



A Publication of the Missouri
Scholastic Art and Writing Awards



Silver Key Winners



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Editor: Erin Small

An expanded edition is available online at:

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

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

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Sarah Baker

Age: Unknown, Grade: 11

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Frazier

Category: Critical Essay

When America Woke Up

The Great Awakening in colonial America swept like wildfire through the dry religious faith of the colonists that had become complacent. During this wildfire, George Whitefield was one of the sparks that set the blaze in motion. It was a Thursday morning when Nathan Cole was informed that George Whitefield was coming to Middletown in an hour to preach. Cole was ecstatic to hear this news and wanted to see for himself this theologian that had already caused such a change in the American colonies. Cole dropped everything that he was doing and rushed home to tell his wife about Whitefield's coming. He sprinted into the field to gather his horse, all the while "fearing that I should be too late". He rode his horse as fast as possible with both him and his wife bearing it down. When the horse began to wear out Cole would jump off and run along beside to give the horse a much needed break and then jump back on. He couldn't contain his excitement at the thought of being able to listen to Whitefield in person. Once Cole and his wife arrived at Middletown the atmosphere was different than anything they had ever experienced before. Around Cole and his wife was a crowd of people, their horses soaked with sweat as they too had ridden hard to see George Whitefield preach (Cole 93).

This was October 23, 1740 and little did these colonists know that they were soon going to be swept up into a religious fervor that would shake the colonies to their core and eventually lead to an American Revolution declaring independence. The Great Awakening expanded to all the social classes, even focusing on slaves and women, unlike many other movements happening in the colonies of the time. The Great Awakening occurred at such a time when religion was deeply needed in America and the religious zeal spread quickly as Jonathan Edwards made Christianity available to all people and George Whitefield charismatically drew people into his emotional sermons.

The colonists had begun to spread out across the vast land of the United States, enjoyed their freedom from religious persecution, and viewed the land as a safe haven for outcasts and unique individuals. However, the Native Americans that already occupied these lands were the only factor keeping the colonists from expanding even more. Missionary efforts became focused among the Native Americans in an attempt to gain more land, and any defiance to this resulted in conflicts between the native people and the colonists. Amanda Porterfield, a historian of American religion, pointed out that religion had become a way to rationalize war and political expansion (6). In 1675 conflicts had escalated into King Philip's War, which was remembered by a cruel and bloody battlefield left behind by both the Native Americans and the colonists. This left America in a bleak state and the people were desperately in need of change, or the work of God.

America had been founded by those breaking away from the Anglican Church in England and looking for more religious toleration. As seen in the very earliest days of the colonies the Mayflower Contract was a religious fellowship and Massachusetts was a "city on a hill", basically an elective theocracy. The people of Massachusetts "*should* be bound together by love and shared faith, an expectation that left them 'free' to do voluntarily what they all agreed was right". As life and religion expanded in the colonies the Christian faith lost the rigidity of the Puritan doctrine, most evidently seen in the Halfway Covenant of 1662. This agreement extended partial church membership in an attempt to refocus

religion in the colonies. America itself encouraged the diversity in religion and formed “a patchwork quilt of American faith” (Great Awakening). The Great Awakening was in response to the corruption within both the society and the church as well as the underlying human faults of greed and arrogance.

People were hungry to find forgiveness, redemption, and grow closer to God once the Great Awakening started to take hold in the colonies. Jonathan Edwards was a prominent preacher that believed that God wanted to save all of those lost people. Joel C. Rosenberg, an evangelical Christian and influential leader in politics, states that Edwards was the grandson of Reverend Stoddard and at the age of twenty six he became the senior pastor at the church in Northampton after his grandfather passed away (Rosenberg, 236). Edwards was a well educated man that published many scientific and philosophical works, but he didn't use his education and status to set himself off from the laypeople of the church. Instead, Edwards was intent to draw on the emotions of men and women as he taught about Christianity. He even used philosophy to explain some of his reasoning by saying that “if all knowledge is ultimately from sensation (Locke) and if a sense perception is merely God's method of communicating ideas to the mind, then all knowledge is directly dependent of the divine will to reveal” (Great Awakening). To Edwards, these impressions were the most important of those who saw and felt God and went as far as to say that they affected human growth in other aspects of life as well.

No longer were the church pews full of the upper classes, but instead all different types of people became drawn into the emotional teachings of Edwards. People became interested in religion and curious about these new ideas. Immoral women came to the church and were saved, creating a reversal in attitudes that was obvious to any bystander. “News of it seemed to be a flash of lightning”, especially to the young people of the town (Rosenberg, 237). These people who heard Edwards speak were overcome with emotion. Sermons such as “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” gave people a look into hell, and terrified them about what their own future might hold. Edwards himself described the people as being “in tears while the word was preached, some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love” (Edwards, 33). Never before had the church been rocked by such emotional teachings. Ministers had often preached in a monotone voice and used a large vocabulary, leaving their congregations confused and in the dark. Edwards was intent on making religion accessible by anyone and the results were remarkable. “The number of saints multiplied, soon made a glorious alteration of the town” (Rosenberg, 238). It was evident that there was a noticeable change in the social aspect in the colonies of America after the Great Awakening. The towns were joyful after the revivals swept through, as all the citizens were on fire for God.

If Jonathan Edwards was most known for his emotional sermons, then George Whitefield was known for his charismatic appeal to the people. Whitefield was an Anglican parson, but cooperated with evangelical believers in all denominations (Kidd, 34). He started his career in Britain, where he graduated from Oxford and became close friends with the Wesley brothers, who influenced his faith. It was in Whitefield's years at Oxford that he realized that he lacked a personal relationship with Christ, which transformed his views of Christianity and the way that he preached. Whitefield first came to America in 1740. He did not stick to church buildings to give his sermons, but would go anywhere outside and in large spaces with his gatherings consisting of thousands of people. Although this doesn't seem like a very radical idea, at the time preaching outside was “considered by Anglican hierarchy as outright religious fanaticism” (Rosenberg, 244). Whitefield took these ideas with him to Northampton, curious to see the place of such great revivals and meet with the man behind them, Jonathan Edwards. He stayed in town for a few days, preaching and talking with Edwards.

As Thomas Foxcroft, a minister in Massachusetts, remarked about Whitefield, “We have in a fresh Instance seen this Pauline Spirit and Doctrine remarkably exemplify’d among us. We have seen a Preacher of Righteousness, fervent in Spirit, teaching diligently the Things of the Lord” (The First). Just as Nathan Cole raced to hear Whitefield speak when he came to a nearby town, many others anxiously awaited his revival. As Whitefield was preaching outdoors to anyone who would listen, “thousands flocked to hear him preach the Gospel”. Nathan Cole even described Whitefield as seeming charismatic, young, practically holy, and “clothed with authority from the Great God” (Cole, 93). These religious men and lay people were curious about Whitefield, but the remarkable fact is that some of the non religious elites were also curious about his teachings. College presidents, local government leaders, the governor of Massachusetts, and Benjamin Franklin “could not resist striking up a friendship with Whitefield”. Benjamin Franklin had never been known as a man who was concerned about Christianity, but he agreed that these revivals were pleasantly changing the behavior of the colonists (Rosenberg, 247).

The Great Awakening was a movement that swept across America as the colonists were revived from their complacent lives and given new zeal to pursue God. However, these revivals had a much deeper effect than just filling up pews and converting people. This rebellion against authoritarian religious rule spilled over into many other aspects of colonial America. No longer were the colonists competing with one another, but instead the ideal was to work together in the faith to achieve even more. In much the same way, the Great Awakening caused many denominations to break off from Protestantism and these smaller groups were able to thrive in the colonies. Unlike England, with all of these different denominations people were able to choose for themselves, which kept the colonists from becoming complacent. This not only prevented the colonists from becoming complacent under one state institutionalized religion, but also became a unifying drive to gain the American Identity (The First). The colonists were accustomed to separating themselves from large institutions, such as the church, and showing their outright rebellion. God’s will no longer remained solely in the hands of the clergy, but instead was interpreted by the people themselves. In politics this was seen as the colonists quickly realized that authority did not remain with the king, but instead in the hands of the people. This later became motivation for independence and eventually the American Revolution.

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Mahryn Barron

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Chris Odam

Category: Poetry

Sunrise Eyes in the Endless Nights

The Prism and the Lantern

I am a prism -
I split the light
into colors unforeseen.
Rainbows flare on my eyelashes
when I blink in the
drip
 ping
 sun
 shine.

I am a lantern -
I dive into the dark
 because my eyes
 will always
readjust.

As long as I have myself,
I'm never lost forever.

Wine Glass Skies

[Verse 1:]
I had tiger lily blood,
fourteen years old
with burgundy wine
down my chin.
We hadn't acquired the taste.

You had sunrise eyes
in the black desert,
and the endless night.
Come along, you said
outstretched hand like a mirage,
let's plan some sabotage.

[Chorus:]
Iridescent adolescents

(up in arms).
Our hands break through
the wine glass skies,
and hold you
up in a spilling sunrise
(up in arms).
I have allies.

[Verse 2:]
They say
physics there defy senses.
Vines turn to thieves
climbing the fences.
Under lamp suspensions,
shadows turn three dimensions.

You were midnight-shaded,
a renegade
running through dirt -
you disappeared from sight.
You went unnamed,
you were a shadow untamed.

[Chorus:]
Iridescent adolescents
(up in arms).
Our hands break through
the wine glass skies,
and hold me
up in a spilling sunrise
(up in arms).
I have allies.

[Bridge:]
We scaled the fence cloaked in rust
'til hinges turned to dust,
emerged from the horizon
over the sea the sun lies in,
incognito
silhouettes in the sunset glow.
We wade in the shade
and bask in the light
of the evening sun
and afternoon moon.

[Chorus:]
Iridescent adolescents
(up in arms).

Our hands break through
the wine glass skies,
and hold us
up in a spilling sunrise
(up in arms).
I have allies.

Mahryn Barron

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Chris Odam

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Periwinkle Pickup Truck

My father was my best friend when I was 7. He carried me on his shoulders in the clear Colorado sunshine, down dirt roads leading from our house, past abandoned houses. The nearest paved road was 8 miles away, so we learned to love the character of the rocks and dirt underneath our feet. I'd cover his eyes because and laugh as he pretended to veer down the open road.

The only other remaining memory I have of him was when we drove in his periwinkle pickup truck. Our family always played "Thunder Road" (1975) by Bruce Springsteen on the stereo. I remember one day, just as Springsteen belted the line about Mary's dress swinging as she "dances like a vision across the porch as the radio plays," my mom waltzed out our front door to greet our homecoming. In that moment, I would have sworn the song was written about her.

This time, as the line faster approached, my dad flicked off the stereo. "Reminds me of your mother," he said shortly. I didn't understand then, hadn't yet understood that division was a concept outside of the classroom, too. The following month blurred around me in a cacophony of off-tune yells and tears, and I counted to ten to keep time. The fights made the house seem huge and lonely and the space more expansive between us, though it was still just the two-room home that was once a sanctuary.

He left just before I turned 9. I told myself he'd change his mind, turn around and run back through the front door. Instead, he left it open in case I wanted to run after him to his destination, thousands of miles away. A few months later, he told me over the phone that he thought sharing a continent with my mother too close in proximity, and I guessed that was incentive enough for him to sacrifice my childhood with him. Hawaii was supposed to be paradise, but there was to place more hellish in my mind's eye. Every year, I blamed him for what could've been, for not spending even one meal among thousands with me in a decade.

This year is different. For the first time since he flew away, 10 years ago, I played "Thunder Road" in the truck. My mother and I sang it at the top of our lungs with pride and joy. We were not wakes of circumstance. My runaway father did not make a sad story of my life, and we took back the power I gave my father by attributing so much of my identity to fear of abandonment. My mother had always been there with a steadfast hand to hold. She was the one who picked me up from school every day, who took me on road trips when the morning sun would set the clouds on fire and we sang our stresses away.

My mother supported me enough for two people – and two voices are enough for a harmony.

Taityanna Beard

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Frazier

Category: Critical Essay

Get Your Head in the Game: The Dangers of Youth Football

The 2015-2016 football season at Pattonville High School was seemingly going very well. There were stands full of fans screaming for the Friday Night Lights that were celebrated each week. However, for high school athlete Matthew Anderson, this was a life-changing night. Anderson went in to tackle his opponent, much like he has before, but something went wrong. He and his opponent had a head-to-head collision and got concussions, traumatic brain injuries caused by blows to the head, on the spot (Mayo Clinic). He was taken out of the game for the night, but was later cleared to play again. Unfortunately, his concussive symptoms immediately returned upon playing. Once again, he was removed from football but was never told to stop any other activity. He continued to work out and had such a bad head injury, that his grades were starting to suffer. By this time he had probably had a string of concussions, all because of an initial injury that was never truly inspected. He no longer participates in any sports, but still misses playing and wishes he could change the way things went (Anderson). Anderson may have been able to take himself out of this extreme activity, but what happens when the injured person is too young to help themselves?

In 2012, Southbridge Pop Warner and the Tantasqua Braves, two pee-ewe football teams, played against each other in a rivalry game. Despite the fact that the youngest boys were only ten years old and that no players weighed more than 120 pounds, this game resulted in injuries for many. Within the first six plays, three boys were pulled out of the game because of concussions. An official on the Tantasqua team even said, "The eyes of one of the boys were rolling back in his head." Nonetheless, the game went on and two more Tantasqua boys were taken out of the game after hard tackles. Even after two more injuries, the game still continued. Tantasqua did not have enough players to participate and the teams were an obvious mismatch, but neither the officials nor the coaches intervened. The game ended at 52-0, with five preadolescent boys with head injuries due to the bad judgment of coaches and officials who ignored the mercy rules that were put into place for a situation like this. (Belson) While the lasting effects to those children are unknown, it provides an example of what is happening within youth football. Knowing that these are just two out of millions of stories regarding the dangers of youth football it validates that something needs to change, not only in the football world but also in society. While football is more dangerous with respect to the number of concussions and brain injuries associated with it, it is equally as dangerous as other sports for other injuries. Because of these dangers, children and parents need to be made more aware of the dangers of football and the rules for modern youth football need modification.

Football is equally dangerous as other sports, if not less, when dealing with regular injuries. From ages five to fourteen, twenty-eight percent of injuries come from football players, twenty-five percent from baseball players, twenty-two percent come from soccer players, and fifteen from basketball players ("Youth Sports Injuries Statistics"). Statistics given by the U.S. National Electronic Injury Surveillance System from 2002-2015 shows that from ages thirteen to seventeen, football had an average of 118,886 injuries while basketball had an average of 119,589 injuries. For both of these statistics, the most common diagnoses were strains and sprains. (Perry) All of these are sports that can be expected to result in injury due to the intense training and games that take place.

The problem comes in when talking about how many concussions are caused by football.

Playing football may be less dangerous when it relates to regular injuries, but there is a big difference in the occurrence of concussions. Football is a major concern because it is such a popular sport. Other dangerous contact sports, such as boxing and wrestling are decreasing, while football has nearly 1.5 million youth participants and is increasing. Football has been proven over the years to be the most popular sport in America, mainly because it is supported by an extremely large collegiate and professional corporate structure (Proctor). With football having such a large support system, it can be hard to try to make sure all their motives are in the best interest of the players. Virginia Tech and Wake Forest researchers found that boys age nine to twelve receive an average of 240 hits per season. Additionally, sports reporter Patrick Hruby found that a high school football player can incur an average of 1,000 blows to the head due to the increased intensity and competition presented in a high school game as opposed to a middle school game. These hits are all very damaging because they can be 80g of force or greater, which is equivalent to a serious car crash. Knowing that children can be hit with forces of that strength becomes even more alarming since children already are more vulnerable to concussions than adults and take longer to recover from concussions. (McKiggan). This explains why the leading cause in death from a sports-related injury is brain trauma and why amateur football is the absolute greatest risk factor for the development of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative disease of the brain that is only found in athletes. Dr. Bennet Omalu, a forensic neuropathologist who played a critical part in diagnosing CTE for the first time, agrees with The American Academy of Pediatrics and Canadian Pediatric Society who recommend that kids no longer “engage in high-impact contact sports.” How can we assure that big corporations, like the National Football League (NFL) will remain truthful about football’s dangers, especially when it is hurting so many people?

Concussions not only hurt the young players, but also the parents of these players. With all these problems possible by simply playing in one game of football, parents of players need to be made aware of every danger. Parents may expect that their child has a physical injury, but rarely do they think about long-term psychological effects. Whether the children play football in middle school or high school, they are still under the age of consent. For any other situation in the United States, it is the parent’s responsibility to protect underage children from dangers (Omalu). Through this thought process, football should not be any different. When the choice of parent allowing their child to play could be life altering, parents need as much information as possible. Parents will ultimately decide whether the benefits outweigh the negatives of the sport for their child but they cannot make this decision if not given all the facts. This is supported by a Marist College poll that showed one in three Americans would be less likely to allow their sons to play football if they knew about the all the dangers (Hruby). Educating the parents of these children, who have the highest risk factors for having brain injuries, is extremely important and will decrease the amount of children playing, therefore decreasing the amount of children being hurt.

Next, the rules of youth football need to be changed and enforced. Often, the rules of the game become more ignored as the players and coaches become more comfortable during the season. Because of this, sixty-two percent of organized sports-related injuries occur during practices (“Youth Sports Injuries Statistics”). With new rules, the children participating in the sport could have better enforced safety precautions for games, as well as practices. Another way to help prevent fatal or extremely harmful injuries is to have athletic trainers at games in case of injury. Without certified athletic trainers to inspect children after being hurt, they can be told false information leading to a worse injury (McEwin). These already hurt players could potentially be injuring themselves even more after going back into a game, presuming that they are okay since concussions are not as obvious as a bloody nose or hurt arm. Even in the case of the Southbridge versus Tantasqua game, the parents of the players argued that the game continued because, “Every kid who was out there wanted to play and not give up” (Belson). This shows that the continuation of the game was the decision of the parents, because they

used poor judgment in ignoring the mercy rules.

Finally, there is another option to changing the many rules within the game. Youth football could simply get rid of the action that makes the sport so dangerous: the tackling. The people in charge of youth football could encourage the expansion of non-tackle football leagues. The sport would no longer be a danger once the tackling and excessive contact is eliminated.

If there are changes made in youth football, parents of players will be appreciative while NFL and society will not enjoy it as much. Right now, the NFL is not fully disclosing the long-term dangers of the sport and the negative effects of playing football. However, if the NFL is forced to acknowledge these issues, the sport will become less popular. With less children playing, less people will move on to the collegiate and professional levels. Also, the people that watch the sport and are drawn to the big, harmful “hits” done during the game will stop watching (Proctor). The NFL will lose money, but it will be at the expense of players being safer and knowing what type of dangers they are getting themselves into.

Until these changes are made, society should continue to question the current system of youth football. Why is it acceptable for information to be withheld solely because something is popular? The problem of youth football injuries can easily be compared to other nationwide problems such as tobacco use or ingesting fast food. Everyday, corporations filter information available to the public to maintain their profits. How can we, as a society, differentiate which issues to expose and reform? Often people may feel like they are in control, but really they are oblivious to the problems of a simple activity like youth football. And while it’s impossible to fix all problems, it is essential that we are always working to do what is best for the people, not a company’s profit or a person’s entertainment.

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Caleb Bishop

Age: Unknown, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Duality: Life in a Mirror

Pas de Deux

We all make fun of the adolescent mind.

We say that she's overdramatic, without knowing
the maelstrom of thoughts that rages in her brain,
they swirl in incoherent rhythm
to the ever-steady throb of a pulse.

Their unsure footing only adds to their movement,
but they second guess

second-

No.

Yes!

every pirouette.

They fling dirt into each other's eyes, their routine
a form of battle.

Each thought exists on varying planes of chaos,
ideas of flesh and bone

waltzing with the cold mist of phantom fears,
fight

to a cacophony of drums and thoughts

that all pound against her skull

in four-four time. One stands out,

one remains true for ever,

glows with the power

of unshakeable knowledge.

Radiating warmth,

he is choreographer and stage light,

conducting and lighting the floor at once.

He sorts the ghosts from the guides,

the right and the wrong,

makes sense of the madness by searing away the superfluous.

The smell of mud and blood

replaced by cleansing ash,

she no longer grits her teeth in pain.

Releasing the sheets clenched in her fists,

she'll finally know the embrace of sleep's peace.

And us?

We'll sit back and say,

"Glad she finally got over it."

Calligraphy

Slipping into the warm night, clear night forged.
Ink poured, black formed the sky by another hand
to lie and keep me sane.
My compeer and I spoke discreetly—dark made us anonymous,
Fright made me monotonous.
Me to him,
him through me,
him to the ink.
Quickly I grew frantic,
as he got lost in the semantics of his own mouth.
My throat, an eviscerated battleground, now hoarse,
my pleas meaningless as offering a sword to the limbless
he had found his own cause.
He drew a pen to sign the letter—
no longer through me,
words only for the ink.
From crimson plashed, he found pigment to cloy a drooling pen.
I hoped this a figment of my fancy,
my fear an abandoned child, sobbing and screaming,
and the night's lies had not kept me sane.
Dark parchment, red pen,
thousands of miles to breach with feckless words,
burning lungs, rendering cries futile—
me through him,
him through me,
us to the ink.

my math homework remembers i left my brain at home

clouds
pink and blue smears
go over my head
like the moon
or calculus.
i long to float up there
where i could eat eclipse and crackers
and differentiate my thoughts.
don't you find it odd
that, sometimes, in order to answer a question
you need the opposite of the thing itself?
i am my own reciprocal.
i hate liars
but i hardly ever come out from beneath
my own silver tongue
or my solidified sadness.
my body is my own mind's conjugate.
but the limit
as i approach everything i know
from the side that loves and the side that loathes

is ultimately me
staring through this restaurant window.
my breath steams the glass
and i miss the final moments of sunset.
"Get off there," my mother says,
"it's full of germs."

Kate Boren

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Marnie Jenkins

Category: Poetry

Explaining My Depression to the Ones Who Love Me

I mean it's like I'm sad
But I'm sad really often and sometimes for no reason
And sometimes instead of really often it's all the time
And sometimes I'm happy, but then I wonder
Am I really happy?
Am I experiencing "Happy" to the fullest extent?
And then I'm not happy anymore because I feel like I'm wasting this happiness
Like I'm throwing it down the garbage chute and myself with it
And then my hands start to shake like railroad tracks and the train is coming, but I can't move out of
the way
And I can't tell if it's because I'm scared stiff or maybe I just don't want to
But happy people don't stand in front of speeding trains
It's being at a party and you realize
Is this music too loud?
Do I even like these people?
I mean yeah me and Sarah are "friends", but at Christmas time would I get her a gift or would I just
give her some of those delicious "homemade" cookies that I made myself (you know from that bag that
has "Betty Crocker" stamped across the front)
And Depression tells me like an old friend, "You know you could just go home. Your bed is waiting for
you."
But the thing is I will never get out of bed because my mind makes the sheets feel like chains and I'm
locked in this prison until Depression decides that it has done enough tormenting for tonight or maybe
it'll spend the night
Maybe it'll invite some friends
And then Depression invites Anxiety to the party that I didn't want to go to
And then you wonder where it came from right?
Because how is depression and anxiety linked?
Anxiety is the beautiful girlfriend that Depression brought to the party, but no one ever invited in the
first place because let's face it we all though anxiety was always a bitch anyways
Do you ever just feel too much?
I mean of course there's a normal amount of feeling, but a normal amount doesn't send your heart into
tremors on a day to day basis
My mind is scattered across the island for misfit toys, but I am the misfit toy
Only there is no singing there are no gifts there is just me
I am so lonely I am so damn cold my fingers might chip off if you tried to hold them
My throat hurts like the case of Strep that I never got when I was a kid
And my eyes have Niagra falls frozen inside of them, but when depression comes knocking there is
nothing I can physically do but answer
And Niagra Falls pours down
Down my rosy cheeks and into my old converse
It just pours and I know that a flood is coming but dammit I couldn't get out of bed long enough to

build and ark and I am so sorry.
Every day depression comes knocking is rainy one
But my smile says I'll be alright
I won't pick up the blades again tonight and draw that crimson liquid from my ever pounding veins
because I do not do that anymore
Because my love for my loved ones is so great it could freeze
Niagra falls and it can cure my sore throat and I am no longer a misfit on an island for toys that I never
wanted to play with in the first place

But I am a girl that loves and is loved

I just wish that love could stop the knocking

Hunter Burge

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Fishing Spots

Kenny and I had always gotten rides from our dads to go fishing, But this was the summer. We got to drive us where we wanted to go when we wanted to go.

May 2019

Ring Ring Ring. As I pick up my phone I see it says Ken Ken, so I knew that he wanted advice for fishing, girls, or he wanted to go to one of my secret fishing spots.

“Hey Let's go to the super secret spot.”

“I wish but it hasn't been the same somebody has been killing all the fish.”

“Really, only a few people know about the spot.”

“I know, someone beat out a spot in the woods to get in, and the worst part is we saw at least 30 slabs on the bank last time we went there, bass, crappie, and bluegill.”

“Well how big were they.”

“10 pounders.”

“That stinks.”

“Yeah we can still hit up some ponds.”

“Okay, which ones?”

“We can go to RQBP.” We have a code for our ponds so people don't know where we are going.

“Sure, after all that is where you caught your PB.”

“Yeah, tomorrow after school.”

“Alright, I can't wait”

May 12

Beep Beep Beep, my alarm was going off at 5:30 so I could get my fishing gear ready, three poles, light spinning rod, medium moving baits rod, and my stiff frogging rod. I had brought just a little tackle that I kept in my truck like topwater, spinnerbaits and chatterbaits, squarebills, and soft plastics. After I gathered up all of my stuff I called Kenny, “Hey bring your stuff to school.”

“Alright, what do you think they will be biting on?”

“Probably spinnerbaits, chatterbaits, and soft plastics.”

“How do you use a spinnerbait?”

“Cmon kenny, you just reel and let the blades do the work.”

“Oh I forgot.”

“Sure you did, hey I will talk to you at school I have to get going.”

“Yep, see you soon.”

I pulled into the school and my parking spot was taken by kenny, “BEEP, I honked, move why don't ya.” He moved out of the way without a word. When I got out I made sure that I locked it up since my fishing gear was in there.

“Jease, is it that time of month for you again.”

“Now That was a good one kenny.”

When I walked into the school I went to the wrestling room to tell coach I had to miss practice. “Hey

coach Burrell I need to miss practice because I have to go to my grandparents place since my grandpa isn't doing well."

"Ok, you're not skipping to go fishing with your buddies right."

"No coach I am going to my grandpa's."

"Ok, I believe you but if it ends up being a lie you owe me 100 sprints."

I ran into Kenny into the hall and I told him that the plan would work, Kenny has done wrestling before but he didn't do it this year since he was scared of wearing the singlet, he answered by being happy to maybe catch a fish or get snagged.

We went to first hour social studies with coach, and I am not to sure if I fell asleep, we watched a dumb movie over the Boston massacre. After that Kenny and I have art together and all we do is talk about fishing and every now and then we might sketch out a lure or so. Then we went off to PE together and we did indoor soccer. After PE we have band, and right now we are playing some pretty cool music that the trombones have the melody. We ate some pretty bad lunch like always. Then it was Geometry, ugh, we got 2 assignments of bookwork due tomorrow. Finally Mrs. Miller's class, we are typing some short story for patriots pen essay, I had a pretty good essay about what America means to me.

Kenny met me at my truck after school, "Hey can I put my stuff in your truck and drop my truck off at your house, if my truck gets dirty my mom will flip out."

"Yeah sure, park it behind the house by the shed, I will pick you up then you could load your stuff in my truck."

"Okay, that'll work."

When we arrived Kenny had gave me a twenty for "gas money" and he took a pole out of his truck and asked if he could use some of my lures. I said sure but you better not get snagged messing around. We took off and on our way to RQBP we have to pass SSBFP, super secret big fish pond, when Kenny and I were little kids dad blindfolded us so we wouldn't tell anybody where SSBFP was. Right when I looked over there and I saw a truck zoom in there, "Dude did you see that?"

"Yeah I was just going to say something to you."

"We might have a chase on our hands, be quiet and pull out the 12 gauge under the seat."

"Ok, are we going to do any fishing?"

"Probably not, did you recognize that truck?"

"Yeah, looked like Brian's."

"Oh crap, how did he find out about the pond?"

"Never mind that are you going to chase him?"

"Yeah I guess."

Well I started grinding gears and trusted that my old blue ford could chase down Brian's junk dodge. I saw it run through the corn field and I was pretty sure that he didn't know I was chasing him, I told Kenny to wait to shoot until he got a clear shot. He asked what to aim for I answered the air first and then if he didn't stop shoot the tires. I told him that there were shells in the glove compartment. "How come you keep all of this stuff in your truck?"

"In case stuff like this happens."

He is heading toward the pond going sixty and I didn't know how much my truck was going to take I was going almost a hundred and jumping hills on overdrive. I told Kenny to shoot a warning shot. He did and Brian slammed the brakes and looked around like he was innocent. I slowed down, "Hey what are you doing on private property."

"I come here to shoot stuff." He replied

"Like fish." I said angrily

“Yeah, but nobody fishes here anyways, or knows about it.”

“We do!” I answered enraged.

“Oh okay, what do you want me to do about it?” He replied like an arrogant jerk.

“Leave since you don't have permission to be here anyways, and if you don't we might have more problems.”

“Ok, just don't shoot me on my way out.”

“Better hurry out then.”

“Ok, and by the way there were some good fish in that pond.”

“We know, never come back.”

As he was leaving Kenny asked if we could do some fishing and I said that we needed to go to RQBP so we could make sure nobody was messing with that pond. He understood with the fact that this pond was almost ruined we left in sorrow but after the final turn Kenny asked if he had a second pond. I replied, “Kenny sorry I never told you this but he has a pond that's better fishing than anything and nobody I mean nobody knows about it, do you wanna go there?”

“Heck yeah where at?”

“Oh you know this, put the blindfold on.”

Trey Butcher

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Life In The Fat Lane

Doubts. They loom above me, beside me, inside my head. They are like a vapor cloud surrounding me. Whether it's from my mom, dad, a teacher -- anyone who has expectations, trust me, they have doubted me. I think that's where it all began. It started as niggling thoughts and then expanded as I grew up. And out. Food was my jam -- my source of comfort and now it had become my enemy.

In third grade my relationship with food became an issue, a big issue. I knew that I needed to fix it. I was just a kid, but this is when it all starts. Parents, teachers, and counselors always say that middle school years are the "crisis" years. Trust me, it starts way earlier than that. Parents want to hang on to their cute, chubby little boy for as long as they can. What they don't know is that even then, in elementary, I was dying on the inside.

I weighed 187 pounds in third grade. That's almost three times as much as the average kid in that grade. You can imagine the comments from the parents who wanted me on their football team. I was "the brick wall" and the "big ol' son-of-a-bitch" -- yeah, and I heard every word. Every last gut-wrenching word.

Fortunately, I have always had a passion of football but not because I was big. I loved the game. Good thing, because at that age I wasn't sure whether to laugh along with everyone, be embarrassed about what I couldn't control, or get mad. I knew I needed to do something -- even if it meant giving up the sport that I loved.

I started to get up early and stay up late trying to find quick fixes on how to lose weight. I can remember getting on the computer and reading about how to lose weight -- all when I was eleven. There were ads for pills that promised muscle definition and weight loss. I was a kid and it wasn't like I could steal my parents credit card and buy something over the internet. I looked at motivation articles about losing weight and they talked about going to the gym. Right. Nothing truthfully worked -- I mean there was nothing to teach a third grade kid about getting healthy and dropping the pounds.

Third grade came and went and in fourth grade I decided to take action. I didn't want my parents to know that I had an issue--they were always telling me that they loved me just the way that I was. I had a weird strategy to keep my secret. I knew that my mom and dad were both dead asleep by 10:30 pm, so I faked falling asleep until 10:40. That's when I started my grind.

I would usually go down stairs and bench the bar on our bench press. Quietly. I probably gained more muscle from putting the weights down softly than I did at actually lifting them. Then came the hard part, running. I hated running. Nothing makes a fat person feel even fatter than running a block or two and having to stop to catch your breath. It was also grueling on my psyche. It was like my own body was taunting me. My mind wanted to run, my brain was engaged, but my body wanted to go back home and crawl back into bed with a Pop-Tart. Not to mention the jiggle. The damn jiggle. Gut, butt, thighs, arms, chin -- everything moved when I ran. It was a constant reminder -- you're fat, you're fat, you're fat.

Almost every night, I would put on my Nikes and stand in the driveway, looking at the place where I started my run. I couldn't stand there too long or I would turn around and go back inside. I ran as fast as I could -- not very fast, but fast for me. I ignored the negativity inside my head. When I rounded the corner to finish my run, I would fall on the ground. The cold ground felt amazing on my hot body. It

was the one thing that I looked forward to. Weird, I know. I would lay there huffing and puffing until my heart stopped pounding and then I would get up, make my way slow and steady up the stairs and fall into bed.

In school, even though I loved football, I hated PE. We would run and everybody would pass me and yell “Hurry up, Jiginator” or “Everybody look, a tall Umpalumpa.” Jesus, who comes up with this stuff? I’d like to say that the reason I started this whole thing was because I wanted to do it for myself-- that I wanted to feel better about life, get healthy, you know, all that crap you read about on Pinterest motivational boards? Hell, no. I had to stop the taunts, the jabs, the snickering. Yeah, I could probably take them out, but that’s not what you do. You don’t go to the principal or for God’s sake, never the counselor, and you don’t go to the teachers either. You do it on your own, in your own way because in some weird way, you’re stuck with these people. They can make life easy or hell for you. That’s the part that adults don’t understand. At the end of the day, you’re still eating lunch with them, passing them in the hall, being partnered up with them as an “elbow buddy.” It’s all up to you and you have to make it work somehow, without the help of well-meaning adults.

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I did this routine for three weeks straight, it got easier. The running became nothing, the pace became faster, and the reps got bigger. Pretty soon I was 153 pounds. My body got smaller and the insults came less often. Victory.

Fast forward to the first year of middle school. I let myself balloon up to 220. I grew taller but I also grew out. I was still playing football and kicking some A, but the insults started to come from the older kids who didn’t know me. The “Hey fat ass, don’t jump or an earthquake will happen,” and the “You won’t make it, how are you even on that team” got me in a whole other dimension of mad and wanting to demolish this problem for good.

I started waking up at 4:40 am and going on hefty runs, almost three miles. My phone alarm would go off and I would think of every excuse not to get up. I would remember how dropping the pounds in elementary made me feel and that would get me out of bed. For a month straight, every morning at 4:40, I would throw on a t-shirt and shorts, put on my Nikes and head out the door. I didn’t have to be quiet this time, my parents knew what I was doing and they supported me. I didn’t have to sneak around and that felt good. After a month, I had gotten myself back down to 180. That was one of the best moments in my life. The feeling of dropping 40 pounds was great. The stretch marks sucked though. If you’ve ever gained and lost, you know what I’m talking about. Unwritten rule in the bro’ world -- you don’t talk about stretch marks, you hide them.

Football season had started and I was pumped. I knew that this year was going to be good. I was healthy, in shape, and I was in a good place. There was one person though, who had never let me forget about my constant struggle with weight and self-esteem. He was the one person that I could count on to notice my weight fluctuations year after year. I’m pretty sure he was the ring leader of all the insults. Let’s just call him Greg. We have always had problems. I gave it my all in football. Greg played the position across from me. Out on the field, I did everything I was supposed to do. Greg didn’t and I usually won out which meant that I was up and running and he was down on the ground. Stupid me. Greg’s dad was one of our coaches. It seemed that any chance he could, he would call a play that, if executed properly, would have me under Greg’s cleat. Greg was a lazy athlete. I wasn’t. This upset his dad and instead of yelling at his own son to put up or shut up, it seemed he would try to take me down and give Greg every chance at my position.

Now this is where it gets a little murky. I had heard through the grapevine that Greg was going to cut block me and go for my ankle. This is a cheat block used by smaller players to bring bigger players down. You go full force, helmet down, into your opponent’s knees. Once he’s down, if you’re a jerk, you step on his ankle. It takes out the player. If you’re good at the move and the coaches and refs don’t see you, you basically get rid of your opponent. I didn’t believe that Greg would actually do this to me

so I just blew it off as locker talk--until when we were lined up, nose to nose, helmet to helmet on the line of scrimmage.

And then I saw them. I had looked down to make sure that I was behind the line and I happened to look across at Greg's cleats. They weren't the cleats he usually wore in practice. He had put on his spiked metal cleats. My stomach turned. It was true. He intended to end my career in football on the next play. "You're fat ass is so big that only whales want you." Man, he couldn't come up with anything better than that? If I didn't know what he was getting ready to do, I would have laughed in his face. Being the better man, I just stared at him.

"Come on 220, let's see what you've got." I still said nothing. My eyes looked at him without emotion. Inside, I was boiling and gearing up for a fight. I got down in my stance. It was on.

HUT. The ball snaps and I shoot forward. My knees collapse. A burning pain shoots throughout my body. I scream and Greg falls on top of me. His metal spikes find their way to my calf and I feel the cleats dig in. I had given him a chance. I wanted to see what he would do and he fell into my trap. He didn't get the injury he wanted, but I knew then that the rumor was true.

I took awhile to get up. I hobbled over to the side line and asked my coach if I could sit out the next play. I wanted to do the one thing that I had been holding back all these years. I had stood by through elementary, middle school, and even now, without doing anything about his comments, his insults, his foul-mouthed exchanges. It was time to even the score.

I wanted to be the better man. I really did. But by being the better man, I had become the bitter man. I needed to do this, to put him in his place. I probably should have done it a long time ago.

Coach put me back in and I went back to the huddle. The play was a pull play where I am supposed to go from one side of the line to the other in a second or two and I mow over any guy who stands in front of me. Greg was the unlucky one who would be standing in front of me. Our running back Trevor was set to run behind me. He looked at me and nodded, intuitively knowing what I was about to do. He winked which gave me a little more courage. I grinned back at him. I line up in my place, muscles tensed, and feeling no regret about what I'm about to do. The adrenaline is pumping and I can practically feel the steam coming from my body.

Down, set, hike.

I took my steps perfectly, one short forty-five degree to the left, Greg followed my moves, but then I turned and bull-rushed Greg as hard as I could. As soon as we made contact, I heard an "ooofff" and then I felt his body drop in front of me. I regained my balance and looked at Greg. He was curled in a ball and sobbing on the ground.

I'm not proud of what I did next. I bent down and in my slow drawl, I said through clenched teeth, "First of all, you weigh 245 pounds and I weigh 185. Secondly, I just made you my own, you jerk, just like every other time we've gone head-to-head, but you're an idiot and never realized it."

I left Greg groaning on the field and walked off. I had my redemption, my day in the sun, and the score was even. That day was the last day that anyone ever made a comment about my weight. I don't talk about that day, I don't brag about it, I don't regret it. I did what had to be done.

Greg? He quit football and wrestles. We pass each other in the hall. He looks away, I stare straight ahead. He has a few classes with me. The teachers never knew, the principals didn't either, the counselors still have their bully prevention programs that we all have to sit through, but I took care of this myself. Greg and I have never spoken to each other again.

My weight stays respectable at under 200. This will be a battle that I'll probably have to fight forever, but at least now, my harshest critic won't be the kids at school, it will always be me.

Catryn Cattoor

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Danby Rush Tower Middle School, Festus, MO

Educator: Nicole Boyer

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

Vanishing

Kicking aside the leaf piles that crowded the sidewalk, I hurried away from school. I grimaced as a cold, fall breeze ruffled my curls; I clung to my new prized possession. Something about the book that I'd found buried in my mother's classroom that afternoon drew me toward it. Intrigued by the elegant, interweaving gold vines that framed the horror novel's weathered cover, I eagerly made my way down the street in the hope that the library to which my mother said the book belonged would be open. As I strolled into *Mr. Linden's Library*, I noticed that the old, frail man, who'd been casually flipping through a book behind his desk, became ghostly pale; his fearful gaze rested on the book. Without even acknowledging my presence, his shaky voice called to his coworker, Karen, who appeared from behind a nearby shelf and rushed to his side, her eyes also glued to the book. With Karen by his side, he seemed to find the words to speak to me. "Where did you find that book?" he asked tremulously.

"In my mother's classroom. She works up at the middle school," I responded pointedly, confused by their horrified expressions.

Without another word, the old man's hands extended tentatively toward the book, but as I proceeded to hand it to him, he faltered.

Drawing away from the book, he fumbled out, "Have you read any of it yet?" I shook my head as Karen sighed with relief.

"Take that book as far from here as possible; get rid of it! You don't want to know what horrid things happened to its last victim!" she hissed, her words seeming to push me out of the room. Unable to form a response, it took tremendous effort for me to even turn away from the counter and stumble towards the door.

I could feel their petrified stares follow me all the way out of the library. *What is wrong with those two?* I wondered, practically running down the block, clear of the library. I rushed back to school, turning over the book in my hands. *Crazy, old people.* The storm that had brought only a mild chill to the air just minutes ago was now whipping around the trees and scattering the leaves that covered the school walkway.

"Marcie!" my mom sounded relieved when I stepped into her 7th grade classroom. "I was just finishing up and about to come look for you. We need to head home; it's looking bad out there." Gathering her bag, she hurried out into the hallway.

* * *

Sprinting after my mom to the car, I shielded my book from the rain that had begun to hammer the roofs of the cars. We sped down the flooded street to our house that sat only several blocks down the road and raced inside. Sopping wet, I trudged up the steps to my bedroom.

Now, let's just see how terrifying this book really is. I laughed to myself. I threw myself on the cozy covers that lay crumpled on my bed, consumed by the book in a matter of minutes. Hours may have passed as I moved from chapter to chapter, but I wasn't aware; I'd lost perception of time as the book's

suspenseful plot unfolded, revealing a hideous villain and his sinister plans. I was so engulfed in this horrific masterpiece that I nearly peed myself when I heard a knock on the door and my mother's drowsy voice calling for me to go to bed.

I glanced at the clock; it was almost 11! Reminding myself that I still had school tomorrow, I threw on a tank top and shorts and curled up under my covers, but some unseen force was dragging my thoughts back to the novel that lay open to my left. *One more chapter*, I decided as the force became overwhelmingly strong. Picking up right where I left off, I was again sucked into the book and oblivious to all else.

As I made my way to my book's 24th chapter, I found myself at a loss. "What in the heck?" I breathed, trying to control the wave of emotions that began to wash over me. I slammed the book shut, unwilling to accept what I'd seen, but when I cracked the book open again, page 258 lay unchanged. Right at the bottom of the page's third paragraph, I was left hanging with an unfinished sentence. *Did the author stop? Did she run out of words? Did she do this on purpose?* My mind filled with questions. Flipping through the next few pages, I confirmed my suspicions. All of them were blank! *How could she do this to me?* All of my confusion quickly turned to anger as I realized that I would never know what happened to the villain. I flipped through the last half of the book incredulously and couldn't subdue the surge of frustration that took hold of me.

In a fury, I threw the book to the ground and buried myself in my blankets. I must have fallen into a fitful sleep because I woke up to the deafening crack of thunder. I managed to collect my thoughts and in the light of the lamp that I'd unintentionally left on, I leaned over the side of my bed in search of the book. All I saw beneath me was my gray carpet. I searched my small room frantically for the book, but my thoughts were still fuzzy with fatigue. *I'll find it tomorrow*, I promised myself as I crawled back into the nest of blankets and wandered into a restless sleep.

I awoke suddenly; my covers lay sprawled on the carpet and to my dismay, it was only 2 AM. *What's going on?* I asked myself, realizing that I was fighting to control my breathing and my heart was practically pounding out of my chest. Frustrated, I knelt over the side of my bed, grabbed ahold of my blanket, and yanked it from the ground. A sharp tug came unexpectedly from the other side and nearly ripped me off the bed. I let out a terrified shriek and quickly released the blanket. Now shaking and wide awake, I tried to summon the audacity to take a look, but just as I convinced myself that it'd been my imagination, I began to hear slow scratching at the foot of my bed.

With all of my courage drained, I huddled in the middle of my bare bed, failing to hold back tears. I'd convinced myself that the murderer from the book had come for me, and expecting the hideous villain to attack at any second, I began to panic. Acting on instinct, I jumped from my bed and hurtled toward my door. My foot was snaked out from underneath me just as I reached the threshold. As I struggled to see what had hold of my foot, my head struck the floor, and my world went black.

* * *

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I found myself surrounded by gloomy houses. Their grand walls cast long, ominous shadows across my path as I began staggering along the sidewalk. *Where am I?* I wondered, checking every shadow, sure I'd find something lurking there. Growing increasingly nervous, I began to realize that I recognized the house at the very end of the block. I cautiously followed the curve of the street that cut through the neighborhood toward the dilapidated structure, but just as I approached the street's cul de sac, I felt a bony hand grasp my arm. Nearly jumping out of my pants, I turned to see a short, gaunt woman who was now proceeding to drag me away from my destination and toward the house to my right.

"Hurry!" she hissed, clinging to my arm with a surprisingly firm grip. She continued to haul me across the street toward the old, abandoned house and after being thrown through the doorway, I leaned

against the creaky wall, fighting to catch my breath as I stared at the woman in front of me. In the dim light of the foyer, I could now see her wild, red hair and tattered clothes. She could only have been 5'1", but her face, aged by stress, seemed familiar.

"Where did you find my book?" she asked, her dark eyes blazing. She slammed the door, sounding as incredulous as she was angry.

At that moment, I finally figured out who I was dealing with. Ignoring her question, I asked the author of my book to confirm my suspicions, "Are you... Mary Viro?"

"Yes," she applauded me. "You're looking at the very author of the book in which you're trapped," she explained nonchalantly, as if she'd been over this a hundred times.

Pondering her words, I tried to clear up my confusion, "You mean, we're in your book?" She nodded stiffly.

"Who else is here?" I questioned, fearing her answer. At that, Ms. Viro's face, which I'd only ever seen on the inside flap of my book, seemed to darken.

"The villain has killed everyone but me," she answered grimly, leaving me shivering. Without another word, she turned her back to me and sailed down the rickety, wooden stairs to her left that I hadn't noticed before. I raced after her, not knowing what to expect.

"No more questions," she told me in an urgent voice as we managed the ancient stairwell. I tried to focus on her words as she summarized her plan, but I was distracted by my inability to see the endless steps. I only caught the end of her rant, "...determined to fix the mess I've created. Getting rid of him is the only way."

Breathless, we finally reached the bottom of the stairs. The lights flickered on, revealing a lopsided table set in the middle of the unfinished basement.

"How's killing the villain going to stop the book from sucking up more people?" I forced out the words between breaths.

Ms. Viro looked up from the table, where she was sifting through the collection of weapons it held.

"The book is just supplying the villain with more victims," she explained. "I wrote the book from the villain's point of view, so ridding ourselves of him will force the story to end." From the table, she offered me a knife and without a moment's hesitation, took off out the back door. I raced after her, looking for the explanation I wasn't certain I wanted.

"Wait, Ms. Viro!"

She stopped and turned expectantly, her face shadowed by the falling night.

"What's going to happen to us?" I tried to hide my dread.

Ms. Viro looked down at her worn tennis shoes, sending her mop of hair down over her face. "You see, I haven't made it that far," she replied distantly.

Changing the subject, she raised her head and pointed in the direction she'd been running. Her voice hardened, "He resides in the house at the end of the block."

I felt my stomach turn as my eyes rested on the crumbling home. Forcing my fears to the back of my mind, I stumbled through the unkempt backyard as Ms. Viro sped off in that direction.

When we reached the villain's house, we crept around its forbidding brick walls toward the back. Still not completely sure of the plan, I tried to copy Ms. Viro's every move as she carefully calibrated each step. Sliding around the corner of the house, I clung to the knife in my sweaty hands.

We're almost to the back door, I reassured myself. As my tension grew, Ms. Viro seemed to inch further out in front. Trying to remain quiet, I picked up my speed and just as I did, I felt cold hands wrap around my face. I began to struggle, dropping the knife; my screams were muffled by his gnarled fingers, but I managed to gain a glimpse of the horrifying image that filled my nightmares. The villain's pale face, contorted and streaked with scars, was crossed by a merciless smirk. As I protested, he dragged me away from Ms. Viro and into the depths of his chamber.

Mustering up every bit of strength I had left, I kicked and clawed, struggling to break his grip. *He's too*

strong, I realized. My muscles screamed as I was forced down the stairs, toward the horrors that the book revealed were waiting below.

They'd warned me about the book. Now it's too late, I told myself, remembering Karen and Mr. Linden. *They'll never know what happened to me*. In my mind, I pictured my mother finding my room empty and Ms. Viro left to face her creation alone. *No one will ever know*. Submitting to the villain, my last moments filled with terror, I now understood why the book's title, framed by gold leaves, had been *The Vanishing*.

Anastasia Cesaro

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The Pacer

One. The chime sent rows of pattering feet across the gym floor. A well mannered spacing came between breaths. Inhale, exhale, no further thought. First the ball and then the heel crossed the red line. Silence, the waiting game comes into play. Shoulders turned back towards the door.

Two. A delayed start. My eyes focused on the Mannheim jersey jogging a few feet before my own. Back at the line, waiting for the last stride and the third chime...

Ten. Less space was left between the bell. I kept up, pacing myself to the tick of the tape. My breaths splayed and went by with unnoticeable transition. Heads followed as two feet, far behind, move quickly towards...eleven. Taylor missed the bell and now trotted up to the stage where she swung her feet and cheered on the remaining. It only seemed to grow easier.

Twenty. Our crowd shrunk down to a cluster. Keeping up with the bell required a half sprint and a prompt turn and load after the anticipated ring. My chest tightened, but not enough to hazard my pace. I was okay, a few more laps and I'd be on my own and I'd feel no regret in stopping.

Fourty. I had no knowledge of my body's reaction. My face blushed pink as raw beef and sweat dripped into my eyes, blurring my vision and burning me blind. Air came in faster but my body refused to collect it all. And my mind refused to let me give in.

Fifty. It was me and Benji. I followed a step behind inhaling loud through the phlegm suffocating my lungs. I was choking on my own breath, and I was in a constant continuous coughing fit that left me struggling for time to breathe. Each time we hit the line, the bell rang no more than a second later. I was stupid, I'd say I still am. I hate to be beaten.

Sixty. There was no space between breaths. I took a long hard inhale through my nose, but my lungs built up a wall. I struggled to gain oxygen and my heart started to a drumroll. I could feel short fast beats in my fingers. The pounding of feet against the stage subsided. I found all I could hear were the fast raspy breaths reaching out from my lips. Why won't he just stop? I knew myself. I knew I'd never stop until I saw Benji jog back to the stage.

Seventy. Benji missed the 63rd. It was me and only me; twenty-three eyes on me as I refused to stop. My lungs were solid. I tried to breathe but I couldn't. I wheezed through cracked lips, and my head throbbed while my eyes bounced in and out of consciousness. I hacked viciously, until I tasted the bloody tang of copper pennies. I never saw the blood leave my body, but I swore I could taste it come up from the back of my throat, dripping over the sides of my tongue, clouding my palette. Why didn't I stop? I will never know. Attempt to do better than just the best in my class? See how far I could push my limits? Maybe I wasn't thinking anything at all, just running because I could, because I couldn't feel anything anymore, because I was losing control over my systems. I will never be able to say why I

kept running, but part of me is glad I did, glad I felt what I did, what I had to feel.

Seventy five. I sprinted to the line, my heart racing, head pounding, and my lungs on the verge of combustion. My eyelids fell for only a second and-smack! My right shoulder collided with the wall and I fell to the ground. I wasn't awake, but I could imagine the room of students running to my aid, mouths wide open, wondering what had just happened. I like to imagine it as a dramatic scene in an action movie, where the heroic main character is shot, and a whole theater of adoring spectators wince and gasp in sympathy for a character they'd grown to love. A teacher would rush me to the nurse and my parents would be called, and I would have no memory of the fear in my friends' eyes as I lay there unconscious.

Eighty four. My eyes shifted to my hands. The nurse pulled the clamp off of my finger and the "bpm" dialed down to "0". I forced myself to sit up straight. My lungs were sore. I felt as if weights had been tied to the cage of my ribs. My mother squeezed my wrist and kissed my forehead, while my dad forced a dixie cup of cold water down my throat. I tried for my inhaler, but I was struck dizzy and fell back, neck to the bed.

"You're okay. You've taken it four times already."

"I have?"

"Yes, you woke up only a minute after hitting the wall. You were awake for a while but fell asleep again."

"Oh..Oh-oh yeah I remember."

"Mommy, I thought I was going to die. I thought that when I hit that wall, that was it. I thought I would just stop breathing. Mommy, what if I had died on the gym floor? What if I never got to grow up? What if I never got to get married, or have my own children, or get to see you and daddy to say goodbye? What if I were dead right now?.."

"Baby, stop. You don't have to worry about that. You won't ever have to worry about that. You're gonna live a long long time. We just have to be more careful from now on. Okay?"

"Yeah.."

"Mommy...who was that man?"

"What man?"

"The man who stood by me. The man who held my hand when the nurse yelled at herself as she checked my heart. He held my hand and made my heart not burn so much as it did before."

My mom tilted her head and looked back at Mrs. Simon.

"Now Mrs. Cesaro, I can assure you there was no one else here in the room with your daughter. I remember. I was well passed horrified after seeing your little girl's heart rate. I would've taken her straight to the hospital, but something strange happened...I ran to grab her inhaler right after I saw her

condition, but as soon as I had gotten back to her, her heart rate had decreased drastically. It was almost normal. I have never seen anything like it. A heart rate drop almost 100 bpm in a few seconds! Well it almost seems impossible.”

“He did it mommy. The man. Now don’t think I’m crazy, but I think it was Jesus.”

My mother only stared my way and looked over my face. She said nothing, and neither did I. I never again spoke of what I saw. I never told my best friend. I never let it escape myself. It was something I couldn’t believe at the time. I thought myself crazy, loony, delusional. I mean, I definitely wasn’t in the best state of health in that moment. I denied the experience in itself. Maybe I was right. Maybe it was nothing, a hallucination of sorts. But sometimes I wonder if that day, in my fifth grade gym class, I was given a second chance. A chance for what I was given, I’m not sure if I’ll ever know. However, one thing I know for sure is that I wasn’t brought onto this earth just to exist. Maybe I’m still here today because I got lucky. Or maybe I’m here because I can make a difference. Maybe.

Cristyn Chauvenne

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Marnie Jenkins

Category: Flash Fiction

Sympathy For The Devil

He wasn't happy. He never truly had been. It was no secret to anyone that Parker Williams was an unhappy man. He was one who believed that he had nothing going for him. He was happy before his mom died. It went downhill from there. After his mother passed away from ovarian cancer, his father died of a broken heart just 3 months after. Subsequently, his sister slid off the road during a blizzard and was killed on impact; she left behind two beautiful, young daughters.

Parker's misery surrounded him like a big blanket. It had reached its tipping point, he decided. The weight of the world on his frail shoulders was becoming too much for him. Parker's mind raced as he sat in his favorite chair in the living room of his miniscule New York City apartment. A gun in one hand, a lit cigarette in the other.

"Is it worth it?" He whispered to himself Parker took a long drag from the burning cigarette. He shook his head. "It was never worth it." He whispered to himself. Four months ago, Parker was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer.

"It's aggressive," His doctor told him. "I'd start making funeral arrangements if I were you, Mr. Williams."

"But you're not me, are you?" He whispered almost inaudibly to himself as he reflected on that moment. "Are you?!" He yelled, as he threw the cigarette on the floor and stomped on it until it was nothing but ashes against the dark wooden floors of his apartment. He slumped back in his chair and began to cough violently. He ran to the bathroom and spit into the sink. Blood was splattered into the sink as he coughed and slid down the drain. Parker caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. His vibrant, chocolate brown eyes had faded and his jet black hair had lost its color. He was dying. It took him a while to come to terms with the fact that he was dying, but he did eventually. Death was always something Parker had never been afraid of. But now that he was staring death in the face, he was terrified.

A clatter from his kitchen awoke him from his daze. He straightened in his chair and leaned forward, peering into his kitchen. His dark brown eyes searched for the source of the noise. He saw a woman standing in his kitchen. She looked up at him with bright green innocent eyes. Her blonde hair shined in the light of the moon that poured into the kitchen from his window. Clad in ripped jeans and a leather jacket. She smirked.

"Who are you?!" Parker yelled, as he grabbed a knife off the counter. The woman placed her hands on the counter gently.

"I think you and I both know the answer to that question, Parker." She said. Her voice low and calm, as if not to startle anyone.

"How do you know my name?"

"Again, you and I both know the answer to that."

"No, I don't. Who are you?"

She sighed then began to walk to him.

"I'll give you a hint." She boosted herself onto the counter and began to swing her legs.

"You call me a criminal, but do you know my crime?" Parker shot her a confused look.

"I loved God too much. I loved Him more than anyone else. But then He went and created *you*. He just expected us to shift our love from one holy being to another. Everyone was fine with it, but I just didn't stand for it. I refused to do it. And then I got cast down from Heaven. And now, I sit on a fiery throne in Hell." She ran her hands through her hair and rested her hands at her side. "Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name."

"Lucifer." Parker whispered.

"You guessed it." She smiled.

"No," He shook his head. "No. Lucifer isn't real. He's a myth."

"Do I look like a myth to you?"

Parker walked into the living room, dazed. The woman followed.

"You," He began, and pointed at the woman. "are not real. You cannot be real."

"Well," She said, as she sat on the arm of Parker's chair. "I am."

"I don't believe you."

"I never asked you to believe me, Parker. That's not what I came here to ask of you." Her voice low and sultry. "No, I came here to ask something very different of you." As she smirked, her eyes turned jet black.

"What's that?" Parker spoke, his voice riddled with fear.

"Rule Hell with me." She said.

Parker was dazed. The only thing he managed to say was "Why?"

"Because I'm dying?" Parker said, a tone of denial seeped through.

"Pretty much." She shrugged. "Less time to decide if you want to be my right hand man or not."

Parker's mind raced as he took everything in. Not only did Lucifer stand in his living room but she also wanted him to rule Hell with her.

"So..." Lucifer whispered as she ran her cold hands through his hair. "Whaddya say?"

The thoughts in his mind were not normal ones. He normally didn't think about ruling Hell with Lucifer. There was nothing for him to live for, at this point. He would leave no one behind and no one would miss him. Why not rule Hell, a place Parker thought to be fake until just a few minutes prior, with Lucifer? The thought felt wrong in his mind, like a funny taste on your tongue. Parker collected his thought and came to a consensus.

He straightened his back against the chair and looked straight ahead at the painting on his living room wall. The bright colors becoming swirls as he focused on his thoughts.

He then closed his eyes and whispered a quiet "Yes."

He kept his eyes tightly closed as he felt his skin burn and Lucifer cackled somewhere in the distance.

Tony Chen

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Grab My Hand

100 left. The sheer cold keeps me alert. A faint rain pelts my face as I run. I'm gasping for air and my legs are prepared to buckle. My ears roar with the din of 1,000 waterfalls while my eyes are fixated on salvation: the finish line.

I finish the rep and the world blurs around me. The roar in my head increases tenfold and my upper body collapses, supported only by my hands on my knees.

"Five more," a weary teammate announces.

"I think I'm going to die," I breathe, looking at Michael, the pack leader.

"You're doing great," he replies nonchalantly, "Keep it up. We only have five more to go." He turns to face the rest of the pack of weary runners, "Ok guys, we need to support Jorge. Stay together."

We run the rep again, and again, and again, and again. Each time I plunge myself into hell, my breaths shortening and my legs jellifying with each successive rep.

"You're slowing down," John scolds during each rep, in a tone that seems more threat than fact.

Following this often comes a "You're doing great, keep it up!" from Michael, who forces the words out between breaths.

Each time I slow down. Each time I'm apprehended, then encouraged. Each time my lungs scream and my legs moan and the roaring amplifies in my ears.

The time for the final rep finally comes. The ordeal about to begin seemed impossible for me to overcome. I lean forward, my mind empty, my ears perked and my eyes focused front and center.

"Go!"

I bolt off the line, feeling the burden of weariness, yet surging forward, feeling power in every stride and control in every breath. Two members of my pack sprint past me, eager to outshine each other and run the rep with the best of the best. This leaves me running side-by-side with Michael.

At the curve, my legs begin to feel less and less responsive to the power that I hold in my mind and more and more responsive to the fatigue I am succumbing to in my body. My body strains to maintain pace with Michael because falling back on the last rep could only mean a disgrace to my name.

With 150 meters left to go, the formerly strong "thump thump" of my feet slowly transitions to a dull "thud thud".

I can't do it, I concede, the roar in my head crescendoing to a deafening, perpetual blast. I'm can't finish. Everyone's going to think I'm...

"Jorge!" Michael yells between controlled breaths, his voice piercing the roar like the sound of a familiar voice emanating from a crowd of strangers, "GRAB MY HAND!" He positions his hand palm-up behind him and extends his arm towards me.

In my stupor, I scarcely register what he's saying. I feel a strain inside my head, and my body surges forward to slap his hand, but then immediately resumes its retreat from physical agony.

"NO Jorge, GRAB MY HAND!" Michael demands. He slackens his pace, essentially sacrificing his own workout, just to ensure that I will do as he says.

Compiling all of my strength, I command my body to surge forward one last time. I lunge for his hand and finally manage to grab hold of it.

Michael pulls me forward, propelling me past him and providing just enough momentum for me to reach the end, and we complete the rep together. As I finish, an overwhelming sense of accomplishment rushes through my exhausted frame.

