I realized that this had been the calm before the storm.

The car moved forward, and I felt it tilt. We fell, and all of us screamed, some out of enjoyment and some, like me, out of fear. The car slowed down for about half a second, and I looked forward, hoping to see the end of the ride.

But all I saw were three twisting loops.

I bit my lip, and tried to catch my breath before I started screaming again. I clenched her hand, and we rolled over the first loop. The world spun as the car dropped over the other two loops and lurched to a stop. We were on the top of yet another incline. It seemed like the ride was never ending.

My throat was dry, and my heart was pounding. Suddenly, the car dropped and my stomach swooped. The car sped over the tracks, ascending and descending. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, I let out a laugh. Surprise hit me, yet I couldn’t stop the laughter from the feel of the wind blowing through my hair and the thrill that came from the speed.

After twists and turns, we finally slowed to a stop. Getting out of the car, I stumbled, still feeling a little dizzy.

A few minutes later, once we were sitting in the park restaurant, each holding a two scoop ice cream cone, Alex spoke.

“That was the best thing ever! Right?”

I didn’t know what to say. The ride had been thrilling and scary, but I had enjoyed it, and that surprised me.

“It wasn’t too bad,” I replied. When I saw Alex open her mouth, I saw her response in her eyes. They were wide with excitement. She looked ready to hop on every other roller coaster in the park.

“But just to be clear, we are not doing a roller coaster marathon,” I added.

“Let’s make a deal - since my birthday is in four months, come with me and do a few more roller coasters as my birthday gift - oh, and I’ll pay for the tickets, even though it’ll be my birthday,” Alex rushed through the last part of her sentence, as though she were bribing me.

Then I said something she didn't expect to hear at all.

"I'll pay for both of our tickets, and I'll do the roller coasters of your choice. But you will owe me an ice cream for each roller coaster, ok?"

She laughed and said, "Of course! Oh, and after that, let's try ziplining! I can't believe you haven't tried that yet! It is *so* fun!"

I shook my head. Somethings never change. My phone buzzed, and I looked down. My mom was here. I looked at the time; it was six o'clock already.

We paid for our ice creams and started walking towards my mom's car. Climbing in, I grinned. While Alex narrated the events of our day to my mom, I closed my eyes and leaned back, exhausted.

Maybe roller coasters weren't that bad. And maybe trying the zipline wouldn't hurt either.

Peyton Panos

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Sailing

The first thing I heard before I opened my eyes was the squawk of seagulls.

“Awwwwk”

“Awwwwk”

“Awwwwk”

God, I hate seagulls. Yeah, yeah I know. I should be eternally grateful for living on this beautiful key and basically living the dream of about 90% of all Americans.

I roll over and squint into the sun. God, the sun. Why does it have to be so bright? And in my eyes, to boot? Yeah, yeah, I know. Seattle gets rainfall 80% of the year and the sun shines only three days in the summer there. Seattleites would *kill* for sunshine in their eyes in the morning. I know, because I left Seattle behind in a fog of rain and landed here -- in paradise.

I roll over, shake the sleep from my head, get up and walk over to my half-clean pile of clothes. I sift through and find a pair of shorts and a t-shirt that smell pretty good. I throw them on and slide into my flip flops.

Because I forgot to load the coffeemaker last night, I think I'll treat myself to a cup of joe at the local diner and maybe order a little breakfast to go with it.

“Hey, Ashlyn.”

“Hey, Peyton, what's up?”

“I need to steal the newspaper, today's paper.”

“Why do you still read the paper?”

“Because classifieds rock.”

“Fair enough.”

“Oh my God, Ashlyn.”

“What, is somebody selling a lawnmower?”

“No the classifieds have been replaced by a mega ad for some kind of contest.”

“Is it a race?”

“Better, it is a story about this old sailor who can't sail his boat anymore so he is auctioning it, but get this he wants to hold a sailing contest to see who gets a portion of the proceeds.”

“Is the contest like, a regatta?”

“No, the paper says it is the first and only Youth Endurance Sailing Challenge.”

“Peyton there doesn't seem to be any rules on the paper.”

“The rules are apparently on a small public island called Mile Out Island.”

“So do you want to go there after work?”

“Sure Peyton.”

“You don't have to help out at the coffee shop for that much longer so I'll prep the prams.”

“HAHAHAHAH, Peyton Panos prepped a pile of pristine prams.”

“Ash your alliteration will be the death me.”

Prams as a whole are small square boat usually seven feet long and four feet wide with a fairly flat bottom. Normally they are made specifically for lakes, however my pram that was ten feet long and four feet wide which made it ideal for riding the waves of the gulf. It was a racing vessel. That alone didn't make it special, what made the my boat so different from anything was the unusually large large jib. That gave the rabbit such an edge in the regattas that sometimes took place up north a few miles. Ashlyn's pram was modified as well though for a different purpose. She made her pram eight feet long and four feet wide. She covered the front of the pram so she could get out of the weather. Ashlyn's covered area on the pram was six feet long and four feet wide. You only had about a three foot high ceiling so sitting was the only option.

"Hey Peyton."

"Hi Ashlyn so who wants to ask their parents for a ride to the beach?"

"You'll have to."

"Why Ashlyn?"

"Well I'm the only with enough room to bring the map, compass, and snacks."

"So why do you need me to ask my parents."

"Because I have to pack My boat."

"Ok Ashlyn fair enough."

"Mom could you take me and Ashlyn down to the beach."

"Peyton it is a two minute walk away."

"Not with the prams, we can't carry those boats."

"Wait, plural as in two prams."

"Yeah mom Ashlyn is coming."

"Fine but you have to wear life vests."

"Deal."

We ride to the beach in our respective boats. The my boat arriving before the Ashlyn's. As soon as my mom drives away I climb into Ashlyn's covered area where Ashlyn is already pouring over the map.

"Peyton Mile Out Island is not only a mile east but two miles to the north."

"We should be able to make it there."

"Ok Peyton I guess the winds will be blowing crosswise the entire time."

We prepare the sails and leave. As expected I have to take down my jib entirely to keep from leaving ash in the dust. I start to get bored so I pick up my walky talky, but ashlyn calls first.

"Hey peyton the island should be coming up in a few minutes."

"Cool, hey ash what do you think the rules will be."

"I'm more worried about the prize."

"Really I thought that It was just going to be cash."

"Well what if it isn't, what if we win and the old guy just congratulates us on winning."

"Well it's not like we need the money."

"Besides proceeds has never meant anything other than cash."

"Peyton we are about fifty feet from the island and I don't see it."

"Me neither."

"Ashlyn what tide it is."

"Don't you have a watch."

"T.I.D.E not time."

"Oh it is high tide."

"Well how long until low tide."

“Maybe ten minutes.”

“Cool, hey Ashlyn am I on top of the island yet.”

“Yeah you are right on top of it.”

“Hey Ashlyn how big is this island.”

“about thirty feet by forty feet, but since it is underwater half the day that map probably isn't accurate.”

“Ok Ashlyn I probably shouldn't be right on top of it.”

I see Ashlyn stand up on her boat and begin to tie the sails up so I do the same. Both of us have just finished throwing our anchors onto where the island is supposed to be when the first dead branches of a bush appear. After a few long minutes the island comes into full view. We anxiously disembark. Though the wet sand did slow our progress it is probably the only thing keeping the small grove of dead bushes here. We see a small ziplock bag waving excitedly in the breeze tied to a dead bush. We run over to the grove and open the ziplock bag. Inside are about fifty pieces of typed instructions.

“Ash I'll read one and you make sure that they are all the same”

“They seem to be identical so I really want to read the rules”

Official rules and regulations of the first and only Youth Endurance Sailing Challenge.

1. The sailing vessel must have no motor or propeller.
2. Each sailing vessel may contain only one person.(Animals allowed)
3. 24.414289, -81.891403 is the location you must reach.(I suggest using gps)
4. You must bring three days worth of food and water. (shelter is also important)
5. Castoff at six am on smathers beach.(tuesday)
6. You can either go solo or in a group of no more than three.
7. All boats must be piloted or anchored at all times.(no towing unguided boats)
8. The maximum size for the boat can't exceed twelve feet by five feet.
9. Parents must give a signature saying that they allow their kid to go on this trip.
10. No one over 18 is allowed to compete.

Sign here to confirm that you accept all responsibilities for all injuries and damage you may encounter. Last name _____ First name _____

“These rules seem really easy, Ashlyn”

“There is probably something else going on there.”

“What?”

“What happens once we get to this island, we can't just sit there for a few days?”

“Ash, speaking of sit what are you going to do about Barkey, that dog will bite through doors to try and find you if you are gone too long.”

“We'll just have to bring him.”

“How exactly do you plan to bring a schnauzer on a weeklong voyage to some forgotten island.”

“Barkey is a little dog how much do you think he eats”

“Let's take a few instruction sheets and play with logistics later Ashlyn.”

“You're right we need to prep the prams before the tide comes in.”

“Yeah it looks like a storm is coming as well.”

As Ashlyn’s boat glides along the surf in front of me minutes melt into hours. I pull out the rules and look on the back, still blank, I sigh and wonder what we have signed up for. I still haven’t physically signed anything, but Ashlyn has she has emotionally signed the contract. She needs this monetary boost if she ever wants to study abroad. Why else would any fifteen year old work in coffee shop. But at the rate the coffee shop was paying her she would be thirty before she could afford to send herself to England. So her only option was this contest or have her parents take out a loan from the bank. I sign the contest rules.

“Ashlyn make sure that you sign the rules.”

“That’s the first thing that I did.”

“Ashlyn How much does barkey eat?”

“About three cups of dry dog food and bowl of water.”

“Ash what are we going to do about water.”

“Peyton look out!”

Talking on the radio had distracted me from the luffing sail that had caught wind going the opposite direction. My only instinct is to not fall into the sea so I dive headfirst into the boom. The boom must have knocked me out for awhile. Because all I can see is a dim glow and all I can feel is pain. Until something stops and I feel nothing, that must have been the painkillers.

“Peyton wake up.”

“Ashlyn where am I.”

“The hospital.”

“what happened to my boat.”

“She’s lost at sea.”

“But how will I race.”

“Peyton your mom doesn't want you sailing, like ever again.”

“No sailing at all.”

“Besides your concussion is way too serious to go out again.”

“How long is the recovery time.”

“Two weeks.”

I tear my eyes away from ashlyn’s sad but smiling face, and realize how serious this must have been. There was a heart rate monitor and several x-rays of my skull.

“Ashlyn what time is it?”

“One am, Peyton I have to go in a few minutes.”

“To go to work?”

“No I’m missing work for half of the week.”

“Ashlyn your boss will fire you.”

“Yeah I'm all in for the competition.”

“In that case Ashlyn I want you to go to my house and take anything of mine that you need.”

“Peyton I’m not going to rob you for a race.”

“Fine, then just take the sailing stuff I won’t need i.t”

“Get well soon, oh and here's your radio so we can talk. ”

Peyton needs a win right now almost as much as me. I duck into my mom’s car and tell her to drop me off at peyton’s house. I find his key under the doormat and before know it I am in his attic. The two things I take are his de-salinisation filter and his waterproof bag. I then walk to the empty lot where my boat is stored, and crawl into my little living space where my clothes, food, and camping gear are and stuff them into the waterproof bag. The sun is up when I’m finally

done with the boat.

“Hey peyton are you up?”

“Yeah.”

“Well I go the boat prepped for tomorrow's race.”

“What did you need from my house.”

“Just a waterproof bag and the de-salinisation filter.”

“Ok, but be careful the filter is really old so you should test it.”

“Got it Peyton.”

“Bye Ashlyn.”

I walk the two minutes to my house and promptly collapse on my bed. I wake up to my mom yelling that dinner is ready. I eat and excuse myself to make the final checks of my gear. I decide to bring Barkey along for the check because he probably won't get much exercise on the boat.

With all checks complete I pick up the radio and call Peyton.

“Peyton are you there.”

“Yeah Ashlyn I somehow haven't moved.”

“Sorry, but anyway the boat is ready and Barkey seems pretty happy with his dog bed that I have set up in the corner.”

“Cool but did you test the filter?”

“No I'll do that right now I'll be back in a few.”

I walk to the beach and, staying as dry as possible I feed the hose into the sea. And I pump the water through the filter the water isn't salty.

“The filter works.”

“Ok good, well bye Ashlyn.”

I walk home and sleep even though it's only eight o'clock. My alarm gets me and my mom up at five o'clock we drive to the beach and wait with the other early contestants for an hour. At precisely six o'clock a truck pulls up with an elderly man he grabs a megaphone and counts down from ten. We get the hint and rush to our boats and get ready. We weigh anchor the second that he says one. Soon after I am underway I check my map and gps I decide to go completely perpendicular to the wind which will land me a mile south of the island, but going perpendicular is a lot faster. Time melts away as I pet Barkey and stare at the GPS. The small dot on the gps gets within a mile north of me and I turn almost ninety degrees away from the wind. Barky startles awake and I hold onto him to keep him from slipping. The pack of prams that sailed straight for the Island were a half mile behind me but they are going considerably faster than me. In the end I cut several of them off but me and the lead pram arrive at the same time. As if on cue the old man steps out from behind a bush.

“Oh well it looks like a tie, you should probably set up camp we have to be up by four am tomorrow.”

At which point barkey sees a bird or something and immediately begins barking for all he is worth. Luckily he stops shortly after he starts.

“As I was saying, you need to be awake by four am because that is when the coordinates of three buoys will be given out.”

I sail next to the dock and tie up my pram. I take my hammock and Barkey to a small grove of trees on the west end of the island. After the hammock is set up I take my food and water purifier to my little base camp and relax. The next morning at four am I am by the dock with Barkey when over megaphone the old man calls out three coordinates.

“24.585217, -81.854153.”

“24.64452, -81.497269.”

“24.360859, -81.44783.”

“The problem is that only one buoy exists.”

While checking my GPS realize one buoy is close but the wind is all wrong. There is a buoy that is far but aligned with the wind. Then there is the final buoy close but in an inlet so I can't sail straight at it. It's probably the close one. I set out into the wind slowly zigzagging until I pass the coordinates and realize I chose wrong. I sail slowly and sadly back to the island and anchor about three hundred feet off the dock. It is about a half hour before anyone shows up apparently there was no buoy at any coordinates. I check the tides on a whim. It is just now low tide. I weigh anchor and began zigzagging toward the coordinates. It is only when I have a mile lead that people start to follow me but by then It is too late I see the glint of orange. While I turn towards the buoy the wind gusts and shoots me forward. The buoy is anchored to the bottom and when I slam into it the line gets wrapped on my keel. Seeing the competitors closing in I grab my line knife and dive overboard. All I need is the buoy so I cut everything else away.

Once I have the buoy, people start to turn around. Sailing back to the island as the victor and presenting the buoy to the old man was the greatest feeling. Soon after the presentation he gave me one of those big checks. I thanked him and left. Halfway back I am in range of peyton's radio.

“Peyton I won.”

“Yay.”

“Aren't you happy for me?”

“It's just that you are leaving me and I can't sail.”

“There is enough money for both of us to go.”

“Thank you Ashlyn.”

Lauren Parker

Age: 12, Grade: 7

School Name: Southern Boone Middle School, Ashland, MO

Educator: Stephanie Spencer

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The Life of Linda

In a small hospital, in a small town (West Monroe, Louisiana), lay a baby. Newborn and beautiful. August 17th to be remembered by generations. Linda Louise Fletcher the name tag read, hanging by a thread on the end of her crib, draped in pink. Her parents, James and Ethel Fletcher, happy as could be, walking out with their second child. Jimmy, her older brother, anxiously waiting in their 42' Ford, peaking his nose out the window. Ethel held Linda snugly on their short ride to their small home situated in West Monroe. Both her parents white, but her mother was olive-toned, much like my dad.

Growing up in West Monroe was, well, complicated. It was a different time and everything was different. When, on a rare occasion, Linda would go to a movie with her scooches, Pat, Charlotte, and Mary Alice, it would only cost \$1.25, that's as much as a pack of gum now. Candy was a dime and so was a coke, though both of those were rarely bought, for her parents maintained a tight grip on a limited budget. Clothing was really different. When Linda was a teen she would never wear pants, it was unheard of. She would wear straight skirts, flats, loafers, bobby socks, sweaters in the winter, and saddle oxfords. Her brothers would wear blue jeans, rolled up, sports shirts, and dress pants, but not too dressy, just casual. After school everyone would rush to the local DQ for a cheeseburger and curly-que fries. Surprisingly, pizza was unheard of. After finishing those salty wonders (french fries) the average teen would pull out their 8 track and groove to some Beach Boys or Elvis Presley.

As time passed and little Linda Fletcher grew into a young adult, she had more responsibilities. She graduated high school and went on to Northeast Louisiana University, studying secretary science. She never graduated, though, for she only completed 1 ½ years of a 2 year program. She went on, in her early twenties, to be a secretary for a lawyer, a vocal rehabilitation office, Malvern Junior High School, and a chiropractor. Between jobs Linda enjoyed sewing, hemming, embroidering, and creweling along with basketball for only her sixth grade year.

One wispy night, she and her friend were driving, and ran a stop sign, t-boning another car. She got through with only a couple bruises and an indentation to her shin bone. The doctor said if her bones were not so strong, she would have easily broken it. About ten years ago, she fell through the ceiling from the attic into the living room, thankfully, she did not fall all the way through and caught herself on a joist. Again, she did not have a bone broken.

Through her life Linda has lived through many elections, like Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon (the rest are kind of a blur). She heard the news of Vietnam on her crackly radio and didn't take it well. At this time she was already married and her husband could easily be in the nationwide draft. Larry, her husband, was

eventually drafted, but to both of their surprises, he was turned down because of impaired hearing. Other than Vietnam, Linda only experienced smaller wars such as the Iraqi war. Now Linda lives in a quaint town in Arkansas secluded from the stress of the news and local problems (she only has 5 channels.) Linda is the best grandma in the world, and I thank her for everything she has given me.

Love you Grammy,
Lauren

Bridget Pegg

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Incarnate Word Academy, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Meghan Farrell

Category: Short Story

Bundle Of Joy

For a week, we retreated deep within the recesses of our home, shutting the blinds, absently shuffling around the kitchen, and above all, not looking at each other. Casseroles were deposited on the doorstep with pastel sympathy cards, to be scooped up as soon as the neighbors gave up knocking and left. Later they'd rot untouched in the fridge, because I was ordered to undergo a strict diet post-operation and Patrick wouldn't hardly eat anything, excuse or not. His relatives had taken to calling him one right after the other, a chorus of murmured advice. He'd go into the other room and whisper with them about how worried he was for me. Me! Apparently, I was acting odd. Not how a childless mother-to-be ought to conduct herself.

During the first psychologist session, scheduled *one day* after I was released from the hospital, we were each asked how we were doing. Patrick took in a deep, rattling breath, and talked a good two hours about how hard it was. All he'd gotten was a final cradle with a too still baby, a family picture with just him and a corpse held gently. I didn't want to be near anything dead so I waited off to the side while a nurse kept stroking my hair like I was a child to be soothed, asking me if I was *really, really sure* if I didn't want to see her. After I first heard that the child was dead, I started panicking and screaming, *GetitoutgetitoutGETITOUT!*

When Patrick finally finished letting all his feelings out, he faced me?Your Turn!?and I felt guilty, not because I'd done anything wrong but because I knew that I was *supposed* to feel that way, like an actress missing her cues.

"I'm fine," I said, tacking on, "I guess."

I was still in shock, they told me. Wile E. Coyote hovering over a cliff, not yet fully comprehending what happened. Patrick was waiting for that realization, almost egging me on to break down like he'd done. At least I was doing something, going on with life instead of looking permanently shocked, clear blue eyes wide, hair frazzled, mouth slightly open as if he couldn't muster enough energy to close it. I'd caught him simply staring at the blank wall the other day, tears dripping down onto the couch. He'd turned to look at me, and for a moment, I could see it: a quick little stab of anger before he dissolved into dullness again.

I knew that there were risks associated with being pregnant at my age, but they were unknown, something that happened to *other* women, the poor things. I didn't actually think that anything would happen, which is why I didn't pay any attention. Friends instructed me to keep a diary of every movement, every stomach upset and food craving, but after a few days I fell through. They'd told me stories, too, of how they could tell their Tiny Jack or Sophie's mood in the womb. There was supposed to be this motherly intuition, wasn't there? An innate connection to your baby, tethered with the umbilical cord, where you Just Knew what was going on. Patrick had thought that if I simply tried hard enough, I could radio-dial my way to medical diagnosis. The entire eight months I had been told that there was a baby inside me, felt her kicking, and yet, there was a disconnect; I would look down at the watermelon-lump and think *where'd that come*

from?

A few hours before Patrick rushed me to the hospital, my sister called and asked if the baby was being too unbearable. “I know that they can get into gymnastics at that point,” She joked.

“No, actually?” I faltered. I hadn’t had any movement lately.

There was a feeling of relief: *no kicking!*

And then of panic: *no kicking!*

“I gotta go? Patrick! I think I should see a doctor!”

Immediately, Mr. Father-To-Be was at my side, a guiding hand on my back because I had turned delicate with all my bulk. “Why?? Are you going into??”

“No, no. I’m probably being silly, but I haven’t felt anything recently.”

“Like, how recently?”

I looked down. “I’m not sure. I just noticed.”

He exhaled through his teeth, waiting a beat. “C’mon. I’ll call them.”

The doctor had shuffled in with his med student posse, all of them laughably solemn.

“Mrs. Miller,” They said, and that’s when I knew it was bad, because before then they’d called me was Mom. *Do you want some ice chips, Mom? Are you feeling okay, Mom? Mom, we need to get another test...* Patrick noticed the demotion, too, suddenly squeezing my hand tight.

“I know this may be difficult to hear, but your placenta ruptured.”

My hand had turned pale blue.

“The baby....the fetus...isn’t viable.”

I said nothing; I didn’t need to.

“What! Isn’t there *anything* you could do? At all? Even if it’s?” *Dangerous for her.* What Patrick *wanted* to say, before he cut himself off. That’s when I realized: It would be a shame if *I* died, a tragedy, but he losing his child was unthinkable. If it came down to it, Patrick would choose a baby he’d never met over his wife in a heartbeat, every time. And if I didn’t want to sacrifice myself, then I was unforgivable. I couldn’t hold a normal conversation with him ever since then, couldn’t stare into the eyes of a man who loved me, yes, but not enough. Patrick let out a half strangled sob, burying his face in the crook of my neck while I just laid there, slightly shocked, more than a little angry. At what, I couldn’t quite figure out, but it simmered, barely contained. There was a strong desire to hit something, or shrug Patrick off of me and onto the ground with all of his sloppy sadness.

Nine days afterward, a tipsy Patrick takes to the less trusty side of the internet, googling things like *angels haunting* and *heaven proof*.

“We could always adopt,” I offer. We both know that won’t happen. I’ll get frustrated with the paperwork (I’m *offering* to help the poor orphans, why should it be this damn hard!) and soon give up. Patrick barks out an angry laugh, wrinkling his nose.

“But they wouldn’t *really* be mine. You just don’t get it.” For a second, I open my mouth but nothing comes out but a shocked, indignant *Hunh!* My husband, my supposedly adult soul-mate, is acting like a teenager. How the hell would he know? I got saddled with extra hormones and weight and throwing up in the office bathroom for hours on end for eight plus months. And what did he do? Announce all puppy-dog enthusiastic, *We’re pregnant!* During those awful weeks, *he* glowed, not me. Old ladies fawned on him and he’d get slaps on the back from beer-drowsy coworkers at parties while I munched gingerly on packets of saltines, hoping, praying

that I'd be able to keep them down.

"Hey!" I run over to him, grab his shirt in a big fistful so he can't escape. "I was the one who lost the baby!"

"Yes," Every syllable is ground out, accusation ringing clear, "But you didn't want her in the first place!"

Patrick wanted kids, at least four or five, dancing around the house with a great dane, a big happy American family like he'd grown up with. When I showed him the positive pregnancy test, he was ecstatic, crying, laughing, hugging, but all I could think about was all the pain that would come.

"I did want her," I say in a voice barely above a whisper. We both know it's a lie. At least, I didn't want her as much as he does.

Patrick shakes his head. "No. You didn't want her! You didn't?you didn't *try* hard enough!"

"So you think," My entire body shakes with rage, "This was my fault!"

"Yes! What if you were a good mother and figured out that my own daughter was sick? Or even pretended that you gave a damn about the fact that she's dead now, instead of acting like everything's okay? You know what? I'm sorta *glad* that she's gone, because I don't think I'd ever want some poor child to be raised by such a heartless bitch."

With that, he shoves me away, just enough to make me stumble back a few steps, so I can watch him slam the door behind him and drive off in the car. Once I'm sure that he's gone, really gone, I let out a scream. Then I pad over to my dresser, open the bottom drawer and shift all the clothing aside. Carefully folded underneath is a miniscule pink onesie, embroidered with *Audrey*, my Mother's name. I hold it tight and cry till I feel a little bit better.

Jonathon Potochnic

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Central High School, Saint Joseph, MO

Educator: Kyla Ward

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

Perditionem Frigidum

A man leads - A man follows

Canto I - The Forest

I woke not knowing I had previously fallen asleep. This isn't the home studio where I worked on my books. The bed in my room I had fallen asleep in was replaced with the grass I now rest on. I know it's grass, despite the grogginess of my eyes and the strange darkness that casts a shadow over my surroundings. The grass is tough and dry, more reminiscent to crabgrass, the kind you get at a beach or something. I am in some sort of valley surrounded by trees that only contains more darkness and pulses of uncertainty. Eyes develop in front of me in the nearest brush and I am frozen, not by the remarkable cold of the forest, but by the ominous the multiplication of red eyes in the forest around me. I am soon encircled by the burning eyes of the creatures and prepare to reer my fists, always my first defense, but a light emerges from behind and I turn. A torch illuminates a man making his way towards me through the brush, scaring off the hateful eyes that had entrapped me. He is wearing a remarkably sharp, albeit old, suit that contrasts highly from forest around him. The white suite stands out from the darkness of this place, and also the rags I just noticed I was sporting. Despite looking foreign in this world, he looks remarkable comfortable.

"Finally, I found you!" he says revealing a pocket watch with a complementary metal chain that keeps it connected to his dress pants. He analyzes the clock and then shows it's face to me.

"I must inform you, we are on a tight schedule," he says putting it away. He gestures with his hand to follow him into the forest and I do so, confused, but ultimately happy that I didn't have to face further difficulty with those red eyes in isolation. The man in the white suit takes out a cuban and lights it on the torch, puffing until the cigar reached satisfactory temperature.

He looked back as we walked onto what developed into a trail and said, "my name is Ligriv and I am going to show you the city of Lived, the city some refer to as hell".

He continued on as he looked to follow a path he seemingly knew, "It's certainly different than the city you left. L.A. is one of our main suppliers, especially on the Earth you inhabit now, it's grown exponentially over the years". He took another puff and continued as I followed in light of the torch, I guess in all reality is doesn't really matter".

The density of the brush began to decrease and an ominous blue began to highlight the leaves of the lonely forest. Other than the blue accent of the forest, it was hard to see beyond the man and the light of his torch. It grew colder the closer we moved towards the city.

We abruptly exited the forest and I stopped to look. Ligriv therefore stopped and looked with me. The city was a cold blue illuminated by many neon lights. The lights on many of the building delivered grotesque messages, almost acting like commands for the those watching. The numerous buildings and skyscrapers had holes and shattered windows that led to the overall perception of a populated, but terribly disheveled city. There was a tall, slender tower in the center of the city that quite literally had music notes exiting the penthouse of the tower into the

sky. I heard the violin faintly from our location.

“The music of Erich Zann, a lone violinist in the tall tower can be heard throughout all seven districts throughout the city,” the melancholy of the notes deriving from the stringed instrument didn’t settle my nerves at all, it just made me feel colder.

The city of Lived seemed like a disturbing iteration of a modern city today in the real world. This situation, however, seemed and felt very real.

Canto II - Limbo

A man leads. A man follows.

The oppressive violin music increased its volume and annoying pang on my ears as we made our way towards the city. A thick smoke or fog became more and more evident as we neared the entrance of the city. Lived was surrounded by a very tall, large wall. It stretched in both directions in the distance as far as I could see. We reached a door, comparably smaller to the wall, that was titled by an overhanging sign: “gatekeeper”.

There was a niche beside the door. As we neared the door more and more it appeared as though it was a booth of some form, with a frail man standing post inside. We stopped and waited as the thin man grabbed a small handle and slid open a glass pane to speak.

“What do you want?” he muttered on examining me like I was a mutt.

“You know what I am doing Norahc, we need to get into the city,” said Ligriv puffing his last of the cuban. “Need to show young Etand here the ropes,” Ligriv flicked the stub of the cuban, not breaking vision with this Norahc man. As my eyes adjusted more to the smoke and light of the booth I took a step back. This man by the name of Norahc was of a horrid appearance, a skeleton of a being no doubt. I waited in an unsettled mindset as the old metal gate slid upward, granting passage.

“If you look at the ground, here, this is the expansion system put in place,” Ligriv pointed with his finger as we continued our journey. There were gigantic rusted cogs, like you might see in a watch, in the ground. They were established in rows of metal plating running through the ground, which seemed to be able to promote movement along the line of metal for the cogs.

“It allows us to expand Lived to hold the new damned, and we fill in the holes after we move the walls with cement,” he said looking at me. I believe he sensed my unease of the gatekeeper, and in turn attempted to look more positive.

“They say when they started the city the conservatives tried to escape to the countryside,” he chuckled, attempting more for me to follow suite and less to continue to laugh by himself.

Considering the context of the situation, however, I couldn’t get over it. He looked disappointed that he had missed with that one. He itched his chin and looked perplexed. Even at his older age, his physical stature basically were screaming his emotions. I suppose he is probably lonely down here. Even if this place isn’t exactly down relative to Earth.

“Not really,” he said, ending the conversation.

-

“Here we are!” he said as a old manor emerged out of the smoke. It could have seemed out of place in the downtown districts, but we were still on the outskirts. This old and protected manor is where the secular artists, filmmakers, and authors reside,” he paused, then continued, “the manor, as you can see, is surrounded by impenetrable walls, no one can enter.”

The manor was of stone composition and Victorian in architectural style. The walls held the manor within and seemed to shun all on the outside.

“It protects against more than just the damned, this district of hell is the smallest of the districts, and the least in severity of punishment. The only thing they feel in there is sadness, which is

heaven compared to the remainder of hell.”

He pulled his pocketwatch out swiftly and looked. As he did this he spoke, “the only outside influence for them is Erich’s continuous, violin induced stream of melancholy.”

A light radiated above him, giving him what seemed to be a ring above his aged head. He put his watch away and looked over at me directly, “we must go.”

Canto III - Lust

We made our way down a road that seemed to lead right into the center of the city. Erich Zann’s tower grew taller and overshadowed our voyage more. The music was equally sad and repulsive, both at the same time creating a horrid overhanging dread of anticipation of the next coming note. This dread was supported by the physical appearance of the notes coming from the tower. As each faded another took its place. The notes had no bar lines or brackets. Just quarter and eighth notes rising from the tower’s peak.

A strange occurrence started a little while back on the road, but I had at first dismissed it. There was a curious wind that had developed and quickly grew in ferocity and thickness. Sand particles seemed evident in the thick of the wind which only maintained, if not increased, the strangeness of this occurrence.

“This is the district of the sexually flawed and perverted. This is, for the most part, a relatively quick section of the journey, for good reason,” he finished the statement with a disgusted facial expression. I could see this only barely, due to the increasing wind, but I was learning his emotions towards things could be easily sensed.

“The winds are most unforgiving,” I said partially covering my eyes to protect them from the whirling sand. He looked to me and nodded in response, but was looking through the street of sandy air for something.

“Here!” He grabbed me and pulled me to a cellar door to an adjacent sidewalk in a hasty fashion. He pulled the handle up and we quickly strode down the decrepit stairs and into the cellar. My eyes adjusted and I was moving quickly again to follow the in the footsteps of Ligriv.

To my surprise, the cellar wasn’t an isolated one. It was a long tunnel connecting to others and as we quickly shuffled by each large group of people we saw more and more of what appeared to be a network of tunnels seamlessly interconnected. Each group was a collection production members, cameraman, directors, and cinematographers filming their set.

As my eyes adjusted more to the tube and limelights that lined the tunnel walls I noticed the nature of the these films. The digital network of tunnels was a large establishment was of films made for adults. The perverted nudity that each cellar held was being sent out into the world to capitalize on the instincts of man and woman for monetary gain.

Ligriv’s travel grew faster. Subsequently, mine did as well. “This is one of the parts I hate most, so dark, cold, and disheveled”.

“The deeper in the tunnels you go, the less lightened they become, and the younger the actors get,” he found a passage and we made our way towards ascending stairs.

“Just like in life, the lust here is never met. Unlike in life, they’re here for eternity”.

Canto IV - Gluttony

When we crested the stairs I held my hand to my head, expecting the sand and winds. I was instead met with the music of Erich Zann. I thought it may prove better than the sand. It did not.

“Our next district is for those of excessive consumption,” he said taking out his antique pocket watching.

“Surebrec, a canine monster, watches over the district and controls the inhabitants with his screen,” he paused to replace the pocket watch from his suite where he had taken it out. “This

own is one of the more comical districts,” he chuckled which gave me some relief. He continued, “the damned here are so blind.”

The temperature decreased, even lower than before in the already cold Lived. A mist had permeated our lonely surroundings. The slight pauses between each district were eerie and silent. A sprinkle of rain started over us as we pushed on.

“Why does the city need to be expanded if there are quiet empty spaces like this?” I asked looking to his shoulder ahead of me expecting him to turn. He looked over with a new cigar perched on his lip, “to create enough separation between the districts,”.

“As you can image, bad things could occur if they were to mix,”

-

“Here we are!” we exited an alleyway and I was met with the smell of food almost immediately. I was drawn by the smell, although ever since my awakening I have not needed to use the restroom or desired to eat.

There was a collection of smaller buildings, a dozen or so, scattered across this part of Lived. A wild pack of people stood outside one building catching slop on their trays and began eating off of it morbidly. Some were on the ground, getting up looking weary as if they were trampled. The food came out of a pipe in the side of a building. Each of the buildings in this district had a pipe like this.

“There is the screen I told you of, and the red eyes above it,” said Ligriv pointing to a large rectangle under a set of ominous red eyes. “The people follow the screen, it shows a sign that correlates with one of the buildings, and they must eat there,” he said looking over the array of restaurants. They eat until they erupt into a pile of digestive organs, and then Surebrec quickly heals them to full health so they can continue to consume,” he said puffing the last of this current cuban. “They know nothing else”.

A symbol appeared on the screen and a man in the pack pointed it out and yelled. They all sprinted in a fury to an adjacent building plowing over one another while being pelted by the rain. It was disgusting and selfish. Ligriv laugh was guttural.

Canto V - The Parallel Towers of Greed and Heresy

“Our time restraints mean that I can only give you a brief summary of the Greed and Heresy districts,” said Ligriv checking for more cubans in his breast pocket. I listened intently, but also began pondering why he had cigars.

“They are the closest together of the districts and each embody a tower,” he paused to his satisfactory discovery of cigars in his inside coat pocket, “I will point them out as we move towards the Wrath and Violence district”.

-

Two high-reaching towers overshadowed the shallower area of buildings we occupied. They were slightly shorter but much wider than the tower of Erich Zann.

“On the left is Greed, and on the right is Heresy,” he said gesturing with his cuban at each correspondingly. “In the left tower of Greed there is a ticker with stock numbers rounding the building,” he paused to return the cigar for an easy puff.

“The rather unsettling part, and their ultimate punishment, is that the ticker is on every level of the building, and instead of repeating it only spawns new numbers,” he stopped to relieve the cigar from his lip, then continued, “they are constantly attempting to beat out the other inhabitants for more stock, selfishly under pressure at all times to out-do and stand over one another”.

“Then to the right is Heresy, with the reporters watching and recording slander on an endless excess of politicians and analysts arguing in circles over subjects that can never be won,” he looks to inspect the right building a little deeper, “neither one with the satisfaction of success, with the continuation of lies and half-lies to build a guilty and frail framework of discussion”. This seemed to trouble him more than usual, “instead of people looking for their own opinions in the endless debate, they look for the little truth”.

Canto VI - An Utmost Surprising Revelation

We continued on to Wrath and Violence. I wondered why Ligriv was addicted to cigars, being from heaven, an angel. I wondered why the Greed and Heresy districts were so close together, and why they embodied towers. I wondered why Wrath and Violence were together. Why his jokes were so atrocious. I wondered why I was here, or why my name was Etand in this city of Lived.

Ligriv, are you real?

Canto VII - The Awakening

The bed was not of cold, sad, isolated grass. The bed was a mattress of Los Angeles origin. I was home. A welcome return. Ligriv was not real, but a figment of my imagination in sleep. Lived was not real. The dream was of such an acute strangeness and was of an exact embodiment of my own personality.

I pulled both the Bible and Divine Comedy stacked atop the normal position on my nightstand. I was going to open them and look, but the redundancy hit me. I knew each word for word. I knew the description of hell that each carried.

It's clear now what Lived was. The problem is that the fictitious city presents me with a non-fictitious discomfort. I look down to the two parallel books laying juxtaposingly together on the bed sheets. These two books coinciding on the bed sheet together created discrepancy. They pulsed every couple seconds with the neon lights of the city just outside. One, Dante's Inferno, was a man's perception. The other, the Bible, was a symbol of tradition and foundation that one could seemingly trust.

The two books unsettled me laying on the bed together. This all spawned from a dream where hell had frozen over and a white suited man obsessed with cubans showed me the districts of the city Lived. I grabbed a cigar from the nightstand and lit it until it glowed independently. The ideas in my head now were quite real and conflicting, however. I looked down at the two books and decided to choose one outlook and develop it, seeing how incompatible the two were.

A man leads - A man follows

Grace Prestley

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Marnie Jenkins

Category: Short Story

Finding My Heart Downtown

Walking into Creative Writing class the first day after Winter break felt like a million pounds of snow dropped on my shoulders. The board read “How was your life changed this winter?”. If it were any other year, I would say not at all. This winter was different.

Every year, I fly back to Missouri to visit my family. Living in California for a few years makes Kansas City drab and depressing. This year, I got off the plane to see a snow-covered ground, like usual. I pulled my pea coat tighter around my waist and braced myself for the brutal cold of a midwest winter. I don't miss the cold.

I emerged from the gate to see my mother, smiling from ear to ear. She was ecstatic, of course. My 15-year-old brother accompanied her, and he was the first to greet me with a tight hug. I could feel his love in the short little squeeze. My father wasn't present; He works everyday until 5 and mustn't have been able to get the afternoon off.

We stepped out into the freezing winter and snowflakes clinged to my thin, blonde eyelashes. My shoulders shivered, as I was not used to the chill. We climbed into the warmth of the SUV and began the drive back to our suburban home. I took in beauty of the expansive trees and fields. You don't see that kind of stuff in California. I hummed along to the top-of-the-charts tune of the week and listened to my mom's chatter of how happy she was that I was home.

Once we arrived, all I could think about was putting on another layer of clothing before we stepped out again to commence our Christmas shopping. I stepped into my old room and embraced the childhood memories of purple walls and boy band posters. After soaking in the nostalgia for a few too many moments, I dropped my suitcase onto the four-poster bed and unzipped my belongings. I grabbed my favorite pair of boot socks and pulled my pea coat back on over a sweater.

We pulled up in front of Target and, after much complaining from me, parked as close to the front as possible. We finally reached the heaters of Target and I felt like I was in heaven. I could walk for hours through a Target without a care in the world.

After stumbling through the clothes aisles for a little bit, we made our way to the heart of the store and I heard a familiar voice come from behind us.

“Ana?” the voice said.

I turned to see the most beautiful guy from my graduating class 100 feet behind me.

“Bellamy? I haven’t seen you since graduation!”

“It’s been a while hasn’t it?” Bellamy replied.

My mom and brother wandered off and I couldn’t stop the blush from rising to my cheeks. We discussed our lives after high school for a while, which was strange. I’ve never spoken to him in my entire life, but he recognized me.

I was never the popular type in high school. I kept to myself and only spoke when spoken to. Needless to say, Bellamy Richardson didn’t speak to me. Now he was. I’d broken out of my shell a little in college, thanks to a reckless roommate who didn’t care what people thought of her. I was a lot braver now; asking Bellamy how his life was going and what his major was. We had a really nice conversation, the first one I’d had in awhile.

“My mom is calling me, but we should finish this sometime. Maybe over coffee?” Bellamy asked. My high school self was screaming internally.

“Yeah, that sounds nice,” I played my inner excitement off.

We said our goodbyes and I caught up to my mom, who had endless questions. After an eternity in Target, we made our way to the millions of other stores on my mother’s list and travelled back home. I took off my coat and a small piece of paper fell out of one of the pockets. A number was written on it, along with the name I was hoping for. I entered his number and sent a text.

Hey Bellamy, It’s Ana :)

I stared at my phone for way longer than necessary before a reply dinged through. Obviously, I waited a substantial amount of time before answering; I can’t seem desperate!

Hey! So when should we get that coffee?

Any time after Christmas works for me. What about you?

Sounds good. It’s a date :)

The last message of that conversation threw me for a loop. *A date? With Bellamy Richardson?* I didn’t even know how to reply, so I refrained from making myself look like an idiot. I’ve always been one to overthink things, and this felt like one of those times. I held my excitement in and headed down the stairs towards the kitchen. One thing I missed most while I was at College: Home-cooked meals. How did I live without this stuff?

The morning of my coffee date with Bellamy, nothing was going right. I woke up a half hour later than I wanted to, my hair was so tangled I almost couldn’t run a brush through it, and my make-up brushes were all crammed in the bottom of my suitcase. I prepared myself as much as I

could and made myself as presentable as possible.

I yelled a brief farewell to my parents and stepped out the front door and jogged towards Bellamy's Challenger.

"Hey there, stanger," Bellamy smirked.

"Hey," I replied with a smile.

We made small talk as we drove towards a Starbucks downtown. When we arrived, he asked me for my order and had me find us a table. I couldn't help but let anxious thoughts run through my mind. He walked back towards the table, drinks in hand, and sat across from me. We continued our conversation about life and thoughts and it was enjoyable. Since I went to college, I haven't been focused on male attention and it's nice to receive it for once.

"So, while we're here, what's your favorite part of Downtown Kansas City?" Bellamy asked.

"This is actually the first time I've been Downtown," I replied. "My parents always thought it was too far and we never needed to come down here."

"For real? Downtown is my favorite part of the city!"

"I always wanted to explore the city, but I never got the chance before I moved to Cali."

"Well, today's your lucky day, Ana," Bellamy smiled. "You happen to be spending the day with a Downtown expert."

We finished our coffee and Bellamy insisted on showing me his favorite parts of the city. I only agreed on the circumstance that he buys me dinner at the end of the night.

We started with his favorite attraction, Union Station. We explored the mini train display, the Christmas tree, and the beautiful architecture. After that, we wandered across a grassy area to the World War I Museum. The top of the building had a perfect view of the city. I took at least a million pictures before he dragged me to the monument part of the building. 217 feet above the ground; that's too high for me.

As we stood in line, I pushed my anxiety back into my stomach. I swallowed my pride and the elevator rose to the stop. We stepped off into open air and I immediately felt slightly queasy. He led me over to the edge and leaned on the suddenly unsteady-seeming rock. I guess he could sense my fear, because he grabbed my hand and squeezed a little. It was more comforting than I ever thought it would be. I'd never felt this safe with someone. He had a way of calming my nerves and making me brave.

After what felt like a million years on top of the memorial, we made the descent back to stable ground and decided to visit Crown Center. As soon as we arrived, I could sense the feeling of the holidays. Gold and silver decorations covered every window and streetlight. Trees were lit with

twinkle lights and I didn't even mind the bite of the wind. He pulled my hand towards a circle and the air got a little colder. The Crown Center Ice Terrace took my ice skating virginity and I fell on my butt at least a hundred times. Luckily, I had Bellamy to keep me on my feet the rest of the time. We spent two hours laughing and enjoying each other's company.

Unfortunately, the time came for us to continue our downtown journey. We unlaced our skates and turned them back in. I pulled my scarf a little tighter around my neck. Bellamy noticed my small adjustment and smiled a small smile at me.

Our final stop was the Country Club Plaza to see the famous lights. We parked and walked towards street level. Bellamy saw my tiny shiver as we stepped into the cold and draped his arm around my shoulders. I felt at home under his arm; it was comforting. He led me through the streets of the Plaza slowing every once in a while to point up at the beautiful lights on the buildings. The entire time, all I could think about was the weight of his arm and the reflection of the lights in his eyes. I felt on top of the world; I'd never felt that feeling before. He stopped in a park and looked at me with a look of pure happiness.

"I wish I could've told you before how beautiful I think you are," he said.

"Why didn't you?"

"You didn't talk much in high school. I always figured you weren't interested."

"The exact opposite actually," I blushed. Why do I always blush?

"Well, I'm glad I'm here with you right now."

He leaned towards me and every negative thought ran through my mind. I also couldn't help but enjoy the anticipation, the waiting. All I could think about was his lips, and then ours touched. His lips were as soft as I imagined, and my stomach felt like it was on fire. I will never forget that kiss, the most magical one I've ever felt.

We made our way through the Plaza and found a restaurant, but I don't remember much about the dinner. All I remember was his deep chuckle at the mention of a joke or his soft smile when we would make sudden eye contact.

He drove me back to my house and, as much as I dreaded it, we said our goodbyes. We swore to text and call, and to get together again the next time we were in town. I haven't seen Bellamy Richardson since, but we have plans for the summer. His dazzling smile and generous eyes left a mark on my heart, and that night in KC was the best night of my life.

Ananya Radhakrishnan

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Mary Institution & St Louis Day School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Meghan Clark

Category: Poetry

Lonely

Lonely

I sit there alone
In my cozy corner
Nose burried deep in a book
But eyes occasionally peeping out
To watch as they play
With joyful faces
Far away

There

They are there
I am here
They are together
I am alone
They are full of joy
I am full of longing
Dare I go?
Take a step?
But what if...
What if they don't accept me?
What if they...
But then the moment passes
And we are called inside
I seethe at my cowardice

In

I sit there
In
As they chatter
And when she asks me
I nod in agreement
Not really paying attention
A secret smile playing across the corner of my lips
Because I am
In

Ananya Radhakrishnan

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Mary Institution & St Louis Day School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Meghan Clark

Category: Poetry

The Best Thing To Be

On Monday I was a fair maiden
All the princes in the land pined for my hand
The boy who lives down the street says I look stupid
Well he doesn't get to be one of my suitors!

On Tuesday I was a pirate
Sailing the seven seas in my ship with ease
Arrrrr!

But then my little brother jumped in the wading pool sending a monstrous wave

All that remained of my ship was a soggy mess
When I demanded he pay me back 10 gold doubloons he ignored me
And when I tried to claw him with my pirate hook
I was the one who got in trouble!

On Wednesday I had the voice of a mermaid
Singing sweet songs to make one's heart flutter
My mother proclaimed my voice was simply majestic,
then told me to go play outside

On Thursday I was a famous artist
Drawing an artistic portrait of each member of my family
I made it so realistic and refined

My dad thought it looked like a bunch of potatoes with sticks sticking out
I told mom he really needed an appointment with the eye doctor

On Friday I was a magician performing tricks to awe all
But then my brother ran off with the penny I found in his ear
And I couldn't find any more

On Saturday I was an astronaut
I was going to be the first woman on Mars!
But then my dad told me to stop hopping,
it was making the floor thud and he couldn't concentrate

I told him I was moon walking
But he wouldn't take no for an answer
On Sunday I asked my mother what I should be
She bent down low and whispered in my ear
"Honey, the best thing you can be is..."

And can *you* guess what she said?

I bet you can't
You want to know?
Well...it's just me!

Sam Reynolds

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Frazier

Category: Critical Essay

WANTED: Dead or Alive?

One Christmas day, Richard Kuklinski was at a family dinner when he was interrupted by a business call. He left the house abruptly with no explanation given to his family to finish some work. He met his client in an empty parking lot, demanding he pay him what he owed. The client said “NO!” and that was the last time he spoke. Leaving the scene of the shooting, Richard went back to his family as if nothing ever happened and wasn’t questioned either. He loved his family, and never once hurt any of them. As a matter of fact, he did what he did in order to protect his little girls from the dangerous world outside. It wasn’t until he was in his fifties that he got caught for his countless murders and was labeled as a psychopath, one who lacks moral qualities such as sympathy, empathy, and remorse (Stamos). Richard did lack all of these qualities but with the exception of his family, the only people he cared about (Kuklinski). He was sent to prison for life, but was this an accurate treatment to give him? The extent in which psychopaths should be punished differs and depends on the amount of free will one has.

Free will is commonly debated about. Does it exist, or does it not? Well there are many theories out there supporting this question. The definition of free will is the ability to act at one’s own discretion (Cave). This allows someone to make a conscious decision between right and wrong. It’s just like in the cartoons watched as kids when a character is about to make a bad decision and has a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other. The angel and the devil represent the person’s conscience. In these circumstances, that person is aware that there is a right and wrong issue to the choice about to be made. This supports the idea of free will, that a person has the capability to make a choice knowing the rights and wrongs. But studies have shown that some people have deformities of their genes in the brain prohibiting them from physically being able to have free will.

The concept of Free Will is well known and the theories of there not being free will sometimes come from religion. Many religious people believe that everything they do is predestined and that God has everything happen for a reason. So people can start to believe that they aren’t in control of what they chose to do because it will happen regardless. When people no longer believe in free will, they no longer think that they are to blame for their actions (Cave).

In 2002, a study by two psychologists decided to preform an experiment to determine what would happen if people no longer believed they could make their own choices. With cheating made easily possible, two groups of college students were asked to take a math test. Because the cheating was made easy, most of the students chose to cheat even though they knew that decision was wrong. This study concluded that people, who no longer believe in free will,

would act more immorally than a person that does believe in free will (Cave).

Neuroscientists have found that psychopaths often have a malfunction in their MAOA allele. This malfunction is called MAOA-L. People with this malfunction have increased violent and aggressive behavior. People with the MAOA-L malfunction often have a smaller limbic system. The limbic system is associated with emotion, behavior, and long-term memory. While a psychopath may be aware of an action that is wrong and shouldn't be performed, generally they are incapable of stopping themselves from doing that action. (Hunter). Also depending on the person, it is possible that the person never developed the ability to know right from wrong in the first place. During fetal Brain development, serotonin, the earliest neurotransmitter system to develop, is released (Fallon 79). If the fetus inherits low activity high-risk form of the MAOA promoter, less MAO-A will be produced there and there will be less to break down monoamines such as serotonin. Therefore the Fetal Brain will be bathed in a higher-than-normal amount of that neurotransmitter and in response, the body will produce fewer of the receptors for that neurotransmitter or hormone. It will change size and cell structure and connection to the brain areas will be impacted by the flood. Those areas are turned off during fetal development and will continue to stay off after birth and throughout adulthood (Fallon 79).

Just like most other brain diseases, it is possible to test a person to see if they have psychopathy. The two types of testing available are behavioral tests, and imaging tests. The most famous behavioral test is PCL-R (psychopathy checklist, revised), developed by Robert Hare (Fallon 12). This test consists of twenty items each scored with a zero, one, or two, with zero being the lowest (12). The normal cutoff for diagnosis is a score of twenty-five to thirty (12). The behaviors most common in a psychopath are lack of empathy, sympathy, impulsivity, lack of goals, unreliability, being manipulative, non-remorseful and many more traits, which are observed when doing the PCL-R.

Studies have shown that children, who had a mother that smoked while they were pregnant, were more likely to end up having criminal tendencies. "Nicotine causes abnormalities in the development of attention and impulse control in the brain" (Hope). Nicotine is very damaging to the brain especially to minors under the age of twenty-one. The brain hasn't fully developed yet and if there is nicotine in a newborn's brain, this will cause deformities and prevent the brain from developing correctly. This will not allow the prefrontal cortex, limbic system, and other parts of the brain associated with empathy, morals, and self-control to develop and they will continue to not have these for the rest of their life.

Not only can psychopaths be formed through genetics, but environmental factors can play a huge role as well. Environmental factors such as abuse, bullying, and family issues are commonly noted in psychopaths. In youth, psychopaths are often abused or had lost one or more of their biological parents but they often deny early abuse out of embarrassment or to protect family membranes. (Fallon 90-91). Thirty-five percent of thirty-five psychopathic offenders in youth detention facilities have reported serious mistreatment throughout childhood (91). Genotype environmental correlation can interact with genes during development (91). Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse at a young age can cause the brain to rewire and can shut down parts

of the brain important to development. These parts of the brain can stay shut off throughout adulthood. So while they were not necessarily born with a gene malfunction, their brains over time were rewired and the genes were altered causing the mental illness. Although some are not born with the genetic malfunctions, other factors caused the brain to develop these deformities leaving the person to become a psychopath.

Just like Richard Kuklinski, Angelina Simpson was a cold-blooded murderer. She brutally tortured and murdered officer Terry Neely In 2009 (Simpson) (. In an interview she admitted that she expected to get the death penalty before she committed this crime. By saying this, she implied that she knew the choice she was making was wrong to the law yet she still believed she was doing what was right. This is an instance where the punishment she received fits the crime committed. It is a good thing that she didn't receive the death penalty though because it is immoral and she has a record of a mental illness. She has been in mental hospitals since the age of ten (Simpson). While she deserves some mental help, jail is a good punishment because she had enough free will to determine what she was going to do.

Regardless of the crime committed, the death penalty should never be a thing. While it is immoral for anyone to kill someone, by doing the exact same thing to the criminal would be hypocritical. As people say, two wrongs don't make a right. Prison is a worse punishment than the death penalty anyways because Prison for life isn't fun. There's no freedom, patrol, choices, it is all scheduled the way the Prison system works. It is hell in prison and many criminals would rather have the death penalty anyways. Giving them the easy way out won't teach them a lesson. Often time's people are wrongly accused for committing a crime and the evidence is often found out after the innocent man took the death penalty.

Each case and psychopath is different in many ways and has a different story to be told. Most are criminals and some are not. Some have been born a psychopath with full-blown gene deformities while some had experienced abuse and environmental factors, which helped with the progression of psychopathy. In the case of Robert Kuklinski, he was abused since he was very young by his father and bullied by kids throughout school. But in his later years when he was caught for his crimes and sent to prison, imaging scans have shown similar brain patters that psychopaths have. But the theory of what his punishment should be is still debatable because it is unknown whether he was born with these gene deformities or if they built up over time or whether it was all the environmental factors. Should he have been sent to a mental hospital in hopes of treating him or should he continue with prison? There is no for sure answer to which punishment a psychopath gets because each case is different but one can take many things into consideration and decide what is morally right for that person. (Word count: 2,032)

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Denae Richard

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Cor Jesu Academy, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Elise Aasgaard, Maria Sciaroni

Category: Poetry

The Living Youth

Running

A rush filled my departing soul.

Not departing as in the death of my soul, but rather the replenishing of a fresh soul. Describe a soul. It sounds foolish beyond means, but it was free, primitive, and growing younger by the millisecond. Conceived curious, I retained a wild heart. Through the belief that there's too much loving to do in this world, I knew I'd create a chaos. He did not desire to catch my wild heart, but rather he ran beside it; bringing forth a chaos with me, we cast off our youth on the city. Running ramped down empty, gritty streets...feeling the cold air sweep our fiery lungs... the soles of our feet aching. Did we have any concern? Not for a minute. Irresponsible delinquents. We felt like we could rule the world, living in a fast lane where all you could feel was the wind, and all you could hear was the speed of the car and the music pounding to the rhythm of our heartbeats. Together we were a fire, gasoline and the spark. The fire casted a shadow upon his deep cheek bones, and I knew he was overwhelmed with danger and curiosity. We were upside down... insane; But, I could give him one glance, and he knew my eyes were saying, "let's be corrupt tonight."

Change your Name

What is your name? Is your name your name or is it your label? Grace. You ponder the idea of sheer purity and beauty, but in actuality she's wildly astounding and adventurous. Lauren? One may associate basic. No, not a bit basic but carefree and shy beyond a particular meaning. If given the chance, would you change your name to change your label? Your name tells a story... your own story. But, **no one** could know that. Who is no one? No one is a label. Maybe no one really is **no one**. Maybe **no one** is everyone. A name could be a sound, associating music with names; that is why people name songs after a person, to give it a meaning. A meaning does not begin to describe a name. A name needs experiences, adventures, stories, and emotions. A name needs a body. A name needs a soul. A soul to feel is a necessity. A name without a soul is a tiger without stripes; it is no longer a tiger, but merely a lioness or a puma. Do you see how a change in character can change a name? Or perhaps a change in name can change the meaning. If you had a different name, would you be a different person? Would you be **no one**?

Lose Yourself

The tempo,
the beat,
and the vibrations
pulsing against the soles of my feet,
lightly tickling my heels.

Moving to the rhythm,
sweat forming beads and trickling on the surface
of our youthful skin.
We did not have to pretend to motion our heads
to the pulse of the bass.
We did not have to pretend.
Why?
Because we *created* the music,
the music that is our lives.
We were *dancing* to the beat,
and we were losing ourselves in our own *freedom*.

Live

For there is a capacious distinctness between existing and living. If you are simply existing, you are not living. But, if you are living, then you are existing as well. Between the two words a complex gap exists. It exists. The gap is not living. It is not adopting challenge. It is not roaming silent streets. The gap is not circumnavigating its heart to greater setting; for it contains no love, no heart, and no purpose. Many exist, but do not live. One encased by a device, distracted by a voice, or simply letting their eyes emerge into a TV is not living. By way of explanation, it is the dilemma of this world. There are greater sunsets to view, roads to be travelled, stars to admire, sunrises we should walk, and journeys to be planned. Why download pictures of sunsets when you could be capturing the picture yourself & experience the moment in its entirety? I will never comprehend this dilemma. That's the difference between existing and living my darling; If you only exist, you just simply aren't living, and maybe it truly isn't that complex.

Blueness

Through engaging into the simplicity of his mind, I have acquired ideas. Ideas about living, loving, freeing...prior to engagement, I did not discern blueness. I remained inquisitive as to why blueness is associated with sadness. Concepts galloped through my mind about blueness: the oceans & the sky. The seas and the skies were the most glorious aspects of nature I had come to apperceive, so why was blueness correlated with sadness? I recall a memory of blueness; it was the first time I emerged into those charming, but curious blue eyes- that was the first time I felt the loving. his ocean eyes freed my soul as we danced across the stars, me draped in blue dress in all -I was living. Ultimately but not intentionally, we escaped from one another's grasp. Maybe that in fact is why blueness is associated with sadness. Because when one misplaces a pair of sky eyes like those, nothing but heartache & misery can be felt. I have never confronted such a pair of eyes like his. Those eyes are addictive. It was transparent freedom.

Iris Roddy

Age: 12, Grade: 7

School Name: St Paul's Episcopal Day School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Molly Pruett

Category: Poetry

Winter's Hold

The sun has turned cold
Locked in winter's cruel hold
Taking away warmth in the early morn
Leaving us numb, lost, forlorn
Without love in our way
To continue as said, day after day
While frost covers the ground in an icy sheet
And snow marked upon by frozen feet
That break the unblemished white
Which touches everything in sight

Iris Roddy

Age: 12, Grade: 7

School Name: St Paul's Episcopal Day School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Molly Pruett

Category: Poetry

We Used To

We used to dance in the rain
Oblivious to a world full of pain
When we were young, we were free
And a perfect world we did see
But no life comes without chains
And through sorrow nothing gains

We used to run barefoot across the earth
Our lives filled with mirth
Not knowing the world outside
A world to which we were tied
We thought everyone was kind
How could we have been so blind?

We used to sing on cloudy days
With no sun above to blaze
We thought the world was full of light
But now it seems to have more night
We saw a perfect world, full of glee
But now I know it can never be

Iris Roddy

Age: 12, Grade: 7

School Name: St Paul's Episcopal Day School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Molly Pruett

Category: Poetry

Like A Bird

Like a bird I will rise
To feel the sun and skies
See all I can with my own two eyes
A sensation to forever prize

Like a bird I will sing
Clear and strong like the first spring
Feeling as high as a king
While I sing and raise my wing

Like a bird I will be free
Whoever I want I can be
Free to climb the highest tree
If only to find how far I can see

Christopher Rubio

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Alta Vista Charter High School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Katherine Laird Kimbrell

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Mom

I was woken by a sudden and gentle shake. My eyes still closed, I tried to remember the dream that had made me feel so happy. As I attempted to return to it, I felt another shake. Forcing myself, I sat up. My feet were still too short to feel the support of the hardwood floors under me. My mother called my name repeatedly when she noticed that my eyes would slowly close. After I was alert, she walked out the room and into the kitchen where she, I assume, prepared her lunch for another day of work; standing for 8 consecutive hours. Childishly complaining to her about leaving bed would be insulting. I stood up.

The small window above me let in a sliver of moonlight, just enough for me to put on my brothers old pants, dull shirt, and worn out shoes. I stood up and traced my mom's footsteps into the kitchen where she looked at me and held a single finger pressed against her lips. My brother would wake up in a couple hours for school, she made sure he was well rested.

We exited through the back door of our apartment quietly like trespassing mice. She would whisper in Spanish, "The neighbors are asleep." as we crept down the stairs. My mother knocked on the door on the left on the first floor; we lived on the fourth floor. After a few seconds of waiting, the door slowly opened. A woman, I over time assumed was family because of how often I saw her, stepped out. I heard my mother thanking the woman while softly pushing me inside. I had cried before to keep her from leaving me here, it never worked, I would end up inside either way. She would often come inside to comfort me, walk me over to a seat and stay for the couple minutes that she could, thinking that her presence would warm the room for the hours that she would be gone. Although the woman did not treat me like how I thought family should, we did not have much of a choice. When she left I was alone, I was cold.

My mother brought us from Mexico when we were still very young. Knowing more about the troubles she would face than the English language, she ventured here. She came with a dream that we would go on with opportunities that were not given to her, hoping that these opportunities would pull us out of the meager life we had always known. Like many families alike, she came here not only for herself, but for her two sons and her family. We were a handful to take care of, more so because she had to also fit the role of a father. Despite my brother and I causing her hair to whiten at a young age, my brother mostly, she still raised us the best she could.

Everyday she gets up for work no matter what her physical and mental state. Working hard, bringing food to the table and keeping a roof over our heads no matter how ungrateful we may have been. Grinding through the day so that she can hurry home to see her sons. Today will be like any other. She will be getting up at the same time with all the other parents giving their children a chance to pursue something better. She tries to remember the dream she had many years before that gave her the courage to travel to an foreign place. Attempting to return to the dream, she prepares her lunch with a meal she prepared yesterday. She goes to work today to support us so we can embody the vision she had for us many years ago. Hopefully, I will be able to make her dream of our success a reality, and in doing so make mine a reality as well.

Christopher Ruhnke

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Flash Fiction

Room 114

I have one month before my mom dies. My mom is the closest thing to me. My dad had passed away before I was even old enough to say “dad” and I am an only child. I had lived with my mom forever and the fun we had together never stopped. There were three things we loved to do together.

1. The beach. We lived less than 15 minutes away from the beach and we would visit almost every weekend. I would swim, surf, or just relax in the sand while my mom would read. The beach was the place for us to escape from our house on a long Sunday evening or the place to go when things were getting tough. There aren't any people at the beach who tell you what you've done wrong in life and no teachers telling you how to do your homework. This was the most relaxing place we would go and it was full of memories. Like the time me and my mom were playing catch with my brand new football I got. My mom threw it over my head and it got lost in the ocean. First I was mad but then we both just laughed it off and got a new one later that day. Another memory we had was the time my mom took me and my friend, Michael, fishing from the shore of the ocean. We had never gone fishing in the ocean but we always wanted to. We got some lures and headed out. When we were fishing, we had caught lots of cool fish. Right before we were about to leave, I hooked a small shark and we were all too scared to take the hook out of his mouth so Michael and my mom ran down to a fisherman near us to ask for help. He was surprised that we had caught a shark but helped us release it after we took a few pictures with it. We were all pretty embarrassed that we had to make the other man help us but it was also something none of us will forget. The beach was our favorite hangout spot and I will always remember how much fun we had there. I just wish I could take my mom there one more time but she is stuck in the hospital.

2. Traveling. My mom loved to travel with me and we have been to 15 different states in the past, including the boring state of Idaho, and my personal favorite, New York. We would drive the old, clunky van to everywhere we went. It barely moved and the gas was horrible but it was all we had ever since my dad passed away, and soon it would be all mine. In my favorite state New York, we went to a Yankees game, we took a tour of some boring place that I can't remember the name of, and went to the Statue of Liberty. My mom loved going to new places she hasn't been to before. We had countless memories from all the places we've been. One time, we were in California and we were given the key to the wrong room in our hotel. When we went in the room, there was a man laying on the bed who started cursing at us.

3. Baseball. She never knew much about baseball until she started coming to my games. After every game she would tell me how great I did even if I played terrible. The first time I ever hit a homerun, I thought the ball got lost in the woods behind the field. My birthday was 3 days later and she had found the ball and gave it to me for my birthday. If we weren't at the beach over the weekend, we were probably at a baseball tournament. After every game that we won, my mom

would take me out for ice cream. From the long drives to an out of town tournament, to long days at the baseball field, we would always have fun.

It was my mom's second week in the hospital and before time was up, I wanted to get her a present. I decided to give her my first ever home run ball, sand from the beach we always visited, and a plane ticket from the only time we rode on an airplane together. I worked on it for days and I couldn't wait to see the smile on her face when I walked in the room. I also made a card with a little note on the inside and a picture from every state we've been to. I jumped out of the taxi with my present in my hand to go give to my mom. I pressed the number 4 on the elevator and walked down the hall to room 114. I put a huge smile on my face and opened the door. She was gone. She wasn't in her bed. Tears started to run down my face. I ran to the front desk and asked where my mom was.

"Honey, she died 30 minutes go."

Kendall Runzi

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Jefferson High School, Festus, MO

Educator: Natalie Fallert

Category: Short Story

Experience Of A Lifetime

My grandma has always adored the joy of holidays and the thrill of adventure, and when paired with a knack for extravagance, you can create some pretty exciting memories. During the Christmas season, she puts up four fully decorated Christmas trees, carefully placed throughout the cinnamon-scented rooms of her house. She believes birthdays are a time of immense celebration, and no person she knows will go their day without hearing best wishes from her. Since the young age of two, she has taken me to more places than I have ever begun to wish for. From swimming in Hawaii to seeing the Beijing Olympics, I have done and seen a lot of spectacular things in my short 15 years of life. The experiences she has given me will last a lifetime, and for that I am grateful.

Our first trip my grandparents ever took us on was to Hawaii. Being so young, I don't remember much, but I do know the gist of the journey, and the things we did when we were there. My grandma and grandpa took me and my two older sisters, along with my two older cousins, on a plane ride from the St. Louis Airport to the tropics of Honolulu, Hawaii. We were only there for about three days, but it was packed with adventure, nonetheless. We swam in the towering waves of the Pacific Ocean. We drank fruit smoothies and ate octopus on the beach. The nights ended with a luau, where we all gathered around a crackling fire, surrounded by the warm glow of yellow strings of lights. We waded in the ocean at night, when the only thing you could see was the dark blue of the water at your feet, illuminated by the bright glow of the moon above. After days of frolicking in the sun and sand, we packed our things to head home from our grand adventure. We flew hours across the deep purple waves of the Pacific and the boxed shaped fields of the United States until we finally reached Missouri, right in the heart of the Midwest. Little did we know, this getaway would set a precedent for many vacations to come.

The next location on our series of adventures was to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. At this time, I had just turned six, so I have better recollections of the experiences this trip entailed. The same crew of my family boarded a plane, yet again, heading northwest to the vast land of Wyoming. The scenery was mountainous, similar to the atmosphere in Hawaii, except these happened to be covered in snow at the top. We spent a lot of time downtown, going shop to shop, feeling like we were part of the Wild West. We got dressed up in cowboy hats and bandanas at a local restaurant and tried fizzing root beer out of huge glass mugs. One day was spent panning for gold, or what I thought to be gold, in a river bank. Much to my dismay, it turned out to be phony chunks of gilded rock, meticulously placed by the workers of the park. This location was unique and more fascinating than I expected from this little country town.

My favorite trip took place in Beijing, China during the 2008 Olympic Games. This once in a lifetime opportunity was jam-packed with activities every day. After going through the long

process of customs, we were on, yet again, another grueling, long plane ride. Walking through the tunnel into the Olympic stadium amongst a swarm of people from all over the world, I had never experienced anything like it. The building seemed endless; athletes crowded the stage, voices from foreign countries echoed in my ears, and I felt small compared to the people around me. The games were enthralling and memorable to watch, but in between the action we had our own “Olympic Games,” which seemed more exciting to me at this age. My cousins, sisters, and I each picked a country to represent and competed against each other. One of my cousins had already chosen the United States, so I decided to represent Germany during this competition. These games were played mostly in our Olympic residence, and being six was a great disadvantage, considering everyone else was older than me. One competition was to see who could hold a handstand in the pool the longest: I lost. We competed in a bike race down the road: I lost. The games were entertaining, despite all the losses. To see some winning, we watched track events and gymnastics but didn’t have much time for any other sports. This trip was very inspiring and has left me with a longing desire to learn about different cultures.

For our most recent excursion in 2009, my cousins, sisters, and I, packed our bags for the great big island of Australia. Because we were spending time in the rainforest, we were required to take pills and get a disease-prevention shot before we even left the country. With the help of a tour guide, we had a pretty exhilarating experience in the overgrown greenery of the Australian rainforest. Much of the trip was by navigation through the jungle, seeing what we could of the spectacular wildlife. Before leaving on the excursion, we were given a hat with hanging mesh to keep out bugs, a pair of binoculars for a closer look, and sunglasses to block the sun. While we weaved in and out of the overflow of shrubs and branches, we kept our eyes on the person leading the way. On the hike, we saw a plethora of wild animals roaming in their native territory. We spotted a baby zebra trailing behind its mother, oblivious to the group of tourists observing from afar. We caught a glimpse of a cheetah lying lazily in a tree, enjoying its afternoon nap. On the trek through the safari, we came to a popular part of the tour, which required a little bit more risk. We had come to a small river about 10 feet across, though it was moving pretty quickly. To cross the river, we were required to swing across a rope suspended on one side above our heads. Though there was a bridge, I decided to use the rope anyway. Grabbing on tight, I jumped off the safety of the ground below me and swung down on the land across from me. We eventually meandered out of the jungle we had ventured through and knew it would soon be time to leave. Once again, our final trip came to an end, and we knew it was one for the books.

While these trips were some of the best trips I’ve ever been on, they were special because they all happened right at my grandma’s house. The “plane” was three rows of chairs on her front porch. Our passports were pieces of yellow paper with an American Flag on the cover and our names written in black ink on the inside. The vast blue ocean was her above-ground swimming pool in the backyard that she always keeps crystal clear. The “gold” was panned in the sandbox underneath the sprawling playset. The river was a blue tarp in her driveway that we jumped over with a piece of rope hanging from a tree. All the animals we saw were stuffed toys, hidden in the bushes and the trees of her yard. We didn’t actually watch the Olympics in Beijing; we competed against each other in a series of yard games. And though Germany never earned anything higher than a bronze medal, it was exhilarating all the same. She encouraged us to use our imagination, and with a little help from props and fun games, created memories that will last a lifetime. Since then, she has taken us on multiple real trips that are special in their own rite, but they do not hold

a candle to the gift of imagination she instilled in each of her grandchildren.

Piper Ruwe

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

Minnesota

Family pictures are a lie. Plastic like poses, being forced to smile and appear happy. My parents looked uncomfortable in their nice clothes and wide smiles. They seem to appear happy to the average person. This was only a feeling they got when they opened a glass of wine or whiskey. After a couple of glasses, you wouldn't want to be around them. Mom and Dad were diagnosed as alcoholics, but it was obvious that this wasn't the only issue that was going on. Every day I feared coming home from school, and if I was late, I never wanted to come back. This particular morning was the first day of winter break. No school, and no bus to take me away from all of this. My little sister, Signa, had the top bunk in our room that we shared. There was a guest room that I could've had, but I was too scared to leave my sister alone.

"Can I ask you something Signa?" she popped up at the sound of her name. Her tight curls bouncing with her movement. Each freckle on her rosy cheeks its own personality, I would tell her they were kisses from angels.

"Sure," shutting the door she slinks over in my direction, she sits next to me on the bunk. She peers up at me with her piercing green eyes, and long eyelashes that I was envious of.

I took a deep breath trying to prepare myself for this question, "Would you be opposed to living with Grandma? We cannot live here anymore, it's not safe. When I go off to college I want to know that you are safe and sound."

Her face goes blank, and her feet halt from the previous swinging, "I never knew that we had a grandma. I bet she is really nice Angelica." Hearing her say my name fills me with warmth, "Have you met her?"

"I saw her a very long time ago, before Mom and Dad moved us out here. I tell her everything about you. She lives in Minnesota. Enjoys making cookies and she was a photographer, I could show you some of the pictures she has sent me? We have been emailing for over a month." I first reached out to her whenever I was making a family tree project in one of my classes for school.

"No that's okay," she fiddles her thumbs in a circle, "Do you think she knows how to use video chat? I want to see her," Signa runs to the closet and pulls down a pink and green polka dot suitcase, "Nevermind, I'm in."

The day is filled with packing and mostly avoiding our parents, like usual. We never really saw them except at the dinner table. They thought that having a meal together would create a better family, boy were they wrong. The only talking that would go on at the table would be yelling, mostly from my parents. Occasionally I would butt in whenever Signa would start shaking out of fear. A constant reminder that we both weren't safe in this mad house. My voice would get covered over by my Mom telling Dad that he ruined her life, or Dad yelling at Mom about money. Their words were always slurred. Sometimes a glass would find itself flung across the room and shattered on the floor. Eventually us kids would hide in our room, while the

constant screams from the kitchen kept us awake. Our teachers would always ask us why we were so tired and I told them many of times that my parents like to yell. They assumed it was because of a sporting event on the TV or just a minor argument.

I run to the bathroom, attempting to dodge my parents bedroom. Collecting my toothbrush and essentials, I hear heavy, dragged footsteps coming down the hall, Dad.

“Angelica what are you doing?” Crap. Hearing him say my name makes my skin crawl with fear and anxiety. I can hardly remember the last time he got angry at me. I was always a good kid but if I did something stupid I knew I was in for it.

I run the faucet and fumble around with the soap bottle, trying to make it seem like I was washing my hands, “I’m washing my hands, did you need something?”

“No, just wondering why you have a suitcase in your room? Is there a sleepover I don’t know about? You know I don’t like you going to people’s houses.” Double crap. He seemed very calm compared to his usual self. I knew that nothing would happen to me because I could tell he had been drinking. How much was the real question.

I step out of the bathroom, considering my options I could tell him what he wanted to hear, or something that would ruin both of our lives, “Oh, um, I just decided to move into the guest room. Not going to anyone’s house sir.” I wait patiently for an answer as he looks into my room. His eyes wander to the suitcase, and his brow furrows.

He nods his head slowly and proceeds to slump down the stairs, crashing onto the couch, reaching over to a cheap liquor bottle on the busted side table. Taking a swig, Dad scrunches his nose and repels at the cheap, bitter taste.

I slip back into my room and pack up the things I had in my hands. Signa is just about done packing up her things and I also. I tried to keep my belongings to minimum, most had memories attached to them, ones that should never see the light of day.. Grey t-shirt, the day that Mom passed out on the floor. Tennis shoes, the time that Dad ran out of whiskey. I fold my clothes into the bag, and toss my shoes on top of them. Signa’s bag is all packed up, and she gives me thumbs up.

As I hear Mom’s voice boom in the hallway I throw Signa’s bag into the closet, trying to subside any of the suspicion. She bypasses my room and into the bathroom. Thank god. I open up my phone and pull out Google Maps and put in my Grandmother’s address. Only a couple hours away, peering at the clock, if we left in half an hour, we could make it there before midnight. I write a note to my parents explaining that we aren’t safe with them and we are not in any harm where we went. I didn’t give any specific details because they would most likely find us. Also because my parents were not fond of my Grandparents at all, and vice versa.

“Mom, Dad, I’m going to take Signa to get some milk, we are out again!” Valid excuse, Mom and Dad would always let it go. I drop our bags out the window of our one story house, and take my sister’s hand. Looking down at her I can almost feel the anxiety in her fingertips. Giving her palm a small squeeze, we walk down to the car. When I toss our bags into the trunk Signa slowly looks back at the house and into her window. Shaking her head, she perches herself onto the end of her seat. As soon as I turn the key in the car, a feeling of freedom rushes through my veins. The car didn’t seem to ever go fast enough. Multiple times I catch myself speeding, like really speeding.

When we make it onto the highway I look over at my sister, fast asleep, her chest rising and falling to a steady beat. Suddenly a huge smile comes to my face. My cheeks burn from happiness and the hot tears out of pure joy streaming from my eyes. The stress is gone, the yelling, the distinct smell of liquor, the fear diminishes with every mile I drive. Looking at sign

after sign there is only one I will be happy to see.

Within a couple of hours my eyes find a sign that reads, "Welcome to Minnesota!". At last! I pull over to the side of the road and shake Signa awake.

"What is it?" She groggily mumbles."

"What do you think," I point to the big green sign, "we are here! Well not exactly, not at Grandma's but still in Minnesota!"

"Let's take a picture! This is something we have to remember forever," Honestly I think we will with or without a picture. Signa practically falls out of the car and poses in front of the sign.

I pull out my phone only to see 30 messages from my Mom containing quite the amount of foul language, and many misspelled words. She was most definitely drunk off her rocker. I'm just surprised that she could even find her phone. Ignoring her texts I block her and Dad's number and open the camera. We snap a couple of pictures, silly ones, regular ones and one of the sign alone. Hopping back into the car we have a snack break. Sitting there with my sister, so many miles away from my toxic parents felt better than anything. Better than the year that I spiked the eggnog during Christmas time, my parents were so happy. Even better when Signa and I had a camp to go to for a week, a week without my crazy parents.

After some more driving we reach a cozy looking house, all decorated for the holidays. A welcoming wreath on the door, red and white Christmas lights along the perimeter of the house, and a breathtaking Christmas tree in the window. Signa and I waddle in the freezing cold up to the door and she gives it a small knock. I hear murmurs behind the door and the bolt unlocks in slow motion. My heart is about to pop out of my chest as the wooden door gently opens and standing there, a short woman with white cotton candy hair. A full spirit and an apron. Within seconds she pulls us into a warm embrace, smells of cookies and peppermint fill my head.

"You are almost as tall as I am!" Signa looks my Grandma up and down. My Grandma is already the type of person who you could feel at home wherever you are when you are around her. She had something about her that was different than anything I had ever seen.

She gives a light and breathy laugh, "I am, you know we never had the best height on this side of the family." She smiles and looks up at me. With a small wink and grin, I can already feel the love and kindness floating around her. She had the kind of eyes that made you want to curl up in a warm blanket and drink hot chocolate while it was a blizzard outside. Warm and inviting.

"Come inside you two! You will freeze out there," she pulls us into the house and sets us down onto the big couch. The seated adorned with throw pillows and blankets. "I've taken care of your parents, you don't have to worry about them. Help is on the way for their sake."

I look down at Signa, her eyes wandering around the house. Her mind is astonished at the sight of everything going on. She focuses on the tree, dressed in ornaments and ribbon. Tilting her head up, eyes filling with light, the star on top catching her gaze. I never had a proper Christmas tree, Mom and Dad would probably end up breaking it or burning it on accident. The lights in the tree were brighter than they were.

Our Grandma could tell how amazed we were at all the decorations and our surroundings. Bringing us both a blanket she gives Signa and I sympathetic look. I could tell I would be happy here, just by the ambiance and feeling that this house gave to me. Each little light on the tree gave me a sense of hope for my future. I notice that the tree has a couple of presents underneath it. Each carefully wrapped and nestling on the tree skirt. Taking a closer look, the labels on the wrapping says Signa's name, another with my name on it.

"I can't believe we are here," Signa looks at my Grandmother and hold out her hand, "It is very

nice to meet you, we have so much to talk about.”

Romila S

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Michele Buche

Category: Poetry

The Magic within the Library

Shelves of books loom around me,
Filled with the old and worn, and the bright and new.
This building I've visited a thousand times,
And each time holds a different surprise.
A recent release of a popular book series,
Or perhaps the addition of soft velvet sofas for the patrons' pleasures.
What stands out most, though, is not the books I've discovered,
Or even the reading nook in which I've spent a plethora of hours,
But the people who stream in,
Dozens of faces seeking an escape from the world's dismal demeanor.
An old man, a solitary statue, stolidly reading his novel in the corner chair.
The twinkling laughter of children who've spotted their favorite Superman comic over there,
A toddler lugging a bottomless bag filled with picture books galore,
The love of reading that is so palpable in the tranquil air.
This is the real beauty, the real magic of the library,
Where everybody is unperturbed by life's harsh realities.

Ian Sajjapong

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Flash Fiction

Bulls and Bears

Four o'clock, the markets have closed and panic on Wall Street has already ensued. Economists, traders, and analysts scrambled through a cloud of sweat and anxiety of a twenty percent drop in one day. But not John Blackman. No. He knew it was coming. He knew way too well, as if the wealthy financier had a hand in the predicament. Because he did, it was his antics, through his deceitful and fraudulent behavior that led to the worst financial crisis in the modern era. But he didn't care. No. His bets, placed in the right direction, would lead to exorbitant profits for his firm and bonuses unheard of for a Wall Street bigshot like himself. None of this had to happen. He was a great investor and had soaring yields in the past. But as the opportunity presented itself, he snatched it. So as he rode the elevator down from the top floor and through the trading level filled with hundreds of panicking analysts, brokers, and traders, many of whom would lose their jobs, Blackman strolled smugly through on his way home indifferent to the struggles of his employees and the strifes of the common man soon to follow.

As Blackman headed home in one of his many chauffeured exotic cars priced higher than the average man's house, he finished his conference call with several Congressmen over the terms of their campaign contributions. Finally, the car pulled up to the financier's mansion. The house for one, large enough to house a hundred men, stands erected and lifeless, built in an antique style unlike the common contemporary architecture preferred by other Wall Streeters. Blackman enjoyed it though. The mansion's stone gave off a barren, spiritless feel that, to the rich man, felt just right.

As he walked into his home, he removed his Gucci suit jacket and his thousand-dollar leather shoes and proceeded to one of his many living rooms. Roaming through the dark halls of his house, the air seemed to grow colder and unusually dark, even for Blackman. After a seemingly lengthy stroll to the television room where he planned to watch the headlines of the day's major event, he arrived at the den. However, in the usual spot where he sat each night to catch the evening news, sat a child, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

Puzzled, Blackman approached the juvenile and said, "Hello little guy? Where's your mom and dad?" The child's blank expression slowly turned toward the man, stared straight into his eyes, and then through thin air, spontaneously vanished. The only remains of the child was an imprint in the leather of the couch that read *not at the factory, not at the farm, not at the office, mommy and daddy, please don't be harmed.*

Perceiving as what he thought was only a hallucination, the man proceeded to bed for an early slumber to alleviate whatever tricks his mind has played on him. One cold shower later, and Blackman prepares for an early night's sleep.

As he entered his bedroom, he saw the child standing next to his nightstand this time dressed in a suit. With the thought in mind that the child is not real, Blackman proceeded to bed ignoring the ominous child at his bedside.

Fifteen minutes later, and the man was sound asleep, indifferent to the trouble of the day's events.

Suddenly, sounds began to haunt Blackman in his sleep. First, the roar of the trading floor, the sound of hundreds of yelling voices as the market opens at an all-time low. Nothing unexpected for the longtime financier who hears such noises fairly commonly in his slumber.

The sounds of the market claimed his head for several hours of unconsciousness. But suddenly, the market stopped and every analyst on the trading floor froze. Following the sudden pause came the voice of the child. Quiet at first, he dreamt of the child and the sound of the words: *not at the factory, not at the farm, not at the office, mommy and daddy, please don't be harmed*. The sound doubled. Then doubled again, and again, and again, and again until seemingly millions of children uttered the phrase etched into the rich man's couch. Finally, the children ceased. And their words were immediately replaced by the screaming of millions of voices all saying *not at the factory, not at the farm, not at the office, mommy and daddy, please don't be harmed, not at the factory, not at the farm, not at the office, mommy and daddy, please don't be harmed* over and over again. It drove him insane. The noise was too much for his mind. Blackman could not take it. It was as if the voices of every single person he had harmed were screaming into his ear. He knew his decisions were not necessary. He knew that he did not need the money. But greed overcame him, and now the weight of millions of people fell on his shoulders which he proceeded to drop. Finally, the financier woke from his slumber breathing like there was no air left to breathe. And still, standing at his bedside, in the middle of the night was the child staring deathly into his eyes with a club in hand, raised high in the air coming down and knocking the financier's head out stone cold.

Blackman finally woke up. The room was pitch black, and his back was not resting on the plush mattress of his bed. He tried moving, but realized there was no room to move. Suddenly, the air began to run out, and at that moment, Blackman knew that he was buried in the coffin his actions built for himself. And on the tombstone of his grave, etched the phrase, "Bulls make money, bears make money, pigs get slaughtered."

Quinlynn Sanneman

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

For a Reason

Pulling into the supermarket, I hop out of my car seat in the small white car. He leads me and I chase behind him, grabbing the outstretched hand in front of me, seeming like it's miles tall. I feel three tight squeezes against my palm--our morse code.

Squeeze.

"I"

Squeeze.

"Love"

Squeeze.

"You."

I look straight up and smile. The bright summer sun gleamed on my shiny blonde hair. In return I squeeze his hand three times, tightly, with all my strength.

When I think of that moment, the tears come. My first memory of value with him, my dad, my father. Calling him those 2 words now seems almost foreign, even though he is my dad. Although the tears are not as often as that day when I was 11, they do come. And every time they come, the memory comes to view of my little hand in his, walking into the supermarket, on a perfect warm day. Skipping along, jumping over the puddle, and onto the sidewalk.

My mom and dad met on New Year's Eve. The way my mom tells it, it was love at first sight. Or something like that. I think it sounded like a rom-com. You know, one with a hot actor that forbiddenly falls in love with a girl, but there is always a happy ending. Yea, something like that.

"Come on, Danna, it'll be fun."

"No, you know that all I want to do is stay home with the boys. We have everything planned from the poppers, to the countdown, to the bubbly grape juice when the clock strikes 9."

"Spoken like a mother who loves her kids."

"You know I do."

"I also know that there is another side of you that you have been ignoring."

"That side of me will remain ignored for a long time."

My mother tells me that she really didn't want to go to this party. However she is glad she went.

She always said she didn't regret one thing. Not even the broken marriage that would soon come, because she told me she loved what she got out of it. Me.

Night, after night, she tells me that everything happens for a reason. I believe her. I wouldn't be here, telling this story if my mother did not go to that party, "fall in love," and get married. But I also wouldn't be here, telling this story, if my parents marriage worked.

It wasn't like I didn't know. My mom didn't keep anything from me. I told her my secrets, she told me hers. However she didn't need to tell me this secret, because it wasn't a secret. I knew. I always knew.

Night after night. The same routine. He gets home, late at night. My mom knows he wasn't at work, but where he was, we didn't know. When I see the dim headlights come to view in the driveway, I quickly dart up the stairs. I wasn't alone, my brothers did the same, just as scared. We didn't want to stay for what was about to happen.

"Work late? Again."

"Yup, there was an emergency call right before I was about to leave."

I should mention that my dad was a firefighter paramedic. You know saving lives. Except in our case, breaking hearts.

The rest of the conversation after that was blurry, and muffled. All I heard was screaming, and bickering.

One hour passes and I can't sleep.
10:00 p.m.

I plug my earbuds into the old ipod I got for Christmas. Closing my eyes I rest my head on the cold pillow. Zoning out to my escape world with nothing but me, and One Direction streaming in my ears. You might say that One Direction saved my life, as silly as that sounds.

Blocking out the entire world with my eyes squeezed tight, but I still can't sleep, knowing what is happening just below my room breaks my heart. A tear trickles slowly down my cheek, like the first drop of rain in the spring. Then my eyes become a heavy rainstorm in tornado season, that never seems to stop.

Glancing down at my ipod, I check the time.
1:00 a.m.

4 hours, I fall asleep and dream of the perfect life.

Two parents that love each other. My 4 older brothers and I, that get along perfectly, and a beautiful house with green grass.

I jump back into reality when my bed shakes to the rattle of a slamming door. The bright sun

streams through my window, and I am fully knowledgeable that it is morning.

The cycle repeats night, after night, come home, they argue, go to sleep, wake up, door slams. Until that day. The day it all changed, and the cycle stopped. As if the rain stopped falling and never evaporated to form clouds. The sun would have no friend to talk to and the grass would slowly wither away.

It was a bright, sunny, spring afternoon. Sunshine and rainbows, with not a cloud in the sky. I got home after a short walk from school and a while later my dad is home early from work. Strange.

“I got the day off early, I’m going to fold some clothes and leave to run some errands around 5:00.”

I reply with a slight nod, with my legs swung over the couch. 5 o'clock came and as he promised, off he went to the store. My eyes are glued to the the TV as he stands up and speaks.

“I’m going to go run a few errands now, I’ll be back in about an hour. I love you, goodbye.”

With my eyes still fixed on the TV, not thinking anything of it, I respond with a simple “ok” and he leaves.

Little did I know that this would be the last “goodbye” I would ever get from him. The last “I love you” and the last time I might ever see him again.

My mom arrives a few hours later from a long stressful day of work, I don’t need to ask, but I can tell by how she looks. Her shoulders were slouched and she was exhausted.

“Where is your dad?”

“He left about an hour ago to run some errands, he should be home soon.”

The look in my mother's eyes at that moment is a look I will never forget. She walks to me and drops to her knees. I watch her as she begins to cry in front of me. The whole thing happened in slow motion. I have seen her cry before, but never like this.

“What’s wrong mom, what happened? Is dad ok? Are you ok?”

The questions just kept coming, I had no idea what was going on. I was only 11. My brothers storm down the stairs at the sound of our mom crying. They were very protective of her. They give her a help up on the couch and I sit next to her. My head on her shoulder, my hand in hers.

I ask one more time, with a shake in my voice. “What happened?”

“He’s not coming back.”

When the words fall out of her mouth and linger in the air, it feels as though all the oxygen was

sucked out of the room. Like a wrecking ball was swung into my chest, and I hung there, weak and powerless.

However I was still. I didn't cry. I was strong. Strong for my mom, she needed me, and she needed love.

These memories are the only ones that I have of my father. I haven't seen him in three years nor have I spoken to him. I usually keep these memories closed in and locked away. Every now and then they escape. I only let them out when I'm alone. I don't want anyone to see the heartache that they bring. I especially don't want my mom to know. She has enough heartache to last more than a lifetime. I breathe through my tears, thinking good thoughts and of the good times that we had. I think ahead to what the future will hold. I know that we will all get through this. I wonder sometimes if he thinks about what he has left behind, if he regrets leaving us, and I've only let myself think this once or twice, if he'll come back to us.

Until we get answers, if we ever will, I console myself with the thought that things happen for a reason. I know that we're given only what we can handle. I continue to pray for strength and every day I continue to receive it.

Maddy Scannell

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Escaping the Echo Chamber

“You fool!” I shouted, then self-consciously lowered my voice to a fierce whisper. “A flat tax exaggerates inequality; it doesn’t reflect ability to pay! It’s idiotic!”

My voice was hoarse after several minutes of trying to argue in the midst of the debate tournament din. I spun a pen, twirling it faster and faster as my aggravation increased. My stiff collar itched and my forehead burned despite icy blasts from the grumbling air conditioner overhead. I glared across the table at Mike, who sported an ill-fitting suit with a crooked tie, a buzzcut, and a scowl.

Face contorted and spittle flying from his mouth, Mike regurgitated arguments, tossing out references to studies like bread crumbs to pigeons. Before I could get in the final word, he stood up violently, nearly knocking over his chair, spat out some obscenities, then stomped into the high school courtyard. I remained seated, stewing in frustration. My pulse slowed, but I kept spinning my pen.

My coach grinned at the other end of the table. “What’s the matter?” he chuckled.

“I’m not crazy; he’s just unreasonable,” I whined, proceeding to detail Mike’s inability to understand empirics.

“Maybe you’re frustrated because he has a completely different opinion than you. Isn’t that what this activity is about?”

I sputtered, finally producing a mangled explanation of his convoluted arguments and lack of evidence. Fuming, I stormed over to where my teammates stood in the cafeteria in search of friendly ears and microwavable noodles.

I poured Mountain Dew into a styrofoam cup of off-brand ramen, ignoring the snickers behind me. I placed the concoction into the filthy cafeteria microwave, splattered with unidentifiable congealed food, set the timer for two minutes, and turned back to the throng of suited high schoolers huddled like penguins.

“You are disgusting,” my partner, Jennifer, commented. “You’ll die young.”

I shrugged. “Bury me with my trophies.”

Everyone laughed, and we commenced discussion of the tournament topic: free tuition to community colleges. Our voices rose and fell, impossibly energetic for the lateness of the hour, filling the cafeteria strewn with snack wrappers, crumpled notes, and the stray G2 pen.

“The government should institute free community college.”

“Yeah, Pell grants aren’t enough.”

“Yeah, a bunch of Nordic countries have already done it successfully.”

“Yeah.”

I didn’t notice that my voice blended in with the agreements; my opinions were indistinguishable from the liberal debaters surrounding me. I relished the echoes which repeated and repeated, over and--“Postings!” bellowed a coach from the top of the stairs, taping sheets of room assignments for final rounds to the wall. I grabbed my laptop and legal box stuffed to the

brim with evidence and hobbled toward the stairs, still trying to adjust my heels. Out of my peripheral vision, I saw my coach give me a thumbs-up, forcing me to recall our previous conversation. Until I arrived at my room, I didn't realize that I forgot my ramen in all of the chaos, as my coach's words about the meaning of debate still rang in my ears.

Jennifer and I exchanged awkward banter with our opponents. The two tall, blonde boys matched perfectly, from their yellow ties and cocky stances to their obnoxious gum-chewing. I spun my pen and tried to ignore the prickly gaze of the other team's spectators.

"I love this topic," commented one of the boys. "It's so important to discuss the advantages of free tuition."

I was shocked that he would explicitly reveal his preference for the affirmative of the topic, considering that it gave us an advantage if we won the coin flip for selecting sides. Often, debaters are forced to argue for a side they disagree with, but it's uncommon to see someone show their hand. We waited in silence until a trio of judges swept down the hallway, uniformly weary after a long tournament. We filed into the room after them, prepared to engage in a debate pertaining to a policy which we already supported.

An hour later, we filed out, opinions unchanged. I kept my eyes down and my head tilted towards Jennifer's as we discussed the final round in hushed tones. A dozen members of our team trailed behind, all trying to jump in with praise for us and insulting comments for our opponents.

"I think you got all three judges."

"Yeah, and the second speaker's rebuttal was terrible."

"Yeah, and your attack on their fourth contention was brilliant."

"Yeah."

A few moments later, the tournament director leafed through the ballots nonchalantly then announced to the crowded hallway, "On a 3-0 decision, Central A wins."

I released a sigh of relief, shook hands with my opponents, hugged Jennifer, and turned to my team, a mass of whooping teenagers. I grinned as people congratulated us, but I felt my smile strain as soon as the director handed me my trophy. I stared at the cheap, plastic trophy, which would soon join my collection of cheap, plastic trophies. Hollow and faux-gold, their puny plaques were my only reminder of past tournaments. The twelve hours I had spent debating yielded a twelve dollar piece of junk and nothing else; I learned nothing, I taught nothing, and I was entirely unchanged, excepting a new trophy and darker circles under my eyes. The tangible object was the summation of my coach's words and the echoes of my teammates and unchanged opinions. All of my doubts about the activity collapsed onto the outstretched arms of the figure on top of the trophy, her arms straining under the weight of my frustration.

I craned my neck, wanting to ask Mike's opinion on the purpose of debate, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"I'm here to advocate for paying reparations to African Americans," I announced to the class with my back to a glowing Powerpoint. I had stuffed it with arguments and statistics and graphs, all of which I meticulously compiled while debating the topic the previous month. The classroom was shadowy, and I squinted into the projector; the students' faces looked cruel in the darkness. I warned them the topic was controversial but encouraged questions.

"I want discourse," I proclaimed, advancing to an outline of the basic rationale for reparations.

I almost expected to hear voices of assent like in the debate room, but I just heard muffled

questions about why black people should receive money from the government. At the back of the classroom, Mike raised his hand, gearing up to ask a question. I thought of my steadily expanding trophy collection. Every time I discussed a debate topic with a class, the trophies felt less hollow, filling with the heat of discourse and new opinions. Trophies in neat rows reminded me of the knowledge I gained, not the tournaments I won; the blue base was nuclear proliferation, the big red and gold one was intervention in Syria. Sharing conversation and information with my peers assigned purpose to not only the trophies but to debate.

Everything is more resplendent outside of an echo chamber.

I pointed to Mike and smiled.

Ella Schmidt

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Poetry

Pyromania

When she asks if you've ever looked at yourself
in your sister's bathroom mirror and then
seen a divine messenger of necrosis and then
made a joke about it to your friends and then
realized your friends were open-mouthed postcards,
what she means is do you ever feel lonely because
you haven't been sunburnt since seventh grade?
Do you subsist among the forsakens or
are you spared the comfort of unholy embers?
Do not answer her unless your inanity is insured.
Do not answer her if you can't afford a fallback plan.
When she asks if you rest your chin on intertwined knuckles before dinner,
what she means is did you ever get further into origami than fortune-tellers?
She didn't think so.
When she asks to walk you home and
says her love is a pipe dream;
what she means is you can smoke it –
but not in front of your third-grade teacher's house
where your last orchestra concert is buried.
When she asks of a levelheaded lead-paint playhouse:
is it not desirable that the foundation catch flame,
if only to authenticate the hypochondriac's forged purgatory?
Is not the fire alarm by combustion justified?
Does not an unfounded alert warrant false extinguishment?
When she asks of the first time you were shown to yourself
in charcoal-glazed thumbs or if you've ever tried to blow out fireworks,
what she means is does an SPF of 35 make you lonely?
Or do you just
feel
safe?

Ella Schmidt

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Poetry

The Best Men

And after this one night, I'll cling to her skirts and follow her to Heaven.
– from “Young Goodman Brown” by Nathaniel Hawthorne

After this one night,
I will never again mask in my shortcomings
her worthiness.
And after this one night,
I will sort my best intentions by
last name of the afflicted.
I will color-code the risks worth taking,
which is to say I will put traffic cones
around quicksand,
caution tape across the poker table and
all the boys we said we loved.
I will clip the wings of an aspiring flight after
bowing to treacherous expectation and the
romance of might-have-been.
I will eulogize the double-crossers
to render them worse and better.
And even as renegade, I am nothing
if not an emergence well-versed in foresight.
I will love her to the synesthetic pulse
of day-old prospect and with the fealty of best men,
the men of coal and work, underground at sundown
and by her altar-side when she blushes alabaster.
And after this one night,
I have been a liar and retracted my words
and burnt my tongue on unhallowed oxidation,
that hellfire heartburn. I have blighted our orchards,
and if she is to keep me, let each day
be a lesson in withstanding frost.
No redemptive stride unduly steep in the recovery
of the soul I will this one night debase.
And after this one night,
I'll cling to her skirts and follow her to Heaven.

Ella Schmidt

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Short Story

The Maybe Pile

Beth said I could tack it to the ceiling over my bed like someone's foul-mouthed teenage brother, gone to play lacrosse or video games at a state school where greek letters forge brotherhood and keg-stand legacy. Said I could tack it up there like I played Melancholia with five other loners in a garage, or like I was off someplace only the boys could throw parties and left it there to horrify some divorced parents, united in the delinquency of their only son. Like loving women was a man's game, and ungentle—it read Kerouac and talked like Caulfield, always-uphill on some beginner's-luck mountain, bitter as the American Arcade and leather-jacket irony kinda cool. Like loving girls meant running away, and waking up to a comic-book sketch of Black Widow's plump symmetry made me Benny the Jet Rodriguez. I really was the origin of her earnestly-intentioned assumptions, or else I really didn't want to blight a pride that suited her, so I hung it up just like that and started sleeping on my stomach.

She stole it from an actual boy, you know. The son of a couple her parents knew in grad school. Said she dug through his closet when he went downstairs for champagne during a Christmas party, and she saw the poster propped up between gym shoes and a wall, partially unraveled with one greenish eye exposed and urging exploration. She was in awe of the creature's proportioned breasts and calculated stillness, this creature who was so decidedly Woman and yet not like our mothers or teachers at all, the way she bore the imperious sex appeal of a man's felt-tipped pen. Beth was drawn to the women of magazine spreads by the arresting nature of the male gaze that animated and subdued them—lights that softened and cameras that steeled, all Diesel and clout. So she stuffed the paper woman in her bag of other people's missing things and when the boy came back they kissed with their mouths open, but I tried not to hear that part when she told me.

I didn't know what it meant to hang it there, all that time after Beth stole it. I told her I loved women and she handed me a hollow one, made disposable for the hands of men. I mean I read Herland and those letters Emily Dickinson wrote to the woman next door before my feminism took a turn for the recreational, but before then, I looked at girls the way I imagined a boy could, only I was closer. At sleepovers when we played House or Wedding, I was the boy. Twelve years old and Beth practiced kissing on me, and I fell in love like *love*, like pathetic fidelity. She kissed me for a year like that and I sat rigid and upright with my eyes fixed and open and the smell of her hair, chlorine-clung to her neck, lingering on my pajama sets for the abridged lifetimes in between our Fridays. This until a real boy, a friend of the family, kissed her like a boy could when we were thirteen and he wasn't. He leaned into her touch unparalyzed and she told me after he tasted like toothpaste and champagne. Then she said *No, he tasted like everything good at once*, and I heard that part no matter how hard I tried not to. She kissed me for the last time that night, so I could know how it felt. I closed my eyes and thought of nothing and when I met her gaze again she looked hurt by my deliberate blankness, but only for a second. Then she said *Don't worry, said Someday someone will do it like that for real, only someone*

who means it.

Before I told Beth I loved women, I asked her why I had always been the boy. I asked her to think about when we were kids—I asked her to listen. It's a terrible thing, asking anyone for anything at all. She stared at me with those wild, damp eyes—eyes like you're lucky to have on your side. *Someone had to be, Okay, Sure.* We were clearing out my bookshelf like we did every few months. By color—that was the ritual. By color: something pretty, something known and silly and superficial, something like girls. When it got down to the red-oranges, the magenta-violets, we always disagreed. I think one of us was a little bit colorblind. I don't know about odds, but with four X-chromosomes and a million graying novels, one of us must've been.

The house was quiet when I told her, and the walls leaned in to conspire with her silence as she sorted my books into the Keeps and the Give-Aways and the Maybe Pile. Beth had eyes that were artless and working, eyes like looking into time in both directions. Not like armistice. She had never been on the receiving end of check-mate. And Beth and the walls, you know, they just stayed sort of quiet. Then she said something—something like: *I always thought some people just didn't need people. Some people like you.* Said she should've known I was lonely. Then: *I never did, you know.*

I wish I'd said something, something dumb like *Don't worry, I wasn't lonely exactly.* I couldn't because she smiled, and a smile is exposure. Beth is unnerving in her overexposure: exposure in her girl's voice, exposure in her bad-teeth beautiful, beautiful like brace yourself. As kids we sold Girl Scout cookies around the block, and the fathers got their wallets right away as the mothers leaned in to hear this defensive-eyed little girl, her small voice and big words a ploy to get people closer.

When she smiled then, in our seventeenth year when I told her, she must have remembered a past affinity for the patent discomfort of women as welded by the hands of men, women with their plastic wings and hollow lips and waistlines, because then she decided to gift me with the pouting comic book creature of an eighth-grade wet dream, a drawing my mother would have killed me over if it didn't give her a heart attack first. But Beth was the half of the Best Friend necklace that just said *Best*—the better fifty-one percent of every broken thing. So I pinned the girl up across my ceiling and slept with my face buried in the pillow. Except on nights when Beth slept over, her vodka soda and retainers on my nightstand, when she asked if I'd met a boy who could put me through art school and kept asking, asking until she fell asleep.

Ella Schmidt

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Short Story

To Love Him Twice Before He Leaves

He ate cold pizza and texted me about political cartoons. He was quiet during movies, and he was easy to love. I hated beer and folk music and called him on a Thursday night to tell him I'd just fallen in love with the girl on the train, her last-night's mascara and legible collarbones like a trained ballerina whose pierced tongue startled the men who kissed her, and, imagining a man who didn't bother taking off his ring to love her anymore, I'd stayed seated past my stop and the next three, until I realized a girl like that was riding the train just to ride it, with persistent beauty and still no persistence at all so would he please pick me up near Hoboken. I knew he'd been drinking and into his static breathing I etched a girl in bed beside him, whose hair was darling and brown, and her face was blank because I could never draw noses and her legs were coming out of her neck. I knew he was alone by his unfrantic disenchantment and I wondered how many times a person need be let down by something blond and back-row beautiful before staying became madness or was that love. He was repelled by the obligatory romantic nature of trains and so he told me to stay right where I was and he'd be there soon, in a cab. I imagined myself, hugging a lamp post by the station as if I were not afraid of the civil repercussions of using overeager pepper spray on men, who are a largely innocent, not innocent but unguilty, people. And I was impossible to love.

I imagined him charging down his apartment steps and shaking his head and forgetting his coat and hailing a cab the way rich men hold other people's wives and sign checks. I imagined him reaching for his coat pocket that wasn't there and bumming a smoke off the driver the way rich men express ungainly gratitude in shrugs and nods and sympathetic rolled-eye banter about what the women were demanding tonight, and he was easy to love. When the cab pulled up to the curb in New Jersey it was raining—how he must have hated the compulsory ballad of the rain!—and he beckoned me with a jolt of his head, his tired eyes with the red where the white should be and the black pupils swallowing the blue, and I stared through the steely stuff of elegiac overflow like Leave me, but he wasn't looking.

Inside, he was wearing a coat because he'd never forget a thing like that when it had been January for months, and the backseat made me childish and pitiful, until he fell asleep on my rain-soaked denim shoulder and I paid the driver at the end of the night. As if this whole time I had been taking care of him, as if my love for him were in spite of something, and have I ever loved anything as much as I loved loving him as I paid for the cab, as much as when I walked him inside with an arm around his waist to prop him up, a cool voice to reassure his steps, like to the neighbors he was a burden I let in from the rain. Have I ever loved him so much as when my love was chronic and self-righteous. And have I ever hurt like knowing this pining inelegance made me impossible to leave behind in the way that boys who don't need to clear their Internet history probably always did their chores because it felt good to be easy for their mothers to love.

Have I ever hurt like borrowing for half a night what it was he got from loving me, and understanding he could leave me now that we had traded places, now that he would wake up feeling unpatriotic about himself and it wouldn't be the desertion of a child who dog-eared his reverie and followed him to a false-hearted world, because in fact I had now taken care of him and could no longer be abandoned.

The only time I cried in front of Kathy was when she asked me how I met him. I don't like to cry in front of therapists because it does not shock them—if anything, it brings them great satisfaction and they leave work to kiss their spouses with *breakthrough* on their tongues. But I cried then, in recollection. I cried in a grand way, and Kathy was delighted.

Keep going, Rebecca. Tell me about high school.

It was always a bit hush-hush, really. I didn't invent that. No one talked to us about drugs or pregnancy, but we arrived at high school equipped with grade-school gleanings of “nights-like-those” and “boys-like-that-one.” There was a tacit coolness to the uncool. I was an outwardly dispassionate student and person. I made sure to always look bored and I made sure my grades were perfect—the kind of student that a teacher might ask to control the class when she had to step out but would never ask to babysit her children. I read books in languages that didn't align with my classes. Teachers loved to see me reading at all, instead of hurling myself from buildings, which was tiresome and expected. Perhaps they thought of grace in coping, of escape.

My father was dying, death as a symptom of cadenced drunkenness, a side effect of something worse. Mrs. Wright was an old widow and my English teacher when I was sixteen, the only adult I ever knew who was inaudible as grown-ups are to the children of Charlie Brown. She was dying also, as the elderly are wont to do: in a way that is no less shocking for its predictability. It happened a month into the school year. There was a mandatory memorial service for her on a Friday night and, not having the foresight to replace her, the school filtered her American Lit section into the hands of other classrooms by Monday. Most of us wound up in senior English, because the course was optional and the classes were largely underbooked.

There was one senior boy in the class, and I think that for a moment the girls felt sorry to so adore the outcome of an old woman's death. They were giddy because he didn't look like any of us. I thought he looked like a caricature of all of us, with his artless eyes and Adderall, explaining his Hawthorne-Faulkner-Salinger America the way rich men pretend to know things, the way rich men pretend. I was crying at this point; Kathy looked inspired.

While my father was dying, the boy's father was mayor—and a mayor of Shitsville, U.S.A. is a mayor nonetheless. His father was the boy's defining characteristic, and the only reason I got to know him: when combined with wealth, I learned, absent parents equal untouched, old-money books and a hollowness that I adored because it wasn't my own, and a home office as an extension of a very-blue, very-boy bedroom for an only child. Everyday he brought a different book to school, and though I thought they all looked awful, it was in vain that I tried to keep from loving the way he read them with such defiant certainty, with the back cover facing the desk to his right so I could read them and verify how awful their dust-coated splendor must truly have been. He invited me to examine them in person one day after school. The day dried cold

and his door was unlocked. I knew I would find his room like this: without him in it, notebook pages left in deliberate disarray across his desk. I knew he wanted me to read them; I knew he wrote bad stories about girls who weren't me but might as well have been. When he came in five minutes late and I was sitting at his desk reading an unpoetic description of a bored girl in the back row who might've had blond hair and a dying father if the author hadn't opted out of guesswork in favor of the unspecified, I wondered what would happen next. I imagined he would kiss me or ask how I took my coffee or offer to drive me home. I imagined he would call me his muse then apologize for undermining my own artistry, or that he would snatch the pages from my hands or yell at me for never paying attention during his favorite class and being relieved when Mrs. Wright died. Instead, we pretended the things I had read were the books he had mentioned, and I said I found them compelling and he said Alright. And really, he never stopped saying it until April.

He couldn't stomach anyone finding out, and so his refusal to take me to the spring formal. I was humiliated, so I took a boy from my class who kissed me in the gym in front of all those high school kids and *him*, and I kept my eyes open to watch his recoil, kissing my date stubbornly as the boy looked and looked and looked away. When a chaperone told me that the length of my skirt violated dress code, the boy approached with an offer to drive me home. Sportcoat and dimples, good like the pastor's son at the pitcher's mound.

That night he drove me home, and the world was an upturned penny basking in the promise that we both didn't want me kissing boys my age, who were infinitely less literate and still played with LEGOs for all he thought of them. We planned to move to the city. I'd never left Rutherford before and I talked about the city like another dimension, where my friends' fathers went to have their affairs and where some people spoke in sestinas and others had purple hair and they all lived together in an opulent shoebox. He got to smiling, to loving the way I spoke of the city in a childlike manner that made room for the impossible and extravagant. I told him about buildings that brightened the nights and polluted the stars, and the *noise*—noise like you could laugh and shatter and whisper and crash and scream and nobody looked away from their paperwork—and I became hysterical, laughing at the thought of such racket, and he said he would be by to pick me up on Friday and take me there and I laughed so convulsively I began to cry fat blushing tears. He pulled right up to my house and I climbed out quickly and ran as he drove off with the passenger door still open.