It's over; I did it. It's over; I did it. It's over; I did it... Michael pulled me up with him. We did it.

John is decelerating. I notice his familiar breathing growing fainter and fainter. I turn my head and notice that his face is twisted in discomfort. His body heaves with each breath while his legs jerk with each step.

I think of how easy would be to just keep running and pay John no heed. My breathing is under control; my legs work fine; my mind is relaxed. I can ditch John without a problem to ensure that I'll always be a faster runner than him.

But then I glance at Michael, and I remember the roaring in my ears. I remember the strain in my brain and the stupor and the pain. Most prominently, I remember the hand outstretched, and the loyal teammate who saved me from it all.

I slacken my pace and retreat until I finally hear John's breath near me.

"Keep it up dude, you're doing great," I assure him. "Come on, let's catch back up to the pack."

John accelerates, grimacing all the while. I soon reconcile with the pack, with John running right behind me as if I were dragging him by some invisible string.

Sydney Cimarolli

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Webster Groves High School, Webster Groves, MO

Educator: Katie Guymon

Category: Short Story

The Memory Be Green

Ruth ran her hand over the wooden box, the one she'd thought was so lovely when she'd purchased it at the local thrift store—such a lucky find. She recalled how long she'd spent saving up for it—babysitting the neighborhood brats day in and day out, sweeping floors, and washing dishes until her skin on her hands shriveled uncomfortably—all so that she'd have a place to store her trinkets. Ruth had been so enamored with the box's golden adornments, specifically its shining lock—she had nothing to hide, but it was romantic to pretend that she did. Ruth had fancied herself a mysterious, enigmatic girl, when really, she'd always been a rather open book.

The box no longer looked as beautiful to Ruth as it once had. The allure was gone, left when the box collected an impossibly thick layer of dust and when its golden decorations turned an unsightly shade of bronze, the result of neglect spanning over the decades that it had been forgotten about. Ruth had a much different connection with the box now than she'd had when she was young.

Ruth's hands shook as she inserted the key into the lock. She hadn't been excited when she'd found the key, only apprehensive. Ruth didn't remember what she'd put in the box, didn't remember much of anything these days, if she could help it. She turned the key. It clicked into the now dusty air, and a strange calm settled like a blanket over Ruth. She threw open the lid, now driven by excitement rather than fear.

The first thing she saw was a dress, silver sequins dancing off of the deep blue fabric, like moonlight on the ocean at midnight. She remembered doing karaoke in that dress, how the crowd had seemed to melt at her command, how she'd felt like a queen. Most vividly, she recalled the man who'd approached her afterwards, lanky and sleek, words dripping from his mouth like honey. He'd likened her lips to a flower that bloomed when they opened, said hearing her voice was akin to watching the sunrise paint a garden of colors across crisp Alaskan snow. He would know, he'd said. He was from Alaska.

Ruth had met enough silver tongued men in her life to be wary, but she was too filled with ecstasy not to let herself believe him. The man was not handsome enough to charm her, but was entertaining enough to fill the night with meaningless talk. He was a fool, but of course he had thought he was fooling Ruth. She remembered giggling as she detailed the overblown, florid tilt of his conversation to her friends over coffee and stale bagels the next morning.

Ruth set the dress to the side and tried to forget about it. Men didn't approach her anymore, except, of course, to ask her if she needed help crossing the street. She always brushed them off. Their earnestness saddened her and besides, she wasn't yet so deteriorated that she couldn't walk some thirty feet by herself. She prayed that she'd never be.

Ruth looked back into the box and this time, a book caught her eye. *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare was written at the top in rich red letters, and the cover was ornately illustrated with a portrait of a hollowed out Hamlet holding the skull of Yorick and looking quite skeletal himself. Flowers poked out of Yorick's eye sockets; Ruth had once found that oddly amusing, but now found it depressing.

The book had been given to Ruth by her best friend at the time, Martha, who was playing Ophelia in a local production. She'd begged Ruth to read the play before she saw it, claimed she'd understand it far better that way. Ruth remembered feeling guilty—the extravagant book must have cost Martha a

ton, and she had no money to spare. Martha, though, was prone to excessive spending whenever she landed a job. She'd felt like such a star being Ophelia, so glamorous. She truly believed she'd make it big on Broadway, then, and Ruth had believed it right along with her. Ruth assumed that dream had gone up in smoke, as she'd been an avid New York theatregoer for a decade or two and never heard a word about Martha.

Ruth had lost track of Martha far too quickly, as close as they were. She wished she could get in touch with her, wished even more that she'd never lost touch with her, but she didn't know where to start. She didn't even know if Martha was alive or dead. *To be or not to be*—Ruth's inner dialogue was beginning to mirror Hamlet's these days.

She set the book carefully on top of the dress. Ruth needed to remember Martha, even if she it hurt her. She owed her old friend that much.

To Ruth's disappointment and relief, the rest of the box appeared to be filled with meaningless junk that she'd simply been too much of a hoarder to throw away. In the corner of the box, peering out from a faded green t-shirt, was an item Ruth thought she'd never have to see again. Her wedding ring.

Fingers trembling, trying to remain as steady as possible, Ruth reached for the ring. Once she held it in her hand, she immediately dropped it, as though it was a burning coal. It seemed to fall in slow motion, producing a muffled, anticlimactic thump as it collided with the carpet. Ruth decided not to pick it up again, merely stared at it in shock. It had been years since she'd even thought about it, since she'd even thought about him.

She was immediately bombarded by memories, suffocated by the clarity of them. Images of Ruth's rose colored days appeared in her consciousness with so much detail, it was as if she could leap into them and return to that time if she wanted to. Of course, she wanted to. But of course, she couldn't. Ruth remained painfully rooted in the present, despite being overpowered by the past. After a few moments, she was able to slow the memories, dissipate their intensity. Ruth dug back through the box for what she knew was resting at the bottom of it—the photograph.

Ruth gazed through blurry eyes at the faded picture of her and Henry, crying tears she'd put off crying for so long. She'd been void of any emotion since his death, closed off anything that she knew could hurt her. She'd never truly grieved for him. After all he'd been to her, that hadn't been fair. Ruth dug her fingernails into her frail skin, an attempt to ground herself in any fraction of the pain she deserved for wronging Henry in this way.

But Ruth could not punish herself for so long. Instead, once her eyes were clear and it was no longer a danger, she drove to the supermarket, bought the most beautiful flowers she could afford—rich reds and pale pinks that bled together like an Impressionist painting—and took the long way to the cemetery. It took Ruth an extended period of aimless wandering before she found his tombstone, black marble glinting in the snowy sunlight. The bitter air painted her cheeks with blush as she kneeled in front of him, the love she'd lost too soon and mourned too late.

Jessica Clark

Age: Unknown, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Marnie Jenkins

Category: Poetry

The Irony of the Seasons:

Spring: I can't wait for Spring.

When the sun starts to shine brighter and

The flowers take their first breath as they are reborn.

When children start to shrug off their jackets and

Chase each other in the fresh breeze.

It's here, but I sneeze as the pollen tickles my nose.

It's here, but I realize that I still have three more months of school.

It's here, but all I can do is think of Summer.

Summer: I can't wait for Summer.

When the dark hallways of school will no longer be my endless reality and

The sunlight seeping through my blinds will be my only alarm.

When families go on vacation together and

Friends that distance forced apart can reunite once more.

It's here, but the squelching heat is inescapable.

It's here, but my brain is starting to turn into mush.

It's here, but all that is on my mind is Fall.

Fall: I can't wait for Fall.

When the trees turn into vibrant flames that lick the blue sky and

The leaves start to crunch under my shoes as I walk.

When I can pull out my dusting sweaters and jeans and

I get to start new classes where exciting discoveries can be made.

It's here, but school starts to get boring.

It's here, but there's always more leaves to be raked off the ground.

It's here, but all I want is the whiteness of Winter.

Winter: I can't wait for Winter.

When Christmas lights start to appear on the houses and

Holiday festivities are always right around the corner.

When the frosty air forces us to stay inside and drink hot cocoa and

The flurries of snow allows little kids to make snowmen.

It's here, but I forgot how the furious wind bites like a hungry wolf.

It's here, but the leafless trees are making the town look dead.

It's here, but all I need is the brightness of Spring.

Spring: I can't wait for Spring.

Shyla Cohen

Age: 15, Grade: 8

School Name: Bode Middle School, Saint Joseph, MO

Educator: Josie Clark

Category: Flash Fiction

Three

Rocks crunched beneath his feet as the wind attempted to move his cropped hair, but to no avail. The man didn't know where he was going, as long as it was away from there, it didn't really matter. A foolish man, he was. Walking to nowhere with nothing. No food, no water, no clothes, nothing. Yet, did he particularly care? No. All he wanted was to get away from that dastardly and atrocious place. He didn't think about where he would go, about how he wish he had never left despite his contradicting thoughts.

Walking onward, he took in the surrounding area. Trees dancing to a noiseless merry tune. Flowers gently swaying with the wind. Bushes trying to join in, yet failing with their chaotic movements.

It was so much better here, no one to tell him what he should and shouldn't do. He could finally make his own decisions. No one to tell him which path he should take.

There, lying in front of him were three paths. The left was sunny and beautiful with flowers and animals jovially running aimlessly. Bleak and dismal was what the middle path appeared to be with the sun seemingly only halfway up. Mud coated the pathway while trees barely stood, already nearly dead. The last path was the worst of them all. A rotting, putrid carcass lay in the middle of the moss encrusted course; the trees couldn't even be called that, and everything was black. Despair rolled in waves just from the sight.

Not much of a decision, thought the ignorant man. Of course the best path take would be the cheerful and sunny one. Grinning, he pressed onward down the joyful lane, blissfully unaware of his mistake.

Allie Corbin

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

The Donor

I watched him pace back and forth in the kitchen, eyeballing the calendar as he went. He massaged his temple as he leaned on the island, resting his elbow on the cold surface.

“I’m sorry but we can’t do thursday.” He groaned, slowly closing his eyes, “Maybe sometime next week?”

A muffled, but stern, voice rang through the phone. Obviously not pleased.

“No, no, Dr. Franklin, I’m sorry. You’re too busy and we don’t have the money. I understand.” He heavily breathed, arching his back, “Thank you for your time, goodbye.”

After sliding the phone onto the counter he looked down on me, my face buried in bills. His face went to vexed to concerned.

“Hun, you don’t need to do that. I already said I got it covered.”

I glanced at him and back down, scanning the table. A few layers of paper and envelopes made the table look bigger, petrifying. Each letter was just a way to worsen our mood and kill our hope.

“I just thought I could help, that’s all.” I mumbled, looking back into his soft slate eyes.

He smiled at my remark as he ambled towards me, not leaving contact.

“Hey, it’s gonna be alright. I promise.” He whispered into my ear, kneeling down besides me.

Those words stuck like bubblegum in my brain. Garrett never made a promise unless it was true. So I believed him.

“Yeah okay, I’ll let you deal with this.”

“Good, now I’m leaving around six tonight to head into work, Chris says they need help rebooting something, I don’t know. But I’ll be home as soon as possible.” He announced, kissing the top of my head, and lifting me out of the chair.

“Hey, what are you doing?” I giggled, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“I know how stubborn you are, I’ll say I have something under control and the next thing I know you’re doing exactly what I told you not to do. Now is that true?” He smirked, bending down to grab my legs, cradling me like a baby.

“Only sometimes.” I winked, burying my pale face into his chest, inhaling his cologne.

“Hm, yeah. Sometimes.” He smiled, rolling his eyes as we moved from the kitchen to the living room.

Garrett laid me down on the couch and bundled me up with a blanket, sitting besides my feet afterwards. Without hesitation, I threw my legs over his lap. He smiled and began to rub my legs.

“What do you wanna watch?” He asked, picking up the remote.

I shrugged, leaning upwards towards him, “I’m just cold.”

I unraveled myself from the blanket and crawled on top of him, wrapping myself and him up again.

“There, better.” I whispered.

He grinned and caressed my exposed head, pulling me in tighter. His breathing became spaced and heavy as our faces came closer, inches apart. I closed my eyes as he leaned upwards towards my face. But his breathing and head abruptly stopped when the doorbell chimed. Both of our heads whipped towards the front door down the hallway.

“I’ll get it.” I groaned, patting on his chest before I got off.

I reached for my hat on the coffee table and threw it on as I rushed to the door. Before I could reach for the handle, it swished open, sending me backwards so I wouldn't get hit.

"Uh, hey?" I asked, shielding my eyes as rays of light from the sunset blasted my eyes.

"Oh, Heather. You can't forget girls night!" She squealed, attacking me with a giant bear hug.

"How could I forget!" I shouted back, smirking.

"You did. But that doesn't matter. We're leaving now."

I stepped to the side and peered down the hallway, searching for Garrett under the blanket, "Goodbye babe, I'll see you when you get home from work."

His head popped up when he heard my voice, "Bye, I love you."

Jennifer grabbed my hand and yanked me out the door before I could say anything back, rushing us to her car.

"So Garrett has to work tonight?" She asked, buckling up and reaching for the keys from her pocket.

"Yeah Chris said he needed to go in and reboot something. It's weird because he does that weekly. Other days it's someone was sick so he filled in for them." I answered back, buckling up as well.

"That's weird. But what really matters is that he gets paid, right?" She asked as the engine revved alive, backing out of my driveway.

"No, which is completely stupid." I sighed, staring out the window.

"Has he talked to someone about that? That's completely outrageous."

When I was about to speak, an obnoxious tune came from my side pocket. I slid it out and answered it.

"Hello?" I asked, still staring out the window.

"Hey-o, it's Garrett's wife, right?" He slurred. Loud music and laughing busted through the phone and into the conversation.

"Uh, yeah. Who's this?" I asked again, a little louder this time. Jennifer quickly looked over at me and gave me a questioned look.

"What! It's obviously Chris. Garrett's, like, bestest friend in the worl-dah."

Yeah. Intoxicated Chris was his second side. The "life of the party".

"Oh, hey Chris. Garrett's at work remember. You sent him there to reboot something for work."

"What? No I didn't, haha. I was, uh, calling you because the home phone wouldn't answer and Garrett wouldn't answer. Duh."

I had to take in Chris's words. I repeated it a few times and then it delivered.

"Hey, have you been sending Garrett at all to reboot things at work in the past month?" I asked, so concerned Jennifer stopped in a Taco Bell parking lot. She raised her eyebrows at me, code for what's happening.

"Uh, nope. Wait. Let me think. No don't ring a bell."

"Oh okay. Thanks."

"Woah, ma'am. I ain't done with you. Do Garrett and you want to come over to my house? It'll be fun."

"I'm good. Goodbye, Chris." I uttered, hanging up and sliding it back into my pocket.

Before I could turn and explain what had happened, I bursted into tears. I hid my face with my hands, trying my best to stop this tsunami of tears. I then balled up, holding myself as tight as possible.

"Oh, hun. It'll be alright." She whispered, leaning in closer as she rubbed my back.

I was gasping for air as I gazed at her in between my elbows. I couldn't get any words out. I was completely speechless.

"What happened? Who called? Do I need to beat someone up?" She asked, tilting her head downwards to get a peek at my face.

I couldn't help but barely grin at her remark. But I scrabbled for words as I was about to explain, "Chris, he uh, just called."

I took a deep breath, exhaled, and untangled myself, “Garrett has been lying to me for a month now about working extra. For all I know he could be having an affair or getting himself into trouble.”

“Well he said he’d be at work. Let’s check there first and if he isn’t there we’ll call him. Does that sound good?”

“Yeah. But then again, Chris was drunk. So we could be freaking out over nothing. Just because of Chris.” I sniffed, wiping my nose with my sleeve. I patted around my eyes, getting them as dry as possible without irritating them.

“Well we won’t know until we go there.” She backed out of the parking lot and onto the road, heading towards the highway.

There was only silence as we made our way to Garrett, hoping he was at work. Sure enough as we pulled in his car was there. But he wasn’t alone.

“Who’s car is that?” Jennifer asked, parking as far away from him as possible. We weren’t as visible as he was, for he had a lamppost hanging over him only a couple feet away from his car.

I shook my head, leaning closer towards the front of the car, “Is someone inside?”

Right as those words left my mouth, Garrett hopped out of his car and sauntered towards the mysterious person’s car. He opened their door, and held out his hand. A woman’s head peered out of the shadows and arose towards him. She gave a bright and vibrant smile, showing her pearly whites. She leaned in and Garrett hugged her.

She wore a knee length, black, cocktail dress. Her hair was curled to her shoulders.

“I’m going in.” I yelled, jumping out and running towards her car.

As I approached them, Garrett whipped his head to the side at me, his eyes widened.

“What are you doing?” He asked, completely baffled.

“I don’t know, what are you doing?” I yelled, looking from him to her and back.

“I can explain.” He whispered, now looking at the woman.

“That would be nice.” I glared, crossing my arms.

“So this is Beth.” He said, motioning at her and looking back at me, “She is a doctor. Now I know we’ve been searching for donors and no one came up or the surgery was too expensive. Well I know Beth since Highschool and when I found her I told her about you and she said she’d do it for us cheap. But the thing is, I’ll have to donate one of my kidney’s.”

I didn’t know what to feel, completely cross or happy. But all I did was come closer and give him a hug.

“I’m sorry.”

“Hey, what’d I say. I promised everything was gonna be alright.”

Varun Devraj

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Amy Doyle

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The Dilemma of the Middle

Prick.

I feel a prick, a tiny green prick. It is not that painful at first, but the feeling lingers. Slowly, the feeling becomes larger and deadlier, blocking out all my other thoughts. It bores into my heart, constricting me like a boa squeezing its prey to the point of suffocation, and the pain threatens to overwhelm and consume me. I will not let it win today. Focusing all my mental strength on the stifling feeling of the prick, I push it away from my thoughts. But the feeling always remains, like a shadow. A shadow of envy and jealousy. A shadow of poison.

It's the day. Acceptance day.

Having just finished my AP Biology test, I am curious to find out if my 17 year-old brother had been accepted into his dream college. As I walk over to my brother sitting at the back of the classroom, I look up and see his face: anxious but excited. When he opens up the email on his phone, he turns it in my direction. I see an orange tiger, but nothing else.

As I scroll down, I find the word that had been eluding me the whole time: "Congratulations." My older brother had just been accepted into Princeton University and I was so excited for him! I couldn't believe that MY brother had received admission into Princeton, one of the most prestigious universities in the country.

But wait? What was that?...

Mentally, I feel something constricting me, squeezing my heart from the inside, the same suffocating feeling as before. This time, however, the feeling is more powerful and I struggle to suppress it.

Prick.

Anna. No, it is not a female name. Nor is it a word that has accidentally been typed. No, Anna (pronounced ah-nA) means older brother in the Tamil language. Older brothers are generally considered examples of responsibility and future caretakers of the family name in my culture. And my older brother had just proven that with his acceptance into Princeton. I do value my older brother and definitely look to him for help and guidance whenever I need it, but sometimes the pressure of him being such an outstanding example is too overwhelming. However, not only do I have to live up to my older brother's example, but I also have to ensure that I set a good example for my younger brother. I have my own dilemma: I am an Anna and I have an Anna. My dilemma is the dilemma of the middle.

Jungle, savannah, mountain, arctic, desert, lake, and farm. All these places are the homes of animals. Habitats. Places they belong.

We play with our toy animals, roaring like lions, chirping like birds, and squeaking like mice. My older brother and I are attempting to make a zoo with different habitats where all the animals should live. I pick up a tiger and try to place it in the savannah habitat. My six year old brother looks at me and says, "No! A tiger goes in the jungle." My four year old brain wants to tell him that the tiger should go in the savannah because it's MY tiger and I think it lives in the savannah. But instead, I nod my head, looking up at him with wide eyes, and place the tiger in the jungle. I think, "How is my Anna so smart and confident? How does he know where the tiger's home is?" However, soon I begin to question myself. "Where is MY home? Where do I belong as the middle brother?" As I ponder these questions, my stomach tightens and I recognize a familiar constricting feeling.

Prick.

"ANNA, COME AND PLAY WITH ME!"

My six-year old younger brother shouts my name from the basement, vainly trying to make me get up from my comfortable seat on the couch upstairs. My ten-year old self sighs and tunes out his bothersome voice, trying to concentrate on my book, enraptured by the story of Harry Potter and his adventures as a wizard. Deep in the magical world of Harry Potter, I am suddenly jolted into reality by my dad's loud voice. "Your brother is calling you to play! You should feel so lucky that you have someone to interact with. Go down and play with him!" Initially, I want to rebel and sit there with my eyes and ears closed until my father leaves the room. Instead, I get up and leave the cozy warmth of the sofa. As I stomp downstairs, I feel hot headed, and angry thoughts start running through my head. "It doesn't make any sense? Why does he always get what he wants?" These angry thoughts slowly turn into jealousy. I feel smothered, as though a great weight is crushing me.

Prick.

I feel stretched and squeezed all at the same time. I am pulled on either side and crushed until I am insignificant. When I go to one side, the other side wrenches me back. I am a tiny squirrel, looking up at two trees: one young and needing attention, the other imposing, tall and majestic. I see my two brothers. One of them is small and needs help and guidance, and the other is a shining example, perfect in all ways, a giant in time.

I don't know which way to go. I feel as though I am a lost animal stuck between lengthening shadows. But, I resolve to push on, to find myself a home. I have to, otherwise I will be consumed. I have to make my own path, my own destiny, find myself a tree to live in. But, wherever I go, the two trees follow. Wherever I go, their shadows lengthen and threaten to engulf me. I am jealous because I want to be one of the trees. I don't want to be a lonely squirrel forever looking for a home and a place to call my own. But I must never succumb. I must keep searching for my place.

I'm at a party having fun playing games and talking to my friends. All of a sudden, I hear snippets of conversation among the adults above the din of voices. The words jump out at me, imprinting themselves in my brain.

“His brother is so accomplished! No wonder he got into Princeton...”

“His older brother is the president of the debate club and of the Model United Nations club!”

“His older brother got a perfect score on the ACT...”

I feel it again. A small poke, but this time I am aware of it, and it feels stronger.

Prick.

Suddenly, the adults turn towards me, trapping me in their criticizing gaze. I feel like the helpless squirrel once more, now cornered on all sides between a pack of hungry tigers. The adults start lecturing me, and their gossipy remarks punch me one by one in the face.

“You should also get into an Ivy League school!”

“Why aren't you doing as many clubs as your older brother is? I'm sure you will become president of the same clubs he was president of in your senior year.”

“Why don't you already have a perfect ACT score?”

The constricting feeling now starts. The envy and jealousy is slowly scrunching me tighter and tighter, making me feel nauseous.

Prick. Prick... prick.

Poisonous envy overpowers me in a matter of seconds. Attempting to free myself of the jealousy, I want to shout, “I am my OWN person! Stop judging me as though I'm a digital copy of my older brother; I'm only a sophomore! I have my own talents, my own weaknesses, my own aspirations!” However, as hard as I try, the words don't come out: I can feel the envy stuck in my throat. I swallow my jealousy, and it drops down into my stomach like a 50 pound weight, a heaviness that drags me down. The adults turn around and start chattering with each other, dismissing me as though I'm a miniscule slug.

Defeated, I walk back to my friends, and join them to play a game of Apples to Apples. The category for this round is

“average.” Average meaning ordinary, standard, mediocre. I immediately think of the word “middle.” Middle brother.

The Oxford Dictionary defines the word “middle” as “intermediate in rank, quality, or ability.” However, I believe middle is not just simply an “intermediate” space, a grey space where everything is the same. Middle is unique and different. Middle is a mesh, a mixing of different styles. Middle is flexibility. Middle is the best, and the worst, of two vastly different worlds. Middle connects people, forms a common ground. Middle has ups and downs, achievements and failures.

I am the middle brother, but I am NOT a middle ground, a grey space that is simply an “intermediate.” I don't want to be the average brother; instead, I want to learn from my failures and accomplishments. As I continue my journey into adulthood, I realize that I will soon be thrust out into the real world. A world where creativity and uniqueness is valued, where I can shape my own destiny.

I will succeed, but I will succeed in my own way. I know that my brothers will not always be around to influence me, so I must be my own person. I have to nurture my own tree out of the ground and build myself a stable home that will withstand the winds of time. I have been overshadowed by two trees, larger and more intimidating than me. I am ready to break out into the sunlight.

The feeling of the prick is still present, and I don't think it will ever leave me. It still suddenly appears in unexpected situations, testing my willpower to subdue it. The feeling still tries to control me with its crushing grip. However, I will never let it consume me. Instead, I am learning that I must focus on the benefits of being a middle child: the ability to make the best of both worlds, the unique perspective of the center, the potential to bring people together on common ground.

Middle is not a dilemma anymore. It's actually the best position to be.

Maddy Duncan

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The Last Lesson

The thick soles of my worn shoes grazed the court as they danced along the white baseline. They forced me towards the pale hash that marked the court's center in a hasty attempt to recover. My shoe's edge narrowly met the hash before eagerly propelling me back in the same direction with a forceful push. My eyes concentrated on the racquet my coach held, swinging in a constant rhythm as he fed each tennis ball. My deep breaths became desperate pants for air as I worked. With every forehand, my once tight ponytail surrendered another strand of hair into my eyes. "Two more!" my coach hollered from across the net as his racquet made contact with the yellow ball. *Small steps*, I reminded myself as it approached, *set your racquet back quickly, bend your knees, accelerate through the ball, and follow through across your shoulder*. "One," I wheezed as my eyes followed the ball's flight from the face of my racquet to the opposite side of the court, landing perfectly within the target marked by vibrant orange cones.

Just one more left. My tongue screamed for a drop of cold water while my muscles tensed in anticipation for the final ball. Reminders swam continuously through my mind as I stared down the yellow blur rushing towards me: *crossover step, shuffle, bend your knees, drop your racquet face, brush up*. "Two," I gasped as my outstretched arm pulled my stubborn body behind it, begging me to reach just one inch further. My eyes squeezed shut, pleading that my racquet would find the ball. But, they collided a second too late and the ball struck the narrow frame of my racquet. The vibration from the impact crawled up my arm as my eyes sprung open. The ball ricocheted from my racquet into a desperate vault through the air. It strained to traverse the looming net, but plummeted into its entrapment. The net quivered with impact and rolled the yellow ball lethargically back to me. "You're supposed to use the strings!" Dan yelled from across the net. "And move your feet! You look like my grandma out here!" "Twenty," I mumbled, restarting my countdown as I compelled my sore legs to continue.

"I told you to put on sunscreen," Dan said as we stepped inside the pro shop after my lesson. "I did!" I claimed, as I pictured the unopened tube, forgotten among the clothes that littered my bag. His head shook as he disappeared into his office. Seconds later, he reentered the room with a white notepad clenched in his hand. Handing it to me, he said, "Write everything down that we worked on today, then write down your goals for next week." My eyes followed him outside as he left me to contemplate my lesson. Gripping a Styrofoam cup of iced tea, he walked the routine path to his golf cart, his footsteps already imprinted in the dry grass. Perching himself onto the seat while ignoring the row of chairs beside him, he lowered the brim of his bucket hat to shade his face. I waited for him to turn the key to the ignition and drive away. But, as he always did, he just sat there, patiently waiting for me to finish my task. I tore my eyes away from Dan and began to scribble down the technicalities for hitting a serve. *Next week*, I thought, *I want to work on my backhand*.

My mother's eyes were red as she walked into my room the next morning. The phone she had answered

an hour earlier hung loosely in her hand. She lingered in my doorway before finally resolving to enter. Her cautious footsteps finally brought her to my bed where she lowered herself gingerly onto the edge. Her figure seemed so vigilant, as if any motion could be dangerous. Yet her eyes seemed so distant, distracted by something only visible to her. I felt heavy. My mother's words rarely were few in number, never so apprehensive to leave her mouth. Finally, she allowed herself to begin talking. Her words seemed sedated, yet I still struggled to process them. I heard bits and pieces: "Dan...heart attack...it was so sudden...late last night...they just couldn't help him." My mom continued, but I seized listening. What she was telling me was impossible, right? She couldn't possibly be talking about my coach Dan, the one who was playing tennis with me less than twenty-four hours before. Over and over again, I forced myself to believe that what I was hearing was true. I searched myself for any kind of sentiment, but it seemed to have vanished. I longed to feel sad, to feel angry - anything to occupy the vacant space that filled me. "...His last lesson," my mom finished. "Wh-what?" I stuttered out as I realized she was still talking. "You were his last lesson," she said as her lips strained to give a sympathetic smile.

All day, the phone's continuous ringing resonated through the house with calls from family, friends, acquaintances. A network of people had emerged, all connected by one person. There is one thing that death always yields: reminiscing. We immersed ourselves in our stories of Dan, telling and retelling our favorite ones. The hole that had dug itself inside of me slowly began to fill as the hours dragged on.

The following week, I returned to the tennis courts where Dan and I had hit just days before. The grass beside them had been scorched to a pale yellow by the summer sun, except for one square patch, which remained perfectly green. Four tire marks surrounded the patch where the wheels to his golf cart had sat. I stepped onto the hard asphalt of the court and walked towards the baseline. "Today," I said, "I am going to work on backhands." I let the yellow ball drop from my hand, gripped my racquet, and swung through the ball. It hit the tape of the net. I grabbed another ball from the basket. My racquet once again carried itself through the ball. The net added it to its collection. "I swear kid, if I have to tell you one more time to bend your knees, you're running!" his voice yelled at me from his golf cart a few feet away. For the third time, I dropped the ball. *Bend your knees, step forward, drop your racquet face, and brush up through the ball,* I reminded myself as I moved towards it. Yellow fuzz flew from the ball as it soared to the other side of the court, landing perfectly on the opposite line. "Better, now twenty more good ones," Dan hollered as he turned the key to the ignition and slowly pulled away.

Ryan Dye

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Cold Case

I think that God has a plan for everyone and that no matter how hard you try to deny the fact, you will end up following His plan. But my question, If He wants the best for me and loves me like no other on earth, then why does He put so much hurt and disappointment into our lives and the lives of the ones we love? I believe that God's plan for me involves working with people who experience depression or other conditions to where they don't see themselves as perfect. But there is the burden of carrying around other people's harmful thoughts and feelings. It definitely takes a toll of my personal being. In all, I have 3 different cases where I feel as if I had helped those around me.

Case file # 183746: One of the first cases I have experienced with this problem was last year. One of my friends who I was not close with started taking interest in me. Carly somehow found my number and started texting me. At first, I just wondered how in the world she had found my number, and there was a lot of one-sided-conversations. But as time went on, I felt as she had just got my number to flirt with me, but then some of the worst text I have ever seen started flooding my phone. Texts came in saying "I have thoughts about committing suicide before" and some saying "What am I worth?". These text really worried me. What if Carly took up on the actions? Would it be my fault for her self harm? Carly truly thought that she didn't matter to anyone and now that the tiger was out of the cage, there was no changing how I looked at Carly.

These text continued and I wasn't sure if there was a heart behind the text or if it was to gain my attention. These text lingered in my thought and kept me up at night, wondering how I should handle this. I prayed to God, asking why I should have to deal with something as precious as someone's life. I prayed asking for an answer and I finally found one, I had to get help from an adult. I went to my parents first and showed them my phone, which caused a lot of commotion because I had not told them sooner. After much thought, my parents told the school counselor even though I didn't want them to. Later that day, Carly was called down to the office and my stomach did flips as she eyeballed me walking out of the room. I had broken the one rule of our friendship, I told someone. But the case ended in a beautiful strong relationship that at once could have been romantic, but now is weeded with jokes and jabs. That's just how it goes in finicky teen world.

Case file # 294375: My next case involved an older kid. I knew him from gym and extracurricular activities. Eddie was the boyfriend in a budding relationship with a girl in my grade. She was an awkward beautiful, and different in a good way. And he saw her for just that. But I didn't know what was happening with him behind closed doors like she did. I had just happened to stumble upon this case, but it was meant to be that I did.

In gym class, when we were playing soccer, I was talking to Eddie when I saw the train track cuts on his arm. Naive and young as I was, I asked him how he had got cut in front of our whole team. He quickly covered up with "My cat scratched me last night," but having researched self harm with case # 183746, I knew that it was much more. I once again confronted him after gym class when we were waiting for the bell and asked him if he wanted to talk and told him that I would be open to anything. But being the boy that he was, he shrugged me off and went on his way.

Because of my experience with Carly, I knew to go to my mom for guidance and we looked up many articles on cutting. We found that cutting is a way to control pain when you can not control anything

else in your life. For the next month, I watched Eddie closely, but he always wore long sleeve shirts. He also avoided me as much as possible because I knew. And for that month, I spoke with his girlfriend to see how he was doing. Most of the time, I got "It's a family problem. Don't worry about it." But I still worried. About a month and a half after the initial spotting, the cutting stopped, just like that. I'm not sure how much I helped the case, but I count it as a win.

Case file #309657: This is probably the most time consuming case I have ever had. This case involved a sophomore girl I met at camp who had anorexia. The first time I went to this camp, I had no clue of any eating conditions. She just seemed like everyone else, happy and normal. But to my amazement, there is always more to what meets the eye.

During my second year of camp, Shelly opened up to me and told me that she had anorexia. She said that the reason she had this horrible condition is because she had grown up in a house with her brothers that wasn't safe. The parents of the house expected the kids to do all of the work and stay quiet if they know what's good for them. The worst part was that her parents were on crystal meth. There this went on for a long time, but finally the grandparent found the children and rescued them from their terrible living conditions. But when the children left, their dad came with them and said that he and their mom were only together as each other's dealers and that he had nowhere to go. So the grandparents brought him in too. He still disrupts her home life, poking at her and telling her that she is fat. All Shelly's mom wanted from the children was money. She only came by the house to ask the kids for stuff. Shelly's situation threw her into anorexia but also led her down a path of promiscuity. She was hurting and looking for affection and love that were only temporary solutions to her situation.

I knew I couldn't solve all of Shelly's problems but I thought that if I worked one aspect of this case, the other stuff in Shelly's life might get a little better. Even though the root cause of her anorexia was her father, I knew that she would probably never get over him so I tried to help her focus on her eating disorder.

Being the case cracker I am, I explained that this habit would lead to a horrible life and breaking it is the best thing to do. So we talked it through and I made her promise me to tell me every time she eats and to tell me the truth if she is full or just pretending. It worked well to begin with, but then she went to the bathroom. I immediately knew she was going to go throw up. But when she came back she said that she has never thrown up, only thought of it. So she continued to eat well the rest of the week and when I talked to her over the phone, she explained what she had eaten. In the end, our agreement was that if I helped her through the tough times, she would do her best to eat. We left camp happy with our agreement and our new friendship.

Then the snapchat's started coming in one night. It was the Saturday night and my friends and I were having a driveway hangout and playing cornhole. My phone buzzed and I took a quick look -- it was a snapchat from Shelly. She had a beer in her hand and looked intoxicated. How could she do this? She broke the promise we made to each other. She was an hour away and I couldn't get to her, so I did the next best thing, I called her brother. I didn't want to make the call -- I didn't trust her brother, but I knew that I would have to rely on him. To my surprise, he took me seriously and rushed home. There was Shelly, safe and unharmed, and on the couch with her little brothers. Whether the snapchat was just a ruse or for attention, or really true, we don't know. But I struggle with this case and I'm not sure how much farther I can go before she is willing to meet me. Sometimes you just have to be OK with not solving every mystery.

Case file #485726: The most challenging case of all. This client does not listen to any of my advice. He acts like he gets it, but he is hiding so much and doesn't care to share. Why won't he get it? Does he think he's too broken to repair? There are others who can help. He tries his hardest to help, but it burdens him to think he needs the same help he gives others. It doesn't feel right for him to give advice to others when he needs the advice himself, to trick others into thinking he has it together. But no one is perfect, right? Or is he the only screwed up kid to ever live--the only one who cries himself to sleep

replaying the snide remarks thrown his way during the day? Is he the only one who prays to God to help do something, to fix him? My fourth case is the toughest and one that I'll have to work on for a lifetime. One, that I hope one day, will be solved. Tied up with a bow and pronounced "healed" or "fixed" or "closed" -- that fourth case? It's me.

Sarah Gardner

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Park Hill South High School, Riverside, MO

Educator: Idean Bindel

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The Time I Slipped

Ouch! That hurt. I was in the Urgency Room with mom and grandma, trying to straighten my elbow. After I fell last night, my elbow was hurting pretty badly. I didn't think that it was broken because I had been using it all day while managing the pain, but mom wanted to get an x-ray just in case.

Man, what a way to spend your Friday night, I thought to myself.

The nurse working the front desk, wearing light pink scrubs, called my name.

"Phoebe?" she called out loudly.

Slowly, I trudged up to the desk, my mom and grandma following behind .

"Hello. Do you have the paperwork we gave you?" she asked.

My mother came forward and gave it to her saying, "Yes. Here it is."

The nurse replied, "Okay, great. I'm sorry, but the wait is going to be a little longer than expected, but we should get you in within the next ten minutes."

Ugh. I just want to go home and have a nice meal. Ooh! We are going to Applebee's after this! Maybe Grandma will get me a brownie bite to share with Kinley....

"Grandma, Grandpa!" I exclaimed loudly when I saw them standing near the doorway of my mom's preschool classroom at the Early Education Center.

"Hi Phoebe! Man, you have grown at least an inch since last week!" joked Grandpa while he greeted me with a big hug.

"Phoebe, how are you? Your hair is getting so long!" said Grandma happily. She too, gave me a huge hug.

After some brief catching up, Kevin showed up and I decided to go find Mom. I looked in her classroom, but she wasn't in there. I walked past the front desk and down the long hallway. I took a left and went into the staff breakroom. At last, I found her at the computer typing away. *Holy Moses, she is a fast typer. How in the world does she do that?*

"Hey Mom," I said.

"Oh, hi, Phoebe. How's your elbow?" she asked with a concerned expression.

"Umm, it's okay. It still hurts, but I mean I can straighten it and everything," I replied.

"Well, if it starts getting worse, make sure that you tell me."

"Okay, I will. And I'm going to go back home with Grandma and Grandpa."

"Okay, I'll see you there."

Crack.

"OUCH!" I yelled.

OH MY GOODNESS!! What the heck happened? Why am I on the floor? Ooooooh, my arm hurts so bad. And I've really gotta pee. Dang nabbit, I'm going to start crying.

Within a few moments, I felt my cheeks getting warm and tears began to collect in my eyes. They started to pour down my face as I began to sob. I was in shock of what just happened. I began to hold my right arm and I slowly felt sharp jolts of pain rush through my body.

Why am I soooo clumsy?

“Shut up, Phoebe!” screamed Kevin.

Are you kidding me right now? Geez. HE IS SO MEAN. Well, I guess I am crying—but hey, it wasn't my fault that I slipped. Ehh, maybe it was just a teensy bit my fault.

I heard the garage door begin to close as I started to slowly pick myself up from the ground, the cold hardwood floors giving me goosebumps. Dad walked in with Cocoa, the Chinese palace dog, and gave her a treat as I walked in the bathroom in a rush to get to the toilet.

“See ya, Laura!” I shouted as I walked out the gym doors into the crisp, December air.

This practice wasn't too bad. Luckily, we only had to run five sprints at the end and everyone made their free throws which is pretty good. Last practice, we had to run ten sprints because nobody could make a free throw and people were messing around. It was also Ann's birthday today, so she gave us all delicious chocolate chip cookies that melted in your mouth at the end.

Searching for my dad in the drive through circle, I grudgingly remembered that it would be a late night. I had to complete my study guide for religion, work on some math homework, finish reading *Number the Stars*, and take a shower.

Well, at least I have a game this weekend. It will be sooo good to finally get back on the court again. And, tomorrow's Friday! Ooh, and Grandma and Grandpa are coming in town!

It was Saturday, one day after I officially was declared a “broken arrow,” as my gym coach Mrs. Vanderwood fondly liked to call every kid who broke a bone. I still couldn't believe that I wasn't going to be able to play today at our first basketball game. I was still going, so I could support the team, and since Mom is the coach. Our team was looking pretty good at practice the night before,

I could hear Mom coming down the stairs, as I carefully got up from the couch.

“Are you ready to go?” she asked.

“Yep.”

When we pulled into the school, I got out and wondered if I would be able to play again this season. Somehow, I had a feeling that everything was going to be just fine.

Quickly, we walked across the parking lot and into the school doors. A breeze of heat hit us when we entered the school lobby. Loud noises were coming from the gym and I realized how hard it was going to be to watch my team play and not be able to contribute.

I walked down the stairs and was met with screams filling my ears.

“PHOEBE!!”

“WHAT DID YOU DO? WHY IS YOUR ARM IN A SLING?”

“GEEZ, LOUISE, HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?”

Amused, I told them the story of how my clumsiness made me shatter my bone. They were all shocked, but I told them that they would have first dibs on signing my cast once I got it. That settled them down pretty quickly.

“Hello, Phoebe. My name is Dr. Jones. So, tell me about what happened to your arm.”

“Umm... Well, I was walking down the hallway last night and it was dark and well I just sort of slipped and fell right on my arm. But, I did go to school today and I'm pretty sure that it's fine because I can still straighten it and everything. Today after school, we were raking leaves that's when it really started hurting. I mean I'm pretty sure that it's just sprained, but we came in just to make sure,” I rambled.

“Okay, well, we're going to get some x-rays. And then go from there.”

I slowly walked back into the room and plopped down on the bed.

“How was it?” asked Grandma.

“Eh, it was fine. They said they should be back with the results in like 10 minutes.”

“Oh, good. Is it still hurting pretty bad?” asked Mom.

“Yeah, but I can manage it.”

The door creaked open and Dr. Jones walked into the room.

“Hello, ladies. So, we got the x-rays back and well...it appears that your elbow is in fact broken,” said Dr. Jones solemnly.

Oh, crap.

Top Five Things I Have Learned From a Broken Elbow

1. You aren't allowed to take the elevator for an arm injury.
2. The elbow bone is not very funny.
3. A broken arm equals siblings forced to be nice to you for a month.
4. Don't try to rake leaves without a cast or sling: it hurts.
5. Older brother's hair skills should not be displayed in public.

Ella Genovese

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Short Story

Over and Over Again

Tommy stood from his desk, staring at the ten-page reflection on his life in the past year. After taking up an occupation as a company lawyer, he had the idea of completing a yearly reflection on his life, because lawyers often gave themselves over to divorce, alcoholism, and workaholic habits. His reflections worked like a religion; they kept him grounded and focused on his priorities and purpose. He watched too many lawyers grow fat, sweaty egos that turned them into the villains of their own lives. Tommy was paranoid. Most years, after writing his reflection, his hands would tremble and he'd dry heave into the toilet for hours, sometimes falling ill the next day. Yet, Tommy felt peace and satisfaction run through his body after finishing this year's reflection. In the past year, he gave up drinking. He no longer wrote of how it isolated him and tore apart his self-esteem. This insecurity and alcoholism, which made him cruel and irrational, was gone by the time he settled down with his girlfriend, Maria, who thought of him well. He had clarity around his life and felt a comfortable confidence.

Tommy smoothed back his sparse, black hair, and it looked plastered to his skull. He lathered sharp cologne on his neck, because tonight he aimed to impress. It soothed his insecurities that sometimes flared up around Maria's parents, who were invited over for dinner. He planned to propose, and after asking Maria's parents for her hand in marriage, they demanded they witness it.

He kept a chunky 3 karat ring in his pocket, scraping his brittle nails over its ridges as he primed himself and his home: fluffing his satin pillows, vacuuming his Persian rugs, taking a beauty nap, and taping up his personal New Years Resolutions on the door to the kitchen. He took the self-help book, *10 Steps to a Good Life*, off Maria's mahogany nightstand and placed it on his reading chair. Above it, he nailed his Harvard degree to the wall, and then hid the thank you cards Maria received for her charity work in his desk drawer.

When the doorbell rang, he scuttled to the door, his bony arm lugging it open for Maria's parents, Janet and Mike. Janet floated into the house, throwing her purse and coat onto the rug.

She spoke to Tommy like Marilyn Monroe sang to J.F.K., "Oh honey! I'm in love with this rug. Is it real? Mike, come look at this."

Mike lumbered in, giving off a calm, controlled, and noticeable presence that suited his large physical size. He flatly replied to Janet, "Very nice."

Tommy perked up, saying, "We got it in Turkey. It was this vendor's lucky day. Maria loved it so much, so I told the guy I'd pay any price for it."

Janet beamed then squeaked, "Right from Turkey? Handmade and everything?"

Mike cut them off—"How've you been, Tommy? Life treatin' you well?"

Tommy smoothed down his hair and said, "Yeah, yeah. Maria, work. It's been going good for me."

Janet asked, "Where is she? Still upstairs?"

Tommy stiffened. Then he grinned with his small yellow teeth, but his hands trembled in his pockets. Too concerned with his own anxieties, he forgot to tell Maria about the dinner. She was still at work. Tommy's spine slouched and his eyes were quick and cruel when he explained, "I told her

yesterday about tonight, but she's still running late. It's a bad habit of hers."

Instantly, Janet commented in assurance, "She gets it from me. I could start getting ready 5 hours ahead of time and I'd still be an hour late."

Tommy and Janet politely laughed with one another, but Mike stood in silence, putting his hands in his pockets when he saw the sweat bleeding through Tommy's shirt. As he cackled, Tommy felt Mike's suspicion, so his laughing died, but the sudden silence made his insecurity become more apparent.

Janet stepped between the two men, delicately saying, "Mike and I are going to fix up my salad I brought in the kitchen. Why don't you call Maria and see how things are going?"

"Alright. We've got big glass bowls to the right of the sink," Tommy replied.

"Glass? Mike almost got me glass bowls for my birthday. I always liked glass. Plastic scratches up too fast."

"Alright, Janet, let's let Tommy call Maria," Mike interrupted the two again, taking Janet's pink plastic bowl of salad, then he shuffled down the corridor and to the kitchen. Janet followed behind him after giving Tommy a motherly, toothy smile. Tommy watched the couple whisper to one another before disappearing into the kitchen, and he felt a self-loathing swallow him. He forgot about the self-reflection he completed earlier. That confidence was gone. He didn't think of Maria or a future or a purpose, because his mind was fixed on finding an immediate remedy to cure the self-hate that made his body ache and sweat. He didn't call Maria. Instead, he stumbled over to his reading chair, threw *10 Steps to a Good Life* onto the ground, and yanked a hidden water bottle of Bourbon from under the cushions. Though he stopped drinking, he still always kept his emergency water bottle. The bourbon sloshed in smooth yellow-orange waves when he sipped and chugged it.

It stopped his hands from trembling, so he texted Maria, telling her (in all caps) that her parents dropped by and to come home. She replied quickly; she was already on her way. Tommy still desperately gripped the water bottle with his claw-like hands. Alcohol allowed him to live freely and confidently, but only in a short-term sense. In actuality, it limited and controlled him as any addiction does. It didn't stop his body from aching, only trembling.

His steady hand held onto his water bottle as he stumbled down the corridor and to the kitchen where Mike and Janet waited. Before entering, he paused to stroke his personal New Years Resolutions that he taped to the door, telling himself that Mike and Janet caught sight of them and admired them. Then he puffed out his chest and strolled into the kitchen with his arms outstretched, exclaiming, "Oookay. Maria's on her way. How's the salad coming, Janet? Mike—you want a beer?"

Mike, who slouched on a stool, stared down the water bottle of bourbon in Tommy's hand. He shifted in his seat, sighed, and then replied in a deep, hollow voice, "I'm alright for now, Tommy."

"No! Tommy, get Mike a beer. He loves beer," Janet insisted, hoping to ease the thick tension.

Mike spoke quickly and coolly, "I'm really fine."

"Mike! It's a special occasion," Janet pushed.

Then, with a whiny and childish tone of voice, Tommy said, "Come on. Mike—have a beer."

Mike laid back in his chair and said, "Alright, for Pete's sake. Tommy, I'd take a Budweiser if you got any."

Nodding, Tommy waltzed over to the fridge with Bourbon stains that embellished his white collared shirt—a result of his sloppy sips. He spoke in an arrogant, sing-songy manner, "Yep. We got Budweiser."

He continued to speak as he poured beer into a glass, "My dad drank a whole lotta Budweiser when I was a kid. Like you, Mike."

Mike never drank. Tommy knew that. While Mike gazed out the window, he nonchalantly replied, "I'm not much of a drinker myself."

Tommy slid the Mike's beer across the granite counter top. He spoke with more intensity and

seriousness in his voice, “He’d ask me to grab it for him when he sat on his chair. I’d make seven or eight trips to the fridge in one night, Mike. He was a real asshole.”

“Tommy, I’m so sorry. That must have been a real hard time for you,” Janet hugged Tommy’s arm as she softly replied. Tommy ignored her. His eyes remained on Mike, who was focused on his beer.

Tommy shouted this time, “I never liked the guy, but, man, I really hated when he didn’t like *me*. He’d put his hands in his pockets. Stare me down. Like you, Mike.”

“Tommy! Mike means well, you know that. He likes you. Don’t you ever feel bad like that around him,” Janet said, as she frantically looked to make peace. Tommy’s spine slouched again; it looked as if he was caving in on himself.

He didn’t look anyone in the eyes, but he somberly yelled at Janet, “He likes me? He’s been nagging me all night! Next thing you know, he’ll be asking me for his eighth beer.”

Finally, Mike responded to Tommy with no malice or frustration in his voice, “I haven’t said a word to you, Tommy. Just put your drink down. Maria’ll be here soon.” Mike searched for peace as Janet did, not caring if Tommy tried to tear into him. He remained relaxed, which gave him a certain power over Tommy, whose eyes looked wild and weak. Though Tommy fell quiet, he still stared Mike straight in his eyes and slowly, even cautiously, took another sip from his water bottle.

Then, the doorbell rang out through the house with a low, melancholy tone. Janet, holding back tears, scurried from the kitchen to open it, and Mike and Tommy followed behind her. In the doorway, Maria stood: relaxed and standing straight, reminiscent of her father’s demeanor. Yet, she shrunk back after she saw the red, teary eyes of her mother and the lost, drunken eyes of Tommy—she immediately sensed the tension of the household.

“What’s wrong?” She asked the three of them, stepping toward Tommy.

Only Janet replied, “Tommy and your dad had a fight.”

Maria put her hands in her pockets when she saw Tommy’s water bottle of Bourbon, then she said, “Tommy, why are you drinking? You never drink.”

Tommy snickered and mocked her in a high-pitched voice, “Tommy! Tommy! Why are you *drinking!*? My God, everyone’s been nagging me all night and now you’re bitchin’ at me too. Relentless.”

“I thought you stopped?” Maria questioned him further.

“It’s a special occasion. I’m just having a good time.”

“Tommy, you can’t drink,” Maria insisted, looking at her mother and father, who stood in silence.

Tommy smoothed back his hair and screeched, “All the wives of the other lawyers—see they always nag. Like you, Maria.”

Mike stepped toward Tommy, pleading, “Tommy don’t do this. Relax—“

Yet, Tommy still spat his words to Maria, “All these lawyers are alcoholics, workaholics. You name it. It’s ‘cause of their wives. They’re always telling them how bad they are—putting them down—like you to me, Maria.”

Tears dripped down to Maria’s chin, but she wiped them away and spoke to Tommy, “You know I’m nothing but nice to you—“

Tommy interrupted, “My dad started drinking after he married my mom. She made him into a fuckin’ villain. Just like you all do to me.”

“A villain?” Maria yelled back at Tommy.

He yelled louder, “I’m not gonna let you all turn me into someone cruel.”

“We’re not the ones making you cruel, Tommy,” Mike replied to him in a measured tone of voice.

Tommy moved his haggard face close to Mike's and whispered, "You want to make me look crazy in front of her, so she won't marry me. Right, Mike?"

Mike didn't move, and he whispered back, "That's not true, and you know that."

Tommy began yelling again, "Well, what's crazy enough for you, Mike? Should I pee right on my own fucking rug? Smash my own furniture? I'm not doing any of that. You won't make me hate myself, because I *love* myself you piece of shit."

Tommy slammed his fist into the wall. There was a silence. Then, Janet, Mike, and Maria started moving toward the door, sending Tommy into hysteria, so he pulled the ring from his pocket and held it in front of Maria's face: a proposal. She pushed his hand down, not even looking him in the eyes. She closed the door behind her. He chucked the ring down onto the Persian rug as the door shut. They were gone.

The next morning, he stood from his desk, staring at the ten-page reflection on his life in the past year. He reread it over and over again.

Alison Gill

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Missy Simonds

Category: Humor

Storks and Screens

Never has the future of the United States looked more grim than in its current state, as today's youth have demonstrated themselves to be an all-time low generation. Adolescents suffer from obesity and other health concerns that were once reserved for the middle-aged. Teen depression haunts high school hallways, and teenage funerals clutter the obituary sections of newspapers. Peer pressure regulates the actions of the young generation. Alcohol and drugs flow freely and entangle pre-pubescent in the sticky web of addiction. The modern child is more concerned with having designer clothes to post on Instagram than eating a healthy meal. Most adolescents have never worked a day in their life, and the value of dollar means nothing to them. Instead of laboring as their predecessors have, this upcoming generation sits in their parents' basements, complaining about 'carbon footprints' and student loans. Today's youth have leeches onto and are gradually sucking dry their parents' wallets, patience, and generosity. These so-called Millennials wallow in entitlement and self-pity with the occasional cries of over-sensitivity and pleas for coddlement.

Time has revealed that the traditional methods of parenting have failed. Parents no longer instill the values of hard work and discipline in their children; parents are mere enablers to their children's laziness and apathy. The only way to ensure the upcoming generation's success and the future prosperity of this great country is change, and the necessary change lies in the demolition of the traditional parent-child relationship. Given the modern technological advancements and conveniences, the solution is really quite simple: technology should raise our children.

Technology, of course, is not limited to the archaic definition of landlines and televisions -- though television is actually a phenomenal tool in the development of a child. With laptops, tablets, smartphones, social media, the Internet, apps, smartwatches, streaming services, hoverboards, Roombas, drones, and the classic television -- to name just a few -- everyone has access to quite a variety of technology. This variety even provides parents with the choice of which screen should raise their child! Let's say you value social interaction; give Lil Timmy an account on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and (if you seek 'alternative' social media) Tumblr. Perhaps your family is more concerned with conflict resolution; just plop Jane in front of the TV and turn on a *Real Housewives* marathon. (Naturally, television offers knowledge resources from legal education through *Law & Order* to social psychology with *Survivor*.) If you wish to foster youthful curiosity, allow Wikipedia and Google to do the job. I understand if some old-fashioned parents harbor concerns about necessary supervision, but technology is more than enough to keep children out of trouble. A recent joint study between researchers at Harvard and Johns Hopkins found that ninety-four percent of children would rather spend hours in front of a screen than outside -- regardless of the time of year or the weather! The miracles of modern technology have managed to combine convenience, accessibility, variety, and supervision into the perfect tool to steer your child onto the path of success.

Technology as parents has spread like wildfire in certain circles of U.S. leadership. The Department of Education has begun to lobby policymakers in the legislative and executive branches to mandate that technology regulate and parent every child for a minimum of 8-10 hours per week in a cautious measure known as the No App Left Behind Act. Child Protective Services are now classifying television-free households as "dangerous environments for the cognitive development of children" and

“lacking the proper resources to raise a child” as well as labeling parents that outlaw cellphones or the Internet as “abusive” and “negligent.” Engineers at Apple are already experimenting with a prototype iParent. iParent, designed as the premier technological parent, offers a whole slew of previously unexplored advances in technology that modernize age-old parental techniques. In iParent, Siri customizes individual plans for the growth and development of a child as well as provides the correct emotional responses to every child’s need; the software has been pre-programmed with the scientifically best reaction to every possible childhood situation, as approved by a panel of psychologists and neurologists. iParent can successfully keep children on a strict regimen alternating between television marathons, computer games, and social media immersion with an updated Audial Nagging Feature, modeled after actual humans. iParent can handle all of the responsibilities of human parents, too -- the technology includes cooking, cleaning, and laundering programs. iParent, though still in the experimental stages, provides all the capabilities of human parents with the benefits of modern technology. American politicians and leading companies have shrewdly arranged for the inevitable switch to technological parenting. It seems as only a matter of time now before screens dominate PTAs and various parent committees.

While allowing technology to monitor the maturation of a child may appear a novel idea, the elite families of Western Europe, Russia, and China have transformed technological parenting into a common practice. For years, the most aristocratic and wealthiest European families have adopted technology in place of their au pair. For instance, despite public appearances, Prince William and Kate Middleton haven’t been in contact with their children since birth; they have wisely stepped aside and allowed screens to raise little George and Charlotte. In fact, it’s rumored that George and Charlotte -- lightyears ahead of their expected development, I might add -- have even nicknamed their iPad “Mum.” The correlation between rapid development and an intimate relationship with their iPad is no coincidence, according to psychologists who have studied the children’s files. The top Americans should follow suit to salvage any hope that the United States can surpass the cultural, artistic, and scientific achievements of the international community.

The world is an ever-adapting and changing place; human-free parenting would just be another step towards progress, akin to the printing press or the telephone. Technological parenting increases the productivity and efficiency of the adults and the children, as individuals focus solely on work, not distracting relationships. In the long term, the widespread use of technology will reduce costs with an expected decrease in the instances of spoiled children and lowered spending on frivolous holidays like Mother’s Day. The lack of face-to-face contact for children will also result in minimal sources of actual conflict or drama besides from the fictitious “beefs” between celebrities. Of course, the greatest benefit that technological parenting offers is to the development and long-term success of the children. Technological parenting, in several controlled studies, has resulted in the neurological development of children 14 months faster than normal, has led to above-average typing skills in toddlers, and has boosted the intelligence of affected children by an average of 35.8 IQ points. When the benefits are innumerable and the harms nonexistent, what exactly is stopping this country from wholeheartedly embracing technological parenting?

The younger generation has vastly underachieved and shows no signs of recovery from obvious failure. The future of the world is at stake, and youth are ill-equipped to lead us towards any future success. Society requires a massive change in its very fabric to guarantee the sustained cultural prosperity. That shift is the elimination of human parenting and the introduction of technological parenting. Decades after the invention of the computer, technology can accomplish things that we couldn’t even *imagine* 20 years ago. We can share ideas with people from around the world in nanoseconds; we have thousands of years of documents and information available to us at the click of a button. There is no limit to the technological world -- not even parenting. At this point, technology is the only instrument properly equipped to truly guide the development of the future generations. Join the

movement. Save the children and the world. Set your child up for success and prosperity. Let your child thrive under the supervision of a screen.

Alison Gill

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Missy Simonds

Category: Poetry

A Together Separate

The paths different
but forced close
together, woven in a sloppy braid.
Each story, unique,
bleeds into another
until the only distinction,
the only that matters, is
its color.

The voices of a hundred years
now with new words,
new slang.
Is it me
or does it all sound the same?
A record in the background
repeating - repeating -
repeating -
repeating -
repeating louder and louder and louder
and louder and -
someone finally takes notice
and flips the record.

The ever-changing names and faces -
Emmitt, Rodney, Trayvon -
and the undefined specifics;
those are for the history textbooks
a sentence, maybe two.
The aftermath;
now that's for us.
Don't get too attached,
they warn,
it will happen again.

But what about you and me?
The miscues and missteps and
honest mistakes -
the unintentional absolutely intended
thoughts, concerns, worries fears -

the ground not safe to walk
the water not safe to tread
the words not safe to speak -
the “where the hell do we go from here?”-ness of it all -
fades into a muddied gray mosaic,
where, if you squint just hard enough,
you can still pick out
flecks of the black
and the white.

A together separate.
A divided united.
We stand under one flag,
hands over heart,
and wonder if that cloth
isn't a little too thin?
to cover us all.

Alison Gill

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Missy Simonds

Category: Poetry

A New America

Here he is standing up in front of other people, Uncle Sam, with the blood of your and mine mothers and fathers on his hands. With the blood dripping down his jaws...

The world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land...

I'm tired of being poor and even worse I'm black.

Negroes have listened to the trickery, and the lies, and the false promises of the white man now for too long.

I see no changes. All I see is racist faces. Misplaced hate makes disgrace to races we under. I wonder what it takes to make this one better place...

...a part of our union that we have not made perfect

There is only the struggle for human rights.

... nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property

The world is very different now.

We have an opportunity to make America a better nation.

So let us begin anew...

No, no, no we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied...

It's liberty or death. It's freedom for everybody or freedom for nobody.

We hold these truths to be self-evident...

...the most basic of this country: to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man.

...you're nothing but a 20th century slave.

We shall overcome.

... the nation's original sin...

I see no changes, wake up in the morning and ask myself, "Is life worth living? Should I blast myself?"

If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

... black people amongst blacks, and white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another.

... problems that are neither black or white or Latino or Asian.

In order to form a more perfect union...

Give 'em guns, step back, and watch 'em kill each other.

He is your enemy

...the kindness the cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and, yes bitterness and biases that make up the black experience in America.

They'll lynch you in Texas as quick as they'll lynch you in Mississippi.

So we're trapped, trapped, double-trapped, triple-trapped. Anywhere we go we find that we're trapped.

We have come to cash this check - a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected.

What do we care about odds?

We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom - symbolizing an end as well as a beginning - signifying renewal as well as change.

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy.

What we have already achieved gives us hope - the audacity to hope - for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.

Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths...

Let's change the way we eat, let's change the way we live, and let's change the way we treat each other. You see, the old way wasn't working so it's on us to do what we gotta do, to survive.