I realized he'd meant it and stayed home from school all week. I brought my father saltine crackers and water and left a voicemail for our neighbors telling them I was going out of town and that he was going to die soon—they needn't change the fact, but I was leaving a key under the mat in case someone wanted to find him. On Friday afternoon, my father opened his eyes and said *Baby how ya feeling* and I considered for the first time that he knew who I was. The thought was too cruel, and soon he was sleeping again, but I left him a stack of my favorite books in repentance—even *Foxfire*, even Virginia Woolf and Alice Munro, but especially anything I ever read for American Lit. Across the bridge were new stories, and no room for the old ones.

He pulled up at half-past three in a cab. I'd never been in a cab before, but he'd sold his car to help us get ahead on rent. It took us to the station. He hated the train the whole way and I

watched him, fidgeting as if we were headed for inevitable collision, pulsing down the fast lane in the wrong direction. We hadn't any books, so he read and re-read the warning label on an unopened bottle of aspirin, and I loved him for the first time: holding tight to the virginal willingness of the young to move the wrong way so long as we are moving, holding tight to that green promise of frantic motion that once made the girl in the back row with the disaffection and the dying father easy to misread, or was that love.

Myles Schmitt

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

His Time

Family is the best thing you can have in our world. For Travis Sterling it was the only thing he had. Travis was a foreigner, an outsider waiting to find his calling. He was the random kid that had received zero attention from school or even strangers. When at home with his family, he wasn't just Travis, the loser who had no friends, he was Travis, the loved son of Heath and Jessica Sterling. At home, he was special, and no one could stop him from being himself. All the pointing and laughing went over his head and he forgot about what all the kids at school said about him. Travis didn't mind what the kids at school said about him; it was what they didn't know about him that upset him, the reason they called him names: his mental disorder.

It was the Fall of Travis's fifth grade year and life was taking him on a joyride. Travis lived his life like what he thought was normal, but his normal was different than his classmates. His teacher, Mr. Kates noticed something odd with the way Travis was acting in class. He noticed that Travis was zoning off and staring into space most of the day. Through Travis's eyes, he saw color, creativity, and fun. He saw what he wished he could have all day and every day of the year. Travis desired the freedom and spontaneous fun, so when he was given that chance he took it.

When he went into his own bubble, the class just stopped and stared. Kids made fun of the way he went away into his own head. Travis's parents were worried about Travis's condition, so they took him to see a specialist. Travis was placed in a blank room with white walls, and when he sat down in a cold gray chair, he went right to his bubble. All at once his world turned upside down. Color filled the room, and he wasn't paying attention to anything going on outside of his imagination. The specialist observed and took in what they noticed was happening. The specialist brought back Heath and Jessica and sat them down and started discussing his conclusions.

"To start things off, my name is Dr. Kidman, and your son Travis has a common mental disorder, from what I have observed your son has Psychosis."

"What does Psychosis mean?" Heath said glancing rapidly between the doctor and his son.

"The best way I can describe it is your son just disappears into his own mind, checking out of reality. So from what I noticed he will need to see a therapist every week for talk therapy and take some medication. We will have to see what caused him to develop this mental disorder, so we will take him back in a couple minutes to take blood and observe him a little more if that is okay with you two."

“Yes it is, and thank you Dr. Kidman,” Jessica cradled her son.

After their meeting with Dr. Kidman, they went home and just spent time with Travis. They wanted him to spend time with his family, and they tried their best to keep him out of his bubble.

As the weeks went on they received a little manila folder in the mail addressed to the parents of Travis Sterling. It was the blood tests Travis took when they went to see Dr. Kidman. The papers stated that Travis had developed this disease from stress. He developed too much stress for his little body to handle, and it took charge and caused him to change. His parents didn't ever think he was stressed, because whenever Travis became stressed he retreated into his bubble and all of his problems went away. Travis's parents had gone through a lot lately, they weren't getting along well. They would always end up arguing about little things. They didn't know Travis was listening, but he heard everything and it changed him. When Travis went to school, Mr. Kates kept a close eye on him and watched over him. Mr. Kates didn't have a clue if Travis was learning anything in class. Mr. Kates did a lot of things for Travis that he most likely will never know. Mr. Kates was his protector, he stood up for Travis when he couldn't defend himself. Many of Travis' fellow students called him names or compared him to many things. He was called names that went from a “Retard” to an “Imbecile” and Mr. Kates had enough. Mr. Kates was done with the disrespect Travis was receiving and he was not going to have anymore unmannerly comments in his classroom. Mr. Kates got up out of his chair and went over to where Travis was sitting and they went into the hall.

“Travis, can you go sit in Mrs. Hon's classroom for a minute? I will come get you when I am done speaking.”

Travis just walked over to Mrs. Hon's classroom. He didn't assume anything, he was in his bubble and little information from the outside world ever got into it. As soon as Travis closed the door behind him, Mr. Kates went back into his classroom to have a discussion with the rest of his class.

“I would like to have a discussion with you class,” Mr. Kates said looking around his classroom.

“What's wrong Mr. Kates?” Jake said with an evil grin.

Jake was the bully in his class, he was the one to make you feel bad about yourself. He had always picked on fellow students that weren't cool like him.

“I believe you all know what is wrong. I have heard some rude comments going around the classroom, and I'm sick of it. You are making your fellow students feel bad about themselves. Most of all, you are making fun of Travis. He can't help who he is. Travis may not know what you are saying to him, but you still shouldn't judge him. How would you like it if every day someone would call you names? How would you feel to be treated like garbage, because right now that is how you are treating him. I know all of you were raised better than that. So I don't want to hear another mean and rude comment towards anyone in the class. Please, that is all I am asking.”

After Mr. Kates had his brief discussion with his class, he went over and brought Travis back into his classroom. From that day forward Mr. Kates didn't hear a single rude comment towards Travis, but he still knew that students called Travis names outside of his class.

Travis lived a pretty normal life, besides the fact that he has Psychosis. He just went through life day by day and nothing really changed. His life was pretty much same, until the Spring of his seventh grade year. Travis had started to change, he was acting differently than he had before. Travis had started becoming angry and he had started to pick on himself. Travis was no longer in his own bubble, that stage was gone and now a worse one was occurring. Heath and Jessica noticed it right away, but they weren't sure if it was going to happen again. Travis's new problem didn't go away, it stayed with him and wouldn't leave his side. Travis was abusing himself, whenever his parents came home from work they noticed a new bruise appearing on his body. Heath and Jessica were worried about his health and sanity, so they went back to Dr. Kidman.

"Hello Mr. and Mrs. Sterling, how may I help you?" Dr. Kidman walked over to greet them.

"We have a problem, Travis has changed, he isn't the same anymore," Jessica moved forward to talk with Dr. Kidman.

"Well, what has changed with your son?" Dr. Kidman asked glancing over at Travis.

"See for yourself, he has been hitting himself," Jessica showed Travis's arms to Dr. Kidman.

"I will take him back to view his new behaviors." With that being said, Dr. Kidman took Travis back to that same dull white room.

Dr. Kidman put him in the same gray, cold chair, but this time he didn't go into his bubble, this time he stayed in the real world, he stared at the walls and saw nothing. He lost his bubble and now he couldn't find a way to get it back. Travis had changed and this change will stay with him. Dr. Kidman just stared and watched Travis as he just sat in the chair, then after a long silence his face changed. He was no longer staring at the walls anymore. He had his fists clenched around the legs of the chair. Then all at once he let out a chilling scream and he began hitting himself. Dr. Kidman didn't know what to do, so she yelled for Travis's parents to come help her with their son. Dr. Kidman couldn't let Travis sit there and hit himself, so she grabbed his arms and held them down. As his parents walked in, they saw what had happened, and they helped keep him down. Once Travis calmed down they left the room to talk.

"I don't know why he is doing this to himself," Jessica stated with tears running down her face.

"His psychosis has developed, from him going out of reality to him abusing himself. I just want you to keep an eye on him, just to make sure he is safe," Dr. Kidman said with a worrying look.

"Thank you for all your help, we will let you know if there are any more problems," Heath thanking Dr. Kidman.

The family just sat in their seats and stared at each other. Their lives changed even more now that Travis has changed. They went home and Heath and Jessica just watched over Travis as he sat in the living room. He just sat in his bubble but when he returned to reality anger came with him. His anger was coming from his bubble. Travis was just drawn to his bubble, nothing could stop him from entering so they needed to keep him from hurting himself. Travis just lived life like he used to, but now it had a twist. In school, Travis couldn't be in his classes so he had to go to a little classroom and spend the whole day with an aid. The only time Travis learned in school was when he was in reality and not hitting himself. The new room changed how he felt, he started feeling depressed and down. Travis was really depressed; it seemed like he wanted to just die. Travis and his behavior was starting to worry his parents, but Heath and Jessica didn't want to have another visit with Dr. Kidman that would worry them even more. They decided to let him to go swimming in their pool. Travis always loved to go swimming, it was always something that would clear his mind and be a source of fun for him.

Travis didn't go in the water though, he just sat in a lounge chair and just watch the breeze create ripples in the water. He wasn't the same, he just let the water mock him. The water just flowed in the breeze and Travis could take it anymore. With a quick splash he dived in, and the world disappeared. When Travis surfaced he was swimming with a blank face, he had entered his bubble. Heath and Jessica were upstairs at the house making lunch, turkey sandwiches and barbecue potato chips, Travis's favorite. They left Travis alone for a little while just to see if he could handle what may happen next, but what Heath and Jessica didn't know what would happen next. Travis was in the same spot, staring at the water with a questioning look. Suddenly Travis just swam underwater, in his head he was exploring the ocean, all of the fish swimming by, the colorful reefs he swam by. That was what Travis saw, he needed that color and fun in his life. The thing that Travis forgot was he needed to be back in reality. Travis was swimming for a long time and didn't come back up for air. Travis's bubble kept him from reality. Now Travis didn't need to be worried about reality he was free.

Jessica finished making the sandwiches and had put the chips and drinks on a serving tray to take down to the pool. Heath was on the couch just watching television when Jessica made her way towards their pool. Jessica was so focused on not tripping and ruining their lunches she kept her eyes down. She made it all the way towards the bottom and immediately dropped everything, she saw Travis face down in the pool. She ran over to the pool and frantically jumped in, she swam to her son and flipped him around and dragged him towards the pool edge.

“Heath! Heath! Help! Help!” Jessica sobbed with tears rushing down her cheeks.

“What is wrong? Why did you yell?” Heath raced down the stairs towards Jessica.

Heath made it to Jessica to see his son lying lifeless on their wooden deck. Tears filled the air as Heath tried to do CPR on Travis, but it had failed. Jessica already called an ambulance to come help their son. They knew they shouldn't have left Travis alone, they knew it was their fault that he may not be living anymore. They had to live with that guilt, but they couldn't help what Travis was doing either. As the ambulance pulled up they tried to help Travis, but loaded him up in an ambulance and took him to the hospital. At the hospital they were told to stay back while they try to help their son. The minutes past and Heath and Jessica sat in the waiting room with

tears in their eyes.

Then Dr. Jenkins came out towards the waiting room and said, "Are you Mr. and Mrs. Sterling?" "Yes, we are," Jessica said through sniffles.

"Please come with me, we need to talk," Dr. Jenkins soothingly stated.

The Sterlings followed Dr. Jenkins into a little room and were asked to sit down.

"I am afraid I have some bad news, your son Travis did not make it. Travis drowned and suffocated and did not make it alive to the hospital."

Heath and Jessica responded with tears and could barely breathe from the news they had received. They got swept up in the pain of losing their son, they ended up staying until 10:30. The Sterlings went home and just stayed in each other's arms, and hooded into the memories of Travis. They held onto their memories of him and never wanted to let go. Eventually they let the sadness drop away from them. They had a funeral for Travis which just made the sadness rise once again. They buried Travis in the Stapleton Cemetery. Travis's family and friends came around and said their final goodbyes.

Then Heath stated with a weak voice, "Travis was special young man. He was one of a kind, and will always be in our hearts. He had a challenge and now he is free. Travis is worry free and is in a better place. He had his place in his world but now he has a place up with God. It was his time to move on and he will forever be with us."

After all of the friends and family left the funeral they thought about all of the good times they had with Travis. Travis will always mean the world to his peers. Travis was special and unique and could never be replaced. When Heath and Jessica lost him they blamed themselves for his death, but they were wrong it wasn't their fault, it was his time.

Ana Schulte

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Law of Reflection

Pads of fingers leave greasy marks on a car window,
censoring cities and car dealerships blinking red and gold
like tiny moons and stars scattered across
desolate space,
a blank page colored in
with glass crayons that tore straight through the paper —
And people call this “politics,”
as if greed can be explained by a law inscribed in stone,
impossible to erase,
so tucked away by its owner and called his,
hiding it in those banks and churches
like lights in the distance
But greed doesn’t belong to them.
We each hold a stone in one hand
while the other presses against glass.

Look up! To the night sky and watch planes dance with clouds,
to the white line, a trail tagging behind
in the dusk, illuminated by pink sun —
Wouldn’t it be nice to leave *no* trace?
Drink half the wine and leave a full glass in its place,
with the taste of adventure of *your* tongue,
but erased in the minds of those
you bruised along the way?
Is ignorance conscious? The choice to forget active?
The potion you seek does not exist,
and you won’t forget the things you did,
the glass crayons you played with,
reckless.

Now open your umbrella, for the storm is rolling in.
Crack of camera lightning flashes
against your back, startlingly candid.
Shoulders slumped with hair unkempt and
hypocrisy duly noted,
you cannot clean the lens capturing your reflection

once the image has been taken.
And though you've been telling the mirror
something quite different,
Remember: actions have consequences regardless of intentions.

Ryan Schultz

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

Long Shot

The score was 9 to 9, playing to 10 win by 1. It was only a pickup game, but to Zeke, it was life. When he was on the court, nothing could bother him. The leather of the ball and Zeke's hand matched like a puzzle piece. It was just Zeke and the ball, the ball and Zeke. That's how it was now. Zeke walked up the court. The center, Tyrone, came up and set a high screen on his man. Zeke did a quick crossover and drove to the hoop hard. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his man. Suddenly Zeke pulled up for a 15 footer. Nothing but net, game. Soon later they were done for the day. As Zeke drove home, his mom called him.

“Hey son, bad news,” my mother sounded as if she had a frog in her throat.

“Nothing could be that bad after that game I just played,” There was a long pause, I could hear whimpering.

“Zeke, grandma died.”

I stopped right in my tracks and pulled the car to a stop and just sat there as if my world was falling around me. I just sat there and thought of what I could do. She was only 74 when she died. I was going to dedicate my next game to her.

The following day we had a game against Lincoln. It was the semi's for state. This game was for her. No one could stop me. I was on fire in warm ups. Draining threes, like my life depended on it. At the start of the game, I couldn't miss. We were up 62-24 at the half. I had 47 points, all were threes besides a breakaway dunk. When there was one minute left in the game, I had 72 points, I got fouled. I went to the line for a 1 and 1. The ref rolled me the ball. The first one went up, I felt the spin and could tell I made it right after I released it. The ref rolled it back. It went up, rolled around the rim, and went in. I had my 74. With 47 seconds left coach called a timeout and put our backups in. I looked up.

“I did it grandma.”

We were going to state. It was going to be either against Elevilles or Stockton. Eleville had a 6 foot 4 shooting guard. He got letters from all the big schools. The Duke's, Kentucky's, and North Carolina's. They also had a power forward who was 6 foot 8 and was very strong down low, but also had handels.

Stockton was going to win state for sure before their point guard got caught using illegal substances. But that didn't matter much because their backup was a freshman but could shoot the lights out but also take you down on defense. Then they had this 6 foot 11 center who just bullied everyone in the paint.

As I pulled into the driveway, all the lights were off but my parent's room. I walked in and saw

my mom. She gave me a big hug.

“I’m so proud of you son. Your grandma would be so happy of you too.”

“She deserved it, it was the least I could do for her”

Right then my phone buzzed. It was Tyrone.

“Dude, theres party at Susan's u better b there”

“Why would there be a party there”

“Because we are going to state”

“Ya so, I'm not going”

“Well will u at least take me, and bring me home”

“Fine, what is your address”

“14234 firehood dr”

I shut my phone off, told my mom I was going to go driving for a while and left. As I got to Tyrone’s, I saw his windows were covered by wood. His house almost looked abandoned. I pulled out my phone.

“Here”

He opened his front door. It slammed shut like a cellar.

“You should really come bro. The message I got said it was going to be *HOT and we both know what that means.*”

“I'm trying to stay sober for state, you know?”

“Doesn't mean you can't come. At least come for the girls?” He said laughing.

“The girls will offer me a drink. Plus my grandma will see me from heaven, you know?”

“Why in the hell are you trying to become some Christian pastor, man? You used to be one of the coolest guys at school, man, you would drink whatever and then get laid. Don't you remember that?”

“Wish I didn't.”

The rest of the trip was quiet. As I dropped him off, he said thanks and slammed the door in

my face.

I went home and just took a nap. At about 11 my phone dinged. It was Tyrone.

“Done”

I snuck out to the living room to find my mom sleeping on the couch. I took off. I was about two blocks away and could here music. As I came closer to the house, I saw a few guys fighting, I didn't think anything of it because they both were probably drunk. I got my phone out and texted Tyone that I was here. He didn't respond so i went to go get him. I went up the porch and saw him on a couch next to about four girls.

“Tyrone let's go!”

Right then the blue and red flashed.

“Everyone get down.”

I couldn't get caught because if i did my hopes of going to college were busted. I earned state, I wouldn't be able to go. I dashed the back door and headed for the trees. I couldn't tell if i was getting chased down but I couldn't risk looking back. My hair on my spine stood up. I saw this patch of blue ahead. Spreading over the horizon. I new there was no where to go but back. I looked up and saw no body. I started making my way up the hill before i saw a few more cop cars and a tow truck.

“I wonder if that's for me.”

I knew my car was parked out on the side of the road. Maybe they would think it was the neighbor's car and wouldn't take it. But I know I couldn't go up there now. It would be very suspicious for a high school kid randomly walking out from behind the house and saying he wasn't part of the party. So all I could do was wait it out.

* * * *

The next morning I woke up to sounds of tires screaming. I tried to stand up but I collapsed back to the ground. My legs ached, and my stomach growled. I knew I couldn't stay here forever. I started crawling towards the house I ran from the other. At least that's what I thought, I couldn't remember. It felt like the whole world was spinning. Then it stopped. I couldn't speak, I couldn't run, I couldn't move. I was stopped in time. A sudden force grabbed me and pulled me up. It was a glowing face with a blue scarf around the neck. It floated in the distance. I then felt nourished and very energized. I found my car and just sat there. I knew my life was never going to be the same.

Epilogue

After everything happened, we lost state to Stockton. Tyrone is off and on in jail. The girls that were with Tyrone, I never saw again. I became a guard at Ohio State. My senior year I busted my knee and never got to play again. I now coach at a small town in Ohio. My players and I have a tight bond because I see my life through their eyes.

Jake Schwartz

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The Sewer of the Years Prior

Shoes reveal plenty about a person. I realized this when I observed the shoes that surrounded me. I noted similar styles with each footwear. Yet there were slight differences between each foot. One of the sneakers looked freshly purchased and another seemed centuries old, as if the owner had been wearing that pair since birth. I shifted my focus from the shoes on the bus to my feet. If the shoe theory were correct, then I was a very indistinctive person. My shoes blended with the average designs of my friends beside me. Ashamed that I was lacking individuality, I disregarded my foot philosophy. I did not want to consider my unimpressive position in society.

A jolting shove on my shoulder pushed me back into reality. I quickly reared my head and saw Casey smiling to the right of me.

“You didn’t come to Italy just to daydream, did you?” Casey joked, partly giggling at his own comment.

“You don’t know me,” I laughed in response, and then pushed him back. Casey bumped into a red-headed girl who was somehow not amused by our playful quarrel.

The six Latin teachers at the front of the transportation exhaustedly told us rowdy Latin students to settle down. After our voices gradually dropped to near silence, one of the teachers informed us that we had an hour and a half to walk around the site. He ordered us to meet back at the bus, and finally told us to have fun.

I marched down the aisle, feeling insulted that these authority figures mandated me to have fun. After hopping down the metal stairs, my feet landed on the wet sidewalk and I waited patiently for my comrades to jump out. Josh ecstatically offered me a high-five as he stepped out. Casey and Chloe, the last two of my group, reciprocated Josh’s salutation. Settled in my group, I continued on foot towards Capua.

My legs, stiff from the drive, were beginning to awaken from their dormancy. Casey, muttering about the cold, sheepishly pulled his hood over his head. Josh murmured in agreement and stuffed his hands in his jean pockets. Chloe continued without a care in the world. I looked up and noticed the gloomy sky above me. Suddenly, the walkway made a turn, and the gladiatorial amphitheater fell into my gaze.

The obscure light from the clouds made the view even more breathtaking. The stadium was supported by extravagant cement archways that outlined the immense grass floor of the coliseum. The archways at the base appeared to welcome even the tallest of giants. When my group walked closer, the arches seemed to grow even more in size, now reaching over thirty feet tall. Above these magnificent arches was another row of arches, composed of darkened and deformed stones, which were eroded or completely missing at most sections. The arena had a decrepit physicality yet a vigorous spirit.

I lingered my palm across the wall. Roman hands had touched this very wall. I envisioned that I was reaching into the past, that I too was a citizen of the Roman Empire. My daydream, just as quickly as it had commenced, was cused by a sudden statement coming from behind me.

“There’s a dog!” Josh exclaimed, his index finger following a white dog as it trotted around the theater.

“Should we follow it?” I asked the group.

“Yes,” posed as the company’s unanimous answer. In response to the decision, we trailed the stray dog. After further inspection, I started to realize that this was the most brave and independent dog that I had ever seen. The dog wandered aimlessly around the arena, casually walking through restricted areas and over chasms. She had complete control over where she went and what she did. I began to develop a strange jealousy for the dog’s utter independence. Eventually the dog clambered down a fissure, abandoning us at a dead-end. We remained alone and confused, like puppies lost without their mother. At that moment, Chloe and Casey noticed a bizarre dropoff. As we stepped closer, it became clear that this was a set of stairs travelling downwards into an unknown area.

“Should we go in?” I anxiously questioned the group.

“Yes,” was their decision. Again I adhered to the majority conclusion.

As a unified entity, our shoes crept down the steps. I watched the amphitheater fade from my sight and the light surrounding me quickly diminished. Dusty air entered my lungs with each breath. My eyes eventually adjusted to the minimal light, and I discerned myself in an unfamiliar world. This world was filled with dark brick archways. The arches seemed to serve as the foundation for the stadium overhead, and were in surprisingly healthy condition. The entirety of archways formed pathways that, shooting off in separate ways, created an eerie maze.

Casey, Chloe, Josh, and I smiled at each other and scampered through the labyrinth. We allowed our inner adventurers to take over, and we split to travel our own ways. Eventually we ran into each other and voted to pursue one of the countless paths to its limit.

Eventually we stepped into a darkened room. I fumbled for the flashlight on my phone and pointed it towards the musty ground. At the bottom of the wall there was a narrow hole that dropped straight downwards. I ushered my companions over. As I shined the light through the spider-webs stretched across the opening, I exposed a sewer system that led toward an uncharted destination.

An inner desire bubbled inside of me. A wish to discover a personal story in those depths was brewing. However, the group had an opposite opinion. They articulated their worries, none of which stopped me. I was too focused on getting an object to sweep away the webs that covered the entrance. I glanced around and found an umbrella on the floor beside me, and imagined the power this tool would give me. It would be my guiding weapon against the unknown horrors of the world underneath. After I twirled the webs onto the umbrella, I looked back at the group. I could see the nervousness in their eyes. It comforted me to know that I was not the only one battling a war with fear.

“You guys don’t need to come with me if you don’t want to,” I offered.

Josh spoke for the rest of the group. “We’ll go if you go.”

I turned to face the void. It seemed to stare back. Taking a deep breath in, I thought of the dog who led us here. I remembered her freedom and courage. I finally released my breath and tightened my grip on my new weapon-umbrella. I then jumped into the abyss.

The umbrella broke immediately on my shoes’ collision with the damp passage floor. So much for the protection against the evils in the corridor. Luckily, however, only the handle broke off, leaving the rest fully functional.

The cement encompassing me was painted with spider-like bugs which had orchestrated a domain of webs. Those bug infested walls ran beyond my sight. A fear of what was ahead began

to build in my brain. After taking only a few more steps, Josh, Casey, and Chloe hastily said their goodbyes and clamored back to safety. I reminded myself that I had personally made the choice to undertake this journey, and in this reminder I found the courage to tentatively tread through the tunnel.

As I walked, I came to the conclusion that this was an ancient sewer system. I theorized that the channels below the field carried the sewage to these tunnels. Carefully inching forward, I slashed away the webs with the remnants of the umbrella. Suddenly, I felt a cold wetness soak through my shoes. I noticed my ordinary shoes engulfed with water that stretched the rest of the tunnel. This added to my fears of the future, but I held onto the courage to continue.

The sewer veered sharply to the left, and still I waded through the shoe-soaking water. The passageway then expanded into a dark and gigantically cavernous room. An innate sense of danger stopped me in my tracks. I aimed the light on the murky water, and to my amazement it was deeper than I could comprehend. I dabbed my shoe in the perilous pool. My brain whirled with the prospect of my unknown death in this shabby sewer.

However, the uneasiness suffocating my brain disappeared. I no longer feared the mysteries ahead. I stood boldly, confident in every decision that I had made and prepared for the future. I recognized my self-reliant position in culture. I understood that I was not subservient to society and could find self-sufficiency in my actions.

After my revelation, my time in Capua had expired. I hurried onto the bus of familiar faces and took a seat. I focused on my shoes. The characteristics of the shoes hadn't changed, but my inner characteristics had developed. I understood that my personality could not be described by something so simple as shoes. My sewer encounter and my drive for similar adventures are the best representation of me, demonstrated by the following: my fear of the uncharted, finding my independence, and maturing. By discovering my independence, I have matured to a level of confidence for any aspects of the future.

Emma Seckinger

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

The Asset

I'm stuck. I am stuck in the awful void of this so called love. In my world, there is no school, no homework, no stupid bus rides home. That sounds great, right? It really isn't all that great and I wish I had those things in my life. I wish I was normal like everyone else. She thinks I don't know what she's hiding behind my back. Boy is she wrong. There has never been a permanent home for me. I come "home" to cry in my pillowcase after my job is done and I know I have to do it again the next day. There is no escape for me. She says she loves me and she cares about me. I'd love to see the day that comes true. I can remember everything of those days even though I wish not too.

The door slams and awakens me from my thoughts. My vision gets blurry, but I know better and wipe the tears that begin to form. If I show my emotions I seem weak, and if I seem weak, there's no telling what she'll do.

"Grayson honey!" Her shoes clank on the wooden staircase leading to my room. The door creaks open and in pops her golden blonde hair with her emerald green eyes staring me down. She closes the door and comes to the edge of my bed tucking her skirt underneath to sit and sinks into my small bed.

"I thought I told you to clean the house while I was away," Alcohol reeks in her breath and makes it hard to focus.

"There could've been a guest," She sighs and looks away as if I should be ashamed.

"I-I-I'm sorry mother. I-It won't happen again," Her green eyes are piercing and it makes me nervous. I fidget and look at my hands that are shaking. She stands, pulling down her too-short-skirt. Her heels make a click-clack sound as she crosses the wood to the stairs. I feel relief flood through my body as she opens the rusty door to leave, but it all comes back when her head turns to face me.

"I'm expecting company tomorrow. *Don't* get near the house or there will be consequences." Her face gets cold then appears to almost light up.

"Oh dear! I almost forgot," She trots her way over to me and gets in my face.

"What did you get today?" Glancing at my pocket, I slip it out and hand it to her. I felt proud but also guilty for how much I had received that day.

"Good job sweetheart." Not even remembering my presence, I hear her whisper about how lucky she is to have a life like this. I wonder what she means by that.

The stars, they tell you your future and your past. They show you the way to go and how to get there. But more importantly they tell you to take chances and be brave. To be the person you want to be and achieve your greatest dreams before they slip away. They tell you to *not be afraid of what comes next*. My heart says the same, but it's my brain that tells me to stay the sheltered child I am. To *be* afraid, and not think of the future. My brain is more powerful than my heart, and always wins. I wish upon the stars and in my heart that I will get the life I deserve and become free.

I wake up on the floor with no blankets on and my bed freshly made. It makes me wonder if I ever even slept there. I smell the aroma of pancakes coming from the kitchen. I put on a new shirt and tiptoe down the stairs. She's eating her breakfast and I see she's saved me two pancakes and one banana. I eat as fast as I can to make sure I'm out of her way.

"Why are you leaving so soon?" She puts down her fork, walks over to me and grabs my shoulders.

"My chores." *Please let me leave. I want to go.* I try not to plead incase I hurt her feelings, although she's hurt mine numerous times. She glances at the time and nods.

"Okay. All right. Go." I feel weight lifted off my shoulders but it's just her hands. I open the door and walk as calmly as I can. Once I get down the block I run to get everything off my mind. I do it all the time and sometimes it works. I look at the clouds and wonder where I should go. I think of the old house and my old friends. I remember playing soccer and getting grass stains all over my socks. I miss it. I miss it more than everywhere else I've lived, and we've moved so much it's hard to keep track any longer. An idea pops up in my head and it will get my chores done while actually making me happy. I sprint home but come to a halt as I reach my street corner. Then I trot up to the front door with a grin across my face. I look to the driveway and street making sure her company hasn't arrived yet. I go to turn the handle but someone else beats me to it from the inside. I panic and jump into the bush. I hear a mumbled conversation and I can tell her's is one voice and the other is some random I don't know. I hear the car start and drive away.

"You can come out now." I stand and my jacket gets caught on a branch I tug it off and leave it there. Her bright green eyes turn dark for a split second but I still catch it and get nervous for what comes next.

"I thought I told you to, *stay away*," Her left eyebrow raises followed by her right.

"Hmm?" She motions for me to come stand by her. I step out and scrape my leg. *Don't cry, don't cry.*

"Yes mo-, you did." I look down at the concrete and see the bugs and dead worms everywhere. I don't look her in the eyes. Trying to find a good explanation but I come up empty handed.

"Why are you here then? He could've seen you and I would've lost more money. You *do* want food right?" She towers over me silently waiting. I want to say something but my mouth doesn't open and no sound comes out. She sighs and tilts my head up so I'm now forced to look at her.

"You want to play a sport again. Don't you?" I'm in utter shock. *How on earth did she read my mind?* I stutter again, with no words spilling out about how badly I do. So I nod my head quickly. Her lips press together as she closes her eyes and looks out to the clouds. *Is she crying?* She lowers her head to look at me and kisses my forehead. I don't know what she's doing. *Why is she getting so upset about this? Or, maybe not upset but something else.* "Well then. Let's go."

I get out of the car and step onto the damp grass of the fields. The white lines are spread apart evenly and the goals are brand new. I feel at home. We walk across the field to meet my new coach. She sits me down away from them, claiming they needed to talk about adult things but I know the truth. They're done in minutes and when she walks over to me she looks angry, sad, upset and everything else all bottled up together. She puts on her fake smile and walks away telling me she'll be here by five o'clock. I walk over to the man and he greets me with a big smile saying welcome and hello. He walks me over to the rest of the team. I tell them my name and they tell me theirs. They seem nice enough.

"All right boys. Now that we've all met, go run laps around the field!" He motions for us to leave and I trot my way over but he calls me back.

"Hey, uh, Grayson!" I turn and look at him.

"Why don't we start with some other drills. Like, oh, I don't know... Passing?" He shrugs and I start to slouch. I go over and start passing with him. Time flies by and next thing you know everyone is leaving. I look to the parking lot but she's not there. *Of course she wouldn't be here.* The coach looks at me and sits to my left.

"Not here yet?" I shake my head and he nods.

"Well, extra practice time for you!" He picks up the ball and tosses it to me. We play for another hour before his wife comes. She wants him to leave and go to dinner with her. He looks at me, I nod for him to go ahead.

"I'll catch a bus!" *I don't want to, but I will.*

She never came.

The days go by fast and soon it's time for my next practice. I arrive late. I walk up to him and say hello.

"Hey man, you're a little late. That's not how things go around here," I look up to him with a distant gaze.

"I'm sorry," He nods and points to field where the boys are running laps. I just stare.

"Well, you gonna go or not?"

"No. I'm sorry sir but I think I have to quit," He looks stunned.

I walk back to the car where she waits for me. My pockets hang low from weight. I open her old car door and get inside. She looks at me eagerly. I hand to wad of cash over and I feel defeated once again. She's happy the whole ride home, but me? Not so much. We arrive at the house and I walk inside. I hear her giggle with excitement.

"Hey baby, I'm going to go run some quick errands," I nod. *Yeah, sure you are.* Two hours pass before she's back. Another hour passes of me just sitting on the couch. The doorbell rings and she comes sprinting out into the front room. The door opens with a gust of air and it gives me chills. I look up to the door and see my soccer coach standing there. Her eyes widen and she starts yelling at me to get up.

"Grayson! Get up now! Go get your things! We're *leaving!*" He walks in and looks at me. He motions for me to get up and stand by him. I toss the blanket off of my lap and step towards him. His hands reach out to grab my shoulders and his eyes are on the verge of tears. I know that because that's how I look at myself everyday. Wondering why my father left me.

"Now you listen to me. I know what your mother's doing and I know you're not okay with it. But take this advice-" She storms into the room with a box in her arms.

"Grayson, don't you dare listen to him!" She turns to look at the man.

"And you! You get away from him and get out of my house!" She puts an empty box at my feet and runs off to get more things.

"Hey now, I don't have much time. Your mother wants to leave and you don't. I get that. But just remember that you don't always have to do whatever she makes you do. Alright?" I nod my head and run to get my stuff because I know she'll leave everything here just to get away. My mind goes numb as this has become a routine. The only thing rattling inside my head is what he said. I'm twelve now and I now she uses the money for her benefit only. I come home to the stench of whiskey and cigarettes almost every day. I hate it and I want out of this life. But I can't live on my own. Not just yet. But I will, and I'll become rich and leave her to scraps and begging just like she did to me.

The tiny red car is packed full of our things. The man stands just outside of the car door and I look to the driver seat where she sits. Her eyes puffy and stained a light red. The car is put into reverse as she goes down the crooked driveway. I notice her glancing into the rear view mirror and I look back to see him standing there in the middle of the street. I never knew you could want something so badly but could never have it. I stare at him until her voice awakens me from the daydream in which he captured me in.

"You don't need him. Y-You-You don't need your father Grayson." Her voice shakes as I whip my head to look at her wondering if I had heard right. No. He wouldn't do that. My cheeks felt like they were burning, my heart like someone broke it open and hollowed it out, my brain like a

hammer pounding on it. I hated her. I hated him. I hated everything. I thought about what he said to me and weighed my options. I decided what to do.
“Stop the car.” She looked back at me with disbelief.

“I said, stop the car.” She did to my surprise. I gathered my one box to her multiple boxes and perched it on the sidewalk by the car. Slamming the trunk down I made my way to the only person I could ever love.
She screamed and yelled driving right beside me. It didn't bother me because I was never going to live with her again. I won't miss her. I probably won't even think about her. But I don't care. She'll get over me. Just as I thought that she threw her necklace I bought her onto the ground.

“Fine! I don't need you anyway! I never did, you worthless piece of garbage!” She drove off. Speeding actually, she won't get a ticket. She'll bat her emerald eyes and show off her upper body, then the cop will let her go. It works every time.

I think of what she called me, *garbage*. That's the one thing she never did around me. Cussed. Never, ever. Not once. Not like I haven't heard it from other things though.

I walked and walked and walked until I made it to the little blue house on the corner. Two knocks on the door and there she is with her tiny glasses sitting on the bridge of her nose. It took her a second to register who I was before I was engulfed in her arms. I told her what happened, she told me she saw it coming and how her daughter was always like that. But she took me in told me I could stay here as long as I wanted too. I could even go to school.
So I did go to school and it turns out that I'm a pretty smart kid. I got moved up quickly and before I knew it I was a grade above where I needed to be. I continued school and got many scholarships to great colleges. But my junior year was terrible.

Her health was fine, she wasn't that old, and was a great driver. But life happens and it sucks. I hated it too. Hated it for taking her from me. I took a week off school to plan her funeral and before I knew it, it was time. Her body softly placed in a mahogany casket, wearing her soft pink coat. I kissed her forehead and placed one white rose in her hands.

“I love you grandma. And I know you love me too. Thank you.” I wiped a single tear from my eye and watched as the casket closed. I wanted to hold myself up in the house and just cry. But she wouldn't want that.

I went back to school and graduated. I had gotten so many scholarships it was crazy Harvard was my college of choice and I then became a surgeon. The woman I hated so much all my lifesaver my success. She tried to reappear with apologies, but I declined. I won't give her away. I won't tell everyone what she's done to me. I want to forget about her. If I forget then I'll get rid of the past that haunts me and I realize I can see life through the the good days. I don't want to find love. I don't want a wife or kids. I know that because anyone who's said they love me or that I love them has left me, abandoned me, or died. I don't want pain, I don't want to grieve over something I should be grieving over.

I just want to be free.

Jessalyn Shipp

Age: Unknown, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Marnie Jenkins

Category: Poetry

Untitled

Starting off the year, everything is fine
Grades, GPA, Stress, Everything;
until one day, the first day you haven't had all your work done
"It's ok", says the teacher
You tell yourself it won't happen again, yet here you are again
a week later with assignments half done
Damn, I mean it's only the second week
It's only the second week
I have people telling me "It will be ok"
Will it though?

...

Fast forward it's December
The grades are ok
Minus one but it can be changed
This 87 can be easily brought up
I'm studying hard and it seems possible
Yet the next thing I know I have to worry about this
Among all my studying and other AP crap, now I have to write
Just something quick so I can get back to studying
I totally didn't have a stress attack
And maybe it's my fault
Maybe I shouldn't have taken extra classes and all AP classes
Maybe all this stress was self-inflicted
It usually is
And maybe I should have listened,
They were just trying to help
They said it would be hard
But nothing good is ever easy
Nothing easy is ever good
And I probably shouldn't be writing this,
if what I said was true
How much more stress is there,
we're only halfway through

Harper Sinclair

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

Tick Tock

The clock runs so quickly
With each tick, a bead of sweat falls.
It's the shackle chaining me to my sorrows
It's the dark cloud
constantly lingering over me.
It's the thing that tears me down
and kicks me when I'm weak.
Impossible to escape.
It follows me like a shadow.
Forever there, lingering in the background.
A constant reminder of it's presence
rings in my ears.
My mind is engulfed by the everlasting feeling.
It's existence weighs me down,
Leaving me unable to move.
I stand frozen,
Drowning in anxiety.
As the clock's hands gradually rotate,
It cuts deeper into me
Like a knife slowly drawing blood.
However, I procrastinate another minute more.

Emily Siskey

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Island of One

I learned how to be the good kid. It wasn't hard, resist temptations, think of everyone else first. At every new school I moved to I would make all A's, and my only friends would be the nerds. Staying up until midnight only to see the A on the paper the next day. As I unloaded the last box from the moving van, the heaviest, full of books, I wondered if I would still be the smart kid that is only there for a few months.

The first move was when I was five, from the small town in the middle of Mississippi to New York City, huge apartment in uptown Manhattan only blocks from Times Square. We stayed for a few months, through Christmas and New Year's, only to see the ball drop from the view across the city from the roof of our building. Then the next year we moved to Florida, went to Disney World twice and stayed through the Fourth of July. Next, we were off the middle of nowhere in Wyoming. The moves got closer together as we traveled all over the country. I learned what to take out of the boxes and what to leave for the next house.

We had lived in Alaska, Hawaii, Connecticut, and California, penthouses and lake houses, to run down apartments and old fixer-uppers. We had survived the long winters of Maine and the harsh summers of Southern Texas. And I know what you thinking, *'Oh they're a military family'*. Nope, my parents just hate the idea of staying in one place. They say, *'There wouldn't be a whole world out there if we weren't meant to see at least part of it,'* and that seems to be the family slogan. When your parents run a small photography business, they can pick up and move whenever they want.

Last week when I came home from the small private school I had attended in Washington DC only to see the boxes back out and the movers in the driveway, I walked through the large house, looking for my parents. Peeking into the study, I saw my mom standing on a ladder, handing my dad expensive camera equipment off the highest shelf. The 'look, don't touch' camera equipment. I take a deep breath and just ask, "Why are we moving again?"

My dad looks over at the doorway, "Oh, hi, sweetie. How was your day?"

"Fine, but why are we moving?"

From the top of her ladder, my mom looks down, "Because, why not? There is still a world to see," and with the biggest smile on her face she climbed down the ladder, pats the top of my head, and pranced out of the room.

"Go pack your room," my dad calls as he follows my mom.

I walk up the stairs and into the small room and see the boxes stacked high. The ones I hadn't had a chance to unpack yet. As I pull the first one off the stack, knowing that it is only half full and start to pull my favorite books off the shelves and place them carefully in the box. "Mia! Mia! Can you believe we are moving again? I'm so excited! Are you excited? I think you should be excited," my brother, Joe screams as he barges into my room.

"Yeah."

“Do you know where we’re moving? Hawaii!” Joe shouts as he continues to run around my room.

My little brother moving, he gets to wear all the cool t-shirts he’s collected over the moves and makes about a million friends at each new school, impressed by his orange shirt from the beaches of California or the green one from the Appalachian Mountains. Apparently cool t-shirts are enough to impress first graders, but speaking from personal experience, not enough to impress middle schoolers.

So I learned, it was rocky for a while but I learned, how to fit in and how to stand out. If you don’t want anyone to talk to you, put headphones in your ears and tap your foot, even if you don’t have any music. I learned that teachers will do almost anything for the new kid, but don’t ask for too many favors because you will be called the teacher’s pet, five a week is good, if none are in the same class. Lastly, when someone asks you where you’re from, only give them one answer. I like to say Alaska because it is always unexpected.

The plane ride was long and boring, full of Mom reading, Dad working and Joe bugging me. Soon we pulled up to a small house and pulled our heavy suitcases from the back of the rental car, our beat up minivan would be coming next week. As I grabbed my backpack from the back seat, my dad unlocked the front door to our new house. Most of the furniture was already in the house, along with the boxes.

As I stepped into the new school, I was greeted by the familiar slam of lockers and loud talking. I made my way to the front office and said hello to the secretary who assigned another student to show you around the building. Like every new school, I follow the girl in what must be the school’s cheerleading uniform down the hallways and smiled to the people in the hallways. The girl showed me to my ELA class and I sat in the back. Answered the questions the teacher asked: Where are you from? Have you moved a lot? How do you like Hawaii so far? I only half listened to the lesson, we learned it last week in DC. I noticed the girl next to me reading a book under her desk. The guy in front of me had a phone sticking out of his pocket that kept lighting up with notifications, and the girl to my left kept coughing. I looked around the rest of the classroom, looking for the kind of people I usually hang out, known as the teacher’s pets, the do-gooders, the ones who are nice to everyone .

I walked into the small library and found the young adult section. Sitting on the small couch, I picked up one of the many books I had collected in my ten minutes at the library.

“Hey,” I hear someone whisper. I look up to see the girl from ELA class, the one who reads under her desk every day.

“Hi”

“Are you getting this book?” she asked.

“No, I have a copy at home, it’s one of my favorites,” I tell her.

“Cool, I’m Megan”

“Mia”

“Thanks for the book, have you finished the book report yet?”

“No, have you?”

“Nope,” Megan said with a smile, “so you just moved here?”

“Yeah, from DC, but I’ve lived everywhere”

“That is so cool, I’ve never even been off the Islands,” Megan said with wide eyes, “I wish my family traveled,”

“Yeah, my parents are photographers so we move a lot, my brother loves it,” I explain.

“Thanks again for the book, and it was nice to meet you, Mia. See you at school”

“See you at school”

Megan and I talked more at school. Slowly I was introduced to everyone at school. Megan and I became best friends. My parents decided to stay in Hawaii, because a local art museum asked for some pieces to put in display and sell some of the smaller prints. So now they have an online shop and send prints all over the world. Moving let us see the world, but now we can truly see an island.

Athena Stamos

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Jump In

We all got into a cramped, navy blue Volkswagen Golf and my uncle drove us down to the lagoon. From my window, I could see the endless Ionian Sea below me. The sea sprayed fountains of water hard against the craggy shore. The road slithered down the side of the mountain like a snake and started to ascend back up the mountain. I felt the engine straining with the weight of its five passengers. Finally, the road topped off, and I saw in front of me a crowded parking lot with cars parked in a jigsaw fashion.

My brother didn't wait for me. Within two seconds, he climbed up on the boulder, jumped off the ledge, and disappeared from my view.

I bent my head forward, and all I could see were my brightly colored pink toenails and the shadow of the cliff bouncing on the waves. I stared at the rocks clearly under the surface of the water. The rocks seemed to bobble and dance through the surface of the water. I guessed that the rocks were fifteen or twenty feet below the surface.

"Jump! Or I'm going to go again!" my brother demanded as he put his hand on my shoulder and ushered me aside.

"Cannon ball!" screamed from the top of my brother's lungs.

I felt a spray of the saltwater on my lips. I peered over the cliff and saw my brother emerging through the surface over the water, swimming away from the cliff. All of a sudden, he clapped his hands and thrust his open arms up to the sky.

I turned my head and saw an Italian speaking twenty-something year old stand on the tip of the cliff with his back facing the ocean, wearing a neon green swimsuit. He signaled to his friends to take a picture of his jump. I tried to understand what his friends were saying, but I couldn't decipher it. Suddenly, with a grunt and a leap, he kicked off the cliff doing a somersault. He cut through the water after two back flips and disappeared into the depths of the crystal blue sea. The waves dispersed where he entered and he finally broke through the surface of the water to the cheers and accolades of his friends.

I could never do that.

I scanned the area around me wishing I had something to do. A variety of people including myself filled the bay. I came across an old man playing with his grandson, speaking Greek and laughing out loud. The toddler had thick, matted, chestnut hair. As I watched him, he rushed to the top of the cliff and leaped, sprinting in thin air as his grandpa clapped with a smile and a gleam in his eye. I leaned forward and could see the little boy cheering as his face brightened. For a moment, I thought that the grandpa was going to jump as he rushed to the tip of the cliff. I thought to myself if the grandpa was about to jump, then why am I afraid. All I had to do was jump into the water.

The rocks kept looming before me. Nobody was on the cliff except for me. I waited for five minutes, focusing on the tip of the mountain above me. I could hear my brother laughing as he climbed up to the top of the cliff.

As my mind cleared, I thought to myself, "if my brother could jump, I certainly could jump."

I immediately cut in line in front of my brother hoping people would not notice. My time came. I looked forty feet across from me admiring the astounding mountains filled with scenery feeling the burning hot, July sun hovering over us. *I got this.* I slid my shaded, dark blue goggles over my eyes. I focused on the spot I wanted to aim for, making sure there were no rocks below. I took a deep breath. I held it. I closed my eyes. I jumped.

I stretched my arms forward and felt the rush of water hitting my face. My ears felt the pressure of the water. I opened my eyes and saw the boulders much bigger now. The ocean floor was layered with rocks that were within my grasp. With my right hand, I brazened them. I threw my head back and started to search for the sun beyond the surface of the water. I kicked and kicked toward the bright yellow sun. My lungs began to ache. I had to take another breath soon. I swam up and broke through the surface, huffing and puffing for my first few breaths.

I saw my mom wave to me above the cliffs and swam towards her as fast I could. I remember her telling me stories from when she was eight years old. She would always come to this bay with her sister, jumping off the same cliff and diving into the water, just like my brother and I did. We kept their tradition and somehow I felt that I went back in time.

Once I climbed back up to the cliff where my family stood, I rushed straight to my mom with the biggest smile on my face, wrapping my arms around her back. This was the greatest feeling in the world. The feeling of victory, pride, and pure success filled my body.

* * *

Years later, we came back to the same lagoon. I stared at the crystal blue water and saw my smile through the reflection. I laughed at myself, realizing how foolish my fears were when I was scared to jump. Fear can be a big, or small controlling feeling or emotion, yet it is a part of everyone's life.

Now every summer we visit the lagoon, I race down to the line of people that leads away from the cliff, slide on my goggles, and splash. I would do this over and over until we had to go. I had a new appreciation of this area, and there was no doubt this could be my favorite place on the Earth.

I wish I was not scared so easily by the cliff eight years ago, and would've just had the courage to try to leap on the first try into the water. I realize nothing can change the past. Eight years ago, I jumped outside my comfort zone in spite of my fear.

Now every time my family and I travel, I always try to get outside my comfort zone and experience something new. In some cases, I learn myself better than I would have never known. Risks can be scary, yet in the end I gain new perspective and can appreciate something I almost passed up. Fears can be justified, but it is better to push past it. I then heard a deep voice and immediately looked behind me.

"Jamie, let's go collect salt down by the shore of the ocean," my uncle proposed.

One by one, we followed him and climbed over a two foot median separating the parking lot of the lagoon and the ocean. I could see down the slope, fifty feet of jagged boulders toppled over each other just to get to the salt. The waves crashed hard against the rocks like aggressive white sprays slamming on the tips of the ragged shoreline. The gray, granite rocks glared in an array of rainbows in the mist of the splashing waves. My parents stayed back by the parking lot. I saw no one climbing down the slanted mountain. I immediately slipped on my hot pink water shoes, I felt like an astronaut jumping on the foreign moonscape from one rock to another. Once we were at shore, I looked up as I waved to my parents from fifty feet below the parking lot. As I ascended back up the craggy slope, I stretched my arms to reach a rock and noticed something. Two small blisters appeared on my right hand. Staring at my hand, I smiled.

Julia Stolfus

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Central High School, Saint Joseph, MO

Educator: Kyla Ward

Category: Poetry

Dots

dots
that's all I saw
I saw lots of little dots

there was glass on the ground
blood on my arms
and beeping in my ears

...

then there were more letters in my last name
fresh paint on my bedroom walls
bedtime stories each night
and bear hugs before the lights went out

sometimes my mom would take me for car rides
but it took a while
because my cheeks would turn hot and tears would burn through my skin

eventually the burning stopped and the tears dried
we would drive through our neighborhood
and I watched the houses flash by in a blur of colors
reds, greens and blues

...

when I started high school it was hard for me to study
I had to take breaks between
every
subject
it felt like each class lasted for a year
each minute longer and loonger and loonger

so I started to draw dots
on the sides of my papers
I crossed one off each minute
watching the clock's hands tick

when the splat of the bell came,
I could leave: a sensation that felt like freedom

...

at college the other students started to create little dots
they would cry and spit up
and I was glad I didn't have one

mothers would bring their little dots to class
one hand writing down the notes
the other hand rocking the carrier
little dots seemed like they were hard to care for

one day a girl and her little dot didn't come to class
when I asked where they were
the room grew quiet
the memories crashed into my mind, hitting the walls of my thoughts without cease

then tears were all over my paper, smudging my writing
it was hard to breathe and before I knew it

I woke up

I hadn't been in one for over a decade
but it was still the same
the same tired nurses
the same old magazines
the same sad people

when I found her little dot he was sound asleep
eyes tightly shut and chest raising evenly
I feared he would be more injured
I feared he would scream when he saw a car
I feared he would cry when someone said his mother's name
I feared he would be like me

...

He's grown now, a good sprout
Doesn't run through my flower beds or break any windows
We drink lemonade together
Freshly squeezed with the seeds floating in it

I like seeing little dots now,
Because it means everything is normal

Aidan Stone

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Heidi Mick

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

Clover's Journal

Alfred Duncan was the chief detective for the News York City Police Department, a seasoned officer with many years of experience under his belt and well-earned respect to go with it. Today, he walked into an old listman apartment building with yet another job to do. The decrepit lobby was musty and dank, smelling of mold that had clearly been rotting through the floor of the main landing for some time. With each step, he couldn't help but cringe at the sounds of the boards moaning ominously beneath his feet. As he began his climb up the creaky wood stairs, his steps become more assured and he approaches the second floor of the building. He was looking for a "Room 24". Meandering down the hall cautiously, he couldn't help but think to himself and wonder what sort of thing could've caused such a rapid decay in the building. Perhaps water damage? The ceilings weren't as secure as they had clearly been once before, and the wallpaper clung lazily in place where it should've held fast. In other places it simply peeled away without any resistance.

He shook the useless thoughts away from his mind as he approached his destination.

The door was whitewashed and sealed behind a sheet of police tape, bound excessively to the point where it was almost comedic. "Didn't have to mummify it.." He remarked under his breath as he passed the threshold and entered the apartment with wary steps. Taking little time for a look around the rest of the living space, he followed directly to where the scene he was called to had taken place. Stopping briefly before opening the second bedroom door, he paused to listen. He can hear the voices of two cops discussing the scene inside. Nothing of actual work, sadly. No, something about their personal lives. He assumed this after hearing a man chuckle and making up his mind to continue on in. With little resistance, the rusty old knob turns and the hinges of the door squeak and moan as it opens to the room. A familiar stench greets Alfred at the door. Nothing short of the usual. Blood and decaying flesh. The other two officers who had previously occupied the room alone began to shift uneasily at the sound of the door, the more stout of the two turning his head and taking a step toward the door with tense shoulders. To his relief, it was only Alfred he saw, and the officer named Jeffrey stood down with a smile.

"Mr. Duncan, Thank you for coming over so quickly. In all my time here, I don't think I have ever seen anything like this." Jeffrey explains to the man as he moves over to examine the rest of the open space for himself. They stood before what had once been a twin sized bed. However, there was no longer a bed frame or much else to come to that conclusion other than a lonely old mattress sprawling on the floor.

"What am I looking at here? Alfred inquires with a growing look of disgust creeping across his face, what had once been a welcoming smirk now settling into a grim frown on his lips.

Alex, the other officer in the room, chimed in without pause, "Well it's obviously a human body. It says here that the previous owner of the apartment was a 'Ryan Clover'. We don't know much on him except what some people who used to know the guy have said about him. He was quiet and didn't come out of his room much. We got the call from the landlord who came in to check

up on him, and we found him like this.”

“Yeesh... to think someone pays for a place like this.. do we know what the cause of death is?” Alfred asked as he nudged what looked like a dismembered arm on the ground with the toe of his boot.

“Not yet. We’re goin’ to get ready to send the pieces to the lab to see if he was mauled before or after he died, just have to wait until a bagger gets here.” Alex answers with clear unease, displaying a fear for what might’ve happened to the man they were investigating.

Jeffrey griped quietly, “Poor kid’s gonna have a heck of a time gathering these bits up.”

Alfred let out a disgruntled sigh, glancing around and scanning the room. This “Ryan Clover” had resided in nothing more than a hole in the wall, a failed attempt at being a repurposed living space. There was a small night stand by the left side of the man’s bed, knocked over, with its contents spilling out onto the floor. In the pile of papers that layered the floor in front of the broken furniture, a single red journal could be seen. Alfred moves to the nightstand to pick up the journal from the pile of papers and other trash that was previously in the drawer of the nightstand. The pages were torn and had blots of blood and other liquids staining the pages, the cover of the journal was embroiled in faded gold letters “journal”.

Alfred picks up the journal to show to the two cops, “Have you seen this yet?”

Jeffery looks at the journal with a hint of confusion, then realization flashes across his face,

“Yes I did see that. It looked to be a diary Mr. Clover kept to chronicle his thoughts”

“We will have to look through this, it might lead to a suspect and put the sicko that did this behind bars for a long time.” Alfred growls as he picks up the journal and puts it in his inside coat pocket

Later that night, after Alfred checked back into the police station he headed back to his apartment in lower Manhattan to start reading Ryan Clover’s journal. It was about 7:00 pm when Alfred finally got to his apartment and set the book down on his small kitchen table and took off his coat and put it on the coat rack by the door and went to sit down at the kitchen table and started to read Clover’s journal.