Alison Gill

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: John Pierson, Missy Simonds

Category: Dramatic Script

Family Business

CATHY

36, brown hair fringed with gray at the roots, has long resigned to wearing large sweaters and no makeup. A woman with a natural maternal instinct but no children of her own. Separated from her husband. From years as the glue between RICK and DANNY, she is tired and seems closer to fifty than thirty. While worn down by near constant conflict in her family, business, and marriage, she still flashes a fierce strength.

RICK

35, bearded, build of a former hockey player more known for fighting than stick skills. A man quick to flares of temper. Married for five years with a child on the way. Grew up in the shadow of a now-dead older brother DEAN. Inferiority complex. Tough guy persona with a fear of male weakness.

Unflinching loyalty and obedience to his mother and older sister overrides his bluster. Envy DANNY and the protection MA and CATHY have provided him. Aware of the flaws and mistakes that POP made as a father but blind to those same flaws and mistakes repeating in himself.

MA

66, has embraced her age, grandmotherly with a turtleneck and slacks. A strict and religious matriarch, always found with her cross necklace. Married for 42 years and bore brunt of raising four children. Her grandmotherly facade belies the biting harshness and barbed remarks underneath the surface. Extreme control over the lives and actions of each of her children. Able to victimize and empower herself at will but more often plays the part of the protective and powerless mother. Fingerprints on all aspects of business though she underrepresents her role.

DANNY

26, clean shaven, dresses like his mother picked out his outfits for him until he was fourteen (which she did): khakis and button-downs. Never been in a long-term relationship. A mother would likely call him handsome. If he were to run, would likely win any political election on the basis of optimism and genuineness. Strongly believes that everything he does is helpful and cares that others think the same. Deferential to mother and resigned to weather the abuses of his older brother. Unsure of how to assert his beliefs and ideas.

SETTING: The kitchen of a Midwestern ranch style house. On left stage, a door to outside of the house. On right stage, a hallway which leads to a bedroom off-stage. The kitchen looks dated with a linoleum countertop and an old refrigerator cluttered with magnets and elementary school photos. At first, it screams middle class but the signs of wealth are there: a brand new stove, a high end tea kettle, an expensive piece of modern art hanging in the hallway, top shelf liquors. At center stage, there is a round table with five chairs. The table and chairs should be situated so that the audience can see all four actors when they sit down and the fifth chair is painfully empty.

CATHY moves around the kitchen in search of a tea kettle. She opens up cabinet after cabinet before she finally finds it. She is filling it up with water when there's a knock. She walks over to the door with the kettle resting on the counter. Another impatient knock sounds before CATHY can open up the door.

RICK is standing in the door frame.

CATHY

Oh. It's you.

She walks back to the tea kettle and places it on the stove. RICK takes a seat at the kitchen table and starts untying his work boots while CATHY fusses with the kettle. Her back faces him.

RICK

What? You expecting someone else?

CATHY

Only hoping.

RICK

You and your jokes... how could I possibly forget about those charmers?

CATHY

It's a gift.

CATHY comes to the table with two coffee mugs. One for herself and the other she sets in front of an empty chair. He rises after a minute and begins walking around the kitchen.

RICK

So's Danny already here?

CATHY

He's on his way.

RICK

I'm surprised, y'know. I mean, he's normally such a mama's boy, I half expected him to be at her beck and call. The kiss ass that he is.

CATHY

And how could I possibly forget about this?

RICK

All I'm saying is the truth.

CATHY

According to you, it is.

RICK

That's all I can offer. Besides you lived with him.

CATHY

Rick, not now.

RICK stops at the stove to lift up the lid on the pot.

RICK

What's this you got cooking?

RICK has already grabbed a spoon and is tasting before CATHY can answer.

CATHY

Split pea and quinoa. I thought she'd want something to eat.

RICK

Oh, Cath, she's sure not gonna want eat that crap. Jesus Christ, you could've at least warned me before I put that, that dishwater in my mouth.

CATHY

It's vegan.

RICK

Nah, that, that soup, or whatever you wanna call it, is foul. Good Lord, I wouldn't let my dog eat that, Christ -

CATHY

Don't let Ma hear you. You know she hates that kinda language.

RICK has been washing his mouth out in between his string of profanity.

RICK

Jesus Chri-

CATHY

Rick! Come on.

RICK stops and studies CATHY for a minute.

RICK (muttering)

Hell, she's no saint with all that "holier than thou" act... It's not like she hasn't said worse. I mean, I know she's DONE worse.

CATHY refuses to answer. After looking around a bit more, RICK sits back at the table. He attempts to make small talk, which only annoys her.

RICK

So... kinda funny you'd end up the vegan right?

CATHY

Why?

RICK

Well, y'know. (A beat) Don't you?

CATHY

No. I don't know.

RICK

Cath, come on. Why do you have to do this?

CATHY

Do what, Rick?

RICK

You always gotta make things so hard. I don't get it. Can't you just let things be easy? Talk to me. Not make it some, some like competition.

CATHY

I'm not trying to be difficult. I just don't get what you're trying to say.

RICK

With all the meat packaging and the... the other stuff. It seems ironic that you stand on your pedestal and preach the vegan laws. That's all.

CATHY

It's called meat packaging, not meat eating. So, just cause we package it, doesn't mean I have to eat it.

RICK

Was that really that hard?

CATHY shakes her head in annoyance. A beat before:

RICK

Danny's on his way?

CATHY

That's what I said. (beat) I guess Linda must've been real torn up.

RICK

You know that she was never that close to Pop. And with the baby on the way, I didn't think it was that important that she come. Wasn't worth all the complaining about swollen feet and maternity clothes.

CATHY

She never knew the real Pop anyway. How's the nursery coming along?

RICK

Eh, it's getting there. We haven't painted anything yet. Linda doesn't wanna know if it's a boy or a girl. Likes the element of surprise.

CATHY

You want a little girl.

RICK

I'm not gonna say anything to her, I'd be fine with a son. I think Linda wants to name it after her mom or dad, but I like Meghan. Call her Meg for short.

CATHY

You could name her after our Ma.

RICK

Ethel just doesn't roll off the tongue in quite the way it used too, so I think I'm gonna have to pass on that one.

CATHY

Understandable. Name her after me. Cathy the Second sounds pretty good if you ask me.

RICK

Ha! Like we need another one of you running around. Name your own daughter after you if want.

CATHY

Don't think that's gonna happen.

RICK

He hasn't called?

CATHY shakes her head.

CATHY

When Jim makes up his mind, he sticks to it. Could never say he wasn't determined.

RICK looks at the door.

RICK

How much longer?

CATHY

Any minute.

RICK

I was talking about Danny.

CATHY

So was I.

A beat:

RICK

Is it bad?

CATHY

What do you think?

RICK

Is she in there? The bedroom, I mean.

CATHY

Hasn't left his side since. I bring her food, but she won't touch it.

RICK

I should stop in.

RICK looks at CATHY in the hope that she'll tell him he doesn't need to, but she remains silent.

RICK

Say goodbye and everything.

He gets up reluctantly and walks to the bedroom off-stage. After a minute, he comes back to the table.

RICK

Damn.

CATHY

Yeah, heavy stuff.

RICK

That, that in there. That's not Pop.

CATHY

I wish you were right.

RICK

No, no. Pop, he was always so... so strong. In control. Of everything. Now, now... shoot, now, he can't even feed himself. No, Pop wouldn't let that happen. Not to himself.

CATHY

For a while, he looked alright. Like there was maybe hope.

RICK nods along.

RICK

She looks like hell.

CATHY

She wants to be in there when he... When he goes.

RICK looks at his watch and stands up. He slaps the table.

RICK

Dammit, Danny!

RICK (to Cathy)

He should be here by now. Goddammit, when he gets here, I'm --

CATHY

Rick. Please. She doesn't need you like that.

RICK

He needs to be here though! Before Ma loses it.

CATHY

I'm sure he's trying.

MA enters from the bedroom off-stage. As soon as she enters, RICK and CATHY stand up. CATHY hands her the coffee mug while RICK pulls out her seat. MA collapses into the chair.

RICK

Ma, Ma. Did - is - did he...

MA nods slightly, enough to confirm that their father has died. RICK takes his head in his hands and starts muttering curses at an increasing volume. CATHY sits expressionless.

RICK

Shit, shit. SHIT. SHIT! Jesus.

MA

Rick. You know better than to take the Lord's name in vain. Especially right now.

The table falls silent. RICK sulks. When CATHY speaks, it's in a voice barely above a whisper.

CATHY

I'm sorry.

MA

I am too. (beat) Your father did really love you.

CATHY

We know.

MA

He didn't show it the best but he wasn't like that.

CATHY

You don't have to convince us, Ma.

MA

He was a good man. Underneath. Underneath the - mistakes. I married a good, *kind* man. He had his moments but we all do. At heart, that was a good man. A good husband.

CATHY

Ma.

CATHY reaches out to grab her mother's hand, but MA stands up.

MA

But it was time. Time for him to go to his Lord and meet his judgement. (sighs) It was time for him to go and for us to move on.

MA looks around the room for what's the first time.

MA

Where's your brother?

RICK snorts.

RICK

Good question.

CATHY

He's on his way. I'm sure he'll be here any minute.

MA

Alright. Because a son needs to say goodbye to a father for...

CATHY

Closure.

MA

Right.

CATHY

Did you want something to eat? I have some soup over on the -

RICK

She doesn't want that crap, Cath.

MA

I'm not hungry.

There's a knock on the door. CATHY gets up to answer it.

MA

Must be your brother.

RICK

Bout damn time he showed. Too bad Pop already kicked it.

MA

Respect the deceased, Rick.

RICK

It's not like he ever did.

MA

He was your father. Act like it.

DANNY steps into the kitchen and immediately starts apologizing.

DANNY

I'm so sorry. I mean, I tried to get here as soon as I could, but the traffic - it was terrible, you know how that can be and then - then...

Met with silence, he trails off.

DANNY

Is - did... Is he...?

CATHY stares into her mug. She answers but doesn't make eye contact with DANNY.

CATHY

He passed. A few minutes ago.

DANNY

I'm, I'm... too late? He's already gone?

RICK

Sorry he couldn't wait for you to get here. How inconsiderate.

CATHY

He's in the bedroom. If you want to see him.

MA

Daniel. Go say goodbye. Go pay your respects.

DANNY still doesn't move but seems to notice his mother for the first time.

DANNY

Oh, Ma! I hadn't even thought - I mean, are you okay? How are you -

MA

Danny. Go. To your father.

DANNY

-- handling all this? I can't even imagine how hard this must be.

MA

Daniel. Go see your father. Go.

DANNY nods and goes to the bedroom off-stage. Once he returns, he sits down at the table. The fifth and final chair remains empty.

DANNY

So, do we need to make funeral arrangements?

CATHY

They've already been made.

RICK

You'd know that if you'd managed to show up on time.

DANNY

I tried. I told you the traffic was real bad and -

RICK

Stop with the excuses. I'm so tired of them. There's always some exc-

MA

Rick. Your brother did the best he could.

RICK

Doesn't he always?

MA ignores RICK's challenge.

MA

About the business...

Both CATHY and RICK perk up at the mention.

RICK

It's still going? Even without Pop.

CATHY

Don't be an idiot. Of course, it's still going.

MA

It's been in the family for four generations. As your sister said, Rick, don't be idiotic. With your father's passing, we have some things to sort out. About where the business is going. Who can run it.

DANNY (clearly worried)

You really think that one of us can continue it? Cause, um, I don't think we're like Pop.

MA

Don't be silly, Danny. It's not rocket science.

DANNY

I guess, I just assumed that since Pop was gone, it had sort of died out. We were done with it now.
MA ignores DANNY.

MA

First, we need to figure out who's gonna take over. Especially since your father never indicated who was expected to continue on the (pause) the Bramley legacy, let's say.

CATHY

For both sides of the business?

RICK

I mean, I would happily take over - y'know, given I'm the oldest son and, I don't think it's really a stretch to say, the toughest - but I think we need some changes.

MA

It's been like it is for eighty years. We don't need to change.

RICK

Ma, I think you're being a little old-fashioned about this right now. It's an evolving world out there and I'm just not sure that we need the meat packaging side.

MA

We need somebody who can handle every aspect of the business.

RICK

Couldn't we just cut out the meat packaging part? We don't have much use for it -

MA

Of course not.

RICK

Okay. Fine. But maybe we, uh, de-emphasize the meat packaging.

MA

If it worked for your father, Rick, I'm sure it can work for you. If you're in charge.

RICK

I know, I know. Bramley & Sons has been in the family for generations, or whatever. But meat packaging - it's not like that's where the money's at. If we focused all the time and energy we wasted on meat, and we focused all that on the other side: who knows where we could end up?

CATHY

Jail.

RICK

Not if we do it right.

CATHY

We need the legitimate business front. To have the other side. Otherwise, how do we explain the cash? What do you tell Linda? Where do you tell her that you're going, what you're doing? Where do we operate from? There's so many logistical issues that you haven't even considered.

RICK

We're resourceful people. I'm sure we could come up with something.

CATHY

We get rid of the meat, and our neighbors start looking at us funny. A community staple closes for no apparent reason, but we still got the cash. Doesn't seem to make a lot of sense. Next thing you know, the feds are knocking at our door. Asking a lot of questions.

MA

Question we don't have answers to. (beat) Unless you want to be the one to answer.

RICK

You two are thinking like this is the 1960s. Unexplained cash? Just blame it on the Internet. Anybody starts poking around, getting a little too close? Nothing's tying us here, no store front. We just pick up

and move. It's simple.

CATHY

It's not that easy, Rick.

RICK

It is. Think, Ma. Just think what we could be if we didn't have to worry about the meat packaging. Imagine if we only focused on the other stuff. Imagine how powerful we'd become. We'd become so powerful - so big - that not even the feds could touch us.

CATHY

Besides we've managed fine so far. Why, all of sudden, do you think that we need to --

RICK

Look, right now, we're strictly regional. We are - no way around it. We run in this tight circle - hell, we rule this circle, but nobody outside the Midwest knows the Bramley name. Nobody.

CATHY

You're acting like we're some low-rung, basement organization.

RICK

We are. We really are when you start getting up to the top. We ain't nothing to them. Everybody names the big names, and I want to be up there. What I'm talking about, what I want is to make us national. I wanna run with the Bonnanos. The Gambinos. The Genoveses. I want to BE an Al Capone. A Whitey Bulger.

CATHY

You don't have the guts.

RICK

It's what I want. It what we should all want. It's what Pop would've wanted.

CATHY

No, Pop would've wanted to make sure that all of his kids survived to have their own families. What you want - it's too big.

RICK

You're thinking small-minded, it's not.

CATHY

It's too ambitious. We don't need to start messing around with those guys cause, then, next thing you know, the Bramley legacy dies with us.

During the next sequence CATHY and RICK yell at each other simultaneously.

RICK

God, Cath! Stop thinking like that! Maybe, if you stopped getting caught up in all the little stuff, stopped obsessing over the tiniest little details, and, for once, just once, thought about the big picture crap, then maybe something good would happen to ya. Jim might not have left. You were the problem! So stop pretending like it was something else! It's this kinda stuff that drives everyone away --

CATHY

Don't be absurd! You want to get us all killed just to serve your little fragile ego! You want to be some big macho tough guy, and so you're putting up this bullshit act! You're not some big guy, no, you were never the big guy son in this family and you can't accept that! You're so insecure because you couldn't even hold Dean's jock and everybody knows it!

MA slams down her coffee mug. CATHY and RICK immediately shut up.

MA

Stop it! We're a family. So shut it! Just shut it.

MA rubs her temples and sighs loudly.

MA

It's like you're both six again... You all need to decide. It's on you all.

RICK

I know, I know you don't want to hear it, Cathy, but we have to, need to -

CATHY

Rick, Rick, you're SO wrong about this, like -

MA

Stop it! What did I just tell you? (deep breath) We're never going to get anywhere if you two can't act like adults and stop bickering. I'm not going to listen to it. It's a family business, and it needs to be a family decision.

The two siblings look at each before CATHY, anticipating his deferral to her, turns to DANNY.

CATHY

Danny, what do you think?

RICK apparently also believes that DANNY take his side.

RICK

Yeah, Danny. It's up to you. Settle this.

DANNY

Uh, uh. I really don't have an opinion. You guys pick. You're older, more experienced, so it makes more sense to go with whatever you guys want.

CATHY

We're not gonna be able to agree.

RICK

It's you, kid. What you want. (beat) What do you want?

DANNY

Look. I'm not in any position to make any sort of decision about how a crime syndicate's supposed to be run. That's for you guys to figure out. For people like Pop to handle. Not me.

CATHY

Danny...

DANNY

I don't wanna jeopardize what we've built. What the Bramley means in certain circles.

RICK

Just tell us: what do you want?

DANNY

What do I want? Uh, well. I - I - uh... I - um...

RICK

Yeah. What you want.

DANNY clears his throat and takes a deep breath.

DANNY

I want out. I want out of the business.

The entire tables falls into a stunned silence. Nobody moves; everybody just stares at DANNY. After a minute, CATHY gets up from the table without a word. She walks over to the cabinets and grabs a bottle of scotch and a glass. She walks back to the table and places the bottle and glass in the center. She pours herself a full glass of scotch and downs it in one gulp. She pours another drink and drinks this one too.

CATHY

Well, crap.

She pours another drink, but doesn't touch the glass. RICK stands up.

RICK

What did you say? (beat) What the hell did you say, Danny?

RICK advances towards DANNY.

RICK

Give me an answer, Danny.

DANNY

Rick, you're angry. I get why, I understand it, but just gimme a chance. Hear me out--

RICK

I already fricking heard what you said and bull! Bullshit!

DANNY

Rick, I promise you, if you'd just listen --

RICK

No. It's all crap. You have some b.s., wimpy ass excuse just like you always do and I don't wanna hear out. I'm so fricking tired of always putting up --

DANNY

Rick. Rick, come on! Just listen to me. Please!

RICK slams his fist down on the table.

RICK

Look, Danny. I don't wanna hear it. I don't. I'm tired of all your good-guy, golden boy crap. So whatever, whatever this is -- some "neglected" younger brother, rebel act -- I really don't give a damn about it. You've always been so ready to make yourself the victim, so whatever excuse you have, whatever blame you wanna place, I don't wanna hear it.

DANNY

That's not what this is, Rick. I think you'd understand where I'm coming from if you would just listen to me. I'm trying to help.

RICK

Look: I understand. I do. Really I do. I understand where you're coming from. I understand that you needed to wait til after Pop died to do this. To make your great, valiant stand.

DANNY

Rick, you couldn't be more wrong right now.

RICK

I get it. Didn't want to disappoint him. We all knew it. That's what you were always scared of. Disappointing him. It's not like you were the son he wanted so you busted your ass to make up for that. *A beat. RICK was effective in hurting DANNY.*

CATHY (to RICK)

That was uncalled for. I know you're mad, Rick, but c'mon. Don't be an asshole. He's still blood.

RICK

God, Cath, look at ya. You're his sister, not his mother. Always jumping in there to protect him. Never letting him grow his own spine.

CATHY

That chip you've got on your shoulder must be real heavy. Back breaking right?

RICK

Ah screw you.

MA (to DANNY)

That's not true, Daniel. Your brother - he doesn't know what he's talking about. Your father loved you, Daniel. It wasn't really in his nature to show affection but I know him and I know he -

DANNY stands up from his chair. He brushes her off.

DANNY (to MA)

I'm fine, I'm fine.

MA

I think today's been hard on everyone so maybe it'd be best for us to take a break.

RICK is sitting down now. CATHY is standing. DANNY passes her to get to the refrigerator. He grabs a beer for himself.

DANNY

Anyone want anything to drink? (beat) Ma? Rick?

Silence. DANNY now moves over to the pot, lifting up the lid.

DANNY

What's this? Cath, did ya make it? Looks pretty healthy. Also kinda looks like vomit, but, eh, screw it, can't hurt to try it right?

He takes a spoon and tastes it.

DANNY

Not bad, actually pretty good, Cath. You really outdid yourself - What did you say it was?

Silence.

DANNY

Sorry, what? I musta missed it.

CATHY

Split pea and quinoa soup.

DANNY

Split pea and quinoa. Huh. I've never really been a fan of quinoa. Kinda reminds me of gravel, like a soft gravel, but I like it in here. I'll need to get that recipe.

A beat.

CATHY

Please stop, Danny.

DANNY

I'm not doing anything.

CATHY

You're doing your good guy shtick and I don't have the energy to go through the whole routine. You're gonna have to talk anyway so it's pointless.

DANNY

What routine?

CATHY

The one you've always done. The whole act where you try to deflect and ingratiate yourself to everyone so that maybe they forget how you screwed up. I thought you'd outgrown it.

DANNY

I don't do that.

CATHY

It worked when you were, like, ten but it's not so cute anymore.

DANNY

I'm not avoiding anything.

CATHY

Sure you aren't.

DANNY

Fine. Try me. Ask away. Anything you want.

MA

It's been a long day. Why don't we take a break, get some rest -

CATHY (to DANNY)

Why?

DANNY

Why? I'm tired of it.

CATHY starts to laugh to herself; her laugh says "Aren't we all?" and it bothers DANNY.

DANNY

By the time I was eight, I was already all in. Running errands for Pop, riding my bike to make deliveries. I never got to be a kid, you know.

CATHY

None of us did.

DANNY

You and Rick were lucky. Pop at least waited until you were fifteen before unloading on you. Me? No, I never get to pretend that my father was just the friendly neighborhood butcher. Those scary men that were outside at the playground? To you, you probably didn't even notice them, but I knew that they probably had guns that were meant for me. I've never had a girlfriend cause I didn't wanna trap some innocent girl in this mess. I didn't take a date to prom cause I thought that maybe somebody would want to settle the score with Pop. Maybe that'd be the night they ran me off the road, send a message to the family. Don't you see? I was all in my whole life, and I don't want that anymore. I wanna be clean.

CATHY

That's the price you have to pay.

DANNY

And I'm done paying it.

RICK

That's not enough.

DANNY

What?

RICK

That's not enough of a reason. I don't believe you.

DANNY

Rick, my whole life you've been pushing me around, telling me what to believe and what not. I'm twenty-six years old, and, if that's my reason, then that's my reason.

RICK

There's more. There has to be. You don't risk ruining this family for that.

DANNY

Well, sorry to disappoint ya, but there's not.

RICK

So you're really tearing this family apart because you're tired. Little Danny's tired, so screw the family. Screw the rest of us. Screw everyone except for Danny. Cause it's all about what baby Danny wants. The family's ruined but it's ok cause Danny gets what he wants.

MA

The family's not ruined, Rick. Stop overreacting - you can't try to blame your brother for something that hasn't even happened.

RICK

Typical. Typical Danny and typical Ma.

MA

Rick, I'm not here for your passive-aggressive -

RICK

When are you gonna start acting like I'm your son too?

MA

I've always treated you like a son.

RICK

No. No, I'm always the enemy. It's always my fault. Danny was the helpless little brother, the poor

baby. Cathy was the daughter. So everything always fell on Rick. Somebody left the door unlocked - "Rick, get your ass in here." Cathy doesn't do her chores -- "Goddammit, Rick, can't you find a way to stop distracting her?" Danny fell off the slide - "Rick, why the hell would you push your brother off the slide?" I was always the fuck up because both of them (points to DANNY and CATHY) were the victims.

MA

What a convenient way to remember it.

RICK (cont'd)

And don't even get me started on Dean, Dean was perfect, a saint, he could do no wrong. If only I was Dean.... Dean did this... Dean would've said that.

MA

Don't bring Dean into this! He didn't do anything to deserve it and you don't get to drag his name through the mud.

RICK

Wow. Even now nobody dare touch your little baby Dean. He's still untouchable. Gone five years but still untouchable.

MA

He's not here to defend himself. He's dead so he doesn't get that chance. So don't talk about him.

CATHY

He's not some some martyr, Ma! He wasn't a saint.

MA

He did an awful lot more good than bad. So I don't wanna hear any of you acting like Dean was the problem.

CATHY

Goddamn, Ma! You're so blind. I'd love to see how you remember me when I die. Make me out into some, some galiant Mother Theresa. God. (beat) You're probably gonna start making Pop into Ghandi.

MA

Dean and your father are two separate people. Two very different people.

CATHY

Dean was a shadow of Pop.

MA

He was not. I made sure of that.

CATHY

He died in a drunk driving accident! He wasn't fighting for our country, he didn't jump in front of bus to save some pregnant lady. He was drunk and he drove into a ditch. There's nothing about that that is good or kind or -

MA

Dean was a good son and a good man!

CATHY

Dean was a fuck up. He was an alcoholic, borderline abusive, but he was the oldest so you forgave it. There was nothing perfect about him. Like I said, a shadow of Pop.

A beat.

MA

If that's how you feel, I can't change it.

CATHY

And I can't force you to see it the way it was.

CATHY gets up to wash out her coffee mug. As she returns to the table:

DANNY

Rick, it's your little girl. Or boy. Whichever it is.

RICK

What about my child?

DANNY

Do you think about em?

RICK

Danny, don't question me when it comes to my family. You have no right.

DANNY

Alright. Fair enough. (beat) But look at us. Is that what you want for your child? They're not even born yet and they're already stuck.

RICK

It's not gonna be like that. Not if they don't want that. I'm not gonna force anything -

DANNY

It's easy to say that, but when it comes down to it, they'll be just like you and me. Stuck in the family business. You can say the whole word is open to em, but really they're trapped. There's nowhere to go.

RICK

I'm about to be a father and a damn good one at that. I don't need you -

DANNY

Maybe it's not coming out right. I'm not saying you'll be good or bad, I just know what it was like for us growing up. We didn't have a whole lotta options and I don't want my niece or nephew to be locked into this shitty cycle. That's all I'm saying.

MA

Danny, let Rick handle his own business.

DANNY

Look, Ma, I know, I know it's not like you ever really had a choice about any of this.

MA

That's not your speculation to make.

DANNY

I'm not passing judgement or anything. I don't know what it was like -

MA

That's right. You don't.

DANNY

But I can figure. I know what Pop was like. I know how hard it'd be to leave.

MA

What gives you the right?

DANNY

I'm trying to help. Believe me, I promise I only want what's best for you, for everyone.

MA

What gives you the fucking right to try to save us, Danny? We don't need you to be our savior. We're doing fine without it. I only ever did what's best for all of you...

DANNY

Under the circumstances, you did.

MA

"Under the circumstances?" "Under the circumstances?"

DANNY

Ma, I'm, I'm sorry. I meant, that there were difficult circumstances and you did everything you could.

MA

Have you ever suffered? Like really suffered. Worried that maybe you wouldn't have dinner or clothes

or that your house would be gone.

DANNY

I never worried about that, but other things.

MA

You wanted a bike, you got the bike. You got your license, look at that! A new car in the driveway.

DANNY

And I appreciated those things, Ma, but they weren't everything.

MA

You've never suffered a day in your life. I protected you from everything. Nobody was going to hurt my son. Nobody was gonna touch a hair on your ungrateful head. So don't "under the circumstances" me.

DANNY

I'm sorry, Ma. I never doubted you or your intentions.

MA

Get out.

DANNY

I said I was sorry.

MA

Get out. Get out of my house. Rick was right. If you want to leave the business, you might as well leave the family.

DANNY

That's not what I want.

MA

What was it my mother always told me? "People in hell want ice water but that don't mean that get it."

So get out. Leave.

CATHY

Danny, don't go.

RICK

Let him go. Before he really screws up.

MA

Leave.

Nobody moves.

RICK

You heard her, Danny. Go.

Still nobody moves.

MA

Now you decide to grow a spine. For the first time in your life. Where'd my Danny go, the one who'd ask "how high?" if said "jump?" (pause) Did you know I had to practically beg the other moms for playdates? The other boys thought you weird because you were basically attached at my hip. Wouldn't leave me alone. Did you know that? It was humiliating, begging kids to hang out with my son, but I did it. Where'd brown-nosing Danny go? My Danny. I miss him.

MA has now poured herself a glass of scotch from the bottle on the table. She's drinking. DANNY pushes back his chair from the table. CATHY grabs his arm to stop him.

CATHY

We can still settle this. We can still figure something out.

MA

Get out.

CATHY

Ma, you're being -

MA (to CATHY)

You can go with him, too.

DANNY

It's fine. I'll go.

MA *chuckles to herself.*

MA

Looks like he finally got the hint.

DANNY gets up to leave. CATHY and RICK follow him to the door. Before he leaves, the siblings conference at the door.

CATHY

You're coming to the funeral right?

DANNY

I'll see if I can make it.

RICK

I don't think it's right that you come.

CATHY

It's our father. Of course it's right that he come.

RICK

Think about Ma. I don't, um, think she's in a state to see him again.

DANNY

If that's how you feel, I won't be there.

CATHY

You're being stupid. Both of you. It'll look funny to the neighbors.

RICK (to CATHY)

Ma doesn't need him there.

CATHY

It's family. She's upset right now, it's gonna blow past and -

DANNY

He's right. So, I guess, uh, this is it.

RICK

Thanks for understanding.

CATHY

You're welcome anytime. Just call before, ok?

DANNY

I'm not sure I'm gonna stick around.

CATHY

Seriously, if you call, I can figure something out.

DANNY

I think It's too late.

CATHY

She doesn't have to be around. Or I can come to you. Promise to gimme a call, ok?

DANNY

Cath.

CATHY

What?

DANNY

Like I said, it's too late. You're sweet but I, uh, I don't think I'll be back.

DANNY turns to leave. RICK realizes something and stops DANNY before he can leave.

RICK

What did you do?

DANNY

What? I'm not sure I know what you mean.

RICK

What the hell did you do?

DANNY

How do you know I did anything?

RICK grabs him and shoves him into the wall.

RICK

What the hell did you do, Danny?

MA now turns to look. CATHY has started to try to pull RICK away.

MA (resigned)

Rick. Put him down. Let the man go.

RICK

What the hell did you do, Danny? Answer me!

DANNY

It doesn't matter. It's too late anyways.

RICK

What the hell did you do? I will kill you.

DANNY

Go ahead.

CATHY

Rick! Stop you're hurting him!

MA

Rick. You don't have to do this. Let him go.

RICK

WHAT DID YOU DO?

Just as RICK begins to shove him harder, pushing DANNY further up the wall, we hear a siren. It's the sound of approaching police sirens. RICK stares at DANNY for a second after hearing them and drops DANNY. A moment of silence:

RICK

You didn't.

CATHY

Danny, this wasn't you, was it? You couldn't do this. Not to us. We're family.

Silence.

CATHY

Danny. Danny?

DANNY

It's what's best. For all of us. (beat, then quieter) I'm sorry.

There's a short rap on the door. After a second, a male voice says "Police. Open up." The family stands in stunned silence, looking at each other. DANNY finally moves, putting his hand on the knob.

DANNY

I think I better get going.

The stage fades to black. Another rap on the door and the male voice repeats itself. "Police. Open up or we're coming in." While still black, the audience can hear the knob turning then CURTAIN.

Samantha Goepfert

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Dirty Laundry

I love sweet bubble baths and
painting poems I cannot read but
like to look at, because
they are so beautiful.

I love candles, even when they're scentless I love
the warm glow, the splash of light in little
corners of my bedroom.

I love to run I love my burning breath
that blooms from my chest and spreads and
I am on fire, and
I am exhilarated.

I love, when the sun stings the treetops in my front yard
and hushes the highway, because it is time to sleep. I love
to sleep. I love the solitude,

the tranquility; the ability to time travel
and teleport .
To forget.
But, when I wake up-- the sun, coaxing me

now, to rise-- my eyes adjust on the
pile of dirty laundry at the foot of my bed, and I want to
get up and blow out the candles, before they melt
and slip into my shoes and greet the new day and dash
towards it, before it's too late but first I must
load up the washer and
let it drown me
wait on the dryer
while it rattles my bones, and
my clothes.

Pull them out and hang them up in my closet next to your
old t-shirts and love letters.

Samantha Goepfert

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Detox

When I woke up this morning I felt
sick-- nausea or
nostalgia, I cannot say which. Faces
all blur together now, as if
nothing
matters
and no one
exists.

Even now, sitting silently in the library still
I am restless. My skin quakes with my thoughts
threatening
to strip naked and swallow me whole still, I see
his face
waxing and waning as the clock ticks but I am
unaware

of each beat of my soul as it moves through the room
unable, to discern whose hands lay, heavy, on my chest, as I
hold on to what is left of
him, here,
now.
But, still there is that
slight
screaming, dangling from my staggered breathing, telling me
who I am.

Jessica Goldberg

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jim Lewis

Category: Critical Essay

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.

Jessica Goldberg

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jim Lewis

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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, barreling 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.

Chloe Grant

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Far, Far Away from Stress

As I hit send on the message asking Megan if she was free, I let out a heavy sigh. I had been up to my neck in exams, essays, projects, labs, and homework over the past five days. Although Saturday had finally arrived, I couldn't help but feel daunted by the seemingly endless assignments that still awaited me. Junior year had only just begun, but I was so overwhelmed that I was already wondering if I would even be able to pass my classes.

As I anxiously drummed my fingers on the faded wood of my kitchen table, I couldn't peel my eyes away from my phone. *Will she ever get back to me?* I wondered. Impatiently awaiting her reply, I began to make a mental list of the countless assignments I needed to complete by Monday morning. The list rapidly began to flood my mind, so I instead began to exhaust every possible scenario in which I wouldn't have to do this work - an admittedly irrational way of coping with my stress.

BEEP BEEP!

My phone jolted me from my trance, and I eagerly reached for it to read my new message. Megan had responded at last, letting me know that she was available. I grabbed my keys, murmured goodbye to my parents, and dashed out the door.

After driving the short few hundred feet to Megan's house, I parked in her driveway and turned up the radio. Casually flipping back and forth through the stations, I finally decided on "All Star" by Smash Mouth - a damn classic in my opinion. Soon Megan pulled opened the car door and hopped in, asking where we were going or what we were doing. Neither of us had a clue.

We drove down my narrow neighborhood road towards Olive. My legs began to shake as I anxiously waited to make a left turn, and we each discussed our issues with school that week. I disappointedly recounted the questions on my biology exam that I was sure I'd missed, while Megan shared her regrets for procrastinating so much on her English essay. Even though I was still helplessly overwhelmed I felt some strange comfort in knowing that I wasn't alone in my struggle.

After I felt we had exhausted this conversation topic, I cranked up the radio and pressed a little harder on the accelerator. We continued to drive without a clue as to where we were going. Never once did we turn off the road we were on: we simply watched as Olive changed to Clarkson, then Clarkson to Kiefer Creek Road. As we slowly wound down this unfamiliar road, we began to take in our surroundings.

"Is this Castlewood?" Megan wondered aloud, clearly both excited and confused.

I shrugged in response and pressed on down the secluded road, until it eventually emptied into a worn-down, gravel parking lot. Megan and I hesitantly glanced at each other, then slowly climbed out of my little black Subaru.

As I shuffled across the neutral grey gravel of the parking lot, I couldn't help but shift my focus from school to the beauty of my surroundings: tall trees encircling the entire parking lot. Continuing my trend of simply following a path and seeing where it took me, I made my way from the parking lot to a steep cement ramp. I trotted down the ramp, still keeping my gaze on the nature surrounding me, until I suddenly felt the ground shift beneath me.

Without even having to avert my eyes, I recognized the familiar feeling of sand.

"Should we keep going?" I asked Megan, not really needing an answer.

We tore off our shoes in unison and jogged down to the beach. As I trailed behind her, we didn't stop until we reached a serene river. After a few minutes of consideration, we determined that this wide river, which cut through the land around us, must be the Meramec. A wave of calm rushed through my entire body as I reached out to touch the cool water. In that moment, I felt so rooted in the beauty of the world encompassing me that any semblance of what I thought was inescapable anxiety faded away from me.

After silently walking around for what seemed like a very peaceful hour (although was probably closer to just a few minutes), Megan and I came across a rotten piece of driftwood sitting in the sand. Together we climbed across it. Only a few short minutes passed before our silent serenity was shattered, as I, yet again, began to think about the overwhelming work ahead of me. Although I had somehow managed to survive the previous five days, I had yet another gruesome five to follow.

Megan clearly understood what I was experiencing, as she let out an exasperated sigh and gazed out over the water, almost with a sense of longing. After a few moments had passed, she blinked and shifted her gaze towards me. I verbalized my concerns as she nodded me on with a reassuring smile. Her support was vital to me in that moment. I truly began to appreciate how easy it was to trust her. I thought back to our earliest memories together, some of which come all the way from preschool. As we continued to unload our stress onto each other, I couldn't help but feel incredibly lucky to have such a strong friendship.

Breaking away from our emotional pow-wow, Megan and I jumped down from the damp, old log and traced our feet along the bank of the slowly churning river. I kept my attention on the coarse sand, now dragging my fingers all around the miniature dunes.

Leaving our temporary graffiti, Megan and I were drawn once more to the water's edge. We both looked around at the isolating beauty of the park around us. We were encapsulated by lush green trees, small white cliffs, and an endless dome of sky. Realizing that the sun was quickly beginning to sink behind the leaves of the tall trees, we knew we would soon have to leave our oasis. But we weren't ready yet.

Not caring whether there was anyone around to judge us, we both began to shout into the simultaneous nothingness and fullness of nature. With each shout we gave, a sharp echo reverberated off the cliffs and back across the river. These echoes drew us in even more. With each shout I let out, I felt myself chipping away at some of the stress I had piled up over the week. With each echo I heard in response, I was reminded that no matter what I go through, I will always remain myself. We both let out our final cries, listening breathlessly to the reverberating echoes, until they finally faded out of earshot. Nothing but the sounds of nature remained.

I allowed these sounds to pull me in, noticing the steady but delicate current of the water in front of me, the gentle breeze swirling past me, and the bugs chirping happily to one another in the distance. This beautiful harmony seemed to fill my ears until they rang. The sharply defined cliffs surrounding me jutted out over the subtly churning water.

I wriggled my toes in the sand beneath me, and began to burrow my feet into the cool, damp sand buried beneath the warm surface. As I shifted my weight between my feet, I suddenly lost my balance and tumbled backwards into the grainy sand. I picked up some sand and felt it all fall through my fingers as I took my final look around.

A feeling of tranquility washed over me as I inhaled slowly, pulling as much air into my lungs as possible. I held this breath in for a moment. Once I released it, what little anxiety remained was melted away. I slowly closed my eyes, now seeing only the insides of my own eyelids and listening to myself. I continued to breathe slowly. With each inhale, I seemed to be absorb all the positivity from that day. With each exhale, I imagined I was expelling all my worries. I had truly reached a state of equilibrium.

I brought my awareness back to the present, squirming my fingers and toes in the sand, lifting my arms and legs, and gently opening my eyes. The sun had now fully disappeared behind the trees,

leaving behind only a deep purple glow, contrasted by scattered streaks of soft orange. I turned my head in both directions until I saw Megan, who was tracing lines in the sand behind me.

“We should probably head out,” I suggested, somewhat disappointed I had to end such a special moment. Megan nodded her head in solemn agreement, and we both pushed ourselves off the ground, rotating our bodies away from the scenery and back towards my familiar car. I focused on every individual step as I carried my feet across the gentle sand, up the solid pavement of the ramp, and through the rough gravel until I finally reached my recognizable black car.

As I sat in the warm leather seats on the drive home, I relaxed with the windows rolled all the way down, feeling the wind rush past my palm as I gently draped my left hand over the car door. I noticed Megan’s hand disappear into her purse for a moment. When it resurfaced it was clutching a homemade CD, sloppily marked “Cruisin’” with a black Sharpie. As she reached forward towards the CD player, I couldn’t help but feel hopeful about the week to come. Although I knew I couldn’t avoid the very real work that still awaited me, I was now reassured by the realization that I can always stay grounded by appreciating myself, those I love, and the beauty of the world around me.

Cassandra Griffing

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

"Thoughts Speak Louder Than Words"

Thoughts Speak Louder Than Words

All eyes on those who shimmer with dialogue
All eyes on those with tongues aflame,
blinded
by their empty words
that block genuine insight.

But my mind is hanging in the shadows,
erupting
with silent screams
like a lion in a cage.
It bursts with vivid colors, illuminating me.
Silently, internally.

If the shy girl from chemistry class is "quiet"
then I am *silent*
The secret force remains inside of me,
never cared to be heard from.

And so the world goes on.
The Screamers continue to dominate its surface,
searching above for what
treasure lies beneath.

Mara Gullett

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Christmas Train

December 23, 2014. I sit back against the cushion of the seat and close my eyes for a bit. It's been a hectic week at work and it seems as if this has been one of the few times that I have taken a moment to relax and collect my thoughts. Holidays are hectic of course, that's a given. My job as a fashion designer gives me little time to think about how much I miss my family in the Windy City; most days that's a good thing. New York during the holidays, though, never fails to remind me of the traditions that I know I'm missing back home- trimming the tree after Thanksgiving, the candlelight services at church the week before Christmas, caroling in downtown Chicago with a stop at Cafe duMonde and their famous hot chocolate. I smile thinking that I'll at least get to participate in a few things during my week back home. In anticipation of my trip, my holiday spirit was bolstered by more than a few shopping trips and I had to buy an extra suitcase to pack the gifts that I had purchased for my brother, sister, mother and father, as well as a sprinkling of cousins who would be coming in.

Two hours into the ride I hear a *screech* and the *puff, puff, puff* of the engine slowing as the train halts to a stop. The passengers look around at each other, confusion washing over their faces. Within a few minutes, the intercom crackles to life and a deep voice says what we were all hoping to not be true. "We are sorry to inform you that our train is currently experiencing some technical difficulties. Please stand by while we fix the issue." There are several grunts of disapproval from many passengers. Others, including me, are just silently hoping we will make it home for the holidays.

By the time it had ceased motion, the subway car was above ground. I look out the window to find it is snowing- *hard*. The twinkling flakes fall from the sky like feathers from a down pillow, soft and billowy, yet I know that with each flake the chance of arriving in Chicago on time becomes less likely. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" a gruff voice asks. I turn and look into the face of an elderly man. Gentle creases line his eyes as if he's spent a lifetime smiling, and his scraggly white beard glistens in the sun. His gaze sparkles with wonderment while looking out at the snow-covered flatland.

I return my gaze to the window and say, "Yes, Sir. I haven't seen anything like it in years." We have a small conversation with him asking questions like, "Where are you headed to?" and "Do you live near the city?" and me answering with "Chicago, to see my family," and "Yes, Brooklyn." He lightens up the mood with his jovial attitude, moving from one person to the next, asking them questions and listening to their stories. His laugh resounds through the subway car. Soon enough, quiet chatter and happy laughter spread throughout the train. Everyone catches the holiday spirit bug. More than a few passengers begin singing traditional holiday carols, and I even find myself humming along.

Hour after hour ticks by and the passengers' spirits sink a little lower with the passage of time. The storm has now cut off all cell signals and we are unable to contact our loved ones or complete our last-minute shopping on the internet. As the train becomes even more packed in snow and ice, I'm feeling cocoon-ish if not just a little claustrophobic. I get out my sketchbook and think about next year's spring fashions. I close my eyes, pop my earbuds in, and listen to a few Beach Boys songs for inspiration. Every now and then a few worrisome thoughts drift in, *What if I don't make it home? What if I'm stuck in this metal box on Christmas morning?*

The elderly man makes his way back up to the front of the compartment and sits in the seat directly across the aisle from me. His red sweater brightens up the train and I can't help but smile. It's not exactly what I would call an ugly sweater, but there's no doubt that this sweater only sees the light of

day during the holiday season. His huge suitcase can't fit in our shared seating area- it has its own double seat. It seems to be bulging with gifts as the points of the boxes try to make their way through the worn leather. He must come from a rather large family of gift givers (and receivers!) I'm sure "SUBWAY SERVICE HALTED BY BLANKET OF SNOW" is making headlines on just about every local news station, but I doubt anybody is actually trying to help us. Others are no doubt digging themselves out of this beautiful mess. I'd try to shovel the thick white blanket away myself, but the passenger doors are stuck solidly shut. The engineer hasn't spoken in hours, evidently with little to update. I don't have a blanket or even a neck pillow, so I follow suit with everyone else and bundle up using my sweater, coat, and boots, lay awkwardly across the double seats, and try to sleep. It's been about fifteen hours since I boarded the train. If we were still moving I'd be only seven hours from Chicago. However, although time has passed, the train hasn't moved a single inch. I'm still twenty hours from my destination. I'll be lucky if I get home as early as lunch on Christmas day. Meanwhile, my affable aisle seat partner has opened his suitcase and miraculously created a plate of what looks to be homemade cookies. I see chocolate chip, iced sugar cookies that are almost too beautiful to eat- scratch that, I could eat a horse at this point in our journey, snickerdoodles, peanut butter, and some other assorted candy that had to have come from a home kitchen. "My dear, you look famished. I was saving these for this evening, but they'll do nobody any good stowed away in my suitcase. Please, take a few." "Oh, these look lovely. Thank you," I say as I reach for one, and then another. It must be because I haven't eaten in a while, but these cookies are melt-in-your-mouth delicious and hit the spot. Soon, I nestle into my coat, drifting off in a drowsy haze made more content by my full stomach. I haven't been able to sleep since 5:30 this morning. I woke up feeling entirely helpless that I can't be with my family right now. All the other passengers seem to have embraced this situation. I wish I could, too. I pull out my sketchbook once again, and use the flashlight keychain I've brought with me as my source of light. Nestled in the conjoined corner of the seat and window, I take my mind off this stressful incident, pencil stroke by coloring shade. As the sun begins to rise, the other passengers wake up one by one. There is a restlessness among the crowd, but there are *Good mornings* and *How did you sleeps* bantered about which lent a general air of goodwill among men. Around 7:00, the engineer gives us the best Christmas present anyone on this train could imagine. "Although several hours behind our estimated arrival time and after working all night to clear the snow, it has been deemed safe to continue to our final destination." The intercom clicks off, and the quiet locomotive turns raucous with cheers. The rest of the ride consists of eating cookies, playing music, and having joyful conversations with the other travelers. We continue en route to Chicago, the elderly man still sitting next to me entertaining me with stories of his childhood holidays. Once we reach the station, the passengers jostle to retrieve their carry-ons and bags and I do the same. I see the man leave his seat and head down the aisle of the train. Other passengers file in behind him and he is jostled down the aisle in a sea of humanity. I wanted to ask his name as we never formally introduced ourselves. Out of the corner of my eye, I see that he has left a bright red box with a magnificent bow tied on top of it. I grab it and try to reach around the others to tap his shoulder. "Sir, Sir!" The man must be hard of hearing- he doesn't respond. I tap his shoulder and extend my arm to return the gift, but as I do something catches my eye. It's the tag on the present. It reads, *Merry Christmas, Samantha, From Saint Nicholas!* The red-sweatered, white-bearded man turns and I look into his eyes with astonishment. He returns my gaze with a wink and a nod and steps out onto the platform, his bag of gifts slung over his shoulder like a bundle.

Olivia Hamlin

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Flash Fiction

Umbrellas

They all stood on a street corner beneath the ugly sky. It was grey and filled with clouds that cut off the nice blue it usually was, the kind of blue you never realized you like until you notice it's absence. The group of acquaintances smiled and talked to each other while looking up to the grey mass above them, willing the walk sign to turn green before it began to rain. But even the impending threat of getting wet didn't ruin their mood.

One of the friends, a woman towards to the back of the group, stood quietly while the rest of her group carried on their conversations, all about different topics, no one really listening to each other but speaking joyfully nonetheless, just happy to be in the presence of company. She stayed quiet though. Surveying the group in front of her, she saw that some were looking at the sky, some to one another, some to nothing in particular, before her eyes landed on the person she had been looking for.

He had moved forward a little, in the group, easily the loudest and happiest of the bunch. He was handsome, she had deduced that long ago, and she all of a sudden wanted to jump next to him, laugh with him, make him smile the way the other girls were. His blue eyes and white smile were blocked from view as he had his back to her and she wanted nothing more in that moment than to see them. She hadn't noticed herself moving towards him, slowly until she was practically right behind him. It only seemed natural then for her to open up her umbrella when the rain began to fall and push it over his head, to keep him dry of course. Preoccupied with such, holding the umbrella over him, she didn't realize her own dilemma: she would surely be soaked by the rain in no time. However, she stayed dry, for one friend behind her, undetected, had opened his umbrella for her.

Elisabeth Hampl

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

Guardian Angels

The overwhelming smell of sanitizer and cleaning chemicals washed over him as he strolled into the hospital. As he passed by the reception desk, a familiar sound welcomed him.

“Why hello Trenton. Back for another visit?” A mischievous voice said.

“Sure am. Got any new patients?” He replied.

“Actually, yes. Room three. His name is Leo, and he’s eighty-six.” She offered.

“Alrighty. Thanks.”

“You know, I think it is really nice of you to stop by every now and then to visit patients. You’ve probably got better things to do.” She reasoned.

“No, I like doing it.” He assured, jogging down the hall.

“Oh, and Trenton, he has a speech disability.” She called after him.

“Okay, got it. No problem. Thanks, Caroline!” He shouted back. She rolled her eyes, smiling, and went back to her computer.

“Here we go. Room three.” Trenton panted. He took a deep breath, opened the door slowly, and waltzed in. Greeting him lay a thin, pale, elderly man. The man looked bewildered, and immediately started to babble all sorts of gibberish. “Hi there, Leo. I’m Trenton, and I’m here to visit you.” Leo continued to sputter out jumbled words. “How are you?” Trenton asked. There was no answer, just jumbled words and sounds. He tried again, resulting in the same thing. Now, anyone else would probably just shrug, shove their hands in their pockets, and waltz right back out of that room. But not Trenton. No, Trenton was different. Trenton had a valuable trait, a trait that only few had. Trenton could connect with people in a special way, he could feel what others felt, just by looking at them. He wasn’t super, he had no power, he wasn’t any different from you and I. The trait that made him different..... is that he truly cared. And with one look, Trenton could tell that this man’s story was a good one, one worth knowing.

Yes, Trenton knew this, and he just had to find out more about Leo. There was just something unique about that frail old man, something he couldn’t put his finger on. He needed to know more about him and his backstory. “Hey, Leo, can you tell me what happened? What caused you to come here, Leo?” Trenton asked softly, not wanting to hurt the man’s feelings, or remind him of whatever the terrible thing was that had happened to him. Leo kept right on spluttering words. “That’s alright, pal. I

understand. I'll be right back, okay?" More sputters and moans. Trenton stood up from the purple chair he was in and started out of the room. He knew just who to talk to.

He hurried up the hall, and there she was. Caroline. She would know about Leo. Trenton suddenly felt panicky. The vibes that came from Leo were like none other Trenton had ever experienced before, and he simply couldn't ignore them. He ran up to her desk, leaning over it.

"Caroline," he gasped. "Tell me everything you know about Leo."

Caroline looked up at him, confused. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Slow down."

Trenton repeated himself. "Please. I need your help."

"What are you talking about? Wait, first of all, why?"

Trenton quickly explained about his urge to find out about the old man.

"I'm sorry Trenton, but I'm afraid that I can't do that." She said sadly.

"Come on, Caroline," he pleaded. "This is really important."

"I can't do that for you, but I can help you with anything else you need." She quipped through clenched teeth, hinting at the security camera zooming in on them.

Trenton got her message. She leaned in. "I'll meet you outside in fifteen minutes when I get on my break, okay?"

"Got it." He whispered. "Fifteen minutes."

After what seemed like hours, fifteen minutes had finally passed. The refreshing summer breeze flowed through him as Trenton strolled out the door, and the sun smiled upon him. He met up with Caroline, who was standing there, waiting.

"Come on. Let's go talk somewhere else." She said cautiously, eying the outside security camera watching them like a hawk.

They retreated to the park. Once they got there, she plopped down on a nearby bench.

"So, what was it you wanted to ask me?" she queried.

"I have to find out more about Leo, and I need your help." Trenton reminded. "Will you please help me?"

Sadness filled Caroline's eyes. "Oh Trenton, you know I would, but..... I can't." She finished.

"Sure you can." he persisted.

"No, Trenton. I really can't. I'm sorry." She assured.

“Oh. So now you think I’m a bad person. You think I would tell the information to someone else.” He retorted back to her.

Suddenly she burst. “Trenton, I most certainly know you’re not that kind of person, but do you know what would happen if I gave you that information?” He flinched as her tone hit him. “I would get fired and possibly go to jail, Trenton. *Jail.*” His eyes widened.

“Wow, I’m..... I’m really sorry, Caroline.” Trenton stuttered. “I didn’t know....”

“It’s fine.” She interrupted. “I just..... What I mean to say, is that I truly wish there was some way I could help you. Really, I do.” Relief washed over him. “But I don’t even work in the file department. There’s just no possible way.”

That was that. It was over. He had to face it; he’d come to a dead end. Now, he wouldn’t find out what about Leo that made him so unique.

Then, Trenton’s eyes brightened. “Hey, there’s gotta be some way we could disguise ourselves, right? I mean, we could go inside disguised as employees who work in Files,”

“And find Leo’s file!” Caroline finished. So the two decided on it. It would take skill, courage, and most of all, quick thinking, but they knew they were up for the task.

After much thought, they concluded that they would meet at the park at 8:15 sharp. They would devise about their plan some, then go to the hospital. Caroline would go in to begin her shift, and Trenton would go in to visit Leo. In a couple hours when Caroline got on her break, they’d meet back at the park and plan about what to do next. They knew that they had to plan carefully, for this could end in triumphant success, or in a complete disaster.

Before he knew it, the next morning was upon him. It was a perfect sunny day, and when he rushed out his door the rising sun greeted him, casting its warm glowing shadow on his back as he remembered the door, sprinting back to lock it. He jumped in his car and drove to the park, getting caught in the dreaded morning rush hour traffic while he watched the majestic city began to wake. When he finally arrived at the park, he hurried over to Caroline.

“Sorry I’m late.” he panted.

“Phew. I was beginning to think you were too scared to follow through with it.” she teased.

“Ha ha.” He grinned. “Me? Never!”

They began to plot. What would they do for disguises? How would they get in? This was risky; if they got caught, it would be over for both of them. Their careers, their records, their money; everything would be squelched. They would immediately be shipped to jail, forced to live in cells for years, despite their pleads. It was a cringing thought. For an hour they theorized, racking their brains for any sign of flaw, all the while surveying the area for anyone who might be listening in. All until about an hour later, when they had finally came up with what they thought was the perfect plan of action. And just in time too, it was 9:21; just 9 minutes until Caroline’s shift at the hospital.

As they crossed the street, they once again acknowledged the great stakes this quest held for them. But it was for a good cause. Trenton wanted to know about Leo, and to help him. The vibes from the man kept getting stronger and stronger. It was all that he could think about. Little did he know, this would influence everything that happened later that day, and it might just save their mission.

As they approached the sliding doors of the hospital, they looked at each other.

“Well, here goes. This is it.” Caroline panted.

“Yup.”

She chuckled. “Wow, you sure know how to calm an anxious mind.”

He smiled. “That’s me. Meet you in two hours.”

“Don’t be late.” She warned.

“I won’t.” He promised.

“Okay, I’m counting on you.” She said walking through the doors.

“Don’t worry Caroline. It’ll happen. Two hours. I promise.” He assured running down the hall.

He skidded to a stop. Here he was again. Room three; Leo’s room. He took a deep breath, opened the door slowly, and walked in. Leo lay in his bed, almost paler than ever, and his eyes were closed.

Smiling he asked, “Hi Leo! Remember me?” Silence.

“Leo?” Trenton asked worried.

Still no answer. Trenton’s heart began to race. Was this it? He rushed over to Leo’s bed. No, it couldn’t be over, it just couldn’t! He didn’t even take a moment to hesitate. He shook Leo as hard as he could, his heart beating faster than ever.....

Leo’s eyes fluttered open. Trenton collapsed onto a nearby chair, struggling to recover.

“Leo, oh Leo, I’m so glad you’re still a-” Trenton caught himself. He didn’t want to worry his elderly friend. “You almost gave me a heart attack.”

Leo looked confused. He started to splutter out words and grunts. Still attempting to revive from his fright, Trenton closed his eyes, and everything seemed to fade away. There was white silence, and images began to form in his mind. Then, Trenton saw Leo, and a thin old lady - *his wife maybe?* - get out of a car. They each bore fistfuls of bags, and started up their long driveway. The woman was a few feet ahead of Leo, when the peaceful silence was shattered by the sound of a body thudding on concrete. Trenton watched as the lady whipped around with a look of pure horror on her face.....

“No, no!” Trenton cried, jerking his eyelids open. “What was *that?*” He thought.

So much for his efforts to calm himself down. As he slapped his hand over his heart, he felt it beating a mile a minute. He feverently tried to shake off this new uncomfortable feeling that was upon him, but once again his efforts were no use. He started to talk to Leo, and this surprisingly seemed to comfort him. Even though the man could not speak, Trenton felt oddly at peace.

As Trenton was chatting with Leo, he glanced at the clock that hung crooked on the wall. 11:23! “Two hours sure have flown.” Trenton thought, as he recalled his promise to Caroline. “Sorry Leo, but I gotta go,” He said. “See you later.”

Trenton sprinted through the hall, focusing his sight on the front desk. Caroline was gone. “She must’ve already left.” He muttered.

He rounded the corner, and the doors slid open, clearing his path. As he bolted outside he felt the summer breeze run its smooth fingers through his dirty blond hair. His sharp blue eyes scanned the area for any cars, and he safely crossed the road. As he made his way to the park, he checked his watch; 11:27. He forced his legs to move faster, and his arms pumped wildly. If he really hurried, then maybe, *just maybe*, he could make it.

He darted in and out of people, sometimes having to shove them out of his beeline for the park, apologizing, and in return received many angry comments. Finally after what seemed like miles, he got there and made a dive for the bench. During the last few seconds he frantically finger brushed his thick hair, and tried for the third time that day to catch his breath and slow his heartbeat down, which still seemed to be racing.

Trenton once again glanced at his wristwatch, and it was 11:30 exactly. Just then he heard that familiar voice.

“Wow, I’m impressed. I was sure you were going to be late.” She panted, collapsing onto the bench.

Trenton chuckled. “And you think you’re out of breath.”

They schemed about what to do next. “Wait, what’ll we do for disguises?” Trenton remembered, beginning to get discouraged.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got that covered. I’ve got a friend who works in Files,”

“Hey, then can’t she just bring Leo’s file out to us?” Trenton interrupted.

“Well....no. All files have a sensor that doesn’t allow them to leave the room.” She explained. “Anyway, as I was saying,” She raised an eyebrow at him. “I have a friend who works in Files, and she knows what we’re doing. She said that they had a couple extra gloves and ID’s in the back.”

“What ID’s?” Trenton asked.

“Some employees recently went on break, and they left their ID’s in the back.” Caroline explained once again, rolling her eyes. “My friend said she would bring the stuff and meet us here in, uh, what time is it Trenton?”

“Um, 11:41.”

“Oh, well any minute then. Hey, why, that’s her now!” She exclaimed, pointing to a tall curly haired woman crossing the street. The woman entered the park. “Over here, Sherry!” Caroline called, flailing her arms. The woman saw her, and started to approach the two.

After exchanging a warm thanks, Caroline took the items, and they started out for the hospital. They put on their easy costumes of gloves and a pinned on ID, and entered. They started right off for the file room, remembering Sherry’s directions - *go straight, take two lefts, go up the stairs, a right, a left, another left, then go straight and take a right. Got it? Room 38. It’s as simple as that. You can’t miss it.* - trying not to look suspicious.

After what felt like getting lost a thousand times (and arguing about directions a million times), they had at last found it. Trenton stood before the door, frozen. Caroline snapped him out of it by saying, “Here, hold your ID up to the scanner like this.” She demonstrated, raising her ID to the scanner. Trenton did the same, and the door silently clicked open. They crept inside, gazing at the huge room filled with what seemed like mountains of files. Now it was just a matter of finding the right one.

“Well, we might as well get started,” Caroline advised.

“This is going to take hours,” He groaned, his shoulders sagging.

“Hey, I have an idea, “ she brightened. “Let’s just ask one of the other employees where the ‘L’ section is.”

“But don’t they organize files by last name?” Trenton recalled, now greatly discouraged.

“I know Leo’s last name.” Caroline remarked. After telling him it, they asked an employee.

The employee looked at them suspiciously, then pointed. “It’s down this aisle, on the right side.”

They stared down the aisle. They searched and searched and searched, but they couldn’t find Leo’s file. Trenton was about ready to give up, but then he remembered Leo. “I have to do this for Leo.” He thought determined. Something had been nagging him to look on the left side. Finally he gave in, and started reading through the names. Suddenly his heart stopped.

There it was. Leo’s file. “I found it,” He whispered to himself. “Hey, I found it!” He exclaimed pulling Caroline over. She gasped quietly, her eyes widening. He ran his fingers over edge of the folder gingerly, then grabbed it, and pulled. There it lay, shaking in his own trembling hands, just waiting for him to open it.

“Well, go on.” Caroline softly urged.

Trenton opened the cover slowly, revealing the neatly typed stapled pages, holding Leo’s past. He began to read, and this is the amazing story he read:

In the spring of 2015 Leo was helping his wife Ann carry in groceries. Then suddenly, halfway

up his driveway, he collapsed. His wife rushed out to him, feeling the need to stay with her husband, but needing to call 911. She was torn, she didn't know what to do. It was a long way up the driveway, and if she hurried to make the critical trip, then her husband might perish. Then as she recalled, "out of absolutely nowhere" a white car pulled up. Two men got out and kindly offered to stay with her husband while she called emergency services. She didn't know these men, but seeing this as her only chance, she seized it, saying "Wait there and I'll come back out with money to show my thanks." However when she came back out with the money, the ambulance was there, but the two men and the white car had vanished. The man and his wife are strong Christians. Doctors say the man had a stroke, and it was a miracle that he survived. Leo will have speech disabilities, but he will still live.