- November 2, 1932

I had the strangest dream last night. I was falling in an infinite blackness, not knowing what direction was up or down, left or right. Then after some time two white dots suddenly appeared out of the black nothingness and stared at me .

- November 5, 1932

I have been having the same dream for days now and I am beginning to see the dots in dark corners of my house and other corners of the world around me.

- November 14, 1932

It has been weeks since the dream started and the dots are becoming brighter and brighter and the darkness keeps deeper and more encompassing every night I feel something is getting closer I can feel it.

- November 23, 1932

Help me the darkness is coming closer and closer the dots are becoming blinding but there is nothing I can do. God please help me the darkness is going to eat me and there is nothing I can do.

- November 31, 1932

I have almost Made it through the month and the darkness has nought consumed me yet and the dots have not blinded me yet I believe I will live but there is still the dots in the corner of my room watching me and It will not stop.

- December 13, 1932

It... is... hard... to... write... the dots have over-taken me the light is blinding and all consuming and It is coming I hear it when I am a sleep but lately I have heard it coming to get me even when I am awake and I feel I will not live past the year.

December 17, 1932

I can no longer think straight, the thing is inside of my head filling it with dark evil thoughts and knowledge no mortal was ever supposed to know. It is close to taking me I can see it in my dreams.

December 24, 1932

It took my journal and I was unable to write for some time and has done something to it I can feel the dots are staring at me through the pages of my journal. Now no place is safe the end is nigh. Please god help me any force out there save me I want to live one more day.

This is where the journal ends. Alfred puts down Clover's journal and solemnly puts its back down on the kitchen table and heads to his bathroom to watch his face and try to comprehend what is written in that journal says about what killed mister Clover. *What that Journal suggest is that an Alien killed Mr. Clover and that is impossible right...Right.* As Alfred mills over what he has read he hears a knock on his door, with a start he wheels around and rushes to the door. He slowly unlocks the hinges and creaks open the door so only a faint sliver of light could sneak in.

"Oh! It is only you Jeffrey." Alfred says with a great sigh of relief

"Yah... I have the cause of death. Apparently Mr clover's head exploded so violently that his body was ripped by the blast." Jeffrey explains to Alfred noting the growing fear in the detective face

"Wh-what cause the explosion?" Alfred asks trying to control his fear

"That is the problem the science people do not know what caused the explosion. Looks to me like spontaneous combustion. Just thought I would come down and tell you" Jeffrey says as he leaves Afraid to mull over the new information.

After many hours of thought Alfer to tired to keep worrying about what he read crawls into bed.

As Alfred falls to sleep he falls into a deep sleep and starts to dream. He is falling in a deep blackness with two small white dots staring at him.

Emma Stubblefield

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Frazier

Category: Dramatic Script

Crucifixion of Lauren Cane

Character List

Main

Defense: *older, slightly greying, with a Brooklyn accent. Charismatic and overdramatic at times. Solo defense lawyer for Eric Hartman, accused murderer of Lauren Cane.*

Kelsey McKnight: *Prosecuting lawyer, no monkey business kind of attitude. Represents Cane and hates DEFENSE.*

Supporting

Eric Hartman: *Young boy, late teens. Awkward in appearance and covered in bruises. Disconnected.*

Mrs.Cane: *Lauren Cane's mother.*

Judge (offstage)

Clerk (offstage)

Bailiff

Jury members- no lines

This story is purely fiction. Any relation to actual people or cases is purely coincidental.

(Lights turn on) Setting: 1940's noir style SETTING: year; unknown. New York courtroom, the walls are dull and paint is chipping away. In the center of the stage chairs are lined up in two rows, six in front six in back, UPSTAGE. A table(STAGE LEFT) with MCKNIGHT (closer to CENTER) and MRS.CANE sitting in chairs behind the table. MCKNIGHT is looking straight ahead arms crossed, looks pissed off. And MRS. CANE is resting her chin on her hands, facing the audience with a mixed facial expression of anger and pain. There is a briefcase in front of MCKNIGHT.

(STAGE RIGHT DOWNSTAGE) Another table, sitting down (further STAGE RIGHT) is ERIC HARTMAN who is leaning back in his chair staring blankly at the table with his hands in lap. The Main lights off and a spotlight is shown on DEFENSE who is standing behind the table but in front of his chair, facing the audience, hands on desk, with his head down. On the desk lies a manila folder on top of a briefcase in front of lawyer two glasses of water on either end, one in the each downstage corner of the table. Everyone is completely still, except the defense lawyer.

Defense

(slow and decisive/ monotone) Eric Hartman, age 17, clean record... for the most part, gets good grades in school, and oh yeah, his father uses him as a punching bag. Twenty calls to child protective services, and we never received a single court date. It's a shame... not one time did we go to trial for child neglect *(lawyer looks up at audience and makes grand gesture with arms)* And yet here we are... *(lawyer opens folder and pulls out documents, holds in one hand. Begins walking in front on the table as he delivers the following lines, "reading from the paper". More natural tone more upbeat and fast paced. Animated with facial and body expressions: dramatic switch in tone)*

On October 23rd our little friend over here supposedly went on a hike around ten o'clock with his "good friend" *(air quotes)* Lauren Cane. Reports say that Eric didn't get home until 12:30 in the morning and when he arrived he was drunk off his ass and couldn't remember a thing about what happened. Now Lauren...well...I think you can all assume she didn't come back. *(slams papers on desk. Leans against desk, crosses legs and arms.)* Two days later they found her a couple miles up the river caught on some factory debris. Her hair was cut and dyed, fingernails clipped, and holes had been drilled into her hands. It's not your everyday murder but, hey, crazy things happen. But here's the thing, as were examining the body some smart guy yells out, "Hey, don't she kinda look like Jesus or what not, with the hair and the holes and all?" *(slight pause)* I couldn't believe this guy! I walked right up to him and smacked him in the head and said, "Now don't you go saying things like that people might hear you!"... but the press caught on to the analogy and the news spread like wildfire. Once the word got loose, the rumors started and people started making assumptions. Which brings us... *(Slides across desk and hides behind Eric, who is still frozen. As he delivers next line he places his hands over Eric's shoulders so his hands are on his chest)* to our little friend here *(pokes head out from over Eric's shoulder)* Eric... poor poor Eric. Now he got dragged into the story because people found out about their little rendezvous and thought, "Hmmm it's got to be this kid, right?" *(gives his shoulders a pat and stands up straight)* Is he innocent *(slowly move center stage)* I don't think so, but the jury doesn't know that and neither does my opponent. *(runs over to the supposed prosecuting lawyer center stage, second spotlight on her. He slides across the floor right before reaching her and fluently goes into her lap)* Kelsey Mcknight *(wraps his arms around her neck and acts like a damsel in distress pretending to faint)* protector of the weak and weary and destroyer of the damned. *(hand on his heart)* She protects those who have been wrong no matter the circumstances. *(sits up and looks directly at audience)* I hate her. *(Hops off spotlight still on Mcknight. Defense walks to center stage, downstage)* She's a liar and honestly a mediocre lawyer, plus she thinks I'm a weasel. She may win a lot of her cases, but she rarely takes difficult ones, like the one unfolding before your eyes. Now, You see the woman next to her. *(Spotlight switches to other woman at the table/ defense turns to face)* That's Mrs. Cane, she's kinda a sleaz but that didn't stop her from loving her daughter *(full front)* It's a shame she lost her girl, but they don't have a lot of evidence against my client. Plus, her mama over there is a little... unsteady *(a bell is heard off stage, Eric smiles)* Well, well, well, I guess It's time to go... *(fixes tie and slicks down hair. Clears throat and stands up a little straighter)* Ladies and gentlemen... take a seat and silence all children and obnoxious relatives, and please, relax, sit back *(throw arms up and shout)* and enjoy the show!

(Defense bows as the stage lights turn on. He returns to his seat as the people "come alive" and the jury enters the room and each member takes a seat. Lawyers are whispering to their clients)

and quiet murmurs can be heard in the jury. The sound of a gavel is heard and everyone silences.)

Judge (offstage)

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Calling the case of the People of the State of New York versus Eric Hartman. Are both sides ready?

McKnight

(stands) Ready your honor.

Defense

(Stands) Defense ready your honor. *(both look at each other and sit down)*

Judge (Offstage)

Clerk will you please swear the jury?

Clerk

Will the Jury please stand(jury stands) Will the jury please raise your right hand. *(jury stands and raises their right hands)* Do each of you swear to fairly try this case before the court, and that you will return with a fair verdict according to the evidence, so help you God? *(all jurors say I do)* You may be seated. Prosecuting attorney McKnight you may now present your opening statement.

McKnight

(Stands up and nods towards the audience/judge) Thank you sir. I'd like to begin saying that this case is not about bringing justice to a young man, it isn't about having another successful case under my belt. This case is about letting Lauren Cane know that she will not be forgotten. This is about putting her killer behind bars so please... keep that in mind. *(Walks in front of table, pacing back and forth slowly)* On October 23rd the defendant , Eric Hartman, and victim, Lauren Cane, left school around 2:15 pm and went on their way home, like any other day. You see, Eric and Lauren have known each other for year, they grew up in the same part of town, they've gone to the school since the second grade. Our victim, Lauren, was a straight A student and according to her teachers and family, she was loved by all her teachers and classmates.

(Light shut off except for spotlight on defense, everyone freezes except Defense)

Defense

Ah, A classic. She using the whole. (*mocking McKnight*) “Oh she was so perfect and innocent how could anyone hurt her! Only a monster would hurt something so precious.” It’s the easy way out! Juries eat this up all the time, I mean just look at them. (*spotlights on the jury all have these worried and sympathetic faces*) Now I’m not saying she wasn’t a good little girl who always went to church on Sunday, all I’m saying is that lawyers do this all the time. (*Slouches back in chair and sighs*) Anyway let’s get back to the fire cracker. (*gestures with head toward MCKNIGHT*)

McKnight

Lauren could do no wrong, and no one expected her to go missing. But then the evening came and the defendant, Mr. Hartman, and Lauren were nowhere to be found. But then the defendant stumbled into his home at half past midnight. Mrs. Cane grew worried when her daughter still hadn’t returned home the following morning and called the police. According to the police report (*McKnight opens briefcase and pulls out a document*) Mrs. Cane stated, “My daughter is careful and she’s never does anything without telling me.” The following morning, October 25th, at 6 am, police found Lauren’s body in the Hudson River. Based on the level of decomposition the coroner concluded that the time of death had been sometime in the evening of October 23rd, the same time and day Eric and Lauren had disappeared. (*Places paper on desk and grabs a second stack of papers. Slowly approaches jury as she speaks*) Further examination revealed that Lauren’s blood had both alcohol and a large dosage of the prescription drug Oxycodone. Even with these harmful toxins in her system ligature marks on her neck and damage to her trachea showed that the cause of death had been asphyxiation with a belt. Bailiff if you would. (BAILIFF enters from STAGE LEFT and hands McKnight a belt in a evidence bag) Thank you. Now this belt was found two miles upstream from where Lauren’s bod was found and evidence suggest that this belt belonged to the defendant. His DNA was found on the belt as well as Lauren’s DNA. Now, I’d like to bring Mrs. Cane to the stand, I know this may be unconventional, but I believe she will be able to provide the jury with crucial evidence.

Judge (offstage)

I’ll allow it. Mrs. Cane you may take the stand. (*Mrs. Cane stands and walks over to down center stage, full frontal and waits She seems indecisive and nervous. She can’t stand still*)

Clerk (offstage)

Please place your right hand in the air and your life on the bible (*Mrs. Cane does as she’s told, left hand appears to be placed on a book*) Do you swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth so help you God?

Mrs. Cane

I do

Clerk (offstage)
You may proceed.

McKnight
Thank you sir, now Mrs. Cane (*approaches Mrs. Cane*) May you tell us about the relationship between the defendant and your daughter?

Mrs. Cane
They were in love. My daughter used to talk about him all the time. (*ERIC looks up in confusion and turns to DEFENSE who also looks puzzled*)

McKnight
Now may I ask you, were you ever concerned about your daughter's relationship with this boy?

Mrs. Cane
Yes, he scared me. One night I got home late and I heard some strange noises upstairs so of course I went up there to check it out. I looked in every room but I couldn't find anything, the only room I hadn't checked was Lauren's. I didn't want to wake her up so I left it alone for awhile, but the noises continued. When I opened her bedroom door all the noises stopped so I quickly turned on the lights. He was there, in nothing but his boxers. I wanted to kill him right then and there but he grabbed his clothing as fast as he could and hopped out the window. We only have a single story house so I knew he wasn't hurt in anyway... I went over to Lauren who appeared to be asleep. I thought maybe she was drugged or something, but I didn't want to push it. (*turns to Mcknight*) I assumed that if she wanted to talk about it she would.

McKnight
So you believe that this young man has a history of violence?

Mrs. Cane
I'd say so... (*begins to cry*) I... I...

McKnight
(*Puts hand on MRS. CANE'S shoulder*) It's okay you may take a seat. (*Faces jury and walks toward them*) As you can see the defendant is not one to be trusted and not only that, but his father has access to both alcohol and oxycodone. His father owns a convenience store and has recently undergone surgery on his left knee. (*full frontal*) The defendant had access to the very things found in Laurens blood stream and... he had a motive to kill Lauren. (*Lights shut off except for spotlight on DEFENSE and ERIC who looked confused and puzzled. Everyone else is frozen*)

Defense
(*leans in*) Motive? Eric what motive is she talking about? You never mentioned any problems between you two.

Eric Hartman

I don't know... Lauren and I didn't have any issues. We weren't even a thing! *(both return to their original positions. Spotlight drops off Eric but stays on Defense. Eric Freezes)*

Defense

This could be bad. *(lights turn back on and everyone unfreezes)*

McKnight

The defendant and Lauren were engaged... in a lovers quarrel. *(Defense snickers quietly and leans forward resting his head in his hands in an attempt to cover his smile)*

Defense

This outta be good *(McKnight shoots him a dirty look and returns begins slow pacing between stage left and right)*

McKnight

Now Lauren had begun talking to this boy in her chemistry class to help her with her homework but according to some of Lauren's classmates, the defendant wasn't to happy about this. On August 18 the defendant got into an altercation with the boy from chemistry but was let off the hook after both parties decided not to press charges. The school allowed him to continue class the next day. The defendant was mad, and Lauren knew it, yet she trusted him which was unfortunate. *(stops center stage and looks at DEFENSE who returns her gaze. DEFENSE still smiling)* Your honor... *(Looks at audience)* That is all. *(she returns to her seat and begins whispering to MRS. CANE)*

Judge (offstage)

Thank you McKnight. Defense, you may now present your case. *(DEFENSE stands up and walks center stage and glances at ERIS who looks at him, terrified. DEFENSE nods and looks at the audience before taking a deep breath. All lights shut off except for spotlight on DEFENSE. Everyone is frozen except for him)*

Defense

This is going to be a lot easier then I thought. One, the judge likes me, plus his kid plays soccer with mine. And two all I got to do is convince this jury that my client, needs a hug not hand cuffs. I mean *(runs over to jury and grabs one of their cheeks: second spotlight of juror: and continues to pinch)* All these guys care about is a good sob story. *(let's go of cheek and goes to a juror at the end STAGE LEFT :DEFENSE spotlight follows: who looks particularly pissed: spotlight switches from the first juror to the juror on the end: Look at this guy. (crouches next to him and looks at his face)* He wished he was anywhere but here *(turns back to audience)* If I can

get this guy on my side... *(stands up does gesture with arms)* I won the entire freaking case. *(jogs back to center stage and smiles)* So let's do it. Let's get this jury on our side.

(All Lights turn back on and everyone unfreezes and goes quiet.)

Thank you McKnight, for that lovely story, but I'll get to that later let's begin with my defendant. Eric Hartman is also a straight A student who has a nearly perfect record, but his father likes to hit the bottle. *(sits on table in front of where he WOULD have been sitting)* Now when his father drinks he likes to show Eric some tough loving *(Quickly looks back at previously angry juror. He still look pissed and disinterested. DEFENSE clenches teeth and turns to front again)* His father beats the crap out of him and although child protective services has visited his house multiple times, we can't seem to get them to care about him. *(Looks back at juror again and all jurors seem including angry loosen up and show sympathy on their faces. DEFENSE says whispering)* Got em now.

(returns to normal tone and pushes himself on the desk and slowly walks over to MCKNIGHT and MRS. CANE)

But at least he had his good friend Lauren right, I mean, They were in the same boat after all. Both of them raised by a single parent who never gave a damn about them. *(MRS. CANE GASPS)* Oh by the way I thought I'd let you all know that Lauren's mother, *(gestures with thumb toward MRS. CANE)* has received many DUI's and assault charges as well as had child protective services called on her 27 times since last October. Maybe it's the drinking, or maybe it's violence, or maybe it's the accusations of child neglect it could any one of those things. *(MCKNIGHT stands up)*

McKnight

Objection your honor, this evidence is irrelevant to evidence previously stated. I fail to see how this affects Eric and his innocence towards this case.

Judge (offstage)

Sustained

Defense

Okay *(throws hands up)* I see how that may be irrelevant to my client's innocence but I believe that this next statement is very much relevant to both my previous statement and this case. *(Walks back over to his own table and stands between table and chair and pulls another document out of manila folder)* Now Lauren Cane was suffering from a mental condition that her mother chose to ignore. *(quickly says)* I call Eric Hartman to the stand. *(DEFENSE gestures for ERIC to take center stage and steps down stage while moving stage right as MRS. CANE and MCKNIGHT begin whispering aggressively and quiet murmurs can be heard throughout the jury. ERIC stands down center stage with DEFENSE directly next to him)*

Clerk (offstage)

Please place your right hand in the air and your life on the bible (Eric *does*. *Once again, his left hand appears to be placed on a book*) Do you swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth so help you God?

Eric Hartman

I do

Clerk (offstage)

You may proceed.

Defense

Now Eric, earlier today the prosecuting lawyer stated that you and Lauren were in a relationship, is that true?

Eric

No.

Defense

So then why, if I may ask, did you get into a physical interaction with another student? Was it not on her behalf?

Eric

He and I fought because they were dating and she told him that I was into her. I tried to tell him we weren't a thing, but he said he read her journal and found out about our "relationship". (*do airquotes.*)

Defense

Are you referring to this journal? (*pulls out run down journal in an evidence bag from his coat*)

pocket.)

Eric

Yes.

Defense

That's all I need from you Eric, for now at least. (*ERIC returns to seat as DEFENSE walks toward jurors far STAGE RIGHT and turns towards the previously angry juror.*) Now, this journal was found in Lauren's bed room and let me tell you some of these things are pretty juicy. One entry from August 16th says, "God, why won't Eric just admit he loves me I know he does... he has to." Now, an entry from August 17th, "I need Eric to notice me, I need him to admit to the world how he feels about me. He's never said or done anything to show me how he feels, but I know his true feelings." (*snaps book shut and JURORS jump in their seats.*) And of course... the next day Eric and her boyfriend got into an altercation. (*begins slowly pacing in front of jurors who follow him with their eyes and heads*) In the sixth grade Lauren forced another student to kiss her in the gym locker room and when they tried to refuse she lashed out and clawed the other students eye. Mrs. Cane tried to cover up the incident but the school found out about it.

Judge (Offstage)

How is this evidence relevant to this case?

Defense

(*stops pacing and walks forward to stage center and stops*) I never thought you'd ask. Lauren has a history of being a delusional narcissist and it's clear that she made up the relationship with Eric. (*Picks up speaking pace and begins slowly walking down stage*) And if the relationship with Eric never existed then why would Eric kill her. He has no motivation, he cared for her but not enough to care if she were in a relationship (*stops at the lip of the stage*) There can't be lover's quarrel, if THERE WAS NO LOVE IN THE FIRST PLACE! (*everyone goes silent and MCKNIGHT and MRS. CANE go silent and stare at each other stunned. All lights go out except for spotlight on DEFENSE*) And now here comes the backlash from Mrs. SassyPants. (*Lights turn back on and MCKNIGHT springs up and opens her mouth to speak but then slowly sits back down. DEFENSE shrugs and whispers*) Guess not.

Defense

Now let's break down the holes in your evidence. (*walks behind his desk and opens briefcase,*

pulls out document) So let's talk about the first major inconsistency. There is very little evidence that supports Lauren and Eric's meeting. The only reason people believe he was even with her, is because they always walked home together. *(moves center stage slowly with documents in hand)* The only evidence that ties him to the scene is the belt. But guess what guys *(throws documents in the air and picks up talking speed.)*

Of course the belt would have his DNA on it because it belongs to him...in a way *(winks at audience)* That belt *(runs over to briefcase and pulls out a belt in a plastic bag suddenly. ERIC flinches)* THIS BELT!! Is the one Eric's father always hit him with! *(Overly dramatic. HE throws the belt on the table and runs over to the jury man far STAGE LEFT and grabs his shirt)* The poor child was beaten and bruised with the same belt found at the scene. Why would he inflict pain on another with the same belt his father used to hurt him. *(quickly goes to another juror in the front row and falls to his knees in front of him, facing the juror.)* His own father betrayed his trust and now he is being framed for a crime merely because of his broken psyche!

McKnight

(quickly stands up) Oh come on we all know that is complete..(get's cut off)

Defense

(Jumps up and faces McKnight) ly correct. The evidence of their meeting is miniscule *(center stage)* and the anger behind each marking on poor Lauren's body does not resemble that of a trouble, yet successful boy.

Judge (Offstage)

So what, you're saying his father did it?

Defense

No...*(more calmly but still frazzled)* I'm saying I believe Mrs. McKnight is ignoring the true culprit because of her sympathies to a killer! *(falls to his knees. Delivers next line wearily)* Her motherly instinct... blocks the eyes of justice. *(falls flat on his back and lays there as if her were dead and the light shut off except for spotlight on defense, everyone is still. Who then sits up quickly)* Maybe I was a bit dramatic but I think I got my point across. *(Lies back down in same position as lights come back on.)*

(The room is in a panic. Jurors are arguing, McKnight is yelling about objections and Mrs. Cane is throwing a fit, Eric is calm but confused)

Judge (offstage)

Order... I said order!! (*everyone goes quiet and returns to their seats and defense picks himself off the floor*) Now I'm a little bit confused about your previous statement Mr...

Mcknight

Objection your honor, that statement is irr...

Judge

Overruled McKnight! (Mcknight sits down angrily) As I was saying, please elaborate on your previous statement.

Defense

All evidence points toward Lauren Cane's own mother. I call Eric back to the stand.
(*ERIC returns to center down stage DEFENSE joins him but more STAGE RIGHT*)

Clerk (offstage)

Please place your right hand in the air and your life on the bible (*Does the same as before*) Do you swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth so help you God?

Eric Hartman

I do

Clerk (offstage)

You may proceed.

Defense

Now Eric, when was the last time you saw that belt?

Eric

November 18, the day I helped Lauren get home, the day her mother saw me in her daughter's room.

Defense

Now why were you in that room that night, and why was it the last time you saw the belt?

Eric

We went to the river that night, and she was under the influence, at least I assumed she was. She kind of lost control over herself and jumped in the freezing river, so I pulled her out and carried her home. I was able to slip through the window and lay her in her bed. The reason why I lost the belt was because I had to take off the frozen clothing. I was about to leave when her mother came in... and I grabbed as much as I could and ran out.

Defense

Thank you Eric... (*places hand on ERICS shoulder and looks at MCKNIGHT then back to full frontal*) Now what do you remember about the night of October 23rd.

Eric

I remember going to the river and she was clearly on something... and she of course brought something to drink, and I had some... but I remembered everything. Until something happened and... after that I'm not sure.

Defense

Was is sudden, as if something hit you. (*Eric nods*) Thank you Eric that's all I need. (*winks at audience member ERIC returns to his seat and DEFENSE walks back to his seat but doesn't sit down, just leans against the front of the table*) Now as Eric stated he left his belt, the one used to kill Lauren Cane, at the Cane's house, and the night of the murder something happened to him after he heard something behind him. But there is more evidence that point towards Mrs. Cane being the killer. Lauren was a perfect child with a less than perfect mother. Lauren was ruining her reputation and she couldn't afford to lose everything so she took care of it and blamed Eric for the crime. I hate to turn the tables on such a short notice but I refuse to put a child away for something he did not do...

Judge (Offstage)

Is that all?

Defense

(stands up straight and walks towards the jury silently stops directly in front of them/ facing them) All I say is... *(slightly bows)* make the right decision and please... *(stands straight again and turns to full frontal and slips hands in pockets as he returns to his seat)* Remember the face of this broken, innocent boy before you make your decision. *(sits down)*

Judge (Offstage)

Prosecution, it's your turn to respond.

McKnight

(stammers) I...we...*(looks down at desk)* we'd like a recess your honor...

Judge (Offstage)

Okay, we will return after a 20 minute recess. *(sound of gavel can be heard)*
(Every starts to stand except for DEFENSE who is staring into the desk smiling. and all the lights shut off. Slight pause before a spotlight of DEFENSE fades in)

Defense

And that's it... Anything they say after the recess doesn't matter... really it never mattered in the first place. *(slowly looks up and closes briefcase)* No matter what they said, I would've won... McKnight may understand the law but she doesn't understand people and their emotions. *(places hands on table and slowly rises to his feet)* This system unfortunately isn't about what's wrong or right anymore, it's about people and their fragile minds. *(walks to juror most STAGE RIGHT and slowly walks from STAGE RIGHT to LEFT while waying)* These goons are easy to manipulate. Pull their heartstrings, made them cry, and then give them a new story that makes them mad. Telling them a mother killed her daughter out of jealousy is a surefire way to get people pissed and I must say I am very proud of myself for weaving that story into this case. Now these two *(points to MCKNIGHT and MRS. CANE)* were a little harder to manipulate. *(walks toward them)* I had to make McKnight believe that I had nothing against her... the truth is, if I let her know I had a weak story she might have pulled out the rest of the evidence to strengthen her case, but now... it's to late. *(sits on MCKNIGHT'S desk in the center facing the audience)* The judge was on my side from the beginning. They tell judicial officials to leave their emotions and biases at the door but come one... *(throws arms up and crosses his legs as he*

slams them back down on the table on either side of his body) Our kids play soccer together he knows me, he knows my wife. Do you really think he wouldn't give me a chance to win the case? McKnight was right to call the second objection, I was bringing up the mental state of a dead girl and yet he overruled it. He shouldn't have, but he did. (*hops off table and walks to the center lip of the stage*) If you haven't figured it out by now, the courtroom is more like a show. The flashier you, the better you do. The more you make your audience like you, the more they believe you. (*sits on the lip of the stage criss cross applesauce style*) I wish it were different but it's not. I confessed something to you lot earlier, I told you that I didn't think Mr. Eric Hartman was innocent and I still don't, he told me in private that he was growing tired of Lauren. The truth is... I think he did it, and those guys back there might as well... but they won't say guilty. (*stands up and brushes off pants*) He's a kid after all. (*Spotlight fades away*)

The End

Jessica Sun

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Game Changer

I hit the ball as high as I can into the sky and wait for it to drop down on the opposite baseline. In tennis, the lob can be used as either an offensive or defensive shot, but its most important function is buying time for the player to move into a better position.

My opponent scans the air hoping to catch a glimpse of neon yellow. By the time the ball drops into her view and she stretches her racket to hit a return, the ball has already bounced past her head. Her return is weak and straight down the middle, the perfect setup for lob number two. Ideally, a player analyzes her opponent's strengths and weaknesses, as well as her own, and formulates a strategy that optimizes her chance of winning the match. In practice, this can be difficult. Does she respond well to forehands hit to the back corners? What about slices after her serve? My lob strategy is unique: with a single lob, I can determine whether my opponent can hit a strong return.

I notice the frustration on my opponent's face. My lobs follow high parabolas with unseeable vertices, making them difficult to track until right before they hit the ground. She grimaces as I return another. Maybe she's exhausted, but it's more likely that she's just not used to this kind of play. Like every girl playing tennis, my opponent seeks to emulate the power and grace of Serena's forehands. There is a level of reassurance in imitating Serena; her playing style has been validated by success.

But does sticking to the norm matter? After all, if Darwin had accepted the established theory of evolution, society might still believe that giraffes have long necks from stretching all day long. Perhaps adhering to the norm is comfortable because the outcome is generally predictable. If a player approaches tennis the normal way, the worst possible result is a loss. If a player tries a new strategy, she has no idea what could happen: her teammates might ridicule her, her coach might scold her, or her parents might cringe from the lawn chair viewing section. On the other hand, she might just win. Her winning strategy could revolutionize high school tennis, transforming the game from amateur players trying to play like professionals to a sport where lobs are the stroke of choice. I sometimes imagine I am that revolutionary, the player that captivates opposing coaches and tennis moms with my exquisite lobs. The reality is far more mundane though: lobbing is sometimes the only shot I have at winning the match.

My opponent decides to try something different: instead of hitting my lob long after it bounces, she tries to hit the ball "on the rise," a more advanced technique that requires perfect timing. Unfortunately, she misses. After slamming her racket on the court, she regroups and we begin the second set. No matter what strategy my competitor tries next, she should be prepared. I'm adaptable.

Teresa Tang

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Mackenzie Everett-Kennedy

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

Flight of the Tattoo Bird

The monstrous creature prowled through the woods. Each of its paws, as big as a dinner plate, hit the ground without a sound. Every purposeful step sent its dappled fur rippling. When the animal's nostrils flared and its dark pupils narrowed, the girl knew: it had scented her.

Up in the enveloping branches of the tree, the girl hardly dared to breathe. Her heart skittered around in her chest as the beast slinked below her, circling the tree as if it had all the time in the world. Could these things climb? She had no idea, didn't even know what this animal was. The beast began to paw at the weathered bark, sending jagged pieces tumbling to the forest floor. With terrifying speed, it leaped into the air, sinking all four sets of claws into the tree.

Oh, no. She had nothing, no gun, no knife, just the clothes on her back. Desperately, she searched her surroundings for something to throw. A bird's nest caught her eye, abandoned except for three blue feathers trapped in its twigs. Without thinking, the girl grabbed the nest and threw it as far as she could.

In the ominous silence of the forest, the sound of the nest landing was too loud. Birds hiding in the trees took flight, squawking in protest, and even the beast seemed startled. It paused in its ascent, pointed ears swiveling. Slowly, hesitantly, it flowed off the tree, long tail snaking behind it. *Go investigate*, the girl urged in her head. Seeming to obey, the beast stalked away, forgetting its prey in the tree.

The girl took her chance and scrambled out of hiding, hitting the forest floor running, adrenaline pumping through her veins, trying to stay quiet but too scared to slow down. She kept glancing behind her, then at her clenched right fist.

Only when she reached the edge of the woods did the girl finally stop running. Bent at the waist, breathing hard, the girl opened her hand. A single blue feather floated to the ground. The last feather. The girl gently picked it back up and continued on her way.

The wings were done. Held up against the last few rays of light streaming through the window, the feathers glowed pale gold. The white of a swan, the red of a cardinal, and there, at the tip, the blue feather, the last one—she had spent years scouring the outside world for these, spent countless hours sewing them into wings.

Finally, finally, finally.

Thick black lines on her arm captured her attention. The tattoo of twisting, dancing marks had mystified her for much of her life until that fateful day, years ago. She remembered it like it was yesterday. Her mother had taken her to the top of a mountain, telling her to look towards the west.

“What do you see?” her mother had asked.

“A river,” the girl had replied.

Her mother had sat down, staring at the girl with solemn eyes. “I'm not your birth mother,” she said. “You were two, I think, when I found you on that river's bank. Don't be upset,” she

added, seeing the girl's surprise. "I don't know anything about your past, but I thought you'd like to know."

"Can't I go look for my parents then?"

"The river's miles away," warned her mother. "It's too far and too dangerous for you to go by yourself." The girl hadn't brought up the topic again.

Only later, sitting on her bed and remembering that conversation did the girl realize that her tattoo looked exactly like the landscape she had seen from the mountain. The thin, silvery river she had seen snaked down her arm as a black line, thinner and thinner until it stopped at a tiny circle with a bird in the center of her palm.

Right then, she knew that she had to follow the river. It called to her, and now that she knew it led to her past, she couldn't let it go. The tattoo was her map, and wings would take her home.

"You're back," said the lady.

"Yes, I am," the girl said.

"I'm surprised you managed to find this place after so many years, especially since you stumbled upon it by accident the first time." The lady peered closely at the girl. "Do you realize how strange it is to want to fly?"

"It's the only way. I can't get to the river by foot, not by walking through the woods. You told me when I first came here that you knew how."

The woman made a sound of agreement, turning to grab a vial from a shelf. She knew magic, that was for sure, had practiced it for ages in this lonely forest, chasing youth and beauty. Few people ever stumbled across this house, stashed deep within the forest, and if anyone did, they always asked for magical favors. Most of them wanted material things, but this girl was the first to want to fly.

"How many birds did it take?" the woman asked, glancing at the immense feathered creation splayed across her table.

"A lot."

"No blood on your hands?"

"Of course not."

"That'll change. Cut your hand." The girl paled. "This won't work without your blood. Drip it in this vial. Here's the knife."

Hesitantly, the girl took the ivory-handled dagger, putting the tip to her palm. *If you think too long about it you won't do it*, she told herself. *Think of the river. You've waited for this for years.* A spark of pain lit her skin on fire as the metal tip dug in, the vial filling up with red faster than she expected. Before the wound had time to close, the woman whisked the vial away.

"Get the wings. We're going to the clifftop."

Without waiting for an answer, the woman flew out the door, leaving the girl to follow after her.

The clifftop was terrifying. The wind crashed against the rocks, an ocean of invisible force. Any closer to the edge, and both the girl and the woman would tumble to the scraggly forest below. A lone vulture glided in the distant sky.

The girl stood on the clifftop with her arms at her sides. She could feel the feathers of the wings pressing against her back as the woman tied them to her body with rope. *Pop.* A vial being uncorked. The sharp, metallic smell swirled around the girl as the woman began to paint the wings with red.

“Close your eyes. Don't speak, just nod. Are you ready?” asked the woman.

The girl nodded.

The woman began to sing in a language the girl didn't understand. She didn't even notice the foreign words at first. The woman's voice had entranced her. It was nothing like the thin, raspy voice from before. No, it was strong, melodious, comforting and passionate all at once, flowing from the woman's mouth like a river. The song seemed tangible, and it rustled the feathers of the wings, an unseen breeze.

If the girl hadn't known any better, she would have thought that an angel was singing.

Without notice, the song stopped, mid-word. “Your body is ready to fly, but your mind is not,” the woman intoned. “Think. Are you truly ready?”

Years of waiting, of dreaming. The girl felt as if the tattoo were burning. *So close, closer than ever before. Am I ready?*

The girl nodded.

“You have to imagine. Believe. If you know what you wish to become, and are certain, then the magic will obey you. Can you do that?”

Another nod.

“Godspeed,” said the woman, and a push from behind sent the girl over the edge of the cliff and into midair. The air slipped between the feathers of the wings, parting before the girl as she plummeted.

I can't move the wings!

The rope that bound the wings to her was slipping.

What do I do, what do I do?

She was too scared to open her eyes.

I thought she could help me fly, I believed she could... The woman's words slipped back into her mind: “You have to imagine. Believe. If you know what you wish to become, and are certain, then the magic will obey you.”

Believe you can fly.

She imagined the vulture she had seen from the clifftop, imagined the air supporting her. She imagined that she had wings, that with one powerful flap, she could propel herself higher and higher. She thought of the tiny bird tattooed on her palm.

A tiny spark of energy seemed to light inside of her as she concentrated. The ball of warmth seeped into her veins, traveling to the very tips of her fingertips, leaping onto the wings, and it felt as if the feathers were melting into her skin. The girl imagined the tattoo bird's outstretched wings flapping. *I can*, she yelled in her head, and suddenly, the wings began to move. They trembled, uncertain, then began to flap, determined strokes beating the air.

A bird call sounded in the distance, and the girl opened her eyes. There was the ground, too close for comfort. The shadow of the enormous wings darkened the reds and golds of the leaves below. Craning her head, the girl could see that the feathers had turned raven black, with shimmering hues of red, blue, and purple at the tips. Bits of emerald green appeared where the sunlight hit.

Laughing, almost crying from the exhilaration, she rocketed upwards, wanting to thank the woman. The clifftop, however, was empty when the girl landed. “Thank you,” she whispered out loud, knowing that wherever the woman was, she wouldn't hear it. Then, abruptly, the girl took flight again.

Following the river would be a long journey, but she was finally ready.

The first thing the girl noticed was the lake. She had followed the river for days, eating the berries she found along the way and drinking from the streams that fed the river. Now, here she was, hovering above the lake that was the river's end. At first, she had thought it was the ocean, for it was so big and blue that it seemed to touch the horizon.

The second thing the girl noticed was the island. It was a tiny dot in the middle of the lake, covered in pine trees, with several smaller rocky masses scattered around it. Grateful for a place to rest, the girl landed on the island, folding up her tired wings against her back.

As she walked along the island's shore, the girl realized how eerily quiet the lake was. It was beautiful, with the sunlight glinting off the waters and soft green of the trees behind her, but something about the lack of noise gave her the chills. She hesitantly wandered towards the pine trees clustered in the island's center. Surely nothing dangerous would live on such a remote island.

Curiosity got the better of her, and the girl pushed through the trees. Branches snagged on her feathers and hair painfully. From above, there had looked to be less trees than there actually were. It felt like eons before the trees gave way to a clearing in the island's center. She hadn't seen it from the air; the pine trees had been too dense.

Wait. There was a stone statue in the clearing. A bird statue. A familiar bird statue. The girl glanced at the stone, then at her palm, back and forth for an entire minute. *A tattoo of this thing?* Up close, the statue was nothing special either, just a simple, cracked bird with its wings outstretched, standing on a pedestal. "I came all this way for a statue," she sighed.

"No, you didn't."

The girl twisted around in surprise. No one was there.

"The statue," said the voice. "I am the statue."

"Who are you?"

"Your sister," said the voice, laughing. The girl blanched. "Don't you remember me? Oh, never mind, you wouldn't. You were taken when you were a baby."

"Please explain what's going on."

"It's a long story..."

It took hours for the voice to explain. Years before, there had been a flood. The river overflowed, and the water engulfed much of the land. The girl's family had managed to take refuge on an island, the very island the girl stood on now. Everyone had assumed that the water would recede, yet it rained and rained, and the water stayed.

"There were parts of houses floating on the water's surface," said the voice. "Tables, chairs, a couch. Someone's boat and oars washed up, so rickety that more than one grown person in it would make it sink. We fought for a long time about who would go on the boat. It ended up being you, because you were light, and our eldest sister."

"Where is she?"

"She came back for us." Their eldest sister had rowed to dry land, trudging beside the swollen river until she found a place to hide the baby before heading back to the island.

"It was no use, of course," continued the voice. "When she came back to the island, the boat started leaking. We were stuck for good, until a bird landed on the island, a dove. It morphed into a woman, who told us that she would save us on one condition.

"The woman wanted youth. Beauty. I was the youngest after you, and she said she would save the rest of us if I gave her my youth. I agreed, because we were running out of food. We couldn't stay on the island. I told the woman that she had to save you, too, and help you find us again if she wanted my youth.

“She wasn’t completely honest about the exchange. She turned everyone else into a swan, then took my youth and turned me into this statue.”

“But she kept one part of the bargain,” said the girl. “She gave me a tattoo that would lead me back here.”

The voice became quiet. “I suppose you haven’t found the rest of the family? Never mind, that’s a silly question. They’re all cursed as swans. You’d have to find the witch to get her to turn them back.”

“Hold on,” said the girl. “Describe the woman.” As her sister listed off characteristics, the girl became certain of one thing. “I’ve met her,” the girl said when the voice trailed off. “She gave me flight. She helped me. I can find her. I can make her break the curse, and I can make her turn you human again.”

“I hope.”

“Trust me. I can do it.”

The girl’s sister fell silent for several minutes. “Don’t forget about me. If you find our parents, come back for me,” she finally said. “Please don’t get hurt.”

The girl spread her wings. “I’ll come back for you,” she promised her sister. She leaped into the air, soaring higher and higher, eyes fixed on the river. The words of the woman came back to her. *Imagine. Believe.*

I believe, thought the girl. She had found the sister she never knew she had. Soon, hopefully, she would find her family, and suddenly the girl felt as if she could do anything, be anything. No longer was she the plain girl from the forest wandering through life. Today, she had found a purpose, and she knew the path to take. Her tattoo would guide her. The journey would be long, complicated even, and certainly not easy, but she believed in herself.

The girl began the flight back to the place where everything had started. She was on a mission, and nothing could stop her.

Anne Claire Tangen

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Dianne Hirner

Category: Critical Essay

Frank Ocean Album Review

Within the span of 48 hours, Frank Ocean dropped two albums after being dormant in the music industry for four years. In 2012, Ocean released his debut album, *channel ORANGE*, which was described as “one of the best albums of the year” by *The Guardian*. *channel ORANGE* set the scene for what Ocean and his music is all about: honesty and storytelling.

After the *channel ORANGE* craze blew over, fans started wondering what comes next and, more importantly, *when*. In short, Ocean, being just like any other boy, has led us on and played with our emotional heartstrings for the past four years by tempting us with a new album. But unlike the typical teenage boy, Ocean was setting us up for the most epic record of 2016.

August 18. *Endless*, Ocean’s visual album is released, sending everyone on Twitter into chaos. The album depicts Ocean building a staircase in black and white. *Endless* is mostly instrumentals, but no worries- it sure won’t put you to sleep. Ocean isn’t afraid to throw in his infamous high notes and some of his soulful rap. His variety of music will keep you intently listening for the entire 45 minutes. Ocean changes from calming background music and smooth vocals to silence in a heartbeat then starts back up with futuristic rhythm.

Would I recommend you play *Endless* at a party or before a basketball game? Heck no. Would I recommend you play it while roasting marshmallows with your best friends? Heck yes.

When I first listened to/watched *Endless*, I thought nothing of Frank building a staircase and assumed it was a metaphor for the time it took to create the album. I realized I was wrong a few days later- the staircase being built in *Endless* was leading to *Blond*, the album Ocean dropped August 20. As it turns out, *Endless* was a separate project from *Blond*.

To say the least, *Blond* was definitely worth the wait. It combines everything you would expect from Ocean: his deep thoughts and candid feelings poured from his heart to the record, but he adds a new layer of depth with psychedelic beats.

The first three and last two songs happen to be my favorites on *Blond* because they effectively open and close the album. The first song, “Nikes,” reminds me of “Consideration” by Rihanna (feat. SZA) because of the voice modifier and the slower tempo. It has been described to be a “masterpiece” by MTV and will give you *all* the feels.

“Ivy” and “Pink + White” the second and third songs, are the the first parallels to *channel Orange* with messages of unrequited love and failed relationships.

Although they are very different- in “Ivy,” we get the first taste of Ocean’s prominent vocals, while the vocals in “Pink + White” are much more laid back- they are cohesive setting the tone for the album.

Skipping ahead to the second to last song, “Godspeed,” Frank begins to conclude the album by “wishing you godspeed.” The song is nostalgic and reminiscent of church with soft organs playing in the beginning.

As we reach the final song on the album “Futura Free,” we are reminded of “Pyramids” from *channel ORANGE* – both are about ten minutes long and separated by quiet interludes. In this

song, Ocean finds himself reflecting on several topics found throughout the album, including race, religion, and sexuality.

Be warned- finishing this album is bittersweet. You'll find yourself wondering: two albums in 48 hours? How long are we going to have to wait until the next one?

Anne Claire Tangen

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Dianne Hirner

Category: Journalism

KC Walking Tours educates natives, tourists alike

To get to school every day, you would catch the bus from Swope Parkway to 47th and Troost. From there you would take the streetcar about five blocks to Rockhurst High School. In the summer, you always took the streetcar out to Swope Park. You might go to the zoo and then take a swim in one of their three pools.

This was what it was like for local Kansas City natives Rita and Mike Messina back in the 1940' and 1950's when streetcars were still popular and in service until buses replaced them in the late 1950's.

KC Walking Tours Founder and Tour Guide Emily Allen promises to take Kansas Citians and those from out of town alike back to the early 20th century with "The Original Streetcar Tour." Allen describes the tour as "the only tour in Kansas City that goes down the entire streetcar line and touches on the history from every neighborhood." Allen founded the Walking Tours because she "[loves] [her] neighborhood."

Allen said these tours, including the streetcar tour, help people learn more about Kansas City. "Often people living in Kansas City don't know much about how the city started, the origin of neighborhoods, or the contributions of those (saints and sinners) from the past," Allen said.

"Walking tours is a perfect way to connect people to Kansas City through stories of the past."

Launching a week after the streetcars themselves, the tour starts outside local River Market coffee shop and restaurant, The Opera House, and heads south down the streetcar line from there. The tour takes three stops: the first at the Library District, where tour goers visit the Downtown Library and see the Midland and Main Street theater, the second at the Crossroads District to learn about the "revitalization" of downtown and the third at Union Station to hear about the history of this classic building.

Not only does the tour focus on the Kansas City's past, but it touches on the present and future as well. The "revitalization" of downtown, defined by Allen as "bringing residents and business back to the urban core," is incorporated throughout the tour because the streetcar is part of this project.

Allen noted that downtown Kansas City was a "once-thriving area."

"The heart of the city, up until the birth of the interstate roadway system, were the downtown neighborhoods and nearby 'suburbs' such as the Midtown neighborhoods," Allen said. "The interstate system not only broke up neighborhoods- the North End, now called Columbus Park and the Jazz District- but it also was the first nail in the coffin of a vibrant downtown."

The Messina's, who have lived in Kansas City all of their lives, felt that the streetcar tours brought back memories, although "so much has changed," Rita said.

"It's a totally different experience," Mike noted. "The old ones were loud, even though they were electric streetcars. It was kind of like a train- the tracks were joined every 20-30 feet and as you went over the joint it clacked."

Although Mike enjoyed the tour because Allen "told me things that I didn't know or that I had

forgotten and surprised me, and [we] [visited] certain places in the city that I just don't go anymore," he does think the streetcars are "unnecessary."

Rita agreed. "I think it's especially for visitors and tourists."

According to tourists Corey and Rebecca from Pennsylvania, this may be the exact point of the revitalization of downtown. They felt they learned "a lot of interesting details about [Kansas City]" from taking the tour.

"We didn't know a whole lot about [Kansas City] before visiting," Corey said. "We got to see several things that we probably wouldn't have seen on our own."

Shillan Thaithi

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Silence

No two words ever consecutively leave her mouth
She is a hermit of the utmost beauty
Her body, a solid specter with no particular intentions
Her hair floats in the wind guiding her lips as they chew on her stylus
She is the queen of mystery
her sultry eyes reveal more than any words combined.
She is a fortress that cannot be broken,
a revolution that will never be stopped.
As her glass is shattered and her walls are taken down
she whispers into our hearts that words are not always meant to be spoken.

Grace Tinder

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Whole Again

I walk into the living room to see a box with a big pink bow on the top. It's not Christmas, it's not my birthday, am I missing something? I look back at my parents with the kind of, is it for me look. Before I barely gave my mom enough time to give a slight nod of her head, I am racing towards the fireplace. I start ripping open the packaging only to find a shirt. Now remember at the age of four, you don't really want clothes. You want toys, baby dolls, and barbies. I decide to look at the shirt even though I am not very amused. The shirt says "Big Sis" and it has a girl pulling her baby brother in a red wagon. I was very confused because I didn't have a little brother. Then they ask me to come outside and then I see, a shiny red wagon.

"Okay mom, so I got a shirt and a wagon, big deal," I say.

"No, Hannah you are going to be a big sister," My mom says as she grins from ear to ear.

I begin to jump with high spirits as my dad picks me up over his head like superman. Those were the good days, when my whole family was smiling and laughing together. Now it's families, more than one, not a big happy one. Separated and never together again.

Three years later... It all started as a normal day. I was playing outside with the neighbors, switching from the swings to the trampoline, then back to the swings. It was a never ending day of giggles and energy all spent having fun with some of my best friends. My parents interrupted the fun as they called me inside to the kitchen. They had serious faces and I could see the red blotches on my mom's face, 'Had she been crying?' I thought to myself.

"What is going on?" I say with a breaking in my voice.

"Well honey, your mom and I are going to take a break, a break from each other. Mommy is going to move into a new house and you will be staying with me until she finds a good place for her to stay. You will be switching from moms house and back to mine," my dad says while stroking the top of my hand.

I began to sink down in my chair. At that moment in time, my whole world stopped. Everything seemed to stop. I was speechless. The sun stopped shining, the day became cloudy, and I felt something that I had never felt before. Would I ever see my mom again? What about Sunday night family dinners? What about Christmas as a family? I had this sick feeling that my mom and dad would never love each other again, and I was right.

Throughout these years, it has been hard for me. I am a very emotional and sensitive girl. Something like this just made my world come crashing down. As the oldest, I was the only child for a couple years. I loved both of my parents dearly and wouldn't trade them for the world. It is hard to have random strangers come into your life and have to be known as a mother or father figure, but have no blood to them and have never seen them in your life before. It is not fair to kids to bring a random stranger in and tell them that this will be mom number two. My conscience told me that I know that I only wanted my mom. The mom who was my superhero and I was her sidekick.

Over the years of me growing older and seeing the way my parents act now, really gets to me.

It teaches me a lesson that my mom always tells me. She says that she wasn't put in this world to be my best friend, even though she is, she is here to teach me about life so that I can grow up to be a successful adult. She used the divorce experience to teach me many lessons. I have always had this inside feeling, about what would happen if this happened to me. I don't want to have to sit my children down and tell him that I didn't love their father anymore. It is not fair to kids to have to hear the bickering and the fighting from their parents. If we are supposed to look up to our parents as role models, the constant mumbled yelling and the "looks" doesn't help.

Through the divorce I felt like I separated from my parents. The days I would spend in my room trying to put this all together, trying to understand. Trying to grasp ahold of why my parents would do this to me. Many times I would wonder if it was my fault, did I favorite one parent, was this all my fault? Night after night I would spend in my room, crying myself to sleep, wishing that I could go back in time and change everything that has happened. If only I could with the snap of my fingers. If only I had super powers to make everything perfect. I also know that some things happen for a reason. Maybe this was meant to be. I like to tell myself that this happens to a lot of people and that I am with step parents who love me, but there are also many times that I wish my mom and dad would be just mom and dad again. Sometimes things can be too good to be true.

My mom would tell me that maybe this was for the best. Having a separated family is better than dreading coming home from school to an unlocked lion's cage. I feel like the divorce has brought me closer to my little brother. We used to fight a lot, but that is just a sibling thing. When the divorce was going on, I was there for him and he did the same for me. I could talk to him about this even though he was only four so he didn't really understand. I guess it was really just more of me being able to lean on him if I needed to. He was by my side through the toughest time of my life. It is very hard when you have to tell your little brother that the arguing, is just a normal part of any promising marriage. They vowed that through better, and through worse they would have and hold each other. What once was a promise, has now crumbled. I tried to explain, even though he was only four. Sometimes little brothers aren't always the worst.

Having the feeling, the notion, the moment my heart tells me something isn't right. I wish that I could explain what it feels like..

I see it, the laughing, the smiles, the joy reflecting off of our eyes through the sunlight. We stand in front of this house that I have never seen before. The burgundy, wooden door is awaiting our presence. Once we open that door and step onto the oak beam floors, our lives change forever.

Many times, I wish my life was just like those dreams. But I'll make it through, just like so many families before me. I'll keep the hope alive that one day, maybe one day, my family will be whole again.

David Tohm

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

Pario

“Here you go, kiddo,” my dad said as he handed me a small wrapped gift box on Christmas morning.

I eagerly tore into the gift, and to my delight found the new Pario Silver game that came out just a few days before. It must’ve cost a fortune.

“Oh my God!” I cried as I jumped up from my seated position to hug my parents. “Thank-you-thank-you-thank-you!”

“Just make sure you aren’t up all night playing,” my mom said with a smile.

After the presents were opened, I escaped to my room and immediately popped the game cartridge into my device. I started the game, feeling as excited as could be. I played for hours without even pausing to take a break. At some point in the evening, my mom interrupted my trance to call me down for dinner.

At the dinner table I said, “Thank you guys for getting me Pario. I’m nearly finished with it already. It’s so much fun!”

“You must really like the game, since you’ve been playing since morning,” my mom said.

After dinner I helped with the dishes. I showered and hopped into bed, but I had no intention of sleeping. As I was laying in bed I pulled out my game and started playing once again. Before I knew it, I’d lost myself in the world of Pario, only to return to real life at two in the morning. The only thing that kept me from going on was the fact that I was unable to beat the final dungeon. I restlessly tossed and turned, but I soon realized that I couldn’t sleep after playing the game for so long. After what seemed like forever, though, I eventually fell asleep.

At some point in the night, I woke up. But I was no longer in my bedroom, instead I was in a strange, dusty shop.

“Wh-Where am I?” I asked as I knocked dust off of me.

“You are in Pario,” a stranger said.

“I’m sorry? Who are you...?” I asked

“Oh excuse me, where are my manners? My name is Professor Crabbottom,” the man said. “What is your name?”

“My name is Joseph Faughn,” I said, glancing around the strange room.

“Alright, Joseph, enough with the chit-chat. We need your help; you’re the only one that can help us. There’s someone called Dark Abigor, and he’s been causing trouble in our land for a long time. But recently, he kidnapped our princess, and you have to get her back before she is harmed,” Crabbottom said.

“I’m not sure I understand any of this,” I said.

Before I could ask any questions, the professor cried, “No time, no time! You must choose a companion to help you on your journey.”

“Companion?” I asked as he ushered me towards some mythical-looking creatures. They seemed familiar, yet none of them looked exactly like the animals I usually saw.

“Yes, a companion. This is Goldeon, Voltslash, and Haunther.”

“What do they do?” I asked.

“Well, let’s see,” the professor said, adjusting his glasses. “Goldeon here is a mix of fire and water magic. Voltslash is a fusion of electricity and earth magic. And Haunther is a mixture of spirit and poison magic.”

The choice seemed easy enough to me. “I’m going with Haunther.”

The professor released the creature to me. It stood by my side without any trouble. “Before you take off, allow me to give you this book of useful tricks for your travels,” the professor said.

“Why?” I asked.

“It will help you in the long run, especially if you come across Dark Abigor,” he replied.

I nodded, “Well, where to?”

“That way,” he said as he pointed to a road outside, “Just follow that road.”

We said goodbye, and it wasn’t long before I was on my way.

“Let’s go Haunther,” I said as I began my journey.

As we walked along the road we encountered a monster. I was scared because I didn’t know how to defend myself, but in a flash Haunther came in and killed right off. I was shocked at his use of magic, but I shook it off. I knew there were more to come so we had to train to become stronger. Weeks passed and we got stronger, better and faster as we neared Dark Abigor’s dungeon. When we finally reached the dungeon, we snuck in through an open window, only to come face to face with the monster himself. I was petrified of Dark Abigor when I saw him. I didn’t know how to win this battle. Back at home, the final boss was the only enemy I wasn’t able to claim victory against.

“Come on, Haunther. Let’s go save the princess,” I said.

“Do you really think you can defeat me?” Dark Abigor said with an evil laugh.

“Yeah. That’s the whole reason why I came here,” I said.

“I can easily destroy someone small like you,” he growled..

“Let’s see about that.” I said, before sending Haunther into battle.

Haunther fought as hard as he could. He held Dark Abigor off for a while, but it was clear that he was losing power. It looked like we were losing the battle, but something occurred to me. I realized that the only way to win was to join in the fight myself. Something in my bag was vibrating. I took it off and saw that it was glowing. I pulled the glowing object out, and to my luck, a sword forged right before my eyes.

“We need to work together to defeat Dark Abigor, Haunther,” I called to my companion, “Go for the head, and I’ll go for the feet.”