And that's where it ended. But one question still remained for Trenton, and he had to know. He put the file in its place, and sprinted out the door to everyone's shock. He bolted right to Leo's room, and stopped, his heart beating faster than it ever had before, and his head spinning. This was it. "If they really were angels, there would be some sort of sign." Trenton thought. He pushed open the door and ran into the room. This was the only thing he could think of. He took a deep breath and asked boldly, "Leo, did you see anything while you were in your stroke?" Leo started to rant loads of unfamiliar words, but then Trenton's eyes widened as he believed, when all of a sudden Leo stopped and spoke as clear as crystal,

"I saw light.....and a ladder."

Laura Harder

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Category: Critical Essay

Musical Devices: The Key To Understanding Moods and Emotions

Musical Devices: The Key to Understanding Moods and Emotions

The year is 1903. The location is London, England. A young woman gets ready for bed. While getting ready, she writes in her journal. She writes, “A violin squeaked, there was a noise of loud voices & laughter. It reminded me how once, as a child, I woke at dead of night: it seemed to me — 8 or 9 I supposed really & I heard strange & horrible music as of a midnight barrel organ, & was so frightened that I had to crawl to the cot next mine for sympathy (qtd in Popova).”

Later in her diary, she describes the music in more detail:

Surely the music that seemed to ebb before, has gathered strength — it sounds louder & louder — it swings faster & faster — no one can stop dancing now. They are sucked in by the music. And how weary they look — pale men — fainting women — crumpled silks & trampled flowers. They are no longer masters of dance — it has taken possession of them. (qtd in Popova)

Found in an article containing the views that Maria Popova, an author, has on music and its effects on emotions, Virginia Woolf’s diary is actually one of her published novels called “A Dance at Queen’s Gate.” Her diary describes the effects that music can have on a person. Through this dairy, Woolf makes her readers wonder how musicians use music to influence their moods and emotions. Depending on the person and the kind of music, reactions can vary. As a result, every kind of music has the power to create a mood or develop emotion in the listener. Whether this is happiness, sadness or anger, depends on the type of music and more specifically, what occurs during and in the music. It is up to the musician to choose what in the music will evoke emotion in the listener. Because of this, musicians use simple devices in music to influence the moods and emotions of listeners.

While dealing with music and emotions, it is first important to understand what music is and what components make up music. Music is sound that is put or organized together to stimulate someone or something else. Music is a very important factor in many different areas of human life, nevertheless many people do not usually understand what components or parts make up music. Through simple research, anyone can find out what makes up music. John Powell, a trained musician and physicist, says these five building blocks are: notes, harmony, rhythm, melody, and loudness (Powell 5). These different elements weave together to help a person choose the kind of music that they listen to or enjoy.

Next, one should understand the difference between emotion and mood. Most people believe that emotion and mood are the same thing; however, they are actually not as similar as one might think. According to Tim Hill, a psychotherapist, typically moods are emotional feelings that last for a longer period of time, most likely several days. Emotions tend to occur at a faster rate than moods. They are more likely to be affected in everyday, immediate circumstances. Moods and emotions do intertwine because they happen at the same time. Experts believe that mood will more likely influence a person’s emotion than an emotion will influence a person’s mood (Hill). Once one understands this difference, it is easy to understand how music influences human emotions and moods.

People listen to a specific kind of music because it stimulates a certain emotion in their body. Marko Ahtisarri and Ketki Karanam, part of a project to help people understand the health benefits of music say, music can give individuals a variety of different emotions, such as happiness, calmness, nostalgia,

tenseness, and joyousness (Ahtisarri and Karanham). Also, a person might be listening to a song and feel one emotion, while another person listening to the same song, might have a completely different emotion. A study done by Byeong-jun Han and Sanghoon Jun, both electrical engineers at Korea University, says this is because the emotions will vary between people. Due to the fact that human emotions are so complicated and vary from person to person, emotional reactions can and will be very different from person to person (Han and Jun 436). For the most part, people listen to music that will help to cheer them up or put them in a better mood. When a person listens to music that they like, these people will have an increase in positive mood, which ultimately helps to better learning and performance skills (Ahtisarri and Karanham).

One particularly interesting type of music is music that conveys sadness through its tone. Sad music is unpredictable and affects emotion in more different ways than most people might think. It is interesting to learn that most people find that listening to sad music is enjoyable, even though most would think that it would be the complete opposite. This is because prolactin, a hormone, is released, causing relaxation and gratification. Prolactin is actually caused by emotional pain, so it is interesting to find out that most people find sad music pleasurable (Ahtisarri and Karanham). However, for some people, sad music is not enjoyable, for many of the expected reasons. These reasons include, the sad song reminds them of a breakup or another sad time in their life. One reason that this occurs is because music caused emotions can often make people recall memories, which can make the listener dislike the song after associating it with a rough time (Ahtisarri and Karanham). For these reasons, many people will begin to dislike music that reminds them of a negative time and they will like music that reminds them of a positive time.

Throughout the music community, both musicians and composers want to influence the moods of their listeners. Musicians are considered to be entertainers and they do not want to bore listeners. Instead, they want influence the moods and emotions of their listeners. In a study by Marjolein D. van der Zwaag and Egon L. van den Broek, both from Philip Research Laboratories in the Netherlands, say that one of the most important functions of music is that it can regulate mood and emotions, so musicians and composers will use this to their advantage when playing and writing music (van de Zwaag and van den Broek). Different characteristics and elements that help a musician help create emotion in the listener. Characteristics of music might include, both melody, and harmony. Some musical elements are: tempo, mode, percussiveness, dynamics, key changes, and the genre that the music is written in.

When exploring the components of music, it is first important to explore how melody and harmony in music can help to influence the mood and emotion of the listener. Most people do not know that melody and harmony are different, but in fact the two are both different. However, both work hand in hand to create a piece of music. "A succession of chords produces a harmony. The relationship between chords and harmony is therefore similar to that between words and sentences (Powell 83)." It is also important to note that harmony will change the mood of the melody (103). One way to change emotion in melody is through a key change or modulation. Key changes are a vital part of melody because going from one key to another provides emotional impact and lift (162). Film composers use key changes when they develop three or four different melodies and repeat them throughout the film to convey certain feelings corresponding with different movie scenes (103). The concept of how film scores influence emotions will be explored as a later topic.

While melody and harmony are broader terms when dealing with music, it is important to learn about the different musical elements within the melody and harmony and how musicians use the elements to help influence their listeners. When composers write music, they use several different strategies to influence the melody and harmony of a piece of music. One way that music can help to influence a listener's emotion, is when a musician plays tunes with different harmonies. Composers will often use an anxious or suspenseful chord to help build up the feeling of tension in listeners, usually in scary or

suspenseful music (Powell 103). When a person experiences tension, dopamine will peak to give a person chills, which is a great way to show emotion in a piece of music (Ahtisarri and Karanham).

Another thing that composers use to give people emotion is the use of different keys. There are two different kinds of keys, minor and major. Usually major keys are paired with bright, cheerful, and pure emotions, and minor keys are usually associated with sad and dark emotions (175). One interesting piece of information about music is that even though in most Western music, minor keys are perceived as unhappy, but in other cultures, including Indian culture, minor keys give listeners a more happy mood (144). Composers are usually fairly selective with the keys that they choose to give the listeners certain emotions (178).

Other than selecting key changes, which affect emotions, rhythm, tempo, and volume help to influence our emotion (200). Typically when tempo and rhythm are faster in a piece of music, the music seems to give a more worried emotion, and less calm and slower tempos will lead to a more relaxed mood and faster tempos will lead to a more excited mood (142, 200). Increases in volume will lead to more excitement and adrenaline production, so a composer will use these things to create suspense and confusion (141).

One last element that a musician can use to influence the emotion of a listener is percussiveness. Percussiveness is any musical impact that happens with the use of percussion instruments. Typically percussiveness will give the listener a more positive emotion because it shows how powerful this type of musical impact is (van der Zwaag and van den Broek). While there are a seeming variety of devices that a musician can use to influence the emotions, this is only scratching the surface.

Musical genres affect listeners in different ways. Typically classical and pop music will increase feelings of ease and decrease moods of worry and tension. Studies have also shown that heavy metal music increases moods of tension and nervousness. A study done by Christopher Rea and Gwen Carnes, from the Department of Psychology and Department of School Leadership at Emporia State University, says that these genres of music will not always affect a person in the same way, for example a person might find that listening to heavy metal music decreases worry and tension (Rea and Carnes). In conclusion, it is important to understand that no person's emotional reaction to a certain genre of music will be completely identical, and all kinds of music will create an emotional impact on the listener, no matter the kind of emotion or mood.

When dealing with music and emotion, one vital type of music to look at is film music and how film composers write music to influence the emotions of their listeners. Joel Douek, a professional composer, brings up the idea that music is one of the most important components in a movie because it tells the watcher how the characters are feeling and explains what could possibly happen next, before the action will even appear on the screen. Movie composers do this because they learn that humans are more music driven than visual driven, as a result, they will react emotionally more to the music in a movie rather than the image. While writing music, film composers will use many of the same techniques to get emotion out of their listeners. A great example of this is when composers use a specific rhythm and dynamic level to create a certain emotion in the listener. When composer John Williams wrote the theme for *Jaws*, he increased the speed and loudness between each note to add a great emotional effect to the music. While this may be a more well known example of how composers use musical elements, this combining of musical elements to create emotional effect will occur in every song that a person will listen to (Douek).

One might wonder the importance of understanding how music and its devices affect emotions. This is because music is seen in almost every aspect of life, from weddings, births, celebrations, death, wars, in every day life, through average at home listening, watching a movie or TV show, church services, and even just shopping around town (Douek). Because of all of this, it is very important to learn that music affects emotions and what within music does effect emotions and moods. Malini Mohana, a neuropsychologist in South Africa, says, without music life would be very different because it has the

ability to create emotions and images more than any other type of stimulus (Mohana). When listening or playing to music, most people tend to lose themselves since music is a good way to escape from the hardships of life.

Throughout history music has been there to serve as an escape. In 1903, Virginia Woolf continued to write in her journal late one night, saying,

The music has begun again—oh dear— the swing & the lilt of that waltz makes me almost feel as though I could jump from my bed & dance to it too. That is the quality which dance music has—no other: it stirs some barbaric instinct—lulled asleep in our super lives—you forgot centuries in a second, & yield to that strange passion which sends madly whirling round the room—oblivious of everything save that you must keep swaying with the music—in & out, round & round—in the eddies & sails of the violins. It is as though some swift current of water swept you along with it. It is magic music. (qtd. in Popova)

As can be seen, music has a huge impact on everyone's lives, including Virginia Woolf's. Music is very important for many reasons. It is a revolutionary piece of art and it is vital and necessary in the lives of so many people, which means it is important to understand why it makes one feel the ways that they do. This is why so many people continue to come back to music every day. Musicians have the great ability to compose and create many emotions, which in turn creates a beautiful and simple art form for everyone in the world to enjoy.

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Madelyne Hartleroad

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Short Story

A Talk in the Night

"I can tell that you're special," he says, his voice drawling out with a comforting resonance. "It's the way you talk, sweetheart. You're not just some normal girl. You have a heart, a real one, not one of those selfish, plastic machines that people call a heart. You've got a heart, and you chose to let me in, you could tell that I'm different too. Sweetheart, you're wise beyond your years. I can tell you think about every word you say to me, but you don't need to. You can say whatever you need to, kiddo."

She lays in her bed, grinning despite the tears in her eyes, and hugs her phone to her chest. She types back, although he tickles her ego with his voice. "I wish my parents understood me as well as you did, Matthew."

"I do too, believe me, kid," he says. "You need someone to take your reins and guide you, to control you, but your parents are doing one hell of a job. You're lucky that I'm here. You need someone to control you, and that person is me. You're a wild child, a rogue spirit. Remember when we met, on that Minecraft server? You weren't going to let anyone but me boss you around. You and I both know it."

She stiffens. It takes her a second before she continues to type. "Control me?"

"Sweetheart," Matthew continues, "you wouldn't be here if you weren't looking for a god. I've already told all the other kids I talk to, but I'm no normal person."

"Can you prove it?" she types back. She hugs the blankets closer to her chin.

"You better watch what you say," he chuckles. "It's dangerous to ask a god for proof." He absently whistles for a moment, and then says, "watch the lights."

Her eyes flick to her bedside lamp. The bulb remains dark. She types back, "nothing happened", but a fuzz of light catches her attention. She turns back towards it and watches the bulb slowly illuminate, as though an invisible mouth is breathing a flame into the glass. Her ceiling lights do the same. She watches in awe and snaps up out of bed. No one else is in the brightly lit room. She walks over to her wall to shut off her lights and notices that the switches are unnaturally hot. Her fingers tingle as if she's pressing them against a toaster. "How did you do that?" she types.

He laughs. "I told you kid, you always knew I was different. Was your switch hot?"

She shakes her head in disbelief. "Yes, it was," she types.

"Put your hand against it and imagine the heat is coming from my hand."

She does as he says. Her palm burns; the switch is scorching. She pulls it back.

"Uh uh, I can tell you aren't holding my hand anymore." She hears him sigh. "You have no idea how much I wish I could hold you in person."

"Can you tell me how you did it?" she asks again.

"Kiddo, you've known since the moment we met, the moment you were attracted to my burly voice, that I'm different from all the people who have let you down. I'm a god, and you'll never know just how much power I have, because I'll never use it against you. I have the power to choke you," he says, his voice firm and overbearing. She feels meaty fingers grip around her throat. They clench, pressing into her skin so tightly she loses her ability to gasp. Her throat sears and the invisible grip lifts her off of the floor. She claws at her neck but there's nothing constricting around it except for the stale air. Her nails scrape against her skin, attempting to pry away those fingers that don't exist. "I could grab you by your neck and let your feet dangle against the carpet. I could choke you to death with my bare hands." She's lowered back down, her feet softly brush the floor. Her neck is released. "But I won't," Matthew says softly. "Because I care about you."

She crawls back into her bed. Her stomach feels like it's trying to claw out of her chest and her pounding heart staggers her breaths. "How will you control me if you never use your powers against me?"

"I can't make you do anything, sweetheart. But you'll know that everything I tell you is the best for you. You know it's true. You and I both know I love you more than your parents ever will."

"They don't understand me," she types back.

"I know, sweetheart."

"But they don't hate me," she continues.

"They don't hate you," he repeats. Matthew sighs. "They don't deserve you. They don't deserve to have such a radiant, intelligent daughter. Your parents don't know what to do with you. You're special. And they're not. Kiddo, you need someone like me to love you."

"That isn't true, they're good parents, they love me," she frantically types. A gnawing feeling encourages her to end the call. "And you barely know me. We met a week ago. How can you say that you love me more than they do?"

"Because gods worship their slaves, just as their slaves worship them," he says. "I love you because you're mine." His voice shakes her like a rattle.

"I'm not yours! I don't belong to you! I could leave right now!"

"But you won't, sweetheart" Matthew says. "You'll miss me. And besides, I'll keep you here." She recoils at hot, wasted breaths fanning across her face.

"You're crazy. I'm going to go." Her fingers fly and her eyes stare at each word as she stamps it onto the screen. "And I'm going to warn all the other kids you talk to. I'm not yours. I don't belong to you."

You don't control me."

"That's what you think, puppet-" she clicks the end call button. And all at once, she exhales every inch of air she has held in her shaking body.

"It's over," she whispers.

And then she hears it. Whistling. She sits up and reaches for her lamp but it's already turning on. And at her bedside is a man. "That's what you think, kid. You'll never get rid of me."

Kara Hill

Age: 13, Grade: 9

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

Educator: Whitney Webster

Category: Poetry

Famous Last Words

These are what I want my last words to be

Read:

I don't want to have last words

A phrase from my last days that signify my end

Let my legacy live on, every quote, every speech

Let them reach,

Out to you

I don't want an end, a finishing line or a rhyme

Or some final chapter

If I die and my last words are remembered

Then I lived wrong

My end should be overshadowed by an endless beginning and a middle that keeps going

My story is your story

Is our story

Is change

Is a phrase that makes every day a different day

Do not put a period or exclamation on the end because there is no end

Just because I am done talking

Does not mean you are finished hearing what I have to say,

Does not mean

That I won't live another day

Kara Hill

Age: 13, Grade: 9

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

Educator: Whitney Webster

Category: Poetry

10 Things I'd like To Say To The Person Who Told Me I Was Too Young To Know My Own Gender

To the person who told me I was too young to know my own gender

One: Screw you

Two: If I'm too young to know my own gender then who is suppose to know my gender?

Cause it sure as hell isn't you

and like

It'd be nice to know

"Well, what's between your legs?" You ask

"Pants" I say

"Yeah but what's in your pants?"

"Legs."

I mean how hard can this be?

Its an either/or question right?

That's what you keep saying isn't it? Right?

There are only two genders, right?

Am I boy, girl, both, neither,

who knows?

Not me.

And apparently gender and sex are like, the same thing now

And I wonder, what about the people who do say they aren't cis gendered

You say they do it for attention

Attention, you say

Because the attention we get is so great

Exactly what we want, right?

Cause we totally get like representation and equal rights and stuff

Cause some people get so much attention

What about the people who are beaten every day for it

What about the ones who are bullied and hated and outcast

What about the children thrown out of their homes

What about the people told that they are wrong, sinful, disgusting, broken, shattered, scattered

What about the people who would rather slit their own wrists than be who they are

Do you think they choose it?

Even if I could choose, i would still choose this because it has allowed me to see the world in a way you will never be able to.

Three, you say there are only two genders

Two genders for what?

People?

Well shit, man, guess i'm an alien then.

Four, you say i'm too young to know my own gender but wasn't it you that told me to pick something

in the first place
As though this is my fault
As though
I popped out the womb demanding to wear dresses and have pink walls
I always had pink walls
Maybe that's why i cover my walls with posters now
Because i'm trying to cover up the disgusting pink stuff underneath
Because why the hell would you care about the chemicals plastering the inside of my stomach
All the expectations and standards and limits i have been forced to swallow
You handed me the labels, i was just naive enough to hold them here take them back
I don't want them
But now they've left stains on my hands i can't wash out
Five, i'm a little too young for a lot of things
I'm too young to be sexualized and have my body seen as public property but that didn't stop anyone
from seeing it like that
I'm a little too young for you to expect me to have sources and intelligent reasonable responses to every
bullet you shoot at me but that never convinced you to put the gun down
I'm a little too young to be dealing with your bullshit
I'm a little too young to have to counter all your bullshit stop trying to convince people of things you
don't understand because you don't have the brain capacity to comprehend that maybe things exist
outside your male female binary
Maybe ima little too young to be saying bullshit
I wouldn't say it if you didn't keep trying to force feed it to me
I'm a little too young to be planning out my life but for the past 6 months i've perfected get away plans
I'm not always sure what i'm running from
But i know i can't let it catch me
I'm a little too young to know my own gender
But you
Are the one who forced me to grow up and figure it out
Six, I don't want to have to know my own gender, why do i have to know my own gender, why do I
have to care about gender, why do I have to worry about gender I don't want to care about gender
Seven, gender is a societal construct, note, that does not mean it is invalid
I believe
In a world where gender had no expectations or stereotypes attached to them, gender would be
synonymous with sex
However
That is not the world we live in and you should respect whatever the hell the i say my gender is
Eight, I'm pretty fuckin scared of what's going on inside my head I don't need any of your help
throwing myself into a dark pit of self doubt and confusion
Nine, no i'm not too youg to know my own gender, i'm not too young to know that i have anxiety or
that i like pasta or that songs that sexualize Santa make me uncomfortable so how is this any different
Ten,
My gender
Is none of your goddamn business

Kara Hill

Age: 13, Grade: 9

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

Educator: Whitney Webster

Category: Short Story

Glass Veins

You never really realize how much blood is in the human body until it's all over the bathroom floor. Until it's soaking through your jeans and skin turns cold and the remnants of a corpse's life are tattooed against the inside ridges of your fingerprints and you can't wash it out.

The first thing I noticed when the bathroom door crashed open was how much red contrast white. Everybody sees black and white as opposites but they're just opposite ends of the same spectrum. Red is more of an opposite to white. Offensively bright puddles against stark white tiles.

The second thing I notice is that the blood is warm. I fall to my knees and my hands are shaking and a repulsive heat soaks through my jeans. My fingers are scrambling for a pulse, the flutter of an eyelash, a groan, anything to tell me I wasn't too late. Rows of deep lines traveling from wrist to elbow, vertical lines. Vertical lines are what you make when you want death. Horizontal lines are a temporary solution, a tick for every hour you can't keep pretending. The blood is warm, but the body is cold.

The third thing I realize is that they are dead. The corpse on the ground was my friend two hours ago and life seemed long and now it's gone and my hands are shaking and my heart is shaking and my friend is still. And my friend is gone. And now all I have is a corpse on the bathroom floor.

I am vaguely aware of screams filling the small bathroom. I don't know where they are coming from. They are drowned out by the screams inside my head. I'm not focused on the tears streaming down my face, the snot bubbling out of my nose. My throat aches and my knees are bruising, but I can't tell if it's really happening. It feels like I can't really feel anything and everything happening in the physical world is just a primal and instinctual response to what I should be feeling. Everything feels distance.

I'm rocking the body in my arms as though I can lull the restless missing spirit of the body into peace. As though, if I could have brought peace to them neither of us would be in this situation.

This situation. All of a sudden I am brought back to everything leading up to moment, like now my life is flashing before my eyes. I remember sobs ringing through the phone, I remember purple crescents lining empty eyes. Recounts of vividly violent nightmares, shoulders smashing into lockers, cruel jeers in the locker room. I remember cold fear, fiery hatred, foggy emptiness and a dark void hiding just beneath bloodshot eyes. I remember silence. I remember not filling that silence. I remember a single message appearing on my phone screen, a loud ring jarring me out of the dozing state I had been in while perusing the internet at 1 a.m.

I'm sorry, but I can't just can't do this anymore. Please don't blame yourself, it isn't your fault. I'm sorry.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. The words keep running on a loop in my head like a broken record. They seem to be the only words that make sense to me at the moment. I'm sorry. I am sorry. I'm sorry for not seeing sooner. I'm sorry for not making things better. I'm sorry for not being a better friend. I'm sorry feeling the tiniest shred of relief that it's over. That they don't have to suffer anymore. I'm sorry for being relieved to be rid of the stress and anxiety and pain of holding myself responsible for another human being. I'm sorry. *I'm sorry.*

Flashes of a panic attack cross my mind. The memory of fingernails scratching at my scalp, of pulling on a jacket and not bothering to lace up my shoes. Time blurs and I can't tell how long everything took, how long I spent staring at the phone, how long I spent screaming, how long I spent shakily trying to

shove keys into a lock. All I know is that it took too long.

I'm sorry.

A door crashing open, slamming against a wall. No response from the empty house of empty people. It is dark, and everything feels too familiar and too unnatural all at once.

I'm sorry.

I can hear my heart beating in my ears and I can feel my heart beating in my wobbling knees and I can taste a throbbing heartbeat on my tongue as I scream their name over and over again, praying for a response I know will never come. I can feel the blood rushing underneath my skin.

You never really realize how much blood is in the human body until it's all over the bathroom floor.

Until it's soaking through your jeans and skin turns cold and the remnants of a corpse's life are tattooed against the ridges of your fingerprints and you can't wash it out.

The fourth thing I realize is that it's over for them. There isn't anything I can do. For them, there will be no miracle, no hope, no thanksgiving dinners, no walking down the aisle, no hellos, no goodbyes.

No more heartbeats, no more tears, no more bruises, no more nightmares, no more darkness, no more emptiness. No more of them. They are gone. Everything is gone.

For me, there is panic, there is fear. There is pain, and sadness and regret and sorrow and emptiness and bruises and nightmares and darkness. Everything that was left behind is crashing down on my and I'm drowning. And I am still here. For how long I do not know and the fourth thing I realize is that I am still here and I cannot leave. I am still here and I am angry and I'm scared and I'm sorry god I'm so sorry.

I'm sorry.

Blood

I'm sorry.

Scared

I'm sorry.

Dark

I'm sorry.

Screaming

I'm sorry.

Silence.

I'm sorry

Silence

I'm sorry

Silence

ImsorryImsorryImsorryImsorryImsorry

Silence.

Brianna Hines

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: South High School, Saint Peters, MO

Educator: Amanda Bramley

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Sisters: Alphabetically Arranged

Sisters: Alphabetically Arranged

Ambulance

The sirens blared, stinging my delicate eardrums. Daddy's hands gripped the steering wheel, his eyes wide and determined. The buildings around us blurred into squiggles and splotches of colors.

"Mommy, why are your pants wet?"

"Mommy's having a baby, sweetie."

"But, Mommy, why is Daddy speeding?"

"We need to get to the hospital."

"But, Mommy, why?"

Birds

"Eek!" Lyssa cried, as she clutched my arm and hid her head in the crook of my elbow.

"Really? They're just birds."

"They're scary," she whined.

I shook my head and guided her down the asphalt hill while she crouched beside me.

Competition

"I'm your favorite, right Mom?" I asked her nonchalantly while completing my addition homework. Lyssa slowly looked up from her paint-covered fingers to narrow her eyes at Mom. I had been hoping to catch her off guard while she was writing in her checkbook. Unfortunately, she had "mom reflexes," so she was prepared to fire back at my low blow without hesitation.

"You're my favorite oldest daughter, and Lyssa's my favorite youngest daughter."

I sighed, unsatisfied.

"I'm her favorite, Lola, but she doesn't want to tell you," Lyssa giggled, her legs swinging underneath the kitchen table.

I rolled my eyes and muttered, "You wish." We both did. The competition for number one was inherently wound into our DNA. On days that we didn't care who was the favorite daughter, we were trapped deep in the pools of teenage angst and resentment.

Doors

Slammed doors usually function to keep people separate, to shield them from each other. But, for Lyssa and I, slammed doors offered an invitation. The person inside the bedroom locked the door, anticipating the moment when she could prove her strength to the other. The person in the hallway solved the puzzle through problem solving and intelligence, showcasing her intellectual superiority over the other.

Most of the time, I reached up to the door frame, felt amongst the dust for the hidden key, and gingerly snuck it into the lock. However, Lyssa would always be intently listening, waiting quietly to hear the metal clanging against the keyhole.

Equality

"That's not fair!" I shrieked, resorting to my usual response to not getting my way. "She wore that shirt last week. It's my turn. That's only fair!" I pouted and crossed my arms. Obviously, my mother wasn't listening. This issue had a clear distinction between right and wrong; I was right, and Lyssa was

wrong.

“No. That’s not true. She’s lying. Don’t believe her!” Lyssa shouted, eager to defend herself.

Bored, my mom said, “Okay. Fine. No one gets to wear it.”

“What?” Lyssa and I exploded in unison.

“Well, now it’s definitely fair. I don’t know who wore it last, so nobody gets to wear it.”

Lyssa and I turned to each other in disgust. “You know, this is all your fault,” I told Lyssa.

“It is not,” she responded. “It’s Mom’s fault.”

I nodded. Because whether it was Mom or Lyssa’s fault, it certainly wasn’t mine.

Flood

“The basement’s flooded.”

“Again?” I sighed.

“Yeah. The water’s ankle deep near the drain, but it’s still raining, so we have to fill the buckets and pour the water back into the sump-pump.”

We trudged down the rickety basement steps down into the dungeon of murky water below. The sky had poured its contents out over the city, and the sump pump was overwhelmed.

“Is it broken?” I asked Mom.

“No, it just couldn’t take anymore water,” Mom assured us. Dad retrieved the bright orange snow shovels from the garage, and we pushed the puddles of water towards the pump, away from the Christmas ornaments and storage boxes.

After two hours of slowly being drowned in grimy rainwater, we took showers and went back downstairs to tell Mom that it was her turn to shower. Lyssa and I stepped across the wet concrete, just close enough to the drainage pipe, when it squirted water all over us like a geyser.

Covered once again in brown liquid, Lyssa said, “Never mind, Mom. I think Lola and I are going to need to take showers again.”

Grandma and Grandpa's House

Outside my car window, I glanced at the house with a domed roof, the house with a U-shaped driveway, and the gigantic mansion we dubbed “Tara.” For eyes accustomed to seeing traffic lights and gas stations, the fields of golden corn and gray mountains sitting in the distance were foreign and exciting. Lyssa swung her feet back and forth beside me, her body stuffed into a car seat, her head bobbing up and down as the car drove over hills.

“Mommy, how long until we get to Grandma’s?” I questioned.

“About fifteen more minutes.”

“How many “Clifford” episodes is that?”

“Just one.”

I poked Lyssa to grab her attention and excitedly told her that in the time of one “Clifford” show, we would be at Grandma’s. She clapped her hands in delight, the dimples embedded in her plump cheeks evidence of the happiness I had created. I sat back in my seat, pleased to have been of service.

Hair

“I’m just obsessed with it! You look so bouncy and cute!” I gushed.

“Thanks, Lola,” Lyssa giggled. “Maybe you should donate yours too.”

My smile immediately straightened into a scowl. My hands clutched my long braid. “No thanks.”

“Okay,” she said, shaking her head at my attachment to my waist-length hair. I would cut it eventually and cry when I realized it was gone, when I realized I would have to wait so long to get it back.

Identical

“Oh. My. Gosh. She’s looks exactly like you!” Yeah, except for the nose, eyes, lips, ears, chins, hands, feet, and height. But everything else was pretty much the same.

“Are you two twins?” No.

“Let me guess, your daughters are twins.” No.

“So are you identical twins?” Nope.

“Lola, why didn’t you tell me you had a twin sister?” I don’t.

“Wow. Which one of you is the older twin?” Neither.

“Wait, there are two of you?” Duh.

Jumping on the Bed

We bounced up and down like pogo sticks. Our heads skidded dangerously close to the bumpy ceiling. The bed was old, and every time our feet made contact, there was an audible squeak from the springs underneath.

Our arms flailed, our throats shrieked, our heads spun. We maintained eye contact for a second and let our bottoms flop onto the mattress simultaneously. The entire time we chortled and hollered in bliss. Today, we would have asked ourselves, what exactly did we accomplish by ricocheting off our bedroom walls? Nothing, except for shortening the life of the poor mattress. But, then it didn’t matter; we had fun, what else could be important?

Kissing like Butterflies

“Lola, Lola!” Lyssa called.

“Lyssa, Lyssa!” I echoed back.

“Will you do it again?” she asked.

“Fine,” I sighed, secretly pleased. She thought I was important. I pressed the sides of our faces together, her cheek level with my eyes, and blinked rapidly to tickle her chubby cheek with my eyelashes. My captive audience erupted in giggles. Yeah, I was important.

Language

“Ehm, Mommy, I sthndt dat Ima kinga firthy,” Lyssa mumbled through a mouthful of wet Cheerios. Her big brown eyes gazed up at Mommy expectantly.

Mom narrowed her eyes, trying to interpret, but sighed and shook her head. “Lola, what did she say?”

“She’s thirsty,” I said, without blinking. Lyssa nodded to confirm my translation, and Mom shook her head, incredulous that I could somehow interpret the meaning behind the Cheerios.

Matthew

I put my hands on the bed, stood on my tiptoes, and looked at the baby. Mommy really liked the baby. She kept staring at her lovingly.

I squinted to see if she looked better when my eyes were slits. She didn’t. I scrunched up my nose and said obnoxiously, “She looks kinda roughy.”

My dad shushed me. My mom smiled tenderly and said, “Well, she just had a bath.”

“But where’s Matthew?” I asked. Puzzled, I looked up at my mom.

“Remember? If the baby was a boy, we were going to name him Matthew, but Elyssa’s a girl.”

“Oh. But why isn’t the baby named Matthew?”

Numbers

“Whatever, Lyssa. I was first, so I’m number one. You’re just number two.”

“That doesn’t matter. You’re wrong anyway.”

“Excuse you? I am not.”

“Yeah, you are. First is the worst, and second is the best. That makes me the best.”

Okay. Maybe she won that round.

Ocular Teasing

“Lyssa! Stop it! You know I hate it when people put their fingers close to their eyes,” I moaned.

Lyssa just laughed, snatched the last cookie, and returned to the family room. I stayed in the kitchen, engulfed in flames of anger. At that moment, my mind was seething. That last cookie was rightfully mine.

Pride and Prejudice

“Ugh, I know that we are supposed to like Mr. Darcy better, but Mr. Wickham is so much cuter!”

“I think they’re both ugly. When can I change the channel?”

“Lyssa! This is such a good movie. C’mon, don’t you like it better than *Becoming Jane*?”

“Yeah.”

“Great!”

“But I hated *Becoming Jane*.”

Quite Pretty

“Hey! Oh my gosh, it’s so great to see you guys here. I just absolutely love your outfits. They are so totally adorable.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Thanks! It’s great to see you too. Your dress is quite pretty,” Lyssa responded for the both of us. Actually, it was ugly. Quite ugly.

Rain

We were bored. The summer day was mundane, a useless day in the history of our existence. We both finished our books, and the leftover remnants of alternate realities were still stuck in our imaginations. The slate had not yet been cleared to allow a new plot to shift into view.

“What do you want to do?” I asked Lyssa eagerly. I was willing to do anything to stop Mom from suggesting I study for the ACT or organize my desk.

“Let’s go outside,” she suggested. I agreed, the humongous textbook shoved into the corner of the bookshelf had already caught Mom’s eye.

The gray sky was a fist, squishing the world between its fingers and the dewy grass below. Our maple tree was swishing, creating a wind tunnel in the backyard. Pressure surged from the west, and leaves shot toward us like bullets. Cold drops of rain plummeted from the continuous cloud covering the sun, hitting our bare arms and legs.

We spun, we danced, we flitted, flailing our arms around like saturated butterfly wings. Our clothes became drenched and heavy, adding to the weight pulling us down to the slippery bricks underneath our flip-flops.

Wind whipped Lyssa’s hair into her face, and rain drops snuck into my eyes. Mom stood by the patio window and snapped pictures of us, the girls dancing in the rain.

Stove

We stood half in the patio, half outside. Our bodies immersed in the brisk night air, just recovering from the first snowstorm. I spat into the grass, relieving my throat of the chemically bitter taste of fire extinguisher fumes and smoke. Lyssa followed my lead.

“I told Divya that the stove lit on fire again,” I mentioned to Lyssa.

“What did she say?”

“She texted me, ‘Oh my god! Is anyone hurt? Lol.’” We both laughed and spat again.

“I guess tomorrow is Stove Buying Day?”

“Yep. As you can tell, I’m ecstatic.”

“As am I.”

Thunderstorm

Thunder clapped against the side of the house and shook the siding against our bedroom. Lightning illuminated the dark walls of our bedroom windows for a second, before disappearing.

“Lola?”

“Okay, you can come in, but only for a little while.”

Under the Dining Room Table

“Lyssa,” I whispered in the dining room.

“Yes?” A jumble of black curls peeked out from under the arm of a chair.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking at my birthday presents.”

“Oh.”

“You want to see ‘em?”

“Yeah.” I crawled underneath the table and listened to her tell me all about Barbie’s new car.

Vacancy

It was weird sleeping in our room last night. I could feel the absence of you in the bed next to mine. I know you have a desire to leave, but can you wait until I’m gone? Then we can leave together, since you skipped ahead and decided to catch up to my speed of growing up. I turned on my side and stared at the door until I fell asleep. Your pillow was sunk in where your head was meant to lay. Your bed was still not made from the morning before. I went to sleep twice as fast because you weren’t there to delay me. The moon and I, we felt your vacancy, like a flower sulking in the absence of sunlight.

Waking Up

“Lola, it’s time for you to wake up,” Mom called.

I slowly sat up and rubbed my eyes. “Okay,” I answered. “Lyssa. Get up.”

“No.”

“C’mon, we don’t want to be late.”

“No.”

“Wake up.”

“No.”

“Am I an idiot?”

“Yes.”

X’s and O’s

Okay. We’ll be there in about half an hour. Sorry you couldn’t come with us today. The lady in the row in front of us wondered where you were. I don’t think she can tell us apart, but she knew one of us was missing. I hope you feel better soon.

Xoxo,

Lola

Yawns

“Lyssa?” I called groggily. “It’s two in the morning. When can we turn off the light?”

“Soon,” she said, her voice barely audible with the toothpaste foaming around her lips.

“Now?”

“Nope.”

“Soon?”

“Duh.”

I yawned dramatically and turned over on my side.

Zed

“...eeex, ee-grek, and zed. See? I already know how to pronounce the entire French alphabet. If you take it, we can speak in our own language, without Mom and Dad knowing what we are saying. I’ll help you study, and we can practice together. So, will you choose it? Please? Yes? Perfect. Merci. Je t’aime.”

Kara Hooser

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Flash Fiction

My Sunshine

Your short curly hair gently sweeps over your stunning features. I long to push it out of the way to marvel in the beauty of your face. I scan your face again, like I had a million times. Your brown eyes are so dark, your pupils get lost in them. On one rare occasion, I was able to see your pupils. The brown surrounding them had lightened to a rich honey brown, allowing the darkness of your pupil to become visible. I couldn't look away. Your eyelashes are the perfect frame for the captivating picture of your eyes. They are so long, I'm surprised that you don't fly away every time you blink. I know I speak of them often, but I adore them so much. I am still jealous that your bottom lashes are longer than my top lashes. Why do guys always have amazing eyelashes? Your nose tells a lot about you. It's strong presence gave a hint to your heritage when I first met you. Upon further investigation, my suspicions were realized. Your lips are usually curled up into a sweet smile. But I don't see that now. As a matter of fact, I hadn't seen that charming smile for quite some time. My eyes trace your strong jawline. The sharp curves resemble the sharp emotions welled up inside of your locked heart.

I used to have the key to that heart. I used to see those stunning features fill with life when you laughed. Your laugh would fill the room. Your eyes would gleam with pure joy. You had a kind heart and showed it all the time. You always made sure everyone around had what they needed, sometimes to a fault. You were my sunshine. You gave light to my world. You brightened my day and gave me joy. But recently, the sunlight within your soul had began to dim. Each day a little of your light was lost. Your smiles became more few and far between each day. I would try my best to bring those gorgeous smiles back, but I was never successful. All of my energy became devoted to your well being. It drained me but it was worth it. I used to know everything about you. I always knew what you were doing and how you were feeling. But slowly, the text messages became shorter and less frequent. Mine became longer to try and compensate for your lost words. I didn't know what to do.

I would lock myself in my room when I got home. All of my energy had been expended on lifting you up, there was none left for my family. It's kind of ironic if you think about it. Now I acted so much happier when I was with you, but exponentially more mean to my faultless siblings. My mom started to notice. She tried to talk to me about my obvious change in character, but I would shut her out. She tried to take away my phone, but I would steal it back. Her disciplinary efforts always failed, so eventually she stopped trying.

Each day, your physical features I knew and loved so well began to change as well. Your perfectly filled out face began to hollow, highlighting the strong bones that support your face. Those brown eyes began to protrude from your thinning face, and they lost their shining quality. Your nose stayed the same, but seemed out of place on your changing face. Your lips were always cracked, never smiling anymore. I often look at old pictures of you, longing for that sweet boy I once knew to come back.

I snapped myself out of my daydream. I was sitting in the back of a church, alone. I looked down at the folded piece of paper in my shaking hands. A single tear traced its way along my numb face, finding its way to my chin. It hovered there for a second before dropping onto the paper. The spot where my tear had dropped changed the color of the paper and smeared the ink around it. It was my turn to go to the front of the chapel. I collected myself and got to my feet. I was doing good until I saw your face lying on the fresh white pillow. I lost it. I had hoped to see my happy man I once knew. But I

didn't. Your rich dark skin I loved had turned pale. Your face was still sunken in and looked sickly. I ran my hand down your cold arm. It was obvious that they had purposely chosen to clothe you in a long sleeve shirt, to cover the purple and blue bruises along your veins. I couldn't spend as much time as I would have liked with you because others were waiting to say their final goodbyes. I held your hand and bent over to whisper in your ear. Even though I knew you couldn't hear me, I thought maybe in some way you would.

"So please don't take my sunshine away." I had sung this song to you a million times, but this time it meant something completely different. I quickly wiped my tears to prevent them from dropping onto your changed face. I quickly walked back to my seat. As I sat down, a hymn began to play again. I looked down at the paper once again. It read:

"We gather together to honor our son..." That made it seem so nice. It glorified your death. But I will never get the scene of the emotional 911 call out of my head.

"911, what is your emergency?"

"He's dead! He's dead!"

"Who's dead?"

"My boyfriend!"

"How did he die?" I whispered something inaudible to the operator.

"I'm sorry dear, I know this is hard but you are going to have to speak up." Barely louder than the last time, I said,

"He overdosed..."

Sophie Hurwitz

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Anita Hagerman

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Echolalia

I first started speaking, my parents tell me, months before I could walk. I'd use the railing of my crib to hoist myself up to a shaky standing position, and proudly announce, "Walking! I'm walking!"-- clearly a phenomenal overstatement. Even back then, I had this idea that saying things would make them real for me, if I could just find the right words.

I am the daughter of two high-school English teachers, so it makes sense that my language would be fundamental to who I am. My parents met in their English graduate program, and had their first date at a bookstore. How could anything other than a language-obsessed child be the result of such a union? I grew up between the King-James-Bible English of my mother's family in Tennessee, and the Yiddish of my father's parents in Connecticut, learning family affection in two different sets of words. How could I not believe in words at least as much as in actions?

Back when I was too young to do things like multiplication, but old enough to know how to count by 10s, I had this need to repeat words I heard. Not all of them— only the ones that sounded particularly nice. I repeated teachers, I repeated my parents, I repeated the other kids in my class. I learned the word "paradox" this way in my second year of preschool. Walking out of the building with my dad, I asked, How is it that I'm so tired but I don't want to sleep? He said, That's called a paradox. I repeated the word "paradox," bouncing it around all the way home.

I Googled "kid repeats things after people" about a year ago and found out that medically, it was "echolalia," a behavior commonly found in kids with autism and occasionally in neurotypical ones. My echolalia ended in the first grade, when my best friend Johanna and I were playing "fairies" during recess. She heard me repeating one of my own sentences under my breath, like a satellite delay. She asked me what I was doing. I didn't want to be the weirdest kid on the playground, so I learned to cherish the words I loved without repeating them aloud.

Fast forward about 6 more years: I was a newly-minted teenager. I knew I was supposed to be defining myself, and learning languages was the way I picked to do that. It started when I began learning Spanish, in seventh grade. I thought of it as a slap in the face to my English-teacher parents-- the temerity of it all, me learning to speak words other than the ones they could teach me! I picked up a truly awful habit of muttering rude things under my breath that they couldn't understand. Although my rebellious 13-year-old self would've hated to admit it, though, this language thing might have made them a bit proud.

I kept collecting language: I taught myself Spanish II from the textbook the summer before 9th grade, repeating new verb conjugations to myself on the back porch. Then, I added French, Hebrew lessons at a local synagogue, and a summer camp's worth of Chinese.

A few days ago, my friend made something she called "lunch bingo". In each square was something

one of us usually does during lunch. Mine was “Sophie says something in French or Spanish or whatever.” She’s not wrong-- I am a linguistic patchwork, and as of now, the parts haven’t decided whether to cohere into a whole or separate completely yet. I still speak Spanish sometimes in French class by mistake, but when someone asks me how to say “cafeteria” in Spanish, the only word that comes is the French word “*cantine*”. Even in English I find it hard to keep the different voices in my brain from sneaking in--“¿*Puedo ver?*” comes out, instead of “Can I see?” Especially when I’m comfortable, when I’m unselfconscious, I don’t keep the wall between languages up so high.

If/when I worry about these things, I remember “Song of Myself”: “*Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)*” Multiplicity, in our culture, is often interpreted as fakeness. Even in ancient Greek mythology, duplicitous Janus, god of doorways and transitions, has two faces. But I don’t think multiplicity is necessarily false. A person can be as many things as they have words to name. My languages allow me to “contain multitudes”. And so I’ve come to think of myself as an ecotone— the area where multiple biomes combine. I talk like an ecotone, with bits of everything that has made me, all converging. By embracing and echoing other people’s words, I create something that is new.

Avery Istwan

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Short Story

Liar, Liar

Fighting a mental battle whilst trying to escape the inescapable was hard, especially while one could barely walk. She could feel the aura of someone following her like a wretched ghost, yet pushed the thought into the back of her mind. *Still three minutes left to get there, and I've been running way later before.* Cold air froze her feet and hands to ice, numbing her face but not her mind from the panic that was quickly enveloping her thoughts. Walking so fast for so long had caused the taste of blood to crawl up her throat and invade her mouth, her chest screaming in pain with each urgent step. *Oh... two minutes.* She felt as if the sidewalk itself was telling her to look back, or to just up and run- but running would only make it worse, running would be her last move. *Oh no, no one minute, one minute, one minute.* Despite the agony she quickened her pace, sucking air in desperately to keep up the speed she needed to get safe in time, safe before--*beeeeeep*-- the bell rang. The rigid clicking sound from her shoes against the concrete came to a stop, as did the pair of feet a dozen yards behind her. *It's over.* Nerves hit her like a freight train and for a moment she felt as if she were going to collapse, until an odd wave of serenity washed over her. Lifting her aching head carefully, quietly she studied the poorly built school building she'd felt so distressed to reach, and wondered if this would be the last time she saw it. It resembled a prison in the overcast light of mid-winter, it's ugly grey bricks almost camouflaging with the miserable sky. Cheap statues of angels lined the roof of the dungeon, tangled in power lines that were in turn, tangled with tossed sneakers. With a sour taste in her mouth she pondered the irony of the situation, as any other day she "Would have done anything to not have to go to this hell-hole of a school." *Does this count as 'anything'?* Placing a hand on her stomach to try to tame her nausea, she took her time in turning around to face her pursuer.

For a handful of precious seconds she decided to study her white puffs of breath in the winter air, until finally she had no choice but to instead study the face staring at her through the fog. Seeing that face she knew so well caused a bomb of thoughts to explode in her head, some memories, some feelings, some ideas- ideas of how she could possibly get out of this situation, yet they all fluttered away when she actually caught a glimpse of her huntress.

"Robin..." She winced at how hoarse her voice sounded, already ruining her first chance for reprieve. She stepped back and cleared her throat to try again, yet was cut short.

"Carol." Robin replied curtly, walking closer. There was an animosity in her eyes Carol had never seen before, their brown warmth turned dark and cold. Carol wondered if she was in a twisted dream. The sky seemed so hazy and light-less, the snow on the ground looked fake, she felt so small. She could feel the presence of the school behind her and wondered if she should run, or if she could, then tried to reason with herself as Robin cornered her, step by step. *She wants to talk to me, that's all she wanted a few weeks ago. It's all she wants now, and I know it.* Carol couldn't help but smile as Robin's features became clear to her, the face she loved so much. Just seeing her fair features calmed her, her long black hair against her phantomly white skin. She was beautiful, even when crying or upset, or furious. Carol held out her arms, and Robin's eyes widened at the gesture. She quickly accepted the embrace, gripping Carol's soft hair, taking in her scent of lavender. Tears of relief formed in Carol's eyes as she held her, and she began to speak. "I-i'm sorry I didn't speak to you when you asked, that was so s-stupid of

me... You know I care about you so much, right? I could never be afraid of you.”

Robin leaned back to cup her cheek, and cast her cold, blue lips to form a smile. “I know.” With all of her strength, she jammed her fingers into Carol’s throat.

“Haha, take this you witch!” The boys caterwauled, chucking snowballs from the edge of the playground. After minutes of the chorus and a few snowballs hitting her novel, Carol finally looked up from her book. Cross that people so ignorant would ruin such a good day to read, she sighed, shut her book crassly, and marched to where the crowd was to see what on Earth was going on. Upon arrival, she snorted, just a snowball fight, big whoop. A lanky blond pelted his shorter friend in the back, three girls giggled while gingerly tossing some at each other. However she pushed her way through the horde, and blinked in surprise. About a dozen yards away a small girl with some wispy black hair had created a tiny igloo, almost finished. It sparkled in the sunlight, each little faux brick delicately placed. When she noticed Carol staring after a couple minutes, she looked away in embarrassment.

“Hey w-wait, no, I like it!” Carol offered. “It’s very pretty.”

*The shy girl looked up in surprise, and almost began to smile- **whoosh.***

Carol jumped and whirled around at the sound, to see five or so of the boys creeping up on her. She straightened herself indignantly, “What was that about?”

The tallest of them simply chuckled and pointed, and Carol turned to see her new friend’s igloo ruined. “Get a load of the freak!” He sniggered as he created a new snowball, his friends following suit. The raven-haired girl shrank in fright, too afraid to run. Carol couldn’t even raise an eyebrow before they were throwing snowballs at the girl, now curled in a ball and weeping. She flinched with every hit, now bleeding from where one had busted her lip.

*“Come on! We just wanna be your friends you baby!” they jeered. “Liars!”, the cowering girl shouted desperately. Some children stopped their playing to look on with fear and uncertainty, some pretended they couldn’t see what was happening. A small circle formed around the spectacle, and Carol’s mouth hung agape in disbelief, until one boy offered, “Hey idiots, watch **this!**” He began to form another snowball, however this time he picked up a rock to pack snow around. The other boys ‘ooooh’d’ in half admiration and half unease, and Carol couldn’t stand it any longer.*

***“QUIT IT.”** She yelled in the most powerful voice she could muster, swinging her book frenziedly at the boy’s head, dizzying him. The other boys ran off in panic of being caught, yet the remaining one growled in pain. “Buzz off you wench!” he spit, forcibly throwing his rock-snowball hybrid at her head. Carol’s eyes rolled back into her head as the trees seemed to grow taller around her, then fell back into the snow.*

Cold, numbing, tingling, then wet. The sensation repeated itself about a dozen times until Carol could open her eyes, greeted by snowflakes falling gently onto her nose. She scanned her surroundings for playground equipment, yet only saw trees... until everything caught up to her. She hurred, turning the white snow around her to a putrid yellow. Feebly she could sense that Robin was trying to speak to her, but the ringing in her ears prevented her from hearing it. Carol let her head rest on the ground, thankful for her few moments of respite before Robin moved near her. “You were out for a long time,” she stated huskily, “I thought you were made of tougher stuff than that.” The fact that she wanted to joke at this time made Carol want to puke again, but there was no strength left in her to move, only cry. Robin quietly played with the gun in her hands, as if waiting for Carol to start a lecture of defense. Through Carol’s half opened eyes she watched the snowfall in the forest, so serene, so pure. Whether it was minutes or hours she watched the snow, she didn’t know. *I always thought the only good part of living in a small town was the short distance from nature,* she concluded.

Robin snapped, tired of waiting. Each word was choked out, as if she was stabbed each time she had to talk. “Do you not... have anything... to say for yourself?”

Carol remained quiet, afraid that opening her mouth at all would cause her to sicken or pass out. She could tell Robin was approaching her by the crunching of the snow, every step causing her head a burst of pain. Her view of the snow became blocked by knees, and she sadly looked up to see Robin knelt down beside her. No tears were in Robin's eyes, no regret. Pain, maybe. *If only I knew what went on in her brain*, Carol thought, gravely searching those eyes. The same eyes she had wiped tears from, the same eyes she often woke up to in the morning, the same eyes that sparkled when she smiled. *When was the last time she smiled? Months ago?*

"Do you know what I hate the most?" Robin commenced, deadly quiet.

"Li-"

"*Liars.*" Robin spit the word out like venom, her eyes strained and red, her face pale as the snow itself. "*Liars, liars, liars.*"

All the parts came together in Carol's mind, and for that she despised herself. It was as if the puzzle was finished already, but she had just chosen not to complete it, not to fit in the final piece. "I'm not a liar", she said gently yet plainly, placing one of her frozen hands on Robin's knee. She rubbed her thumb back and forth across it gently, as if to soothe her like she had done so many times before, only to be smacked away with force by the barrel of her gun.. "You're every bit a liar," Robin croaked. "It was all lies, *'I'm not scared of you, I'm here for you'*, you didn't mean a word of it." Carol turned her head to avoid eye contact, yet Robin held it in place. Once again tears formed in Carol's eyes when she was forced to look at her, she opened her mouth yet no sound came out. "They weren't lies." She whispered desperately.

Carol shut her eyes as Robin's lips turned to a tell-tale frown. Wrong answer. The cold feeling of the gun pressed to her head almost felt nice for the pain, yet she flinched when Robin spoke again. "You're not even sorry..."

Carol opened her eyes again for one last look at her captor, she sounded different, sounded sad. Maybe regretful, almost. Yet Carol decided she would say nothing.

With each excruciating second, Robin's heart sunk lower. Her grip on the gun loosened. *Anything*, she pleaded, *anything, say anything, say 'I love you', say 'I made a mistake', just say sorry.*

Silence, for minutes.

Robin saw red. *Click*, she prepared the trigger, *boom*, the birds flew away.

Carol would say nothing, forever.

Caitlynn Jenni

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Mystery at Corral Canyon

(A modern-day tale of suspense written in the style of the iconic legendary sleuth Nancy Drew) Ruby was in the passenger seat, I was in the middle, and Bella was at the helm in the driver's seat. Always has been, always will be. Driving down Maple Street was a reminder of the good in this sometimes cruel world. The trees swayed in the wind like chimes on the door of our local five-and-dime and the sky was as blue as my convertible roadster. I took in a big breath of air. This was home.

"So..." Ruby tried to start a conversation. She hates it when I'm in my own little world.

"So..." I reply as I adjusted my slim-fit dungarees to meet the tops of my saddle shoes.

"Are you guys going to the dance tonight? I don't want to be by myself again. Heck, I don't even want to go! My mom says I need to 'get out there'."

"I want to go camping tonight. I have no time for boys." Bella said simply.

"It's not all for the boys." Ruby grinned.

"Sure." Bella rolled her sparkling blues and maintained her impetuous attitude. She never did have a flare for the romantics.

Listening to them argue was so funny. They usually agreed on everything, but Ruby has been rather distant lately as she's trying harder to please her mom than to be true to herself. Me? I'd rather just be myself. Thank heaven my own parents aren't in a hurry for me to grow up. Sixteen is when you can act mature, or be a silly goose. I'd rather be the goose. Jeez, I have my whole life ahead to be a grown up.

"Nan, up for camping tonight?" Bella asked me.

My heart yearned to go camping. But I didn't want to leave Ruby out. I considered my options.

"Ruby, why don't you come with us? You love camping! Fiddlesticks, it must be torture for your mom to force you into something you don't want to do." I directed my gaze towards her and a smile upturned my lips.

I knew I hit the sweet spot. I was pretty sure this got to her. All she had to do was tell her mom she doesn't want to go to the dance. If there's one thing I know, it's how to work the girls.

I knew my words had worked magic. We stopped by Ruby's house and after a bit of conferring with her mother, Ruby came out on the porch with a sleeping bag and a load of camping supplies that would make a mountaineer jealous. Ruby goes big or goes home. She practically brought her whole house with us. I mean, our camping trips are usually three to four days, and in June, you need lots of water, food, and more than a few light frocks to keep warm on the chilly nights. That's the thing with Utah, so stinkin' hot during the day, but at nightfall, Bam! The cold hits you like a punch from your baby sister during church.

As we begin to load all of the supplies, Ruby rolled out the four-wheeler from the garage. We back up the Jeep and hook up the trailer. Ruby carefully drove the Polaris up onto the trailer. We take care not to scratch it as this would send Mrs. Mayne into a whirlwind. That Polaris is as precious to her as her first-born.

Mrs. Mayne opened the screen door of the back porch. She placed her hands on her slim hips, adjusted her apron, smiled, and called out, "Girls, be careful up there on Corral Canyon. If your cell coverage is limited, send smoke signals!" We giggled and waved cheerily as we drove off leaving a trail of dust

from the gravel driveway.

That's the thing about camping around here in this part of the world. No one would dare bother three pretty girls on their way to pursue an adventure. Of course we would never be caught without our Colt Python packed away in its hot pink case under the driver's seat. Never hurts to be cautious.

After stopping at our houses and collecting even more gear, we made our way to the Wilford's property. They own all the way up to the mountain top, where we always go. Lately the government had been trying to exercise eminent domain over their land, but the Wilford's were hardy folk. They were fighting tooth and nail to keep the property in the family and so far they were winning the battle. They said we could drive along the trails and use the clearings for our camp site as long as we cleaned up our mess. Old man Wilford keeps watch over the comings and goings (especially with the government sniffing around) and we knew that we could come down if we needed anything. But trust me, we are always prepared. Bella always packs the heat in the form of a few hunting rifles--one time a cougar attacked us on a previous camping outing and now I have a new rug! I am in charge of bringing along the four-man tent and Ruby brings everything else we might need.

"Let's put everything on the Gator." Bella suggests.

We parked the Jeep and loaded everything on the four-wheeler and the trailer. We climbed on, and started our trek to the top.

"This view is breathtaking!" I exclaim. Every time I see it, it resembles a new design on a picture. I see Utah Lake sparkling in the distance and the sun has turned the sky a beautiful coral. I could stay up here in this moment forever.

We quickly set up the tent before sundown. We unpack and Bella starts a fire. After hungrily eating our campfire stew, we load up our long sticks with marshmallows and our mouths watered in anticipation of s'mores.

"I call first story." I always had the best. I did research. People who have lived in our town had told me stories of Indians, soldiers, and lost children freezing in the cold after becoming stranded in Corral Canyon.

"This is a story about this very canyon. I was told it happened here about twenty years ago. Looked it up, it was in an article. Robert Gray and his son Billy were on a hunting trip. They took separate trails to look for wild game and they became separated."

"Okay, stop. You are giving me the chills." Ruby was a scaredy cat.

I continued in my gravelly voice. "It started to snow. Billy was crying out for his dad. Robert heard him, but could never find him before they both froze to death. Every year, on the anniversary of their deaths, the Wilfords say that they hear little Billy's cries for his father."

Suddenly we heard a twig snap. "What's that?" Ruby screamed.

"Oh, probably just a squirrel or something," steadying my voice.

Suddenly, a dark figure jumped out of the trees. Ruby and Bella screamed, but laughter escaped my lips.

"Ty!" Ruby and Ella shrieked.

I've played pranks before, but this is the first to involve another person. Oh, I got them but good this time.

"You guys should have seen your faces." Ty exclaimed.

"And you!" He pointed a bony finger at me. "You looked funny enough trying not to laugh!"

Ty wasn't usually a part of our threesome, but anything that involved teasing, he was in. I asked him to come and scare the girls, and he had gladly accepted my offer.

Just as we sat down again around the campfire, we heard someone running up the trail, calling out to us. The girls looked at me and I just shrugged. "I only had one scary episode planned for tonight." With that, Bella ran to the tent and grabbed the rifles throwing one to each of us.

"What about me?" Ty's eyes grew wide.

“Should have brought your own, big man.” Bella had no time to waste on unprepared hooligans whose shenanigans unnerved her.

Little Emma Wolford ran right up to our campsite where she stopped short. You would too with three double-barrels staring you down.

“Sue’s barn has caught fire!” Emma yelled.

Sue was an elderly lady who was allergic to everything on her property. Why she lived up here, I have no idea, but it was obvious that she needed our help. We loaded the water-filled Yetis up on the trailer. We all squeezed onto the four-wheeler, along with our guns (you never leave a gun unattended and besides, it’s the canyon. Who knows what could happen?) and sped down the mountain.

As we neared the barn, it wasn’t quite as bad as Emma said. The fire was mostly under control. I ran up to Sue, who was busy hauling water from the well to the fire. Ty and the others brought over the water from the trailer and doused the fire until it was smoldering.

“How did this happen?” I asked with a leveled tone. I didn’t want to alarm Sue, but I was pretty sure that this didn’t happen accidentally.

“Well,” she started. “I heard a loud bang outside, and I saw the flames from the barn. I saw someone running away from the barn but I was too busy fighting the fire to chase after him.

“Describe him. What was he wearing?”

“He was tall and wearing all black, except for a blue hat.” Suspicious indeed.

When the fire was finally extinguished and Sue calmed down. I suggested that Ty stay at Sue’s place until morning. Sue was grateful for the company and Ty seemed to lean in to his new responsibility as Sue’s caretaker. The four of us started back towards the wheeler. As we drove back toward the campsite, we talked among ourselves.

“Who in the world would want to set Sue’s barn on fire?” Bella asked.

“My thoughts exactly. There isn’t a soul in Corral Canyon who would want to bring harm to a lonely old woman with allergies.” Ruby said.

“I agree. There’s something that’s just not quite right about all of this.” I said more to myself than to my two friends and little Emma.

“Nan, just drop me off at the trailhead and I’ll make my way home.” Emma suggested.

“Absolutely not, we’ll take you down the trail and then return to our campsite. Tell your pop, we took care of Sue.”

After dropping off Emma, the Polaris found it’s way through the twilight and the not-too-distant fire at the campsite was a welcome sight for all of us.

Except we weren’t alone. There was the silhouette of a man, and under the moon, I could see he wore a blue hat. It was the man who had set the fire! He was sitting near our campfire and in his hands was -- one of our guns!

I stopped the four-wheeler immediately.

“Nice of you gals to leave your rifle unattended while you put out my fire.”

He came closer to us, pointing the rifle at us. I knew that he had only taken one of our rifles. I still had mine near my feet, but I couldn’t get to it without him taking notice.

I had an idea. I put my hands up. “OK, mister, you got us. We were stupid to leave our rifle where you could find it. We surrender. Girls, put your hands up where he can see them.”

Bella and Ruby looked at me like I was crazy. I gave them the signal that we had perfected in our youth. I scrunched my nose and blinked twice. This signaled to them that I knew what I was doing.

They gave me back their signal -- blink twice and raise the brows.

The intruder came closer and he moved his finger to the cocking lever. At that moment, I pressed on the gas and the Polaris ran up on him. He lost his balance, loosened his grip on the gun, and fell backwards into the fire, tossing the rifle to the side.

The Polaris though had a mind of its own. It swerved left, right into a nearby tree. The three of us were

thrown off and were scrambling to stand up when we heard the roar of another gator on the trail. Old Man Wolford roared into the campsite. Meanwhile, the intruder had extracted himself from the fire, but the damage had been done. He wasn't going anywhere for a while.

Old Man Wolford ordered the man to lay on his stomach as he fashioned some makeshift shackles around his wrist. As he searched his pockets for weapons, Mr. Wolford found the intruder's wallet and opened it.

"Whaaat in tarnation is this?" Wolford's eyes opened wide as he looked at the identification. "You're from the government agency that's trying to take over my land. What business do you have up here, setting Sue's barn on fire and then scaring the daylights out of these girls?"

The man in the blue hat hesitated before giving his statement. "I am acting on my own behalf and not as a representative of the government. I've been working on your case for years, trying to process paperwork and sending it through the court system so that the government can take back what's rightfully theirs. I've been the case manager for this property for almost a decade now and I just couldn't stand it any longer. I took matters into my own hands thinking that if I scared Old Sue she would leave the canyon. I had plans to frighten you and your wife as well. Scaring these girls was icing on the cake but they were clever. Too clever."

"You underestimated the intelligence of these modern young ladies. They've been camping up here on Corral Canyon all their lives. They know this terrain like the back of their hand. They're a fine shot, too. If you would have come up on them in the middle of the night, you sure as heck wouldn't be here talking to us right now." Mr. Wolford looked at the three of us and smiled.

"Thank you, Mr. Wolford." I said gratefully. "With this mystery solved, there's only one thing left to do."

"What's that, little lady?" Mr. Wolford asked.

"Eat our s'mores and tell a few more stories by the campfire." I said gleefully.

Bella and Ruby laughed. "We'll go for the eats, but the stories are done for the night."

"I agree. I'll get this mister down the mountain and into the hands of the sheriff. We'll see you girls bright and early in the morning for breakfast." Old Man Wolford led the government agent to his gator trailer and made his way back down the mountain.

The three of us were silent for a bit. I walked over to our canteens and gave each girl her own. "

"Let's raise our canteens to Corral Canyon...and the future adventures of three best friends."

"To friends!"

"To friends!"

Bella and Ruby raised their canteens and we clinked them together, knowing that the future of Corral Canyon was secure as was the friendship of three adventurous girls.

Caitlynn Jenni

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The Last Strike

The car pulled into the parking lot. I was still pulling my hair into the usual french braid pigtails. This was it.....the end of my journey. After this, I was going to be an ordinary, plain middle schooler. A storm was brewing, and I was going to strike.

My mom reached over and put her hand on my knee. "Honey, good luck. Whatever happens, I am so proud of how far you've come."

I wasn't listening. I did not go through all of this to lose. We were currently in first place, and I would only take a victory. I will not leave Springville--my home--with a ninety percent. I'm taking it all. I hopped out of the car and tried to hold back all of the anger. My dad's job, and everything behind it. Of course, I'm proud to be an army brat, but moving around is like ripping apart an artist's favorite canvas and telling them to totally change their style.

My canvas was a design any twelve year old girl would have wanted. The best friends in the world. Friday nights on longboards. Laughing until you fear that your life is in danger. But friends and fun couldn't make the boxes and goodbye cards disappear.

Putting on a smile, I walk to the place where the team is. All getting ready for the big game. Some sitting on the bench, others on the tarp laid over the soggy grass. I set my bag behind the bench.

Putting on my cleats, coach crouches beside me. "Ready?"

"To crush them." I say matter of factly.

"Me too." MaryKate says. "They are so getting it!"

The rest of us laugh as we jog to the goal and warm up. A passing drill, couple shots, and a game of ABC juggles later, the referee calls for captains. Kaylee and I meet them at the half circle. We shake our opponents hand, flip a coin, all that good stuff. We get the kickoff, and they chose the side, which, come to think of it, is useless because the sky was overcast, and the ground is flatter than Kansas.

We walk back to tell the news. Then here comes the pep talk. More like the Better-win-or-else-extra-laps-at-practice talk. But it was a good last one. After doing our cheer (Which could make even Zeus pee his pants) We run to our positions. I'm the right defender. Always have been. But never again.

The game starts. Shots, fouls, the typical soccer game. Cornaby scores! Next thing I know, its half time. I grab my jacket and plop myself on the bench. Tab hands out blankets to share. Who knew to bring blankets in the middle of the day, and the end of May? Tab always does. She's prepared for everything.

We go over first half. We're doing great. Just more of this and less of that. We drink lots of water and Gatorade.

"Who's ready to win?"

"I'm ready to crush those candy canes!" Rylee says.

It's true. Their uniforms are red and white stripes. We all laugh at the stupid, but hilarious comment. We're the goofy team. That's for sure.

Trying to be the better person, but failing terribly, Couch says, "That's not funny, now you need to score, Clark."

Like that's a challenge! Clark scores almost every game. Not a game goes by without a yellow card or a goal scored because of her. She is so crazy. On the outside, she could be god's pet. On the field

though, she's playing with the devil. Trust me, I can be like that too. I just need to be mad enough. We cheer, then take our places. We are ready to win. I take a moment to stretch my legs. All at once it starts coming to me. I will never play with this team again. This is my last half with them, I'm going to make it count. I take a deep breath, and the familiar sound of the whistle blows.

Number twelve comes hurtling towards me. I can take her, I have before. But as I get in position, she crosses it. An early cross, barely past the half line. But still takes everyone by surprise. Fifteen comes up and launches it towards the goal.

"Oh, shiz, it's goin' in!" MaryKate says.

Our only hope is Emma. She's short, but don't underestimate her skills. She jumps, going in for the kill, and punches the ball over the net. Another saved by Emma! Our fans cheer. It's a corner, but who cares? We've played this team enough to know all of their strategies. I grab my post as MK orders people to mark a player. They kick it.....and Emma catches it!

She drop-kicks it to Clark waiting at half line. Clark speeds around the defense and is making her way to a goal. Ten seconds left. Just in the nick of time, she rockets that ball into the back of the net!

Everyone goes wild! We've won. The whistle blows and the final score is two to zero.

Our parents make a tunnel for us, as always. I am so happy. We've won first place for our league. The team will be going up a division, the hardest division. We crowd around the coaches. They tell us how great we did. In the beginning, this was a hard team. We have been on a road of wins, losses, bruises, broken bones, and now, two championships together.

They also acknowledge that this is my last game with the team. They all know this, but I guess it's just about thanking me and stuff. After I thank the coaches, I make my way over to my bag. I take off my cleats, and-

"Okay. Who stole my pants?" I yelled. My warm ups were gone. And they were pretty expensive too. Probably MK, she always steals my stuff. Whatever. Whoever it was, I hope that we laugh about it when I come back to visit.

As we gather for our last cheer together, I know this is it. We huddle up and start.

Here comes the lightning, here comes the thunder.

Here comes the lightning, here comes the thunder!

HERE COMES THE LIGHTNING! HERE COMES THE THUNDER!

WE ARE THE STORM! THE MIGHTY MIGHTY STORM!

GOOOOO STORM!

We break apart, and coach reminds us that we have a party next week. All of a sudden, it starts to rain.

Wow, I guess the storm really did come. Our family hops into the car and we drive home.

Emily Johnson

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

Her Monster

“Mommy?” I called into the unrecognizable darkness. I could feel her next to me. “Mommy? Where are you?” I wanted to reach over to her, but I couldn’t move. My legs, arms, head, stuck to my bed like paste. I could only move my eyes. To the left of me, I still felt her, but I know her smell. RUN! My mind wanted to move but my body wouldn’t respond. What I thought was my mother stepped into the light of my window. Closer, closer, closer until it was on my bed. I wanted to close my eyes but it came closer, closer, closer. I was staring into the face of my sister.

“That’s the story of the first time I experienced dream paralysis,” My best friend’s mom works full time as a therapist. My therapist. She scribbles down a few notes.

“I’m going to ask you a few questions. What date did this...” She hesitates.

“This, experience take place,” She looks up from her notepad.

“December 8th, 2006. Five days after my sister passed aw-.” I’m choking back tears. “Five days after my sister passed away.”

“How old were you when this incident occurred?”

“I was five years old. My sister would have been six,” More scribbling on her notepad.

“Why do you think your dream paralysis originated from your sister passing?”

“Me and my sister were close. Very close. We never had one fight, until the third of December. She took my favorite stuffed animal and cut it apart. I was angry so I shoved her back! Behind her was the ledge over the staircase. It broke from how hard I pushed her. She fell off and-. I’m sorry, I have to go.” I storm out, hot tears running down my cheeks. I collapse into the middle of the street.

“I’m sorry! Please come back! It was my fault!” I scream angrily into the sky, hoping that she is up there, listening, forgiving me for what I did to her.

“It was my fault you died. I’m s-. I’m so sorry.” I am laying on the street soft drops of water begin falling from the clouded sky. An awful end to another awful day. I find the strength to get up and walk home.

“I’m home!” I’m trying to sound happy even though I feel like my brain is shutting down. My mom gracefully skips down the stairs and pulls me into a bear hug. She holds my face in her petite hands.

“Oh, sweetie! Your eyes are bloodshot! And your face is puffy! How are you holding up?” She brushes the hair out of my face and wipes my tears.

“Mom, I can’t do this anymore,” I slide past her, grab a granola bar and lock myself in my room. Don’t go to sleep Jean, please don’t sleep. No matter how hard I try to stay awake, I always fall asleep. My mind is clouded with exhaustion. My legs feel like spaghetti.

When I wake, I’m not in my room. I can’t move. This is another dream. Go over your steps Jean. I think to myself, hoping that I’m not speaking out loud. I don’t want the monster to hear me.

“One. Be aware of your surroundings.” My eyes dart around the room. My old house, that is where I am. Over on our old, red couch, something is sitting.

“Two. Be aware of the situation.” The situation is sitting on the couch. Standing now and coming towards me.

“Three. Identify your fear.” My fear is that I will be looking into the eyes of my sister or, what’s left of her. Her monster.

“Four. What is step four. Think!” It’s too late. There she is, in front of me. She outlines the curve of my nose with her finger, like she did when she was three. I blink and she is gone but, I still can’t move. I can feel the banister resting on my back. Falling, falling, falling then, I’m awake. My alarm clock has been buzzing for hours.

“Jean! Breakfast is ready! Wake up!” My mom hollers from downstairs. I smack my alarm clock and it falls to the floor. Rolling out of bed, I feel pain. Searing pain shooting from my right leg up to my head.

“Mom! Mom!” Alarmed by my screams, she bursts into my room. The next thing I know, I’m in a hospital bed. I strain my hearing to listen for the sound of my mother but all I hear are unfamiliar voices.

“She passed out from pain. Yes, her mother brought her here. Broken leg, poor girl.” My mind is racing. Broken leg? How is that possible?

“She’s awake. Miss Jean? Hi, my name is doctor Fritzenburg. It seems you have fractured your right calf bone and you are going to have to wear a cast and use crutches for the next month or so. Do you have any idea how this happened?” How could I possibly have broken my leg?

“The banister.” I whisper so quietly that the doctor couldn’t even hear me. It was real. My dream paralysis’ are real.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” His voice brings me back to reality.

“I had a dream last night. I fell off a banister and when I woke up, my leg was broken. It was fine the night before!” Every word that came out of my mouth sounded like a lie.

“I see. Thank you, you will be released shortly.” He walks over to the corner where my mother is sitting.

“It sounds like she has been sleep walking. I suggest you set up cameras in your house to monitor her.

“How in the world am I supposed to pay for that?” She replies. I listen closer.

“The hospital will pay for everything. Telling Jean about this could make her uneasy, I suggest keeping it a secret. You and your daughter just need to sign out and you're free to go.” My mom rushes me out the hospital door. Her face looks troubled as we climb into the car. Probably because she is trying to keep a secret from me.

“So I decided that we are going to Panera for lunch. Does that sound good?” She turns and faces me.

“Yeah, yeah.” My mind is elsewhere. She starts talking again but her voice fades into the background. If I'm sleepwalking then how did I fall from a high place, break my leg, and end up back in bed? It doesn't add up! My stomach rumbles.

“Panera sounds amazing mom. I'll think about all of this later.” The drive home was miserable. Spending the night at Sarah's, my best friend, was the only thing that could make me feel better. I needed to get out of the house so my mother could set up her “secret” cameras and, I need to talk to someone who won't be scribbling on a piece of paper the whole time. Having a break from all the chaos at home was refreshing. Staying awake until 1:00 a.m. made me so tired. Sleeping would only result in me having dream paralysis. Before I knew it, my eyelids slowly started to close, and I didn't fight it. I am going to talk to her, I want to hear her voice. Her voice was so sweet, when she was alive, but the monster might be different.

Hello? The sound won't come out of my mouth. I can't move. I can't talk! How could I be so dumb? Stay calm Jean, stay calm. Go over your steps. Here she comes, screw those stupid steps! Michelle! Michelle please listen! Everything is shaking. I spring up in my bed and Sarah steps back.

“Jean? You scared me half to death yelling in your sleep!” She's hysterical. I want to answer but I still can't move. This isn't dream paralysis, this is fear.

“Jean? Are you even listening to me? What are you looking at?” There she is, standing there, behind Sarah. Her bloodshot eyes just staring at me. This is the clearest I have seen her. Her left hand is bent, in an unnatural, nauseating way. Blood streaks her demented face. Disoriented, her monster waits at the door. She's still here, not as a person but as a spirit. She extends her right hand out to me. I shift my eyes to the clock. It reads 3:00 a.m. When I look back, she has vanished.

“That's it! I'm going back to bed and you should too!” Sarah marches over to her bed and lies down. I lay down and, for the next 6 hours that we had to sleep, my eyes stayed open. My body locked in place. No sleep, no movement, for nearly 360 minutes and 21,600 seconds. The next day, when I went home, I dreaded my sleep, but that night, I had the most peaceful sleep I have had in 10 years.

I have never experienced dream paralysis since that day, 14 years ago. Today, December 8th, 2030, I am living happily with a husband and a daughter. Every day, I see my sister, and I know that one day, she will move on. If you are experiencing something tragic like a death of a loved one, things will get better. They always do.

“Honey! I finished my book!” I call up to John, my husband. I look over to my left and I see my sister, wearing a smile that I haven't seen since she was alive. The clouded sky opens up and my sister

vanishes. Jesus finally took her to heaven.

“Thank you.” I look up and say. The sun sets and I go to tuck Erin into bed, my daughter. I kiss my her forehead and close her bedroom door.

“Mom!” I hear her yell from behind the closed door.” I walk in and see her sitting upright in her bed.

“Will you leave my door open tonight please? I know i’m 8 but, i’m scared.”

“Yes dear. Goodnight, I love you.” I leave her room with the door open. Taking one more look at her beautiful face, I cross over to my room and lay in my bed.

“Goodnight sweetheart.” I say to John, who lays still next to me. I let my eyelids shut. I slowly drift into sleep. My eyelids fling back open and I lay in bed, motionless, unmoving. There is a painful silence all around me. This moment takes me back to a memory when I was five years old. Something exits Erin’s room and comes closer. No! Leave her alone! I can’t speak. It’s on my bed and it crawls up to my face. Demented, it stares into my eyes. My daughter.

Ava Jonkman

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Memoir

It was a simple question and that's what started it all.

"May I please have my paper back?" I asked. At that point in time I wasn't mad or upset, I just simply needed my paper back. I thought that she had probably mixed up her paper with mine and that she took the wrong one.

She looked at me like I had done something wrong. And then her expression completely changed. I could see in her eyes that I had approached the wrong person at the wrong time and that I would pay for it.

When she gave me my paper back, she threw it me. She started to laugh and then because she was laughing, her friends laughed as well. She was a year older than me and when you're a teen, it seems as though one year could actually be more than that.

I had seen her around school and had tried to stay out of her way. It was impossible. I was her target and she made no secret of it. It was just the little things. Mainly when she passed, she would laugh or say something or get her friends to say something. Nobody saw her. Nobody ever does.

We were at an NJHS function to log in some service hours. She was in eighth grade and I was a year younger. We were stuffing some plastic eggs for an Easter hunt for disabled children. We were working fast because we only had two hours to finish the work. She managed to avoid the work and ended up taking pictures and Snap Chatting her friends for most of the time. When it came time to load the eggs into boxes for the children, she picked up the eggs and began throwing them at me and a few of my friends. She laughed when they hit us, broke open and the candy fell out.

We were left to pick everything up and put everything back together. Again, she was the innocent one. The one who made everyone else do her dirty work. It was the longest two hours of my life.

The bullies lie in wait for an innocent victim. Someone who they think they can run over, trample on, step on, and crush. She did just that to me. I never knew why she chose me as her victim. All I know is that I had to put up with her incessant taunts, her looks, her laughs.

I tried to tell myself that she was nothing to me. You could tell that she was starved for attention. She only said things to me when her friends were around. She wanted to be "the cool one" the "leader of the pack" -- she wanted all of that at my expense.

She knew that I wouldn't fight back. It wasn't in my nature to do or say anything negative or derogatory. I never understood why anyone didn't catch on to her.

I heard that she was involved in a cheating scandal in school. That she took some tests for some kids and she got caught. Somehow she weaseled her way out of it. She didn't get punished much. She probably lied about what she did and everyone believed her.

As we waited for my friend's mom to come and pick us up they just kept going. I don't even understand why she wouldn't stop taking pictures of us. She just wouldn't quit, there was no stopping her and eventually there was no stopping her friends either. I don't even think I knew her name until that humiliating day. I just kept trying to get away but everywhere I went, there she was. A sneer on her face, hatred in her eyes, just lying in wait for me.

After what felt like year, Nicole's mom finally arrived and I was away from the monster. But the thoughts in my mind never left and they will always haunt me. Every time I see her or one of her

“friends” I just hope they don't notice me. But somehow they always do, “Ava, Ava, Ava” comes running out of her mouth smacking me in the face, killing me from the inside out.

I know now that aggressive behavior promotes social status. I wouldn't have believed that before I became this girl's victim. I know it's true now. Other students seemed to gather around her. She was a part of the “popular” crowd. I'm pretty sure that people were scared not to be her friend.

When my eighth grade year rolled around, I knew that I would be safe. I would be safe for awhile anyway. I have months before high school begins but always in the shadow of my thoughts is that I'll have to see her again. I'll have to deal with her behavior and her taunts.

But for now I'm safe. But knowing her she will find me pounding harmful words into my mind, words that will stay with me forever. Never able to leave the dark corner of my mind.

Hunter Julo

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Pembroke Hill School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Ben Christian

Category: Poetry

Canadian Pacific

My grandfather runs a railroad.
He has walked down every track,
Sweat dripping down his forehead hotter than burning coals,
Branding his name in the metal.

He is built of twenty-dollar days,
Seventeen and running long enough to support my mother.
Before him,
Our family was rooted in Memphis, Tennessee,
The world beyond a train away
And ultimately too costly to reach.
A train whistle rings louder than my future
But never louder than his legacy.

Every time I hear a train whistle,
I think about when he was a cotton runner,
His blood spilt across the Memphis roadways,
Parts of his bravery lost in the water.

Every time I hear a train whistle,
I think about how he suffered through enough hungry nights
For our whole family.
Twenty-five years later and he's still empty.

For too long,
My grandfather found solace in an ancient practice of fermented happiness.
His train ran a course with an insatiable thirst and no destination.

Lucy found you drinking last week,
A liver without the youth to handle your relief.

Your body is an engine combining air, pressure, and fuel.
Your air is polluted with cigars,
Smoke swallowing your lungs whole.
Your fuel coming from liquid in glass bottles so sharp
They threaten to burst your whole engine in flames.
You formulate enough pressure for yourself that we always worry
If you're combining air and fuel and work and family together too quickly.

Our whole family wishes you would quit your job.
I swear you wake up in the middle of the night with hot sweats
Because you're worried you didn't make enough to pay the bills on time.
We no longer need you to bend your body to make our tracks
So we can keep moving forward.
You have laid the way far enough.

Every time I hear a train whistle blow,
My ears confuse the sound for the ambulance
I saw take you away.
I hear my mother crying
When you were too sick to make it to your sister's funeral.
I hear your engine rupture because it cannot run
Off your temporary fuel.
You dying is my worst nightmare
And my worst memory.

(sung)

I've been working on the railroad
All the livelong day
I've been working on the railroad
Just to pass the time away
Can you hear the whistle blowing?
Leading towards your grave
I've been working on the railroad

(spoken)

Hoping it will save you some way.

James Kim

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Humor

The First KISS (Kissing is Such a Stress)

In 8th grade, I saw the group of beings called “girls” as an esoteric concept—an enigma wrapped in a mystery, wrapped again in a puzzle, to which boys like me could only appreciate the aesthetic of the view, but ponder at the intricate inner workings. I tirelessly asked girls to dances, to which they answered no and placed me in the dreaded friend-zone every time. I didn’t understand—we were mutually nice and maintained a comfortable air around each other. I came to realize I was too conservative in my behavior and I needed to display my affections more.

I beheld her with my eyes for the first time in my science class that year. I knew that I should simply shake off the side effects of puberty, but the infatuation overpowered my ability to reason as I continued gaping at her. My inexperienced self was too shy to suavely approach her and begin a conversation, so I simply gazed as a child would at a brand new Lego set topped with chocolate ice-cream cake. Being aware of the conflict between my desire and ability, I immediately initiated my research to conspire a plan to woo this girl.

After hours of scouring the internet message boards on how to flirt with girls, I rubbed my dry eyes and deliberated on how I could possibly approach her. . . Iba. In terms of appearance, Iba was a mixture of cute, hot, and pretty (they all mean different things, girls). But what made her so attractive was her ease with laughter, her eclectic interests in art and biology, and her carefree lifestyle of impulse.

One by one, I tried the various methods to get closer to Iba. I poked her. I asked for her number. I texted her. I walked with her to classes. I went out with her in group dates. I video chatted with her for hours. Iba came to understand my gauche maneuvers and playfully laughed at my attempts to compliment her. After many successes and shortcomings, I became competent in the art of flirting at the veryleast.

It was the summer after freshman year, and still *nothing* had happened except a little hand-holding and cuddling. People were bombarding both of us with “Are y’all official?” to which I initially tried to explain our over-complicated relationship—going through the motions of dating minus the label—but eventually responded with a “Nah.”

I became aware of the internal and external pressure to kiss her. I knew I was going to move to Missouri within months and I wanted a sense of closure before we parted ways. Before I realized what I was doing, I texted her, “Wanna watch a movie sometime at my house?”

“Sure,” she responded a few minutes later.

We snuggled in my basement couch as I pressed “play” on the remote to commence the movie. As the title screens slowly appeared, Iba and I briefly held eye contact. It was one of those looks where people try to look relaxed with desires of enjoying the moment, but with the fully tacit understanding that within an hour, the movie would not be the focus.

I have no idea what happened in the movie except that there was a lot of snow in the film. I blanked out with my eyes locked on the flatscreen TV but with my mind drifting towards other desires. The position was far from optimal—Iba’s head was inconveniently angled away and awkwardly distanced, despite that we were cuddling with my arm around her shoulder.

For thirty agonizing minutes, nothing much happened except that we repositioned a few times. I

knew that if anything, I should go in for the kiss, because Iba sure seemed interested in the movie. So, I went through the mental checklist that the internet told me. Confident air. Lots of eye contact.

Touching/cuddling.

No. Eh. Yes.

When is it going to happen? Maybe today's not the day. NO—I will *not* back out this time, not after a year and a half of nothing.

Maybe she doesn't want to? Stop overthinking. Just. Go. For. It.

I turned to her, bringing my face closer to Iba's, and whispered something funny in an attempt to emulate the suave men in movies. She laughed and grabbed the back of my neck and pulled my face to hers, immediately locking our lips.

I was shocked—her advancement wasn't part of the plan nor was it a foreseen possibility (within reason). Fortunately, my mouth was open and ready since I was in the middle of giggling like an idiot at my own joke. Briefly, I thought, 'What do I do with my hands?' Despite the flurry of thoughts in my mind, I went with the flow and continued through the awkward motions of slightly opening and closing the lips, keeping my eyes slightly open to see what she was doing. But then I thought about Bruno Mars' lyrics in "Grenade" and reasoned that I shouldn't be opening my eyes while making out.

At that moment, Iba pulled away. "Wanna know a makeout tip? Open your mouth more," she teased with a sly smirk.

Cringing inside, I grinned back and went in for the second strike.

That day, I entered my basement as a naïve child and emerged one step closer to manhood. The kiss was pretty great, but it wasn't the physical action that I valued the most out of the experience. It was the validation at that point that I had partially solved the puzzle, enough to let us share some secrets. Enough to let me see her dark side and appreciate her for who she was nevertheless. Enough to let her affections for a fool like me to pull through. Perhaps I even got to the mystery. Or maybe, just maybe, the enigma itself.

Nick Kime

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: John Pierson, Missy Simonds

Category: Humor

Millennial Hindsight

Tom's gold cufflinks reflected the bright natural light gaping through the trees. His blue suit was crisp and ironed, his hair combed back with perfection, each strand perfectly in line with the other. Tom's old black size 12 dress shoes were tied with polka dot laces, laces given to him by his brother James in 1946 just after James returned home from Europe, telling everyone how the Frenchies wear polka dot shoelaces now, and how it's gonna be the next big thing.

Yes, Tom looked lovely in his coffin. All his friends and family came to see him. Tom wasn't necessarily a popular chap, no, not popular in the slightest. As his age progressed, Tom grew more accustomed to speaking whatever came through his mind at whatever particular moment with no regard given to the people near him or his surroundings. Tom's funeral didn't draw a big crowd because of Tom's nature in itself, instead, because his extended family was already in town and wouldn't need to buy another plane ticket.

Two days prior, Tom shuffled through the big chapel doors with nothing but his pocket constitution and a ballpoint pen in his right pant pocket. After a tumultuous journey through a conglomeration of some of today's youth, Tom eventually found his seat next to one of the more outgoing subjects, a girl in her twenties with bright green hair. "How did you get to know Lisa and Mike?" asked the girl. Tom responded by looking at her with a wide gaze, laughing slightly to himself, and turning his attention back to the program just placed in his hands. In reality, Lisa was Tom's great niece. Although the two rarely spoke, they did once have a thrilling conversation about the history of railroads in 19th century Maryland, prompting Tom to make this trek out to the city to attend her wedding.

As the ceremonies started, more people filed into their seats. However, noting his general grumpiness, Tom's neighbors had mostly turned away from him and were conversing with other attendees. The minister began to speak, music began to play, and Tom saw his great-niece Lisa walk down the aisle in a non-traditional, off white wedding dress. While others were enthralled in Lisa's beauty, Tom let out an "oh please" just loud enough so that those sitting around him could hear it.

Without any warning, any sign, Tom suddenly felt a stinging pain in his left arm and in his neck. He burst out into a cold sweat, shivering and shaking with each inhale. A fire rose up through Tom's stomach, burning the inside of his chest, plaguing him with a pain so indescribable, yet so unextinguishable. Tom had no clue what to do. While he considered stopping the wedding, he figured that would be a "sissy" thing to do. Instead, Tom desperately searched for help around him.

Tom turned to the green haired millennial sitting on his right, and in a raspy voice let out the words "oh help me, please." The green hair did not denote some sort of superhero, ready to protect those in danger. Instead, the woman thought he was once again attacking the outwardly progressive ceremony unfolding between Lisa and Mike. Fed up with his belittling comments, she began to prepare a speech denouncing traditional weddings, inspired, of course, by her favorite Youtube celebrity "artisanal90schick." After much careful deliberation, she eventually turned to Tom, ready to defend her friend Lisa. However, instead of seeing a conservative enemy of 21st century norms, she looked to her left just in time to see the lights leave Tom's eyes, to see traces of spit on the side of his mouth, to see his body slumped over lifeless in the cold oak church pew.

As the minister approached the renowned line of "We now pronounce you, husband and wife," an

unexpected scream filled the air. Confused guests turned their heads, trying to see the commotion in the 11th row, only to discover Tom's 84 year old body with his pocket constitution spread out, covered in scribbles, barely able to be made out as "I'm dying."

Tom sure did bring a big crowd out to his funeral.

Leyla Fern King

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Flash Fiction

Not Quite Dead

*Not all ghosts are dead,
some are old friends,
hiding in the shadows,
a father not quite dead
or a grandmother
lying in bed.*

Her father wasn't dead, but he might as well be. He had decided that drugs were worth five years in prison and that his daughter did not matter enough to stay out of trouble. He was never home and rarely paid attention to Anastasia. His wife had left years ago, and he didn't care about anything else afterwards.

Anastasia no longer saw her dad, but she no longer loved him. He did not love her, so why would she love him? He had yelled at her too often for it to be considered love. He constantly told her that her birth had run her mother away. Why would she love that?

Her mother had loved no one but herself when she had Anastasia. She didn't care that she had given birth to a beautiful baby. She only cared that she didn't have the money she wanted; didn't have the house. Nor did she have the handsome prince she thought she would marry when she was young. She only had a little girl, and Anastasia was not enough for her to stay.

*Beautiful babies
that would become fine ladies
but were not enough for mother and father
to give a bother.*

The older Anastasia grew, the less and less she cared about her parents. She had her grandma, and that should be enough. She was deathly ill but still tried to take care of her. She lied in bed all day and still made Ana feel safe. Sure, they didn't have the most money, far from it, but they were the richest at heart. At least that's what her grandmother said.

Every day Ana went to school in mismatched clothes that didn't fit her. She had nappy hair that she never combed, but at least she was happy. Happy? No, not really. Hopeful, maybe, but not happy. She hadn't been happy for a while.

*She smiled for grandma
like it was law.
She smiled at school
for the fools.*

Life was not something Anastasia enjoyed, for hers was a tragedy.

* * *

As Ana did the laundry, she couldn't help but feel lost. She wasn't very good at it, and her clothes were fading. Her socks were disappearing, disappearing like she wished she could. Her socks would go into the wash and vanish the next day into the vast world of the unknown.

At first the socks would spin in the washing machine. She would watch and feel lost. She was a sock, but she wasn't. She was in a washing machine, and then she wasn't. She was spinning, spinning, not able to get out of her own head. Spinning, spinning, stuck in a box. She was spinning until she was disappearing. Spinning until she was in a world of nonexistence.

She couldn't get out of her head and she couldn't escape her thoughts. The socks were stuck in the wash and couldn't get out.

*Lost in the unknown
and blown
into an empty world
that's curled
itself up.*

Ana was stuck inside herself. For this reason, living was hard for her. School was hard. Everything was hard. She thought too much and wrote too many poems to be alive. She wasn't living, just not quite dead.

As Ana walked to school, she wondered why she existed. She wasn't anything special, just a teenager with no parents. She had a tragic life, and humans don't like sad beings. She wasn't good at school, and she wasn't even that good at poetry.

At school her teachers always sprung surprise quizzes, claiming life was filled with them. But they were no longer surprises when you came to anticipate them. She always expected them but was never ready. Her average grade was fifty percent. That's a failing grade. She was failing. She was a failure.

Once she had gotten a eighty-five percent on an English quiz. She had been so excited. She had *finally* passed a quiz. She had rushed home to her grandma, jumping just to tell her the news.

* * *

"Grandma!" she yelled. "I'm home!"

Her grandma didn't respond.

"Grandma?" Ana walked down the small hallway to her grandmother's room.

"Are you okay?" Her grandma still didn't respond. "Grandma?" Ana walked into her grandma's room.

She was lying on the top of the covers on her bed, not moving. Her chest failed to rise. No sound fell from her lips, none at all.

"Grandma!" she ran up to her. "Grandma!" Ana shook her. "*Wake up you're not quite dead yet!*" she cried. "*Wake up! You're not quite dead!*"

Ana had learned enough about the practice of medicine to know when someone was dead. Still, she shook her grandma. She hoped to shake life back into her.

"*You're not quite dead, yet.*"

A cover

*of flowers
a lover
of cowards.*

*She's six feet under,
no more thunder
in her bones,
only stones
surrounding her.*

*She lives with the worms
but she's not quite dead.
Maybe she's still
lying in bed?*

Kamilah Kirkwood

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Frazier

Category: Critical Essay

Profiling the Profile

On the afternoon of July 15, 1982 a body was discovered by two teenage boys from Kent, Washington, floating in the Green River in Washington State. Later, the body was identified as sixteen-year-old Wendy Lee Coffield. Coffield, a high school dropout and runaway who had resorted to a life of prostitution, was last seen July 8, 1982 in the area of Tacoma, Washington. The cause of death was determined as strangulation using her own clothing. She was the first of what was soon to be forty-nine victims of the Green River Killer, a serial killer who created panic throughout Washington. The perpetrator was Gary Leon Ridgway who had been a suspect in the disappearance of numerous women, but detectives were never able to find adequate evidence that would allow them to build a strong case against him (Lange). The Behavioral Science Unit of the Federal Bureau of Investigation created a profile using the murders that had been committed to build a general idea of who the suspect could be. There were numerous elements of the profile that matched personal characteristics of Ridgway including: “familiar with sites where bodies were found; drives conservative, older vehicles; has average or slightly higher intelligence; is divorced; has apparent low self-esteem; is in good physical condition; is white; still sees prostitutes” (Smith). But as the investigation went on, law enforcement was faced with a difficult obstacle: nearly half the men in King County, Washington matched this profile. This in turn raises the important question, how effective can profiling really be? Criminal profiling is a fairly new technique used by law enforcement and should be thoroughly investigated in order to understand how effective it proves in solving crime.

To reach the answer to such a question, it is important to pay attention to the basis of criminal profiling. Overall, profiling starts with psychology, but more specifically, criminal psychology. Criminal psychology focuses on understanding human behavior in people who commit crimes. As other forms of psychology work to understand why people act in a certain way and what goes through their minds, the same goes for criminal psychology. Having an understanding of the reasons for committing a crime and the mindset of a criminal is what allows profilers to build a profile (“Criminal Psychology”).

When it comes to building a profile the first and most basic step is examining the evidence. Law enforcement officials will go through the crime scene and look for anything that sticks out or gives evidence of a special pattern or signature that the unknown subject, also nicknamed “unsub” by the FBI, may leave behind. Follow up examination may occur with victim and witness reports. The fact that there are two types of profiling challenges the credibility of profiling as a whole. Inductive profiling takes the characteristics of previously known offenders and applies them to the “unsubs.” This only works if the two groups do indeed have traits in common and is what makes inductive profiling risky. It’s important to keep in mind that humans are not perfect, predictable creatures. Two different individuals could commit the same crime, even have the same behavior, but have completely different reasons. The reasoning behind the crime is the most important part, especially when it comes to dealing with more extreme cases such as serial murder. Inductive profiling has a tendency to produce more leads but there are a few downsides. Many of the results will be generic personality traits that almost anyone could possess, which is similar to the situation the Green River Task Force was faced with

when looking for their serial killer. The alternative to this is deductive profiling, which focuses more in depth on the crime scene. Profilers using a deductive method will require a level of creativity and abstract thinking. The reasons behind a crime are discovered when using deductive profiling and more often than not, while fewer leads are produced, they will be the more accurate and specific leads that better narrow down the suspect pool (Huet). In general, law enforcement will use both inductive and deductive profiling when building a profile, but may rely on one more so than the other.

Similarly to the two methods of building a profile, there are two common categories that an “unsub” is placed into: organized and disorganized. Organized “unsubs” in many cases can display psychopathic traits such as charisma and manipulation, knowing right from wrong, and a lack of remorse. This does not mean that the “unsub” is in truth a psychopath and if a profile is built with that assumption, it can lead law enforcement to the wrong suspect. An organized “unsub” will commit a premeditated and carefully planned crime and manage to leave behind little evidence. In contrast, a disorganized “unsub” may display psychotic traits like impulsivity and delusions. More often than not, disorganized “unsubs” will be younger and under the influence of a controlled substance while committing the crime. Crimes committed by those in the disorganized category are usually crimes of opportunity, sloppy, and may leave behind traceable evidence such as fingerprints and blood (Winerman). Malcolm Gladwell challenges the organized and disorganized typologies, or categories, in his article “Dangerous Minds.” Gladwell explains that John Douglas and Robert Ressler, developers of criminal profiling in the Behavioral Science Unit in Quantico, Virginia, created these typologies without interviewing a representative sample of serial killers who had already been imprisoned. As previously mentioned, inductive profiling uses the characteristics of past offenders and makes a comparison to current “unsubs” but Douglas and Ressler did not do this. So that raises the question of where did these typologies come from?

It should be noted that not all crimes fit into one of the specific categories. Take for example the Black Dahlia murder in 1947. The Black Dahlia, whose real name was Elizabeth Short, was discovered brutally murdered in the Los Angeles area with severe mutilations and her corpse severed transversely at the waist. What is important about this particular case is that there was no blood found at the scene, which implies that the murder occurred somewhere else before being placed at the dumpsite. The dismemberment was done in such a clean manner that it implies that the “unsub” took his time and had knowledge of what he was doing. But the placement of the body showed that the corpse was simply tossed like trash because it was posed in way that the women who discovered the body believed it was a mannequin. The dismemberment implies an organized killer but the dumping of the body implies a disorganized killer (“Gives Up, Says ‘Can’t Stand IT Any Longer’”). This trend shows up in majority of cases that law enforcement deals with so how accurate can putting “unsubs” into the two categories really be?

Brent Snook of Memorial University of Newfoundland along with some of his colleagues conducted an experiment with a group of professional profilers and non-profilers such as college students and psychologists. Each group was given a mock scenario in which they had to review details of a solved crime and build a profile using the following four categories of predictions: “cognitive processes, physical attributes, offense behaviors, and social history/habits.” The results of the experiment found that the predictions from the profilers were not significantly more accurate than the predictions of the non-profilers (Snook). This provides evidence that profiling is not a specialized skill and the average person could in fact build a profile on his or her own time if desired. So what is to say that law enforcement agencies using profiling are actually utilizing a technique that will improve solving crime?

Criminal profiling has gained popularity in recent years thanks to film, television, and the media, but the information put out by these outlets is not always accurate. Certain crimes and the descriptions of profiles built by the FBI and other agencies are told in a story-like way to appeal to the

public and gain attention but this in turn takes away from the credibility (Snook). Keeping in mind that in human nature, humans tend to generalize almost all the information we are given. News outlets will relay the information of successful profiling instances more than failures and people will generalize those successes and believe that it is a technique that always works. Repetition also plays an important role in the belief of profiling. If it is constantly repeated that criminal profiling is indeed effective, people will start to believe it (Snook). When the correct predictions of profiles are overemphasized, they hide how many incorrect predictions a profile is actually consisted of.

Human nature has been mentioned many times and this is because as much as people like to believe they are doing things in a scientific manner, it is often times just the way the mind works. The human mind has an easy time, in most people, of picking up patterns, especially environmental patterns. But it also identifies meaningless patterns in the world (Snook). That is not to say that the patterns the FBI and other law enforcement may find are meaningless, but it does raise the question: how often are profiles built with meaningless patterns that will not help in getting closer to identifying a suspect? Profiling is a difficult technique to question and not because it is still fairly new, but because it is based on psychological ideas and theories. And while some psychological theories have in fact been proven true, there is always room to question and challenge the way the human mind works and processes because it is nearly impossible for anyone to know with one-hundred percent certainty why humans think and act the way they do. And when it comes to profiling consider this: do the agents and officers who are building these profiles and trying to understand criminals even understand themselves? Profiling has proved effective in some cases, but it is not the best way to solve crime; there are too many weaknesses in the technique.

Sophie Krug

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Poetry

leave the band-aid alone

i have not always been a broken bone,
jammed into a dirty cast with old signatures of the people i once knew
that is not me but the position i can't seem to wiggle out of
the fracture that won't seem to heal
endless visits to unreliable doctors that all assure me:
"just give it a few more weeks."

don't scratch the wounds, i learned
even when it feels so good against your scraped flesh
keep your nails short and away from your open skin
i can't keep my hands off of my injuries
can't stop scrubbing them raw in the shower
an obvious illusion of cleanliness

it's clear to everyone else why i'm covered in bruises and cuts
"what do you expect when you keep walking into traffic?"
they say with bored frowns and tapping toes
the sidewalk is five steps away but i choose to ignore it
tripping over roadkill and breathing in car fumes
am i halfway to healed, doc?

Stephanie Krutz

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Jarrod Roark

Category: Short Story

Walking on Eggshells

BRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRING.

A bell shrieks, jolting me out of my sleep. I flounder around a bit in my burrito-wrap sheets before untangling myself and crashing to the floor. Laughter fills the eggshell-white room and I put on my biggest smile, laugh, and glance up at the camera by the corner of the ceiling. The solid red light glares at me, surely a demon's lost eye.

It always points away during designated times, giving me time to change and sleep in privacy, and I can add more time if I want at other parts of the day. But as soon as that bell goes off in the mornings at 9am, the camera points directly at me. Because I used to sleep in until around 10am – before I got started in this televised group home, I'm always caught asleep or in the process of waking up. God, *both* are equally embarrassing. The other five people in this building get up way earlier than I do, so they don't normally have a problem or make the laugh track sound so early in the day. The viewers like me, apparently, so I don't think I'll be kicked off unless I mess something up badly. Last time I tried to get on this sitcom back in 2018, I didn't get picked. That was a rough year for me. Now that I'm in, I have to stay. And even if the audience turns on me and I have to leave, it has been nice being able to live in a house again.

It's such a weird show. They lock us in this building for three months and provide us with plumbing, electricity, television, comfortable rooms, delicious food, and all we have to do is provide entertainment whenever the cameras are on. Although, each month, viewers can vote to keep people on the show for longer, so some people end up just staying. Again, weird show. Gets a lot of viewership worldwide, though, so something must have worked out.

I leave my room, go across the hall to my bathroom, and jump in the shower. I'm glad the hallways are set up like they are, with the rooms on one side and the bathrooms on the other. That means the bathrooms are probably out of the view of the cameras, which means I don't need to worry about slipping on wet tiles and hearing the laugh track in the bathroom.

* * * * *

After cleaning up, I walk downstairs to join my housemates. Out of the fifteen that started, five others and I are left. On a short platform in the middle of the granite island in the centre of the kitchen sits a half-eaten cake with chocolate frosting and candles. Everyone sits on sofas around a nearby coffee table talking with one another and every now and then someone says something funny and the laugh track sounds.

“Oh, here comes Ian,” Hana says shyly. She tugs at her hijab. “Good morning.” Everyone loves Hana.

She's so sweet and kind. Another voice draws me away from awkwardly staring at Hana as I traipse over to the group.

"Happy two-and-a-half-month anniversary of our time together here," Dwayne smirks, sipping a cup of steaming coffee. He's a chill guy, but besides that, I don't really know him.

Hana, Dwayne, the others all continue their conversations as I sit awkwardly, hearing snippets of each. After a while, I sneak over to get a slice of cake and notice the lighter next to the plates that was used for lighting the candles.

"So, Ian, have you been enjoying yourself here?" Hana asks suddenly, making me jump.

I can feel everyone's eyes on me, waiting for me to mess up so they can laugh at me again. "Oh, uh... yeah, it's been fun!" There we go. That sounded confident. I get a fork and a plate, then maneuver the fork to act as a lifting mechanism for the dessert.

"Awesome. I just think you've been acting kinda strange for the past couple days. You okay?"

This sudden question makes me lose focus and I drop the cake. Not only does it hit the floor, but it also takes out my right pant leg. The group at the table starts cracking up and the laugh track sounds, implying that I should smile. So, I force a laugh and pick the cake off the ground before throwing it away. I quickly bend down to clean up the mess of frosting and crumbs from the floor when I hear the unmistakable sound of fabric tearing. A new round of laughter sounds, both from my housemates and the laugh track, as I notice the newly-created hole on the backside of my jeans. Again, I force an amused expression. My nails dig into my palms, creating that familiar sense of calming pain. Not as much as it used to, though. My palms have formed calluses where my fingernails fit nicely. As does the lighter, which I pocket while the cameras are focused on the group over at the table.

"Ian, you're so precious. Are you okay?" Hana asks.

I laugh again. "I definitely am! Just so clumsy. I get it from my mom..." I pause, dropping my voice down to a loud whisper. "Don't tell her I said that, though." More laughter, and I join in, my head pounding. I shut my eyes tightly and blink a few times to try to dull the pain. No one notices. "Hey, I'm going to go change pants. Can't have anyone thinking this happens regularly," I joke.

"But Ian, they already do!" Laughter.

* * * * *

I punched her. I can't believe I punched her. That has to be it; the audience will hate me after that, and I'll be let go. I'll be free. I would rather live on the streets, having people point and laugh, knowing I'll always be the Clumsy One who can never do anything right, than be stuck in this hell any longer.

Sprinting to my prison room, I don't notice a side table protruding out of the wall and it clips me in the leg. Laughter explodes as I collapse to the ground in pain, clutching at the injury. The laugh track that follows is different this time. And it scares me. I look around for a camera pointing my way. I don't find one. My head still pounds.

I pull myself up and run into the room. Once I'm inside, I lock my door. The bolt pinches my index finger and I flinch. Laughter fills the room, growing louder and louder until it becomes deafening. The time on the clock clicks to 1pm and the red light on the camera turns on as it pans the room, looking for me. The laugh track is still blaring in my ears.

"Shut up!" I scream, my vocal chords straining painfully.

A monotone robotic female voice sounds from the monitor next to my bed. "Congratulations, Ian. The audience has voted for you to remain for another month. Stay tuned for next month's decision, and stay happy."

My head spins and I feel vomit clogging my throat. How? Why did they keep me here? This is where I draw the line. I need to get out. My hands grow numb and my fingers twitch. I breathe deeply, my heartbeat quickening in anticipation.

I have to get rid of this. I have to. It has to go. I need to get out. I can't live like this anymore. I want to die. No, I want it to die. The laughter. All of it. Now.

I move into the camera's field of vision and I stand still until it focuses on me. I need it to see what I'm about to do. It needs to see that it can't control me. I'm the one with the power here.

I lift my right hand. In it, I have the lighter. I look around my prison to find the best first target. My eyes settle on the curtains covering the tiny window that I always hated. I reach out and flick the lighter once, twice. A fire blossoms as I hold the tiny symbol of life in front of my eyes. My smile widens. This is where I go free. No more laugh tracks, no more pointing out every single goddamn mistake I make. No more being known for my faults everywhere I go in this cursed world. Slowly, I hold the fire under the curtains and swiftly set them ablaze. Flames curl around the bland eggshell fabric and add colour to the matching eggshell room. So many eggshells to break. In a flash, the fire spreads up the curtains, eating away at them as bursts of light from the window appear. I then move the lighter to the walls. Oh, it's so beautiful. Everyone always says how water is the purifying element, but that is clearly because they have never seen anger and panic evaporate completely in a wall of flame. The fire reaches the camera in the corner. Immediately, the metal starts to char and warp and the red light shuts off as the plastic melts. I laugh hysterically, giddy with glee. They can't stop me now. I stand still, closing my eyes as I'm engulfed by my own exquisite creation of destruction.

Stephanie Krutz

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Jarrod Roark

Category: Short Story

Rainbow

“Oh, hello. I didn't notice you there; I'm sorry! My name is Ariadne. I'm eleven years old. What is your name?”

She pauses for a second.

“Oh, do you not like to talk?” she pauses again. “How weird. Everyone else does. Anyway, that's alright. You're just like my sister. She doesn't like to talk much either anymore. Have you ever met my sister? I should introduce you sometime. Her name's Iris. She and I are best friends! I talk to her about many things. She listens to everything I tell her! We are great friends, my sister and I. Have you ever met my sister? She's the most wonderful person in the world!”

“Do you like my rope bracelet? My sister made it for me before my family died. I wear it everywhere. Although, it rubs and kind of hurts my wrist sometimes. But it's okay. Oh yeah, did I tell you? My family died a few weeks ago. There's a big war going on here. I hate war. They always say how good it is, and that there are so many reasons that we are fighting, but I don't get it. What's so good about innocent people dying? That's what I tell my sister. I tell her, ‘my family would still be alive if there was no war or bombs.’ She always agrees with me.

“Before you came along, I was walking to my favorite place in the whole wide world. I have been walking for a few hours now. My sister was walking with me for a while. Where is she, I wonder? Oh, look, here she comes! Hello, Iris!” She turns away from her sister. “I've already introduced her to everyone else, so I'm really happy that you got to meet her!” Silence fills the air as Ariadne walks along, until being suddenly interrupted by a loud growl.

“Oh, sorry. Did I scare you?” Ariadne asks. “That was my stomach. You see, I haven't eaten in a few days, and I'm starting to get... hungry...” she says, her voice failing as she falls to the ground in a starved faint.

...

Ariadne's eyes fly open and she observes her surroundings. She lies on a thin bedroll in a gray tent, when a middle-aged woman pokes her head through the tent flap and smiles.

“Oh, good! You're awake!” Her head vanishes from the tent. “Jeff, git yer ass over here. She's awoked!” The woman hollers, her voice slowly fading as she moves away.

Ariadne shakily stands up and gently opens the tent flap, squinting to see in the dark. Stepping outside, she notices the outlines of several other tents of the same kind as the one she was in. Families eating dinner gather around a campfire that glows golden against the black backdrop of night.

The woman from before beckons Ariadne to come join them. She tells Ariadne that she “found the poor girl fainted dead away from hunger,” so she had taken her to the refugee camp at which she was staying. Ariadne silently accepts the food and refills her water flask with good clean water. A man next to her smiles softly, introduces himself as “Jeffrey”, and tells her to rest up. Nearby, a fight starts to form.

Ariadne looks over at the combatants, and upon hearing the word *war*, starts to rub her rope bracelet on her wrist.

The woman, who had earlier said her name was “Medora,” walks up to Ariadne and asks if she is okay, then notices her bracelet.

“Oh mah, Lord, girlie! Don’t that hurt, you rubbin’ yer wrist with that bracelet o’ yers? I’ll be damned if yer wrist don’t fall clean off, darlin’!”

Ariadne just shakes her head and hides her rubbed-raw skin. Medora sighs and walks off. Ariadne says quietly, “I don’t want to speak because then they’ll think I’m crazy.” She listens in on the argument ringing out as the men’s tempers were rising, fists almost flying.

“This fight’s pointless!” one man shouts.

“No it ain’t!” another yells back.

“Why do ya say that?” a third chimes in.

“Those damn rebels don’t know what the hell they’re doin’,” the second says.

“But to them, *we’re* the rebels!”

“But we’re *us*, ain’t we?!”

“Just my point! Both sides are fightin’ ‘cause neither of us can figure out shit!”

“You know, this place will be destroyed pretty soon,” Ariadne says. Even though her voice is the quietest, the entire arguing party goes silent and turn to look at her.

Slowly, enunciating every syllable, the second man asks, “Whadda ya mean?”

“I mean just that. All of you will die if you do not get away from here.”

There is a pause, and then laughter and raucous guffawing fills the air.

“Yeah, right!”

“You’s funny!”

“This place hasn’t been hit since the beginning of the war decades ago!”

“Well, it will be in the next few hours,” Ariadne tries again, her voice not growing any louder.

“Git outta here, Missy,” someone shouts.

“Yeah! We don’t need any’uns possessed by demons!” someone else exclaims.

“All right. Good luck and thank you for your kindness,” Ariadne says, standing up and walking out of the camp. All eyes watch her exit.

...

A while later, Ariadne stands in a field of green grass and wildflowers. The glowing sun is high in the blue sky, and puffy white clouds dot the horizon.

“You know, people call me ‘evil’ and ‘insane’ all the time. They say that the Devil is talking with me. That’s when I like to come here, my favorite place. It’s all quiet and no one is mean. My family is there and my sister plays with me, too!”

A long way behind Ariadne, screams slice through the air, machine gun firing sounds, then silence falls.

“Oh, it looks like the refugee camp is being wiped out,” Ariadne says indifferently. “I was right again. This has happened before, here, with my family. I had a really bad feeling one day, but they didn’t believe me because it was such a beautiful day. So, I ran to the bomb shelter alone. Soon afterwards was when the stray bomb hit. It was then that I starting hearing everyone talking to me. I’m sorry that noticed you so late. That day was so beautiful, just like today. It’s like I’m living that day again.”

A soft, squealing whistle starts to become clearer. Ariadne looks towards the source of the sound and sees a large metal object careening through the sky.

...

Ariadne lies on the green grass, watching the white clouds drift lazily across the blue sky. A few birds chirp some ways away and a bright blue butterfly lands softly on her nose. *How could this exist? How can this exist, sister? Don’t we live in a war, sister?* With this realization, the beautiful landscape cracks. The pieces shatter into slivers of light before dissolving completely, revealing hundreds of craters dotting hacked-up earth and patches of charred grass. Uniformed bodies litter the field, some missing limbs, many bleeding, all dead.

The ground vibrates and a large *kaboom* in the distance makes a few clumps of dirt land on her stomach. A couple of bloodcurdling shrieks shatter what silence existed after the explosion, and a few somethings *thud* to the ground a few feet away from her. She softly moves her right arm, which lies by her torso. The rope bracelet has fallen off.

“Huh. It looks like we have walked into a battlefield. This is strange. My side feels warm and sticky, but what hurt a while ago doesn’t hurt now,” she says softly. “Th-thank you for staying with me, even if you said nothing.” She opens her mouth to try to say something else, but no sound comes out. She

sighs.

They were so foolish, so foolish.

I tried to warn them, but they didn't listen, didn't listen. This devastation was never meant to be. Silly little humans, always trying to be better than one another. Never listening to a small voice when it pleads to settle things peacefully. Hopefully they will have learned better by the time I have woken up.

I tried to warn them, but they didn't listen, didn't listen. Never listen, never listen.

This sky is so beautiful, so peaceful. It would be nice if everyone could just stop to see it. Oh, there comes a raincloud now. It's getting harder to see. Oh well. Maybe I'll see a rainbow later with my family.

I had always wanted to see a rainbow. My sister did too, you know. Always did, always did.

Never did, never did.

Madison Kunz

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Over Too Soon

I can't breathe. I literally cannot breathe. My throat has grown so tense that I silently scramble for any sweet bit of oxygen I can get. It feels like my trachea has been doused with hydrogen peroxide. I look down and see that my clenched knuckles have turned the same pasty white as the hard linoleum I'm kneeling on. Well, more like collapsed on. I'm still struggling to wrap my mind around what I've just witnessed.

The cafeteria. A place I've hated since the sixth grade. At the start of middle school, a microscope was used to examine my off-brand jeans and Good Will bought tee shirts. Since then, I've faded into the background along with others like me. To get this straight, I honestly hate myself for sounding so cliché. This isn't goddamn High School Musical; jocks don't shove nerds into lockers and chicks with bouncy blond hair don't necessarily rule the school. I've got friends and everything, but I still get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach every time I have to pull out my foodstamps. I mean, whose shitty idea was that? *Yeah sure, let's let everyone know whose parents are such low lifes they can't afford a school lunch at \$1.90 a pop.* True genius.

I sat down and stared at five soggy chicken nuggets and peaches--fresh from the can. Ketchup packets have turned into a myth (Heinz who?), so I started to eat the delicacy plain. I chewed four times before anything caught my attention.

Across the room, a few boys started to raise their voices. Five of them were sitting together and one was standing over their table. The standing boy had his back to me, but he had sandy, dirty blonde hair and noticeably large ears that stuck out under his shag. He seemed troubled in his bulky, navy zip-up sweatshirt and dark washed jeans. He turned and I realized it was Brandon. His face kept contorting as he blinked too hard and scrunched up his nose, revealing his top teeth and some of his gums. He's had Tourettes ever since he was 6 years old. Any words he managed to get out, he stumbled over profusely. One of the boys sitting down was Chase, a classic, All-American bully. They appeared to be taunting him, and my heart couldn't help but ache for him. I told it to quit. Your life will be hell if you mourn the pig in the slaughter house.

I guess you could call Brandon and me friends; well, more like two people thrown into a lot of the same circumstances. We started kindergarten the same year and we found that we had the same teacher. Brandon was quiet and I was outgoing. I chose friends based on how much they liked to run and play at recess. Brandon would walk around the perimeter of the school yard, seemingly contemplating life. Sometimes our paths would cross and we would smile at each other and say hello.

When we enrolled in middle school, I hadn't seen him for awhile. His hair had grown long and straggly and he had become pale. Maybe he was always like that, I couldn't remember. In sixth grade we rode the same bus. At first, we didn't sit near each other. Then, inexplicably we started sitting across from each other, not talking or even acknowledging each other's presence, just content to sit and think our own thoughts.

The taunting and teasing came a little at a time. A new kid named Chase moved to our neighborhood and he was big, tall, and obnoxious. Word was that he was kicked out of his old school and our school was just the next one in line. The first day he rode the bus, he tripped over Brandon's trombone and caught himself on the next seat.

“Hey, you little perv, pick up your instrument or the next time I’ll use it to bash your face in.”

Brandon just sat there and stared ahead with a world weary expression on his face like he had been down this road a thousand times before. Chase moved past him without saying a word. The next day, Chase climbed the steps of the bus and looked as though he was on a mission.

“Jerkface, where’s your instrument today? I’m feeling like I want to use it for a little workout, know what I mean?”

This time Brandon answered, “Don’t have it, I left it at school.”

“This’ll do.” Chase grabbed Brandon’s lunch box and threw it out the open window.

It only got worse. Chase became more popular and everyone wanted to do what Chase was doing. If Chase got new shoes, exact replicas would pop up in the hallways like dandelions. One of Chase’s hobbies was relentlessly taunting Brandon. I watched it grow slowly, but it didn’t seem like a big deal. You can’t notice anything when it’s a little at a time.

Back in the cafeteria, when I saw it was Brandon, I figured it was just your run-of-the-mill bullying and I directed my attention back to my rainbow colored plate. Today I got purple. Lucky me. Suddenly, a yell pierced through all other noise in the lunchroom. Brandon let out an agonized “N-NO, I S-SAID STOP-P IT!” that matched the hoarse yell from just a moment ago. His words were choppy and disconnected. I watched in a mix of confusion and horror as his hands shook and reached for something on the inside of his sweatshirt.

I craned my neck, but I couldn’t get a clear view of what he was retrieving. Fear flashed in Chase’s eyes. A panicked, “What the hell?!” escaped his lips. By this point, the scene had attracted everyone’s gaze. I couldn’t imagine what he must be getting. A sick note? An act that ended in nothing but a middle finger flung in the bully’s face?

Then I saw it.

I can’t put into words the emotions that washed over me and numbed my body. My fork slipped out of my fingers and tumbled onto the floor with a clatter. The world moved in slow motion. I felt like a mere house fly, unable to control any of my surroundings.

Out from the navy sweatshirt, Brandon pulled out a handgun. A firearm. A glock.

My jaw went slack. I was frozen in place. His hands continued with the uncontrollable tremor. He raised his arms and held the gun away from him like it was a bomb. Suddenly it hit me. *Where were the teachers? Why weren’t they doing their damn jobs?* I swiveled my head around and saw nobody. I was too cowardly to say anything or do something.

The room was completely silent. There were only about 40 people in here, this being the smallest and last lunch shift of the day. All faculty were out of sight, presumably eating their own lunches in the lounge. Any supervision during lunch had died after eighth grade.

Someone needed to go for help, but no one wanted to move. My eyes didn’t dare to twitch, but out of my peripheral vision I could see a small girl quietly sobbing, her shoulders heaving up and down.

Chase’s eyes were squinted and his shoulders were hunched inwards in an effort to protect himself.

Chase let the slightest bit of tension out of his body and this made Brandon furious. There was no sign of a smirk anywhere on Chase’s face, but Brandon roared anyway. “DO YOU THINK THIS IS F-FUNNY?” There was fire in his eyes and his forehead was drenched with sweat. It made his hair stick in damp clumps around his dark eyes. His mouth folded downwards first, and then he let it swing open. He began sobbing.

He must be sick. Mentally ill. Not right in the head. In a matter of seconds, his devastated bawl turned to a devilish smile. Not just a smile, a full blown grin that led to nauseating chuckle.

Through the giggles he spoke clearly, “No...more.” Then, he wrapped his fingers around the trigger and I tore my eyes away in disgust.

The gunfire sent a deafening blast barreling through my eardrums. My arms flew up around my head and I can’t remember if I was one of the ones screaming or not. I thrust my eyes on the scene. The

gun was still clenched in Brandon's otherwise limp arm. His face showed no remorse. On the floor, lay Chase with one of his buddies by his side. The healthy one was in hysterics and waving his hands aimlessly in the air. *You idiot, pack the wound.* Scarlet blood spilled out onto the floor. He was still alive, but was obviously critically wounded. The blood was coming from somewhere on his torso, so I knew it couldn't be good. His mouth was slowly opening and closing like a fish out of water. He was gasping for every shallow breath.

I knew he must be in so much pain. He was going to suffer for a long time, and he wasn't even guaranteed to live.

I like to think that in all situations I can maintain my composure. I am no Shakespeare with words, but I pride myself in being able to form complete and intellectual thoughts. "*Girl with the shitty home life is actually smart?*" It throws everyone off.

In that moment, I blurted out the most poetic string of letters ever known to mankind. Truly, I believe an opera could be composed around my one, deeply moving line.