I charged with all my might towards his feet and stabbed his leg so hard that the sword went right through. While Dark Abigor was in pain from the stab, Haunther charged in and attacked the monster’s eyes. He could no longer see so I tossed the sword up to Haunther, who stabbed Dark Abigor right in the heart.

Dark Abigor dropped to his knees, before falling to the ground. He was dead, and we’d finally won the battle. The princess, who was hidden somewhere far behind Dark Abigor, stood up. I could tell she was hurt.

“Come on, lets get you home,” I said.

I put the princess on Haunter's back, and together we rushed to the king and queen’s castle.

When we arrived, they were worried sick. When they saw their daughter, they were so grateful to find her safe. Hours later, they named me a knight in front of thousands of people.

“Please stay and protect our land, Sir Joseph,” the queen said.

“I wish I could,” I said, “But I have my own family to return to.”

“What’s that?” the princess asked.

“Whats what?” replied the king.

“That,” she said as she pointed to a strange looking void in the sky.

“I think that’s for me,” I said.

“Game complete! Restart or quit?” the portal asked in a monotone voice.

“Quit,” I said.

In seconds, everything went black. Suddenly, I woke up to find myself in my bed once again. I looked at the time on my clock; it was 9:30 a.m. on December 26th. My long journey was nothing but a dream.

I pulled out my device and opened the game. There stood the princess, safe and sound, and the words “Thank you, Sir Joseph!”

“So it wasn’t a dream,” I said to myself.

Nathan Tung

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Critical Essay

Eternal Torment

Emily Dickinson comes to a dark conclusion as she explores what it would be like to go insane in the poem “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain.” The poem is primarily about madness, which she compares with death throughout the poem by framing it in the context of a funeral procession. She also highlights the continuous pain of the transition into insanity, and suggests that the speaker has no control over the process, but just has to suffer through it. Finally, she shows how this madness extends beyond the typical bounds of death and into the spiritual and eternal. In “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” Emily Dickinson shows how going insane is a fate more terrifying than death due to the lack of control one has during the transition and the eternal torment of madness.

By associating the transition to insanity with a funeral, building up to a fast plummet, Dickinson highlights the terrifying lack of control one exercises in staying sane. The metaphor begins on the first line with, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” (1). In a funeral the deceased is carried around and remembered, but can not and does not perform any action: a corpse has no control over its funeral procession. This is also the case in the poem, where the corpse seems to represent the speaker’s sanity/mind. When Dickinson writes, “And then I heard them lift a Box,” (9) she is conveying this lack of control. By using “a Box” as opposed to “my Box,” she creates a sense of detachment with regards to the casket. Inside the box, there is nothing the speaker can do to affect the procession other than perceive it—just as much control as she would have if it was someone else’s casket being lifted. This theme is expanded upon in the last stanza when she is shown to have no ability to stop his/her endless plummet into insanity: “And then a Plank in Reason, broke,” (17). By using the imagery of someone falling through a plank, Dickinson conveys a lack of control as well as inevitability. Someone standing on a plank does not have to do anything to cause it to break but just stand there. In falling through a breaking plank, one loses complete control over the situation. It is a similar situation with insanity: it is impossible to stop the transition and climb back up to sanity once the plank breaks.

Dickinson uses repetition along with words that create a sense of pressure to describe the immense pain of the transition. Each example of repetition of words also has a similar structure, creating an even more repetitive feel: “Kept treading - treading - till it seemed . . . Kept beating - beating - till I thought” (3,7). The imagery of the speaker’s brain being mercilessly trampled and beaten is quite violent and evocative. The repetition serves to reinforce the continued nature of these actions, clarifying how the brain is not just stepped on or hit but continually so, even for eternity.

This theme is continued as the funeral transitions from a normal, physical one to having a spiritual effect, leading to a fate of isolation that is depicted as far worse than a typical afterlife. The speaker describes the mourners “creak across my Soul” (10). This marks where the descent to madness takes torment to a level past death. A normal funeral ceases at the physical—once the box is lowered and buried, it is over. Here the procession enters the soul, deeper than the mind,

and part of the spiritual as opposed to physical realm. As they seem to fully cross the boundary between physical and spiritual, the speaker finds herself locked out of heaven and trapped in isolation. She laments, “As all the Heavens were a Bell, . . . And I, and Silence, some strange Race, / Wrecked, solitary, here -” (13,15,16). Whereas a dead person would go to heaven and finally have peace, she can only long to share the same fate. Insanity is depicted as an alternate afterlife, one of solitude and silence—demonstrating how madness is worse than death because there is no peace afterwards, but rather just more pain. By describing herself as part of “some strange Race” and “Wrecked,” the speaker highlights how madness makes them feel alien and no longer intact as a human. This also contributes to the sense of isolation apparent in “solitary” and “Silence.” These words serve to create a sense of hopelessness as well, that there is no one around to save the speaker from their painful fate. This experience is strikingly different from that of death, where the dying never have to feel inhuman and enjoy the luxury of being in the afterlife with others.

In the last stanza, Dickinson describes a fall that is implied to last forever, the speaker colliding with different realities in a confusing and painful demise. The speaker says, “And I dropped down, and down - / And hit a World, at every plunge,” (18-19). In her description, we see the implication that this fall is never-ending. By using “every plunge,” Dickinson implies that there are multiple plunges and that maybe this fall is more bouncing and ricocheting than a straight down plummet. This idea is supported by the choice of “hit,” suggesting that maybe the speaker is not falling through Worlds, but rather bouncing back and forth off of them—which attests to the chaotic nature of the fall and shows how, even at this point, the speaker is not sure of her fate.

“I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” employs a deep metaphor, repetition, careful word choice, and imagery to depict insanity as one of the worst fates imaginable. No one is safe from this fate, as, once the plank of sanity breaks, there is no stopping the ensuing plummet. Although going insane does not mean death, it does mean the remainder of one’s life will seem a painful eternity—making death seem a preferable option. Every word in Dickinson’s poem is chosen to convey that message, whether it be defining the nature of this torment or painting a mental image of the narrative, opening the speaker’s mind for the reader to see the horrors within.

For reference (only work cited):

Emily Dickinson, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain:”

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till I thought
My mind was going numb -

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,

Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race,
Wrecked, solitary, here -

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then -

Emery Uhlig

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Pembroke Hill School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Siabhan May-Washington

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Hamilton and Les Mis: A Survivor's Guide to High School

Last August, I became a high school student. Like every freshman, I was nervous, not just about the harder classes and extra homework, but how I would navigate what seemed like a social minefield. I wondered where, and how, I would fit in. It didn't take long for me to figure out that there are two kinds of people in this strange little ecosystem: those who spend most of their time worrying about what others think of them, and those who are more interested in what they think of themselves. Although I like to believe that I am a pretty unique teenager, I understood from the first day that, like every other kid, I would eventually fall into one of these two categories. What set me apart from the average ninth grader, however, was that I began to figure things out not with the help of my parents, my teachers, or even my friends, but with a little wisdom I picked up from my two summer-before-high-school obsessions: *Hamilton* and *Les Misérables*.

Although on the surface they seem pretty different—one is a modern American hip-hop musical based on a Pulitzer Prize winning biography, and the other is a classic nineteenth-century French novel—they are both not just brilliant, but heavy on the tragedy, which, I'll admit, makes them fairly irresistible to a teenage girl. More to the point, and this is where they came in handy for me, their protagonists differ dramatically in the way they see the world and themselves. As I tried to find my place in high school, it struck me how similar the two groups in my school were to the two protagonists—Alexander Hamilton and Jean Valjean. Let me explain.

Alexander Hamilton was born in the Caribbean in 1757. His father ran off and left him, his mother died, and a hurricane destroyed his town. Despite all of this, Hamilton managed to get out of the Caribbean and to America. He did this by publishing his writing and using his incredible talent to become noticed. Even after he reached America, however, he still had no money, no social or political standing, and no connections, so he joined the American Revolution. He did this not only because he cared about America's freedom, but also because he hoped to improve his own status. He immediately understood that this war could serve as a route to the fame and power he hungered for. After the war, Hamilton did indeed gain fame and power, becoming the first Secretary of the Treasury, and is still remembered today as a Founding Father. Although he achieved basically everything he had ever dreamed of, however, it still wasn't enough. In the words of Lin Manuel Miranda, he would never be satisfied.

Alexander Hamilton achieved greatness not only because he was willing to work for it, but because he was willing to sacrifice just about anything for it. He was incredibly ambitious, working almost constantly to try to maintain the position he had fought for his entire life. When he agreed to write the Federalist Papers in support of the U.S. Constitution with John Jay and James Madison, the three men were supposed to divide the work equally between them. Of the eighty-five essays, however, Hamilton ended up writing fifty-one. This manic commitment to his

work definitely got him noticed. The problem was, it didn't leave a lot of time for anything else, even his family.

Although Hamilton loved his wife and seven children, he rarely spent time with them and sometimes seemed completely oblivious to, or even uncaring of, how they might be affected by his actions. After he was accused of embezzling funds from the U.S. government, in a desperate attempt to prove that he was not guilty he not only admitted that he had had an affair with another woman and paid her husband to continue the affair. Afterwards, however, he published the Reynolds Pamphlet, a detailed account of his affair for everyone to read. His wife was publicly humiliated, but all Hamilton could think about was protecting his own professional reputation. This obsessive interest not only in his career but in what the public thought of him brought Hamilton fame, but not happiness.

In some ways, Jean Valjean was very similar to Hamilton. He was also born in the slums of society, and had very few opportunities as a child. He lived with his widowed sister and her many starving children. Instead of it getting better, however, his life only got worse. One day he was caught stealing a loaf of bread. He served nineteen years for this small crime, and the injustice of it embittered him. He became a shell of the person he once was. He started looking upon the world differently, deciding that it was not a loving, generous place, but a harsh, unfair one.

Valjean's life, however, was changed because of an act of incredible kindness and generosity. After he was released from jail, he was unable to find a place to stay because he was an ex-convict. Eventually, he met a bishop, who took him in and let him stay the night. In the middle of the night, Valjean stole from the bishop and snuck out, but he was caught once again and taken back to the bishop's house. When asked if Valjean stole from him, the bishop surprised Valjean by showing him mercy, something he had never experienced before. The bishop lied for Valjean and told the policemen that he had given Valjean the items he had actually stolen as a gift. This becomes a major turning point in Valjean's life. He never forgets the kindness and compassion the bishop showed him.

While Valjean goes on to treat people the way the bishop treated him, showing kindness and generosity, Victor Hugo works hard to keep him from becoming a kind of saint. Although he can seem saint-like at times, there are many times when he doubts himself, or tries to convince himself to do the wrong thing because it would be better for not only himself but everyone else as well. At one point in his life, after he's been on the run from the police for a long time, he finds out that another man has been accused of being him, and will be imprisoned for life for Valjean's crime. Valjean could turn himself in and save this man, whom he doesn't even know, or he could leave him to be imprisoned, and no one would ever know what he had done or who he really was. After years of running from the law he could finally be safe. At that time, Valjean was, because of his hard work and good deeds, in a position of power. He was the mayor of his city and he owned a factory, where he would employ anyone who needed a job, no matter if there was an opening or not. He knew that if he turned himself in, all of his workers would lose their jobs, and he would lose his reputation. He tried to convince himself that it would be better for everyone if he didn't turn himself in, but in the end, he did the right thing and admitted who he really was.

Valjean always does what is right, even when it might cost him his freedom or even his life, and will definitely cost him his reputation, which is something Hamilton was never willing to risk. Valjean never looked to anyone else for approval. In fact, throughout most of his life, most people didn't like him. He was alone and shunned, but he was able to respect himself and the decisions he had made. To Valjean, his own opinion of himself meant more than what others thought of him.

When I started high school in the fall, after spending most of the summer reading the words of Victor Hugo and listening to the music of Lin Manuel Miranda, everywhere I looked I saw people my own age, in the modern world, making choices that reminded me very much of those choices that Alexander Hamilton and Jean Valjean faced. Anyone who has ever lived through high school knows that, of the two groups—those who care about others' opinion and those who care about their own—the first one is definitely the larger of the two. It's the safe, easy choice. Those people will usually try to get in with the popular crowd by changing things about themselves. The problem is, this always backfires on them. It just ends up making them unhappy and giving them a bunch of fake friends.

What I learned from my summer with Hamilton and Valjean is that it's better to join the smaller group, even if you're probably not going to win any popularity contests. Other people's opinions of you will change, and they will come in and out of your life, but your opinion of yourself will always be there. Even if others approve of your decisions and admire you, if you know you did the wrong thing, or weren't true to yourself, you'll never be happy. You have to live with the decisions you make, and in the end, it's your own approval that matters.

So, for what it's worth, that's my insight, from a 14-year-old's perspective. It's definitely helped me, and, who knows, maybe it will help another teenager one day. We can all use a survivor's guide to high school, and, as strange as it may sound, I can't think of better guides than a fictional Frenchman and a Founding Father.

Olivia Umscheid

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

The Message That Changed My Life

I was the average high school teenage girl. Braces, boy crazy, and big dreams. I was a straight A student. I had a sufficient amount of friends. I was about to go to state for track. Kids in this generation don't appreciate how much they have. I didn't either, until it was gone.

I stepped down from my charcoal grey Jeep onto the similarly colored asphalt parking lot. I always got coffee on Saturdays before I went to yoga, and I only went to yoga to work on breathing exercises. They actually helped me quite a bit during track season. I pushed the door open to Starbucks and greeted the barista with a smile.

"The usual please." I told her while taking out my wallet. I swiped my card, scooped up my drink, and shuffled back to my car.

I flicked on my turn signal and heard the familiar clicking that indicated I'm turning left. Perched at a red light, I pulled out my phone and watched it introduce the home screen. I noticed a text from my sister, but I ignored it. My sister, Riley, was the type of girl who did everything right. She currently attends Yale. Yeah, I said it, Yale. She was a state champion in track 3 years in a row. To top it all off she had beautiful features that made all the boys drool over her. She was my absolute role model and everyone expected me to follow in her footsteps. I can't keep up! Anyway, She wouldn't stop rambling about how I took her favorite lipstick. Couldn't she understand that it complemented my outfit perfectly today? The dewy shine of the nude shade tied in with my cream colored boots. I couldn't pass it up. I turned left, and merged onto the highway. The chime of my ringtone sounded and the screen flashed on with another message. This time I pick up my phone and read, "Eden plz answer, I have a date @ 4 and I need my lipstick ASAP! Omg where R U??" I had one hand on the wheel, my phone in the other. I typed my response while taking brief glances at the road.

"Lol Riley, chill, I'll be home in-" I heard a blaring car horn and my phone slipped from my grip. Suddenly my life was in slow motion. I had swerved into the lane of a towering semi truck, hit it head-on and ricocheted off of it. No longer looking at the road ahead, I was barreling into the highway divided. The car flipped on its side, taunting to tip over. My vision started to blur as I heard the distant ring of sirens. My morning coffee was spilled across the car and was seeping into my white blouse. Glass from the windshield had collapsed and carved various gashes onto my innocent skin. My phone was balanced on the dashboard looking at me smugly. More messages from my sister appeared. My lips felt cemented together, even with that lipstick I borrowed! Through my parched mouth I achieved to say "never again."

I woke up in an uncomfortable hospital bed. My parents were sitting in the chairs to my right and

my sister was crouched by the left side of my bed clutching my hand. On the nightstand to my right laid my belongings. Sitting neatly were my glasses, my phone, and my purse containing the tiny cosmetic I risked my life texting about. I tried to talk to Riley, and even though it came out in a raspy grunt, she still heard me. Her head snapped up. She jumped up and repeatedly pushed the bell for the doctors to come in. When the double doors to my dull hospital room burst open, I was immediately propelled down a hallway. There were startled faces looking at me with horror in their eyes. I swiveled into another room, and was parked directly in the middle of it. One doctor after another ran assorted tests on me. I was strapped down and had multiple IV lines. I felt helpless, drained, confined. I had no idea what was going on. My head was pounding and I just wanted to sleep. The doctors were trying to ask me questions, needing details on what had happened and asking how I felt. I started to tune them out and I found myself caught counting sheep.

So that's the gist of it. About those sheep... It's been so long, I lost track of how many there were. I feel like a mummy wrapped up in darkness instead of linen. Although I am incapable to move or speak, I can hear everything. It's pure misery. Every day my family comes in and talks to me about everything I'm missing. They ask me for advice, in hopes they are gonna get an answer from me sooner or later. My sister never went on that date, and she blames herself for the accident. I wish I could reach out and comfort her, tell her it wasn't her fault. My friends from school come to visit here and there. They come and tell me how lucky I am that I'm missing the tests in chemistry. They dish out all the drama. They relive the details from homecoming and prom. They complain about final exams. My track coach, Max, came after every meet and talked about our results and team scores. One day he told me, "I know you're fightin'. If you fight like you run, you're gonna be outta this in no time."

I know I made a careless choice. So many of my friends text and drive. I thought it was okay. It was just a quick text! It was completely my fault, but I can't help but think, *did this happen for a reason?* I don't know if I'll ever wake up. If I do, I want to share my story with other teens. Hopefully it will affect them, to put down their phones when they turn the key in the ignition. It's a small favor to ask, but it would make a huge impact. I may never wake up and my story may never get told. All I can do is hope for the best, cause I physically can't do anything about it right now. That split second I took my eyes off the road, changed my life forever. Don't let it change yours.

Lindsay Vanover

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Day Dreaming

Tear stains streak my cheeks, clouding my vision with sorrow.

“Why did this happen to me? What did I ever do to him?” I choke out.

“For the last time, Amber, guys suck. Just forget about him. You can do better than that guy, hang on and let me think up a few more inspirational comments,” she rambles.

“Wow, you’re so great at comforting people,” I mumble, sarcasm oozing from my voice.

“It’s a gift,” she says, flipping her hair. “So, who’s going to be Amber’s next prey?”

“Oh my God Vanessa, I’m not getting into another relationship already. Plus you know how terrible I am at flirting,” I sigh.

“Yeah, you act like a giraffe walking for the first time around guys.”

“Well, thanks for the support.” Vanessa really was a great friend, but if you wanted to cry on her shoulder, you needed to brace yourself for her gritty comments dripping with sarcasm.

“Anytime.” I swing my tissue-stuffed bag over my shoulder and drag myself out the door. Sliding onto the worn out seat of my Volkswagen, I puff out a blast of air and turn on the car. The engine whirs to life, and I listen to the faint hum of the road as I make my way home. I suck in a deep breath and press the heels of my hands into the steering wheel. I can’t cry yet. I need to wait until I can curl up alone in my room. I wish I could just live in a pile of blankets. And everybody that passed would say, “Oh look at that girl in the blanket. She looks so warm and happy. Has it really been 25 years she’s been under there? Wow, talk about commitment.” But instead I have to actually go out into the world and live and talk to people. Darn people. Why do you have to go and make me interact with you?

I wake up with dried tears on my pillow and a fuzzy blanket pressed close to my face. I lug myself out of bed and get ready for the day. Brushed my teeth? Check. Brushed my hair? Check. Clothes? Check. Homework? Check. Barely awake? Check. Low self-esteem? Check. I head out the door towards the tortuous chambers of (dun dun duh) high school.

I plunge into the swarms of students clustered around the entrance. As I weave in and out, trying not to bump into too many people, I hear the whispers around me.

“I heard Amber and Jay broke up last night.”

“No way! They’ve been together since 7th grade!”

Tears burn in my eyes, threatening to spill, but I will them not to. Can’t a girl just forget about what happened last night? Nope! This is high school.

I see that familiar blonde head bob up in front of me. I rush over to her.

“Has it already spread that fast?” I whisper.

“Of course, sweetie. In fifth grade the whole school found out about Steve wetting his pants before Steve even knew.”

“Ugh, all I want to do is forget about it,”

“They’ll be over it quick. Pretty soon Brent will have gone through another 10 girls.”

“I sure hope you’re right.”

The smells of stale cafeteria food fill my nose. I search through the chaos for Vanessa.

“Amber!” I hear someone shout above the crowd. I scan the room for her head, begging for her blonde hair to get caught in the light. She’s so freaking short, I’d never be able to find her without that ultra-blonde head of hair. But it’s not there.

“Hey, Amber,” I feel someone’s arm slide around my shoulder, and stiffen. I slowly look up, begging not to see Brent hovering over me. Phew. It’s just Matt. Relief floods through me as I see that familiar mess of brown curls. That very mess of curls has been by my side since 1st grade.

“Oh hey, Matt,” I sigh.

“Hey, relax it’s just me. I may have a cold heart, but I won’t turn you into stone like the Ice Queen,” he laughs.

“Ice Queen?”

“You know, the one from Narnia.”

“You’re talking to the wrong person. I’ve never read those.”

“What am I ever going to do with you,” he mumbles, grinning. He wanders off into the mass of people swirling around us. I finally make my way to our usual spot. The creaky lunch table in the very back. I flop down and eat my sandwich in silence.

“Woah, what happened to you?” Vanessa gawks, trying not to laugh.

“It’s been a long day, and we’re only halfway through the day,”

She smirks and tries to hide her laughter by shoving a spoonful of noodles into her mouth.

“Maybe you should lock me in a room so I can have an excuse to never talk to anyone again.”

“Good idea. I might get arrested for that, though,” she trails off, taking another bite of noodles. We spend most of lunch in silence, her glaring at me, half angry, half pitiful. As we’re about to leave, Matt slides in next to Vanessa.

“Do you guys want to come listen to my new song?” Vanessa nods, and Matt swings his arm around her shoulder.

“I can’t I have Student Council this afternoon,” I mumble.

“Dang. Well, I better get going. I want to work on my next song before Music Comp,” he says, his arm grazing Vanessa’s back as he leaves. As he walks away, out of the corner of my eye, I see Vanessa blush. I brush it off and finish my lunch.

The next day, I do everything in my willpower to avoid every single living being. Until lunch. Why is it always lunch?

I plop down on the bench, already exhausted from the day. Matt and Vanessa slide in next to me, exchanging glances.

“Hey, Amby, you okay?” Matt asks.

“No,” I mumble. “Definitely not okay.”

“Look,” he booms, “you’ve not had a good week. We get it. But you can’t let some guys ruin your whole week. So tonight, you and Nessa are coming over to my house, we’ll break out my old friend Ben & Jerry’s, and you’re going to tell us everything. Because that’s what friends are for.” I sheepishly nod and shove a forkful of salad in my mouth.

Matt and Vanessa talk while I eat my salad in silence. Tears burn in my eyes as everything come crashing down on me. I bolt to an empty classroom, but Matt and Vanessa are close behind.

Tears flood my eyes and streak across my face. Vanessa slide down the wall, falling onto the

floor. “Remember in sixth grade, when our biggest problems were getting a B on a math test,” she says, giggling to herself.

“Remember my first song? Wow, was that terrible,” Matt bursts out laughing. We all pile onto the floor in fits of laughter, remembering his song.

“Oh yeah, that reminds me. You never played me your new song,” I mumble.

“Good thing we happen to be in the music room,” he smirks, grabbing a guitar. His curls flop into his eyes as he bends over the guitar, holding it like a trophy. His strums fill the room with warmth as he sings softly,

Deep within those grey blue eyes

Swirls the darkness of the skies

Stars twinkling, burning bright

Hidden in the pitch black night

The universe is in her eyes

“Tada!” Matt sighs. The last echo of a chord swells in my ear, and then slowly drifts off. I’m left stunned against the wall.

“That was,” I trail off.

“Terrible? Cringey? Absolute trash?” Matt suggests.

“No, no. That was amazing. Really,” I mumble, all words gone from my brain. I look over, and Vanessa’s in the same dream-like trance as me, a warm grin spread across her face. Before I can say anything else, the bell rings, and I shuffle out of the room, speechless.

The next morning, I groggily get out of bed, still worn out from pouring all my emotions out last night. We sat there and dug through 3 tubs of ice cream before my parents called, thinking I was dead. My phone buzzes, startling me. It’s Matt.

Hey, you still holding up?

Barely.

Thanks again for last night.

Hey, that’s what friends are for. If you need anything else, I’m here for you.

I gulp, staring down at my phone screen. Should I do this? Should I really tell him how I feel? I don’t want to screw this whole thing up, like I seem to do with everyone. My heart thuds in my chest as I try to decide. But then I remember how he stood up for me. How his sweet voice drips like honey in my ears. I take a deep breath and press my quivering fingers on the letters.

How ‘bout as a thank you, you come over tonight and we can make cookies or something?

Nessa too, or just me?

Just you.

Okay.

This might be a terrible idea, but hey, I’m the queen of terrible ideas.

“Yes exactly. So we can infer that Atticus will, Amber?” I’m snapped out of my trance by an annoyed look from my English teacher. She’s standing there, tapping her toe against the floor, glaring at me over her glasses.

“Amber?” she scowls.

“Atticus will go in the attic?” I answer, although it comes out more like a question.

“No, Ms. Amber,” she sighs exasperatedly. Her eyes shoot hundreds of mini daggers at me, sending me into English exile. Well, looks like I have another teacher that hates me. She turns around on her heels, searching for her next prey. I slip off back into La La Land, where I’m faced

with more pressing matters. What to say to Matt. Let's go through our options.

Scene one, take one, action.

I stand in the hallway, facing away from Matt. I'm dressed in a glorious red gown, flowing around my slim figure. Soft lights fall on the two, amidst the chaos.

Me: (dramatically whips head around to face Matt) Matthew James Banerberb. I have something to confess. (camera zooms in on my face) I'm afraid I've fallen madly in love with you.

Matt: (gasps dramatically and clutches heart with hand) No. Amber Lynn Marie Francesca Rosenblitz De Soto, I'm afraid I have something to confess as well. I'm madly in love with you. (both characters simultaneously gasp, then run into each other's arms)

Me: Oh Matthew. I knew all along it was you. From the moment you told me that you loved me five seconds ago, to now, with us hugging. (sniffles back tears)

Nah, that one's a little too over dramatic. How 'bout this?

Scene two, take one, action.

Matt is staring off into the distance at his bedroom window. Suddenly, I enter, chain-clad, holding a beatbox on my shoulder.

Me: Aye, yo, wazzup home dog.

Matt: Nothin' much, tiny fuzz.

Me: Hey, I know my hair's frizzy, but I'm trying a new conditioner. (runs hand over poufy hair) Anyways, I was walking down the street, when I heard this sick tune. It made me think of you, boo. (turns on beatbox, and My Boo is playing. I burst out into the running man challenge, singing along with the song, a little pitchy) Boy you should know that I've got you on my mind, you're secret admirer. I've been watching you. At night I think of you. I want to be your lady baby. If your game is on, give me a call boo. If your lovin's strong, then I'll give my all to you.

Matt: Aw man, this is rad. I've totally had feelings for you, I just didn't want to admit it. How 'bout we roll together, tiny frizz?

Me: Sure thing, home slice. (we walk off into the sunset together while My Boo finishes playing.)

I think that might be a little *too* casual. Also, I'm not really the type to carry around a beatbox.

My arms are too weak.

The bell rings, forcing me back into the real world. Well, my ideas are total crap. Looks like I'll have to wing it.

My stomach twists and turns as I swing open the door.

"Hey Matt!" I chirp, trying to stay confident. But no amount of hours spent giving myself a pep talk in the mirror can prepare me for this.

"Hey," he greets. We shuffle into the kitchen as I'm reeling through conversation starters in my head. But nothing seems to fit for "let's make some cookies, by the way I like you!" Before I blurt out some terrible dad joke, I shove a wad of frozen cookie dough in my mouth. I wince as I try to bite through the rock-hard lump.

"Wow, you're really spoiling me. Nestle pre-made cookie dough!" Matt laughs. I try to smile through my mouthful of frozen cookie, but I end up looking like a psychopath. Wow, such a great way to start this off.

"So, why didn't you invite Vanessa?" Matt asks. Oh boy. Looks like I'm digging right in.

"Look, Matt, there's something I need to tell you," I murmur. I see him tense up in the corner of my eye, and my stomach twists into a boyscout-worthy knot. Am I really going to do this?

"I think I'm in love with you," I blurt. I stare at him, silence his only reply. The knot in my

stomach gets even tighter. “You’ve just been such an amazing friend, and lately I’ve been wanting us to be, well, more than that. Just the way you care so deeply about everyone, especially me and Nessa. And then with that song you sang, about that girl, I couldn’t handle it anymore. So,” I trail off and awkwardly shrug. My heart stops beating as I see the fear in his eyes. He slowly stands up, shoving his hands deep into his pockets.

“Look, Amber, I’m flattered. I really am. But,” he says. I wince. But is never good. “But that song wasn’t meant for you. It was meant for Vanessa.” There goes the knife. Straight in my heart. “I, I thought you knew,” he stammers. Oh look, he’s twisting the knife. Deeper and deeper into my heart and soul. My gut drops down to the fiery pits of the underworld, while my heart shatters into a million pieces. Anyone have a dust buster and some duct tape?

“I see. Yeah, I totally get it. I’m sorry for the misunderstanding.”

“No, *I’m* sorry for the misunderstanding,” he interrupts. “I should have said something. I shouldn’t have lead you on. I’m really, really sorry. I really am,” he apologizes over and over. But no matter how many times he says he’s sorry, it won’t help. I feel utterly disgusted with myself right now. But even worse, I feel like a bad friend to Vanessa. How could I have been so caught up in myself that I didn’t notice? I didn’t notice all the times she blushed around him. How every time me and Matt hung out, she was always there too. I feel like a complete dumb headed, self centered, over-emotional idiot. Let me tell you, that’s not a good feeling.

“By the way, please don’t tell Vanessa. I was wanting to tell her how I felt in person,” he says.

“Yeah. Definitely,” I whimper, my lip quivering. “Hey, good luck with her.”

“Thanks,” he mutters, a small smile spreading across his face. His smile that used to fill my world with sunshine. But now it tears me into pieces. I usher him out before the tears come pouring down my face like Niagra Falls. When I hear his engine whir away, I slide against the door onto the ground. It feels like someone ripped my insides out and scattered them in a halo around me. And I thought today was going to be a good day.

The next day, I seem them in the hallway ahead of me.

Scene three, take one, action.

Vanessa scans the crowd for his face, but he’s nowhere to be found. Her face lights up as he sneaks up behind her and wraps her in his warm embrace. Sun beams stream down on the gleeful scene.

Matt: (whispers in her ear) Hey! I need to talk to you.

Vanessa: What, you got a secret you just can’t bare to keep inside?

Matt: Actually, yeah.

he takes her hand and leads her outside into the courtyard. They sit down at the base of an ancient oak tree, towering above them. He pulls her in close, then whispers in her ear. We can’t quite hear what he’s saying, but a huge grin erupts on Vanessa’s face. She tilts her head up to kiss him as they mold into each other like clay.

Except, for once this isn’t a Nicholas Sparks movie, or some crazy dream I’m making up in my head. This is real life. And it’s smashing me into smithereens.

Now, the smile that once filled me up to the brim with joy, shatters my heart into a million pieces. Your smile that lit up my cells was really meant for someone else. Strands of pain are now forever entangled in their warm embrace. The sight that once made my heart leap is now attached with the memories, relentlessly clinging to the past. I wasn’t a fool to fall in love with you. I was a fool to think you had fallen in love with me. I guess I was just day dreaming.

Ethan Ventress

Age: Unknown, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Dramatic Script

Millennial Passage

Backyard of a house in the evening toward dinner time where boy is playing with astronaut toys and has a cut out cardboard box on as an astronaut helmet. he is running around the yard with his toy rocket when his mother calls him inside for dinner.

Scene 1.

Boy (Cody)

(making engine noises and intercom sounds like astronauts are talking)

We've finally reached our destination captain! CHHH Starting to land on Jupiter in 3...2...1-

Mother

(From inside the house out the screen door or window)

Cody, it's time for dinner. Come inside sweetie your dinner will get cold.

Cody then starts to head up the back porch stairs to the kitchen still playing astronaut along the way.

CODY

Coming mom!

(Making rocket engine noises as he starts his way to the back porch)

End scene 1.

Camera now leaves the backyard to faces out the back screen door toward the outside to see cody come in. he enters the house and shuts the door behind him.

scene 2.

MOTHER

Take that helmet off Cody, don't think for a second you're going to eat with that thing on your head.

Camera shows cody sit down at the table

Cody then sits at the table with his space themed plate and silverware in front of him with meatloaf on his plate; his least favorite dish.

Camera now shows cody's mom sit down at the table across from cody

His mom reacts to Cody's unsatisfied disgusted look at what is on his plate

MOTHER

I know it's not your favorite but that's all we had, now eat it or else you'll go to bed hungry.

camera cuts across the table to show Cody

Cody squirms in his seat knowing his mom is right that if he doesn't eat it he'll go hungry but still refuses.

camera cuts back to mom's side of the table

MOTHER

How do you expect to be a big and strong astronaut if you won't eat your food?

Cody reacts to this as almost like an insult then begins to begrudgingly eat

CODY

Fine, but only if it helps me be an astronaut.

end scene 2.

scene 3.

Time lapses to mom doing the dishes, the camera faces her back to see cody run behind her. then cuts to over her shoulder to see cody run by playing with his astronaut toys.

MOTHER

Cody, put up your toys and brush your teeth it's time to go to bed.

Cody stops to listen to his mom.

CODY

OK.

Cody then runs off toward his room still playing and making rocket noises. Camera cuts to cody brushing his teeth. then cuts to his room where he has on his astronaut themed pajamas. he gets in bed and his mom enters the room and goes to him.

MOTHER

Goodnight my little spaceman.

The camera is over cody's head to see him facing up.

The mom kisses his forehead then leaves

end scene 3.

scene 4.

The camera stays there to see cody close his eyes then cuts black. ending the first part of the film.

Starting the second part. The camera opens back to the floor of the main hallway to where the audience can only see feet. an older version of cody walks in while his mom is talking in the background to him.

MOTHER

Cody! Hurry up or you'll be late for school!

Cody then walks in to the hall where only his feet are seen by the camera.

CODY

I'm right here just give me a minute.

He then stops

once he has stopped and he finishes his line the camera pans up from his feet to his face to show that cody has grown up. he doesn't look at the camera directly but off to the side. camera pans to cody walking in the kitchen

CODY

(Camera moves with him as he moves through the kitchen)

I'll just take something quick for breakfast, I don't want to be late. I have that test in trig today.

He grabs an apple from a fruit bowl and starts to walk out of the kitchen.

MOTHER

Don't forget your lunch!

Mom hands him his lunch as he's still moving out but stops him with the next line.

Mother

Hey! Aren't you forgetting something young man?

Cody stops realizing what he's done, backtracks to his mom and kisses her on the cheek.

CODY

Love you mom, see you tonight.

Then he leaves out of the camera shot. Mom follows but stays in the camera shot and says-

MOTHER

Love you too, good luck on your test!

end scene 4.

scene 5.

The camera then cuts outside facing the front door and shows him leave the house and head down the steps to where his car is parked. The camera pans along his path to his car. Camera cuts to show him unlocking his car and sitting in the drivers seat and starting the car. The camera will cut to the car that will be in motion with cody driving down the road still eating his apple, he finishes his apples and tosses it out the window and turns in the school parking lot. He parks and sits in his car and pulls out his notes and reviews in the car for a moment. he then closes the binder of notes and gets out of the car. the camera will be behind his shoulder as he leaves. the camera will then cut to him walking in the school halls to his class where he enters into a classroom and sits at a desk and pulls out his note to review again. Camera then cuts to in front of him to see his reaction from the teacher speaking after the bell rings.

end scene 5.

scene 6.

TEACHER

Okay class, notes and books away please. Test will be handed out to you shortly.

Camera then cuts to behind the teachers shoulder looking toward the class.

TEACHER

The test will have no multiple choice, I want no guess work. You will have the class period time to work and no other time.

Camera then cuts to the teachers face.

TEACHER

Any questions? Okay, once the test is passed to you, you may begin.

camera cuts to a high up shot to see most of the class as the teacher passes the test to two students. camera cuts to in front of cody sitting at his desk, with no test yet. he sits anxiously, then the teacher walks into the shot and hands cody a test. he takes it then begins. camera cuts to him working on the test. the camera then cuts to show the clock on the wall and how time flies by, the bell rings and the camera goes back to cody just finishing up. then the camera cuts to the door leaving class as a line of students are leaving handing in their tests as they exit. once cody exits the camera is on the other side of the door showing him leaving and exiting out of the shot.

End scene 6.

scene 7.

the shot then fades out to black then fades back in to show cody walk in as it is the next day. the camera cuts to show him sit at his desk and he looks up to see the teacher hand him back his test, he IMMEDIATELY looks at it to see a "C-" down as the grade. the bell rings in the background but it's not the end of class it is long and off in the distance to transition to cody driving in his car back to his house OBVIOUSLY beat up over his grade. the camera then cuts to him pulling into the driveway, then cuts to inside the house to see the door open and him walk in, in another room he hears his mom.

end scene 7.

scene 8.

MOTHER

Hey hun!

camera then shows him walk up the stairs, then cuts to him sitting on the couch in a slump.

CODY

Hey mom.

the camera cuts to see his mom enter in the living room from the hallway.

MOTHER

What'd you get on that test you were studying for?

camera cuts back to cody on the couch.

CODY

(really depressed/crushed voice)

I got a C *pauses* a C-

Camera backs up to a wider view of the couch. cody's mom sits down next to him on the couch trying to comfort him.

MOTHER

How much did you study?

cody

A ton! I don't understand what happened. I tried my best to learn and understand the concept!

MOTHER

I understand that you're very upset Cody, but you're just gonna have to try harder. I understand you're doubling up on your math and science classes and not every student does that, but also not every student will work as hard as you and not every student will excel like you. Remember that.

Mom gets off the couch and leaves Cody sitting in thought.

end scene 8.

montage

Camera cuts to cody in his room, it's dark but he has the light of a lamp to see. he is working on a laptop and piece of paper studying. Camera cuts to him at school receiving another test, camera pans around him in a spiral as he does his work. camera cuts to him receiving the test back and the grade on the paper shows he got a Straight "C". camera cuts to him on another day walking through the halls studying with his binder open. Then the camera cuts back to the desk where he is handed another test. the camera is focused on him writing and working out problems. the test is given back to him with a straight "B". Finally he is preparing for the last test of the year to ace the class, he is at home in bed asleep with notes all around him the camera is facing down on him when his alarm goes off.

end montage

scene 9.

Cody wakes up kinda startled, gathers his papers his papers and sits up in his bed and wipes his eyes.

camera shows him get up and move to his closet for a shirt. camera shows cody leaving his room going down the hall. camera then cuts to him sitting at the kitchen table eating cereal still going over notes, his mom walks up behind him and rubs his shoulders and the camera cuts to looking up from cody eating to see him and his mom.

MOTHER

Are you ready to take on this test today?

CODY

I feel ready. I feel like I haven't studied this much on anything in my life. I have to pass this though, if I don't... I don't know what I'll do.

MOTHER

I believe you'll pass.

(Kisses Cody on the head)

Love you son.

She then turns and goes back deeper into the kitchen out of the shot.

The camera stays for a while longer then cuts to the outside with cody getting in his car.

end of scene 9.

once the door shuts the camera cuts back to him on the road, he looks deep in thought. then the camera cuts to him walking up to the school, no notes in hand, he looks confident. the camera then cuts to the hallway toward his classroom where he enters and sits at his desk, once he enters the room the camera doesn't cut but follows him to his seat. the camera then cuts to the teacher.

end scene 9.

scene 10.

TEACHER

Welcome class, this is the last test you'll take this year in this class so do your absolute best.

The teacher starts passing out papers amongst the class.

the camera cuts to a couple desks in front of cody then it goes past them to zoom in to cody.

He's mumbling under his breath

CODY

Come on, we gotta get this, come on.

the test gets handed to him and the camera cuts to a side shot. and starts to slowly zoom in past him toward the window to his side. the camera stops close to the window, then focuses in on the reflection of cody then focuses back out.

end scene 10.

scene 11.

it focuses back in to see cody enter into the class as the next day. the camera then cuts to being in the classroom showing the teacher get up from their test with the test papers in hand to stand in front of the class.

TEACHER

Alright class, here is your final test grade of the year. Next to your test grade I have wrote down your finishing class grade for the year for you. I hope some of you are more than happy with your your grades.

The teacher moves about the room handing out papers.

the camera shows him moving to person to person as it shows cody sitting nervous at his desk.

the camera for a shot will show this and have the teacher walk by in front of the camera. then

after a while the teacher finally goes to hand cody's test to him. the camera points up to see the teacher kind of smile at him and reach out to hand cody the test. the camera cuts to facing down off to the the side to see cody grab the test and pull it down to himself. he opens up the folded test to see that his test grade was an "a" and his class grade an "A-".

end scene 11.

scene 12.

then the camera cuts to his house and the front door flinging open and him rushing inside.

CODY

Mom mom mom! I did it! I really did it! I aced the test and finished the class with an "A-!"

As he is saying his line he is running up the stairs into the living room where his mom gets up to embrace him once he finishes his line.

camera follows him up the stairs into the living room to embracing his mom.

MOTHER

I'm so proud of you!

Mom releases her hug but leaves her arms around him
My boy finished his classes with "A's". And I couldn't be more proud.

CODY

Tonight, I think I'm finally to take my "giant leap".

end scene 12.

scene 13.

camera cuts over cody's shoulder to see his mother smile at him. then cuts to cody in his room at night, with low lighting on the computer. it shows him typing from a side shot. then he finishes and shuts the laptop and turns out the lights. he wakes up the next day with no alarm calmly. the camera cuts to the same angle from the night before and shows him get up and go back to the laptop and the camera will show him get on his email to see he has one new email in his inbox from "Center for astronomy education". he opens it to see that he was accepted. the camera cuts to a different further back angle to see cody get up slowly and start to jog out of the room.

CODY

Mom! Mom I did it...I did it!

end scene 13.

scene 14.

The camera then fades out black staging the end, but it only pauses and fades back in with bright lighting kind of hazy. it is the adult version of cody in an astronaut jumpsuit holding his helmet standing in front of a doorway. he stands there BRIEFLY then starts to turn to exit. in the background, audio of a launch countdown starts. by the time it finishes cody has turned completely around and is walking through the door. the hazy brightness fades the scene completely white, once the countdown is done the screen is completely white.

end scene 14.

the screen fades back in to show footage of a rocket taking off implying cody did make it and completed his dream. then fades black and credits roll in.

Ending the second part and the film "Millennial Passage".

Trevor Vigus

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Dalton

Category: Short Story

Air Force

It was a chilly February morning in the city of Maryland Heights in eastern Missouri, and yet there were two young men flying through the streets in a banged-up Nash 600. The driver of the Nash 600 was named Jack Moore, a handsome young man with steel gray eyes, a shock of dark blond hair, well muscled due to his years as a linebacker on his high school football team, a height of 5'11" and a weight of 143 pounds to match it. The passenger sitting next to Jack went by the name Walter "Wally" Harris, a close friend of Jack's, owning deep brown eyes, unkempt black hair, and a tad on the pudgy side, though muscled, with 150 pounds to go with his 5'6" height. The reason for their speed at 8:06 a.m. on this Saturday morning, was because it was the 13th of February, 1943, Wally's 18th birthday, and so the boys were headed down to enlist in the United States Army Air Force, to fight the Nazis in World War II. Jack had turned 18 earlier in the week on Tuesday, February 9th, but had waited to enlist until his buddy Wally was 18 as well.

It wasn't long before the two arrived at the enlistment office, speeding as fast as they dared. They quickly entered, stating their desire to enter World War II as a part of the United States Army Air Force. The rest of the time the two spent in the office went by in a blur, for they could not believe that they were actually joining the war. They were quickly measured for their physical attributes, and gave the recruiters their diplomas, for each had graduated the previous year because their parents had them entered into public education a year earlier than usual, and had been working to save enough money to go to college after they returned from the war and beaten the Nazis. After that, Jack and Wally were both told that they had fit all the requirements, and were to report to Chester Field in McBride, Missouri in 30 days to start the Classification stage.

Jack and Wally were ecstatic They hopped back into the Nash 600 as happy as they had ever been as they went back to Jack's house for lunch. On they way, Jack asked Wally, "So, what do you think we should do? Say our goodbyes and pack up tonight in order to leave tomorrow?" Wally responded, "Yes, that sounds like a great idea. After lunch, drop my off at my folks' house, and then pick me up tomorrow morning, 8 o'clock sharp." "That's a plan." With that, they arrived at Jack's house, a nice brick house with two bedrooms, one for Jack's parents and one for Jack, a bathroom, an unfinished cellar, an older kitchen, a small dining room, and a living room, centered around a small black and white television. Jack's parents were home, so Jack and Wally told them that they had enlisted in the war. Neither of Jack's parents were not surprised, though what they were the most surprised about was that Jack had managed to wait for so long to enlist, as he had been rambling on about wanting to join the war and fight the Nazis. Jack's mother prepared the boys peanut butter sandwiches, and then sent them on their way so that Wally could spend time with his family before he left for Chester Field tomorrow with Jack and Jack's father, so that Jack's father could drive the car back up to Maryland Heights. Jack and Wally got in the car and Jack drove Wally the 3 blocks it took to reach Wally's house.

When they arrived, Jack went into Wally's house with him to say goodbye to Wally's family, because Jack and Wally had been friends since they met in first grade, and each had been close with the other's family almost as long as they had been friends. After saying his goodbyes, Jack said to Wally, "I will see you tomorrow, I still can't believe that we are finally in the war." "I feel the same way, see you tomorrow at 8 o'clock," was the response. "See you then."

Jack got back in his car and drove home, where he went to his room and packed the few things that he would need, and then spent the rest of the day with his mother and father.

The next day Jack and his father woke up, ate a quick breakfast, after which Jack said goodbye to his mother, and drove over to Wally's house to pick him up. Wally got in and said hello to Jack's father, who was the driver, and they started on their way to Chester Field. The hours they spent driving to Chester Field were very happy and joyful, with them reminiscing on the fun times that they had shared. Finally they arrived at Chester Field, at which point Jack's father gave a heartfelt goodbye to each of the boys before wishing them good luck and heading back to Maryland Heights.

The boys then found an officer, who assigned them to their bunks, gave them their orders on what their beds must look like each morning as well as other orders, and that their classification test and advanced physical would be the next day. Jack and Wally set their stuff down and then waited for the other cadets to return from supper.

When the other cadets arrived, they were introduced, but mainly ignored, as their job hadn't been assigned, and if they failed the test or physical, they would leave to go to the regular Army. Jack and Wally went to sleep after the lights out, feeling anxious for the test and nervous at the thought that they might not pass.

The next day, Monday February 15th, 1943, the cadets were awoken at 0600 hours by a bugle. Groggily, Jack and Wally got dressed, headed down to the mess hall, ate the military rations given for breakfast, where they talked with a few more people. They especially grew close to one man, a 19-year-old Richard Miller. He was 5'10", very close to Jack's height, but with a sturdier build, striking blue eyes, and close-cut blond hair. He was from Washington, Missouri, and had already lost his father to the war, and had joined up to avenge him by killing Nazis. After Jack, Wally, and Richard exchanged their life stories over breakfast, Jack and Wally headed over to the building where they would need to take the Classification test and advanced physical.

They wished each other good luck, and then Jack took the test while Wally took the physical. Jack had studied with Wally for this test back home, and with their dedication to join the war, knew all the answers by heart. Jack flew through his test, finishing it a few minutes before Wally finished his physical. Before they switched places, Jack and Wally exchanged a few words. Jack led, asking, "How did the physical go?" Panting and out of breath, Wally responded, "It was tough ... um ... you should ... do fine ... how was ... the test?" "We studied for that thing for so long, you could do it in your sleep." "Good luck." "Good luck."

Then Wally went to take the test as Jack entered to take his physical. He was greeted by a short man with glasses and graying hair, though his dark brown eyes bespoke an intelligence brighter than most. Jack quickly took the physical, finishing with a moderate degree of ease, doing some of his best physical work he had ever done. Jack and Wally then met in the center room, and waited for their results. An hour later, their results came back to them, with both of them getting high grades, and placed in the category of single-manned fighters. As for the physical, Wally barely passed it while Jack made it through easily.

The next few months flew by for them, as they went through boot camps and educational classes, eventually ascending to pilot school, where they were able to actually pilot planes. Jack and

Wally were both phenomenal in flying, passing all their classes with the best grades, and along with them, Richard. Then the day came for their final flight before they were no longer cadets and became true pilots. One final flight and then they were to be shipped overseas to fight in the war against the Nazis.

Jack and Wally got dressed in their flying gear, for they were taking this final flight together, as they had done with all of their flights, growing closer than ever, and close to Richard Miller, who had become a pilot the week before. The two boys then got clearance to fly, and hopped in their fighters. They then took off, flying to the east. After an hour of flying Jack noticed some weather coming on the radar so he radioed Wally, telling him to turn back and they could finish their hours when the storm cleared. They then flew back in that direction, but the storm was moving faster. By this time, the rain was pouring down hard, with lightning in the air. Wally was ahead of Jack and Jack watched as lightning came down and struck Wally's left wing, sending him spiraling to the ground next to the hanger. Jack landed as quickly as he could, and rushing over to the burning heap that was Wally and his plane, already being quenched by the rain. As he saw the melting plane and his friend's dead body, he vowed to destroy the Nazis and all they stood for.

Brooke Wagner

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: Southern Boone Middle School, Ashland, MO

Educator: Stephanie Spencer

Category: Short Story

The Girl Who Can't Be Ignored

Her name is Alisha. Brown curly hair is always wild, matching her personality. She is small, but nobody can push her around. New York Yankees hoodie a second skin. Mahogany eyes shimmer with hope. A dreamer wishing to escape. This dreamer can sing. When she sings, her voice is so powerful it evokes the deepest emotions. People stop to take notice of the mystical blessing that is her voice. It chills them. They can't ignore her.

Alisha lives in the "bad" part of town. The ghetto, to specify. Smog blankets everywhere, a barrier to the sky. Police know this location by heart; it is a second home to them. If it's not locked up, it's stolen. Unless you are one of the unfortunate and live here, you don't dare enter.

Money was scarce. The day Alisha turned 18, her parents kicked her out. "They couldn't support her ridiculous dreams of singing on Broadway. She needed to wake up. Dreams like that just don't come true for a girl like her from a place like here. No matter what anyone tells you."

Step by step she turned her back on the house that was never a home and the neighborhood that never believed in her. Alisha strolled to the street corner and sadly plopped down. She fell apart. Broken. Defeated. Just a small, fragile girl in a world of people who would hurt her. Tears of hopelessness fell from her cheeks to the chipped pavement. A hispanic man with tired eyes, and a bushy mustache came up to her. With such gentleness, as if not to scare her, he placed himself on the pavement .

"Don't cry seniorita, " the man reassuringly patted her shoulder. "Why not?" she asked, looking up at him with tear stained cheeks. "Because, you can either cry and let the world win," he paused, "or get up. Stay down and wither away, or do something."

Although this man was a stranger to her, Alisha took his every word to heart. He was right, she realized. Now, she knew exactly what to do. Standing up she wiped away the tears, and brushed off the doubts. They didn't matter.

With a voice of an angel, she began to sing. She sang like it was the last time she ever would. People walking by stopped. How could they not? Some even placed money near her.

Once finished, Alisha was ecstatic to find all the money people had generously granted her. No one had ever given her money before. The hispanic man had stayed the entire time. Watching. Waiting.

"You have a gift," he told her in his Mexican accent. Amazement hung on his every word. "Thank you!" Alisha exclaimed. "My name is Javier," the man spoke gently. "Alisha," she shook his worn, calloused hand. "I want to take you to more street corners, because that voice of yours needs to be shared with the world." He gestured to a sad, little, yellow taxi. "Oh, I don't have enough money to pay you," disappointment echoed in her words. "On the house," Javier smiled.

Even though Javier had nothing to gain from helping Alisha, he did. So together, the gentleman with tired eyes and the small girl with a powerful voice and big dreams rode off into the smoggy haze of New York.

Months flew off the calendar. Every day after Javier's grueling shift of driving the packed roads of New York City, he would wander about with Alisha, finding street corners where she could perform. Alisha took residence in Javier's three room apartment on the 2nd floor of a shabby complex. The apartment was packed to the gills with Javier's three kids, his hardworking wife, and his wise aging mother, Juna. They welcomed her with open arms and open hearts. For the first time in a long time, she felt loved. This family didn't have much, but they had each other, and to them that was the world.

It was another long day of driving around New York City in a well loved taxi. Alisha almost had enough money to audition on Broadway. So close to her dreams she could almost taste it.

"If we keep going at this rate I'll have enough money to audition!" Alisha exclaimed to Javier while counting the crinkled paper bills. They pulled up in front of Broadway. The almost intimidating twinkling lights reflecting in their windows.

"Perform there," Javier pointed to the bustling street corner right outside of the one, and only Broadway. "Outside of Broadway? I'm not ready for that, am I? I mean that's a huge deal,"

Alisha thought. Seeing her uneasiness, Javier, who become a father figure, patted her shoulder. "You can do it," he told her pride shining in his eyes.

Alisha shuffled her way out onto the the street corner. Many people bumped into her and didn't even start to apologize. They didn't care. She was just a girl standing in their way. But all that changed the second Alisha opened her mouth. It was a heart stopping performance to say the least. Her best. Many people had hints of tears in their in their eyes and some were even crying.

Amongst the crowd stood a woman who took special notice to the girl singing in front of her. No ordinary woman was she. Wearing a lacy black dress paired with a white cardigan and heels, her whole outfit screamed important. Just coming back from a coffee break, the woman was pleasantly surprised with the voice before her. Not many people had that kind of passion behind their words and when you found someone who did you just couldn't let them go. Letting them stroll out your life was like allowing a cart full of diamonds to slide off a hill into a very large pit of lava. She needed this girl. Alisha began to skip back to the taxi. Completely satisfied. The important woman in the crowd went after her.

Although before she could stop her, Alisha went still. A homeless girl, clothes more like rags than anything else, leaned against the red brick wall. Her head downcast. She couldn't be any older than 10. But here she sat, no home, no food, no family, no friends, no one to love her.

The money held in Alisha's hands didn't seem so important anymore. Looking down at all the cash people had given her, she compared it the the almost empty bucket the girl held in her cold hands. She placed the money in the bucket. Looking up, utter astonishment lit up the girl's face as her bucket became 10x heavier. Speechless.

Regretless, Alisha smiled. The woman saw all this happen. Not only did she need this girl's voice, she needed her heart.

"Excuse me," the woman tapped on Alisha's shoulder. "Yes?" Alisha said happily turning to face the woman.

"I noticed that you were singing tirelessly to earn that money. You gave it all away.

Why?" Alisha thought for a second, "Even though I worked countless nights to earn that money, she needs it more. Before, I thought that money was going to make me happy, fulfill my dreams. But, I'm already happy. I don't need money."

There was nothing more the woman needed to hear. "I am the director of the upcoming cast," she motioned to the magaincent theatre before her, "We need you. So what do you say? Are you in?"

Shocked Alisha's eyes went wide. Is this really happening? "You mean...?" she couldn't finish the sentence. Tears came. Showing off pearly whites, Alisha's reaction made the woman happier than she had been in days, maybe even months.

"Welcome to Broadway!"

Julia Wakefield

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

One Living Thing

There was one, living thing.
The *only* living thing
that she loved.

It was unlikely,
and she fought it off as fiercely as she could.
She did not want love.
Not for the living.

But he was a force to be reckoned with, as they say.
He laughed loudly,
And talked loudly
and in her hissing, guttural voice
she shushed him.

And when he talked quietly,
when he whispered,
and the small sound seemed out of place
coming from his wide, brutish face

He spoke to her.
and unwillingly,
That soft warmth was pulled into her chest
and she found love for the living.

He was her one living thing.

But life—
life is fleeting.
And just a moment
after she'd found her impossible affection
for the pulsing flesh,
the steady inhale and exhale of breath
the living, blinking eyes

The life went away.

And seeing him dead,
seeing him cold
made her into ice.

And she walked away from the body that had breathed,
and she knew she could never love the living
because life ends.

She lived her life dead
and preferred it that way.
But every now and then,
Once in a blue moon, as they say

Someone brutish would walk by
And she'd watch the blinking eyes
And the pulsing chest,

And once in a blue moon
she'd admit she had a fondness
For the warmth of the living.

Julia Wakefield

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Fox Hunt

This door is locked.

You must go around.

Run! Fans travel in packs.

Women, dresses, the camera flash blinds, refracting off of jewelry.

Everybody shimmers, even the men, you stand out– dark spot.

Everybody smiles, snaps a picture, takes it home.

You fight through the forest, stumbling through bodies.

The heat is choking. You can feel the make up
dripping from your neck.

Smile, snap a picture, take it home.

A hand catches you, *softly...gently*.

He holds you there, and you look into his face, round and familiar.

"Come on darling. Take off that mask and show us your beautiful, smiling face."

Smile, snap a picture, take it home.

One word sets you off and you let him go, break your connection.

Instantly the chase is on. The hounds

let out a mighty bay of pursuit.

Smile, snap a picture, take it home.

You hit the dressing room door.

Slam!

There is silence. There is darkness. You are alone.

Across from you the lights flicker,

glowing yellow orbs defining the mirror.

You take a step, see your image, all in costume.

Melting, crying girl, *pretending*– to be a woman.

You let the mask hit the floor, stiff, solid frame.

The mirror looks back at you. Unchanged.

Smile. Snap a picture. Take it home.

Lucas Walters

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Flash Fiction

The Dying World

The Sky is bleak, though I suppose it always is. I remember the stories of when the sky was blue and the birds chirped and the trees were actually living instead of ugly hunks of metal with oxygenators in them. Now everybody walks with their heads down. They don't say hello or do anything else except what they are told to do. Everybody lives in constant fear, of Russia or India sending more nukes. Of other people like themselves. Of the Trillionaires that control this world now. That they'll do something wrong and that the police will take them and put them to work clearing out the radiation. Everybody is afraid and because of it the world is dying. I sigh and continue on. Everybody looks at me like I am insulting them personally by wearing bright colors. Over the last few years I have found some faded clothes that have bright colors. They aren't anything like the clothes people wore before but they are the closest i have seen. Now nobody wears anything except gray lifeless clothing. I wonder what someone else from another planet came here. I suppose they would see basically dead people. I haven't heard a laugh since I was six years old. It is really depressing. I sigh and continue walking to my job.

I enter the work room and hang up my coat. Nobody even glances up at me or says hello. Everyone is doing their jobs until the work shift is over and then they will go home and eat some dinner by themselves and then they will go to bed themselves. Nobody will have any children to love or a husband or wife to lay with. Ever since 2056 children have been born and raised in test tubes in a lab. Then as soon as they are four they go and become part of our lifeless community at the childcare center. Then once they are thirteen they are expected to get a job and become just another person in the lifeless flow of our community. They are expected to not to raise a commotion, not to say a single word to other people to distract them. The only people who don't have to obey these rules are those who rule the world, the trillionaires. They are the only ones with actual children. They wear orange and blue. They smile and laugh. I am jealous. The work shift is done. I pick up my briefcase and walk out of the door. I walk to my home. I guess that I really can't call it a home though it is more like a shack with a bedroom, bathroom and kitchen. I walk in a i immediately notice that there is someone against the wall. I call out

“Who's there?” A man steps out in a police uniform. My heart stutters to a stop. The man begins to speak

“Well sir as you know you've already been called out by your neighbor Mr. Blackburn.”

“Well... ye. ye. yes sir but why are you here now.”

“ Well Mr. Blackburn reported another nuisance. He said you were making loud disturbing noises at your house at night.”

“Well sir i thought it sounded good.”

“Well sir it was distracting and as you know you get a warning and then you get sent to clean out the radiation.” I look around and sigh

“Yes sir.”

“Good, Please sit against the wall, the recovery team will be here soon.”

He turns to leave but turns back around.

“Oh and sir, If you try to leave there are snipers outside.”

I nod and think. I think about how I will die in the radiation mines. About how much worse my life will become. I sit there and decide I will not make this world a worse place than it already is. I stand up and walk outside. Something hits me in my back and for a couple seconds my brain reviews my life and I realize how depressing it is. Then I'm gone.

Chunyang Wang

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Thomas Jefferson School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Boaz Roth

Category: Critical Essay

This Is Us: "Sivilized" Slaves

Tracing back to the beginning of human civilization, we may grasp some prevalent principles of slavery. For instance, transporting black slaves, manufactured goods, and cash crops, the transatlantic triangular trade inhumanely materialized human beings of color over a span of three centuries. Especially in North America, civilized and educated white men legitimately possessed the slaves and treated them like heartless hounds. In one of the most controversial American novels—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—Huck, a child fleeing home, encounters Jim, a runaway slave, on the Mississippi River. Though both of them are pursuing a somewhat vague idea of freedom, the conceptual constraints commonly shared by civilization and slavery make us wonder who is truly enslaved.

Ostensibly, it is Jim: a degraded and ashamed slave. Owned by Miss Watson, Old Jim not only serves the men and women of the household but also has to endure all the childish pranks. Obviously, he only deserves callous disregard. Having heard that Miss Watson plans on selling him down the river to New Orleans, Jim, anxious and afraid, detaches himself from his beloved family and runs away. While navigating down the river, he always needs to hide or disguise his identity. Priced at forty cheap bucks by the Duke and the King, Jim is enslaved and considered as an inferior object that doesn't express any thoughts or have a conscience.

Despite that his social identity is a slave, Jim has essentially been liberated after he steps into the river and unites with Huck. He is determined to reach Ohio—in his heart—the state of freedom. During the arduous journey, Jim establishes an intimate, spirited, paternal bond with Huck, and the old man's gracious protection tears apart the stereotypical impression of a worthless slave. While traveling with the Duke and the King, Jim is even granted more independence because of the brilliant disguise that they have designed for him. Step by step, Huck repents of his mistakes—those inconsiderate tricks that are inflicted on Jim—and eventually realizes that the uncivilized, yet wise, man has become an indispensable part of his adventures. Under the mysterious, starry sky and on the vibrant stream of the Mississippi River, Jim lives rightfully as a free man.

Huck, however, has been enslaved by the conservative and stereotypical views of the civilized society. Though he carps about the spotless clothes that represent satisfactory manner, the essence of civilization is profoundly engraved in his mind. Throughout the journey, Huck gradually notices and compliments Jim's compassion and altruism. In light of his education in the white-dominated society, nevertheless, his narration always conveys a satirical and racist tone. At the end of the novel, Tom's reappearance completely demolishes the last bit of humanity and independent judgement in Huck, who is convinced that Tom's knowledge from books prevails. Besides, many readers may argue that the river symbolizes God, providing Huck

and Jim their separate peace and freedom; however, the immature child cannot suppress his curiosity to become completely isolated from the interruption of society. The white fog that bewilders their sense of direction reminds us of the domination of white folks' civilization. Eventually, Huck—adopted by Aunt Sally—must return to be “sivilized” (the incorrect spelling itself alliterates with the word “slavery”). The carefully crafted symmetry and repetition reinforce Huck's trapping in the civilized society. Enslaved, he has never been able to escape successfully, nor will he ever be allowed to.

To argue that Huck is the only individual who is enslaved appears unjust, because so are we—every single one of us is trapped in our ideas, thoughts, and concerns arisen from modern civilization. In this world full of obsequious and corrupt souls, we have already forgotten to cherish, to appreciate, and to treasure! We fade into the crowd and become accustomed to discrimination without realizing it. To prove our sincerity and integrity, we forge profound willingness to showcase our seemingly truthful flesh and dictate the most embellished lies, but our sincere souls are indeed concealed in petite and confined shelters in abundance. Worse yet, we attempt to fabricate our shelters and imitate the norms so that we don't stand out as the noticeable or abnormal or special beings, even though we are already disgusted by our own cowardly, yet sarcastically committed, ingenuity.

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Julia M. Wang

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Janet Duckham

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The Perfect Student

Note for people who do/did not attend this school district: We take seven classes, and an O stands for outstanding citizenship.

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Seven A+'s. Seven O's. Throughout middle school and part of high school, my report card stayed like this—a picture-perfect piece of paper filled with promise and potential. My whole life, my awesome mom and dad had drilled into my brain, “*Don't worry too much about grades and tests. Just try your best and learn as much as you can. I mean, that's all you can do, right?*” WRONG. In my head, I thought: *What the heck are you guys babbling about? Grades are everything. It's easy for you to say—you don't have to deal with the stuff that I do. Do you know how hard it is for Asians to get into a top college now? So many of them have perfect GPAs, perfect SAT scores, perfect everything. Excelling at the piano and violin? Taking Calculus as a sophomore? Juggling school and about ten extracurriculars? No big deal for an Asian. I have to do all these things just to be considered average. You guys just don't understand.* But out loud, I always just smiled and replied, “Right.”

While my parents drilled these words into my brain (they hadn't really stuck yet), unknowingly, I was drilling myself into black hole that would suck me in for most of middle school. While middle school was probably a breeze for most, for me it was more like a lethal, insuppressible hurricane, eating me up one day at a time... just kidding, it wasn't actually that bad. But it *was* hard. I was slowly transforming into a perfectionist, and *everything* can be hard for a perfectionist. *Ugh this word is totally crooked—what happened to my handwriting?! I need to rewrite this whole essay.* If even itty-bitty blemishes bothered me, then bigger blunders were a nightmare. One time in seventh grade, I cried about getting a 95 percent on my last Advanced Geometry test (I had gotten over 100 on all the other ones). So... yeah. I didn't really take the whole “*Don't worry too much about grades and tests*” thing to heart. I thought I was fine, though. I thought I was happy. But then came sophomore year, and for the first time, I started to see that I wasn't. I was taking AP Calc BC, AP Physics Mechanics, AP Euro, Advanced Chem, and Advanced Lit, among other classes—I couldn't fit in Latin so I was taking it independent study. I had tennis after school every day, and a few times our matches didn't end until around seven. Oh yeah, I also needed to practice violin. But HOW WAS I, A FREAKIN' SOPHOMORE, SUPPOSED TO STUDY FOR MY CALCULUS TEST, FINISH MY MASTERINGPHYSICS ASSIGNMENT, TAKE NOTES FOR EURO AND CHEM, TRANSLATE SOME LATIN SENTENCES ABOUT THIS BOY NAMED QUINTUS ON A FARM, PRACTICE MY SCALES AND ETUDES, AND GET ENOUGH SLEEP?! I am *not* the kind of person that can sleep after midnight and wake up feeling jolly the next day (actually, is anyone really that kind of person? I don't think so—maybe they just pretend to be). You might

be thinking, *Oh, the solution's simple! Just don't take on as much.* Yeah... try telling that to an overachieving perfectionist. Contrary to what some people may think, perfectionism is *not* helpful. It slows you down *a lot*—sometimes you can't get anything done because you're stretching yourself into a strained strand of string to meet this unreachable standard. It's dangerous. It's toxic. Early last year I started to get terrible anxiety, and I broke down many a time. It was time to listen to my parents. This year I've cut down on some extracurriculars not as important to me, and although I'm still taking rigorous classes, they are classes that I enjoy and can handle for the most part. I've also learned not to compare myself as much to my peers—if you ask me what I get on a test, I'll probably say that I got some positive number (I learned this from my older brother). I'm not a huge fan of unnecessary competition, but I won't judge you if you are. There isn't a *right* way to behave. There isn't a *right* way to learn. There isn't a *right* way to live. Mom, Dad—thanks for teaching me this. Thanks for helping me rediscover *why* I go to school in the first place—it's to learn, to better myself, and to better society. I'm doing my best, I'm enjoying these final two years of high school (even with standardized tests and all), and I'm slowly accepting that **I AM NOT PERFECT**. I'm not perfect. Who cares?

# Shoshana Weinstein

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## The Great Gumball Fiasco

The sound that came out of my mother's mouth was not quite human.

We had just arrived home, and I was hanging up my coat and backpack when I heard her strangled shriek. My heart did a little dance in my chest as I came running, expecting that she had hurt herself in some way. Instead, I was greeted by an unforgettable scene. Machanchon lay sprawled on the floor in the middle of the living room, panting and wagging his tail. Brightly-colored gumballs were scattered around him, rolling across the floor in every direction.

Head lolled back, neon-colored drool oozed from the dog's mouth, collecting in a small, fluorescent puddle on the wooden floor. The thick white fur on his chest looked like a child's tie dye project gone wrong, stained cotton-candy pink, sunset orange, and sky blue. In the corner of the room was an enormous cardboard box, the words, "Over 10,000 Gumballs!" printed on the side in large, colorful letters, torn open. My mother stood in horror, her hand over her mouth, while the dog blissfully rolled in the pile of gumballs, revelling in the chaos he had created.

Adopting Machanchon had not been what one might call a "well thought out decision." It was true we practically owned a zoo already, between our dog, cat, bird, lizard, and 200-gallon fish tank; and we certainly had never intended to get a second dog. When my father, my sister, and I saw Machanchon at the pet store, though, our hearts melted. His tan, sausage-like body wriggled madly with enthusiasm when we petted him. His gigantic triangular ears flattened as he nudged my hand with a cold, wet nose, trying to get me to pet him. What really sealed the deal was the fervor with which this mutt attached himself to my father, all fifty pounds of smelly, dirty dog leaping up to lick his face. Besides, my mother was out of town and couldn't protest-- it was as if the stars had aligned, letting us adopt him.

Now, however, Machanchon was in trouble. I watched him gleefully squirming in his mountain of gumballs, joyful and unaware of the fury building in my mother's eyes. I bit my cheek hard, pressing my lips together, but failed to stop a gasp of laughter from escaping me. My mother glared at me, then slowly smiled, and soon we were both overcome with hysterical giggling.

"Dad is going to be *so* mad," I choked out when I could finally speak again. "He loves that gumball machine."

"The gumball machine itself is unharmed," my mom pointed out. "The dog only got to the extra supply of gum. We can clean it up."

Machanchon finally got up, prancing about our feet as we collected wayward gumballs, looking as proud and self-satisfied as a dog possibly could. It seemed to me that he knew we loved him too much to ever punish him.

Nonetheless, it was clear to us that Machanchon was still adjusting to our lifestyle. He certainly lacked discipline on occasion-- like that time he turned on the gas stove in the middle of the night, or the Thanksgiving that he ran through the house with an entire raw turkey in his mouth. However, our bird's carcass in our family room was the last straw. I wasn't there to see

it, but I can vividly picture my mother's disgust and shock upon coming home to find one dead bird and one very lively dog amidst a shower of feathers. With that, Machanchon was once again up for adoption.

Rationally, I understood. We had a frail and elderly cat at the time, and we couldn't keep him in the house with a dog who apparently was a cold-blooded murderer. I knew that. All the same, I felt a small piece my heart breaking as my parents searched the Internet for a no-kill animal shelter.

Without a doubt, Machanchon had loved our family. He made this love apparent from the way he sat outside the bathroom door crying every time any of us took a shower, until we returned. His immense affection was displayed in the way he slept those first few nights (on my parents' bed, of course) with his head on my mother's pillow so that he could rest a paw against my father's chest. He was sweet, excitable, and extremely dysfunctional; in short, he fit into the family perfectly.

On the day we gave Machanchon up for adoption, the family crowded around him. Looking around at my parents and my younger sister, I saw my own misery reflected in their anguished faces. My sister had wailed nonstop for hours, her damp cheeks nearly purple from sobbing and screaming. Even my father's eyes looked puffy and red, the first time I had ever seen him shed a tear. Machanchon himself, on the other hand, was overjoyed at receiving this unexpected attention. As we each sniffled and tearfully embraced him, he squirmed with excitement, his long, bushy tail cheerfully thumping against the floor. I buried my face into his warm fur, and desperately wished I could somehow communicate to him, that I could truly say goodbye. Moments later, he was in the back of the car as my dad drove away, still wagging his tail with delight. My mother, my sister and I were left to stare at each other with numbness and regret.

That was when the extraordinary thing happened. We went back to our daily lives, only now I thought of Machanchon in every quiet moment, wondering where he was, if he'd been adopted by another family. Part of me wanted to forget about him, to forget he had ever come into our family, if only to numb the bitter sadness I felt gnawing away at my insides.

Little did I know, Machanchon had made sure he wouldn't be forgotten.

A few days later, I was still thoroughly immersed in gloom. Thoughts about Machanchon crowded my head during every quiet moment. I had never dealt with loss before, and now I felt that grief might consume me. I sat down on the couch, and felt something small and hard beneath me, pressing uncomfortably into the small of my back. I slid my hand under the cushion, but could find nothing. Slowly, painstakingly, I moved my hand from left to right, until something sticky brushed against my fingers. My first instinct was to jerk away in revulsion. Instead, I wrapped my fist around the object and pulled it out. A round, moist sphere sat in my palm, tinged pink and dotted with small indentations. After I stared at the object for several seconds, I deduced that I held a slobbered on, half-chewed gumball covered with lint and dust.

It took months for us to find all of the gumballs, and to this day it is still a mystery how the dog managed to hide them all over the house. There were two in my father's pillowcase, one in his rarely-worn tennis shoes. Every chair in the house had at least one mangled gumball wedged into it; they were under the couches and behind the TV, every one dented with teeth marks and flecked with grime. With the discovery of each gumball, we were prompted to retell stories of our much loved mutt.

Pulling a sticky green piece of gum out of the cushion of the old gray armchair, I remarked to my sister, "This must be third one we've found in this chair."

She grinned. "Remember that time he shattered a glass dish, ate all the brownies on it, and hid

the shards of glass in the couch cushions?”

“Or,” I said, starting to giggle, “that one time a neighbor’s house was for sale? He ran through their open front door while they were having an open house! Dad had to chase after him!”

Sometimes these stories made us laugh; sometimes they made us cry.

It was as if our beloved dog had found a slightly disgusting way to remind us of him, and to ease our heartache at his absence. Machanchon may have taught me more about coping with grief than any human family member or friend. Those linty gumballs helped me understand the power of remembrance-- that through my memories of lost loved ones, I have the ability to hold onto them, to bring them back, at least temporarily.

Today, I walk through our living room each day when I come home from school. The gumball machine has sat there for years now, and it serves as far more than just a candy dispenser. From the moment Machanchon left, that machine became a vessel for the memories we had of our beloved pet, and just a glimpse of it helped our fond recollections resurface. At times I pass by the gumball machine without a second thought. Other days, however, I pause for just a moment and rest my hand upon its well-worn but polished surface. I recall the time a psychopathic husky won the hearts of my entire family, and for just a moment I let my memories bring him back to me.

# Magda Werkmeister

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

## Nihilist in Bloom at a Retail Store

“everything happens for a reason  
sometimes good things  
fall apart  
so better things  
can come together”  
is what the sign asserted  
and the woman  
couldn't help herself  
from scoffing  
“this is where dreams  
go to die”  
there in the cold  
light, hospital  
white, of the retail store.

what  
reason  
is there in any of this  
she thought to herself.  
she was not bitter  
for what injustice  
is felt by those born  
into cookie-cutter lives  
but she was aware  
of the injustices  
and abject cruelty  
in the world  
and she was becoming aware  
of the absurdity  
and misplaced values  
in the life of a white suburban woman.

what reason existed  
even in her own life

dead dog at seven  
stood up by prom date

rejection from ivy league

new puppy at eight  
met boyfriend at prom  
full ride to state college

things come together  
in the natural fluidity  
of a human life  
but rhyme and reason  
had been abandoned as infants  
at the door of a derelict convent  
and had not been seen since  
that black velvet night  
and with that thought in mind  
the woman left the retail store.

# Claire Wilhelm

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

## Appreciation

I once had a teacher who said  
“I like to teach appreciation, rather than tolerance”  
That has always stuck with me

I look at my world, a world of small minded safety  
No one ventures out of their self imposed boundaries  
Separations like race, religion, gender, sexuality, building walls too high to see over  
Invisible to the naked eye but painfully obvious to those who are aware

Awareness is like a magnifying glass  
Opening your eyes to all you want to see and all that you don't but should  
Opening your eyes to injustice, soft and blurry at first but then sharp and impossible to miss  
Opening your eyes to privilege, a light to help you find your way through a dark room  
Some are left to fumble in the pitch black

Many are completely uncomfortable with this concept  
That they are a part of a system that disparages human life because of a difference in pigment  
A difference in belief  
A difference in who one loves  
They make excuses for each other and stay in their safe zone  
But when that safe zone is marked by a straight white line, everyone loses

Why do we encourage tolerance?  
Tolerance sits firmly within the safe zone, comfortable and easy  
We can tolerate others while staying complicit in the face of injustice  
Tolerate the cruel jokes our friends make, the racist words flying out of the mouths of politicians  
Tolerance lets us make excuses for each other and ourselves

I say we appreciate each other instead  
Appreciation has no room for hate or even indifference  
It has plenty of room for discomfort, a stretch in boundary, a fallen wall  
And it has room to accommodate all the love in the world

“Appreciation, rather than tolerance”  
Words that I still think on, live by, love by  
Break a barrier today, my dear friend, and love without boundaries



## Isaiah Wilkes

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Frazier

Category: Critical Essay

### The Cost of Change

(1)“It’s just the times we’re facing,” said Mitchell Maynard, a miner, as he left Camp Creek mine after one of his very last shifts. Mr. Maynard, who wears a large tattoo on his upper left arm showing a joyous Jesus embracing an elated miner, has been contemplating what he will do to support his family since he learned last month that the mine he works at will be closed for good. He doesn't have an answer in the time being, but he has not lost all hope. “I know I will find guidance from the Lord,” he said (Krauss).

(2)“For the past week wellies have been the shoe-wear choice in our neighborhood, ...” said Jamie Clarke, a resident of Oxford, England, writing about the series of floods that hit central Oxford. His city was hit by a flood that was due once every one hundred years, but Clarke reports that this was the third and highest flood in six years. These floods have forced Clarke, his wife Eve, and two small children to move around constantly in order to find safer living conditions for the kids, “For Eve and I life seems to be on hold, living out of bags and constantly unsettled.” Clarke also speaks on how he sees the lives of many in the city are massively disturbed as well. “Sandbags lined the entrance to dozens of houses, many of which had pumps working day and night to keep the water from rising into their rooms. Families in the area were unable to use their toilets or have a shower for days because the flood waters had blocked the drains.” Portable toilets were brought in by the city council, but provided little relief. The local school and nursery had been closed due to the two main roads that run into the city being underwater, “A once vibrant urban community had been turned on its head” (Clarke).

(3) A recent study was done by climate activists led by Stanford University professor Mark Jacobson in an attempt to outline a “roadmap” for the transition to one hundred percent renewable energy by 2050. The authors make an effort to model the transition away from coal, natural gas, oil, and even nuclear energy to rely solely on wind, solar, geothermal, hydroelectric, and tidal wave energy. But there is a crucial problem with this plan that cannot be ignored. Jacobson and his authors project a creation of about 2.5 million long-term jobs, but also project a destruction of around 3.8 million long-term jobs making a net job loss of approximately 1.3 million (Everly). Furthermore many of the jobs created will not even go to the millions of mining families because all they know is mining and trying to go back to school with no job or money is an insane proposition.

“The clean-tech is growing twice as fast as the rest of the economy” said Ron Pernick, co-founder of researcher Clean Edge and co-author to *The Clean Tech Revolution* speaking on the rise of the “green” economy. Researchers Brookings and Battelle report that the total jobs across the clean-tech sector now outpace that of the oil industry and are double those of the bioscience industry. U.S. clean-tech jobs are growing at 8.3% compared to the job growth of 4.2% from 2003-2010 (Martin). The Department of Energy predicts, using conservative estimates, that by 2030 there will be over half a million wind jobs (“Jobs”). The writing on the wall is evident based on these facts. The key to creating American jobs in the future and even

now is not an investment in a falling fossil fuel economy, but in the up and coming green economy.

The problems with jobs in the energy transition are evident. Many people will lose the jobs they have worked for and maintained through dedication. Many will also gain jobs they currently work towards and will work to maintain. People are losing jobs in non-renewable energy fields, but there is a pressing issue with the conservation of the environment, so a choice has to be made. Keeping the future in mind, the change in current economy due to the transition will be costly in many areas, but in the fast growing “green” economy the current costs will be paid for in the long run in economic and environmental prosperity.

(4) Two of the main arguments for the expansion of renewable energy is that the ways of obtaining this energy is much better for the environment, especially in the means of reducing greenhouse gasses and many methods are comparable cost wise to non-renewable methods. Patrick Moore, cofounder to the environmental activist organization Greenpeace and co-chair of the Clean and Safe Energy Coalition, an organization that supports increased use of nuclear energy states “Nuclear energy is the only large-scale, cost-effective energy source that can reduce these (greenhouse gas) emissions while continuing to satisfy a growing demand for power.” He also speaks on the pricey dogma of nuclear energy, “It is in fact one of the least expensive energy sources. In 2004 the average cost of nuclear energy in the United States was less than two cents per kilowatt-hour, comparable with coal ...” (Moore). Advances in nuclear technology will only make it cheaper. Other renewable energy methods along with nuclear energy are now able to compete with non-renewable methods in energy production and cost, giving all the more reason to get behind the renewable energy transition.

“The fact is, nuclear energy has not recovered from the crisis that hit three decades ago with the reactor fire at Browns Ferry, Alabama, in 1975 and the meltdown at Three Mile Island in 1979.” Christian Parenti, an investigative journalist and frequent contributor to *The Nation* magazine, says speaking in one of his articles over the risks of nuclear energy. He provides some examples of the dangers of nuclear energy in his report in regards to human and economic safety. “The fundamental fact is that unclear power is too expensive and risky to attract the necessary commercial investors ... the average two-reactor nuclear power plant is estimated to cost between \$10-\$18 billion to build before cost overruns, and no US nuclear power plant has ever been delivered on time or on budget ...” (Parenti). The truth of the matter is that nuclear energy along with other methods of renewable energy have their advantages and disadvantages, so which do you choose?

Specifically speaking on nuclear energy, there are obvious reasons why there are such frequent disagreements on the issue of expansion. Depending on the perspective you take in viewing the evidence the benefits and detriments of this method can appear more prominent. Nuclear energy is in fact very expensive initially and can be very dangerous, but it also makes up for the initial cost in the long run if the economical benefit of costing the same as coal and the environmental benefits are taken into account. Also the deaths of the nuclear power plant accidents, as devastating as they were, are nothing compared to the 5,000 coal-mining deaths worldwide (Moore). The present is significant in many ways when concerning family, friends, and overall life. But what we do in the present to prepare for the future is even more crucial, so despite the fact that methods such as nuclear energy will be expensive now, the *real* price is so minuscule when the futures of our children, our children’s children, and the world are taken into consideration.

(5) Although most arguments supporting renewable energy methods revolve around their

emission/environmental advantage, non-renewable energy methods have viable arguments for their benefits all the same. A NASA study reports that in experimental and arid settings, elevated CO<sub>2</sub> levels can increase plant growth (Reiny). The greenhouse effect also allows farmers to grow offseason crops in larger quantities per acre. A more modern use of the effect is for solar hot water heaters. Solar hot water heaters use this effect to heat water for domestic use. It can also save 20-30% on domestic energy bills. In this application the benefit of the greenhouse effect in the household economy is monumental (“Greenhouse”). This evidence affirms that the greenhouse effect not only benefits the agricultural economy, but also the domestic economy.

The greenhouse effect does have some benefits on crops, but when the bigger picture is looked at, the cumulative harm done to crops is much greater than the benefit. In order for prosperous crop growth and reproduction the temperature it grows in must be optimal for that crop. Additionally when the temperature exceeds the crops optimal range the crop may be able to grow with sufficient water and nutrients available, but this will have a significant destructive effect in farms in underdeveloped countries and pastures that aren't irrigated (“Climate”). Real people and communities around the world depend on these potentially un-irrigated farms and entire ecosystems depend on pastures' grass production. If temperatures continue to rise, eventually no crop will be able to grow in natural conditions and entire ecosystems with their wildlife will go extinct.

Facts from both sides of the argument are capable of swaying someone to either side. But one fact sticks out like a sore thumb when it comes to the effects of the environment; that fact is the future outcome. A small rise in temperature may indeed help many specific crops around the world in the proper environment, but what after that? If nothing changes in regard to human caused global warming the temperature will continue to rise and even exceed the crop that requires the hottest climate. The future needs of our world have to be taken into consideration and supersede current wants.

The facts have been presented and the outcome is clear. There are many problems with both the transition and continuing without change, but right now the needs of the future surpass the needs of the present. Jobs will be lost and created, but only time will tell whether there is a net gain or loss. Both methods of obtaining energy have some kind of detriment on the environment, but renewable energy is realistically the better choice. Despite the few benefits, global warming and pollution as a result of nonrenewable energy obtaining methods are present day problems that have to be addressed seeing that they have had effects that already cannot be overturned. Although there is no turning back from the majority of damage that has been dealt on the Earth, a widespread energy transition will at least prevent many future problems that will be caused by sticking to our current energy methods.

Since the beginning of time, change is what has moved the human race on to newer and better horizons. Drilling for oil, the use of the car, and the internet are all examples of these changes. The only problem with change is that there is always some group of people left behind, which is what makes change so difficult more often than not. The whalers that were left in the dust because blubber was no longer needed, or the horse and carriage drivers who were put out of business because of cars, or the newspaper/magazine companies who, with all their workers, are now obsolete because of the internet. These men and women who were/are part of this group that have families, needs, and goals like anyone else have the habit of being regarded as just a statistic or a number on a screen. There is no doubt that this is not the way it should be, but there is nothing that can be done or said to cure these individuals of the plague that is change.

Because change is an incurable plague that affects the part of every human that wants better and does not settle. Only those who are willing to refine themselves will survive and reap the fruits of their efforts to keep moving forward.

# **Kaitlyn Williamson**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## **Forgiving Myself**

I hate you. I hate you for how you make me feel, for how you made me feel. I hated myself for years because of you. I was four years old when you decided I'd be your victim. I was four years old when you dragged me into the daycare bathroom and drained my body of innocence, like an alcoholic downing a bottle of scotch. I will never forget the look on your face when I begged you to stop. How the smirk on your face resembled a wild tiger, getting ready to pounce on its prey.

Do you know how hard it was for me to sit down and watch all the color drain from my mothers face when I told her how you invaded me? I was four years old, when I looked into the mirror and called myself worthless for the first and definitely not the last time. Worthless. That word echoed like a shot in my head.

The memory of you follows me wherever I go-the grocery store, the mall, and even in the safety of my own home. It's like you've died and your ghost has decided to become attached to me, haunting me wherever I go. It's like a chip on my shoulder that I just can't ever get rid of, and no matter how hard I try to push that memory to the back of my mind, it always seems to come back.

I didn't know what happiness was for years, and I always felt like I was faking a smile wherever I went.

My own dirty little secret.

I never believed I would ever know the feeling of being genuinely happy. The truth is that I hate myself. I hate myself for letting this wash over me like some sort of disease. I hate that something that happened over a decade ago is still so fresh in my mind. I wish that whenever someone asks me "If you could have any superpower, what would it be?" my mind didn't automatically wish that I could have the power of erasing memories, so that I could get rid of you for once and for all.

I barely remember the details, but the aftermath is something that I will have to live with for the rest of my life. As much as I can remember, it was every time the cold red and blue sleeping mats would come out, and the light would leave, taking my hope with it and replacing it with a dark hell. For the next year, that moment was the one I was dreading the most. The lights would go off and the heavy wooden door would close, trapping me in that hour of my own worst nightmare come true.

My mother and I don't talk about that year, but I think it impacted her the most out of all of my

close family. I feel like sometimes she blames herself, like maybe if she would've picked the daycare down the street, that it would've stopped it from happening. I don't blame her. The only person I blame is the pathetic low- life who thought it was okay to destroy a little girl and her family's happiness.

Flash-forward to today. I'm sitting here, reliving all these memories and even though the sting is not gone and the heartache remains, I don't hate the person I am. I have forgiven myself because that's what it is too, isn't it? We always blame ourselves. I'm not self-actualized to the point where I have forgiven him. To be honest, that forgiveness may never come.

I am broken, but...

I am beautiful.

I am strong.

I am resilient.

## Megan Willis

Age: 12, Grade: 7

School Name: St Paul's Episcopal Day School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Molly Pruet

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

### A Torn World

The ground shifts beneath me, I stumble as it does. As I glance up to see what caused my downfall, I see that I wasn't the only thing to fall. The buildings around me collapse as if they are made of cards, the streets and their surrounding sidewalks crack and break like glass. I know what's happening, it's not an earthquake but a slight shift in the Earth's gravitational pull.

This has been happening a lot recently, ever since 2058 when we first saw the Earth shift under our feet. Now, almost 65 years later, we have created research centers to look into why this is just now happening. I work in one of the research centers in Osaka, Japan, we are in charge of calculating when the next shift will be so we can warn and evacuate the city if necessary.

"Marina, we were three days off," my research assistant Haru tells me in a distressed tone, "three whole days!"

"I KNOW, I know," I exclaim in an annoyed tone as my mind scrambles to find a reassuring reason for this unexpected turn of events.

An intern runs up to me and nervously asks, "How could this happen? We've been right down to the minute for the past 5 tremors, so how are we wrong?"

"Mina, calm down," I tell her coolly, "There was probably a reason for this and we merely overlooked it."

"But this one was different," Mina said in distress, "it was BIG, much bigger than the others. You were there, you saw how the buildings crumbled away effortlessly. They were like, like a kid's building set toppled by the wind."

"No need to get so worked up," I told her, "We'll look into it and see what level it was on the scale."

We walked over to the large computer monitor, and I typed in the code to the program we use to measure the tremors. Haru and Mina gasped in shock, and I shook my head in complete denial. The destruction level was a 7.9342 out of 10. We slowly lurched over to the interactive screen to view the damage throughout the city. Unsurprisingly, Abeno Harukas (the tallest building in Osaka) had finally tumbled down, it had shockingly withstood for almost 140 years since it was created, and the relic finally fell. The other major damages included, the Asuko Company building, and the 50 story Hilton Hotel. We could see the crowds of people filling the streets, and the rescue workers climbing through the rubble with hopes to find survivors. I shifted our view to look across Osaka, and toward the bay. We saw that the aquarium had fallen as well.

"Haru, I need you to call and see how many casualties there are so far-" I started to say.

"-I'm right on it," Haru interrupted as he rushed away.

"And Mina, head over to the main department to see if they have a cause yet, if not, come back and get me. I can help with that if needed," I told her.

"Okay," Mina replied hastily.

"And I'm left to clean up this mess," I said to myself.

"Huh?" Mina said inquisitively, "Did you say something to me?"

"Oh, no I was just talking to myself," I said quietly.

“Well, then I’m off,” she called back as she walked down the hallway.

As soon as she walked out of the door, I collapsed in my chair and put my head in my hands. Right then, my office phone rang quite loudly in my ear. I glared at it for a couple seconds, and then cautiously picked it up.

“DID YOU FORGET TO DO YOUR JOB? OR DID YOU TAKE A DAY OFF?” the East Asian Research Center manager screamed at me, “I HIRED YOU BECAUSE YOU WERE GOOD AT THIS, WHAT CHANGED?”

“Sir, it was just one mistake-” I said calmly.

“ONE MISTAKE? THIS ‘ONE MISTAKE’ COST OVER 1,000 DEATHS, AND 370 BILLION YEN WORTH OF DAMAGE!” He shrieked in my ear.

“I underst-” I started to say but was interrupted by Mina running over and yelling at me.

“MARINA! MARINA! WE FOUND OUT WHAT HAPPENED!” She called out.

“Well then tell me, but please stop yelling!” I told her. Then I said into the phone, “Hold on a second please, we may have a reason for the mistake.”

“We figured out that someone got their hands on an antigravity machine, and that’s why the process speeded up,” Mina said quickly.

“Hold on, weren’t those banned decades ago?” I asked.

“Well yes, and everyone thought they were gone, but apparently someone still had one,” She stated knowingly.

“Okay, I’ll tell the boss,” I said to Mina before speaking into the phone.

“I guess it isn’t your fault then,” my manager told me apologetically.

“I guess not,” I retorted, “we’ll try to hunt down the culprit.”

“Get right on it,” he commanded before signing off.

I went with Mina to the main building, and we sat down by one of the trackers to see what was going on. He told us that there was a reported antigravity machine near Barcelona, and one in Nairobi as well. We got him to show us the exact location of the machine near Osaka. Mina was the first to see it, that there wasn’t just one machine, there were hundreds. I decided we needed more eyes and more investigators, so I called my assistant.

“HARU GET OVER HERE!” I yelled into my cell phone before hanging up.

After waiting about 7 minutes, Haru came screeching down the long corridor that led to the research room. I was waiting impatiently outside the door, and practically dragged Haru into the lab. I pushed him into a chair and told him to look at the projection and tell me what he saw.

“It’s a large machine,” Haru said cautiously.

“Look again, you can move closer,” I sternly replied.

He inched forward, took a minute to look closely, and then exclaimed, “It’s not just one machine, but hundreds of small ones!”

“Right,” I stated to no one in particular, “but what could they be doing there?”

“How am I supposed to know?” Haru said with some attitude.

“Hey! It was just a question, no need to get snarky,” I told him.

“Okay, okay. I have no idea why they’d be there,” He said a bit more calmly.

“Neither do I,” I sighed.

“We have a call here for you Miss Furukawa,” one of the lab researchers told me anxiously.

“Okay, I’m coming,” I stated with no expression.

“Hello?” I said into the phone.

“Is this Marina Furukawa?” The man on the phone asked.

“Yes... and you are?” I asked back



“I am a threat to you and everyone else on this planet,” he shot back.

“Why?” I inquired, “What will you do that’s so dangerous?”

“I am in control of all 1,600 antigravity machines,” He snapped, “and I’m not afraid to use them if you don’t cooperate.”

I dropped the phone in shock, it clattered loudly and everyone turned to look at me. I quickly apologized for the disturbance, picked up the phone, and told him we’d cooperate.

“Good, I expected you to be willing,” He said in a satisfied manner.

“What must I do... sir?” I said very respectfully.

“Oh, I understand,” He retorted distastefully, “so now that I’ve threatened you, you use honorifics.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think you were older than me, you sound pretty young,” I said hurriedly, “not that that’s bad.”

“We should just get on with the deal, shouldn’t we?” He replied.

“YES, yes we should sir,” I said thankfully.

“Please stop being formal, I am probably younger than you,” he told me, “To stop me, you must find me. I’ll give you one clue, I’m not in Tokyo or Niigata or Kyoto, I’m right here in Osaka, in a temple. Hurry, you only have three hours starting now!”

“WAIT!” I exclaimed, but was cut off when he hung up.

“What happened boss?” Mina asked worriedly.

“ATTENTION!” I commanded, “ALL OF YOU LOOK AT ME! There was a man on that phone, he said that—well, you don’t need to know what he said, but he’s at a temple somewhere in Osaka, and we need to find him within three hours.”

“Do you know what he looks like?” Haru inquired.

“He’s younger than me,” I stated nervously, “everyone split into groups of two and go and find him! Mina, Haru, you two come with me, we’ll take the district by the bay.”

“Okay, I may know a few temples in that district,” Haru said.

“Good, we can go in my car,” I said to them.

Around 20 minutes later we arrived at our first stop, a little temple called Taiyu-ji. We jogged in, but to our dismay, the temple was long deserted. The dust had accumulated over the years, and there were cobwebs draped through the rafters. There was absolutely no one in this place, but we still searched it top to bottom.

“Well, there’s no one here,” Mina said dismally, “maybe we should check in with the others.”

“That’s a great idea, I’ll call Anna and Naoki,” Haru told us.

He dialed the number and spoke quietly for a while before hanging up and telling us the news, “They haven’t found him, and neither have the others.”

“We should move on, we only have around 2 hours left,” I suggested.

We got back into the car and sped off to the next temple on our list, Hozen-ji Temple. It took us about 25 minutes to get there, and this time, the temple was in use. We bowed continuously as we walked in, and looked around to see if there was a young man in his early twenties. We saw a few people that matched that description, so, we walked over to one of them to check his ID. He was 24 years old, he didn’t have a criminal record, and his voice didn’t match the one I heard on the phone. We spent forty minutes checking all of the young men in that temple, but no one was a match.

Mina suggested, “Maybe we should go and help one of the other teams since there’s not a lot of temples around here.”

“Wait,” Haru told us, “I have one last place in mind.”

He led us about four blocks away to a little shack-like building. He said to us, "This is a temple that's not on any map, so there's a chance that he's hiding in here."

"Well, let's go in," I said.

We stepped into the small temple, but the darkness was overpowering and nothing could be seen. Mina pulled out her phone and turned on the flashlight, so with the weak lights from our phones we searched the dusty building. It was to no avail though, as no one was in there. As I stepped out into the sunlight, I saw a young woman, maybe about twenty, sitting on a stone way across the way. She came over to us and addressed me, "Miss, are you looking for my brother?"

"Maybe, where is he?" I replied.

She said, "He's in a bar down that way, he was in there about fifteen minutes ago."

"Fifteen minutes?" I thought out loud, "That was right before we arrived."

"Yes, he saw you pull up, and then ran down the street," She told us helpfully, "I can take you to the bar."

"Thank you Miss," Haru thanked her.

She took us down a narrow alley, through a few twists and turns and finally through the doors of another ramshackle structure. We entered and went over to the cashier and asked to see if there was a young man here.

"Yes, there are a couple here," She said, "Just turn left up there and you'll see the main room."

We followed her instructions, and then the young woman who guided us called out, "Hey, brother, someone wants to see you!"

He casually turned around to face us and calmly inquired, "What do you want?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Haru retorted, "We're here to arrest you for possession of illegal goods, destruction of property, and accidental manslaughter."

"Oh, that wasn't an accident," He smirked before sprinting for the back door of the bar.

"Is he some sort of psychopath?" I asked his sister with a worried tone.

"Somewhat, we all just leave him be because no one knows what he'll do next," she replied.

"There's no time to waste!" Mina shouted as she and Haru took off after the criminal.

"Thanks for helping us, but we can handle it from here," I told the sister before chasing after the others.

We caught up to the criminal after about fifteen minutes of hardcore running. Haru and I grabbed his wrists and Mina walked behind us as we took him back to the car. We unceremoniously threw him into a seat, then we piled into the car ourselves. Haru locked the windows and doors, and then drove us to the police station.

I had called ahead and told them we were bringing in a dangerous criminal. So, upon our arrival, four officers came out and cuffed the suspect and dragged him into a investigation room.

After hours of questioning, our suspect emerged cuff free. I grabbed his wrist to stop him, but he snapped at me. I questioned him, "If you didn't do it then why did you run away when we showed up, and then say what you did was no accident?"

"I did do it, I just convinced them I didn't," He replied snarkily before snatching his wrist away and purposely walking out of the building.

I stood there for a minute contemplating what to do before I walked out of the building myself. I looked around for him, but there was no trace. Mina and Haru came out of the station as well, and we started walking around to find him again.

I saw a glimpse of a figure down an alley way, and I crept towards it to investigate. It was our suspect! I tried to catch him, but he winked at me and then hopped over a fence and ran into the night.

## **Megan Willis**

Age: 12, Grade: 7

School Name: St Paul's Episcopal Day School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Molly Pruett

Category: Poetry

### **It's Going Swimmngly**

The waves wash away imperfections,  
Leaving no trace of life  
The wind and the waves,  
Pull the sand away with them

The washed out sky,  
Is nothing compared to the ocean  
The salty smell of the sea,  
Comes along with me

As I splash in the water,  
Fish hide from me  
Seashells scrape my feet,  
But the sand soothes them

The cold water is refreshing,  
But the sun burns  
I float along without a care,  
I guess its all going swimmngly

# Abby Wilner

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## Actions and Assumptions

Frustrated once again with my inability to see the board, I slumped back in my chair and muttered to myself. I glanced around at the seemingly never-ending plethora of posters taped neatly to all four walls. I had spent an endless amount of minutes attempting to translate them, usually without success. Then again, actually seeing the words on the posters was a whole different challenge.

My poor vision was just another tally on the list of annoyances that day. More than anything did I want to just go run off my exasperation at practice. However, with the realization that I had to sit through another hour of German, the most I could do to release my anger was scowl.

Not sure of what to do while others were checking their answers, switching their gaze between their paper and the board and making marks here and there, I started twirling my pencil and glanced at the boy across from me.

As usual, he was hiding his phone behind the stack of white boards, and texting with no intent to focus his attention on the class he was in. I noticed his paper, full of questions but no answers. I wondered if my attitude towards school would mirror his when I became a senior... I hope not.

With a small sigh, I averted my eyes and switched my concentration to my paper once again. My distracting motions must have caught the boy's eye, for he looked up from his very important conversation. We'd talked a couple times, but seniors don't exactly give much time of day to freshmen.

He was a tall, skinny but muscular athlete, friendly enough but never with much solicitude. His reputation was far more important to him than any of his classes. He was one of the ones who would carry around nothing but a pencil and his phone, always coming up with excuses as to why his homework was incomplete.

Putting the pieces together as to why I wasn't checking my work with the board, he casually raised his hand and waited to be called on by our teacher. I sat waiting, oblivious to his observation, expecting his usual "need to go to the bathroom" excuse to get out of class.

When his name was uttered by our teacher, who most likely made the same assumption as myself, he surprised both of us by asking, "May I please have a copy of what's on the board? I can't see."

Shocked yet grateful, I smiled and looked down.

"Um... yes. Sure- of course," replied our teacher, confused, as she brought over a copy. He never did what we were supposed to in class, so the reason as to why he would want to participate was beyond her.

As I was about to thank him, someone from across the room snorted and said, "You need serious help if you can't see that from where you are."

Obviously, the snarky response was aimed at the boy who had helped me out, for that was who the class believed needed the copy. Nevertheless, I wondered what would have been said

had they known the truth.

I looked over to where I'd heard the retort, finding myself staring at the biggest, meanest football player in the room. He was similar to the boy across from me in many ways, such as never doing his homework, not having supplies, etc., except that he had offered up many rude comments towards others in the class before, a couple times even targeting a kid with disabilities.

Embarrassed and ashamed, I was sure I knew what the boy across from me would respond with: something along the lines of an explanation as to why he was asking for a copy, that it was for me and not him.

Without any hesitation or change to his facial expression, the boy, not at all concerned with how others perceived him in that moment, replied, "I left my glasses at home today, bud."

I froze, attempting to take in the situation, for not only had he kindly gotten me the copy, but he also purposefully took the hit from a peer so I did not feel bad about myself. All the while, the boy felt no need to defend himself and explain the truth, even though it would have benefitted him.

At this point, completely awestruck, I was almost too shocked to take the paper when he handed it to me with a simple, casual, "Here you go." Was this really the same boy whose eyes were always glued to his phone and whose mind was always working to come up with new excuses?

I whispered a "thank you" to him, but he was soon back to his texting, and I was unsure if he ever heard me.

The rest of the day, I couldn't stop thinking about the boy's one act of kindness. I no longer viewed him as a slacker, a careless student, a class clown. Instead, I associated compassion and benevolence with the boy. Although what he did may have been miniscule to him, it was enough to override all other stereotypes I had made about the boy. While he didn't care for school or try in anything other than his sports, none of it mattered, because he had a truly good heart.

Seeing others in the hallway, I often notice those with pink hair and nose rings, those who wear cropped tops and tight clothing, those who dress up nicely and always do their homework, and those who carry around nothing but a pencil and their phone.

I see them and I remember back to the day in German. I think of all the things I could be thinking, of all the assumptions I could be making, but I don't think anything and I don't assume.

Recently, I was paired up with a "slacker" for a lab in science. It would have been simple for me to go through the whole process myself and ignore his contributions, assuming that they were irrelevant. However, the first thing I asked him was, "Where would you like to begin?" As it turns out, working with someone is always helpful, regardless of the labels associated with them.

Among my classmates are plenty of lazy students, all choosing to maintain a certain reputation. However, amidst the lack of effort hides numerous hearts as good as the boy's who sat across from me.

## **Natalie Wolbert**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

### **Again And Again**

Nobody, no sign of life, nothing. No one believed what I had to say. No one believed a 15 year old girl that saw something that would never leave her mind. I was scarred. That day will stay with me forever.

The bell rang throughout the halls to signal the first day of high school. A new school, a new life, and a new beginning. This year, this one would be different. I would make it different. I pace through the halls passing all new faces to my first class, History.

The door slams right in front of me, awaking me from my daydream. I grab the cold door handle and open the door to a new classroom. I examine the room for an empty seat. There is one in the back right corner. I quietly slip to the back of the room, trying to go unnoticed. I give a glance at the neighbor for reassurance before taking a seat. Another bell rings and class begins.

I recalled my whole day on the trek home. My house started to come in my view, followed by the beach behind it. The siding was worn but still held its original tan color. It wasn't the most colorful house on the block but that didn't matter, the bright red door caught your eye when you walked by. The smell of salt was just around the corner and the waves crashing on the shore was just behind my house. I stepped into our house and set my school bag on the little cushioned seat by the door.

“How was your day?” a woman's voice rang through the house.

“Good, and yours?”

“Okay, thanks for asking!”

Walking on the wooden path just made my whole day. The long planks were hot from the sun and they made your feet burn if you stayed in one spot too long. The one step from the long planks into the soft sand was something that was treasured in my mind. As soon as your feet hit the sand it was like heaven. The sand was light and fluffy; it was hot from the sun beading down on it. It stuck between my toes when I stepped and when I lifted my foot the grains fell off one by one. With every step, my feet became more and more hot from the sun and the sand. When I got to our meeting spot, a set of smooth rocks tucked behind a cove, I planted myself on a rock and waited.

While waiting, I had realized I forgot my phone so I decided to take some time and think about my day. Thinking about my day my feet were playing in the sand just like the little kids do at the playground after I leave school, not worried about life just having fun. It must have been an hour or so of me just waiting for my friend, I guess she forgot. Oh well! I decided to abandon my rock and move to the where the sand and the waters edge meet, now I could see the whole beach as

far as it would let me. I was the only one on the beach as far as I knew. To my left a dark figure comes running from the long planks. I didn't really think anything was wrong but I just watched her, hair flying in the wind that she had made for herself and her long strides that she took with her legs. As soon as she got to the water's edge she paused, looking left and right then back to the blue ocean. She took very careful steps into the water then after about four steps she took off. Racing to the ocean like it was calling her, once she was about waist in she dove into the sea. I kept watching for her head to surface, but it never did. I didn't know what to think, she had just vanished before my eyes. All these questions raced through my head. Was she running from something? Someone? Is she okay? What is she? I didn't know the answer to any of those questions but I deeply wanted to.

My body shot up and ran over to where she had disappeared. I stared into the deep blue water just looking for her to rise up out of the water but she never did. I turned to stare back at the wooden path to my neighborhood, my feet started to move toward the path... fast. I reached my house and slammed into the door, closing with a click. I wiped off my sandy feet and headed to the kitchen where my mom had been making dinner.

“How was Maren?” My mother asked.

“She never came, but-” before I could finish my mom butted in.

“Wait, so you were at the beach alone?”

“Well yes but that's not the point, I was sitting at Maren and I's spot waiting for her and I saw this girl go into the ocean and never come out.”

“Oh dear, should we call the police? Are you sure that's what you saw?”

“YES!! Positive, very positive.”

“Okay okay, I'll call them.”

My mother called the police and they had just asked her where the spot I saw her go into the water was and what she looked like. I didn't want to talk to them so I just had my mom do it. By the end of the call it was dark and my mom told me to..... I woke to a alarm clock.

A dream, really? I just shook it off and started to get ready for school. I had arrived and the bell rang and classes started, History. The seat in the back of the room was calling my name. The day ended quickly, and I paced home. I opened my bright red door and walking up the stairs to my room, laying on the bed I remember I had to meet a friend at the beach. Not thinking I run down to the beach and find there is no one waiting for me, running to the water's edge I wait. My eyes wander into the deep blue water, it just made me smile. I start to walk into the deep ocean and then start to pick up the pace. I plunge head first into the ocean, going down I grab the sand in my hand and squeeze it out through my fingers, just watching.

I relived the 21st of June only one time. It was the day I was taken of this earth by water. It filled my lungs and pulled me down. I couldn't talk to my friends and family for years. I want to go back but in my heart I know that will never happen. I was taken for a reason, a reason I do not know.

# Savanna Wooten

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Dalton

Category: Flash Fiction

## A Portrait of an Unusual Soldier

I have a secret. No one here has seen the real me yet, nor do I ever intend on allowing that to happen. What would they think? Would I be seen as deranged or brave? Useless or helpful? I push these thoughts away, I cannot even think about it. They would ridicule me, expose me, and kick me out into the world I already left behind. I must keep it a secret for as long as I have to until the dying breath of Union or myself in battle. I will not let my Confederate army down. They must not know that under this facade of a soldier, I am a woman who was born to fight.

A droplet of sweat formed just above my left eyebrow, threatening to fall into my eye. I wipe my forehead using the rough material of my uniform sleeve. The sun was relentless these summer days, seeming to melt everything within its reach. My kepi, jacket and trousers did not offer much relief to the heat, however, they were still preferable to layers of petticoats and my hoop skirt that I wore in what seemed to be an entire lifetime ago.

Just two summers ago, the summer of 1860, I was an average woman living in Charleston. At just 18 years, my mother had been pushing me to settle down and prepare myself for the inevitable ‘womanly’ duties that I would have to carry out day after day for the rest of my uneventful life. I did not like this option for the sake of my own happiness, however I knew that this was the only viable option in order not to upset too many people. I began to believe that I would become the quintessential women.

We all knew it would come. It was not an if, but a when. The tensions had been too high, the government too unstable. In our brains we prepared for the day that our men would be taken to war, but our hearts were all too distraught. I watched Papa leave with only the clothes on his back, a rifle and one of my mother’s handkerchiefs. Soon following him, my brother, only 16, joined the ranks as well. The household that was once filled with perpetual laughter and happiness was eerie and gloomy. I had tried everything to lift the spirits of my house, but there seemed to be no possible cure for my mother’s particular sadness and longing for the ones she knew we lost. It only worsened when the soldier, not one of our soldiers, came to the house to hand my mother two letters. Our entire world came crashing down. My mother dropped to the ground that day, in all senses, and could not seem to find a way to stand up again. Not able to stand the way my life had been flipped upside down, I knew I had to do something.

There had always been rumors of women who did believe in the normal dynamics. Women living alone, making a wonderful life for themselves full of adventure without a man to aid her. Of course, these rumors had always been accompanied with remarks of disapproval and disgust. These rumors only intensified when the war started. Stories of women sneaking into the ranks and into the heart of battle. Giving up everything in their lives to fight for their country for reasons of love or simple patriotism. I had decided that given the circumstances, I must become one of these women, one of the legends. I would do this not to gain attention but for the sake of my family and myself. This was the only way I knew how to help.

I had told mother that I was to stay with relatives further south, she agreed without a blink of



an eye. In reality, there would be no relatives, only companionship of the horrors I would see. With my brother's shears and wardrobe, I transformed myself into a convincing boy. Cutting my long elegant hair and trading my layers of clothing for simple trousers and shirt was utterly liberating. I was among a group of young boys in my enlistment group, none looking past the age of 15. I humored the doctor checking all enlistees, answering questions as if I were merely a teenage boy. I was lucky that the doctor required only a superficial check of my physicality; my identity was safe for the time being. I was cleared to join the ranks along with the others. I was officially part of the Confederate Army.

I was prepared to offer my life for my patriot cause. My fellow soldiers called us selfless, but I consider us lucky. This life offered more freedom than I had ever imagined my life could contain. Of course, we saw the horrors of warfare daily; something not for the weak but it was still the most liberating and exciting experience I knew I would ever get the chance to have in my lifetime. I could never allow for my officers to strip me of this life, this identity I had built for myself. I would keep my true self hidden for as long as I needed, forever if I had to.