"You dick!" I howled, unable to control myself. As soon as these words left my mouth, chaos broke out among the cafeteria. Even through the havoc, Brandon's eyes stayed locked on me. The adrenaline that had been rushing through my body suddenly vanished. My heart sank as our eyes fastened together. His tics came back, even greater than before. The corners of his mouth spazzed and his face writhed. He started to move towards me, unblinking. I prayed that he'd put down the gun, but it came with him. He got closer and I stumbled backwards off my stool and hit the back of my head hard on the table on my way down.

Now, I am sprawled awkwardly on the floor, and air ignorantly won't fill my lungs.

He stands in front of me and with pierced lips, he raises his right arm to point the gun at me. His eyes beg for mercy, yet I am the one at gunpoint. For a moment, all the noise in the cafeteria turns to mush and all I am focused on is Brandon. For just a moment, I don't see the boy who just shot a classmate. I see the boy who was quiet, but so caring. I see the boy who was always the best artist in grade school. I see the boy who was the only one who didn't care if people saw him hug his mom when she dropped him off for 5th grade. In this moment I found the unclouded and unpolluted boy, who I hadn't even noticed went missing.

"Brandon," I choke out. I slowly reach my arm out to him and people all around me yell at me to stop. I watch his eyes change and he looks like he knows everything there is to know in this world. He looks as though he understands something the rest of us don't. He looks like he finally felt peace.

He carefully turns the gun away from me and I nearly fall over myself after him. He draws the gun back and rotates it around in his hand.

Then, he softly places the muzzle of the gun in between his lips and closes his eyes.

Madison Kunz

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Poetry

The Willow Tree

The Willow's young roots trembled
With excitement, as the sound of
Laughter carried nearer to him.
He had been eagerly awaiting
This moment.

Bounding up the hill,
Came a soft Lab, followed by
A small girl dressed in a
Lacey white blouse.
Her wispy hazel hair was pulled back
With a ribbon,
The gentlest of baby blues.
Pride swelled in the Willow's trunk
As the girl clambered up and swung
From his branches and her dog
Danced happily underneath.

Without warning, time turned
And rings were added
To the Willow's growing body.
Once again, the girl returned,
But now she had to be called a woman.
No jagged bones stuck out;
Only soft curves adorned her.
This time she brought a man.
Together they sat with their
Backs resting against the base
Of the Willow's strong stalk.
They talked until the words
Ran silent and tension
Slowly grew between the pair.
Protectiveness tickled the ends
Of the Willow's branches
With each harsh word from the man
And every flinch of the Willow's little girl.

The seasons cycled through and
The Willow yearned to see his

Little girl once more.
At dusk, just as the Willow started to droop,
His girl tenderly padded up the hill.
At first, the Willow was overjoyed,
But he was instantly infuriated.
The coppery light from the sunset
Illuminated her bare arms.
Each delicate limb bore
Numerous bruises, each one
Tainting her once glowing skin.
Rage began boiling up
From the Willow's roots.
Who would do this to his
Innocent and merciful little girl?
She continued to approach the Willow,
And when she reached him
She stopped to examine something
On his branch.
There, clinging on, was an old,
Tattered, and fraying ribbon.
It had become so faded, its baby blue hue
Had nearly turned white.
The girl's feeble fingertips
Reached for what she had
Tied there, so long ago.
Just as she grazed the material,
A late breeze swiftly
Floated by and carried the last of
Her ribbon with it.
Too exhausted to retrieve her belonging,
The Willow's little girl
Curled up beneath him
And closed her eyes.

The Willow's leaves fell and were
Replenished before he saw
His little girl again.
Everyday he thought of her,
And everyday that passed
Without her, traced another worrisome
Wrinkle into his aging bark.
During the crisp dawn of a morning
Leading into spring,
The Willow found himself anxious,
And he knew that today he
Would see her.
While dew still clung to
New blades of grass,

The Willow watched as his
Little girl's head started bobbing
Over the hillside towards him.
Early morning sunlight gleamed
Off her chestnut hair,
Which she left to cascade
Around her shoulders.
Relief flooded over the Willow
When he saw that
Not only had her skin healed,
But her eyes had healed as well.
Lovingly, the Willow accepted her
Into him and she placed
Her palm knowingly over
His wise trunk.
Then, out from her pocket she pulled a
Baby blue ribbon.
This ribbon was vibrant, alive
And healed.
Her nimble fingers wrapped the new cloth around
The Willow's grateful branch.
Carefully, she fastened it in place
And watched serenely
As it fluttered against the wind.

Erin Lamping

Age: 12, Grade: 7

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Andy Chen

Category: Flash Fiction

Canoeing

Juliet squealed as a butterfly alighted on her tiny nose. I watched as her pudgy baby hands swiped at the gorgeous creature, and as the butterfly fluttered away. We were gliding down the river in an old canoe, enjoying the weather and avoiding the bustling city as much as possible. I knew this river like the back of my hand, as I had been here many times with my friends Robin and Violet, both whom I have known for seven years, since I was six. Spotting a sandbar up ahead, I pulled our boat to shore. I figured we would have to be home soon, so I decided to take the rapids to get home more quickly.

I strapped my one-year old sister, Juliet, into her baby carrier, which I then tightly secured to my chest. We shoved off and headed for the rapids. I maneuvered the canoe with expertise through the first part, but something looked different. I jumped when I realized I had taken a wrong turn. A small waterfall loomed in the distance! I paddled quickly in the other direction, but without success. Juliet shrieked as our canoe was thrown around like a juggling ball, and I lost all control. My mind was racing, thoughts whizzing through my head like bullets, willing time to stop.

Holding Juliet as tight as I could, I felt our canoe drop, pulled down into the churning water below.

Our canoe flipped, throwing us violently into the water. Frantically, I struggled to the surface still holding tight to Juliet. I grasped a nearby branch of an overhanging tree and climbed to safety. A searing pain shot through my arm. Reaching up, I found my hand covered in blood. I must have gouged it on something. I unstrapped Juliet and held her, expecting her to cry, or at least struggle, but she lay still, her chest rising and falling in a slow rhythm.

“Juliet?” I cried. “Juliet?!” She drowsily opened an eye and looked up at me, a stream of blood running down the side of her head. Her left eye looked strange, but I couldn’t pay attention to that now. Tearing off my sleeve, I blotted the gash as she moaned and began to stir. “Come on, J. Stay with me, stay with me,” I pleaded, tears stinging my eyes. After wrapping the makeshift bandage around her head, I called for help as loudly as I could, hoping someone would find us. I felt a twinge of pain in my arm and got dizzy. Crumpling into a helpless heap, I cried. I cried more than I ever had before. Tears and tears and tears were flooding out of my eyes as if they would never stop.

Then, all of a sudden, I heard panicked footsteps behind me. I swiveled around to find my eighteen-year-old brother, Ike, running towards me, calling my name. I shoved Juliet at him.

“Help her! Help her, PLEASE,” I wailed. His brow was furrowed, his eyes a mix of confusion and fear.

“Delilah? What happened?” he said.

“Come on!” I said, and ushered him back to the house, a weakening Juliet in his arms. Jumping into the car with Juliet, Ike started the engine, waving me back into the house. Once inside, I took care of my wounded arm, and awaited Juliet’s return from the hospital.

Now, one year later, as I hold my little sister, I am guilt-ridden as I look at the long, gnarly scar that will always disrupt her face, and as I gaze into her forever unseeing, blank left eye.

Alexandria Latuda

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Flash Fiction

Following the Sun

“Need a ride?” I yelled out the window at my best friend, James. He was walking with a woman --- a woman who was not his wife. She was holding a sunflower from the field next to her. He had picked it for her. He led her up to my window.

“I don’t want to be a burden,” she said, not making eye contact.

“Don’t worry. He’s got nothing better to do,” James said jokingly as he climbed in the car. She laughed and followed him, sitting in the back. “Home, please.” I drove away. I didn’t ask the girl’s name and no one offered to tell it. The car was quiet; the girl was mesmerized by the sunflower field she viewed from the window.

“Don’t you just love sunflowers?” she mused.

“I like sunflower seeds,” James said.

She ignored him. “You know, they turn to follow the sun?”

“Yeah, they’re my favorite flower,” I said. I dropped them off at Jack’s house. He helped the girl out of the car and then she started walking in. Before he walked away I caught him.

“Jack don’t do anything---”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. I wasn’t sure if it was a suggestion or a command, but I nodded. He started to walk away again.

“Aren’t you at least going to give me a tip?” I said facetiously.

“Get some sleep,” he yelled as he walked away.

I tried to. I spent that night looking up at the ceiling. The next morning I saw her leave his house. I spent the morning ignoring this. That is, until James called me. He was having car trouble, and so I drove to pick him up.

“You know there are people you can call who do this for a living, right?” I said as I arrived. He laughed. He climbed in the car and I started driving.

“Just you, no friends?” He was quiet. “Does your wife know?”

He was serious. “No... and I don’t see her finding out.”

“I thought marriage was built on trust and telling the truth.”

“Either tell the truth or lie well.”

“That’s beautiful. Was that in your vows?” He didn’t respond. “No one likes being lied too---”

“No, no one likes *finding out* they’ve been lied to. His look became softer. “Look... she’s never going to leave me; she needs me too much. I’ll be fine.”

I stopped the car. “Get out.”

He got out. “You know, even if she wasn’t with me, she still wouldn’t be with you.” I drove away. I didn’t see him again until I was walking in town and saw James and his wife having dinner. There was a sunflower on the table. He had picked it for her. She listened as he put on a performance. He beamed when she laughed. She had a way of listening that made everything seem infinitely more interesting. I stood there watching them until he noticed me. James shook his head at me through the window. She was so happy, so in love. I nodded and kept walking.

Eventually James and I became friends again and I never brought it up. I don’t know if it got easier to keep the secret or if it just got harder to bring it up. I used to not be able to talk to her, but now we see

each other and laugh. She talks about him, who she thinks he is, and I nod along. I can look her in the eye, but I can't look at sunflowers.

Hayley Leal

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Short Story

Mickey and Lily

It was noon when I rolled into an unwashed flannel. As I put it on, I caught my own eye in the mirror, seeing patchy stubble on my cheeks; and a little drool on the corner of my mouth. At least there were no wrinkles yet; I was *technically* still in my prime. For a moment I thought about picking up my drumsticks, but drinking some booze sounded a little better, so I headed out towards the grocery store. This was the kind of grocery store where ladies wear polka-dot dresses and everyone's smiling which made me feel like there was a pound of maggots squirming between my ribs. When I arrived, I grabbed the neck of the cheapest vodka on the shelf and started to head out. I stopped dead in my tracks - there was this head of blonde hair standing in front of the flower display. It belonged to a young girl in a dress. She stuck out a tiny hand and delicately plucked a voluminous bouquet of flowers from the display. It struck me right in the gut, watching that girl. I stepped over to her.

"Which ones do you think are the prettiest?" She said, holding some pink roses up against the others.

"Uh...I don't know, kiddo- I like the pink ones," I said, studying the display along with her.

"Me too. My mom sends me here every week to get a bouquet of flowers for our dining room table."

I pondered if my mother ever went out of her way to have flowers on the table. It always seemed that there was no room for a vase in the midst of all of the paperwork she always had scattered around. She was a paperwork kind of person.

"You know...maybe I'll get some flowers, too." I said. "You've already got the prettiest color, so which ones are the *second* most pretty?"

She chewed vigorously on her bottom lip trying to decide, leaving a ring of drool when she was done.

"...yellow ones..." her eyebrows were furrowed with concentration.

"I think you're right." I watched my dry knuckles curl over the elegant stems. Within those seconds, the girl had scampered her way to the register. With vodka in one hand and yellow roses in the other, I followed her. She pointed at the bottle of liquor in my hand.

"Is that for a party?"

"Yeah, a one person party." I snickered.

"You must be a loser."

"A loser?" I choked on my spit. "You think I'm a loser! God! A loser..." she was funny, this kid. Nobody made me laugh like that.

"You know, kid, you've really got it made...what are those? Light up sneakers? Look at my grimy chucks. You're what? Ten? And you're already cooler than me."

"My mom picked these out." She shrugged.

Her eyes ticked back and forth as she watched cars whiz past us.

"What are you doing today?" I smiled at her.

"I don't know...maybe I'll watch Spongebob."

"Let's hang out."

"My mom said there's creepers out there...and you're probably an alcoholic." She said, nodding toward the liquor in my hand. She wasn't even scared. She was more grown up than me.

"Do you even know what an alcoholic is?"

"Yeah! It's someone who's always carrying around a bottle of beer when no one's even having a party."

Dad said they're creepy, too."

"Ha!" I cracked up again "What if I *proved* to you that I wasn't an alcoholic?" I said.

She peered at me, waiting for her proof.

I tossed the bottle in the trash and looked at her. It hurt to let that precious bottle go, I'm not made out of money, but she might as well have had a halo around her goddamn head; it was worth it.

"That doesn't count." She schooled me again.

"Sure it does," I plopped my ass on the curb.

She stared at the trash bin for a good thirty seconds until she finally shrugged and flopped right next to me.

"So what's your name?" she asked, sounding much more lax after her big decision.

"Mickey."

"That's like Mickey Mouse!" she lit up, like kids do.

"What's yours?" I smiled.

"Lily. How old are you?"

"Twenty two,"

"Hm. Is it weird being so *old*?"

I know she was a kid, so it hardly counted, but I had never been called old like that. It felt like a slap in the face, because it reminded me of the one thing that the booze was supposed to make me forget. I felt the same hole in my gut that I woke up with that morning.

"Well..." I answered. "I think it's weird that you're ten, what's *that* like?"

"You should know... you've already been ten. Remember?"

"I can't remember what day it is, Lily...honestly."

"You want me to tell you what it's like?" she asked.

"Tell it all."

"Okay...my teacher is named Ms. Mandy and sometimes she'll read us this story book about two frogs after lunch time...." She paused to gather more thoughts, "I think that's my favorite thing out of the whole week.... And- I have my first boyfriend, we played the kissy game on Friday.... My bestest-estest friend is named Riley...."

"The *kissy* game?" I threw a fit laughing again, "I forgot about the kissy game! God, you ten year olds know how to have *real* fun. You know...my school didn't do story time like yours. I kinda wish we did."

"Why?"

"I told you I can hardly remember things...but I remember a little." That was a damn lie, as soon as Lily started babbling off about her little life memories spilled into my mind like blood squirts out of a gash: getting goose-bumps from the cold desks, teachers with wrinkles in between their eyebrows, kids with their faces so far in their books you'd think they'd be eating it for lunch, and if we spoke at all of frogs, it was because we were sticking scalpels in them, not hearing about how they went for a picnic in some storybook.

"It was a private school – real fancy. Why do people act fancy? No one is actually fancy. We're bald gorillas."

She thought that was funny.

Strangely enough, I didn't want to drink myself into oblivion in that moment. Maybe remembering wouldn't be so bad with Lily there. I saw my mother slapping a test with a stupid B on the top on the kitchen table. I saw my father pecking at the keyboard late at night, his neck hovering like a crane. I saw my grandpa, the one who bought me that drum set when I was ten, and then decided to croak on me at sixteen. Finally I saw me, when I was sixteen, with my nose kissing the pages of a mundane textbook and bloodshot eyes. There was nothing in that textbook for me, but I breathed in those words like air into my lungs.

“Can I tell you something?” I said, surprising myself.

“Yeah.” She spoke so sweetly, and I don't think she even meant to.

“I do remember. I didn't really want to remember, that's all...”

“What do you remember?”

“You see...when you grow up, everything gets heavy. What's the heaviest thing you've ever carried in your whole life?”

“One time I tried to lift up my Daddy's car. I told everyone it came off the ground but they thought I was just joking.”

“I believe you.” I nudged her. “You see, it's the feeling you got in your arms with that car but it's in your head and your heart instead. I got so tired that I just let go. I let go of school and my parents let go of me and everything was just gone.” I could see Lily working it all out like a puzzle as I spoke. “My parents were really strict. Think of a robot. Imagine giving a big hug to a robot. It would be sad because robots aren't warm and squishy, you might as well hug a table or something. That's what my parents were to me, and my teachers, and all of the weird kids with glasses at my school...I try to forget about it.”

“Maybe you aren't going to forget about it.”

“Yes I will. I forget all the time.”

“Not right now.”

“Lily...don't ever turn twenty two – don't even turn eleven. Just stay ten.”

“Why should I?”

“Because I'm out of chances. I blew it. Now I just have to wait around for...for I don't even know what...” I felt a catch in my throat. It was the first time that tears had knocked on my door in years. I swallowed them.

“You do *something*.”

“I work, I drink, I eat, I sleep and I drum. I'm nothing. I wish I was like *you*. Look at you.”

“You *drum*?”

“Yeah...my grandpa gave me a drum set when I was ten. It was weird, because I had only ever played proper things like the violin or piano, so the drums made me feel like a rock star. I beat the living daylights out of them. Those drums know me better than any piece of paper I've written on or person I've spoken to, I swear.” I remembered that first moment, the first time I felt rhythm in me stronger than my own heartbeat. The sticks were big and smooth under my little hands.

“He was everything to me back then – my hero. ...See this grass?” I took her teeny wrist in my hand, as gently as I could, and brushed her fingers over the green blades.

“What does it feel like?” I asked.

“Soft...”

I saw my grandfather's pink nose hanging off his face like a bubble, and his sideways smile complete with stained teeth.

“That's how he was. He was soft in his heart, and yet stronger than anyone else.”

“Where is he now?”

“He died. I was sixteen.” I saw him again, this time he was in his coffin, unreachable. My parents never unraveled. No one did. We just sat there like the bricks on a wall, fitting in the little spaces that were cut out for us, never causing scenes. Not even for someone who deserved one hell of a scene. I just stared at him, dead as a doorknob.

Tears came knocking on my eyelids as I remembered, and I let it happen. Lily cried with me. People kept pushing their carts in and out of the store, cars kept pulling in and out of the lot, time kept ticking by, but for Lily and I everything stopped.

“I wish your grandpa was here, talking to us.”

“Me too.”

Then she was hugging me, and it was soft. It felt like the realest thing I had ever experienced. I wrapped my arm around her. The buzzing in my head stopped. Everything stopped. Our ages melted away and we felt more like yellow roses than anything else. I took Lily's hand, and I held it like the collection of cells and tissues in her palm mattered more than anything else ever had, and to me, they did.

"I wish I could come and be a kid with you." I sighed.

"Me too."

April Ma

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Lisa Bauman

Category: Critical Essay

The Fallacy and Corruption of the Two-Party System

There is endless ambiguity over what the American Dream stands for—but one thing all can agree on is that the American Dream shapes our democracy that is ruled by the people. Since the Declaration of Independence was published, Americans have struggled with this issue, especially in balancing power between themselves and authority. Thus, democratic elections were born. However, these elections are becoming less and less democratic. The 2016 presidential election cycle exemplified the internal conflict of picking a single person, from only two options, to represent the free world. With increasing dissatisfaction of voters comes the rise of third parties. Millennials who favored Bernie Sanders may flock to Green Party’s nominee, Jill Stein, and Tea Party centrists who dislike what the GOP represents may choose Libertarian Party nominee, Gary Johnson. Voting out of spite and not for belief has fractured the election cycle, and this fracturing stems from America’s two-party system. Indeed, the American dream of a perfect democracy is rooted in our ability to reform this flawed two-party system.

Critics of the two-party system condemn the decreasing productivity. The legislative output that drives this nation forward also what keeps the American Dream alive—the idea of a progression for equality and opportunity for all is a crucial step forward for achieving general prosperity and peace. However, since the advent of the two-party system, there has been decreasing cooperation between the two main parties. According to a Pew Research survey conducted in early 2016, 36 percent of Republicans thought that “liberal” policies were “a threat to the nation’s well-being.” Approximately 27 percent of Democrats felt the same way about conservatives. Although this stratification is often rooted in miscommunication or stubbornness, not which policies are good or bad, it has led to very clear barriers between the two parties, some unwilling to work with each other, solely based on one’s political affiliation. This antagonism has put both parties in a gridlock. The messages preached by each party have also become increasingly extreme, even garnering more support by demonizing their opponent. Inevitably, we must ask: how can America progress if we cannot heal the entrenched ideological divide that bars us from improving that shape our lives?

With increased awareness of domestic and international issues, comes increased attention from the public towards American policies and legislations. This ushers in the siding of parties, in turn, allowing for extreme Democrats or Republicans to gain momentum. Yet again, the American people are cajoled into compromising their beliefs for a “greater good,” and yet again, bitterness grows in the voter population. This virulence is more than warranted, however. Most Americans are becoming vocal about the dissatisfactory performance by the government as a public servant, and according to a Gallup poll from 2016, 80 percent of surveyed public disapproved of Congress. This may seem like a strikingly large percentage, but this is in fact, an improvement from last November, where the disapproval rate was 86 percent. The same poll also revealed that 60 percent of those people wanted new political parties. Progress is and will continue to be inadvertently barred from occurring if we keep this system. As a result of the continuation of this broken system, seemingly democratic processes become more corrupt, and decisions are skewed in favor of politicians, as opposed to voters, ultimately undermining the entire purpose of American democracy. This slow and steady paradigm shift has poisoned the American dream. Two-party politics actively destroys the public’s political representation. It is the

partisan gerrymandering, the manipulation of Congressional rules, the refusal of an offer simply because the offerer is of the opposing party—these political machinations fuel widespread hatred for politics. The ideas and epistemology that created the two-party system is so deeply entrenched in our society that often media is unable to address issues without using a “liberal versus conservative” framework on an issue, and every argument becomes token Democrat versus token Republican. The disgust for the status quo is understandable, and explains why many people flock towards “independent” candidates like Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, both of whom are considered to be on the farther ends of the political spectrum. At best, many can consider the two as radical. Party stratification poses the greatest risk to American democracy, as it threatens to tip over the great wall we have built to block out anarchy. Similarly, addressing every issue through only two approaches, one liberal and one conservative, destructs America’s ability to truly address and solve a problem. There is no way we can decide the future of our countries if our solutions are bound to two extremes. This false dichotomy divides the nation and impedes us from reaching for the freedom of the American dream.

Despite the many structural flaws and internal consequences, there are some upsides to the two-party system. Since there are always only two candidates with realistic chances of winning, it may seem impossible to a voter to decide between “the lesser of two evils.” But this can actually simplify the voter’s decision. This also means that the media coverage will mostly be focused around the two candidates, thus presenting more information for the undecided voters, and doing more work for them, rather than said voters needing to research presidential candidates for themselves. This, in turn, could result in a larger voter participation rate. However, even if the cap of two choices *does* assist voters in their decision, the limitation itself narrows American voters’ abilities to broaden their perspective and knowledge of politics. This amputation of America’s political identity and education not only risks integral voting processes, but also further deconstructs the American dream towards a unified democracy.

As Americans concerned for the future of the country, we are obligated to ask: is the two-party system simply a disadvantage to the status quo, or is there an alternative we can engage in? Within the democratic party are many people with varying views; centrist Democrats and those who favor European socialism many not feel comfortable belonging to a monolith of “democrats.” There are also those who consider themselves fiscally conservative, yet socially liberal. These libertarian-leaning individuals similarly would clash with the Christian, and largely Evangelical segment of the Republican party they are often grouped with. Alan Krinsky, a political analyst, suggests that there be a four-party system, encompassing Libertarians, Social Conservatives, Liberal Leftists, and Centrists. Ideas like Krinsky’s lead critics to point out that multiple parties cannot exist where there are only two political groups, but many countries recognize that two parties aren’t democratic. For example, both Germany and Australia reformed their elections to include six parties, and countries like Israel and Italy have even more. The biggest shortcomings to theories like Krinsky’s is the current winner-take-all elections in places like the House of Representatives. Reform towards more proportional representation and political offices chosen by the people is the only way to take that vital step towards achieving what America only dreams to be.

When it comes to the American Dream, the bottom line to keeping our voices free is protecting American democracy. The right to choose our representation in the current so-called “democratic” elections is being suppressed by the deeply embedded two-party system ideals in society. While some may argue adherence to certain documents like the Bill of Rights or the Constitution holds truer, the inability to make vital policies must be addressed first.

Sophia Marusic

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Missy Simonds

Category: Short Story

Here

Finn crumples himself on the other end of the couch. Three sunken cushions slouch between us. His eyes are glassy, cracked marbles rimmed in pink. I imagine plucking them from his skull, letting them roll around in my hand, trading them on a playground for chewing gum.

Ava?

His voice sounds like cobwebs. I don't look up.

About Michael...I...

The letters of my father's name roll off his tongue like cut glass, the inside of his mouth is raw and red. He wipes his nose and inhales into his sleeve.

We'll have to bury him.

I know.

The ice cream in my bowl is a soft soup, it cries small white tears. I stand and put it in the sink. Finn stares at me, his nose dripping, unraveling.

I turn to go upstairs.

Here is what is like for your father to tell you that he is attracted to men. Or, not even that. You will learn that later. Here is what it is like for your father to tell you that he is leaving.

You are twelve and he picks you up from school four minutes late. You climb in the car and he hands you greasy French fries and a vanilla milkshake and drives you to the park. You sit on the edge of the fountain, next to a bust of someone known for dying, and run your oily fingers over their blank oxidized eyes. Your small hands smell like pennies when you're done, taste like salt, are sticky with ice cream. He says he can't be happy in this life. There are things about love you just won't understand. Sometimes you just grab all the little pieces and even though they fit together, they fit together crooked and wrong. What he's trying to tell you, he supposes, is that he won't be around anymore.

You throw up into the fountain.

You want him to say Sweetheart, I love you
still, or, Darling, everything will be fine
or, Ava, you will always be important
to me

Instead, he hands you a napkin to wipe the vomit from your lips and says
I'm sorry.

My room is stale with day old shadows when I wake up.

No one has said what is going to happen to me. I haven't asked. I try to call my mother again, but her voicemail has been full for the past few months. I listen to her recorded voice, press the phone tight to my ear until I can hear nothing else. My tongue is thick against my teeth.

In the bathroom, I run the bath and thrust my fingers into the stream until my skin screams red. The steam coils over the mirrors. I climb into the tub without undressing.

The water fills my sweatshirt and jeans, soaks into the fabric and grounds me to the white porcelain. It makes my body solid. Warmth creeps into my skin in stages, sealed beneath my clothes; I am heavy, I am there.

Under the surface, the light makes thousands of haloes. They fill my nose, my mouth, my ears, glaze over my eyes. I pretend I am Galatea, shaking off my stone, and seeing the world for the first time. I release my breath in shaky bubbles and count to ten over and over again.

Here is what it is like to watch your father leave. Your family is already a dichotomy of two, but now he has returned for the rest of his clothes.

Your mother left for the grocery store four hours ago, and you imagine her sitting in the car in the parking lot, sweating and listening to public radio. In the passenger seat, the milk gets hot.

She won't return until you call her and tell her he is gone.

Your father's hands are familiar hands. They have held you, fed you, brushed your hair. Now they are helping him leave you. They fold his clothes neatly on his dresser, but then crumple them into the suitcase. You are silent. You sit on the bed with his socks. You are watching each starched shirt wrinkle in succession.

When he starts to zip up the suitcase, you thrust your hands into it and grab his wool sweater. You and your mother bought it for him three Christmases ago, and you know he will never leave without it, so you run and fold yourself under your bed. He calls to you. You can see only his feet, and they take three faltering steps in your direction and then stop.

The front door clicks shut and a car starts in the driveway.

You remain under the bed, nose pressed on hardwood, inhaling dust, tasting dust, until the tissues of your lungs become dark, scratchy wool.

The water is cold. The tips of my fingers are grey and swollen and wrinkled.

I emerge shivering and dripping, little pools of water forming around my ankles. The only sound is the hollow moan of the soap suds spiraling down the drain. It feels like the house is yawning around me.

I open the door in degrees, watching the light spill from the bathroom and fan along the floor.

Creak.

Lighter.

Creak.

Nothing.

Creak.

Lighter.

Creak.

Finn.

I swing the door completely open, his face flushes from his cheeks back into his hairline.

I... I heard the water running and...and I wanted to make sure you were alright.

My lips quiver against my chattering teeth. A steady stream of water runs from the hood of my sweatshirt to the hardwood floor. Drip drip

drip.

Well.

He jams his fingers into his feathery hair.

Drip. Drip drip.

His skin is so white it is almost blue, and it looks like there's a rash reddening on the back of his hands.

Drip drip.
I don't say anything.
Drip.
An ocean is at my feet.
Drip.
I was just making sure—
Drip drip.
He shakes his head furiously as if trying to dislodge something.

I...I...just..., his voice catches.

Drip. I'm afraid he might cry. I don't want to see him cry.
Wordlessly, I move towards my room, careful not to brush against him; he's still shaking his head. I close the door behind me, but keep it imperceptibly cracked, and crouching in my wet clothes, I watch him. He stares at my door the way I see him stare at the shadows he can't quite figure out how to paint.
He walks toward the room at the other end of the hall. For a moment, it seems as if he will go in, his fingers poised stiffly on the doorknob.
My nose bumps against my door trying to get a better look and it rattles in its frame, a low thump. He glances back and shakes his head, walking away and flexing his fingers as if the handle burned him. He stuffs his hand back in the pocket of his bathrobe and turns off the hallway lights. I watch him take a towel from the bathroom and slowly wipe up my puddle in the dark, moving his arms in sweeping circles. I pull back from the door.
Still sopping, I wrap myself tightly in the blankets from my bed and press myself against the wall, alternating layers of cold and hot and wet and dry. The gentle creak of the floorboards echo in this cavernous darkness. I imagine his tears falling against the wood; drip drip
drip.

Here is what it is like to watch your mother implode. But she calls it "self-realizing."
She tells you that her life is a string of empty pictures. She tells you that she is a flower and this is her second blossoming. She is choosing to be lonely, no, not lonely. She is choosing to be alone, and she is starting to become. Your house is suddenly full of books, of handwoven baskets, of kale based cooking of various ethnic origins. And then she is leaving to "find something that she has lost, and lose something that she is not." She's going to Australia. She's going to Tibet and to the mountains and to Spain. She thinks she could learn from being a migrant worker somewhere. You are quiet when she says these things.

The morning she leaves, the sun rises slowly like purple butter. You want her to say
Ava, my light, come with me
or, Ava, I don't want you to feel alone
or, Ava, you are my most important piece
Instead, she takes her bags from you and says Ava
be good for your father.
She doesn't look back at you when she drives away. You think she will later, so you sit and watch the street as it grows full with violet light. You will wait for her because you can. She says you can.

I shed my blankets and wet clothes, my stomach yawning and gnawing. Like a half-baked moth emerging too soon from its cocoon, I stand, naked, in the dark.
I peer through the crack in the door.
Finn is nowhere to be seen.
I wander to the staircase, and dangle the front half of my body over the banister, listening. The water

downstairs is running, somewhere. The cold, steel railing presses into the soft flesh of my stomach. I can hear Finn humming to himself, something slow, something sad.

I hoist myself right side up and count my steps back down the hall until I'm at the door.

I run my fingers over the worn, brass doorknob. I press my face to the paneled wood. It is hollow against my cheek and for the first time, I am afraid. Afraid of what lurks in the stillness. I twist the handle and slide into the dark.

I feel as if I have broken something sacred.

The bed is made, white and unadorned. The side where my father slept is slightly messier, more wrinkled, and I picture them making this bed together; Finn, meticulous and neat, my father, hurried and manic.

I press my face into the pillow; I breathe in the scent of something deep and sharp, evergreen and fine leather and a little bit of lemon, and suddenly I am shaking all over because this is the scent of Finn, who is full of bed making and toothpaste brands and shared pillows and how my father like his socks folded, and here I am breathing it in, empty.

I walk to the closet. I see my father's loafers unmatched in a pile, like huddled, lonely mice. I see Finn's belts suspended evenly on the wall, each thin, leather snake uniform with the rest. There is a row of starched white shirts and I can tell which ones were my father's by the way the collar is creased.

I knock every belt to the floor.

I tear every round, white button from the shirts.

I want Finn to know I was here first.

I snatch my father's wool sweater from the shelf and rip it over my head. The sleeves hang far past my wrists and the armpits come down to my ribs. It is scratchy against my skin, and I try to pull inside myself, a shell of a girl inside a man's sweater.

Here is what it is like to live with your father after he chooses to leave.

You sleep in a room that smells like chemicals because he painted and repainted and repainted again because he couldn't remember your favorite color and was too afraid to ask.

He settles on a shade called "Butterscotch Tempest."

You wait for him to ask you to do something before you move or breathe or blink. You clean up after yourself, you barely unpack your things, you are silent, you are contained. You are a guest. You are a ghost. This is not your home. This is not where you belong. You do not fit in this new life that drapes itself across your father's shoulders.

You hold your knees close to your chest on your bedspread that smells like spearmint and stick your fingers into the soft paint.

You meet his new friend, who belongs in this house more than you do. He has hair like feathers and paints watercolors and makes grilled cheese and is closer to your age than your father's but never seems to leave.

They kiss in front of you and you pretend it is okay. You have become good at pretending. Remember, you are a ghost now. You are an image of a girl.

You listen to your father tell you that he is in love with Finn. You think he does not remember that your turtle was named Finn, but you had to give it to the neighbors before you came to live with him.

Finn is sitting at the kitchen counter, a towel across his shoulders.

His head is freshly shaven, bleeding in a few places, his hair is spread in front of him. His scalp is sickly, a sallow ivory that looks like the underside of a blind freshwater fish. Where his eyebrows were, are now mere facial ridges covered in electric white skin. Beneath them, his marble eyes have sunken lower.

I picture him running the razor over his skull, slowly, methodically, with his artist fingers. Him,

plucking his feathery fuzz with a knife, the way you would from a bled-out bird. Carving away his eyebrows, trying to become cold, unfeeling, beautiful marble.

The clumped hair seems to be alive. A pelt of something that shouldn't be hunted.

He turns as I enter, and his eyes widen at the sight of the sweater, but he says nothing. I say nothing about his head. Instead, I unfurl my fingers and deposit the buttons next to the hair, giving it tiny, white eyes. Finn does not acknowledge them.

I stand behind him for a few moments, watching him arrange his hair against the dark marble. Fluttery piles of faded blonde find form and line so that it looks like a wildfire, or something taking flight. He sprinkles in the buttons like pearls.

He doesn't breathe, for when he does, little flurries of hair rise and fall from their position. His lithe, white fingers fuss over every strand until I can see the face of my father against the black surface.

I grab his wrist before he can finish shaping the mouth of hair. It looks like a furry wound.

The tendons in his arm tighten, and for a moment, I am uncertain whether he will pull away or strike me.

With the sleeve of his other arm, he wipes away his creation, and my father's face is reduced again to shredded strands. I release him, and he lowers his head to the table, little dots of blood trickling a path from the nicks in his scalp to the wrinkles on the back of his neck.

I make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I cut it into quarters, the triangle kind. I pour some milk, and watch condensation bead up along the sides of the glass. While Finn's head is burrowed in his arms, I sweep all of his hair off the table and into a sandwich bag and place it next to his shoulder. He doesn't move.

I sit two stools away from him and begin to eat, each mouthful tasting chalky and dry. I want to prod Finn, and tell him about the Summerian afterlife, where even the kings serve the gods in a house of dust, eating dust, and breathing dust, and coating themselves in dust until there's nothing left of them but dust for all eternity.

I think I feel sorry for him.

Here is what it is like to watch your father's boyfriend receive the call.

You are tucked into the faded armchair, the only place you have claimed your own in the past two years. He is hunched over his desk, smoothing paints with his fingers.

The phone is ringing. You know he wants you to answer it, but he will never ask you to do anything, and you will never do anything without being asked.

He wipes his fingers on his denim shirt that he wears every time he paints. You like the predictability of him, the stability, and the way the colors on his shirt all run together. You will never tell him that.

He answers the phone and there is static silence. He is nodding.

You want to tell him that the person on the other end cannot see his nodding.

He hangs up the phone. He is still nodding. There is no color on his shirt that can describe the one on his face.

You want him to stop nodding.

You break your promise of never being the first to speak to him, you say, Finn?

He nearly stops nodding. He looks at you, and his eyes are hollow.

He says something about a car accident.

He says something about confirming a body.

He does not break, but tears begin to run freely down his face. You speculate that he is not breathing in this moment. You speculate that the world is certainly not breathing in this moment.

You do not cry. You are a ghost, a stained glass image of a girl, you are good at pretending.

You want to tell him that there's no reason to go, you know it is your father, you know he is dead, you know because you can feel yourself being completely alone in the world.

I make another peanut butter sandwich.

Finn doesn't move, and I watch the blood coagulate on his scalp, forming watery, crimson blossoms with scabbed over centers.

There is a silence like being underwater and we move accordingly. Everything lags.

A few times, I consider saying something to him, but the sweater tightens around my chest and my lungs grow thick in the wool. His hair in the bag next to him shudders as if it is breathing.

I brush the crumbs from my sweater and put my plate in the sink, turn on the faucet, saturate the sponge with dish soap. I used to always do the dishes with my father. When I was little, he would fill one of our pasta pots with bubbles, and I would play in the lather while he cleaned. He would take a handful of the white foam and smear it on my face like a beard and I would laugh and laugh.

I suddenly can't feel the water running over my hands. I look at them beneath the faucet and they look cold and stiff and dead.

I spin away from the sink and hurl the plate towards the wall. It wavers in its flight and hits beneath the window. The porcelain screams when it cracks. Bone white chips bury themselves in a graveyard at the baseboard.

Finn looks up from his elbows, looks at me, looks at the wreckage. His light eyes are fringed with foggy pink. His mouth is red and slitted. He looks like a skull.

I watch his lips, wait for them to grimace, wait for them to yell, tell me to clean it up.

We've surfaced now and we're both gasping for air, testing our bodies again as we move in real time.

Finn stands, watches me watching him, and picks up the jelly from the counter. He tests the weight of the mason jar in his hand, flexes his wrist, and heaves it where my plate hit.

The sound of the glass shattering is violently delicate. Raspberry preserves weep down the wall, bleeding between the glittering shards.

I stand next to Finn. I pick up the peanut butter and fling it. He hurls the cutting board. I lob the knife.

We fill ourselves with the horrible noise, painting the wall, littering the floor.

When we are done, we are panting, we are the destroyers and the destroyed. My face is wet. Finn notices.

He turns to me, says

Ava?

My body quivers. He says again,

Ava?

My breath runs from me. I do not look at him.

Ava.

Here is what it is like to tell your dead father's boyfriend, what it is like to unravel yourself in front of him.

He is quiet and your face is wet.

You don't know exactly what you say, other than you can't stop saying it. You tell him about your father, your mother, the french fries, the sweater, the car driving away, and the paint. When you start talking, everything gets very big for a moment and then very very small.

When you are done, it is quiet. The air is naked. You don't know what you want him to say, you wish you had never told him anything at all. He makes you a glass of water in a clear plastic cup.

He sits down next to you, watches you drink the water, and says,
Ava, I am here.

Lauryn Masters

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Marnie Jenkins

Category: Journalism

Creative Outlets

On any given day, the high school is bustling with activity. Music floats down the hall from the band and choir rooms as the sound of sneakers hitting hardwood echos from the gym. Posters hang from lockers as evidence of club meetings and activities, while teachers lecture in classrooms. All of these things seem to define an average high school, but what sets Platte County High School apart is the creativity displayed from students outside of the halls.

Many students partake in artistic activities on their own time; activities ranging from traditional drawing and painting to rap to photography. Through these activities, students are able to express themselves in a way that influences those around them. Senior and studio artist Rylie Lawver wants to draw attention to issues important to her through her drawings.

“Art to me is really just a place to go when I need a break from the real world,” Lawver said. “It’s also a way to tell others and show others things that are important to me and things that I want to change in society.”

While changing the world may not be an easy task, students involved in the creative arts are able to contribute a piece of themselves to society. Through his photography, junior Luke Hodson strives to convey a message to which his audience can connect.

“Looking at a picture is a one-way ticket back to the moment you took it,” Hodson said. “I think that’s really important. I feel like photos capture so much without words. You can tell that a picture says a thousand words and some pictures just kind of speak to you.”

Creating something that speaks to a specific audience takes more time than many would expect.

“Every spare moment I’m not working or doing schoolwork, I’m doing art,” Lawver said. “It varies for each piece, but on one piece it could be up to 15 hours outside of school or more.”

Students know that if they want to create something amazing the time commitment is worth it. Junior and rapper Rocky Chambers says this time commitment directly correlates with a change in her character.

“It has inspired me to be a better person and to know that I have to work hard to get something that I want to achieve,” Chambers said.

The hard work these students put in now is setting them up for a future of creativity.

“In a perfect world I would love to get my degree and major in videography with a minor in photography,” Hodson said. “Maybe while I’m in school get a job as an amateur photographer or a paid

internship or something like that, just to get my portfolio built up a little bit.”

Lawver plans to build her portfolio through college as well, getting a Master of Fine Arts degree.

“I want to go to the Kansas City Art Institute and get my MFA,” Lawver said. “I would either be a professor, or maybe a K-12 teacher, or possibly even a graphic designer. I just want to keep my options pretty open.”

While colleges are setting students up with great opportunities to thrive in their respective arts, the internet is allowing them to create their success without a degree.

“Honestly, if I didn’t have to, I wouldn’t go to school for photography,” Hodson said. “I feel like you can make it pretty far with just your know-how. Especially with the internet nowadays you don’t really need a degree.”

Through self-taught aspects of their craft, the students are able to set goals and achieve them based on their own morale.

“My goal is to make it as far as I can,” Chambers said. “I think rapping would be a cool career, and I would be able to collaborate with artists that I look up to.”

In order to achieve their goals, some of the teenage artists strive to find their distinct style and create something original.

“I think it’s really important to find your own style because if you’re happy with your art and your art is depicting you as a person, then other people will be able to see that,” Lawver said.

Often, creating something original means breaking out of one’s shell.

“In this day and age when everyone has a phone or a camera at their disposal it kind of puts people like myself in a position where you have to get really creative with your shots if you want to make something different,” Hodson said. “If you want to make something unique you have to get out of your comfort zone and adapt to the situation that you’re in.”

The different situations and opportunities the creative arts bring to students continue to let them express themselves in a way that is anything but stereotypical. Art allows students to open new doors and leave their mark on this universe.

“Art to me is just the possibility of showing people your own world and changing the world because of that,” said Lawver.

Ida May

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Central High School, Cape Girardeau, MO

Educator: Mickey Heath

Category: Short Story

Glass

Sixteen sets of narrow, steel-framed doors hissed open. Automatically, repeating a customary routine, her weight shifted up the stairs. It was easier not to look, and she knew where to place her feet. She stepped up.

One. Two. Three.

And then came a disorienting array of fractured faces and tinted colors. Disconnected lips sliced across her vision. Eyes refracted to mosaic-tiled orbs. Noses plunged into and out of their usual planes, distorted into Picasso cubes stacked haphazardly. Smiles beamed in corners, some flipped upside down; others gently arching in distant maritime undulations. Hands crossed at the knuckles. Fingers drummed the armrests several panels away. The square windows cracked and bent into a multitude of fragmented panes. Space itself converged at the center and fled outward in zig-zags—arbitrary fractal patterns. A jumbled, kaleidoscopic vortex surrounded her.

Sepia tinged the hue of everything she saw. The monochromatic world did little, though, to soften the barrage of fractured sights. She pushed her sunglasses up the bridge of her nose. The sole accomplishment of the tinted curtain was safety. When she had to open her eyes, it simplified visions for her. It filtered out, if only partially, the cacophony and discordance she would otherwise have to make sensible. And it was a shield, too. For she had discovered in inconceivable wonderment that everyone else only saw one set of doors instead of sixteen. What did it matter that her sunglasses were incongruous with her rain-soaked rubber boots? Life was easier this way.

A gentle mechanical sigh swung the doors closed behind her. She closed her eyes. What bliss it was to be free from the visual onslaught. Navigating by memory, she walked to an open seat, her boots squishing transient, dewy footprints into the floor of the bus, quacking methodically over to a slab of worn gray leather. The soothing chatter and rustling of other patrons enveloped her. A click as a woman snapped shut her powder compact. Hurried stamping of a man behind her trying to shake off the water. Muffled adolescent laughter and popping camera shutters. Pages crinkling in an ancient, rediscovered book. Muddied phone conversations blurring into one another.

She relaxed into the seat. The chill of the outside weather emanated from the window next to her cheek. But the world made sense again. No more scrambled parallel sequences; here was the present, flowing lazily along the tide of time, no longer glinting off the face of a cut and polished diamond—just one flat sheet of perception for her to absorb.

With a loud wheeze, the bus rolled forward. She careened with the motion before her muscular and skeletal systems had time to check the effects of inertia. She was jounced along the potholed roads, swaying inside a thin aluminum can adrift on choppy seas. The rumbling journey down Lock Street

was predictable, every motion rehearsed millions of times before, never deviating from routine.

~ ~ ~

“Good night, Bedelia.” Tender, motherly hands tucked her in with three folds of the cover.

One. Two. Three. Just like routine.

But unlike the norm, sounds of aberrant firecrackers blistered the mid-September night. Thick, hot-headed firecrackers.

~ ~ ~

“Don’t be afraid, Bedelia. Look.” A huge, calloused hand wrapped around her small, chubby fingers. The cape of safety guided her hand toward the dormant firecracker.

A spark as the lighter met the fuse. Then chortling crackles.

She jumped back when the first fireflies shot out at the speed of light. She hid behind a large, khaki-clothed tree trunk.

“Bedelia, look. Isn’t this fun?”

“Go on, Bedelia.” A comforting voice with tender hands nudged her forward.

She peeked out from behind the great, safe leg. Green and blue sparks flew as the firework spluttered on the ground.

“Not like the Olympics, but this is great, huh?”

She walked tentatively to an unlit firework.

“Let’s try another, whatcha say?”

Her eyes lit up.

~ ~ ~

The room lit up.

A deafening explosion of metal and gun smoke. Abrasive yells splintered her ears as shards of glass rained down on her exposed arms. Another yell, pained this time and not angry. She opened her eyes, and they shattered like the gaping window beside her. The comforting voice would speak no more. Tears and blurry lines sliced across her vision in the indigo canvas of the night. Stars spilled their glittery inkwells; specks of color floated in the corner of her eyes. Sharp, jagged lines etched themselves indelibly into the thin film now smeared with tears. Fractured, cleft into a million pieces.

Her voice joined the wail of the siren, a double-edged scythe that spun out from the epicenter of the

shredded glass and shattered lead shell, from the pinpoint of the beginning of the webbed fractures that would last a lifetime.

~ ~ ~

She tucked her arms in close to her sides as she glided off the bus. She opened her eyes again and looked down the wobbly pier hovering spectrally over the misty lake. There, to the side, the creaking, rusted Ferris wheel stood still, a snapshot as it paddled somberly through the air. What had it been like in a bygone lifetime? Spidery rails and crooked beams collapsed outward from the central rivet. Giant metal flakes dangled off the weather-worn limbs; the acid-eroded leaves hung tenuously from brittle branches. She saw it as though it had passed through a corrugated, tesseract-pockmarked sieve. In her world, great structures rose without grounded support; pieces singularly levitated high above the ground. Nothing was connected; reality was suspended in her shattered vision.

Her mind spun, teetered on the verge of vertigo. She commanded the blissful shutters to drape once again over her eyes.

The gentle, droning drizzle pattering on Lock Street wrapped around her. Indistinct murmurs and marketplace bustling colored the background. Hungry pigeons squawked. Splashes of busy feet rippled, one after the other. It was a typical rainy day.

But then, a soft cooing rang in her ears. Not from a bird. It was a watery whistle. Tones, music, skated across the damp chilly air. They sang with single notes and a tapestry of unspoken melodies.

Her feet turned from the path she had traversed innumerable times in the past. She left the crowded sidewalk for the gates of the Ferris wheel. The music bent in curves, lifting and sinking with joy and sorrow, with a feeling she couldn't quite place. It rose above her and carpeted the ground beneath her. It pushed her forward at her back and hummed with longing in front of her.

Soon, she stood at the foot of the Ferris wheel, soaking in the sounds, internalizing the lingering vibratos.

“How are you today?”

She opened her eyes when the music stopped. Facing her, a young woman with soft, feathery hair—an empathetic softness that could not be hardened even by the cracked shards of her vision—rested her twenty crystallized fingers over a broken field of water-filled glass cups.

“That was lovely.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I appreciate that.”

The lips moved in separated, shifted pieces, each with its own magnification.

“I haven’t heard you before. Do you normally play here?”

A shaking head trailed and multiplied across her visual fragments.

“Sure is a first time for everything.”

Drumming raindrops filled the ensuing silence.

The musician said, “If you don’t mind my asking, why are you wearing sunglasses on this fine cloudy day?”

“I suppose, perhaps, for the same reason that you’re out here playing music on this jolly rainy day,” she replied.

The musician laughed. “I promise you I’m not usually this crazy.” Her bemused expression reflected off the fragmented jewels of a thousand chandeliers.

“What is it like, to play music in the rain?”

“Liberating, calming, I suppose. You might imagine it, understand it, but before today I never really *knew*.”

She looked up at the Ferris wheel, frozen in jumbled tumble, and she turned away. “Not really for the same reason then.”

“Reason for what?”

“Why I’m wearing these.” She touched the dark lenses obscuring her eyes.

“Why, then?”

The words escaped, a breath upon the air, carried by the invisible wings that had carried the music to her. “To protect and disguise my shattered eyes.”

“What do you mean?”

“You wouldn’t know what it’s like.”

The musician touched one of the glass cups, releasing a single, sustained note. “I can imagine what it’s like. I can understand how the world must appear when you’re looking at it through broken glass.”

She turned to face the musician again. A chorus of warbling, dainty notes resumed their diaphanous echo.

Barely audible through the haze of the rain, she heard: “Your ‘self’ is contained in you. My ‘self’ is contained in me. But when we walk together in consciousness, through awareness, a greater, transcendental self is created. I can understand.”

She tucked her sunglasses on top of her head, and because she understood what it was like to play music in the rain, she walked with the musician down Lock Street, even as the musician continued to waltz her fingers across the tops of the water-filled wine glasses at the foot of the Ferris wheel.

Ida May

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Central High School, Cape Girardeau, MO

Educator: Jennifer Weiss

Category: Poetry

Down by the river

Down by the river,
a chainmail of aqua scales,
a jewel-toned giver,
a dragon's swaying tail,
cotton pearls the horizon,
Breathes its way downstream,
as steamboats march—a herd of bison—
along the Missouri-Illinois seam.
Clamors and chatter melt—
laughing freshwater branches—
to feed the great Mississippi belt
Winding by cabins and ranches.
and two iron horses
Rear from opposite shores,
Singing in their aerial courses
a song of half-finished lore.

Down by the river,
a smear spitting green,
a bubbling liver,
an ochre eel of unctuous sheen,
Dark wool swathes the eye—
spins out from concrete towers—
as engines roar in artificial night,
Stampeding in myopic glower.
Pipes belch muddy paste—
Rumbling legs of bruised water—
to buoy the centipede drowning in waste
in its crawl past factories gathered
around the welded embrace
of two iron horses
Bridging, leaping, over the face
that cries beside coal-fired forces.
They collide, stand,
Race invisibly against time—
against the concrete-encased hands
toiling amidst grime.
They challenge the legs
of the centipede coughing below

to their mane-tossing speed renege
and to above their freed majesty flow.
They eye the glistening stallion
just starting to step out
from the stables of a new battalion
farther down the river's route.

Down by the river,
a stained, corrugated wire,
a misty-eyed shiver,
a stretched, deflated tire,
Two bowed, rusted horses look
upon the silent concrete towers
now streaked by eroding, acidic hooks
of lonely, drenching showers.
weather-beaten tears
Forever scar the cheeks
of brick fists that leer
with empty eyes through the weeks.
wrinkled hands float listlessly
across the rough stone walls,
Etching in the faces indelibly
the loss to all.
hollow, echoic clanging drifts—
ghostly sighs from the past—
to accompany the river as it shifts
down the winding, steel-dotted mast.
but a great new stallion leaps,
Sailing between the shores,
Outrunning the ancient two-horse heap
that mournfully stretches one time more.

Down by the river,
a ribbon of dust,
a turbid, tight-lipped quiver,
a serpent of distrust,
soybeans quilt the land,
while corn guard its keep,
leaving the river to quietly reprimand
the tear-stained stone blocks in sleep.
now, a single horse dashes
between the Mississippi's shores,
Flying to heal freedom's gashes
And rear, unvanquished, above the war.

Ida May

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Central High School, Cape Girardeau, MO

Educator: Mickey Heath

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

To Solve a Rubik's Cube

He twiddled the pencil around his fingers and looked up from his books to the narrow shelf over his head. A neat row of various Rubik's cubes sat: a four-by-four, one that looked like a Mondrian painting, another that looked like those infinity lamps they sell at the mall, all sorts of variations of the classic puzzle, a collection amassed over six years. His Grandma had bought them for him—out of love, pity, generosity, or a mixture of the three. The original, though, was absent from his collection; it was hiding and collecting dust where he had shoved it under his bed when they first arrived at Grandma's.

"You can't come to my graduation, can you?" his sister's muffled voice was on the verge of tears in the next room.

A pause in the silent winter.

"Why did you have to do these things? Why? You know no one at college or at work looks at me the same way anymore."

Turner laid down his pencil and clenched his fists. He reached on the shelf for the octahedron variation he had just gotten for his sixteenth birthday. He scrambled it and looked intently, memorizing the layout of the colored pieces. Then, he closed his eyes and began to spin the pieces back into place.

"No. Only Turner and Grandma will be there. Grandma doesn't know where Mom is either."

Click, click, click.

"I'm done. With you under house arrest and Mom God-knows-where... That's it. I'm done. I don't expect anything anymore."

Click. The last piece. Turner replaced the finished puzzle to the shelf. He sat briefly and then jumped up, bubbling with resentment. He grabbed his jacket.

"Grandma, I'm going to the store around the block." He wrenched the creaky door open.

A half-moon lay cradled by the stars and clouds. Indigo velvet blanketed the world.

He pulled on the store door. A rusty bell dinged. In the flickering light, Rick paused in his inventory cataloging and said automatically, "Can I help you?"

"No, thanks. I'm just looking."

The extent of their communication had simmered down to a couple of terse, polite necessities.

Turner roamed the small selection of shelves and displays. The old book bags, dog-eared books, and miscellaneous thrift goods imparted a feeling of comfort and settled-in peace.

In the corner, something caught his eye. The sharp light glinted off the surface. It was his old cube. No, just one that looked like it—down to every worn corner and even the missing central white square. But, his was at home. This couldn't be his. The great cube that had laid dormant at the back of his vision began to whirl again now.

He reached out, one inch at a time. When his fingers touched the cube, the squares lit up. The luminosity rippled and shifted colors. Stunned, he pulled his hand away. The cube regained normalcy. He looked at his former friend. He was still organizing the inventory as if nothing had happened.

Turner reached out again, and the surface undulated in Technicolor splendor. After a while, he began to feel that something about the cube didn't look right. He looked behind him and was startled to see no shadow attached to his feet. He whipped around and—yes—the cube had no shadow either. He glanced at Rick again and suddenly came face-to-face with his own shadow, now standing upright and holding the shadow of the cube. They wavered in the glaring light.

Turner's shadow put the cube's shadow in its pocket. Turner felt a weight drop in the jacket. The shadow leaned backwards and fell on the ground, instantly collapsing back to two dimensions. The shadow moved with him. He looked at the shelf; the cube was gone. He felt his jacket. Nothing bulged out or made the fabric sink, but a curious weight remained.

“Bye, Rick.”

The inventory continued. He really hadn't seen anything.

Turner exited the store.

~ ~ ~

Sitting at his small, wobbly desk again, Turner reached into his pocket and took out the cube that his shadow had given him. Every touch made the lighted colors shiver and change. Well, here was a new puzzle. He tried turning the cube to line up the colors. It was no good. Every touch sent the colors spinning off to different squares.

He laid the cube down and got out a sheet of paper. With one finger, he touched a single square. Blue changed to yellow. He made a note. Using the same finger, he touched the same square again. Yellow changed to white, and then red, and then blue, and then orange. He tried a different square. There was no discernible pattern. The color changes were completely random. He made lots of notes late into the night and tried to decipher if there might be some other more complex pattern, but he couldn't see any. At last, he went to bed, feeling both exhilarated and confused by the intractable puzzle. Colored squares swirled before his eyes like luminescent fireflies until he finally dropped off to sleep.

The next day dragged by. When he got home, he sat down and started working on the cube again. No matter what he did or what calculations he made, the cube could not be unscrambled. The magical

colors and lights fluttered across the surface, evanescent as the wind. The only constant he could find was the missing sticker. That square never changed colors. He found himself staring at the blank plastic. In the next room, his sister was on the phone again and saying, “You can’t come to my gradu—”

Turner felt like someone had punched his stomach. Something was squeezing him from every side. He looked behind him, but no one was there. He looked again at the place for the missing sticker, and he felt a tug on the top of his head. Without warning, he was instantly pulled headfirst down into the plastic block. He tried to scream, but no sound came out, and then his feet disappeared into the cube.

~ ~ ~

He woke up to blinding light. Inside his room, artificially bright light flickered through his window. He ran to the window. Monstrous shelves filled with a hodgepodge of materials surrounded him. Across a wide chasm, a gigantic Rick was conducting inventory. He looked as far down the window as he could. There was no shadow.

A rusty bell dinged.

“Can I help you?” a rumbling voice asked.

That was yesterday. Yesterday. Turner’s mind clicked. *Oh no, oh no, oh no. It’s a cycle.*

“No, thanks. I’m just looking.”

He clutched the sides of his head with his hands. Turning his back to the window, he paced gravely around his room. He tried the door. It was locked. The cube that he had sat on his desk the night before was gone. He checked under his bed. His old one was still there, collecting dust. Everything was the same in his room as when had left it, except the duplicate, shadowy cube.

A huge finger reached out to his window. Turner ran to the window.

“NO! STOP!” he yelled.

Magical lights danced around his room. The room revolved, and he was thrown violently against a wall. Amazingly, nothing fell. The window remained still, but now the ceiling was where the floor should have been, and the floor where a wall had been. He got up and jumped in front of the window.

He waved his hands frantically in front of his face and shouted, “STOP! STOP! GET AWAY!”

The finger came again, and Turner hurriedly flattened himself against the floor. The room spun and shifted under the dancing auroras.

“What’s happening? Why am I here?” he asked the ceiling. “Get me out of here!” he bellowed. No one replied.

A fuzzy cloud crossed his window. Lint from the inside of his jacket stuck to the glass.

Enraged, he took his old cube from under his bed and threw it against the window. Small cracks splintered the glass. The cube came to rest on the floor. He heard a slurp and looked up. The glass mended itself.

“What is this? What is this? *I’m just supposed to be stuck here?*”

He kicked the wall and bruised his toe. His sneaker left a small mark, but no dent.

He sighed and held his face with his hands. With nothing else to do, he collapsed backwards and fell asleep on the floor.

~ ~ ~

“Am I just supposed to be *stuck* with you? Is that what you think?” His Mom’s muffled question from six years ago came back to him in a dream.

He saw his sister, and then there was a heavy thud. They both jumped. Something smashed against the wall of the living room. Their parents’ mountainous voices clambered over each other.

“Get in the car,” his sister ordered. “We’re going to Grandma’s.”

Turner couldn’t move. He clung to his shadow—a shadow of the past. A shadow that remained on the porch, pushing with all the weight of his ten-year-old self, pushing in disbelief on the door that would not give way. He couldn’t move if his shadow refused to come with him.

The singing birds and rocking trees grew ever more unreal. With each passing second, the colors brightened, and sounds became more rhythmic and mechanical. The world bent into a cube. Forms contracted and stacked themselves into squares of the six basic colors he knew so well. They turned as the wind turned, except the one red block of the fury-filled house that was jammed in the cube and refused to budge. It squawked in protest.

A robin lifted off the tree branch it had been sitting on, leaving behind a wake of motion and a piercing cry.

Shouts fired like gunshots in the air. More robins squawked. That jammed piece of the world-encompassing cube squeaked erratically.

“Get in the car,” his sister ordered. She pushed Turner to the driveway. A tenebrous rubber band between him and his shadow stretched to its limits. He looked back for a split second and saw a portion of a thin, dark line like those separating each of his cube’s colored squares—a thin line shaking the handle of the door and finally capitulating with a snap. His shadow angrily returned.

He sulked far down into the passenger seat, as far as the seatbelt would allow. His sister launched the car into drive mode and squealed out of the driveway. The squares marching in color-coded regiments crumbled and devolved into war—a massive jumble of meaningless shapes and a soup of the six basic colors.

He looked at the scrambled cube in his hands and flipped it to the face with a central white square.

Every time he started solving the cube, he always arranged the squares a certain way around this central square. He stared blankly at the road that his sister's car was gobbling up and began picking at the corner of the sticker. After a while, he rolled down the window and held out his index finger with the sticker lightly attached to it. The rushing air grabbed at the waving piece of paper, and within seconds, it flew off, spiraling chaotically in the air current.

~ ~ ~

He woke up to blinding light. He gasped and looked around his room. His old cube was sitting on the floor, forlorn. A dark mark discolored the bottom of a wall.

When had those gotten there? he thought.

A foggy memory of a cracked window flashed through his mind.

Ding!

“Can I help you?” a booming voice asked.

He snuck to the window and saw a gigantic version of himself and Rick exchanging niceties in the thrift shop. Then, he saw himself from the past walking over. Nausea hit Turner.

It's repeating. I'm stuck here. I'm doomed to repeat this day over and over.

“NO! NO! STOP! *You don't know what's going to happen!*” he screamed futilely at the finger drawing closer and closer to his window.

Out of instinct, he fell to the floor and braced for an impact. The room spun around him in disembodied colors.

“GET AWAY!” he tried to warn the Turner from the past.