Trudging through the field alongside my fellow soldiers, who I had grown close to in these past months, I was exhausted but determined. I looked up at the sky, ablaze by the sun, hoping that women later on would be able to experience this liberation and freedom that deep down all humans crave without judgment and fear. But I knew I was only a soldier, no one cared about my hopes and dreams as I marched onto the field of my final battle.

## Ann Zhang

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Humor

### Nobody Is A Superhero

Richard Tutweiller leaned back in his chair and let his eyelids fall like shutters, taking another drag on his cigarette. An imprint of the Evite's crimson letters tattooed the blackness of his vision, the color of a newly dried scab. With one hand he swiped halfheartedly at his laptop, shutting it with a satisfying click. It would taunt him no longer.

His desk was crowded with crumpled balls of paper, an assortment of scribbles vaguely resembling his favorite superheroes--Batman, Superman, Spiderman, Thor... One by one Richard launched the sketches into the trashcan across the room, sinking every shot. It was a skill he'd long since mastered in his refusal to leave his seat.

It took Richard less than a second to ponder the invitation. An alumni gathering? As if! His college days were lost in the wrinkles of time, drenched and drowned in thirty years' worth of wine. The few memories that remained were anything but pleasant, coming back to haunt him on the occasional lifeless autumn night, as the frat boys would do wheelies a few streets down, and the yowling of tires against pavement would thrust Richard back into the clutches of his own youth and recklessness.

There, as the hour hand trotted past midnight, sleep seduced the weary man, and he allowed himself to melt into her familiar arms.

#

"You should go." Annette set her empty mug in the sink as Richard stumbled down the stairs, rubbing the morning grogginess from his eyes.

"What is there I would want to remember?" he snorted. "College was hardly kind to your old man."

"Then you can go back for closure. Talk to old friends again, drink a little. Have a good time, for once. I miss your smile."

Richard grumbled incoherently in reply, but Annette waved him off, rolling her eyes. The habit had stuck long since her adolescence, when she would prop herself up against the very same kitchen counter and dissect the latest addition to her sizable timeline of boyfriends.

"Screaming at Jeopardy contestants until two in the morning is only fun for one of us, Pa," she quipped.

"I would hardly call it *screaming*--"

Annette cut off Richard's protests with a huff. "What about that one professor you've always talked about? The one who could never remember who you were? Go back and show him what you've got now."

Her father inhaled sharply. "Monsieur Lacroix."

A smile twitched at the edge of Annette's devil red lips. She had him now. "Yes, Monsieur Lacroix, that old bugger. You should go." She handed Richard his coffee. "I'll be making dinner for one tonight. Go enjoy yourself."

The old man shook his head and scowled, muttering to himself. "Monsieur, monsieur,

monsieur. *Qu'est-ce que je vais faire?*"

#

Nine hours later, Richard found himself gasping for air at the top of the stairs, collapsed against two massive doors, the entrance to his alma mater. The suit he had chosen--the only one he could still button over his eternally rumbling gut--hadn't seen the sun in over a decade, and it itched horrendously.

"You all right there, big guy?" An uninvited hand slapped Richard on the back.

Richard blinked at the younger man slouched before him, whose other arm was slung around the shoulders of a pixie-like brunette, probably his wife. They radiated vogue in the way that is inherent in millennials, and Richard himself, with his graying hair and skin like rawhide leather, felt ancient. He let his mouth hang open, and he wrung his hands, suddenly remembering that questions usually call for responses. "Uh... yes."

The couple nodded so vigorously that Richard feared their heads would fall off. "Welcome back, then," chirped the woman, flashing her too-bright teeth.

Richard scratched the back of his neck. "Uh... yes."

Moths were beginning to swarm in the crisp September air, and the evening hour bathed the streets in a balmy darkness. The twenty-somethings held open the door in yet another display of courtesy, as the happy can always afford. Richard sucked in his stomach and stepped into the light.

Monsieur Lacroix was hardly recognizable, cloaked and veiled by all the time gone by. Students swarmed around him, and the beloved man nodded this way and that, chuckling politely at the anecdotes thrown at him like fastballs. "Remember when..."

Richard's eyes locked in on the professor, willing their eyes to meet across the buzzing banquet hall. If Monsieur would just turn his gaze slightly to the left... No. Richard would have to battle it out for the man's attention.

"Look over there. It's that one kid with the brown eyes. What was his name again?" Richard whipped around at the sound of the familiar voice, as grinding to the ears as ever--Gregory Kayne. Greg stalked closer to Richard, an easy smirk breaking across his face. His comrades crept behind in his shadow.

"Hey... buddy! How's it going nowadays?" Greg crowed. "Let me guess, my old pal's a physician. Or maybe I've seen you around the courthouse. No... Well, don't leave me hanging!" He jabbed Richard with a meaty elbow, oozing with amiability.

"I'm... I'm a telemarketer, actually."

Greg's smile dropped to the floor. "Oh. Then tell your friends over in the business to stop calling up the Kayne household in the Hamptons, alright? We don't need no stupid cable."

Richard nodded weakly, watching Greg's back disappear into the crowd, the other men trailing behind him like slobbering dogs. The twenty yards to Monsieur Lacroix stretched out before Richard like miles. He dragged one foot forward, then the other, eyes glued to his ratty dress shoes, praying that no one else would approach him with nosy inquiries disguised as politesse. With the all the grace and dignity he could muster, Richard weaved his way through the sea of alums, his lumbering form sticking out like a sore thumb among the limber businessmen. But in the end the ship hit land, and Richard wailed out, "Monsieur, Monsieur! *Vous souvenez-vous de moi?*"

His presence drew blank stares as the mob around the professor dispersed and Richard sashayed over, oblivious. Slowly, Monsieur Lacroix's gaze settled upon his former student, milky eyes flashing with recognition. "Of course I remember you, Richard. You were my star pupil, yes you

were.”

Richard burst into a coughing fit, startled by the professor’s gentle words. All throughout college, Monsieur would rarely recall Richard’s name; the man couldn’t have picked his student out of a line-up. Perhaps beneath a layer of stoicism, Monsieur had buried a frank admiration for Richard, and after all these years it was unmasking itself at last.

“*Mon cheri*,” Monsieur drawled, leaning closer, “Our staff here is short a member this year. It’s a slot for only a real connoisseur like you, and we need to fill it soon. Do you understand what I am telling you, Richard?”

Richard’s heart fluttered like a schoolgirl’s at the sound of his name rolling off the older man’s tongue. *Ree-shar*. At long last, he was being recognized for his talents.

“*Oui*, Monsieur. I understand.” He nodded gravely.

Monsieur Lacroix extended his hand, and Richard shook it firmly, smothering the urge to sweep the professor up in his arms. After all, Richard was a real man now, returning valiantly to his forever home, the place that had sculpted him throughout his tender years. *Enfin!*

#

Annette wished her coffee had more personality. She swirled her finger around in the lukewarm mug, seemingly entranced by the whirlpool of dark roast as Richard recounted the riveting tale of the last evening’s adventure.

“...and I start tomorrow, so I’d better get some classroom materials prepared fast, or I’ll have nothing to teach with but my own textbook from ‘69!” He flung a grin in Annette’s direction, expecting his effervescence to be contagious. “A college professor, can you imagine?”

His daughter nodded absentmindedly. It was still dark outside, and her enthusiasm never made its appearance before the sun, especially since she’d spent the night out in the city, doing... well, she couldn’t quite remember, actually... “Yeah, Pa. Real exciting.” Annette stifled a yawn.

Richard blew her a kiss, the sarcasm having rocketed over his head.

#

Richard arrived without difficulty at Monsieur Lacroix’s classroom, approximately twenty-nine minutes ahead of the bell. He had no one to impress upon but a crowd of empty desks, but still, feeling rather significant, he chose to lug around his load of books--a dazzling variety of foreign texts. He paced around the room, murmuring prepared introductions under his breath. “*Bonjour mes étudiants, je m’appelle Richard...*”

The door creaked open and Monsieur Lacroix hobbled in, taking no note of Richard’s presence. He flipped through a stack of copies, whistling the tune to “*La Vie en Rose*.”

“Monsieur? Hello?” Richard cleared his throat. “I’m ready for my students.”

The seasoned professor halted, his forehead crinkling in bewilderment. “What? Oh yes, I nearly forgot, my dear... brown-eyed friend. They will be here for you any time now.” He returned to his filing his papers.

Richard sat down with a thud and drummed his fingers against the desk, brimming with anticipation. “Do you have any advice for me, on my first day? I must admit, I’m rather new to this.”

Monsieur Lacroix gave a tinkling laugh. “Just keep fingers out of noses and accidents off the furniture. And don’t let things get too loud, or it will disturb their parents across the hall.

Babysitting is simple, *mon cheri*. I’m glad you volunteered to help out.” He slipped from the classroom without another word.

Richard frowned. “Excuse me?”

The door was flung open all at once. Children streamed in like ants, shrieking and hollering and

gnawing at textbooks.

“Ah!” one cried out, jamming a miniature Eiffel Tower in his mouth. “Ah dah boog da bah! Dah boogadee bah gah...”

Or at least that’s what it sounded like to Richard. Children were hardly his strong suit; in his own prime he’d passed Annette around like a hot potato, keeping a handful of sitters on speed dial.

The cacophony clashed on around him, and Richard, the reluctant conductor, wilted. His head sank into his calloused palms, sweat trickling down in the cracks between his fingers.

A girl flung her arms around Richard’s leg, dwarfed beneath his looming figure.

“N-no, bad girl. Shoo.” Richard swatted at the child, quivering in her presence, but the snotty-nosed imp clung tight and began to wail. *Damn*. “Don’t cry, please don’t cry! Please don’t...”

Aha!” He tore a sheet of paper from one of his textbooks and scrunched it up. “Here, fetch!”

The children’s fingers emerged from their nostrils to trace the path of the makeshift ball as it hurtled from Richard’s hand. In that moment, the world unraveled in slow motion--the ball careened through the air like a wayward missile; grazing a ceiling projector, ricocheting off the wall, and nailing a kid in the head before, at long last, pitching straight into the trash can.

Richard’s technique was flawless. An awestruck silence hung heavy in the air. Even the girl clinging to Richard’s leg loosened her grip, choking back her sniffles to gape up at him in astonishment.

“Woah!” A slack-jawed boy of six or seven pressed his hands to his cheeks. “That... was... awesome!”

“R-really?” Richard’s face was blazing now. He fiddled with his tie, eyes darting around uncertainly. Such clear, unadulterated flattery was foreign music to his ears, but it was definitely a melody that he could dance to.

The boy bobbed his head enthusiastically. “Yeah! You’re like... You’re a *superhero!*”

“A superhero,” Richard whispered, the words tasting sweeter than honey. “Perhaps I am.”

## Ann Zhang

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Short Story

### Ground Speed

Sam is asleep, her lips half-parted, no ridges in the space between her brows. She splays her shoulders like a rag doll's, and they rise and fall with her shallow sighs.

From the aisle seat, Nadia reaches across to slide the window shade closed. It is dawn, and the sun's ebullience is stinging her eyes. She'd never had the luxury to feel at home on a plane before, to knock knees and bump elbows without apology. In the past, her father's incessant demands had been best accommodated by the first class. They would sit opposite each other without speaking, Nadia stretching out her limbs to fill the recliner. He would order orange juice for her, champagne for himself, and while he took his business calls in the bathroom Nadia would square her shoulders and pretend she was drinking the finest French wine.

When the attendant reaches Nadia's row, his face brightens. You speak Arabic? he inquires. His vowels are too flat, his syllables smudged.

For a moment Nadia considers lying. Her English has been sculpted by an enviable background of tutors, all flown straight out of the States. She could pretend to be American-born, second or third generation. But grogginess is drowning out Nadia's thoughts. All she can offer is a reluctant bob of the head.

Immediately the man begins to jabber. His name is Ziad, he tells her, slipping into Arabic now. He is from Tripoli, the youngest in family of eight. He is looking for work in California, where his cousin owns a restaurant. There is a room in the back, and he can stay until he's settled in, as soon as he has enough money saved... Who is the lady next to Nadia? Where are they going? The other passengers pretend not to stare. Nadia shifts her eyes, addressing the seat in front of her.

*Ukhti*, she says. She hazards a glance at Sam's slumped over figure: My sister.

It is a lie, a blatant one. Sam is red-haired and sun-kissed, freckles spilling across her skin like constellations. Nadia's features are dark and rigid, and her complexion is grungy, too mossy for tan, too muddled for olive.

The attendant squawks. Nadia does not like how the man props his elbow against her seat. He smiles as if being *lebnani* is a secret between the two of them, some manifest intimacy. Besides, Nadia reasons, the other passengers are growing impatient. They tilt back their chins and inhale like asthmatics, desperate enough to savor the smell of airplane food.

I would like my meal, please, Nadia blurts.

The attendant seems startled. Of course... madam. You have selected?

Nadia points to the vegetarian option--pasta slathered in an unidentifiable sauce. She considers herself a carnivore by inheritance, but today she would rather not gnaw on half-cooked chicken. She orders the same for Sam and places the dish beside her own.

Somewhere on the plane a baby begins to wail, and Sam's eyelids flutter open. Her gaze settles upon Nadia. What did I miss?

Nadia stabs at her meal, skewering a noodle that hangs limply from her fork, dripping with oil.

Nothing much, she says. It's good you got some rest.

#

Perhaps it is something in the ocean's pungent breath, a particular magnetism that draws strangers closer. Sam suspects the lullaby of the waves, spines arching to the sky and then tumbling back down, the resonance unraveling our insides. Some kind of a seaside high, she hypothesizes. But not enough to muddy one's rationality, right?

It was by the Mediterranean, Sam recalls, in a little-known cove a day's journey from Beirut. She clutched a camera against her ribcage, inhaling with the tide, the froth swelling to kiss her bony feet. In a few minutes, she would capture the horizon as it erupted in flames. Of course, she was supposed to be in the city still--her professor had warned her not to stray from the streetlights. But Sam ached for something dazzling to send back home, to prove that photography was an artist's trade.

She was combing her toes through the sand when a voice rang out from behind her.

This is my father's land, it declared--in English, to Sam's relief and indignation. Did the back of her head so clearly broadcast her nationality?

The girl--well, not a girl really, probably as old as Sam--was tittering. Don't worry, she said. You can stay.

Sam stuffed her hands in her pockets, clearing her throat. Oh. Good. It's... nice to meet you.

You don't have to say that. A pause. I'll assume this is your first visit.

*Na'am*, Sam articulated, flaunting the little Arabic she'd picked up at the airport. Yes. First visit to Lebanon, first plane ride, first time leaving Wyoming. It was all the same, really.

You should come in. It's getting chilly. Nadia nodded towards her house, tucked behind a cluster of rocks flowering out from the coastline.

Inside?

Yes. There is *kibbeh* for dinner.

That sounds delicious, Sam said, then added hastily, *Shukran*, thank you, and the girl burst into drunken laughter again. The sky was darkening now. The sun had already dipped into the sea.

Sam trailed a few steps behind, camera drumming against her chest.

It was the kind of building that deserved its placement so close to the waves; the feng shui of the dining room was shamelessly surgical. Sam was reminded of her half-deaf aunt in Florida, the one who would paint her vacation home from a thousand different angles and distribute the artwork among disenchanting relatives, hollering that they were always welcome to visit...

Nadia was staring, expecting an answer. Sam flushed. Come again?

I asked if you'd like something to drink.

Oh. Yes, please.

The girl uncrossed her legs and barked out orders in Arabic, suddenly much older than her skin had suggested. A maid waltzed in from the kitchen, balancing a kettle and a trembling stack of silverware. She poured two steaming cups for the diners, then scurried from the room.

Sam hesitated. And... your family? Are they eating with us?

My parents are away. On business. Nadia took a sip from her tea, and Sam tried to mimic the girl's elegance, wincing as her knuckles grazed the scalding porcelain. In fact, Nadia continued, they're in America at the moment. New York, I believe.

It's wonderful there.

It must be.

Well, I... I've never been, actually. But I've seen it on TV.

Where do you live then?

Oh, cowboy territory. Wyoming, if you've ever heard of it.

There's a famous park there, yes?

Yellowstone? Yeah. Did you know that a moose can hold its head underwater for three minutes straight? Sam's eyes were sparkling, her spirits unsubdued. I was a tour guide there, at some point.

Not anymore?

No.

The maid reemerged with a tray of *kibbeh* and some pita bread, which she doled out in hearty portions. Sam did not protest. As soon as the food touched her plate, she began to shovel it into her mouth, praying that she came off as appreciative rather than unseemly.

My hungry cowgirl. What's it like in America?

I don't think I'm qualified to tell. Sam's smile was distant. What about you? Have you been?

Not yet. But I've heard things. Like... I've heard that many women are doctors and scientists.

I've heard that you can buy a burger for two dollars. And also, my father tells me, strangers don't talk to you unless they're selling something.

Sam snorted. Can't argue with that.

Do you like it there?

I guess so. Sam polished off her tea. I can't imagine living anywhere else.

You have your own house, then?

Soon enough. I've got a year left of college, and then I'll be on my own, wherever the scenery takes me... Northeast, probably. I have a soft spot for musicals.

College? Nadia echoed. She was admiring the tablecloth with an ill-suited intensity. Sam stifled a yawn, tugging at the edges of her shirt...

Muffled chatter seeped through the kitchen walls, penetrating the table's silence. A man's quip in Arabic rang out among the chorus, followed by shrieking, unrestrained howls. Sam wished she'd understood the joke. She spoke a schoolgirl's Spanish, at least. She knew the colors of the rainbow. She could ask for permission to use the bathroom--¿*Puedo ir al baño? Sí, rápido.* Not that there were any Hispanics in her neighborhood.

I'd... I'd better get going... Sam stumbled from her seat, ramming her elbow against the table.

Her head began to spin. Where was the door? Her camera? And how far away was that goddamn hotel, anyway?

Wait. Nadia stood. I'll drive.

Sam blinked.

You won't find a taxi out here, *habibti*.

Oh. Alright.

#

Nadia is nibbling on the last of her pasta when the attendant reappears.

Madam, he says, jabbing a finger at her crotch. Your buckle, madam.

Excuse me?

Your buckle, please. We are about to land.

Nadia clenches her teeth as she fastens the seatbelt, shrinking away from the man's giddy wink.

Someone a few seats behind her has been crooning the same melody for hours, and the lyrics hammer at her brain: *Give my regards to Broadway...*

Their window is open again. Sam rests her forehead against the glass, grimacing when the engine hiccups. Outside, the buildings are harsh and angular, jutting into a skyline of pastels. But despite its bones of steel, the city is warm-blooded, its entropy beguiling. It exhales billboards



and traffic lights and tourists swallowed up in crowds.

We're here, Sam cries, struggling against her seatbelt. Nadia, look. We made it.

Nadia presses her cheek to Sam's. By next year, she imagines, this moment will have crystallized. Together they will play it back like an old record.

For now, Nadia cannot help but forget herself beside Sam's dizzying grin. They crane their necks at the window, cooing with delight, as if land had become an alien concept once they'd tasted the sky.

## **Edmond Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Frazier

Category: Critical Essay

### **Locked Behind Bars: Prison Controversy and Its Effect on Prisoners and Society**

The heavy steel door slams behind. Hundreds, maybe thousands of inmates are being herded into their cells after dinner, told to move on quietly and in an orderly fashion or face punishment. After every inmate has been forced within their cells, the impenetrable steel doors that separate them from the rest of society are slammed shut and locked. This is the start of an uncertain night where inmates are restless, often staying awake listening to the hum of machines and the clatter of other inmates. Much more menacing are the dark thoughts harbored by these inmates that grow even more heinous as the days go by. These thoughts push many inmates across the line, driving them into utter madness. Not able to take the thoughts anymore, an inmate attacks fellow inmates with a rusty, sharp piece of metal he found in the cafeteria, killing and wounding others before being restrained by prison guards. The inmate is later thrown into solitary confinement to “calm down”, but instead, his mind breeds even more malicious thoughts while alone for a grueling 23 hours a day with no human interaction at all. This practice proves to be detrimental to both the mental and physical health of prisoners, especially after long periods of time within solitary. Conditions like these are experienced daily at every state and federal prison in the United States which hold a whopping total of 2.2 million prisoners nationwide and the number is growing. So why is this number growing and not decreasing like it theoretically should? Due to the fact that prison practices undermine the purpose behind incarceration by making prisoners less capable of rejoining society upon release, the incarceration rate in the United States is incapable of stopping.

Many uncertainties arise out of the question of what a prison’s purpose in society is. Andrew Coyle, professor of prison studies, describes the purpose of prisons as a place where criminals are held in order to be rehabilitated for re-entrance into society. Alas, if the crime was severe, a criminal is housed in a prison for life rather than being re-taught how to be a contributing citizen of society. Prisons are also in place for deterrence and punishment, but rehabilitation is the number one priority of prisons. Rehabilitation of criminals leads up to the eventual possible release of prisoners back into society and the safety of society is the most important aspect of government. Thus, rehabilitation is seen as the basis for prison procedures. If done right, rehabilitation has the potential to turn a ruthless murderer into a compassionate citizen that is loved by the community. But instead of re-teaching prisoners how to act like a civilized citizen, prisons are leaning towards harsher punishments that achieve the opposite of rehabilitation. A direct consequence of these prison practices, the mental and physical health of prisoners is compromised.

The prison environment that results from the practices of prisons breeds a multitude of health problems and mental health issues, leading to endangerment of both prisoners and society. According to a Bureau of Justice Statistics report, over half of all prisoners in U.S. prisons have

mental illnesses, depicting the severity of the problem in U.S. prisons. The report also described the rate of mental illnesses in the prison environment as equal to four times the rate of the rest of society. Prison populations have a much higher rate of AIDS/HIV, Hepatitis A, and Hepatitis B than society, resulting in increased attention towards the treatment of prisoners (Malave 701-702). These numbers are highly alarming and this is just the beginning of a dark, unseen account of prisons. Many people, typically experts in the justice field, are pushing for prison reforms, as they see the impacts that these diseases and mental illnesses can have on both prisoners and the communities that prisoners will be released into. Prisoners are so fragile from their stay in prison because of the fact that their health issues were not necessarily treated in prison. Not treating illnesses in prison leads to a worsening of these illnesses. Newly-released prisoners are twelve times as prone to dying from health issues and are one-hundred-twenty-nine times as prone to death by drug overdose than the normal people of society (Malave 708). This poses a threat to the safety of prisoners after they are released because they have an increased risk of dying to drugs and health issues that should have been addressed within their time in prison. This also demonstrates the fact that prisons are not medically treating prisoners correctly, and even sometimes not at all. Prisons are not capable nor equipped to handle mentally ill prisoners, which leads to a worsening of the symptoms or the creation of new illnesses. (Kim et al 10) This undermines the purpose of prisons to produce healthy, well minded people capable of being citizens of society due to the fact that the health of these prisoners is degenerating, leading to a lower overall mental health than normal. Bad mental health then leads to more problems down the road, potentially causing trouble in the communities in which prisoners are released back into. This situation is evident in a federal investigation done on prisoners nationwide, revealing that 25% of prisoners who had mental problems and illnesses were jailed or imprisoned 3 or more times (Newton 42). One can deduce from this statistic that the number of times imprisoned or jailed corresponds directly to the presence of mental illnesses. As the number of times jailed or imprisoned rises, so does the rate of mental illnesses, contributing to the already horrid health situation within prisons. Also seen in prisons is the medical maltreatment of prisoners by prison medical staff, a major player in the degrading prison environment that contradicts the purpose of prisons.

Prison medical staff incompetence is one of the biggest factors of health problems within the prison environment. Many problems arise out of the medical staff's divided attention between prison administration and prisoners. Unlike society's normal medical personnel, prison medical staff are influenced by outside sources, mainly the prison administration. Persons with more authority in prisons may threaten medical staff with loss of their job if they do not comply with their requests. Common requests of prison administrators include treatment of prisoners using a less productive medicine that costs much less than the prescribed medicine, ceding of confidential prisoner health records, and denial of treatment. All of these demands from the administration go against the code of medical professionals, but medical staff can only comply or run the risk of losing their income. This is known as dual loyalty and it severely compromises the health of prisoners (Pont et al 475). Another effect of prison practice, dual loyalty contradicts the purpose of prisons, making it near to impossible for prisons to reform. Reformation in prisons is wholly sidetracked because of the dual loyalty of medical staff in prisons, which then pushes prisons toward a more restrictive setting where reformation is nonexistent. New problems with prisoners can arise out of initially small illnesses because the medical staff are too distracted with prison administration rather than concentrating on the well-being of their patients. What were

small problems can inflate quickly into large scale problems that further degrade the prison environment and make reformation hard. Along with dual loyalty in the medical staff is the dependence on medicinal treatments rather than the therapy needed for some illnesses. Medical staff rely too much on medicine and not enough on therapy and counseling. In many cases, therapy is not available at all in prisons, which leads to recurring accounts of substance abuse, mental illnesses, and other physical illnesses. When therapy is needed, medical staff turn to medicine instead as an “easier” way to treat the illness, but instead, the illness is not treated at all in most cases. This ties back to the story at the beginning recounting the mental instability of prisoners as the medical staff act lazy and take the easy way out rather than assuring the health of prisoners (Malave 705-706). When the health of prisoners is compromised, so is the purpose of prisons because the chaotic environment created by maltreatment of prisoners is not suitable for reformation of those same prisoners. Solitary confinement is also responsible for creating such a disruptive environment for prisoners as well.

Another prison practice, solitary confinement contributes a great deal to the hindrance of reformation within prisons. Solitary confinement, often called solitary for short, is defined as a stay in a cell that is closed off from the rest of the prison population. It is estimated in the Yale Law Journal that there are between 89,000 and 120,000 prisoners in solitary confinement in the United States, more than the total normal prison populations in other advanced democratic countries like Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom (Gottschalk). Prisoners generally are kept in these cells without human contact for twenty-three hours a day, only receiving one hour of time to go outside for some fresh air. In the twenty-three hours that prisoners have to themselves, they can experience some dramatic changes in their psychological behavior. When in solitary, prisoners often report twisted mental awareness, something that is not normal within society and even within the general prison population. The twisted mental awareness changes how a prisoner thinks and can majorly impact their actions after their time in solitary is over. Rick Raemisch, Head of Colorado’s Corrections Department, wanted to experience what it was like to be in solitary for himself. Ordering prison guards to treat him like a prisoner and lock him in solitary, Raemisch did not know what he was going into. Raemisch reported hearing incessant sounds throughout the night that pounded in his head and made time in the cell unbearable. He later reports increased heart palpitations, nightmares, and nervous breakdowns during his time in solitary. What surprised Raemisch was the fact that he was only in the cell for a total of thirteen hours, but it felt like a whole week to him. This shows the impact that solitary has on a prisoner and demonstrates how the practice of shoving countless people into solitary counters the goal of reform. When prisoners do not have a stable state of mind, no attempts at reformation can be made to “correct” these criminals, thus solitary goes against a prison’s basic functions, yet it is still in place. While solitary destroys any chance of reformation within the prison setting, the discharge of prisoners is wreaking havoc outside.

When a prisoner finishes their sentence in prison, prisons release them, also known as discharge. While it does accomplish one part of the goal, the part where the prisoner is released, it does not accomplish the most important part, which is the reformation of prisoners’ actions. Prisons generally do not give their prisoners a discharge plan, a plan of what these prisoners should do when they are released, which leads to confusion and even the future incarceration of these same ex-prisoners. Only 44% of prisons give mentally ill ex-prisoners discharge plans, leading to an abnormal, crime ridden life for many. Also, only 30% of provide substance abusers with

discharge plans, which may lead to future incarcerations for the same offenses that landed them in prison the first time. Of equal importance is the negligent act of not providing ex-prisoners with information about healthcare benefits that they need (Malave 709). Because of prisons' failure to properly conduct discharge procedures, many ex-prisoners become repeat offenders of the law and run the risk of losing their lives in the process. Prisons feel as if they have accomplished their goal of reformation, but in light of these facts, it is clear that the exact opposite is occurring.

Because of these modern prison practices, the main purpose behind incarceration in prisons is being contradicted. Like the example prisoner in the story, many prisoners are put through horrific treatment in prisons, which either worsens their existing medical conditions or creates new illnesses. The main source of this problem is seen in the incompetence of prison medical staff, who have a dual loyalty to both their patients and prison administration. The medical staff rely much too heavily on the use of medication to temporarily treat the problem, but that method fails to work due to the fact that these medications have little to no usefulness in these situations, and rather, therapy and counseling is needed. Equally as inadequate, prison discharge procedures are not done correctly, leading to the future re-incarceration of prisoners who were not provided with discharge plans to aid them in their life outside of prison. Overall, every one of these prison practices contradict the fundamental purpose of prisons and gets in the way of prisoner reform. What started out as an institution to reform and re-educate criminals, prisons have turned into horrible places of legalized torture, where people, like in the story, are seen to become mentally and physically unstable through the use of many prison practices. It is seen that prison practices contradict the purpose of the prison, one example out of the many that constitute the category of institutional contradiction, where social institutions contradict their fundamental functions with their practices. Another example of institutional contradiction can be seen in schools, where the implementation of competitive sports was thought to be a good idea, has driven students farther and farther away from their goal of receiving a good education. Reported by education reformer Larry Cuban, the sports programs instituted by schools are pushing students to do better in sports and improve their physical health, but is undermining the primary goal of schools: education. This situation of institutional contradiction is also evident in many social institutions that intend for good, but only succeed to contradict their intention.

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# Honorable Mention

## Writing Portfolios

### **Amanda Arbuckle**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Collegiate School of Medicine and Bioscience, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Lea Frost

### **Jessica Goldberg**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jim Lewis



## Amanda Arbuckle

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Collegiate School of Medicine and Bioscience, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Lea Frost

Category: Writing Portfolio

### Moonlight Appointment

Strange things happen in the moonlight, when the moon bathes the sea in a pale, lustrous light. Both strange and wondrous things occur, more rapid than the change of tides. I insisted that I accompany her that night, a night set apart in her memory from all others. My friend agreed readily; she did not want to wait alone. So, once the sun sunk into the depths of the ocean, we trudged down the beaten sandy path that hardly was a path at all, past the scraggly line of palm trees that bordered the edge of the beach. We waded through waves of grass, onto the soft, golden sand. She stopped a moment behind me, stroking the grass absently with her hand and staring up at the moon.

“A full moon.” She observed with awe, her eyes glistening, perhaps with tears. “He told me there’d be one when he returned.”

The stars gazed down upon the figure of the woman, still young after all these years, still trusting in the beauty and certainty of dreams.

“Come on.” I said, tapping her shoulder and rescuing her from her reverie. She sighed with contentment and we continued onward.

Then we came to the place, a solitary rock that rested partly on land, partly in the ocean. The ocean was at high tide, so the greater portion of the boulder glistened with silver water droplets. I took a seat on top of the solid stone. There was plenty of room for the both of us, but my friend insisted on standing. She was shivering in the October air, smiling as she rubbed her trembling hands together. My friend wasn’t cold though, she was excited, and I imagined, terrified. She paced the sand, turning one way then the next, occasionally dipping her toes into the Pacific Ocean and squealing at the sudden chill that shot through her body. Then she chuckled to herself, resumed her walk, and repeated her husband’s sacred promise under her breath.

“Until death do we part, but no, my love, we won’t part even then. Three years on this same date, this same hour, we will meet again. Come to our special rock. I will be there under the light of the full moon at high tide. Death will not keep me away.”

“Do you believe in ghosts?” She asked abruptly, halting in place.

“You know that I don’t.” I replied.

“My husband *will* be here.” She insisted. I checked my watch. It was five minutes past six. He would come between six o’clock and seven o’clock if such a thing was really possible. Ten more minutes passed, and she stole an anxious glance toward the moon, hovering like a distant lantern over the lonely waves. It illuminated her pale, anxious face.

“He’ll come.” She whispered half to herself. “He’s never gone back on his word.”

I had befriended Charlotte a few months after her husband’s death, and she had often spoken of the promised appointment, a sweet smile stretched across her face every time. Even when a spell of sadness descended upon her when she recalled the times before his departure, as she put it, the thought of his promise always chased the clouds of sorrow from her heart.

“He won’t stay long, I imagine.” She said. “Just long enough to tell me he’s happy and grown



used to heaven.”

I nodded, not sure what to say.

“He’ll tell me not to worry, that everything’s all right, that I’ll be all right. My husband was such a kind man. I was lucky to have him, even if just for a little while.”

“He was lucky to have you.” I said, gently “You’ve always been faithful to his memory.” The minutes crept by. She grew visibly restless. It pained my heart.

“Charlotte,” I said. “Perhaps we should head back...” She would not hear of it.

“I trust him to keep a promise. He trusts me to keep mine. Besides, it’s not time yet.” I agreed.

“No, it’s not.”

Still, the minutes rode the train of the night. We were the passengers, waiting at the station. There were footsteps in the sand where Charlotte had trod. The tracks grew deeper as she walked over them again and again.

“Charlotte,” I began, “You shouldn’t be out here alone.”

As though to echo this, the shrill, plaintive cry of a seagull split the air. I shuddered and pulled my jacket closer to my chest.

“I’m not alone.” She answered, hastily. “I’m with you.”

“Yes, but...” I fought for a comeback. “Maybe, your grief for him has blinded you. I understand how much you want to see him again, but it’s just not possible.”

“Who are we to say what is and isn’t possible?” She answered coldly, turning her back to me toward the vast blue water, and crossing her arms.

“The dead can’t keep promises.” I said. “They’re beyond caring what happens in this world.” She shook her head. “The dead care very much what happens in this world. They’re our advocates, the travelers who went before. They’ll see us through this world and the next. They’ll see us beyond.”

She held both arms outward toward the ocean as though reaching for that other world and embracing the sea. I alighted from the rock and laid a hand upon her shoulder. My friend had begun to weep. I wiped her tears with my handkerchief.

“Don’t cry, Charlotte, please. I only want what’s best for you.”

She gave me the ghost of a smile and returned the handkerchief.

“I’m a foolish old woman, aren’t I? Thank you for accompanying me tonight. I only wish you shared my faith in him.”

“Would you know him if you saw him?” I asked, regaining my position on the boulder. “I mean; how would he even appear to you?”

She thought the question rather odd.

“He will appear just as I remember him, before he was ill. Yes, that’s how it will be. I’d know my husband anywhere.”

Five minutes until seven: the night remained as empty as ever, save for the small form of a hopeful woman on the precipice of despair, the worried murmur of the waves, and the woman’s anxious male friend. How could she hold out so long? Even Charlotte with her abundance of hope had limits.

The moon seemed to mock us now, throwing its callous light over the stark landscape and our stricken faces. The ocean, sympathetic but a moment ago, roared with laughter as it crashed against the jagged rocks. Charlotte’s tears glimmered like the stars.

I cleared my throat.

“Charlotte, he’s not coming tonight.”

She did not answer, only bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut against the glaring light.  
“Charlotte,” I began again. “Your husband is not coming tonight because he’s already here.”  
She spun to face me with startled eyes and a smile broke across her face.  
“Matthew, it...it is you! Oh Matthew! How could I not see it before?”  
I took her in my arms, kissed her tenderly, her tears flowing into mine.  
“I’ve always been here, Charlotte.” I whispered into her ear, “And I always will be.”  
In her castle among the stars, the moon smiled and the ocean grew still.

## A Quintet of Poems

### **The Woodpecker**

It was not made for him, that hummingbird nectar  
But it matters not to the woodpecker  
I watch as he sneaks up the railing of the Juliet balcony  
Perhaps half-fearing, half-desiring an ambrosial kiss like Romeo  
He pops his head out from behind the feeder  
Turns it one way, then the next  
Then repeats the action.  
Timid, he creeps forward around to the opening of the feeder  
Where I can see him best  
He sips, stops, sips again  
Tentative, he raises his head  
And checks the clearing yet again

He loses time between the sips, by being so cautious  
Who is he expecting to sneak up on him?  
Who is he afraid of?  
Who will prematurely end those blissful sips?  
The woodpecker, of course.

The woodpecker is not deterred by the arrival of a hummingbird.  
He will drink, and no one will tell him otherwise  
He drinks.  
The hummingbird must wait  
Flitting about furiously  
His wings humming with indignation.

Satisfied, the woodpecker takes his leave  
Just after checking the clearing again.  
His alert black eyes, the red plumage on his chest,  
His cautiousness, I remember best  
But I also know that the woodpecker's bold.

For it was not made for him, the nectar.  
But he drinks it anyway.

### **The Writer**

Even when she rests  
Her mind is always working  
Replaying the fantasy scenes in her head  
Like her favorite films.

She adds, she subtracts. Constructing castles in the sky  
The characters are her court  
She smiles, pleased she has made something of her own,  
Though really, all good stories come from God  
She's only a borrower.

The girl is not crazy; she's a writer  
Perhaps it's not so different.

She has access to a thousand worlds.  
She builds the bridges to them too.  
And her friends remain there waiting for her return  
So the story can resume.

One foot in the land of magic  
One foot planted in reality  
How hard to balance time between the worlds  
And remain an inhabitant of each!

She knows everyone in the worlds  
That she sculpted with her mind  
Everything there goes her way  
Friends aren't hard to find.

Though Joy and Tragedy compete there often  
She ensures Joy remains supreme  
Only there is she in full control  
Empress of her dreams.

There are times she feels alone  
The sole keeper of the world  
But she is the bridge builder  
With words on a page  
She reduces the distance  
And sets the stage  
For the reader

And when the reader looks and travels the pages  
She has flown to the writer's home  
And this land is no longer a mystery  
But the reader's own

The writer sits there in the silence  
You wonder what she does  
When you call out, she answers,  
As though she were somewhere else entirely

You wonder where she was  
"Come, I will show you."  
You travel through her imagination together.  
She is proud to show you to her home.

### **Wake Me**

Wake me if I should drift away  
To sail uncharted seas  
Wake me and I'll recall the day  
I rode upon the breeze

Wake me and I'll return  
With tales of mystic places  
Fire that freezes, ice that burns  
How the imagination races!

I escape to caverns deep beneath  
Then mount a tree and ride a leaf  
I befriend a cat, a talking crow  
Still coming back to you though

I scale a mountain  
To the youthful fountain  
In my mind, forever young  
A super-strength potion  
To swim the ocean  
Hearing songs that wait to be sung

And once I return  
I'll give you my tales  
Now enters reality as  
You fasten my sails

### **Autumn Rain**

The sky is as black as my pen's ink  
And I think  
It will rain  
The wind groans and throws its weight on the trees  
They buckle, sink to their knees  
It will rain

I write this to you in the fall  
When the leaves are gold, falling like Goldilock's hair  
And the temperature is not too hot, not too cold  
Just right

"Just write," you'd echo back to me  
The echo sounds the same, but carries different meaning  
"It's what you do best."  
Perhaps this is so. But I have little else to get me through the winter  
Some starlight, candles, and words  
The starlight to keep watch with me through the bleakest night  
For the sun has vanished in a paper thin mist,  
There's no music since the birds have left  
Like you, they're missed.

The candles, like the stars, are night's sentries  
But closer to me, less sure of themselves, flickering nervously  
Knowing they can burn with one touch  
And die with one blow

And the words, what can I say about them?  
In many ways, more deadly than the candles' flames  
Sometimes I'm half-afraid of their power  
I could build you up  
Or knock you down  
And you can do the same

What should I say to you?  
The words spring to mind, then fall from my lips  
I miss you, there, I've said it  
And the prospect of winter sends the tears falling  
Like an autumn rain  
How precious are those remaining leaves to me  
Still dangling from the trees

"I miss you too," I imagine you say  
As you glance over my letter  
"It's good to hear from you, but it hurts."  
It's sunny where you are, but still winter is there  
Though there are no outward signs of it  
Our words bring comfort along with the pain  
And I think of you  
As it rains

## What Others Think

My eyes are green  
Some say they're jade  
Some say they're like  
A shaded glade.

Still others think  
My eyes are blue  
Like frothy oceans  
A sapphire hue.

Some say my eyes are hazel brown  
Perhaps a tinge of grey is found

There are those that say my wit is sharp  
Some who think I'm scatterbrained  
Some say they play me like a harp  
Some doubt if sense has been ingrained

But I don't care.

They say I dream instead of plan  
Not good for any young woman  
They claim that I must never rest  
If I should hope to be best.

Some say I'm short  
Some say I'm tall  
Some say I'm pretty  
As if that were all.

Some call me modest  
Some call me kind  
A rule-abider  
Not hard to find  
Anywhere.

But I have patience  
And a steel-iron will  
I won't just be run-of-the-mill  
I won't let their comments wound my heart.  
I'm more than a sum of all my parts

I am who I choose to be

Not you, not her, I'm simply me.  
Let them say all they want  
I'll be sharp if they are blunt  
They can say my eyes are blue  
And I will know it isn't true  
For I have seen  
My eyes; they're green.



## I Know Why The Fat Lady Sings

For most, the word “opera” conjures images of heavy women in horned helmets belting notes at the top of their lungs. Others may picture singers collapsed to the ground as they slowly and tunefully die. Yes, opera can be overwrought with emotions. Opera can involve plump songstresses taking their own sweet time to expire. At the same time, however, opera is an exploration of the wide spectrum of human emotions experienced at one point by many of us. The story of opera is our human story, only put to music. Sure, most of us have not braved flames and dragons on a quest for love. Still, opera is a crucial art form that has inspired many other expressions of art, makes for a compelling form of entertainment, and continues to have an important place in the world today.

First off, what is opera? Simply put, opera is a tale told through words and music (“What is opera” 1). Opera is a form of storytelling combining acting, dancing, and singing to deliver the maximum emotional blow to the audience. For this reason, operas tend to have touching and often outlandish story-lines. The two main types of operas are the serious opera and comic opera. A serious opera or opera seria has a story rooted in the tales of heroes and the gods, an example being *Siegfried*. Comic opera or opera buffa is a lighter fare, usually with happy resolutions (Estrella 2). One of my personal favorites, *the Magic Flute* is an example of this. Even though this opera is considered a playful romp and the tears in the audience’s eyes come mainly from laughter rather than sorrow, *The Magic Flute* does a splendid job of melding grief with joy. As the heroine, Pamina, contemplates killing herself, believing wrongly, her Tamino no longer loves her, the audience cannot help but pity the poor girl. A few arias later, the viewers’ sides are splitting with laughter as they observe the hilarious encounter between Papageno and his dear Papagena. It is this artful balance that draws me to this particular opera.

Though it is easy to confuse operas with musicals, a similar art form also involving music and acting, there are notable differences. Typically, operas do not have spoken dialogue, though there are exceptions to this rule. Musicals generally advance the plot through the use of spoken dialogue, just straight talking. In opera, the plotlines of the story are told through recitative, a form of singing sometimes accompanied by the harpsichord. The recitative is broken by the arias, which are songs that bring the action to a standstill to delve into a character’s emotions and innermost thoughts. Another difference between the genre of opera and the musical is the singers themselves. In operas, the singers are not amplified by microphones and must rely on the power of their own voices to carry the story (wno.org). The crucial difference, however, between a musical and an opera is what *drives* the story. According to Anthony Tommasini, a writer for the *New York Times*, “Both genres seek to combine words and music in dynamic, felicitous and, to invoke that all-purpose term, artistic ways. But in opera, music is the driving force; in musical theater, words come first” (3). Tommasini speaks the truth. For me, the music in opera is far more important than the actual words of the characters. In reality, I only pay half-attention to the often sappy words exchanged between the characters. However, the music itself delves into the characters’ emotions, emotions that are rarely well-expressed in words.

As an opera-goer, though knowing the basic storyline of the opera has enhanced my overall experience, I have enjoyed operas sung in foreign languages because of the passion embedded into every note. An opera does not have to have a convincing story; it just has to touch the heart. For example, when listening to the aria from the opera *Don Giovanni* in which the title character attempts to seduce the maid, Zerlina, I do not need to know exactly what words the couple is singing. Through the human instrument, the voice, I sense the charisma of the man, and the

reluctance of his victim.

Today, an art form that is over four-hundred years continues to inspire and entertain millions of people, young and old. Even outside the stage, opera asserts its presence. Countless times a commercial has come across my T.V. screen, opera music blaring in the background. What is more amusing than hearing the most famous aria from *Pagliacci*, an opera of betrayal, to the backdrop of a pizza commercial? Movies often feature opera music. Most surprising to me was hearing the “Habanera” from *Carmen* in the children’s movie *Up*. Not that I was looking for opera music of course! Why is this fact surprising? Many older opera-goers complain that younger audiences are not properly exposed to opera or that opera is a dying art. Yet, this example demonstrates that even today, children are being presented to opera. However, opera’s influence is not limited to television and movies alone. Even musicals commonly borrow elements from opera. In the case of *The Phantom of the Opera*, this is most apparent. A young *opera* singer is helped to fame by a ghostly mentor. Today, through the use of supertitles and CDs, operas have become much more accessible to audiences everywhere.

Though critics of opera may lambast it for its outrageous stories and protracted performances, for me, opera is a way to grasp intense emotions shared by all human beings. Opera has opened my eyes to a whole, new world of music that bridges the gap between mind and soul. For me, one of the most powerful operas that drew my emotions was *Otello*. (Yes, this is the opera form of Shakespeare’s *Othello*). Witnessing for myself Otello’s rage and Desdemona’s steadfast love and vulnerability awakened in me an almost desperate longing to make all right again. But like any theater-goer, I could only watch helplessly as Otello’s jealousy destroyed all hope for happiness. You may wonder how I became hopelessly immersed in the world of opera. Reader be warned, all it took for me to become obsessed were a few opera CDs and librettos to take the dive into the opera world! In short, opera is more than just fat ladies singing. It is one of the highest musical expressions. Still, the “fat ladies” have their roles. As they say, “It ain’t over till the fat lady sings!”

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## Analysis of Robert Frost's "Birches" and William Butler Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium"

On the surface, the poems "Birches" by Robert Frost and "Sailing to Byzantium" may not appear similar. Frost, in his poem, describes seeing a multitude of birch trees bent by an ice storm while Yeats describes feeling out of place as an old man in a country for the young. However, though Frost and Yeats describe different circumstances in their poems, both these circumstances reveal the speakers' dissatisfaction with the worlds they inhabit. Both "Birches" and "Sailing to Byzantium" focus on the theme of escaping the world and finding a place to belong. The speakers of the poems each arrive at different conclusions about how to accomplish these goals. The speaker of "Birches" decides to make his escape through nature by becoming a "swinger of birches," whereas the speaker of "Sailing to Byzantium" finds his solace through becoming one with the art of Byzantium.

In both "Birches" and "Sailing to Byzantium," the speakers of the poems are not entirely content with the reality in which they live. Upon seeing birches bent "from left to right," the speaker of Frost's poem says, "I like to think some boy's been swinging them" (1,3). However, he acknowledges that what he imagines is not really the case. "But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay/As ice-storms do" (Frost 4,5). Later on in the poem, he also suggests his dissatisfaction when he speaks of being "weary of considerations" and seeing life as "too much like a pathless wood" (Frost 43-44). The simile of life as "like a pathless wood" especially highlights the speaker's feeling of being lost, that his life has neither purpose nor direction (Frost 44). The speaker of "Sailing to Byzantium" also laments his discontent. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker says of the place he has left for Byzantium, "That is no country for old men" (Yeats 1). He goes on to describe the country he has left as evanescent and superficial "Whatever is begotten, born, and dies" (Yeats 6). In addition, the country he has left shows no deference toward what is old or long-lasting. "Caught in that sensual music all neglect/ Monuments of unageing intellect" (Yeats 7-8). The connotation of the word "sensual" from this line is especially important (Yeats 7). Sensual often implies the idea of something being gratifying to the body, especially sexually. This stands out in sharp contrast to anything that is intended to be enjoyed intellectually. The speaker in this poem uses juxtaposition to better contrast the "sensual music" with the "Monuments of unageing intellect" (Yeats 7-8). By doing this, he indicates that intellectual pursuits are of great importance to him, though they are disregarded by the youth of his country.

In order to escape their dissatisfaction with the world, the speakers in both poems draw upon the past for inspiration. The speaker in "Birches" decides in favor of the boy bending the birches over the ice storms bending them, then goes on to detail the process by which the birches are bowed by the boy. In his description, he reveals the care the boy must take to accomplish his task. When the boy ascends the tree, he must do it "With the same pains you use to fill a cup/Up to the brim, and even above the brim (Frost 37-38). Later, the speaker tells the reader how he knows what the boy must do to bend the trees to his will. "So was I once myself a swinger of branches/And so I dream of going back to be (Frost 41-42). Evidently, the speaker enjoyed his personal experience bending birches as a pastime, despite all the care it took. He enjoys it enough to want to return to doing it again. Unlike the speaker in "Birches," the speaker in "Sailing to Byzantium" does not rely on his own personal experience for inspiration. Instead, when he travels to Byzantium, he looks to the people he admires to help him overcome his dissatisfaction, not in the world but in himself. He says:

O sages, standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul. (Yeats 17-20)

The speaker of Yeats's poems reaches out to those who have gone before him, who are preserved and live through art. They are a part of the "Monuments of unaging intellect" that the youth in the country the speaker came from did not appreciate or seek to preserve (Yeats 8). Knowing he is mortal and tied to "a dying animal," the speaker seeks the aid of those he sees as immortal, who are in and can take him into "the artifice of eternity" (Yeats 22, 24).

Throughout the course of the two poems, the speakers' searches for where they belong are resolved, and the speakers come to realize that they do have a place in the world after all and cannot leave it wholly behind, even if the world is not all they want it to be. The speaker in "Birches" declares he wants to leave the world for a time, but with full intentions of returning. He decides he wants to "to go by climbing a birch tree...*Toward* heaven, till the tree could bear no more" (Frost 54, 56). Then, he would fall down to earth again and the process would repeat. In short, though the speaker can become weary of the world in which he lives, he wants to keep his connection to it. In a way, the speaker is like the tree he climbs. The tree's branches stretch above the earth, but its roots keep it fixed to the ground below. For the speaker in "Sailing to Byzantium," the speaker's place is not in the natural world but rather in the material world, the world of art. Once he perishes, he wishes to be made out "Of hammered gold and gold enameling" (Yeats 28). Once made out of gold, he would sing "To keep a drowsy Emperor awake" or "Of what is past, or passing, or to come" (Yeats 29, 32). The speaker perhaps desires to be made out of gold, in particular, because it is beautiful, long-lasting, and very valuable. Earlier in the poem, he bemoaned the fact that the youth of his country see old men as nothing more than "A tattered coat upon a stick" (Yeats 10). By being made of gold, he would be considered worthy no matter how old he was. In fact, his value would increase with age. And in contrast to the "sensual music" mentioned earlier in the poem, the speaker's song would have a more scholarly purpose (Yeats 7). It would impart knowledge to others or serve to rouse an Emperor, perhaps from a sleep of ignorance.

Although the two speakers experience different trials in their lives and arrive at different conclusions for finding solace from the cares of the world, the goal of their search is the same. Both physically and spiritually hope to leave behind the world they thought they knew, one by ascending a birch tree, the other by sailing to Byzantium and immersing himself in the artwork there. And despite all the headaches of the world they inhabit, neither speaker wishes to depart from the world for good. For as the speaker in "Birches" says, "Earth's the right place for love" (Frost 52). It is up to the two speakers to decide what love means to them in their lives.

## **Death By Waterfall (Almost)**

It was not a waterfall, as one may have assumed from the title, which nearly wiped out my family. The waterfall itself was harmless. However, the trip to view the waterfall was the virtual walk of death. Why, you may ask, did my family put themselves in such peril? The blame can be placed on the shoulders of my dear mother. We were new to California and had spent many a weekend exploring various parts of this beautiful and fascinating state. My mother has always been a bit of an adventurer and loves to see and try new things. The waterfall had been mentioned in an article in the paper. The location was also close. It was not far from the town of Julian, a place we had traveled to many times, and was hidden among the rugged mountains that make up much of this area. My father, mother, brother, and I eagerly jumped into the car and headed towards this new and fascinating exploration. Little did we realize what we were truly in for on this casual journey!

We arrived at the park in ebullient spirits. We had never seen a waterfall before so this was truly a treat. The sky was blue and the sun shone brightly. It was early morning and the air was still crisp. The mountains lay before us and the path down the mountain was steep, yet easily maneuverable. As we began the trek down, it never occurred to any of us that eventually we would have to come up this same steep path. Our first missed clue.

Our spirits were high and the views around us were stunning. Far below us, one could see the river as it snaked its way through the valley. Mom took hundreds of pictures as we walked. Along the way we met many fellow "explorers". The exhaustion and weariness showed plainly on their faces. Many travelers were huddled in small groups along the cliffs, sitting or laying in the dirt. One woman was being half carried up the path while another was throwing up into the brush. These "clues" were also overlooked by my excited and foolhardy mother.

The day became much warmer. This was to be expected when you were in the desert. My brother and I asked repeatedly if we would ever arrive at the bottom of this endless path. Many times my parents would stop hikers going up to ask if the waterfall was close. We heard over and over that it was just a little further. My mom echoed the travelers' words. "Just a little longer!" She called, after another hour elapsed with no waterfall in sight. Hours had passed by this time and my family had considered turning around more than once, but we pressed on.

We finally reached the valley, and flat ground. After walking for another half hour, we reached the waterfall at last. It was breathtaking. It was nestled among the large rocks and trees that stood towering above us. It cascaded down from high bluffs into a small pool of water, which was perfect for swimming. Much to our surprise, the area was filled with people. There had to be at least 100 fellow travelers, many of them college age. My mother said the atmosphere felt like a college fraternity party, which somewhat tarnished the moment. We found a place to picnic, and then Jack and I threw ourselves into the cold refreshing pool of water. My parents had failed to bring bathing suits so they were unable to partake of this activity.

Sadly, it was time to leave this small paradise and head back. The temperature was now over 100 degrees and the sun beat down upon our faces. The flat ground ended, and towering above us was the mountain that we would be forced to climb to reach our car. What little merriment that was left in our bodies from the waterfall quickly evaporated. With every step, the sun seemed more intense, and the path steeper. We consider ourselves a fairly athletic family, but the mountain had us beat. My mother, the instigator of this fun and carefree hike, was the first to become sick. Our water supply was used up and she was dizzy and nauseous. Like many hikers before us, we stopped often and huddled against the cliffs, attempting to find even the hint of

shade from this evil and unyielding sun. At one point, my mom threw her body on the ground and refused to go a step further. Crying, she begged Dad to call a helicopter and rescue her. Dad encouraged her to go on. We walked for a few minutes, stopped. We walked a few minutes more and stopped. In this slow and painful way, we progressed up the path of this beast of death which wound around and around the mountain. Three hours later, we could just glimpse the makeshift parking lot and what appeared to be our black car. "We're almost there!" I rasped, my voice barely a whisper. Painfully, we scaled the last few feet of the mountain path. Looking upwards, we spied our car in the distance, and with the last of our strength, attempted to speed up our barely moving legs. With one last glance behind us as a reminder of what we had just conquered, we made the last turn around the top of mountain and almost crawled to the car. As we reached the car and blasted the air, we heaved a sigh of relief. Amazingly enough, we had survived the waterfall!

We can laugh now at this traumatic event in our lives. My mother has even joked that we should go back again when the weather is cold. Even now, when we have to do something undesirable, we call it a "waterfall experience". I myself have wondered many a time how some of the people we met at the waterfall could ever have made it up that steep mountain. We are no triathletes by any means, but we really thought we could handle this hike. I learned a very important lesson that day. Be wary of any day trips your mother suggests that involve walking, mountains, deserts, or ... waterfalls!

## Across the Lake NOVEL EXCERPT

### Prologue:

Once upon a time, there was a castle. It was nestled on a small island and constructed on the pale, smooth cliffs overlooking a lake. The lake remains today, still a clear sapphire and as endlessly deep, Sapphire Lake it's called. But the castle, all that's left of it is a crumbling pile of ruins--tired, beaten walls tottering among the rocks. There was a king once, so the legends say, more sorcerer than man. At his side, he kept his most cherished possessions--his two sons. They called the castle overlooking the lake their home, until one fateful day.