This is never going to work.

He sat glumly on the floor as the evening wore on in dazzling, nauseating, multi-colored plumage. On a whim, when he saw a block of color fly past him on the wall, he planted his palm on it, capturing it. To his surprise, the square stopped moving. When the room came to a still again, a single yellow square remained on the otherwise white-washed wall. His mind sparked.

The room began revolving again, and he army-crawled across the floor and slapped his hand on another yellow square when it crossed the wall. It stayed, and two yellow squares stared at him from the wall opposite the window.

In the transient steadiness, he scrambled to his desk and scrawled a note. He looked at the old cube and the scuff mark. An overwhelming motion slammed him against the desk, knocking the air out of him. He crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

~ ~ ~

Voices from the past echoed in his dream. “You didn’t *know* what was going to happen, did you?” Rick, two years younger, asked without meeting his eyes.

Turner opened and closed his mouth mutely.

Rick buckled and unbuckled the watch around his wrist.

Sounds from long ago filtered through his fourteen-year-old mind.

His friend seized a button on the side of his watch. “31.85 seconds,” came the pronouncement, followed by the addendum, “Turner, that’s your best yet.”

A crowd of schoolchildren gathered around the picnic table gasped in the shade of the maple tree. The noise and chants of “Go! Go! Go!” had blown away, grains of dust upon the air.

He leapt off the picnic table and tossed his worn cube into aerial somersaults. Clouds of dust rose around his sneakers, the remnants of an ancient cough.

“He does that all the time when he doesn’t have any friends to play with,” someone said in contempt.

“You didn’t have to watch if you didn’t want to. I never asked for any of you to come.” Turner stuffed his worn, solved plastic cube into his jacket pocket. “Let’s go, Rick.”

Even after he and Rick had left, the other children chattered and whispered around the picnic table, feasting their eyes on the somber emptiness of a timeless guardian maple tree.

The memory faded with Rick’s next words. “But time is too important to give away. That’s what my parents told me, anyway, when they saw the story in the paper about your father’s arrest. I’m sorry, Turner.”

He crumpled his freshman class schedule in his hands. “Alright. Bye, Rick.”

~ ~ ~

He woke up to blinding light. Soon, he heard himself telling goodbye to Rick.

How many times have I heard that? I’m stuck. I’m stuck. I’m stuck.

He panicked. When he looked around the room, he saw his old cube deposed from its hiding place under the bed, a mark on the wall, and a note. Curious, he crept closer to his desk.

Hi, Turner of the new cycle. I’m Turner of the past cycle. You’re going to be stuck in that cube you got from the store and keep going in this 24-hour cycle if you don’t solve it. And you’re going to have to solve it from the inside. When the colors come by, press your hand—

A long pen streak slashed the page. Something must have happened.

He felt a rumble. The room began to move. He got on the floor. He lifted his eyes and saw two yellow squares on the wall. The pieces clicked together in his mind.

When the colors flew by, he slapped his hand against the wall. In a topsy-turvy room, Turner moved slowly along the floor, capturing and matching the colored squares to the walls. Gradually, with continuous revolutions, tile by tile, the sides, floor, and ceiling became painted expanses of yellow, blue, red, green, orange, and white.

You're going to have to solve it from the inside.

He went to the window and looked out. When he touched his palm to the glass, a burst of white light blinded him. He turned his face away and felt his feet floating off the ground. Gravity flipped upside down. He was pulled feet first out the window.

~ ~ ~

And then he was sitting at his desk again. He shook his head. His old cube was in front him, and the place where the central sticker had been missing for six years was filled in again. Shocked, he went to the window and looked out. To his relief, he saw not the flickering thrift store lights, but a serene night.

He touched the surface of his cube. The magical colors still danced across the surface. He dashed to look underneath his bed. The cube that was supposed to be there wasn't anymore.

He spun the segments of the strange cube around. The fluttering colors never rested long enough for him to solve it. The outside of the cube was and always would be chaos.

You're going to have to solve it from the inside.

He placed the cube on his shelf. *It is solved from the inside*, he thought. *Time moves forward again. I'm out of the cycle.*

Turner looked behind him at his shadow. It was in its place, healed from the snapping jaws of resentment. It was at peace.

Alex McClure

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Short Story

When you found me I was daunted. Fearful that you would leave me, and be just like my last owner. But no, you took me in and treated me as your own. After my training to keep me from making your beloved carpet go from white to yellow. We were finally getting closer. Chewed up socks and shoes made you furious. You went from furious to joyful. Whenever you were upbeat we would play a little game called tug of war. Now I knew I was a part of your life. And my life finally seemed worth living.

I would howl at the cat across the street and you would scowl at me. You ordered me to the kennel. When you entered your room, feathers and pillow covers scattered across the floor. You would yet again send me to the dark kennel in the corner of your apartment. But when it mattered the most, we could always lean on each other. Anything you were having a dispute with I was always there to make you feel better.

You taught me to fetch and to roll over. As time passed, I felt as if we were best chums. Day after day we got closer and closer. But in a way we were growing apart. Day after day you were gone a little longer than the next. Something about your job, or that's what you would tell me when you were stressed and needed a friend.

After about the fourth day of you not coming home till late, you showed up with a girl. Just like every other guest, I treated her like she was part of the family. She wasn't a fan of me and to make her just a little bit chipper you made me bypass her. Week by week she showed up more and more, you started to resort to me less and less. After a couple months you had made up your mind. She was now your first precedence.

On a Saturday, in early November, you and I had decided to take a walk in the park for all the time we had skipped out on. But on the morning of the walk you weren't in your bunk where you normally are when I come to greet you wagging my tail. When you appear in the entrance of the door to your 500 square foot residence, something has changed but I can't quite put my paw on it. But when I inch toward you with my tail moving rapidly I get a glimpse of it. A small red suede box extruded out of your pocket. Later that evening Jessica (your beloved human companion) shows up in a flattering dress. You approach and slide onto your knee and open the tiny swede box slowly.

"Will you marry me Jessica Rose Kennedy?" you propose.

Jessica stands there aghast, about as much as me because I am trying to figure out what is happening. Jessica puts her hands to her face and screech.

"YES!YES!YES" Jessica shrieks.

You pick her up and spin her around and deliver a small smooch on the cheek. About three days later

you are helping her carry gigantic boxes with her name on them into our tiny but understandably small home. I jump up on her leg and start to lick her face. Jessica wallops me.

“Get off of me you stupid mutt,” she mumbles under her breath.

My care taker hears it slightly but decides to not make anything of it. I’ve always known Jessica doesn’t care for me all that much. But since the arrival of Jessica the amount of attention my owner has been showing me is very slim. My ears suddenly go from up to down and my head droops over as I feel a whole new way about my care taker. I want him to be jolly of course but I also want to be cherished. Three months later your human companion Jessica shows up. Her belly had gotten noticeably bigger over the last couple months. After a couple of weeks Jessica stopped coming over. But when she did come back 2 little human off springs are in her hands. My owner had been helping her carry one of them and when they entered through the front door they stopped and stared at me. Jessica leaned over to Tony (my owner) whispered to and Tony nodded and grabbed me by my collar and led me into the bedroom. He quickly sealed the door behind him and locked it. I went from being your best friend to your pet.

When your human offsprings turned 2 they finally were allowed near me. And the loving they gave me was amazing. Every moment I spend with them was fascinating. You took the little human away from me and when they came back their hair was much shorter. The next morning you kissed Jessica on the cheek and with 2 suitcases in your hand gave me a pat on the head then headed out the door. I hadn’t seen you in nearly 4 weeks, when one day the phone rang. Jessica politely picked it up and tears ran down her face like rain in March. She set the phone down and started to cry. I pranced over and layed my head on her lap and licked her forearm to show caring. But she pushed me away.

“Get away from me you dumb dog, I hate you” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

The next morning she loaded me into the car with the kennel and my tether and the offsprings in the back seats. I was excited, I hadn’t seen Tony in just over 4 months and road trips reminded me of him. But when we arrived to the sound of hundreds of dogs barking and scratching the fences my hope for ever being loved again melted like an ice cube in the Sahara Desert. Jessica filled out some paper work and let the kids stroke my head for a couple minutes. When she picked them up and said, “time to go”. She avoided my eyes and got up and Benny the youngest of the twins tried to clasp my collar and started to sob with muffled screams like “NO! MOM NO! DON’T LET THEM TAKE MY DOGGY!”

Without releasing a tear you turned and left, Jessica. My family. My life. My hope. Was all gone. After a couple weeks another family payed a visit to me. After a long meeting with the man, they decided to adopt me. And just like that my hope for the same life I had before, the life that was snatched away, was renewed.

This new family was nothing special. They had twice the space Tony had to run and play but they did not have twice the affection Tony had for me as a young pup. The male of the 2 older human beings was always away two weeks at a time for business trips, and was home one week in between to spend time with me and his human companion. On the 8th set of weeks he was away he came back and spent time and time again absorb as much time with me as he possibly could. I had no clue why he had started all of the sudden treated me as if time was running out for the old ‘mutt’. Days before his next departure he loaded me in the car with my tether looking thing and a couple trash bags with a few chew toys for yours truly sitting next to them.

We unloaded at a park with a big walking trail. He treated me as if I was the human offspring he never had. The walk was splendid and he brought me back to the car with a welcoming of a dog bone and a big bowl of water. I slurped down the water and gnawed at the bone before getting in the car. He stroked my ears and my head on the way home. But right before the turn to the road for home he turned onto another road. We slowly rolled up to the destination. He grabbed my restriction tether.

And whispered “It will be okay buddy.”

He led me into the room with a scale, a bed and some treats on the top shelf. I started hopping up and down towards the teats but they were never in reach. The vet approached and lifted me onto the bed. My current owner that had treated me as his long lost offspring left the room, his eyes starting to tear up. The glass pane in the wall let observers see from outside the room. He was the only one watching. The vet left the room and told me she would be right back.

The vet entered the room with dark glasses over her eyes and a needle in her pouch. She gently grabbed my leg and placed a tourniquet around my leg. A single tear fell beyond her glasses. She turned to the cabinets and loaded the needle. I took a look at my owner to see if I myself should be worried or not when I spotted him in the window his hand pressed against the glass he face red with tears and he couldn't bear to raise his head. When he finally did he smiled at me as if that was a farewell of some sort. The vet place a hand on my leg to keep it still. She seemed harmless so I started licking her hand. She released her tears, falling down her face and she whispered three words.

“How could you do this to me?” I thought.

“I'm so sorry” as if she was responding to me. I could barely hear over her muffled voice

While I was licking her face she placed the needle in my vein. I felt the cold hard sting of euthanasia running through my veins. Slowly my tongue started to slow the licking. The wagging of my tail against the table started to slow.

One last time I whispered “How could you do this to me?”

The whisper wasn't for the doctor, it was for my family. The ones I loved, unconditionally.

Noga Melnick

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

The Death Cure

The Healer arrived at midnight, unannounced but expected. After all, where does a healer belong if not in the house of the dying? And Janet Milner was dying.

Naturally, her parents were devastated. Their smart, beautiful Janet Milner, these days so pale, confined to her bed while her classmates studied. Janet, with her inquisitive mind and endless curiosity, her daring eyes that would soon dim into the blank stare of the dead. It seemed a terrible irony that right before graduating, right when she was offered the job of her dreams at the most renowned research lab in the country, Janet developed the very condition that she would have worked to cure. And now she would die before she ever had the chance to make a difference.

Unless the rumors were true, of course. Unless there really was a man whose abilities went beyond the understanding of science, a man who could cure what would otherwise be a death sentence.

He was known simply as The Healer, for his real name was never disclosed. In fact, very little was known about the man that so many people entrusted with the lives of those most dear to them. They knew only that when The Healer enclosed himself in a room with a dying patient, a few days later he would emerge leaving behind a healthy person. Just like that, cured.

The Healer's record was impressive indeed, enticing and perplexing, but not without its own blemishes. Occasionally, when The Healer took his leave, the only thing left in the room for the family to discover was a corpse.

Nevertheless, when The Healer showed up on a doorstep, few people turned him away. They were too desperate, too despairing since the doctors reported there was nothing to be done. No treatments. He was their final hope—the determining factor between life and death.

The Milner parents were no different. Disheveled and exhausted, Sadie and Jack opened their door to the warm night air and beheld The Healer, his long black cloak billowing in the wind, the hood pulled over his head, hiding his face from view.

“Oh, thank goodness,” said Sadie before ushering him inside. “You can't know how grateful we are.”

The Healer did not respond, but strode purposefully through the house, his footsteps silent as a cat. His gait was rigid with his hands tucked into the wide sleeves of his cloak, but he moved with the grace of a panther, never faltering as he made his way to the room where Janet slept.

Sadie felt cold. All the warmth seemed to have seeped out of her body. She stood stiff as a statue, her hand still on the doorknob, watching the cloaked figure in amazement. It took a moment for her to

realize that she wasn't breathing. She struggled to release the pressure and her breath came out harsh against the thick air. She moved to take her husband's hand, but Jack barely noticed, too focused on refilling his own lungs with oxygen.

The Healer reached Janet's door. The hand he removed from his sleeve was skeletal and white as a pearl, his long bony fingers reaching for the doorknob.

Jack wanted to scream at the man to stop, to get away from his daughter who had already been through enough. His heart contracted and he gasped but stayed silent, for rationally he knew that this was what was best for his daughter. Otherwise, he and Sadie would not have answered the knock on their door.

The Healer paid Janet's parents no attention. He knew they were afraid of him, as they should be, but that did not stop The Healer from resenting them for it as he slipped into their daughter's room and locked the door.

The room was small, one that would have been cozy under different circumstances. The closet stood open by the door, the mirror hung crooked in the corner. There was a nightstand by the bed. On it was a full mug of tea, already cold, and an untouched piece of toast, the knife still stuck in the glob of butter. And in the bed was Janet Milner. And she was awake.

Janet Milner was the same as all the others, except that she was different. Her desperation was familiar to The Healer, comfortable. But he was not used to the eagerness. It made him pity her, even as he longed to experience the emotion himself. He almost respected the young woman for her strength in the face of death, her ceaseless ambition that so starkly contrasted with the other terminal patients. The Healer thought he may have even smiled if he could manage it.

"Hello," Janet said.

The Healer did not respond, though this time it was not a conscious decision. Frankly, he was dumbstruck by the extraordinary normalcy of her greeting.

And then she smiled, a sweet smile, if perhaps a little tired. The Healer, however, did not appreciate the gesture. He simply moved to the side of the bed and began his diagnosis.

Janet watched transfixed as The Healer's hand hovered above her ankle, not a centimeter away, and yet not touching the blanket. His hand snaked up slowly, following the path of her leg, the curve of her hip, the rise of her chest. He did not touch her, but his fingers left a deep chill everywhere they hovered, until her whole body felt as cold as ice, freezing and ready to crack.

Her toes fell off. One. By. One. Her fingers curled. Turned blue. Frosted over into little thin icicles. Her tears froze one her eyes. She couldn't see. Then her neck cracked, her head teetering on the frozen stump.

Something pressed against her mouth, parted her lips, and a bitter, slimy liquid was poured down her throat. Janet gagged, but enough went down to have the desired effect. She woke up.

Immediately, Janet rolled her neck, wiggled her fingers and toes. Her vision was back. She was fine. Well, as fine as one could be when they were dying. But she was more than fine, she realized when she

saw the cloaked figure hovering over her. The Healer was here, curing her. The Healer was here, just as she'd always dreamed.

"Hi," she said and was happy when her voice sounded normal. When The Healer did not respond, she continued, "Thanks for coming. I'm not too keen on dying, but I wasn't worried. I knew you'd come."

His lack of response disappointed Janet. She had always wanted to meet The Healer, had even daydreamed about him teaching her, or caring for her. So when she became ill, Janet barely cared. She held to her faith that The Healer would come. And he did. *He did.*

On impulse, Janet reached out and grabbed The Healer's hand. He stiffened but did not fight her as she laced their fingers together. His skin felt papery and thin, hard as a rock, and deathly cold. *But it was him*, Janet reminded herself, and she brought his hand up to her face.

The Healer did not move as Janet brushed his hand across her cheek, kissed his palm, and lead his hand down her neck to rest on her heart. Janet closed her eyes and fell back asleep. This time she did not have nightmares.

The Healer was weary of his hand in hers, but he did not remove it as Janet slept. There was nothing inherently dangerous about the position and he could work just as well holding her hand. And there was something about it that felt foreign, nice.

The next time she awoke, Janet was healed. And she was still clasping The Healer's hand. "Hey," she said with a small smile. She gazed into the hood, trying in vain to catch a bit of his face, the curve of his nose, the slant of his mouth. "Say something."

The Healer jerked away as her hand came up but it was too late. His hood had fallen and she had *seen* him.

The Healer did not need the mirror. He *knew* the price of his brilliance, his stupidity. His face as white as death, two gaping holes above a flat nose, his mouth sewn shut. He wanted to scream, but only managed to widen the holes of the black threads as they stretched his lips. He grabbed the butter knife off the nightstand and slammed it home. It punctured his heart. But he had tried that before. He knew there would be no blood.

Only Janet was lucky enough to die that night.

Kailey Mgrdichian

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Liberty North High School, Liberty, MO

Educator: Greg Wickham

Category: Flash Fiction

Intelligence Chips for Felon Children

After the Great Criminal War sighed to an “official” end on this filthy planet galaxies away from Earth, I tinkered.

Who was I to decide their fate?

Our colony-turned-city would not go down the shithole. Not like Lost Vegas, a failed colony that literally was lost. My intelligence chips were a success, albeit after desperate and persistent pleas to the mayor.

“What if,” I shouted through his wall of bodyguards on their way to his car. He added a new man after I broke through last week. I was flattered. I nearly fell down the steps when his parade halted. “You could tell someone’s probability to become a criminal?”

He sighed. I held my breath. “You’re never going to go away, are you?” The guard barrier parted with a wave of his hand. He fixed a glare and his suit. “Show me.”

I scrambled excitedly to plug in the suction pads to a bodyguard’s brain, calibrating my hand held display. Two intelligence chips ran my algorithm and reported two pieces of data. On the left side of my screen, the man’s total crime count. This included past, present, and future. Their past crimes were added to their ancestor’s average count with an age ratio to determine future crimes, based on family history patterns.

Oh, wasn’t I a smarty-pants?

The second number was a severity rating from one to five. The first number took each crime individually and converted it into a number, one being as minor as jaywalking, and five being murder. The average severity was displayed on my right side screen.

Mr. Bodyguard’s numbers finalized and I pulled public records to verify. The mayor only stared in surprise despite every whiteboard I filled with explanatory equations. He approved my work and funded the manufacture of multiple chips to test each and every citizen.

The new law went as follows: the Criminal Limit of a citizen may not exceed twenty (20) total crimes, or a three-point-five (3.5) rating. Those exceeding will be jailed indefinitely.

It started out simple, huh?

Soon enough, everyone in the city was tested. Until the prisons overflowed with criminals. The old limit, through a tough decision, became the new automatic execution sentence.

But it didn’t stop there, did it?

The new Limit was 10 total crimes, or a 3 rating. The prisons freed up quickly. Executions took less than a month. After everyone in the city was tested, it only left the babies of the free public, a few popping out every week. Babies were tested straight out of the womb.

How was I even supposed to test for that?

More and more children violated the limits, until we ran out of daycare space in prisons. The 10-3 Limit became the new execution sentence. The jailing sentence was abolished. We couldn’t afford to lose any more citizens.

I sat in my high rise labratory apartment late at night, walls covered in scribbled equations. Something was wrong. I needed to find the pattern.

We tested the babies too soon. Their soul was too new, too fresh, and hidden behind the goop

covering them. The goop of their mother, *vernix caseosa*, skewed the algorithm. It added the mother's numbers to the baby's numbers, pushing almost every baby over the Limit.

How was I supposed to know?

My head fell into my hands, grief dragging me to the floor in my high rise apartment. I sent a kill code to every intelligence chip, destroying them as deeply as I was inside. Plowing through the death records, I reverse engineered the numbers for every child under one. Ninety percent of them were innocent. One hundred percent dead. I calculated our population decline. We'll be gone in less than two hundred years. The next generation won't be enough to sustain the colony, much less a city. I left a note to the mayor.

There's one more kill code I have to send. This one requires a manual overhaul, and only terminates one intelligence chip. I stand on top of my high rise apartment. Only a few lights remain in the surrounding buildings. The wind is more alive than the colony tonight. I open my arms and fall to the city hall steps below.

Who's the lost city now?

Bailey Mitchell

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Dianne Hirner

Category: Humor

#WhenYouShare50%DNA

Watching the trees zip by, I slump against the train's window, bored and ready to return home from a college visit. I click on my phone, open Snapchat, and make ugly facial expressions to send to my closest friends, not caring if the woman sitting next to me sees my double chin and gabby gums.

Sighing, I swipe through filters and find one with a blonde beard, shabby and oddly familiar. I pull my hair back into a ponytail and position the Snapchat beard onto my face. I capture the image and immediately burst into laughter, filling the entire dimly-lit train cart with the unrestrained, vibrant "Bristow laugh." Wiping tears from my eyes, I search my phone for a picture of my oldest brother, Jack. I crop the two pictures side by side and send the photo to my family GroupMe with the caption: "Guys, the freak show is coming into town with a must-see main act starring the twin bearded ladies!"

I smile as I picture Jack, sitting on his couch with his fraternity flag hanging above him, drinking a beer and studying for his Physical Chemistry test. He probably has his "concentration tongue" sticking out--just the same as I do when I'm solving stoichiometry problems--and he's thinking it would be easier to master Mandarin Chinese in a week than to major in Chemistry. When he checks his GroupMe, I know that he will flash the same little-square toothed smile, white and big-gummed, just as I am now.

My eyes tear up. I think of the first time Jack referred to his house on Harrison Street as home, and not the yellow house in Brookside--where he and my other brother Andrew tore the heads off my Barbies and wreaked havoc on our neighbor's flower gardens. Soon he will move away for medical school and marry the love of his life. I know that his future is blindingly bright, and I will have to crack out my American flag sunglasses to watch it unfold.

I blink back my tears and wonder if he knows how big of an impact he has had on my life. I've watched him since we were very young, hoping I would grow up just like him. I've taken mental notes, observing him navigate through tragedy and celebration, and I am inspired by his confidence and intelligence. I wonder if he saw right through my desperate attempt to find something to talk about when I listened to his favorite bands in sixth grade. Or if he knows that I still listen to the *The Church of Lazlo* every day on my way home from school--a sanctified ritual we preformed when he picked me up in his big ol' Suburban when I was in grade school.

I have watched him cultivate deep friendships with amazing individuals, excel in his academics, and I even accidentally witnessed his first kiss with Mary, his long-term high school sweetheart. There is no way I can ever thank him enough, especially for *that* awkward moment, and I laugh to myself, knowing that I will probably never be able to properly tell him how much he has taught me.

Looking down at the bearded ladies, I realize that Jack has given me the greatest "life template" to follow, and I can grow up to be just like him...but I think I look better with a smooth, shaved face and I shouldn't even try to pull off that beard.

I feel a buzzing in my back pocket, and grin at the text I receive from Jack: "#WhenYouShare50%DNA." I ponder the undeniable 50% of genes we share, while twirling the same blonde hair --only longer--with my fingers and I blink the same blue eyes I share with Jack. I see, on the other hand, the 50% that is uniquely me, even though my mother still can't seem to get our names right.

Josephine Moten

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Finding my voice

The doctor entered the room with x-rays in hand, and turned on the projector. My mom gasped as she looked at the images on the screen. I was shocked too; no one in my family had expected this. I was here because my pediatrician had referred me just to be safe, but had little concern that the test would come back positive. It felt like I was in slow motion. The image of myself as someone with perfect health had been shattered. Instead, there stood a decrepit, distorted figure whose life would never be the same. Those next few words from the doctor changed my mindset forever.

“You have scoliosis.”

It all began during a physical exam with my pediatrician. She told me to bend over and touch my toes, then asked if I was leaning to one side. When I replied in the negative, she showed my mother and then me, the reason behind her question. On one side of my back I had a hump, making me look like a lopsided camel. My pediatrician suggested that I might have scoliosis and referred me to an orthopedic surgeon. No one was really expecting me to have the disease that my family had just heard about for the first time. These were precautionary measures. Besides, sometimes the test had errors. But when we went to the surgeon, he not only told me, but showed me that I had scoliosis.

Scoliosis is an abnormality that affects the spine and according to the Mayo Clinic, it is “a sideways curvature of the spine”. Scoliosis usually occurs with teens, but it is most commonly seen with teenage girls. A person with scoliosis will have a rotated spine, which affects the body. One shoulder can be higher than the other, one hip can be higher than the other as well as rotated, one leg is higher, than the other, one shoulder blade will be severely pronounced and more importantly, if the curvature is great enough, it can push on internal organs such as the very important lungs. If the lungs are affected a person with scoliosis may experience shortness of breath on a regular basis or their growth may be stunted. The causes of scoliosis are relatively unknown, but doctors do know it is genetic or the result of a traumatic experience.

The spinal doctor referred me to a surgeon for more information, but my family was not listening to him. They were overwhelmed with the diagnosis. Surgery was something I had never gone through and to work on such an important part of the body - a part that could leave me paralyzed - was a scary notion to us all. Yet unlike my family, I had a million questions exploding in my mind - things I just had to ask. But instead of opening my mouth, asking about the disease that affected *my* body, I just sat there. I was too afraid to say anything because I didn't want to look dumb and I was afraid that I would somehow say something to offend someone. So instead I sat there, suppressing the questions and letting them fade like stars. When we went home, I tried to find out as much as we could about scoliosis. Online, I found a program called Clear Institute, that uses the muscles of the back and non-invasive chiropractic measures to correct the curvature. My family and I watched a video of a girl who had amazing results with the program. This could be an option instead of surgery. Suddenly, my prospects began to look better. But when we met with the surgeon, the tide changed again.

The surgeon showed me that the top part of my S curve was fifty degrees and the bottom portion was sixty three degrees, therefore suggesting surgery right away. The surgery would take four to six

hours and would involve the doctors inserting titanium rods and screws into my spine so that it would stay straight. I would stay in the hospital for three days and in bed at my house for three months. The recovery time could take as much as six months to a year. To add to the cons, I had never had stitches - let alone surgery - in my entire life. I would not be able to play sports post-surgery and I would face restrictions afterwards. The surgery was a quick way to fix the problem and to hopefully not have to deal with it again. But, there were many downsides. The surgery was costly, 5-10% of the curve would still be untreated, my body could reject the foreign objects, I could not get sick after the surgery or the germ would attack the metal in my back, I would not grow anymore, and most importantly, it would mean I could not bend my back. Activities such as gymnastics and simple bridges would be out of the question.

I sat hunched over while the surgeon delivered the prognosis. Tears began to flow from my Mom as my dad held her hand. My brother sat in shock. I wanted to cry out, to tell my mom it was going to be okay. To tell her it was not a death sentence and we could get past this. I wanted to ask the doctor questions and to say that surgery wasn't the only way. But instead, I once again sat there, with those millions of thoughts and questions churning inside my brain. I have always been a shy and quiet person. I never spoke in public unless directly called upon and I was never the focal point of a discussion. My mom always shares the story of when I first started playing the violin. I was so scared of playing with everyone (not even by myself) that I cried and hid under my mother's chair for the duration of the class. I was so afraid of messing up, offending someone, or playing differently from the other students that I let that opportunity pass by. Thankfully, my mom made me play at the next class, but my shyness became a recurring theme; a personality trait. And now it was the same scenario with the doctor. I wanted to speak, to comfort my parents, to ask my questions, to voice concerns and opinions, but I was too afraid. So I sat there as silent as a rock, watching the conversation and life go by me.

After the meeting, and after much deliberation, my family decided to go with the Clear Institution program, I could always change my mind and decide to have surgery, but not vice versa. The nearest location was in Arkansas. My family and I drove there for two weeks at a time, going to physical therapy and buying equipment to help the curve. After a year and a half, the rest of my family wanted to make sure Clear Institute was actually helping me. This led my family to schedule another meeting with the same surgeon as before to get a second opinion about my progress. When we all met with the doctor, I had improved greatly but he still suggested surgery. My family, inundated with the fact that all the time, effort, and money had still not rescued me from surgery, signed up for a day for surgery.

Those two months before the surgery were the start to a metamorphosis. A lot of tasks had to be done to prepare for the big day. I had to clear my schedule, let people know I would be incapacitated for three months and try to purchase a hospital bed for me to have at home. Then there were the medical measures such as vital exams, ur analysis, and six big vials worth of blood work. On the other side of the spectrum, my family and I had to mentally prepare for what was to come. My dad would later tell me that, during his routine morning exercising, he would try to come to grips with the surgery. Eventually, it seemed that everyone in my family was ready and thought it was the best way to solve my spinal issue. But apart from them, there was also a metamorphosis within me. Deep down inside I didn't want to have the surgery. But this time I would not cower under my "safe place" and not say anything - I would speak up. I now needed to convince my family because they would have to be behind me. They were paying for everything, and I needed their support, love and wisdom. I had to convince them.

In those last two months I did the only thing my thirteen year old self could think to do. I tried to find a way to make my voice heard so that my family would understand everything that we were up against. I wanted to use all the resources I could - to lay everything out for the last time. My solution

was to make a powerpoint. In it I detailed the definition of scoliosis, the effects and the causes, and every other relevant piece of information. I listed the pro's and con's to surgery and then finally, gave my opinion. After lots of work and research, my powerpoint was ready. I practiced constantly until I had it memorized. I wanted to give the best presentation I could - to give all my ideas, opinions and to share those thoughts in my mind. It was as if all those bottled up things I wanted to say and those missed opportunities pushed me to talk. But when I finally stopped working, I realized that there were only two days left until the surgery.

I called a family meeting and set up my powerpoint. It was my job to convince them. I went through my powerpoint while my family members looked poker-faced at the information. When I finished, we sat there in silence for what seemed like an eternity. I didn't know if my family was more surprised by this new opinion or the fact that I had even shared it. Silence. Then finally my dad broke the ice saying, "I don't think we should go through with the surgery." I let out a sigh of relief. While my brother agreed, my mother needed more convincing. We all tried to convince her as she carefully pondered our arguments. After much deliberation, she agreed. My family immediately picked up the phone and called the hospital to cancel the surgery and I smiled. I felt so elated - I couldn't believe that I had actually done it!

My scoliosis diagnosis was a turning point for me. Yes it affected my life because I now know I had a disfiguring spinal disease, but it also made me speak up. Despite teachers and adults having told us young children, "You have a voice so share it. Don't worry about what others say because we all have different opinions.", I never really believed them. I was always too afraid of being wrong or different - too afraid people would get mad or disagree. In the bubble that was my childhood I sat on the sidelines, too afraid to participate. But this time, I had actually stood up for something I believed in and persuaded others in the process. I didn't worry about what others thought in that moment, I was simply sharing my opinion - my thoughts and questions. My diagnosis was the first time I had ever used my voice, but more importantly, the point when I found it.

Josephine Moten

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

The Power of Observation

I, David, am a writer by trade. It is my job to uncover the truth through keen observation; looking at everything and noticing the slightest of changes. I was called to write about the beloved, larger than life, Dr. Goliath Erutan. We were to meet in the town square or “market” so I could observe his daily life. As I locked my house to leave, a strong gust of cold, howling wind pushed me back into the door. The little sparrow that had hitherto been spinning its tale of beauty frantically flew away, as the air was now pierced with the dark, echoing call of the raven. The air turned cold and stiff as heavy black cloud cast my path in a black haze, drained of color and life. I reviewed my known facts about Dr. Erutan. He was the doctor of our town, and a leading doctor of his time. He was always cooking up new ways to better the world. He would work on projects to make plants look greener, make them grow faster, or even produce bigger fruits. But Dr. Erutan also worked tirelessly to find medical cures. However, the doctor was most beloved for his personality. Whatever remedies he discovered, he always shared them with our town. He was a calm, kind man, who helped people whenever he could; he was known for giving to the poor and homeless, helping the sick and wounded and he was treasured for his knowledge.

When I arrived, Dr. Erutan was standing by the fountain. He was leaning on a gnarled stick, dissected with his eyes the people in the marketplace. I reintroduced myself and my purpose for following him, as this was the first time we had ever met in person. He, in turn, greeted me with a politely vigorous handshake and a warm nod of the head. “I must purchase several herbs and spices for my latest experiment and supper.” he said. I nodded, but I was caught off guard by his voice. Under the calm, soothing tones, there lay some deep wicked snarl; as if a raven or a dragon were trying to claw its way out of his very soul, fighting to be heard. His breath too reeked of what seemed like rotten decay, a stench of death and evil.

I followed him like a shadow as he strode towards one of the stalls. All those who we passed, showed the doctor the respect his reputation entailed. They called out a friendly “hello sir” and “how are you”, to which the doctor answered with a kind, “I am excellent, thank you. T’is a good day to be a Christian!” Upon reaching a stall, the Doctor purchased a large bag of poppy seeds. A haggard, gray haired woman begging in the square. When she saw the doctor she called out to him to ask for money. The doctor, not responding either purposefully or from poor hearing, ambled on towards another stall. The old woman, obviously expecting money from the noble doctor cried, “Well, some doctor *you* are! Not a noble man!” But no sooner had she said this, than the people of the marketplace immediately came to the Doctor’s rescue and shooed the old woman away, telling her to leave this good man alone.

But as I watched, I noticed Dr. Erutans fingers slowly close tighter, and tighter in a choking, death grip around the top of his staff. I noticed the eye that imperceptibly twitched. I noticed the shadow from his hat, completely cover his facial features in black, obscure darkness, leaving two angry, red, glowing eyes, piercing the woman like snakes, latched onto their victim.

Suddenly in a flash, a change came over him, and he once again turned into the loveable Dr. Erutan. “It is quite alright”, he said with a smile devoid of teeth. Others complimented him on his kind heart and calmness in the face of such a “blasphemous woman”. It was evident that the townspeople adored him not only as a doctor, but as a person. To them, he could do no wrong. To them, he could walk on water. Dr. Erutan seemed to be protected in an impenetrable bronze armor of a perfect societal image.

When he had finished his rounds in the marketplace, I asked him where our next adventure would take us. He told me he still needed to collect more herbs and necessities for his work at home. “But sir”, I interjected, “We have made the proper rounds here that you earlier described. What else is there to acquire?”. Dr. Erutan turned, looked at me square in the eyes and smiled. His smile at a first glance seemed pleasing and kind, but when studied carefully, looked cold and calculating. It was a slow smile that did not spread warmth or color throughout his face or his eyes. No, those two remained as unfeeling and white as the pearly straight row of teeth that were now displayed. “To the forest.”, he said.

We walked out of the marketplace, and onto a small path. When houses began to appear he veered off the path and into a dense thicket leading to the forest. “Follow me,” he said, beckoning with his fingers. “Are you sure that you know where we are going?”. I questioned. “Yesss”, he hissed. We walked for quite sometime, picking our way through the rocks and sharp bushes. I saw this as an opportunity to learn more about him, and as I watched Dr. Erutan surveying the ground, I noticed that he was fully enraptured with his search. “I see you love nature?”, I said, but immediately regretted my question, adding, “I’m sorry, that was a shallow question; seeing as you are a doctor. Of course you like the forest and nature and all its extremities!” “Yes, nature is quite glorious.”, he answered. I was relieved that I had found a common interest between us and a means to extract more information about the Doctor's thoughts. “When I was a child,” I started, “my mother always took me out in mother nature and showed me how to appreciate her beauty. To observe and watch, maybe that’s why I am a writer now. She also told me to admire it, even things that are imperfect - the runt of the litter, a deformed toad, a crooked plant - because there is beauty in all of nature. And God has played a part in it all.” “Ahh, my boy, No.” Dr. Erutan interrupted, walking towards a knoll devoid of trees. He plucked up a small green leaf that had been growing out of the nearby shrub and held it up to the light, gingerly examining the stem and pigment, “Nature is a tool for man. We use mother nature and her children for observation, but the real beauty comes in man’s ability to bend her to his will. We can change her imperfections and make her even more beautiful. Man has the power over nature.”, he said and snapped the leaf in two. The shocking crack resounded throughout the forest. “And in the world of science, we are at the very brink of unlocking a treasure chest of knowledge. We are learning things we have only dreamed of. We can use these newfound cures for nature on man and fix our imperfections. Man will become perfect and with complete control”, he finished. There was no change in his voice as he ripped the leaf in a dozen pieces. As it turned brown, he slowly opened his hand to let the wind carry them away. What was left he carelessly flicked to the ground.

“David.” the doctor said to me, now quieting to almost a whisper. “Come here.” In front, there lay a beautifully patterned mushrooms. “These are very special mushrooms.”, Dr. Erutan said, “They are one of the only perfect things nature has to offer. The most wickedly delightful of creations. These mushrooms look calm and harmless sitting there; almost good enough to eat. But do not be mistaken. These mushrooms are slowly rotting on the inside, turning more poisonous and vile. It is to the point that even when you cut it open, you cannot see the decay, and years of torment because it has become so good at hiding it from the outside world. Yes, these mushrooms are so deadly, that eating

one of them can kill you in a slow painful death.”, Dr. Erutan stated. His eyes lit up, dancing with a passion, as if the fires of hell were burning in his soul. “Ah, yes, it is like no other death you can ever imagine. And even worse, nobody will know how terribly you are suffering on the inside since you will look perfectly fine on the outside. Nobody will come to your aid, they will watch you as you rot slowly on the inside and become as hollow as a walking stick. It is fascinating how this mushroom can have such power, and make a man bend to its will. Better yet, it is so fascinating, how a small creature such as this, can make one feel the same thing it feels, each and every day. But, a few drops of this mushroom, and you can cure all your ailments. You will be invincible and impervious to all and any future, past and present disease. Almost a control of life or death.” With this final statement, Dr. Erutan plucked up the mushroom and dropped it in his basket as if our conversation on the mushroom had been a normal, everyday occurrence. My eyes widened as he turned around to me once again. “David, it is now close to supper, and I would like to have you over to eat tonight.”, said Dr. Erutan, his tone now cheery as a sparrow. No one would have ever guessed that hitherto, he had been speaking of death and sorrow. Dr. Erutan gave me directions, instructing me to meet him at his home, that very few had visited, on the hour of 7 o’clock. I thanked him and picked up the notebook I had dropped out of shock, carefully dusting it off. But when I looked around, the doctor had vanished.

I returned home and walked up the path to my house. Pushing on the door, I noticed that it had somehow been unlocked. Puzzled, I looked around, but on perceiving no one, I cautiously made my way inside. Earlier, Dr. Erutan had talked of “un dernier repas”, which he explained as, a last supper of sorts. I wasn’t completely aware of what it meant, seeing as I don’t speak French, but according to the doctor, it is the last meal of the day. I assumed the meal would be opulent, seeing as he was a doctor and therefore had money, so I felt the need to dress for the occasion. Lastly, I grabbed my token of luck - a water and sand smoothed stone in the shape of a perfect circle. My mother had told me that this rock was a good luck charm because it was of mother nature’s perfect beauties and God’s perfect creations. I wanted to show it to the doctor in reference to our earlier conversation.

Dr. Erutan house was very far from anywhere I had ever gone. It was very far off the road, and away from any neighbouring houses. And by now, it was now dusk. When I reached the house it was as perfect as the doctor's reputation. The ground was luscious and green. Plants and flowers thrived in mass numbers in the doctors yard, creating an idyllic scene. A stone path was carefully carved out, each stone a perfect circle, and the path in a straight line. The trees were full with color and squirrels that bounded back and forth. The little pond murmured a hello as small lizards and animals collected around it. The house was painted in bright inviting hues of gold and red. And big colorful sunflowers were painted on the patio. As I walked closer, I noticed small cracks in the walls and peeling paint to reveal rotting wood. I noticed the empty rocking chair swing to and fro in dizzying repetition. Some of the shutters were falling off and roof shingles were missing. I stepped onto the path and noticed the thick black clouds creep in and I noticed the temperature suddenly dropped. The possible indications of a storm brewing.

Just as I raised my hand to knock, the door swung open revealing a well dressed Dr. Erutan and a house that looked even more disturbing on the inside. Some of the floorboards of the foyer were missing and the walls were painted an unsettling stark white. Inside the house it was a cold as a morgue. “Become comfortable.”, doctor said. It was more of a demand, rather than a simple show of hospitality, “I have prepared our dinner by the fireplace.” He lead me past a sealed door and into his living room. The food was not as opulent as I had envisioned, but still tastefully balanced. We began eating right away without a prayer, as I silently thanked God for this wonderful meal. The doctor watched as I nibbled the salad. “How do you like it?”, he said with a maniacal grin. And that is all I remember.

I woke up later in a different room, devoid of windows and the warmth of the fire. Dr. Erutan's back was to me, as he seemed to be sorting through his different instruments. He had traded out his dinner clothes for a white lab coat. My confusion turned to horror as I realized I was laying on one of his operating tables! "Dr. Erutan, what is going on?", I yelled at him, jumping up. He turned slowly. "I knew I should have used more poppy seeds, he should not be up," he muttered to himself. "Dr. Erutan, answer me!", I screamed. "Calm down boy!" he answered, his eyes maliciously flashing. He was now fully facing me. The white lab coat had large splatters of red all over the front, and in his hands he held a scalpel and tweezers. As the storm raged, it seemed only to illuminate and electrify the doctors growing fervor. His eyes were that of a wild man, and I could no longer recognize any semblance of the old "kind, beloved" doctor in his face. "Listen David, the poppyseeds were for unconsciousness. I was going to inject a drop of the mushroom!". I began to shake and grow faint. "I could have proven my studies; I have only tested the mushroom on animals and plants, but you would have been my first human to make invincible. I was on the verge of an important discovery! You could have been famous as the only invincible man alive! I could have been famous!", he cried, "To have power, control over life or death, whether you succumb to disease or not... Don't you too want to have that power, that control nature?!" The mask was now completely off, I could see the demon underneath, that had been clawing its way out of Dr. Erutan. What had been rotting inside of him. "You, you," he said bitterly, his voice getting louder and louder, "You, you", he yelled as a mighty bolt of thunder shook the ground, "You, you," he screamed, his face twisting in rage, "you, halted the name of science!". He lunged at me with the scalpel. I, however, was no match for this gargantuan pagan sent from the depths of hell. Out of desperation, I looked for something to defend myself. Saying a quick prayer to God, I threw the rock had been in my pocket in a sling-shot motion. The rock sank into his head, sending him reeling back, and giving me a chance to run out of the room and run out of the house. As I fled, I heard the most terrible, blood curdling and fear inducing scream of agony and evil, like the scream of a banshee. The vultures flew to the ground, as I ran further and further away from that horrid place.

David may have dispatched of Dr. Goliath Eurtan, but there were many more monstrous giants like him still in the world. He rededicated himself to solving murder mysteries, and seeking the truth or the true motive of a person. This account is from David's personal journal. The doctor, was never seen of again in that town, or in any other. Perhaps the doctor felt his image destroyed beyond all repair or he was fully consumed by the evil on the inside, in his heart i.e. there was no more an appearance of kindness. As David never stayed around to find out, it is unknown whether the doctor had actually intended to make David invincible or if he wanted to kill David. Or perhaps the doctor only wanted David to *truly* understand who he was, not just on the outside.

Gracie Neece

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Run

Lonely? Yeah. Miserable? Sure. Angry? Of course. These are emotions that never leave my body. Always there, always a constant reminder. Pain overtakes my body but it's not the kind of pain you would have from a sprained ankle, or a broken rib, or just some bruising. It's the kind of pain that you get from being overwhelmed, never sleeping, crying more than once a day, or never feeling emotion at all. It is the kind of pain you don't know how to share with other, yet here I'm sharing it with you. Kinda strange right? How people can't express feeling through saying words but they can through writing. It a strange, but very beautiful thing.

I'm laying on my back on the cold wood floors of my hallway. No I didn't fall and no I don't usually lay in the hallway. I am stuck here in a black hole of silence and numb feelings. Every time i try to escape it I fall right back in. I'm staring at the white popcorn ceiling. The old,creaky house is quiet. No one is home but me. Dad is at work, he's probably working late again. Mom.. well i'm not quite sure where she could be. Probably somewhere in the world being happy without us. Leaving me, dad, lily, joe, and nila all alone. Yup, single dad with four kids. It's crazy. I'm not for sure why he decided to keep all of us, especially me. I mean I am the one who causes him the most stress, the most tears, the most anger. It has gotten to the point where I never see him. He leaves for his first job before I go to school, and he doesn't get back home till we are all asleep. I am the one who had to take care of the rebellious 11 year old, the cry baby 6 year old, and the sweet 6 month old. I love nila the most. She is such a great baby, hardly cries, doesn't get upset easily, and she always make me smile. She is the only one i really talk to, i mean she doesn't understand anything i'm saying so that is why it's so easy to talk to her.

The only thing I feel at this moment it the cold hardwood floor under my body.I should be up doing the dishes, preparing dinner, getting the kids rooms ready for when they go to bed, laundry, you know.. The usual. The funny part is I can't though. My brain has shut down every part of my body except for its self. My thoughts are racing so fast for a second I think I feel them moving around in my brain. I closely inspect every part of the living room, when I get over to the clock it says 4:15. Damnit! I was supposed to pick them all up from school fifteen minutes ago. I finally get out of my "not wanting to do anything" mood and race to go get nila. I open the creaky door and wince at the loud sound. I see her laying there in her crib and the sound of the door jolts her from her peaceful slumber.

"Hey love bug," I whisper as I walk into her tiny nursery, "We are running late to go pick up Joe and Lily. Let's put on your jacket and go for a ride."At the word ride her tiny mouth stretches into a smile and then it turns into a giggle. Nila loves to go for car rides, I always look in the rear view mirror and I catch her trying to wiggle around so she can gaze out the window. I smile and focus on the road again.

I pull up to the elementary school and I only see joe. I park in the first spot where it says reserved but I ignore that. I get out of my car and throw my hands up as if he could read my mind. He just shrugs his shoulders and continues to kick the rocks at the ground. I unbuckle Nila from her car seat and march towards the front doors. I grab joe by the collar of his jacket. I walk swiftly through those big metal doors and straight to the front office. I see Lily sitting there with a red pass in her hand. I roll my eyes and go sit next to her.

"Principal's office again? That is the third time this week! What is wrong with you, you need to get

your head on straight.” Lily just glares at me and doesn’t say anything.

I sigh and we sit there in the piercing silence, even Joe is quiet. This is all just so surreal. It’s like this isn’t even happening, like I’m in an alternative universe. I don’t know why I feel this way, it’s just another day. Nothing special, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing new. I’m stuck in my own thought when I snap out of it to the sound of the metal door opening. I look over and see Mr. Peabody standing there with no emotion at all.

“Nice to see you again Graycen. I wish it was in other circumstances, but yet here we are.” He smiles and it almost wants to make me barf. He hated me when I was in elementary school. He starts walking to his office but he almost looks like he’s strutting. Like a chicken, I used to call him that whenever I was in this school. I smile just a little bit but then I get up and start walking towards his office. Lily doesn’t budge so I have to drag her by her collar just like I did Joe. She scratches me but at this point I hardly notice. We all take a seat in his office and I watch the dark wood door shut. This was going to be a long night..

I already put Nila to bed but I doubt she is sleeping for all the fighting is going on.

“What were you thinking? Getting into another fight at school?! Do you even know how much stress is on me and dad at this point? And you doing this crap isn’t going to help at all either.” I’m screaming at her but she never even cares. She stays straight faced and never responds. But I see something twist in her eyes, there is a flame like I’ve never seen before. I know she is going to crack and for a split second I am proud of her.

“Shut the hell up! I don’t care about you or dad or Joe or even Nila. You all don’t mean a thing to me. Every day I wake up and I hate you. Every second of the day I hate you all. I get in fights because I try to stand up for myself. I get shoved down every day, called names, laughed at, and things are thrown at me. So I snap,” at this point I’m angry, but not at her. I am mad at this strange, dark, hateful place we call Earth. I can feel the anger inside me boiling like hot tea.

“I don’t even understand why you even try to fight with them. You are too weak, too small, too worthless, and too much of a nobody. I hate you, you don’t even realize how much we do for you. You’re such a little ungrateful-”

“Just shut up already. You loud mouth cow.” She storms off to her room and for a second I’m shocked. But that blissful moment didn’t even last itself. The anger comes back and I try to push it down deep but I can’t. I try to distract myself so I go to the kitchen to make dinner.

I check the refrigerator and it’s bare, looks like dad couldn’t make it to the store.. Again. I sigh and grab the only cut of meat we have left. It’s a small one again but we will have to make it work. I cut it up into four slices, one slightly bigger for dad when he gets off work. I put some honey over it and shove it into the blazing oven. I then go to the small pantry, I look around and it too seems to be bare. I sigh and grab the few potatoes that we have left and make some soup.

When I finished dinner I plop down onto that old dusty couch and wait for it to cook. My mind is racing yet again and I can’t make it stop. *You loud mouth cow.* Those words keep replaying in my mind like a broken record. *Beep, Beep, BEEEEEP!* The timer goes off and I jump up off that old couch and walk over to the kitchen. I take the slices of ham out of the oven and take the soup off the burner.

“Dinner is ready.” I yelled and I heard footsteps racing towards the kitchen. I let out a distressed sigh and sit at the small kitchen table. Joe is the first to come to the table, he’s running and he stop like he just saw a ghost.

“Is this all we have again..?” the sound of disappointment brings tears to my eyes. I just nod my head and he walks over to me and gives me a big hug. I was surprised at first, I just look at him in awe. He never does these types of things. “It’s okay, and close your mouth you’re gonna catch flies.” I didn’t even realize my mouth was in the ‘o’ shape. I close it and smile. But my smile quickly fades when I realize Lily isn’t coming down for dinner.

“Go ahead and eat, I’m going to take Lily’s dinner up to her room.” His mouth is already full and he just nods his head. I stand there just for one moment longer, that moment seemed like it could've been an eternity. I watch him sloppily eat his soup and he looks like he just won the lottery. “Is it good?” He just nods again but with a huge grin on his face. I chuckle and grab Lily’s plate and head up to her room. I tip-toe past Nila’s nursery because she is still asleep. I creep towards the room that we both share and I see that the light is off. I try to turn that cold rusty door knob and it doesn’t lock. I curse under my breath and stand on my tiptoes to run my hand across the top of the dusty door frame. I feel the key and I grab the cold piece of steel and jam it into the keyhole. By now I thought there would be yelling but all I hear is agonizing silence.

Have you ever gotten the feeling that something bad is going to happen. It’s almost like the feeling of someone watching you but it’s so much more tedious to endure. It’s where your breath hitches in your throat and if you try to talk to just babble words. Your legs forget how to work and it’s like you’re learning how to walk again. It’s as if time has stopped. When I turn the faded bronze doorknob my heart feels like it’s going to leap out of my chest. The room is dark, it’s not cold but it brings me to a chill. I take one step inside and what I come to a halt.

It feels as if the world is crashing down on me and I’m a small ant trying to hold it up. I want to scream and yell and make everything go away but I know I can’t. My mind is telling me to run far, far away but my body stays still. Looking at my limp sister covered in blood, her hair is matted, and her face is streaked with tears. I kneel next to her and I cradle her like she is the most fragile thing in the universe. I never realized how little she was, she always wears baggy clothing and it seems as if she’s skin and bones. My hands are now drenched in her blood, warm but to me its ice cold. Blood coming from the deep gashes on her wrists and thighs. I scan her body looking for another cause and there is a gun next to her hand and a silencer. I let out a small yelp and grab the gun.

I’m sprinting so fast I can feel my legs. My mind feels like static from an old tv. Out of habit I go to the park, straight under the big weeping willow tree. I break down and start to cry. This is all my fault, I yelled at her and I realized all of my anger onto her. How could I not have seen that she was suffering, how did I not see right through her. It was as if she was frosted glass and I couldn’t see through the snow. I can’t escape the feeling of emptiness..

For a moment I feel at peace. It seems as if every motion in my body had stopped. Everything seemed so inanimate, as if it had turned to stone. I feel the cold steel pressed to my temple. I take one big breath. Then I hear those wicked voices from the halls,

“Do it you worthless whore,”

“It’s not like anyone will miss you,”

There laughter is almost unendurable. I can’t quite describe the feeling that came across my body. It was almost like a lightning bolt of hatred. I turn to face the real life demons that haunt me every day at school. I hold the gun up to one of their chest’s. I feel the backfire of the gun as I watch a bullet sear through their body. Then another shot happened. I took off, running faster than ever before, all I hear is my breathing. I don’t know where I’m going but I do know that I have to *run*.

Megan Negus

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Cameron High School, Cameron, MO

Educator: Tonya O'Boyle

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

What the Cigarettes Did

My Grandpa Dennis was an interesting man. He reminded me of a hippie Santa Claus with his big beer belly, white beard, and long white hair to match, which usually hung in a low ponytail. His wardrobe consisted of mostly tie dyed shirts and baseball caps, and his demeanor was carefree and humorous. When he laughed, he tossed his head back and bellowed in a raspy voice. At almost every dance recital, every music program, and every volleyball game he was there, I would find him sitting beside my dad with kind watchful eyes. He was always there. Always. He worked at a fiber glass company, converting sand into glass like it was some sort of magic trick. The job paid well, and he retired after almost fifty years of working there.

But he wasn't perfect. Not by a long shot. My grandpa was a certified alcoholic who preferred the company of other drinkers over my own father at times. He had the tendency to get high and frantic, and boy, did he love his cigarettes. The long hours at the fiber glass company often took time away from his family, and when he was home, the only two things he wanted was a cigarette and a Budweiser. But these aren't things you tell a child. Not when they're favorite relative was, in fact, her drinking, smoking, hardworking grandfather. I didn't know the severity of his problems until it was too late.

One night in 2012, when I was supposed to be asleep, I decided to be a rebel. My parents had recently gotten a divorce, but under certain circumstances, they decided to work things out. The idea of my family being together again filled a void in my chest, so of course, when I discovered my mother talking on her cell phone, I just had to eavesdrop. So I went to my bedroom door and pressed my ear against the frame.

"What?" My mother whispered in disbelief. There was a moment of silence before she spoke again.

"How bad is it?"

Another moment of silence.

"Stage Three?!" she was almost shouting, and despite the door between us, I could hear the pain in her voice. My heart was racing in my chest.

"I had a feeling it was coming," she admitted. "your dad may have waited too long to get treatment."

The next morning, when my sisters were in the shared bathroom, I turned to my parents. "Stage three," I said to them. My mother's eyes widened. She knew I had eavesdropped, and I wanted her to know. I'm sure the two conspired to keep it a secret from us for as long as they possibly could.

I stared between them with tears in my eyes "So it's true?"

My dear grandpa had been stricken by cancer. Lung cancer to be more specific. I wished I hadn't of

eavesdropped. It was better not knowing about what the cigarettes had done.

So, my grandfather did what any sane person with lung cancer would do: Underwent a series of chemotherapy treatments along with radiation. My dad took him to every appointment. After that, he wasn't the same. With each passing day, the treatment caused him to lose a lot of weight and his long white hair had to be shaved off. He looked paler, thinner, but he was alive. We spent as much time together as we could. It took almost an entire year, but slowly, my grandpa was getting better and better. My family had hope. I had hope.

But here's the thing about cancer. It doesn't care whether you have hope or not. Cancer is just dozens and dozens of tiny screwed up cells that multiply like rabbits. I learned that the hard way in 2014, when the cancer came back and fried his brain.

My family went and saw him when we heard the news. There he was, laying in a hospital bed, hooked up to a couple monitors, thanks to our friends at Hospice. Everything about him was blank. Looking at his face and eyes, the only thing I saw was what the cancer took.

What the cigarettes had done.

"Hey, dad," my father greeted, coming to his bedside. My grandfather didn't move. He didn't utter a single sentence. Instead, he managed a couple of grunts, as if acknowledging my father's presence. My sisters and I stood at the foot of the bed, tears in our eyes. My littlest sister grew frightened. My mother couldn't even enter the room. I couldn't look at him. His wife, my own grandmother, began to give away his things.

"He's not dead, yet!" my great-grandmother blurted out.

She handed my dad a necklace with a dragon pendant on it. In the center was a purple gem, a moonstone. Later that day, after we left his house, my dad called me over and bestowed his necklace to me.

Two days later, I was sitting in an armchair watching a movie. My dad was at work, and my mom went to the store with my sisters. That's when she called me.

"Hello?" I answered.

"I have some bad news..." my mom's voice cracked at her words. I knew what was wrong.

My grandpa passed away.

She told me that she was in the checkout line and would be home as soon as she could. I hung up the phone, and sobbed alone in my house. I couldn't believe it at first. I didn't want to believe it. Many people had survived cancer and were perfectly healthy! Why couldn't he be? As the tears streamed down my face, I realized how angry I was. I was angry at the fact that he didn't survive, angry with my step-grandma, who only married him for his money and sent him in a tailspin in the first place. I was angry at the fact that he waited too long to seek treatment. I cursed him for that, and I cursed the cigarettes.

My dad rushed home from work. He was the first person to come home after the news.

"It's okay..." he cooed as he held me in a tight embrace. I cried into his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry dad!" I cried. "I can't believe he's gone! It's not fair!"

I expressed my feelings of grief in bountiful tears and heaving breaths. It was too much to bare. The cigarettes had taken control of his life. They had taken *his* life, and now, there was no amount of sobbing and cursing that could ever bring him back.

His funeral was held two days later. We missed the second day of school. There, I was reunited with my degenerate step cousin, who now, because her grandmother was a widow, meant nothing to me, and several of his coworkers from the fiber glass company. The church wasn't packed, but it was filled with family members and friends who cared so much about my grandpa.

Except my step-grandmother. After the funeral was over, we went to the Cracker Barrel for lunch. She was a widow now, a widow with his money. She took his money and ran. I never saw her again.

I learned three things from his death:

1. Don't smoke. The cancer will probably kill you.
2. You learn who really loves you only after you die.
3. Life isn't fair. If it was, then he would still be alive. I could tell him about my boyfriend and the promise ring he gave me. About my hopes and dreams, and he would support me fully. I could tell him the exciting news about my acceptance into Missouri Western State University. I could share my work with him. Things would have been better.

Now, I keep his memory in my heart and on a chain around my neck. The necklace he owned helps me through tough tests or competitions. I never leave home without it. He serves as a reminder to the horrors of tobacco and the mistakes of putting your wants before your family. I loved him with all my heart and soul, and my only hope is that he looks down on me from heaven with those watchful eyes and is proud of me and everything I have done.

Megan Negus

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Cameron High School, Cameron, MO

Educator: Tonya O'Boyle

Category: Flash Fiction

If Kisses Could Really Heal

Kids are prone to accidents. They'll fall, scrape themselves, sprain an ankle, or break a bone, but for every incident, there will always be someone to care for them. A doctor, a nurse, a parent. We are all too familiar with the magical healing powers of a mother's kiss. Whenever she placed her lips on a bandaged cut, she'd soothe our sobs and make the pain go away. Can you imagine it?

"Momma!" a child cries out, tears streaming down their tiny little face. "I fell off my bike and scraped my knee!"

The mother gasps. "Oh, sweetheart!" she'd scoop the wailing child into her arms. "Let's have a look."

The mother rolls up her son's pant leg and inspects the wound. Located just below the kneecap was a fairly large and round cut, bleeding slightly, but not profusely.

The mother turns back to her son and sets him down. She fetches a Band-Aid and some rubbing alcohol. With a gentle hand, she cleans the cut and covers it up. "Here, I'll kiss it and make it feel better."

She leans down and places her lips against the bandaged cut, and the cut disappears, as if it were never there to begin with.

"See, all better," the mother says to her son. The boy grins at her, wrapping his pudgy little arms around his mother's waist. "Thank you, momma!"

Recently, I thought to myself, *what if kisses could really heal?* I thought about the booboos that would go away the instant her lips pressed against our injuries. Doctors would be baffled by it, and it would become obvious to everyone that *anyone* could become a healer.

Kisses would given out like candy in hospitals. A kiss would take away the pain and put broken bones back in place faster than a cast could ever do. A single kiss could work wonders on the cancerous child, and those pesky oncogenes would be forever vanquished by the magic of a kiss, like shadows dispersing in the face of the light. No chemotherapy. No radiation. Just the instantaneous recovery and a childhood well spent. Kisses could will away the flu, the cold, and incurable diseases. Hell, now that I think about it, hospitals, clinics, and other healthcare facilities would shut down completely. In the case of an emergency, no one would need to dial 911 for medical help. With a simple kiss, all would be well.

A woman wakes up, sitting upside down in her car. She turns to her husband in the driver's seat. There is a cut on his forehead. Blood trickles down his face. So much blood...

"Richard..." the woman whimpers. He doesn't say a word. She shakes her head.

With a click of her buckle, she frees herself from the confines of her seatbelt and drags her body towards her fallen husband. "Richard!"

She takes his injured head in her hands, and places a kiss on his head where the cut is.

Suddenly, her husband sucks in a breath. The cut is completely gone. Only the blood remains.

That's just what the kisses could do on a person's physical state. Just imagine what a kiss could do to someone who is hurting emotionally inside. People who suffer from depression could finally see the world in the limelight again, they could finally move on with their lives, just at the touch of a loved one's kiss. People who are prone to anxiety attacks, spinning into madness and finding it hard to breath could finally take a breath. The fear, the anxiousness, the internal pain, would stop the moment a person kissed them. Kisses could save lives.

Just think about it: someone is standing on the edge of a ledge, sitting in the room with a gun to their head, a bottle of pills in their hands, completely fed up with the way their lives have panned out, unable to take what life has handed them and live with it.