The king had a weakness; he would do anything in his power to protect his sons from the dangers of the outside world. What could he do but shelter them away on the island, barely letting them catch a glimpse at the land across the lake? They were good sons, obedient, understanding, knowing their father meant well. Yet, what is a father's command compared to the tantalizing wonders that lay just a boat ride away?

No one quite knows what happened next. Two boys rode across the dazzling blue waters. One returned, shaking and utterly incoherent, muttering about something dark and dreadful, reeking with the stench of evil. The king had to act fast. "There is a power." He told his remaining son. "If you wield it, it can protect you from a similar fate." In a hushed voice, he whispered its location. "Go to it." He informed him. "Ignore everything else. I will hold the evil at bay."

When the boy returned, shambles were left of his home. The towers had tumbled to the earth and lay strewn in crumbled heaps. The gardens were crushed and dead. There was no one left; the area was deadly silent. He took one look at the sunken structure, flattened like dough, and screamed. Even today, people say the howl of the wind, the screech of an eagle, are really the prince's agonized screams. Because the prince's spirit remains among the wreckage, no one sets foot on the island.

### Chapter 1. The Silverstreams

She didn't like "the Boy" as she distastefully referred to him as. But really, this was no secret. Since her arrival about six years ago in the Silverstreams' home, Martha had treated Rafael with nothing but contempt. Her glances were hostile. Her shrill voice, accusatory. Martha was always wary as though expecting him to attack at any given moment. Yet, she was the one who lashed out with her fiery tongue and sullied his good name, even though she blatantly refused to use it. Soon enough though, Rafael would not have to put up with her any longer, but this thought was not exactly cheering.

Tom and Martha were busy "discussing things" in the living room of the Silverstreams' summer lake house that evening. Rafael crept down the stairs, placing each foot down with the care of experience while the rest of him hugged the rails. Pausing on the second stair, he crouched down, craning his ears to listen. As usual, they were speaking about him. Though he knew exactly what the subject pertained to, Rafael felt heat burning his cheeks.

"Have you prepared the paperwork?" Martha demanded, crossing her arms as she spoke. She stood glaring down at her husband who sat seated in his favorite chair. Tom rubbed the stubble sprouting from his chin and answered the affirmative.

"Yes. In four weeks, he'll be as good as gone."

"It's about time the boy went away." Martha continued.

"What is he, sixteen, now?"

"Almost seventeen." Tom said.

“Plenty old enough for boarding school.” Martha said. “My parents sent me and my siblings away at the age of twelve. Look how well we turned out.”

At this Rafael snorted, betraying his hiding spot. Martha strutted toward the stairs, her beautiful face darkening.

“Come into the living room if you so badly want to eavesdrop.” She ordered, turning her back on him, and returning to the living room. Rafael reluctantly followed, avoiding his father’s disapproving face. Martha took a seat on the sofa across from where Rafael stood.

“Sit.” She ordered, jabbing a slender finger at the chair behind him.

“I’d rather stand.” Rafael said coolly, remaining where he was.

“Listen to your mother.” Tom growled, making as if to rise.

“She’s not my mother.” Rafael answered evenly, but he plopped onto the chair anyway.

Throwing a furtive glance Martha’s way, Tom cleared his throat. “Your mother and I have been talking...”

“I know.” Rafael said softly.

“And we’ve come to a decision.” Tom continued. “We’ve found a great boarding school for you, Borlath Academy, a place with everything you could possibly need. It’s up about 2,000 miles from here, smack dab in the heart of the city. Naturally, because of the distance, we’d be unable to bring you back often for visits.”

“Naturally.” Rafael echoed dismally, knowing that was the whole point.

“But,” Tom continued in an upbeat tone. “You’ll learn a valuable lesson—*independence*. And which is more, you’ll be with others just like you, *special* people.”

“You mean mentally disturbed.” Rafael corrected coldly.

“No reason to sound so ungrateful.” Martha hissed. “We’ve both cared for you for six years now.”

“Cared? I didn’t know you cared.” Rafael said. His father threw him an annoyed look.

“Despite all we’ve done for you.” Martha continued, “You’ve remained totally recalcitrant and much too headstrong. Borlath Academy will teach you respect.”

“And you are in sore need of help.” His father continued. “If we didn’t keep an eye on you, who knows what would happen to Daniel? We’d likely find him dead in his sleep.”

Rafael shot out of his seat. Of all the insults thrown his way, never had they stung like this.

“You know I would never harm, Danny.” He growled, his hands balling into fists and his chest pumping up and down. “Rather, I’d be afraid for anyone trying to harm him, after what I’d do to them.”

“You’re a bad influence on him.” Martha said flatly. “Some separation is good.”

“*Some* separation?!” Rafael screamed with laughter, even as a part of him withered inside. “I’ll never see him again; you’ll see to that. If you want to get rid of me so bad, why don’t you just throw me in the lake? I’m sure it’s a much cheaper solution!”

“What’s happening?” A young boy asked sleepily. They all turned to see the tiny form of Danny on the stairs, rubbing his eyes to stay awake.

“Nothing sweetie.” Martha said, whirling past Rafael and scooping her precious boy up in her arms.

“It’s past your bedtime, sport.” Tom said affectionately. “If you want to get up bright and early and swim, you’d better get some rest.”

“Not sleepy.” Danny protested, his mouth gaping open in a yawn. Martha chuckled and carried him up, humming to herself. Tom and Rafael watched them go.

“Listen boy,” He said gruffly. “If you care anything for Danny, you’ll do what’s best for him.”



You need to go away. It's what's right. You're scaring him, all of us, with your nightly...fits."

"They're not fits." Rafael retorted wearily. "Two nights ago, I really saw something. A shadow..."

"No more!" Tom interrupted. "You're not in your right mind, never were. Should have known that when you first came crawling to my doorstep."

Martha popped her head from the balcony of the stairs, looking rather irate.

"Says he won't go to bed unless you tell him a story." She informed Rafael. "Get on up here."

"Of course, since you asked so nicely." He replied, making his way upstairs. However, there was a trace of a smile upon his lips.

Danny lay inside the covers of his bed; his head propped up by two fluffy pillows. His face lit up when he caught sight of his step-brother.

"Raf!" He cried eagerly, sleep banished instantly from his thoughts.

"Hey, Dan." Rafael said, sitting beside his bed. The little boy's smile faded to a frown as a serious thought struck him.

"You're not going away, are you? I heard Mommy and Daddy talking...please don't leave." His blue eyes brimmed with tears.

"Shh. It's all right." Rafael said, planting a kiss on his forehead and ruffling the boy's hair. "It's nothing you need to worry about yet. We've got a whole month left together." Danny stuck his lip out in a pout.

"I won't let you leave." He decided finally. "Not ever!" Rafael chuckled at this, though his heart was shattering almost as though his parents had smashed it with a sledgehammer.

"Don't worry, Danny, I'll think of something." But he was out of ideas.

"I believe I came here to deliver a bedtime story." Rafael reminded. Danny nodded eagerly, jumping up and down.

"Yes! I want a story! Tell me a good one, Raf. About the two princes and how they helped the old lady who was really a Queen. And she helped them find the cavern of riches."

"You know that story!" Rafael teased. "Backwards and forwards."

"Again! Tell me again, *please!*"

"All right." He consented with an enigmatic smile. "But you'll go to bed then, ok?"

"Ok." Danny said, curling back into the covers. In a low, gentle voice, Rafael began:

"The king was gone for a fortnight, leaving the kingdom in the hands of his trusted sons. One night, a terrible storm raged. The wind moaned through the trees, forcing them to quake with terror. The lake was as black as a cauldron and bubbling like boiling water. Rain crashed onto the ground. No soul dared venture into that merciless night. Safe inside the castle, the two princes admired the majesty of storm from their window. The youngest was the bolder one and suggested they could better appreciate the storm from its kingdom outdoors. The oldest however, convinced him the beauty could be better taken in from a drier standpoint. While wondering at the gale, they suddenly heard a faint knock upon the door and shrill voice call out, "Your majesties, I beg you, let a poor woman in." The princes sprang immediately to action. The oldest tore the door open wide and the younger one dashed for a blanket and hot tea. They saw to it that a fire was started and the old woman, creaking joints, sopping clothes, and all, was seated in the most comfortable chair before the fire.

When she had warmed herself until she was toasty and the feeling had returned to her numb toes, the old woman thanked the two princes profusely.

"What reward can I offer such kind gentlemen?" She asked, a spark flaring in her impish

eyes.

"No reward is necessary." The oldest assured her quickly. The youngest added,

"We are grateful for your company, and if we have made you comfortable, then that is reward enough."

Suddenly, the old woman rose and her wrinkled form melted before them into one of youth and beauty. Her silver strands turned to black, silken tresses and her gray eyes to ones of lavender. Before them stood La Reina de las Hadas, the Fairy Queen, and they reverently knelt.

"For you compassion." She began, in a voice as sweet as honeysuckle. "I will lead you to the cavern of riches, just on the edge of this island. No one but me knows what treasures this grotto holds."

Rafael snuck a glance Danny's way and was pleased to see he had fallen fast asleep. Kissing him good night, he whispered, "I hope your dreams are as rich with wonders of the imagination. Sleep well." He tiptoed from the room, shutting the door carefully behind him.

In the hallway, he came face to face with his grandmother, Abuelita. His grandmother as always smelled of rich cinnamon and her long black hair had been brushed to silkiness. Though she had an aptitude for comprehending many languages, speaking them came much more difficult for her, so she often resorted to snatches of Spanish, her native language, along with her limited English. Abuelita studied Rafael thoughtfully, before asking in broken English, "Tonight shadows come?" Rafael shrugged uneasily.

"*No sé*. I don't know. *Es posible*."

"Ah." His grandmother said, gripping her cane tighter, concern written upon her wrinkled brow. "Careful. Watch your *hermano*. Danger for Danny."

"I will." He promised, standing straighter as she hugged him. "I won't let them take him, not now, not ever."

"*Pero vas a la escuela*." She reminded. "*Está muy lejos de aquí*."

"I know the boarding school is far from him." Rafael sighed. "And I have no idea what to do about it, but I can't leave him alone, you know that." She nodded, pulling away from him.

"You *loco*, they think."

"Well, I probably am insane." Rafael admitted, "Can't say I blame Martha, or my dad for believing that. I wish, Abuelita, I wish my mother were still alive. She'd understand, I know she would. My mom would take my side; she'd believe me." Abuelita sighed and slowly shook her head.

"Tu madre es un ángel, an angel." Blinking back tears, she ordered, "To bed, Rafael. God be with you."

Planting a good night kiss on her weathered cheek, Rafael went to his bedroom and plopped into bed. As he lay there, his thoughts tossing in his mind like a tempestuous sea, he drifted in and out of sleep like ocean waves upon the shore. He was not a deep sleeper, never had been, much to the detriment of his own well-being. Most nights, he lay shrouded in a blanket of silence. Sometimes, he would peer out the window and see the moon reflecting upon the lake like some giant pearl caught in a silver-black web. At times, he heard the faint but steady drone of crickets, just as alert as he was. Occasionally, his thoughts would turn to his mother, gone a little over six years. But still, her death was fresh in his mind. He remembered her arms about him one last night, a final kiss and caress, and then...darkness. Her shrieking figure had been swallowed in thick shadow that he had fought frantically to extricate himself from.

"Run." She had told him. "Your life depends on it."

His mother had pressed a shining, silvery-blue amulet shaped like a teardrop into his hand.

Clenching his fist, he snuffed its glow and had looked helplessly up into his mother's eyes.

"Remember me." She pleaded, kissing his cheek. "Rafael, may God be with you!"

Her last words, they burned like angry wounds carved into his memory. Even now, the thought of her threatened to overwhelm him, and he shifted to his side, breathing heavily. No one could see his tears, so why was he afraid to cry? Perhaps, he too believed in the illusion he had fashioned for himself and used throughout the years. He was brave, nothing fazed him. He was strong; he could stand against anyone, anything. Let them smash him to smithereens with ugly words of loathing. Let them tear out his heart. He would remain detached.

Eventually, he did fall into an uneasy sleep. But as always, it was short-lived.

## Chapter 2. Shadows

With a jolt, he awoke. Something was amiss. He shot out of bed, scanning the dark of his bedroom with a keen pair of eyes. Nothing. Yet, an eerie feeling slithered down his spine and he shuddered.

"Imagining things again." He muttered reprovingly to himself, but part of him knew he was not. Making his way out down the hall, he glanced toward his parents' room. His father's snore assured him he was asleep, and probably Martha too. Still, he continued on tiptoe toward Danny's room. Just when he had begun to convince himself that the peculiar sensation inside himself had subsided, he heard what he least wanted-- a thump.

Rafael darted into Danny's room. His heart stuck in his throat. He spun around, seizing hold of his step-brother's t-ball bat.

"Show yourself." He demanded, hoping he appeared braver than he felt. In response, a low chorus of laughter echoed through the room. Rafael gasped as something cold and clammy brushed by him. He could almost picture, icy claws squeezing his neck. Pointing his bat outwards, he growled,

"Afraid to show yourselves, huh? Bunch of cowards!"

"Cowards?" A whispery voice hissed. "I think not." Rafael swallowed a scream as four beings clothed in shadow emerged from the walls. They glided toward him, their cloaks not even touching the floor.

"Stand back." He snarled, lifting the bat. "I'm not afraid to hit."

## Swan Song

The music died the day Cecilia did. For she had been the master of melodies, a composer to rival both Vivaldi and Bach. In her mind had sounded a thousand scores. Notes waltzed across the parchment as she laid them down with trembling fingers. She was known simply as the Swan for her music never failed to carry her audience away on the wings of their imagination. The notes were pure, simple, and intricate, bitter and sweet.

*The Swan will fly no more. The Swan will fly no more. The song is dead.* Odette thought, though the others tried to convince her otherwise. “Your grandmother’s soaring higher than ever before.” Her mother said through eyes glistening with pearly tears. “At least now she composes for a celestial audience, someone worthy of her talent.”

Odette did not linger long at the funeral. She left behind the white flowers and weeping, the dying echo of voices and the sympathetic faces and the well-meaning wishes. She could not stay. Dashing out of doors to face the cruel sun scorching her face with scornful eyes, she caught the first cab home. The car halted before a two-story home hidden behind a curtain of ivy. Only little specks of yellow could be glimpsed through the interwoven strands of green.

Odette left the cab and let herself in the house, biting her lip to keep the tears from spilling across her cheeks. The room was much as she remembered. Cozy upholstered chairs were arranged in a circle around a stone fireplace on one end of the room. On the other end, a grand piano, shiny black with spotless keys, winked in the golden sunlight. The sunlight came through French doors that led out into a garden of peonies and lilies.

Odette took a moment to collect herself and neared the piano. An envelope lay atop it. Surprised, she sucked in a quick breath. Should she open it? Her fingers trembled as she plucked the cream-white envelope up. Her heart skipped a beat. On the front of the envelope, in the Swan’s freely beautiful cursive was written *Odette*.  
*Open it!* Her heart commanded. She did.

*Odette*, it read.

*I write to you with a full yet heavy heart. I am ready for Death; he has waited patiently for me long enough. Yet, I know you are not ready for me to go. You never liked goodbyes or endings. If you had your way, a song would never end. You would play it endlessly until another tune caught your fancy. Then the process would begin all over again. I know this song has come to an end, but there is another, just waiting for you to discover it. I was working on a final composition before I died, and I finished just in time to give it to you. Look in the piano bench. This song is yours.*

She pressed the letter to her heart, trying to fight back her tears. Then she laid the letter aside and opened the piano bench. Resting inside the velvet folds was a score. Odette took it in her hands.

*Flight of the Swan for the Clarinet.* Was the title. Odette found a music stand and her grandmother’s battered clarinet case in a nearby closet. She set the score on the stand before the French doors, assembled the clarinet, and stood at the ready behind it. And then she began.

The music started gradually, in a lower register, like a distant echo. Then, like the first pinprick of light at dawn, it rose, its sound splashing the world around with a welcoming joyfulness that refused to ever perish. It soared higher than a bird winging its way through the world. It was clearer than a tear-drop. It was smoother than the water of the tide pools Odette and Grandmother Cecilia had dipped their fingers into. The melody flowed as freely as a river, was

as powerful as the ocean waves, roared to a crescendo.

Tears trickled down Odette's cheeks, momentarily blurring her vision, but she played on, her fingers caressing the old silver keys. Her body and the clarinet's moved in time. They moved and breathed together. They were one. And, as the last note descended into the room, and the swan landed gracefully and settled down to rest, Odette saw her grandmother behind the glass door, more clearly than ever. She saw her as she always had: her snowy hair pulled back in a long braid, her pale blue eyes smiling, her wrinkled hands softer than worn leather raised like a conductor's giving the final cue.

Odette met her grandmother's smile through her tears, and let the music's echo die. She was ready now. The song was done. One life had finished. Another would take its place. The music would start anew; it would never truly die. The Swan would always fly.

"Goodbye grandmother." Odette said.

The Swan smiled and turned away.

"Goodbye."

## **Nature's Own: A Pentalogy of Poetry**

### **Seasons' Call**

Listen! The birds call  
I listen, my book on my lap  
A breeze whistles through, kidnapping the leaves  
It is fall and the trees  
Stand bare and exposed  
A carpet of leaves underneath  
I hear the water lap  
Against smooth rocks, completely exposed  
I do not think of the leaves  
Or the chores or tasks that call  
Reaching overhead are the trees  
Small, defenseless, I sit underneath  
In California, there were only palm trees  
The yards had no cover, totally exposed  
The sun shone bright, no shade to sit underneath  
Despite the work, I missed the leaves  
Idly with my hands on my lap  
I longed for Missouri, couldn't resist its call  
In Missouri, I will be exposed  
To all seasons; I have a blanket draped on my lap  
When it gets colder and the snow covers the trees  
The hard dead ground will be hidden underneath  
Shivering, with my hands to the fire exposed  
I await the spring and the return of the bird's call  
My cat nestled on my lap  
Icicles glisten on the trees  
The softness of snow, Winter's silent call  
Fall is the dance of the leaves  
My covers so warm, I bury myself underneath  
Only my face remaining cold and exposed  
Buds bloom, the return of the leaves  
Green jeweled crowns perched atop the trees  
The stream's steady lap  
I smile, can't hide the delight underneath  
Robin's chirping, Spring's call  
They fly hither and thither, to every eye exposed  
My feet are exposed, I run through the trees No books on my lap, I answer the call  
The green leaves of the flowers that lay underneath

### **Time Slips Through Our Fingers**

Time slips through our fingers  
Like golden grains of sand  
But we do not cling to what has come and gone

We let it go  
And open our hands

We do not chase the tide  
We let it come to us  
Though this may take a time  
It comes eventually  
There's an element of trust

The ocean comes and brushes our feet  
And washes the sand away  
But yet it leaves behind some footprints  
The signs of our presence  
To be seen for other days

Leave nothing but footprints  
Take only memories  
But I take the sky, some shells, the sea

We built a sandcastle on the beach  
And watched it sink into the ocean  
Our own Atlantis  
We were not sorry to see it go  
We let it slip away

Time slips through our fingers  
But let us be content  
To have lived each waking moment  
On our golden shore  
Whose worth we cannot fathom  
Now that is time well-spent.

### **Back In Time**

I gulp down the sweet, golden cider  
That burns my throat  
For that crispy, nippy season, I yearn  
Fall

I am in a pumpkin patch in my mind's eye  
All pumpkins like the buds of newly formed suns  
Which one should I choose?  
And then it dawns on me  
I feel the pumpkin's smooth surface  
Lay my hands across the ridges  
Bridges to my childhood

Remember when the pumpkins were bigger than me?  
Now I carry them in my strong arms

With the strength of a woman  
If I split the orange skin  
Can I go back in time?  
Recover what is lost?  
Alas, I must be content with the seeds of my memory  
Memories carved into my mind  
That shine like jack-o-lanterns

### **Snow Flurry**

Skitter-scatter to the ground  
Snow is falling, down, down, down  
    Flittering flurries ride the air  
Alighting on a ground so bare  
    Then gone, so fickle  
Then here again  
Will this dawdling ever end?  
    I wait, a prayer in my heart  
For with snow, my school won't start  
    Deceptive, devilish flakes  
You offer a promise half-baked!  
    Yet still I wait  
Perhaps it won't be long  
For you to prove me wrong  
And I can go and skate!

### **Bolder**

    Hello cold and beautiful world,  
I will thrive in thee,  
Though thou may do all thy can,  
To push me to the chill, hard ground.

    Hello blistered, barren earth,  
I will thrive in thee,  
Though sand storms sting my eyes,  
Drown out the lullabies,  
I will survive in thee,  
Though I may never rest.

    Farwell, land of strangers,  
I leave the shore, uncertain, unsure,  
But awake,  
I open my arms to the elements,  
I am at their mercy,  
I smile into the wind,  
While I linger in the open door.



Let the ship cast off,  
Into waters unknown,  
I will dance in the rain,  
Laugh in the sun,  
An adventure all my own.

I am clad in enthusiasm,  
My blood runs with dreams,  
That I know will come true,  
I am trembling from head to toe,  
Soon to take the stage,  
The audience waits,  
There's my cue,  
Let the adventure begin,  
I am ready tonight,  
The stars are spotlights on me,  
Good bye to the world I knew.  
Hello, impenetrable night.

I stand in the doorway,  
Nearly swept up by the wind,  
But I set myself like a boulder,  
I laugh  
It's colder than I remember,  
I shiver,  
So much colder,  
But I am bolder too.

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## **The Time I Failed**

### Emerging from the Nest

This disaster just didn't mesh with my life plan: go to a top-notch college known for creative writing, gain admission into a rock star graduate program, write some short stories that go nowhere just like all struggling authors do, and then stumble upon my big break where I produce a brilliant book series for teenagers that becomes wildly successful. J.K. Rowling, look out, because here I come! Those dreams burst into flames around me as I sat in the Vice Chancellor's office at Davidson University awaiting my parents' arrival to pick up their epic failure of a daughter.

"If you need any help with homesickness or you're having trouble adjusting, our resident advisors are trained counselors available to you at all times," advised one of the Duke TIP officials during orientation.

Those comforting words greeted my fellow Duke Tipsters and me as we stepped off the plane. In an effort to look cool and confident, I gave a big, exaggerated roll of the eyes and a loud and impressive snort. I scorned anyone who dared to look sad or depressed.

Upon entering my dorm room I met my roommate, Anna, from a remote town in Kentucky, who quickly informed me that I was the first Jew she had ever met. She stared with a disapproving gaze as I took packages of Oreos and Cheez-Its out of my duffel. In disgust, she hurled a bag of kale chips onto my bed.

I silently cried myself to sleep that first night. Surely, things would get better. Only they didn't. Consumed by homesickness, I could not focus on the assignments. I became a self-sabotaging mess spiraling out of control. My crying jags unnerved the students around me and disrupted classes.

On the 11 hour drive home in deafening silence, it became abundantly clear to me that genuine feelings cannot be wished away or covered up. I had never wanted to leave home and knew in my heart I wasn't ready. I was so busy thinking of my future, building a resume for college applications, and trying to impress people around me that I lost sight of who I was. Confidence, maturity, and independence cannot be faked. The harder I worked at pretending, the stronger my insecurities became until they ultimately engulfed me. Had I been completely candid from jumpstreet with my parents about the fact I desperately did not want to go away for the summer, perhaps we would have talked through my fears and taken steps to make me feel comfortable going. I would never know if I could have thrived at Duke TIP because I was too busy acting the part I thought I was expected to play. We will never be successful in achieving our goals in life if the pathway we take is disingenuous and conflicts with our values, how we feel, and what we believe. I was so preoccupied with satisfying other's expectations of me and following an artificial template for success that failure was guaranteed. I shouldn't have been too ashamed to reach out for help. Needing support systems doesn't mean you're weak. In fact, admitting you're scared is probably one of the most courageous things you can do. I suspect

everyone, child and adult, experiences times of self-doubt and an overwhelming sense of “I don’t think I can do this.” Stifling those emotions and refusing to acknowledge their validity only provides an opportunity for them to fester.

## The Real Huck Finn

### *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Time to “decide, forever, betwixt two things”*

Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* continues to generate controversy as a novel accused of perpetuating racial stereotypes, employing unwarranted racial slurs, and encouraging disrespect for African Americans and their suffering under the institution of slavery. In her essay, *Say It Ain’t So, Huck: Second Thoughts on Mark Twain’s “Masterpiece,”* Jane Smiley, argues “Twain really saw Jim as no more than Huck’s sidekick . . . and Twain and Huck use Jim because they really don’t care enough about his desire for freedom to let that desire change their plans” (Smiley, 357-358). This superficial evaluation of the novel overlooks the meaningful way in which Huck and Jim’s bond evolves throughout the novel to reveal a beautiful friendship between races. Jim functions as the catalyst for Huck’s growing awareness that the color of a person’s skin neither defines him nor provides justification for denying him humanity. By establishing Jim’s intrinsic goodness through Huck’s development as an independent thinker whose individuality prevails over conventional morality, Twain creates a powerful tale of how enlightenment triumphs over ignorance and cruelty.

Jane Smiley misjudges when she criticizes Mark Twain for “underwriting a very simplistic and evasive theory of what racism is” (Smiley, 357); a theory that she contends wrongly promotes feelings as a solution rather than action. Her analysis is flawed in that she fails to recognize that Huck’s feelings of love for Jim are so strong and overpowering that his conscience cannot compel him to act in violation of them. Twice in the novel, Huck wrestles with his “scorched” (110) conscience “stirring up hotter than ever” (111) as he struggles to determine whether or not to turn in Jim as a runaway slave in compliance with societal norms. Unable to escape the “pinch” (110) of his nagging inner voice, Huck self-interrogates:

What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say a single word? What did that poor old woman do to you, that you could treat her so mean? I got to feeling so mean and so miserable I most wished I was dead. (110)

As Huck’s guilty conscience mounts around the sin of helping Jim with his escape, it is offset by sympathy, affection, and friendship. After ultimately lying to two bounty hunters to save Jim, Huck confesses to himself:

I got aboard the raft, feeling bad and low, because I knowed very well I had done wrong, . . . then, I thought a minute, and says to myself, hold on, -- s’pose you’d a done right and give Jim up; would you felt better than what you do now? No, says I, I’d feel bad -- I’d feel just the same way I do now.

(113)

Much later in the book, Huck again grapples with his “grinding” (222) conscience when he discovers the duke and the king have sold Jim into slavery. After writing Miss Watson to reveal Jim’s whereabouts, Huck feels “good and all washed clean of sin for the first time in my life” (222). He acknowledges that “help[ing] a nigger get his freedom . . . was wicked, and low-down and ornery” (222). However, as Huck contemplates his decision to “do the right thing and the clean thing” (222) and betray Jim, he tears up the letter reflecting on his friendship with Jim:

and I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing . . . and I see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog . . . always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was . . . and then I says to myself, ‘All right, then, I’ll go to hell.’” (223)

By having Huck feel sinful, weak, and remorseful for protecting Jim and his freedom from slavery in direct violation of society’s moral code, Twain highlights the distortion of values and the unfathomable cruelty and insensitivity that constitute the foundation of the antebellum Southerners’ belief system. In this way, Twain effectively mocks the “morality” of the South by breathing life into Huck’s excruciating conflict between following inhumane moral standards and succumbing to brotherly love and compassion.

Moreover, contrary to Jane Smiley’s condemnation of Huck for merely “*feeling* positive toward Jim . . . instead of actually having to *act* in accordance with his feelings” (Smiley, 357), Huck does indeed take swift and concrete action -- he tears up the incriminating letter to Miss Watson and deliberately misleads the slave hunters in order to protect Jim. Smiley’s criticism of white Americans generally because they “think racism is a feeling . . . that can be rejected . . . when how they *feel* means very little to black Americans” (Smiley, 357) is misguided. Indeed it is the power of Huck’s natural feelings, which triumph over reason, that propel Huck to safeguard Jim and his freedom. Jim’s goodness “just seemed to kind of take the tuck all out of me,” (111) remarks Huck as he suppresses his conscience. On balance, all of the solid, objective reasons in Huck’s world support betraying Jim, including laws, societal traditions, and principles ingrained in Huck since birth. Despite the great weight of concrete reasons and environmental support for turning in Jim, it is Huck’s raw feelings that win out. Smiley’s analysis significantly underestimates the consequences and importance of feelings in the battle against racism.

Focusing on Jim’s love for Huck, Smiley contends that the novel insults black people. She argues that, despite Huck’s failure “to take Jim’s desire for freedom at all seriously . . . Jim [nevertheless] grows ever more affectionate” toward Huck (Smiley, 357). However, contrary to Smiley’s view that Jim’s feelings for Huck make him weak and subservient, it is Jim’s sophisticated ability to articulate this love and affection for Huck that accentuates Jim’s emotional depth. When Jim realizes that Huck has pranked him by making Jim think he only dreamed they were separated by fog, Jim professes:

When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin’ for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos’ broke bekase you wuz los’, en I didn’k’yer no mo’ what become er me en de raf’. En when I wake up en fine you back agin, all safe en soun’, de tears come en I could a got down on my knees en kiss’ yo’ foot I’s so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin ‘bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren’s en makes ‘em ashamed. (95)

Jim’s capacity to eloquently express his love for Huck, his unwavering feelings of devotion to their friendship, as well as the hurtfulness of Huck’s insensitive trick, sharply contrast with Huck’s incapacity to express his emotions to anyone other than the reader. Huck’s callous prank

highlights Jim's multidimensional personality and exposes his white counterpart's limitations.

Twain illustrates that it is Jim who is truly "free" to be himself and reveal his passions. It is Huck who is the slave, unable to liberate his feelings. Jim's emotional intelligence, warmth, and genuineness deeply touch Huck, who is compelled "to go and humble myself to a nigger - but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither" (95). In this moment, Huck learns from Jim to value and respect another's feelings. Raised by an abusive, drunken father, Huck first experiences adult love, selflessness, and nurturing from Jim, whom Huck discovered would go so far as to "stand my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me -- so I could go on sleeping" (223). At the end of the novel, Huck experiences Jim's heroism as Jim relinquishes his chance at freedom and risks recapture in order to help the doctor save Tom Sawyer who, ironically, Huck sees as just as bad as the rest of them. As the doctor and Jim save Tom's life, the doctor observes, "I never see a nigger that was a better nuss or faithfuller, and yet he was resking his freedom to do it" (289). Smiley's indictment of Twain for cultivating Jim's affection toward an allegedly undeserving Huck ignores the critical role of Jim's kindness and love as the driving force in Huck's moral development. She loses sight of the fact that Jim, a genuine and beloved hero, teaches Huck how to be a hero.

Those critics who accuse *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* of offenses such as "use of the word "nigger" that can never excuse or fully hide the deeper racism of the novel" (Smiley, 358) inaccurately characterize the primary message of the novel as promoting a particular philosophy about racism. A closer examination reveals that anti-racist ideas actually emerge as a by-product of Huck's moral enlightenment. The centrality of the novel is Huck's maturation from an oblivious boy to an independently thinking man who, through his loving friendship and protective alliance with Jim, comes to gradually reject the conventional morality of a society that regards black people as nothing more than property. Twain truly gives the reader a great American novel in which freethinking, compassion, and goodness are in conflict with well-established societal values that unify whites based on their inhumanity. Huck journeys from his "sivilized" life to "light[ing] out for the Territory ahead of the rest" (296) that embraces justice and equality. His changed character is authentic, not derived merely from an abolitionist creed, proving that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a great American novel.

## Queen Bee

Theft. Trespassing. Destruction of property. Intentional infliction of emotional distress. These are only a few of the criminal acts with which I could charge my little sister, Queen Bee Meredith. Although nearly three years younger than I, standing at only 5'1", and weighing a mere 80 pounds, Meredith can be a formidable enemy. Like the fastest animal on land, the cheetah, Meredith invades my room with unparalleled stealth and speed. Earrings are MIA, never to be seen dangling again. Nutella fingerprints appear on my favorite white jeans. The last remains of my mother's matzo ball soup, which we refer to as liquid gold, have suspiciously disappeared. I begin to sketch "Wanted" posters and hang them around the house.

Meredith, fulfilling her role as director and consummate manipulator of middle school students, is too busy with her flourishing social life to respond to my angry accusations. The typical endless parade of her friends streams into our house and the smell of a dozen bags of microwave popcorn soon engulfs me. The deafening giggling invariably leads them to break out messy makeup palettes and curling wands in our shared bathroom. I think to myself, "don't you have homework to do or a book to read? I hope you flunk your *Lord of the Flies* test tomorrow."

It wasn't until the last week of my freshman year that I realized how wrong I was about my sister. My elementary school is famous for its end-of-year awards assembly, where two coveted honors are bestowed. Overly involved parents begin gossiping about predicted recipients as early as junior kindergarten. In my narrow-mindedness, the only prize worth receiving was the academic honor awarded to me at graduation as valedictorian of the class. When I returned to the nurturing environment of my elementary school to attend Meredith's graduation awards assembly, I remember shifting in my seat with obnoxiously visible impatience. How dare her graduation impinge on my time preparing for tomorrow's biology final?

"It is my great pleasure to announce Meredith Goldberg as this year's recipient of the Rossman Citizenship Award," bellowed the headmistress, Mrs. Shipley.

Her words jolted me out of my deep meditations regarding a comparative analysis of mitosis and meiosis. I listened intently as Mrs. Shipley described the selection of my little sister for this prestigious honor. She described Meredith's congeniality, optimism, and genuineness.

"We are all better people for having known her," Mrs. Shipley explained.

In that moment, I began to slowly understand that I had wrongly labeled Meredith as superficial and frivolous. As I digested all the stories the headmistress recounted about my sister's magnetism and uplifting presence, I discovered that academic achievement was not the only meaningful yardstick. On the contrary, Meredith's natural skills in cultivating friendships and her uncanny ability to connect with people were just as important - if not more so - than rock-star test scores or a list of As on a report card. As we headed to Meredith's favorite Italian restaurant to celebrate with fettucine immersion, I committed myself to becoming less judgmental, more accepting, and increasingly open to appreciating our differences.

Meredith is gorgeous. Athletic. Class president. Students flock to her at lunchtime and battle to sit next to her and bask in her aura. My prescience suggests she'll surely be voted prom queen. I now understand that her magnetism is the product of her kindness and bottomless generosity of spirit. While I pour myself into my studies with hair in a disheveled ponytail and fuzzy Dr. Seuss slippers warming my feet, Meredith invests her time selecting a lip gloss shade matching tomorrow's runway-ready outfit. I now embrace our differences and learn from them. I take more time out from my studies and academic endeavors to socialize with friends. To listen. To cultivate relationships with people and collaborate. I even partnered up for Chemistry lab with

the Queen Bee of my own class. I know now that there are areas of sameness to be discovered, and that I can learn a great deal from her.



## The Road to God: A Journey of Uncertainty

In Cormac McCarthy's disturbing novel, *The Road*, the theme of religion and testing one's faith in God is thoroughly explored. The protagonists, a mutually loving and devoted father and son, confront cannibalistic barbarism in a post-apocalyptic world. As they scour for any remnants of food and struggle to make it through each day, their journey along the bleak road alternates between glimmers of hope ignited by God and plummets into desperation. They are guided by their belief in God despite their inability to remotely understand or accept God's ways. In a seemingly godless world replete with insurmountable devastation and unthinkable inhumanity, God still exists, and their enduring faith in God is essential to the father and son's survival.

During some of his most despairing moments, the father reveals his faith in God by vehemently expressing his anger toward God for subjecting him and his son to senseless, painful suffering and tragedy. When the father cannot control his debilitating, bloody cough and fears his impending death and the fate of his son, he turns to God in confrontation:

Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? He whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God. (11-12)

Rather than renouncing God during times of adversity, the father instead articulates to God his feelings of frustration, disappointment, and anger. In this way, McCarthy illustrates that belief in and respect for God does not require blind acceptance of God's plan. Harboring anger toward God and the "[b]arren, silent, godless" (4) universe that God permitted is not only consistent with the father's faith in God, but itself constitutes an act of faith. The father's challenging of God's will provides the spark for the father's continued quest to survive and his ongoing commitment to the moral goodness and spirituality embodied by his son. For the father, his son represents all that God has created in his image, and by protecting the boy, the father is also safeguarding the values of God. McCarthy further underscores this notion by contrasting the father's faith with the lack of faith exhibited by the mother. Rejecting the father's proclamation that "we are survivors" (55), the mother decides to commit suicide and explains:

You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I've taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot. Death is not a lover. Oh, yes he is . . . I am done with my own whorish heart and I have been for a long time . . . my only hope is for eternal nothingness. (56-57)

Survival, life, and hope are inextricably intertwined with faith in God, and the mother's abandonment of God and capitulation to nihilistic nothingness results in her embracing death and tragically ending her own life.

The little boy's unadulterated altruism serves as a foil to that of his father's selfishness and reveals that God's goodness lives within the little boy. Despite the father's repeated protestations that "we are the good guys," his commitment to a moral code is tempered by the overriding idea that helping others in even the smallest of ways will disadvantage him and his son. When they cross paths with a man struck by lightning, "as burntlooking as the country, his clothing scorched and black . . . one of his eyes burnt shut and his hair a nitty wig of ash upon his blackened skull" (49-50), the father ignores his son's sobbing, repeated pleas to offer aid to the dying man. The father's insensitivity to the man's suffering is juxtaposed with his son's powerful desire to show kindness toward the man, regardless of whether or not the man could be saved. Through this striking comparison, the boy evinces God's desire that man show his fellow man unwavering compassion and rebuild humanity through acts of kindness. This notion that God lives within the boy is reinforced in the father's conversation with the haggard old man who calls himself Ely, whom he encounters on the road and offers aid at his son's insistence:

How would you know if you were the last man on earth?  
I don't guess you would know it. You'd just be it.  
Nobody would know it.  
It wouldn't make any difference. When you die it's the same as if everybody  
else did too.  
I guess God would know it. Is that it?  
There is no God.  
No?  
There is no God and we are his prophets . . . When I saw that boy I thought I  
had died.  
You thought he was an angel?  
I didn't know what he was.  
What if I said that he's a god? (169-172)

Here, the father confirms his belief in the existence of God by revealing to Ely how he views his son. Like an angel, the boy is uncorrupted, innocent, and comprised of pure goodness. The father's heart knows this truth. As Ely observes, the boy is a "prophet," inspiring his father to persevere in the face of ultimate darkness. Indeed, the father is spurred on to survive because his child has been chosen by God to uphold morality. With deep commitment, the father explains to his son, "[m]y job is to take care of you . . . I was appointed to do that by God . . . I will kill anyone who touches you" (77).

When over six millions Jews were tortured and murdered during the Holocaust, the Jewish people's faith in God was not extinguished. The response to Hitler's Final Solution was for victims to pray that Judaism would flourish and for surviving Jews to heal by building meaningful lives of purpose centered around traditional Jewish values. Godlessness did not follow Hitler's attempts to annihilate the Jews; rather, a renewed commitment to the Jewish values of devotion to family, education, loyalty, and kindness, all rooted in a belief in God, resulted. Analogously, Cormac McCarthy's gripping tale of post-apocalyptic barbarism illustrates that in the face of unimaginable inhumanity and depravity, one's faith in God is tested to its limits, but nonetheless endures. The nameless father and son's harrowing experiences do not obliterate their faith in God. Belief in God is evidenced by the father and son continuously "carrying the fire" of God's goodness and mercy, which ultimately provides the very foundation

for their perseverance. The son's unwavering commitment to morality, compassion, and benevolence is what allows him, even after his father's death, to communicate with his father through God and continue his journey on the road to salvation.

## **Religious Holidays in Schools**

As leaves begin to change color and fall sweaters start to make an appearance, the anxiety over missing school during the High Holidays sets in for many Jewish teens nationwide. While school breaks are scheduled to coincide with the celebrations of major Christian holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Good Friday, the same accommodations are often not afforded to Jewish students. Jewish high school students in the United States often face a difficult choice. Either they attend school and miss the observance and celebration of the High Holidays, or they participate in High Holiday meals and rituals under a cloud of worry over missing important classroom work. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) offers valuable resources for helping schools and students balance these competing demands.

"Diligent efforts should be made in schools to accommodate observance of the High Holidays," Karen Aroesty, Regional Director of the ADL Missouri and Southern Illinois, said. "We're looking for both sides of the conversation between students and teachers: to be aware, sensitive, and to anticipate a great deal of much-needed conversation on the subject. We are always available to provide guidance. I can go in as an advocate and ensure that students raise these issues early enough so that educators and administrators understand what helps and what doesn't."

Fortunately, many St. Louis area teenagers attend public and private schools which offer flexible absence policies aimed at accommodating the needs of their Jewish student population. For those students attending public schools within the Ladue School District, they can expect their absences during the High Holidays to be met with understanding and respect.

"We are very aware that a significant percentage of our students are Jewish," Susan Dielmann, Director of Communications for the Ladue School District, said. "At the high school level, the dates for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are included in an overall reminder to staff each year [so that] in no case would a student who is away from school for religious purposes be expected to do school work during the time of the religious observance."

For students in Clayton, the manner in which teachers accommodate them for observance of religious holidays is largely at the teacher's discretion.

"Each year we remind teachers about the need to be sensitive to religious observances and that some may require obligations the evening before that may preclude a student from studying or doing work," Dr. Gutchewsky, Principal of Clayton High School, said. "We allow students and teachers to arrange make up assignments/tests on an individual basis that is mutually agreeable."

Consistent with the school's perspective, Clayton sophomore, Daphne Singer, also expressed the importance of working with each teacher on an individual basis.

"I have found that the teachers are great when it comes to flexibility regarding assignments and work during the High Holidays. In high school, there are assignments typically given a one-day late pass or more, depending on how strict the teacher is," Daphne said.

Private schools in the St. Louis area are also taking meaningful steps to serve as role models. For example, John Burroughs School closes for both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

"Approximately 10 years ago, we started to close for the High Holidays because we had about 20 percent of the student body absent as well as 10 percent of the faculty," Andy Abbott, Head of John Burroughs School, said. "For any religious holiday, students are instructed to make arrangements with their teachers ahead of time, and those absences are always excused and students are given the time they need to make up work, which frequently includes the day after a

Jewish holiday."

Jewish parents at Whitfield School expressed great satisfaction with the school's policies on absences due to the Jewish holidays. They believe their children's religious needs are effectively accommodated.

"Each teacher works directly with the student and his/her family in order to ensure that holy days can remain sacred and not be tainted by the need to engage in school work while observing or celebrating," Rabbi Carnie Rose, parent of two Whitfield students, said. "Teachers make themselves readily available before and after school to help students catch up on missed materials."

Jack Kanterman, a sophomore at MICDS and now in his fourth year at the school, emphasized that he never felt excluded from important school events due to religious observances.

"There has not been a field trip or major school function scheduled on a Jewish holiday," Jack said. "There are very few Jewish students in my class at MICDS. Even so, I believe the teachers and administration respect the different religions and their holidays."

Many students fear that missing school because of High Holiday observance could wrongly be mistaken for a lack of interest in school work or might jeopardize their grades. The ADL actively mediates these tensions.

"Even at the Community College level and in university graduate programs I have dealt with teachers who were restrictive and punitive regarding student absences for the Jewish holidays," Aroesty said.

Fortunately, many St. Louis area students attend public and private secondary schools in a much more enlightened environment where absences for Jewish holidays such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are permitted without penalty. In addition, some of these schools even provide a reasonable amount of time to make up missed assignments. High school is a time to celebrate this special time in Jewish life, feast on some apples and honey, and enjoy a Happy New Year!

**Gothic Girl**

**Quiz: What's your dream house?**

**Need advice?**

**Ask Luella!**

**Killer recipes!**

**Quiz: What's your dream house?**

**Complete this quiz to find the house of your dreams (or nightmares!)**

The ideal setting for my dream house is:

- a. buried in a dark and dense forest
- b. in a foreboding town where it is always night
- c. in a climate with blowing rains, howling winds, and ferocious thunder
- d. an ancient burial ground

The basic structure of my dream house is:

- a. a stone castle
- b. an underground, hidden cave
- c. a brick mansion
- d. a church built of bones

My dream house has the following exterior feature:

- a. a big, heavy wooden front door that creaks
- b. turrets covered in black moss that burn to the touch
- c. windows that reflect your darkest secrets
- d. a moat filled with deadly piranha

My dream house's caretaker is a:

- a. serial killer
- b. giant venomous snake
- c. poltergeist
- d. leader of the walking dead

The welcoming smells of my house are:

- a. decomposing bodies
- b. sardines
- c. black cat feces
- d. burning flesh

The house's charm can best be found in the:

- a. bedroom where the headboards are skulls (from personal kills, of course!)
- b. kitchen where all knives are covered in blood

- c. bathroom where the bathtub is a coffin
- d. family room furnished with electric chairs

#### QUIZ RESULTS:

Mostly A's: For those of you with mostly A answers, we have the perfect residence for you! Just listed this week is "Forever Dead," a towering stone castle on the west side of Cemetery Town. This jewel is completely hidden by a dense forest, where branches violently strangulate and crack the necks of those wandering through. The caretaker, Dwight Dismember, escaped from prison 17 years ago and has boned up on many aspects of running such a large property. He supervises a staff of lost souls who put on quite a show for renters. Don't miss the midnight voodoo dance, Exorcism at dawn, or Sacrifice Sundays.

Mostly B's: The Cave of Doom just went on the market and sports a spiraling staircase covered in slimy moss and a labyrinth of dark chambers, where heartless spirits and tortured souls take control of your mind. This dank cave houses thousands of hungry vipers, who team up with their eight-legged friends to tie up visitors in an inescapable, sticky web that transforms into a wheel of torture. Don't worry when your victim begins to break apart because the cave offers the newest soundproofing technology so those blood-curdling screams and gut-wrenching pleas for mercy won't be heard above ground.

Mostly C's. Partial to the haunted mansion, are you? Come and check out Butcher's Hollow, located under a black storm cloud that drowns you in icy rain, deafening thunder, and lightning that reveals a flash of the Devil's den. The mansion is surrounded by colonnades decorated with gilded gargoyles who come alive at night and protect you from intruders. The head chef, Ima Intestine, cooks up a nightly feast of blood and brains sure to set your mind at ease. Vampires and werewolves have their own floor, leaving the attic to you for extra storage space.

Mostly D's. Tap into your religious side with Holy Terror Church! When the church bells ring, blood pours from your ears. Holy Terror was recently built, complete with the latest in ghosts, spirits, and other supernatural forces. Pain, death, and cruelty are an integral part of your living experience, with a church basement offering a fully equipped laboratory for human, animal, and spirit experiments. One special feature at Holy Terror is the mirror-covered roof and walls. Behind each mirror is a different evil soul banging away and pleading to be released. The sweet sounds of shattering glass are sure to keep you on your toes.

#### *The PROMISE OF POETRY*

Submit your gloriously gothic poetry to our chilling contest, and we'll publish the winning entry here.

This month's winner comes to us from long-time subscriber, Vampirella, who still resides in Transylvania with her zombie dog, Fluffy. Her inspiring piece, *Darkness of the Soul*, stopped us dead in our tracks.

#### Darkness of the Soul

Rotting corpses piled up throughout my home  
Carpets soaked in blood and covered in shattered bone.

A thick stench hovered of decaying saliva foam  
Dreaming of every savory drop and reliving every moan.

No passerby lost in the dark wood and seeking help on his way  
Escaped my deadly pleasures or anticipated their violent doom.  
Each desperate plea and piercing scream was music to which I'd sway  
As I tore their flesh and feasted until my stomach had no more room.

Combing my long black hair each night with shards of ghostly teeth  
I bathed in their tortured tears and made tapestries from ashen skin.  
From the victim's hair I strung jingle bells upon the Christmas wreath  
Another lost soul enters my lair and disappears within.

**Ask Luella: advice so good, it could kill you!**

Dear Luella,  
I need your advice about what do with the bodies in my basement. After accidentally cutting myself, I discovered how much I love the taste of blood! It's so addictive! Last week, when I slit my mother's throat to quench my thirst, I threw her dead body down in the basement. My dad and brother are there too, but only after putting up a pretty good fight. I had to use my dad's golf clubs to finish them off. I just cannot seem to get enough! Our letter carrier was a real whiner. I swear I think I still hear him squealing in the basement, even though I drained him dry. My basement is small, and it reeks with everyone rotting away down there! Where should I dump the corpses when I finish a meal?

Faithfully yours,  
True Blood

**Dear Luella,  
I've been dead for a few hundred years now and can't seem to move**

Dear Luella,  
I've been trying to inhabit my neighbor's body for weeks, but for some odd reason, she's not interested! How can I convince her that this is the right thing to do?

Sincerely,  
Rebuffed

**Dear Luella,  
Violence is so wonderfully energizing. I was just murdered in prison by my cell mate and taken to the morgue. I awakened much to the shock of the morgue attendant and was able to strangle her to death. Now, I'm on the run again. This is the 7th time I have died! Do you know how many lives I have left?**

**Gratefully,  
Seven is Heaven**

Dear Luella,  
I'm having a lot of trouble sleeping lately. Ever since my wife was murdered, I can



**on! Every time I kill someone, I try my best to grab onto their soul as it rises. Yet, somehow I am still dragged back down to this dreadfully boring universe. How can I pass to the other side?**

**Thanks,  
Stuck in Hell**

**Dear Luella,**

**My new apple orchard is growing quickly. Each time people come apple-picking and bite into one of my juicy, delicious apples, they turn into an apple tree. Now I have thousands of acres of trees, but the police have come sniffing around with all of the disappearances lately. How can I get these cops to try an apple?**

**With respect,  
Rotten (Apple)**

Dear Luella,  
These revolting children at my orphanage are just sickening. They are all so sweet and polite, and I just can't stand the sight of their little smiling faces. Last night I threw all their stuffed animals down in the dungeon and chained the starving kids to their beds. In the morning, all of their stuffed animals were back in their beds, snuggling up to the brats and tucked in under the covers! But, it's impossible! The kids were in bed bound with shackles and their bedroom doors bolted shut. I could swear their creepy stuffed animals snarled and glared at me. I think I must be losing my mind.

see through her eyes what the killer is doing. He just kidnapped a family on a camping trip and has them tied up in his van. I was hoping you could help me get this information to the authorities. I can't get anyone to respond to me because, you see, I was killed along with my wife.

With appreciation,  
Beyond the Grave

**Dear Luella,**

**Being a werewolf can be a lonely life. I've fallen in love with Betsy from work, but I sense she's getting frustrated with me leaving her on dates as soon as it gets dark. Do I tell her the truth?**

**Help this aching heart,  
Furface**

**Dear Luella,**

**I came home from school yesterday and heard my mommy singing in my room while she was making my bed.**

**As I went running up the stairs to give her a big hug, the front door opened and I heard my mommy say, "Honey, are you home from school?"**

**I climbed out a window and have been hiding ever since. Can you help me find my mommy?**

**Help me soon!  
In hiding**

Submitted posthumously by  
the orphanage director's estate.  
She was discovered decapitated  
in the dungeon with this letter  
in hand.

### **Tantalizing recipes:**

- poison punch
  - ? cup mummy juice
  - ½ tsp snake venom
  - ¼ tablespoon arsenic
  - ½ cup drool from rabid dog
  - 2 gallons apple juice
    - Blend ingredients in the dungeon. Have the living dead sample it to make sure the punch does not taste suspicious. Prepare coffins for guests.
  
- witch's stew
  - 6 sets of eyeballs from those you've murdered (preferably fresh)
  - 12 infected toenails
  - 4 wings from black crows
  - one victim's set of teeth, ground to a fine powder
  - 18 cockroaches
  - fur of 2 rabbits
  - 1 cup green slime
  - 5 hearts
  - 3 dry, cracked lips
  - 5 pints fresh blood
  - warts and moles to taste, assorted sizes
    - Light several bodies to get a good fire burning. Place cauldron over fire and dump in all ingredients. Stir with skeleton arm bones and bring to a rapid boil. Simmer until choking clouds of steam appear and screams bellow from the cauldron. Pour into chest cavities and serve piping hot. Garnish with terrifying nightmares and near-death experiences.

- grandma's apple-appendage pie
  - 6 tongues, freshly cut
  - 12 hands with fingernails removed
  - 4 heads shaved
  - skin from 2 victims, preferably fresh
  - 4 tails from poodles
  - 1 leg
  - 3 feet
  - 2 tsp sweat from fear
  - 16 apples, peeled and cored; chop fine with guillotine
    - Roll skin thinly into pie crust and mold around pie plate. Baste skin with sweat. Mix remaining ingredients and pour into pie crust. Bake at 400 degrees in cremator. Garnish with spider eggs.

**DON'T FORGET TO RENEW YOUR SUBSCRIPTION  
OR ELSE . . .**

## **Starbuck's Station**

“Tall caramel macchiato and warmed pumpkin bread, for Jessica!” a chipper voice calls. I sluggishly shuffle forward, gratefully accepting the magic in a cup that will, by some mysterious witchcraft, transform me from the unresponsive lump that I am at 6:00 am into my usual bubbly self. I plop down at my favorite table nestled in the back corner, eagerly anticipating the arrival of what I’ve dubbed my Coffee Crew. For one blissful half hour I can relax into a world where I’m not buried alive by avalanches of homework, responding to barrages of emails from struggling newspaper staff writers needing my assistance, or maintaining a brightly smiling face and glowing personality. Here, I am totally inconspicuous, engulfed in anonymity, free from expectations and free from presenting a perpetually cheerful and confident appearance.

Right on cue, the door swings open. A woman in her mid-50’s, donned in athletic attire, fresh from her run, cheerfully jogs into the cafe, placing her order with no apparent shortness of breath or evidence of physical exertion. As someone who is winded from a hopscotch game, I marvel at how one attains such a level of physical fitness.

A blast of humid, St. Louis summer air rushes into the cafe as two nurses approach the counter. I study them thoughtfully, unable to determine whether they’re grabbing a caffeine boost on their way to work or winding down after a long night shift. I hope they can’t sense my irrational fear of needles or my natural tendency to think I need a quintuple bypass when I only have a hangnail.

My favorite member of the Crew is undoubtedly Porsche man, who earned this title from his eye-catching belt. The word “Porsche” is needlepointed across the front in all caps with bold, black thread, while the remaining space is embellished with various intricately embroidered Porsche models. Though I arrive before him, I know better than to park my beat-up Volvo in his unofficially-reserved front spot where he skids in with his red Porsche 911 Turbo.

Smiling, I watch the members of the Crew take their usual seats, unfolding newspapers and conversing with fellow patrons. I’m completely content to simply sit and observe the world around me, a bustling whirl of hurried people and whirring coffee machines complemented by the low, soothing murmur of conversation and slowly brightening early morning sky.

My life resembles a high-speed train in perpetual motion, frantically racing from one destination to the next. I embrace this hectic schedule, thriving in my numerous positions of leadership and responsibility. However, “Starbucks Station” is a haven where I can hit the brakes, so to speak, to unwind, self-reflect, and prevent myself from careening off the tracks. I allot myself a mere half hour to simply enjoy my own company, pushing out of my head distracting thoughts of an impending AP Calc test or tap dancing performance in which I must execute a flawless one-footed wing. With the small jolt of caffeine and the calm of people-watching, I am able to approach the day clear-headed and motivated, barrelling through full steam ahead.

I cling gratefully to the promise of 30 minutes of solitude where I am my own priority. With mounting family obligations like chauffeuring my little sister around town or running by the grocery store to replace the curiously ever-disappearing milk (where does it always go?), I have learned to establish these early morning minutes as vital to my day. If, for even a few moments, I can immerse myself in a world of coffee-scented tranquility, I feel confident that I can tackle whatever life piles on, with an energy rejuvenating and warm like a tall caramel macchiato and a piece of pumpkin bread.

## 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 thatday 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 wont [sic] be coaxed round as if I was a baby or a puppy. If I cant [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 bitter 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.