"Momma..." a girl stammers, tears in her eyes. She has her daddy's gun pressed against her temple. The kids at school keep calling her a slut. No one will talk to her. She's had enough.

"Sweetheart, it's okay..." the mother breathes. She's afraid that any sudden movement might make her daughter pull the trigger. She slowly makes her way towards her. "Put the gun down, honey. Please."

The girl closes her eyes, her breath hitched. Her mother steps closer and closer. She lowers the guns away from her head, and in place, the mother presses her soft lips against her temple.

Suddenly, the girl opens her eyes. All the pain, all the suffering she once felt, now suddenly replaced with joy and content. The girl looks up at her mother, and the two embrace in a warm hug. Tears fall from the girl's face, but not tears of sadness. Tears of gratefulness and joy.

"I love you, momma," the girl says to her beloved mother.

"I love you, too, sweetheart," her mother replies, her tone just barely above a whisper.

A happy ending to a once tragic scene.

Kisses could heal heartaches.

"Do you have to go?" a woman asks her fiancé, standing at the airport in uniform, ready to be sent off to war.

“I have to,” the man replies. “But I promise I’ll return home.”
And with that, the man places a tender kiss on his future wife’s lips. Suddenly, the void in her heart has been filled, the cracks, sealed.

I’d love to live in a world where kisses could really heal the sick, the dying, the hurt, the emotionally unstable, and the weak. But later on in life, we learned that the healing abilities of a mother’s kiss was more of an optical illusion, a psychological trick placed on our ever so changing brains. It really brings you back to reality, but hey, advancements in medicine are constantly being made today. Who knows? Maybe, someday, a kiss could really heal the wounded.

Alex Newett

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Pattonville High School, Maryland Hts, MO

Educator: James Dalton

Category: Short Story

Death or Glory: The Tale of a Roman Soldier

I -----

Marcus shuffled forward, pushed by the constricting mass of his fellow soldiers in front and behind. His boots splashed and slipped in the mud of the battlefield, almost causing him to fall. The centurion called out, "Tortoise formation!" Marcus awkwardly moved his shield to an overhead position, parallel to the ground, just in time. The arrows came down, raining from the sky, their impacts on the soldiers' shields making a deafening and horrifying sound. Marcus looked to his left, just in time to see a fellow Roman sink to the ground, two arrows buried in his shoulder and his forehead.

As his unit was called out of the tortoise formation, Marcus looked around the battlefield, and his horror escalated. From all sides he heard the screams and the cries of the wounded, eventually dying out, but quickly replaced by more. Hundreds of Roman and German bodies lay everywhere. The air was filled with the scent of blood and smoke. Arrows and crossbow bolts from both sides rained down onto units, wiping out many young men. The near constant din of the infantry fight struck terror into the hearts of all.

Marcus suddenly realized his unit was about to receive a charge. Many of his fellow soldiers cowered in fear. The deadly German swordsmen swept down from the hill above and crashed into the front rank of Marcus' unit. The men in front were thrown back, their cries silenced immediately. The German men fought viciously, ignoring the many casualties taken because of Roman swords. Men struck down were crushed by the ever-advancing waves of men from both sides. The clash of sword on shield was ear splitting.

As a vicious German swordsman cut down the Roman in front of him, Marcus found himself thrust into the front line. Men from both sides were cut down viciously, replaced by more, who were cut down just as fast.

Marcus thrust his sword into a German's exposed side. His expression was that of surprise and terror as he sunk to the ground, dead. Marcus looked away from the dying man in horror, just in time to raise his shield and deflect a deadly javelin thrown from within the German ranks. Marcus fought for his life, staying in the battle despite the fear of being brutally killed, which had caused many of his comrades to retreat against orders.

Marcus fought for what seemed like hours. He became fatigued, finding it increasingly more difficult to keep his shield raised.

Minutes passed, with more and more men brutally sliced and stabbed, their limp bodies falling into the mud of the battlefield. Marcus felt the German line wavering, and encouraged his fellow Romans to fight just a little longer.

Suddenly, a cheer went up from the German formation. A German cavalry unit had been spotted thundering towards the rear ranks of the Roman lines. Marcus' unit was charged, causing Romans to fly backwards into their comrades' swords, propelled by the sheer mass of the charging horses. The weary Romans went from afraid to terrified. The unit broke. Romans ran for the relative safety of the back line, abandoning their posts. German horsemen cut them down as they ran for their lives. Marcus had no choice but to run.

He ran through the thick mud, which had mixed with the blood of thousands of fallen soldiers. He could not look back, for he knew that he could never forget what he saw. A galloping sound grew louder and louder. Marcus finally gained the courage to look backwards as a German horse crashed into him. Marcus was sent flying, and fell onto the muddy battlefield with a splash, the impact breaking his left arm as his shield was trapped underneath him. Marcus lay there, terrified out of his wits, wishing he could drown in the foul mud rather than experience the horror of battle again. His eyes met the lifeless gaze of another Roman soldier. "Gaius..." Marcus whispered. Marcus could not tear his eyes away from the body of his friend. Grief and fatigue drug Marcus into unconsciousness

II-----

Marcus woke up. Beams of sunlight streamed through the light curtains in his room. He rose, stretched, and walked to the window. Below him, the first wave of workers and craftsmen strolled about the streets, setting up for the day's labor.

Marcus padded downstairs to the main room of his family's villa. His father, Severus, was already awake. He beckoned for Marcus to sit by him while the servants prepared breakfast. "So, Marcus," he said in his powerful voice, "How are you this morning?"

"Fine, father," Marcus replied sleepily.

"Aren't you worried?"

"No."

"You turn twenty today, you know."

"Yes, father, I know that."

"You do know that your mother is—"

"She'll be fine, father, and so will I."

Marcus stood up and walked away from his father. In truth, Marcus was worried, very worried. Since his father was an officer in the army, Roman law required that Marcus enlist as well at age twenty. His friends had marveled at his chance to join and serve his nation with glory and honor. Marcus never let them forget that, and bragged to everyone he could.

At breakfast, Marcus and his parents ate in silence. His mother was obviously very worried, but Marcus decided not to say anything. Marcus finished his breakfast quickly and rushed up to his room. He laid down on the bed, basking in his happiness that finally, he would do something impressive with his life.

After many hours of rest, Marcus finally came downstairs with his pack. Marcus' father stood proud, albeit with a sad smile. His mother was sobbing into a cloth. Marcus went to comfort his mother. "I'll be on leave before you know it, mother," he said.

"Take care of yourself!" she sobbed.

"I will," said Marcus, and without another word climbed up onto the cart with his father, who beckoned the servant steering to begin the journey. As they went along, Marcus took in the familiar sight of the Roman streets. Children playing, merchants trying to swindle people, and the overall happy feel. Marcus did not want to leave this place, yet felt a great sense of pride in his responsibility in the coming years to defend these people.

"How are you feeling?" Marcus' father asked.

"I'm great! I think that the army will be a great experience. I'll get paid well, and win lots of honor. I'll make a great warrior!"

Marcus' father turned away with exasperation and worry on his face. Marcus has much to learn, he thought. If his twenty-year-long career in the army had told him anything, cockiness was nearly as dangerous as incompetence in all walks of life, especially war.

Marcus said farewell to his father and leapt off of the wagon with a smile on his face. His father watched him go, then ordered the wagon return to his house, all the while worrying about Marcus.

Marcus entered the recruitment office. He strode confidently up to the recruiter and proclaimed,

“I would like to join the army!” The recruiter looked at Marcus and sized him up.

“What’s your name, boy?” he said.

“Marcus Flavius Romulus,” Marcus replied. “You may know my father, Severus Flavius Romulus Magnus. He’s a high ranking officer in the 1st Legion Maximiana.”

The recruiter gave Marcus an exasperated look, then proceeded.

“You’re twenty years old, right?”

“Yes.”

“You are 6 Roman feet tall, yes?”

“Yes.”

“And you are in peak physical condition, it seems like, so...”

The recruiter led Marcus into the rear area of the office, and beckoned him over to a fireplace.

“Pull your arm out your sleeve,” the recruiter told him. When Marcus did so, the recruiter pulled a brand out of the fireplace and branded Marcus on his right upper arm with the SPQR (The Senate and People of Rome) mark before he had any time to react. As Marcus fell to the floor in pain, the recruiter dropped an identification tablet and a certificate of enlistment by him and said, “Welcome to the 5th Legion Iovia.”

III-----

“GET UP, YOU,” the drillmaster yelled. “YOU’RE ONLY HALFWAY THERE! UNLESS YOU WANT TO QUIT NOW, OF COURSE!”

“No, sir,” Marcus said, and with a groan, returned to formation and began running again. The soldier next to him gave him a dirty look, then continued running.

Marcus had been training for four weeks now, and those four weeks had not been easy. He had proclaimed his superiority to them, because of his father’s prestigious position in the army. This had been met with annoyed glances and sarcastic replies. Marcus soon became the laughingstock of his training group.

Marcus collapsed in a heap at the end of the run, rolling to avoid a kick from Gaius. Gaius was another one of the recruits, and treated Marcus horribly.

“Whoops!” exclaimed Gaius. “I didn’t see you there, Marcus!”

“Go away, Gaius,” Marcus groaned.

Before Gaius could retort, the drillmaster called the group to attention. Marcus sprang up from his position on the ground to standing straight up. A centurion from the legion walked up.

“You men have been training hard. You seem fit for the legion! So, in a week, all of you will be shipping out to the 5th Legion base in Pannonia Secunda. There, you will fend off the hordes of German Visigoths as they try to attack the lands of Italy. But do not think that you will stand idle, waiting for the next horde to come for weeks on end. This is a dangerous assignment. You have to put aside your petty differences and work as a team.” At this statement, the centurion glanced over at Marcus and Gaius. “You may address me as Centurion Titus, and nothing else. Is that clear?”

A chorus of “Yes sir” broke out from the group.

“Good. Now, at ease,” Titus strode off with three other officers.

Marcus and Gaius glared at each other, and then went their separate ways.

A week later, the group began the long march from the outskirts of Rome to Pannonia. This would require marching north to meet mainland Europe, then east, then south, all through difficult terrain in the Mediterranean summer heat. After many hundreds of kilometers, Marcus’ group finally reached legion headquarters, and joined up with the experienced soldiers already based there. The tired recruits limped to their quarters and promptly slept.

IV-----

A week after their arrival, the alarm was struck up. A Visigoth horde had been spotted a few kilometers south of the fort. Marcus fastened on his armor with excitement. He ran to the drill yard,

fastening his sword scabbard onto his belt and hoisting the large round shield up. He quickly jumped into his spot in the ranks.

Centurion Titus stepped up. “Men of the 5th Legion Iovia! A Visigoth force has been spotted! We go out to show them what happens to the enemies of the Emperor!” Marcus cheered loudly with the rest of the regiment. He saw Gaius do the same.

Marcus smiled broadly as the army marched out of the fort and into the forest. An older man who was marching next to him said to him, “Why are you smiling? Do you have a death wish?”

“No! This is my first battle and I can’t wait!” Marcus exclaimed. “This is what I came out here to do!”

The veteran gave him a hard look and didn’t reply.

Marcus’ unit crashed to a stop. Marcus stared out at the German hordes. His excitement was slowly replaced with dread. The veteran saw Marcus’ expression and knew exactly the feeling that Marcus was experiencing. He had had the exact same experience eighteen years ago, in his first battle.

Marcus’ unit was called forward, Centurion Titus striding boldly in the front rank. Enemy swordsmen ran at Marcus’ unit from the front. Marcus braced for the charge, and the two units crashed together in a deafening cacophony of wood against metal, steel against flesh and bone. Marcus gasped in fear as the front rank of each unit stabbed mercilessly into the enemy, felling many proud warriors.

The battle raged on. Marcus’ fear ran high, even though he was many ranks back from the action. Suddenly, a group of German swordsmen broke through the line, heading straight for Marcus. Marcus raised his shield and intercepted a blade, the strike vibrating his entire arm. The veteran next to him displayed cruel efficiency, striking down any enemy who got close.

Marcus was holding out when he saw the veteran trip and fall. Marcus quickly rushed in, stabbing the German swordsman going for the kill. Marcus watched as the life faded from the German’s face. Marcus was filled with dread at the act he had just committed. The veteran got up and thanked Marcus, but Marcus did not pay attention to the battle until after the Visigoths had been routed.

After the battle, the veteran approached Marcus. “Thanks out there, for what you did. My name’s Quintus, by the way.”

“Does... do...does it always feel bad to...kill a man like that?” Marcus stuttered out.

“Kid, war never feels good. No matter how much propaganda you hear, no matter you much ‘glory’ you win, it never feels right afterwards. But you’ve got to follow orders and protect your loved ones, so in that case, it feels right. Do you know what I’m trying to say?”

“Yes. My name’s Marcus by the way.”

“Thank you Marcus, for saving my life.”

After that, Marcus became friends with Quintus. Marcus stopped acting superior to the others, and made friends within the legion. Gaius turned out to be a very caring man, and helped Marcus many a time in subsequent battles. Marcus fought many battles, but the feeling after killing another human never got any better.

One day, a messenger came sprinting into the fort. He spoke of a gigantic German horde amassing to the west. This horde had more soldiers than ever before, and had deadly German shock cavalry in it as well. The 5th Legion prepared for battle and marched out of the gate. Marcus felt confident in his ability to fight with his newfound friends. Quintus smiled at him, and Gaius’ reassuring nod from a rank behind him gave him courage.

It began to rain, huge quantities rushing down from the heavens. Within minutes, the ground became muddy and slippery. Marcus looked up in time to see a German archer unit raise their bows and prepare to fire. Centurion Titus called out “Tortoise formation!” and the battle began.

EPILOGUE-----

Marcus sat up straight. He wiped the cold sweat off of his brow, and groaned as he swung his legs out of bed. His arm ached. It had never fully healed. He ran his hand through his graying beard as

he shuffled to the door of his room.

Last night Marcus had had another nightmare. He dreamt of the battle where he broke his arm, and witnessed defeat and fear in larger quantities than he had ever seen. After that battle, Marcus had been sent home to heal. A few short months passed and all of his physical wounds had healed. His emotional wounds, however had stayed with him all of this time. Nightmares about his battle experiences were commonplace. Gaius' dead body was the subject of most of them.

Marcus had spent his life up until now as an officer in the army, overseeing fewer and fewer battles until he became an administrator. He had risen to a considerable position in the Emperor's court, and watched as the corrupt took over from the honorable Emperor Theodosius.

As Marcus waited for breakfast, a messenger ran into the house. "Did you hear, sir?" the messenger asked urgently.

Marcus beckoned the youth to sit down. "Now, what's the matter?"

"Rome has been sacked, sir! By the German tribe known as the Visigoths!"

Marcus sank down in his chair, petrified. "What happened?"

"The Gothic hordes ripped through the city. Many basilicas were destroyed, and the ashes of Emperor Augustus and Emperor Hadrian were desecrated!"

Marcus did not hear the rest of the messenger's speech. He walked away as the servants of the villa gathered around the messenger. Fear struck his heart. His hands shook, and his whole body felt cold and dead. Marcus felt fear for Rome, and knew, in his heart, that all he had fought for would soon be utterly destroyed.

The End

Amanda Nicklas

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Dramatic Script

Chrono-Perusing

Cast of Characters:

Maxine Quinn: A time traveler who needs to get some social skills under her belt.

Carson Everests: A student who can't always comprehend what he's seeing.

Jon Evercrest: A second time traveler who wants to change history to better suit his needs.

At Rise: Carson hangs up a poster on the school wall. As he does, Maxine enters behind him, soaking wet with an umbrella over her shoulder.

Carson: (Still facing the poster) How many times have I told you? You can't sneak up on me; never have, never (He turns around, seeing it is not who he thought it was) will...

Maxine: You're right on the never have, but I bet it'll happen someday.

Carson: Have we met?

Maxine: Tomorrow. Do you have a second?

Carson: You seem to. (Beat) When did it start raining?

Maxine: In about 6 days, I think.

Carson: In 6...(Slowly) Have you taken anything recently? For... recreational purposes or otherwise?

Maxine: If I was smashed, would I be dripping the proof that I wasn't delusional? (She motions with her umbrella, dripping water on the floor in front of Carson)

Carson is silent.

Maxine: If now isn't a good time for you, I could try again.

Carson: (Apprehensively) Now is fine.

Maxine: Perfect, because this is going to take a while.

Carson: I have class in 20 minutes...

Maxine: Don't worry. You'll have time.

Carson: Okay... and you are?

Maxine: I'm Maxine, my friends call me Max. (She holds out her hand to Carson) It's nice to meet you, Carson.

Carson: How do you know my name?

Maxine: I've heard it in passing, nothing to worry about, I'm not stalking you.

Carson: (Still apprehensive) Okay...

Maxine: Now, about that favor. It's an odd one, but I need you to help. Do you trust me?

Carson: I just met you...

Maxine: Innocent until proven guilty. Think about it. Now, do you trust me? I've given you no reason not to.

Carson: Sure.

Maxine: Perfect. I need you to trip the next person who walks down the hall.

Carson: What? No! Why would I do that?

Maxine: Because the future might depend on it.

Carson: What? Might?

Maxine: See, it's a lot of little things at this point.

Carson: You must be on acid or something.

Maxine: Again- I am soaking wet. (Beat) You need to come with me. Now.

Carson: Hell no!

Maxine: Just into a classroom. The door will stay open, I just *really* need to talk to you. And you need some questions answered.

Carson: Fine.

Maxine lays her umbrella on the ground, taking Carson's hand and leaving stage left. Jon Evercrest enters stage right, crossing center stage and tripping over the umbrella. He stands up, angry.

Jon: Where did you go...

Jon turns around and exits stage right. Maxine and Carson enter stage left.

Carson: You're a *what!*?

Maxine: Don't get so caught up about it, we're on the clock here.

Carson: You're not! (Beat) A time traveler??

Maxine: I am what I am, there's not much I can do about it.

Carson: Okay, Dr. Who! Prove it!

Maxine: Check the weather forecast, right now! (She motions to how she is soaking wet) There's a severe storm warning for Tuesday.

Carson checks his phone, then looks back up at Maxine.

Maxine: I'm soaking wet, dripping, 100% drenched, and it's not because I jumped in the lake a few blocks away. I came from rain. And if you want to check, it's not raining outside!

Carson: I still don't believe you.

Maxine: Why not!?

Carson: Because I'm not on acid!

Maxine: What is with you and acid?? Can you not think of any drug I could potentially be on? Is marijuana not a problem, too? Seriously, ask me questions instead of questioning my sobriety!

Carson: Fine! (He pauses) Do they have glasses in the future?

Maxine: Yes, and I'm wearing contacts. Is that really the only question you can think of??

Carson: Are time travelers common where you come from?

Maxine: It's only 3 years in the future, and kind of. They aren't too common, but most of them can only go a few minutes or day into the past. It's a cautionary thing.

Carson: So they can't... because they're scared?

Maxine: Kind of. They don't know what would happen, so they don't.

Carson: But you're here.

Maxine: I'm not here because I got bored in my backyard. I'm here because a very bad person decided that he was going to go back in time and change the future to how he wanted it.

Carson: Why?

Maxine: Because in 363 days, a social revolution starts. It targets corrupt business leaders, and his business takes the biggest hit of them all. Instead of owning up to what he did, he ran and hid.

Carson: And he's here... because?

Maxine: Because he wants to change the minds of the people who made any decision against him, before they make it.

Carson: And that means...

Maxine: He's going to make subtle changes that will reverberate through time to make the endgame in his favor.

Carson: This is Dr. Who.

Maxine: What it is, is wrong. He's trying to suppress voices before they even say what they're thinking. He's punishing people before they do anything wrong!

Carson: Punishing? (Beat) Is he going to kill people?

Maxine: I hope not.

Carson: You *hope* not??

Maxine: I don't know how he's going to do it; I know that he is.

Carson: So you followed him?

Maxine: And now, I need to stop him.

Carson: Why doesn't anyone else stop him? Should there be a police force against this kind of stuff?

Maxine: There are, but they're about as useful as 2 dollar bills. They don't know about this, no one does. I'm the only one. And when something this terrible is happening, and there's even a small chance that you can do something to stop it, you have to. I had to.

Carson: So... what is he going to do? Specifically.

Maxine: He's going to manipulate subtleties. A senior at this high school is one of the first pressers for this movement. She's his biggest threat. He's going to use small things, like posters and pencils, people who she talked to at exact times, brief encounters that she had that slowly built up the idea to take up an initiative to fight what was wrong.

Carson: And you know this how?

Maxine: Really good timing.

Carson: Good timing... for a time traveler?

Maxine: Everyone gets lucky; ghosts, politicians, and yes, time travelers.

Carson: Ghosts!?

Maxine: Come on.

Maxine pulls Carson off of stage left, lights fade. Lights up on an empty high school foyer.

Carson: Class started 10 minutes ago! You said I'd have time!

Maxine: You'll have all the time in the world, once we're done.

Carson: (Whining) I have perfect attendance!

Maxine: Do you want to save your society or not?

Carson: (Beat) What are we doing in the commons anyway?

Maxine: Subtle temporal manipulations. (She points to a table) Move three of those chairs to a different table.

Carson: Isn't this the kind of stuff we're trying to *keep* this guy from doing?

Maxine: Yes, but we're combating him by doing the same thing.

Carson: But what if we do something wrong and make it worse? What if two students here, who sit together at this lunch, give birth to the next Albert Einstein, or the kid who creates world peace?? Aren't there theories that any manipulation of a timeline creates a *new* timeline?

Maxine: You read too many comic books, that isn't how it works. There are other powers at work besides us. And fun fact about time travel, there are certain events you can't change. If something is going to happen, it's going to happen.

Carson: But this social revolution, what if that's what's supposed to happen?

Maxine: Then I guess we're in the clear.

Carson: There's a chance we could be doing all this for nothing?

Maxine: A small one, yes. But if I go back home, and it's still happening, then there's no way we'll ever no. Better to be safe than sorry. (Beat) Move that poster.

Carson goes to fix the poster, and Maxine lays down underneath a table.

Carson: (Over his shoulder) What are you doing?

Maxine: Breaking a table.

Carson: Why??

Maxine: A collapsed table should cause enough commotion to break up any conversations that shouldn't be happening.

Carson: But what if they should? What if this guy is doing all of this, but it doesn't do anything?

Maxine: It's not just that. Even if he can't change anything, he still became a horrible person.

Carson: Became?

Maxine: If he can't change anything, then I-

Jon enter stage right. Maxine hides until the table, and Carson attempts to "act casual" hanging up the poster.

Jon: Boy!

Carson: (Freezing) Me?

Jon: Do you see anyone else around? Of course, you! Have you seen a girl run through here? She's [describe actress]. Nosing around, clearly in places she doesn't belong.

Carson: (In a high-pitched, suspicious voice) Never seen her.

Jon: Haven't you, now?

Carson: Nope, just (Coughing, lowering his voice) Just hanging up posters.

Jon: If you do see her, let me know. I'll be around the area for a while, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Carson: How?

Jon: I'll be around. (He holds out his hand) Jon Evercrest.

Carson coughs, startled. He stares at Jon.

Jon: Is something the matter?

Carson: (Clearing his throat) Nothing, sorry about that.

Jon exits stage right. Maxine crawls out from the table. She looks at Carson as if she is worried.

Carson: Why did his name sound *exactly* like mine?

Maxine: (Trying to brush him off) Jon sounds nothing like Carson, you psyching yourself out.

Carson: But Evercrest sounds like Everests!

Maxine: So his name sounds similar to yours. You shouldn't worry about it. If his name scares you, I picked the wrong person to help me.

Carson: (Beat) Why did you pick me?

Maxine: Because you're the only person who can make the difference I need.

Carson: Which means?

Maxine: It means we don't have much time.

Maxine exits stage right.

Carson: What the hell does that mean?

Carson follows behind her. Lights fade. Lights up on Carson and Maxine. They are sitting at a cafeteria table on stage right amongst many other students. Maxine has a cap pulled low over her face.

Carson: If that's how people wear hats in the future...

Maxine: I need to make sure he doesn't see me.

Jon enters stage left.

Maxine: Crap-

She tries to get up, but Carson doesn't let her.

Carson: If you get up, you attract attention. Just let him pass.

Jon stops in his place, leaning down and picking up a necklace, and puts in his pocket. When he does, his suit shifts, showing a large red scar on the base of his neck. Carson touches his neck, where there is an identical scar.

Carson: That's...

Maxine looks at the ground.

Carson: That's me! Maxine, that's my scar. You said that I had nothing to be scared of!

Maxine: And you don't.

Carson: Is that me?? Don't lie! Is that me?!

Maxine: Yes. He changed his name, you change your name, in 13 years.

Carson: Don't tell me that! Aren't there time-travel rules and crap that keep you from changing things like this!?

(Beat)
13 years!?

You said that you were from 3 years ago!
Maxine: I am! He is not! (Flustered) He jumped back 10 years, which wasn't far enough. It's kind of like a time traveller's pit-stop. He couldn't make the rest of the jump all the way, so he paused. That's when I found him out, so when he jumped back again-

Carson: I jumped! When I jumped back again!

Maxine: *He* jumped back. That isn't you! Hopefully it never will be. That's why I'm here.

Carson: To make sure I don't grow up to be some evil time traveler??

Maxine: To make sure that you use the power you inevitably gain to make the world better, instead of worse! He fights all reforms tooth and nail-

Carson: How do you know??

Maxine: Because I checked! I became the first time traveler to ever go more than 2 days forward in time. I had to know it was as bad as I thought it was before I made any jump to change anything. And it was. As soon as I realized I could change it, I had to!

Carson: How? What made you think that you could stop me from becoming some horrible Mongol?

Maxine: Part of me thought that if I led you on an adventure, if I showed you how important it was to try and make the world a better place, how working together really made a difference... that you would remember that.

Carson looks down at the ground. At the same time, Jon freezes, looking down at the ground. Jon takes the necklace out of his pocket, retracing his steps and handing it to a student.

Jon: Is this yours? It's beautiful.

He hands the necklace to the student.

Jon: (Holding out his hand) I'm Carson Everests, it's a pleasure to meet you.

Maxine stands up, running off stage left. Carson follows. Lights fade. Footsteps are heard onstage, and lights come up on Maxine and Carson in an empty classroom.

Maxine: It worked!

Carson: It worked?!

Maxine: I- It worked! We did it!

Carson: We?

Maxine: I told you, you were the only one who could've helped me. And you did.

Carson: I did?

Maxine nods, snapping her fingers. Blackout. Lights up on Max, alone in the school hallway. He looks up at the clock.

Carson: (Dazed) What just happened... Huh, class starts in three minutes. (Beat) Class starts in three minutes!!? I- She- Maxine? Max?

Carson runs through the hall, and into his classroom, right as the bell rings.

Teacher: Mr. Everests, I don't know how on earth you cut it so close. Time seems to be on your side, this morning.

Carson: (Slowly) I think it is.

Carson sits down at a desk, and a girl leans up to him from the desk behind him.

Maxine: Can you tell me what the date? I left my glasses at home.

Carson: (Not turning around) Yeah, it says to open the book to page September 18th.

Carson turns around, erupting in coughs when he sees Maxine, whose demeanor is much gentler.

Maxine: Are you okay??

Carson: Yeah, I'm fine... Are you new here?

Maxine: I moved here the other day, my parents wanted me in school as soon as possible. (Holding out her hand)

Maxine Quinn.

Carson: Carson Everests. (Beat) Do your friends call you Max?

Maxine: They haven't before... but I like it. Max Quinn, has a nice ring to it.

Carson: I'm glad you like it.

*Lights fade,
End of Play.*

Minerva Pappu

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Street Pockets

When you open the first door to the vestibule of a building, it creates a vacuum and pulls the second door to the building slightly open. Unless, of course, the building's doors are sturdy. It was this type of sturdy door which that building had. When the doorman opened the first door, the second one remained in place. It was raining, just; the sky was spitting. "Madam, traffic zyada hai. Kaphee late ho jayange," - *there's a bit of traffic, we will be quite late*, our driver informs us. I have heard those words often enough, and they signaled me to sink into the back seat and idly watch the happenings outside. So my eyes had wandered over to the building with sturdy doors. *Ahilaya*, the name read, *fine silks handcrafted by skilled artisans*. *Fine?* I wondered at that phrasing; did they mean *fine* as in thin and delicate, or *fine* as in beautiful? The name sounded familiar, I thought, we had been in there before. It was very fine, indeed. A tall woman walked up; the doorman pulled the door. The tall woman did not even have to break stride, the door just *opened*. The hem of her silk skirt disappeared through the second door as I lost interest.

My unfocused eyes drifted to the sidewalk in front of the building and slightly to the left. Here, apparent siblings were sitting on the street-side of a nearby stone wall to a courtyard. The older child, a young boy, was swinging his legs against the stone, and the younger child, a young girl, was sitting with her legs folded. *If he swung his legs too hard against that stone he might kick off his sandals from the heel*, I mused. Their penurious aspect clearly set them aside from the normal traffic. Occasionally they would get up and ask for a few *paisa* - coins, but without even saying a word. There can be dignity even in begging. They were standing now, and the rain was starting up again.

It was the monsoon season, so the rain was warm, and the glass windows started to fog, blurring my view. I wiped away the fog to notice the building's door open for another shopper, this time, a man. It was the same routine: the man approached... the door opened... the man did not break stride...

The children were playing now - counting something that was in their hands.

A white Honda City crawled up before the building. The door opened once again, and the tall woman marched through, waving her hand, chiding someone on the other end of her small Blackberry. Her step was definite, her shoes impractically tall, her posture stiff. *Cli-ick, cli-ick*. It seemed as though I could hear her tall shoes taunt me from across the street.

Hand in hand, the pair drew nearer. *Cli-ick, cli-ick, cli-ick*. She marched on, puppet-like. The children were to her right, impossible to ignore. *She'll stop, surely she'll stop*. The car-door opened, and the woman stepped inside.

Minerva Pappu

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Poetry

Unmoved am I

Unmoved am I — with a “hey” —

 In trifling bleat —

Unmoved am I — when the hem unravels —

 Why not pull it more?

Unmoved am I — when sands shift —

 Into congruent deserts —

Explosions draw nearby moths —

Only as air is fleetingly bright —

 Then — the fleet sets sail for other kingdoms —

And other sheep may bleat and bray in protest —

Many more moths may dance their merry jig —

 And hop about —

Yet unmoved am I — when fleets change course —

Unmoved am I — when soldiers return —

Claiming they have won —

 With their brothers in their arms —

Unmoved am I — when droplets cling steadfast —

 To the only leaves they know —

But moved am I — when the Rainbow Trout jumps —

 A Great Escape from Fate’s maw — upstream —

Moved am I — when set by a lightning’s single blow —

 Forests alight —

Moved would I be —

Had time punted backwards —

Danni Park

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Cyanide Centipedes and Sloths

The air was cold and damp in the bus thanks to the air conditioning that was on high, and the sporadic drizzling throughout the day. Being stuck in a bus headed towards some unknown surprise with a group of middle school girls from Indiana was not how I pictured my evening, but I had made a promise to myself to experience everything Costa Rica had to offer, so I had to try and make the best out of the situation. Years of planning and fundraising were not going to be ruined because a couple of preteens didn't understand the appropriate time to use an indoor voice. I just had to sit back and endure the high pitched droning that was being emitted from the back of the bus, while also prevent myself from getting motion sick from the winding deathtrap that barely qualified as a road.

Finally the vehicle came to a stop in front of what seemed to be the opening of a forest. The only building in sight was a wooden cabin that had definitely seen better days, and a few cars parked on the side of the shack. Once I hopped off the hunk of moving metal and took in my surroundings, I was upset and disappointed. Instead of being surrounded by the culture the city of Monteverde had to offer, I found myself being faced with a seemingly endless greenery that looked no different than the masses of trees I'd seen before. It was as if the forest was an overgrown weed that went on for miles. I had already spent the day hiking around the muggy forests risking falling on cyanide centipedes and catching zika, and I didn't want to waste any more of my day stumbling around another overgrown patch of trees that wasn't any different than the ones earlier. I came to Costa Rica with my friends searching for new adventures, and yet it began to feel as if the trip would mostly consist of wandering around in various tree clusters.

Unable to back out of the night hike due to the promise I made to myself (and the \$20 I had paid to participate), I suffered through the welcome talk, and our group was quickly divided. Not long after, we were all given barely functional flashlights that would most likely die out once we stepped an inch out of the clearing. The tour guide got started as soon as possible, and before I knew it we were out on the many trails, hiking our way to the unknown. As I had predicted, many of the flashlights began to dim, but that isn't the only problem my group faced. The trails weren't marked at all, and no one was handed a map. We were relying on one person to safely navigate us through the dense thickets of nature, and our tour guide didn't even have a map. All he had was a flashlight and walkie talkie. It seemed as if our situation was getting worse, and I was having a hard time pretending that I was having fun. I couldn't even the fresh night air, or the frequent appearances of the nocturnal wildlife.

After what felt like an eternity of single filed shuffling on dewy dirt trails and witnessing the awakening of the nightlife, the dormant walkie talkie sprang to life. Listening to a long string of fast paced words and static, the tour guide quickly started sprinting further down the narrow path. Momentarily shocked, we all realized that our only way out of the forest was rapidly disappearing down the trail, so we began running after him. As we began to catch up, I was able to hear the words "sloth" and "close by" tumble out of his mouth. It was as if those few words were a defibrillator because I felt like I was brought back to life. The air that I once thought was muggy and chilly began to

fill my body with the energy needed to continue moving forward. The winding path that lead to nowhere now showed me a destination, and it was leading me towards something I had only ever dreamed of. I was going to possibly accomplish one of my goals; I was going to see a sloth.

Suddenly the path opened up into another clearing with a cluster of long trunked trees, and I immediately knew where the prize was at. The tour guide, who I had decided while running was the greatest man on earth, brought us up to the base of the tree right underneath the sloths. Yes, plural because there was a mother and child! Unable to control my joy and excitement, I broke into tears. The people who were with me would say that I cried over the fact that I had just come in close contact with my favorite animal of all time, but that wasn't it. I had just spent the day trudging around countless forests that offered nothing but the chance of zika and a cold, and I thought that this would be the same. Taking the time to look back at the last 30 minutes of my life I realized that I had just done something few could accomplish. I blindly sprinted through the rain forest with no idea where I would end up in hopes of achieving one of my life long dreams. I ran through dense masses of trees that were all different sizes, which held both potentially poisonous animals and exotic wildlife, and felt the sharp fresh foreign air fill my lungs. This wasn't just another trip in the forest. This was an adventure in a place that offered me something I could never imagine finding at home.

Those moments before I took my phone out to take countless photos and videos of the precious sloths, those few moments of quiet (hysterical) crying, allowed me to fully appreciate what nature had to offer. I couldn't just group every forest as one mass of trees because each one had something to offer that the others couldn't. Looking back, all the places were unique and each was an adventure in its own way. So as I slowly began to dry my tears, as my hand reached back to grab my phone out of my back pocket, I made a new promise to myself. I wasn't going to keep this standard of what an adventure needed be like because everything about Costa Rica was exciting and new. There isn't a true way to plan an adventure because the best parts about it are the unexpected and spontaneous moments you experience, and I have dim flashlights and sloths to thank for that realization.

Amanda Pendley

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe South High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Cynthia Roth

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Drained

A hint of cherry red color caught my eye from across the street. A for sale sign in front of Zach's house: my childhood best friend. In front of it the gutter on which Zach and I would sit with his foster siblings eating popsicles and rolling tennis balls near the drain, playing goal keeper. Remembering this as a sixteen year old made me nostalgic. Then there was the myth, originating from a dare to retrieve a stray ball from the sewer, ending in an imaginary creature we'd invented, trapped in that gutter. Zach's voice echoed, and I soaked it in like a sponge, because when he talked I listened closely. My seven year old self felt sorry for that being whom I imagined, living down in that dark labyrinth with all of the filth of the world. They would pull their arms up to peek out, and watch as the world happened around them; hearing only tires crunching on gravel and the buzz of cicadas in the summer, enclosed beneath a world where you could supposedly be anything. That's what I learned in second grade Social Studies; that in America, anyone could be anything. Our country full of freedom, meant for all different kinds of people. That was back before I knew about discrimination, or abuse or harassment. That was back before I had learned anything of real importance at all. It was before I knew apathy could be spread in the form of scripture or red wine or the sound of Zach's mother screaming at one of her foster kids while my family unloaded the groceries from our car across the street, yet no one said anything. When I finally did learn something of intrinsic value, it came rushing in all at once creating an overdose of empathy, one that I'm still recovering from today.

It was me as a seven year old, wondering where the bruise on her shoulder came from. Now it is me, a seventeen year old, hearing that one of the girls I teach ballet to is abused. I tell my boss because I wish I would've known to call social services the first time, and don't want to let fear paralyze me to the point of apathy the second time.

It was me as a seven year old, too scared to wear a two piece swim suit due to how people would look at me, because apparently it's not a bizarre thought for someone to sexualize a seven year old, and I know this because now as a seventeen year old, I walked into a QuikTrip with a friend and her younger sister. We wore clothing fit for ballet, elegant in its context, but although the only part of our bodies not covered were our arms, the little girl, who is like a little sister to me still gets whistled at by the creepy man picking out which cigarettes to buy.

It was me as a seven year old sitting quietly in church, like I was taught. Now, it is me as a seventeen year old forcing my opinions to go back down my throat until it is safe, it is my mind forcing my mouth shut so I don't scream in the middle of the service that they can't force feed religion. It is me, sitting on the couch with my uncle, a Southern Baptist pastor, restraining myself from exploding as he points at the television screen, watches a musician perform and proceeds to say "what a bisexual waste of a human being," him nodding in church as another pastor calls the legalization of gay marriage the holocaust of this generation. My opinions surge back up, get wedged between my teeth. I wonder what he'd say to my face if he knew I tend to love people instead of a gender.

I am seventeen years old, driving home one night, when I reach my cul-de-sac, my headlights flicker over the neighbor's outdoor cat, slinking into the gutter like he's done for years. I dwell on it because the gutter is next to Zach's house, and I'd just found out he's missing. I think back to all the time we spent together and realized that he taught me a lot; most importantly to speak up when I

could. His disappearance made me realize that the creature who I created, living in that gutter, turned out to be me. I would pull myself up to peek out, and watch as the world happened around me, as a kid I was taught apathy and I didn't question it. I kept my opinion inside my mouth instead of inside the world. I was trapped down there with all the filth that others said to me when I couldn't defend myself. I wished I could only hear the buzz of cicadas in the summer and the crunch of tires on gravel instead of the ignorant remarks of those who may not have intended to hurt me, but did anyway. In second grade Social Studies, they taught me that in America, anyone could be anything. They didn't teach me about wage gaps, and gender roles, and prejudice, and oppression, and hate crimes, and people who will never apologize to you no matter how much they knew they were wrong. I had to teach myself those things. I had to teach myself how to survive those things, and not end up completely drained. I broke the bars out of that gutter, yet all of the hate in the world is still down in that dark labyrinth, and now I have to teach myself to move forward.

To Zach, I know we haven't talked in a few years. You told me the gutter's a dangerous place. You taught me the world's a dangerous place. I hope you find your way out.

Jasmin Puente

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

Educator: Carole Bunse

Category: Poetry

Vinyl Alcohol

Indie picture perfect scene.
Vintage browns and flower crowns.
Smoke and Ash and Laughing friends.

Pretending we were 60's kids. Not caring about the threat of bombs against our skin. A recollection of every time I thought of him. But I don't anymore.

Instead I think of the background noise. The record player that sits on the shelf as a prop. Next to the polaroid camera still in it's box. I don't know what the laughter of my friends sounds like but I can see the light on their faces. And maybe it's just my guilt reflected back at me. A memory of looking for him among a sea of them's but his face has become a blurry streak out of the corner of my eye. A monument I never visited. An overused cliché waiting to be used in a quote of the day calendar.

I tried to convince myself that it's okay to forget something you don't want to remember. An underhanded excuse because his name must have gotten lost on my tongue. His name no longer safe between my teeth.

A 1970's punk rock attitude with the heroin to match. Track mark veins and a pretty smile. Too many pills not enough water. Learning how to conceal the stomach pains. He smoked enough cigarettes to get him through the day but not enough for the days after. Record player voice screaming violence into a static tv screen.

The sensory overload of missing someone who's lips you can't quite remember. Whose funeral you never showed up to. Fill in the gaps of your memory with a faded sense of hurt. Learn how to peel back the layers of guilt when your family no longer feels familiar. When a sense of comfort no longer feels familiar. Find your home in people you've just met. Leave yourself buried in bad days and bad poetry. A dorm room plastered with carbon copies of hydrogen bomb memories.

The taste of vinyl alcohol laces the bottom of the glass. A new kind of freshness. Like a peppermint falling apart in your mouth. Digging out pills from his car hoping they give me my life back.

A Poem On Loving The Self Destructive

Blunt force trauma mornings.

Migraines caused by the Earth spinning too fast and all at once.

Some days my skull feels abandoned and the just-got-off-the-merry-go-round sickness settles in. Voids of lifeless statues whisper the passing day,

at some point they all just run together.

Clocks don't stop ticking because paradox average lives
can't see the constellations fading.

These days are a lot less like waiting and more like stopping altogether.

Still... the universe ends in bursts of color
But nothing is more beautiful than the galaxy view of your eyelids.
Nothing more beautiful than the crescent moon shadow of your cheekbones.
Nothing more beautiful than your telescope bruised wrist.
Crowded supernovas of unexplained hurt.
I can't tell if you're the stars or the moon but you feel so far away.

Through a blur of malnourished fingernails across already breaking skin
desperate for warmth in a time of relapsing.
The hunger pains gnawing their way around my stomach,
The chemicals in my head,
Never feeling quite right through the emptiness.
Just when I thought I had set the standard for self destruction
fell in love with a boy with a guillotine walk.
This March to the Scaffold addict
Fueled with enough venom in his bite to be both the killer and the victim.

A quick relapse in between classes
Scraping love from the bottom of the laundry basket
Never having full closure from sixth grade relationships
Lipstick stains faded along his jawline.
Becoming an autobiography of violence
and a little lacking in sobriety.
Something he wrote himself between late shifts,
Trying not to pass out at the wheel.
Coffee cups thrown into the backseat of a passed down car.
Nervous ticks filled to the brim with cigarette smoke.

I learned love is not violent,
Swallowing tar in between breaths at the end of a dive bar.
It's not supposed to hurt.
It's supposed to heal so much you mistake it for hurt.
All he did was make me feel so healed I mistook it for love.
I learned why I should be weary of the dead.

And for what it's worth
I wasn't asking you to build me mountains.
Just hold my hand.
Men are not made to be Gods
they are just made to be dirt.
To give life to everything. To let the roots of everyone know take what they need to grow.

Mankind is only a lonely painter.
Constantly staring at abstract nothing,
searching for the same feeling that everyone who has seen this canvas before felt.
But we are all left with the same amount of nothingness that we enter this world with.
I'm not asking you to paint me the sky
just point out the funny shapes of the smoke clouds leaving your mouth.
Men were not made to be painters, or writers, or musicians but nameless works of art, made to be left to
rot on some hospital walls because someone thought it was worth looking at as they come and go.

Lillian Puntney

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

The Tsunami

“Mom, Mom come look at the sunset!” I hollered loudly. The sky was full of brilliant shades of pinks and oranges. The soft clouds surrounded the sun like a halo while the clear water reflected rippling light.

“Wow, that’s gorgeous hon.” I glanced over to my Mom. She was smiling. Her hair swayed in the breeze as the light danced across her face. “Your Dad and I are going to go scuba diving tomorrow. Do you want to come?”

“Sure!” I exclaimed. We were on the coast of Japan, in Naha. My Dad worked in the Marine Corps, and was deployed here. It was a tough transition, having to leave Virginia, and I would give anything to go back. Still, all of the people here loved Americans, and the hotel that we were staying in was amazing. It had a personal balcony for our room. The beds were made of clouds and the bathroom looked like Mount Olympus. To top it all off, we had the perfect view of the ocean.

“Okay, I’m going to bed Alice. Come in soon!” Mom kissed my forehead. I nodded and smiled. The sky was now a deep purple and the air smelled fresh and clean. Taking one last look at the sky, I headed inside.

I woke up in a cold sweat. My stomach was clenched and queasy. Our room was shaking like it had just been put in a blender. The T.V crashed to the ground and shattered. Tables and chairs were falling to the floor. “Mo-Mom, Dad, where are you?” My voice whispered through the chaos. “Alice, get up! We need to go!” I could hear my Mother’s voice through the rumble. I got to my feet, unbalanced. Mom and Dad were waiting at the door. I looked back through our window where the beautiful sunset had once been, but there was no glimmering light or clear water, just rippling darkness. It was a tsunami. I scrambled to the door following my parents. It seemed that the whole hotel had woken up. Loud footsteps and screams were heard throughout the building.

A wave of bodies flooded the hallway. It surged towards the stairwell, dragging me along with it. I could no longer see my parents, but I knew that they were somewhere. I just had to keep going. I tripped over the mass of feet in the hallway. No one stopped. They were a stampede, trampling all over me. I covered my head and waited, sprinting at my first chance to get up. I rushed down the stairwell, looking for anyone. The halls were deserted and quiet. The only sounds were of my heavy breathing. I rushed outside, taking in gulps of air. People were running around, looking for shelter. I searched for my parents, but they were nowhere to be seen. The gigantic wave was even closer now. A building nearby was swallowed by the dark mass. I decided to run with the crowd. “MOM! DAD! WHERE ARE YOU?” But the only answer was of the chaos coursing through the city. If I didn’t find shelter now, I would be ripped apart. I remembered from school that tsunamis travel about 8 miles per minute. “Think, think Alice, where should you go?” I mumbled to myself. The Tsunami was a few miles away, I had about 30 seconds. “A tree!” I shouted in panic and triumph. There was a palm tree close beside me. I wrapped my arms and legs around it, clinging on for dear life. It would be here any second. There was no more time, I tightened my grip and braced myself. I shut my eyes and waited for the impact, my stomach sick with fear.

My vision went black as a mix of water and debris hit me. My grip on the bark loosened as I ran out of air. The pressure was squeezing all of the oxygen out of my lungs. I took a huge gasp. Saltwater rushed into my mouth. I let go of the tree, letting my body drift with the water. Rocks and bark hit me, slicing through my skin. Pain washed over me. I could feel my lungs collapsing and my eyes bulging. Everything was dark and cold, I was dying.

I woke up surrounded by rubble. I shook while I retched saltwater everywhere. Everything was gone. Trees were ripped from the ground and buildings were now bits of rock. The sky was a crystal blue, like nothing had happened minutes before. It taunted me, anger and fear rose in my chest. I started to cry. What if my parents were dead? I buried my hands in my face and sat there. Just hours ago, I was in a deep sleep. Now I was surrounded by death and decay. I tried standing up, to look for my parents but a searing pain shot up my leg. I looked down and saw dark blood gushing from my thigh. A sharp piece of metal was sticking out of my flesh. I could see bone. I threw up what was left in my body. Staring at my thigh wearily, I grabbed the metal. "AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" My throat burned as I shouted. I could feel the metal slicing through chunks of my skin and muscle as I tore it out. My leg now looked like a torn up slab of meat. Sobbing, I searched for some form of cloth. My bloodied fingers found a mud stained rag. I pinched my skin together and tied the material tightly, so that my wound was stinging. I was soon soaked in blood. I staggered to my feet, panting. "Mom, Dad, can you hear me?" My voice was hoarse and sore. I waited for a response, but none came. Looking around, I saw bodies everywhere, but none moved. They were all dead, either crushed by the wave or debris. The body closest to me was torn apart. Flaps of skin were hanging from its limbs and chunks of meat were missing. But something was familiar about it. The lifeless form had caramel hair and long fingers, my mom. "Mom, mom wake up!" I hobbled over to her. Her beautiful face was now unrecognizable. "MOM! MOM! GET UP!" I screamed at her. This couldn't be, she couldn't be dead. She was so full of life. "Mom! Come back to me, come back to me. You can't be dead, I know you aren't!" Tears started sliding off my cheeks and onto her chest. I stared at her waiting, waiting for something to happen, to have my mother suddenly be okay and hold me in her arms. But nothing happened, I just stood there hoping for the hopeless. My thoughts were frozen and my body was numb. I could feel my shaky breath leave my body. What I once thought was Heaven, was now Hell on Earth. "Al-Alice. Is that you?" A distinct voice groaned. My father. I whirled around but found no trace of him. "Over here." I slowly turned. Dad's body was covered by cement and seaweed. "Dad! Dad can you move?" I rushed to his side and started heaving rocks off him. As I got closer to his body, the redder the debris became. His face was caked with bruises and mud. "You're going to be okay, you're going to be okay." I whispered to him. "Alice, Alice go get help. You can't get me out of this by yourself." As much as I wanted to help my dad, I knew I couldn't. His left leg was bent in awkward angles and there was a pole pierced through his torso.

"Okay. I'll come back for you dad." I pushed myself off the ground and took one final look at my father. He was always the strong one, but now he seemed small and frail. I forced a smile then turned away. Fat tears rolled off my face as I trudged along. My dad was slowly dying as the minutes went by.

"DOWN HERE! DOWN HERE! I'M HERE, HELP ME!" I waved my arms frantically while attempting to jump up and down. A helicopter was coming into view. A wave of relief washed over me as it came closer, it hovered over a clearing then touched to the ground.

"Ma'am, ma'am are you okay?" A group of men in camo rushing over to me, a Fire Team from the military base in Okinawa. I nodded excitedly.

"My father, he is hurt, you need to help him. You need to go now and help him!" I led them to the

direction my father was in. They followed as I climbed through the remnants of the city. As my dad's body came into view the leader stopped.

"Abbott I need you to take this girl back to the helicopter. We will help her father."

"Wait, my mom. Her body is over there. Please take her back with us. Please..." I pointed at my mother's lifeless body.

"Johnson get her mother and any other survivors you can find." I was safe. I was finally going to be okay. Abbott gently took my arm and led me away. I was walking toward the big machine when my stomach dropped. Screams filled the salty air. I could see my father bleeding out while the men yanked him from the ground.

"We're losing him." I watched the doctors work on my father. He was bleeding uncontrollably. Foam was oozing out of his mouth while his eyes lulled back.

"Ma'am I need you to look at me." A woman was crouched beside me working on my leg. I looked at her. "What's your name? Honey what's your name?" But I couldn't answer. My throat closed up as the doctors stopped operating on my dad.

"He's gone. Too much blood loss."

The day was cool and cloudy. Sprinkles of rain dotted our shoes and coats. My Aunt rested her hand on my shoulder in an attempt to comfort me. I stared at the graves of my parents. I had gotten what I wanted, to be back home. All it took were losing the most amazing people in my life.

Ahmad Rafiq

Age: Unknown, Grade: 7

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Kelly Rebhan

Category: Short Story

The match

Running as fast as he could, he dashed toward the house as the tornado siren blared in the distance. “Almost there,” he gasped heavily, sweat beading on his brows.

He reached for the door handle as he felt the violent blasts of wind pulling him back. However, before he could turn the handle, he collapsed to the ground as the world around him faded into darkness.

It was the year 2012 - a good year for most people. However, one boy thought life was boring, disappointing, and pointless, and so he thought he might as well lie in bed for the rest of his life. However, this undertaking lasted about an hour before his parents told him to get some exercise, or, in other words, get out of the house. He grabbed his grainy, orange basketball and dribbled toward the hoop on his driveway. He twirled the ball on his fingertips and then released the ball so that it soared in an arch shape. It balanced on the rim and fell away from the center of the hoop. He had missed his shot, and, in frustration, he threw the leathery ball as far as he could. He immediately heard the small, cracking sound of something wooden breaking in the area of the thrown ball.

He hesitated slowly toward the dark area and found not only his basketball, but a small match box containing an odd looking match. He observed it curiously from every angle. It had a blue tip and a dark oak body. He struck the match on the side of the box. Nothing happened. He tried again. Again nothing. Annoyed, he poured water from his water bottle onto the tip of the match, and instantly it erupted with a dark, sinister, blue flame. He leapt back in alarm and the flame went out as it hit the ground.

“What the heck was that?!” he said out loud.

He stood up, picked up the match, and poured water on it again. It again erupted in a blue flame that glowed like the night sky. It was then he realized that it needed moisture to ignite. He held the match, observing it in a curious way. The afternoon wind started to calm down while he held it. He turned it slightly to the left. Instantly, a gust of wind coming from the East caused him to lose his balance. He fell hard on the cement floor of his driveway. He got back up slowly as pain discharged through his arms and back. Still lit, the flame seemed not to burn any of the wood of its long body.

He then tilted the match slowly to his right. This time he was instantly bombarded with a gust of wind coming from the West. He was slammed into his garage door like someone being slammed into a locker by a school bully. He felt pain shoot all over his body as he lay on the ground, blood dripping from his hands and nose. He couldn’t move a muscle, for his limbs were blazing with pain.

“Where have you been?” his parents asked with concern.

“Outside,” he replied.

“You’ve been out there for hours!” they exclaimed.

His parents were very over protective, but they weren’t like this all the time. When they saw him covered in blood, they lost it completely. While he rested on a wooden chair waiting for himself to stop bleeding, he thought about the match. Millions of questions popped in his mind. What was it

doing in his backyard? How is it even real? How powerful is it? Then an idea occurred. One so horrible, he would regret it very soon.

He walked to school poker-faced to disguise the devilish smile in his mind. He walked to his first period, but unfortunately on the way he bumped into a group of 8th graders. Not normal 8th graders, but the mean kind that rid themselves of 7th graders by shoving the poor, unsuspecting ones down an unfortunate flight of stairs. Today they chose him. Usually when this happened, his first instinct was to run away. However his mysterious, recent discovery changed things for him. He felt powerful and armed.

“What are you looking at?!” one of them boomed.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he pulled out the match and lit it.

“What are you gonna do, burn us?” they taunted.

He then pointed it toward the group of 8th graders, and they were sent flying before they crashed into a heap on the ground. They instantly ran from him, screaming through the hall. He felt a pair of massive hands touch his shoulders. He slowly turned around. It was the principal.

He sat down in the office chair as instructed.

“Why did you try and set a fire with this match?!” the principal demanded.

He was conflicted on how to answer. If he told the truth, he could reveal a deadly weapon. If he told a dumb lie, he could get expelled for lying. Expulsion would equal major disappointment from his parents. They would not accept their son screwing up this badly. They had been looking for a good school for a long time.

“I don’t know”, he mumbled.

The angry principal tried to break the match in half. He watched in horror as the wood slowly snapped in half. The tip of the match glowed bright blue. It grew brighter and brighter. It then abruptly exploded with light. Papers on the principal’s desk went flying everywhere. Astounded as they both were, they sat dumbfounded. The match was surprisingly gone from the principal’s hands. The boy noticed the sky getting dark like nightfall happening. Then an explanation hit him. When the principal attempted to break the match, it must have transformed into and created a storm. He looked outside again. Debris was flying in every direction. A tornado had formed a few miles away, and it was heading right in their direction.

The tornado siren blared in the distance. Kids scrambled everywhere, crying and screaming in panic. Some seemed oblivious thinking it was a drill. The lights flickered and then turned off completely. As a result, the kids screamed louder. While watching the scene unfold, he knew he had to fix this. The principal tried to calm the kids down. He attempted to remind them of the procedures of a tornado. Suddenly, a massive swirling cone of wind destroyed half the building. The kids ran in the other direction, running frantically outside while continuing to scream from the top of their lungs. Then he noticed that as the tornado progressed forward, everything behind it vanished into complete darkness. As a matter of fact, it was heading straight towards him! He ran down the path to his house as he glanced back over his shoulder and watched it trailing behind him in horror. The storm began spinning faster. He also saw complete darkness behind it. Everything he ever loved was gone. His friends, school, and town gone forever, but he had to keep running. “Why is it after me?!” he thought, panting.

He dashed down the street with the tornado still on his trail. He saw his house in the distance. He sprinted as fast as he could.

“Just a little further,” he said to himself, panting.

He grabbed the handle. However, he collapsed with sheer pain in his lungs. The tornado had reached him and pulled him in with its extreme speed. Gusts of wind surrounded him. He curled into a ball. He soared in the air as the wind picked up speed. His world went dark.

He woke up on the hard cement sidewalk with people peering down at him in a concerned semicircle. He couldn't see who they were at first, but then his vision cleared. It was his parents. His mom was holding something in her hands. A matchbox.

"What happened?" they asked in an anxious voice.

He revealed the whole story about the match and its power. He scanned around and it appeared the tornado was miles away, but something else seemed odd. His house was in fine condition. He looked at himself and his parents. They were fine too. Then it hit him that everything related to him deeply was immune to the match. He then looked inside the matchbox and found a piece of paper folded neatly into fourths. He unfolded it and smiled. It had the formula to stop the storm.

Not concerned about who may have written it, he devised a small plan in his mind. First he would immediately get to the area of the storm (which in this case was the football field at his school). He would then climb to a high area and open the matchbox. Hopefully if all went as planned it would then pull in the match and shut completely. He told his parents about his desperate plan and got ready to go. "It's too dangerous!" his mom said.

"I can handle it, Mom. I have to do this," he exclaimed.

"You're staying right here!" they yelled.

"Look, if I don't do something, the town will be destroyed," he said urgently.

They paused after he said this. Usually they would give up and say yes. However this was a matter of life or death. In this case, their son's. On the other hand, the whole town would be destroyed and possibly the country.

"We are here for you," his dad started. "We protect you, feed you, and take care of you. However, sometimes you need to make your own decisions, and it starts now."

He hugged both of his parents and ran down the path of the school. He turned left and ran to the bleachers of the field. Then he sprinted up the stairs which led to the roof of a building. The tornado was only 10 feet away from him. He quickly opened the matchbox. The glowing blue center was sucked in and the windy vortex faded. Once it was in, he closed the box. It started to shake violently. It exploded with light and he went flying out of control. He fell on the hard, cement ground of the track. Pain surged through his body, but he didn't care. He was just so relieved that the match was gone. He was overwhelmed with three thoughts. One of happiness, one of pain to him and the last a realization that defined the rest of his entire life. The message that life is full of opportunities, and that he should not hesitate to seize them. He smiled while looking at the sky.

"That was fun," he said to himself contently, and he really meant it.

Adnaan Raza

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Andy Chen

Category: Humor

Pets in Poverty

It is true, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's war with Syrian revolutionaries has resulted in 4.6 million Syrians being forced from their homes. In addition, up to 13.5 million citizens are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Syrians have no opportunities to provide fundamental resources such as, clothes, food, clean water, shelter, or schooling for their children. The Syrian government has not sent relief efforts, because the government is the predator attacking its own people. Syrian natives risk their lives daily attempting to escape to neighboring countries, only to be labeled inferior, and denied safety and peace of mind. We in the United States have agreed to let an astounding .0007% of these refugees into the country. The iconic and haunting image of a three-year-old Syrian boy lying lifeless by the water's edge merely scratches the surface of the measures Syrians are willing to take to escape the living hell that is their homeland.

The Syrians have nowhere to go, they are destined to die. Considering little to no aid has been offered from other countries or the Syrian government, there must be a solution created to save the fleeing refugees. We must find a way to appeal to people in hopes they will open their hearts and help these desperate Syrians. One creative way to engender some sympathy is to simply dress up the Syrian population as adorable cats and dogs! It has clearly been shown that people around the world treat their pets much better than they treat their own kind.

The refugees would transform themselves from being a discarded people, to being beloved pets, obviously a far better alternative. Of course these people will be dehumanized, but this is irrelevant, seeing that they were never treated as humans to begin with. The cost of the costumes will certainly be expensive, therefore the costumes will be distributed only to people who appear to be able to survive longer than one week. By leaving thousands of sick people to die, money will be saved, and we will avoid the need to host an unmanageable number of untamed refugees in our countries of hundred millions. We would offer refugees the choice to live their life as a dog or a cat, whichever they prefer. Surely if they choose the wrong variety of cat or dog, people may not be willing to adopt them. After the refugees have been fixed in their costumes, they will be put into a large kennel in the center of major European countries. All kennels will be equipped with electric fencing to ensure the pets' behavior. Each of the Syrian pets will put on their best pouty dog or cat face and have their photo taken to be put on the adoption website. Assuming they still have any faith, they will pray day and night that someone will adopt them. President-Elect Donald Trump will most certainly criticize the proposal, claiming, "If these people are Muslims, then they are ISIS and we have to deal with this problem before they show up at our houses with bombs." Due to the incoming administration's concerns, the costumes will not have pockets in which the Syrian citizens could carry their own personal bombs.

If the refugees do not receive any offers of adoption within three months following their arrival, they will be euthanized. If, by chance, they are adopted, they will be forever separated from their families, put in a cage and transported to their new home. Assuming the adopter is humane, the refugee will live out their days as a beloved pet, receiving belly rubs, playing ball, chasing squirrels, and sticking their heads out the car window. As a pet, they will be cleaned and groomed, an option previously not available to them. They will be given the finest of foods, perhaps even beef tenderloin. This is all unless the adopter decides to treat them as a human and give them basic human necessities, although

very few people have done this so far, so it is unlikely people will start now.

This proposal clearly has plenty of benefits that would better the refugees' lives while making sure that the world can still ignore them and treat them as inferior. This solution would also allow refugees to leave the state of terror they face in Syria. The refugees gain access to food, clean water and shelter, all which were previously not available to them. The new owners of the Syrian refugee would have a new faithful companion to keep them entertained. Additionally, people who have always wanted pets have an opportunity to have one and feel they are somehow making a difference in the world.

What a revolutionary idea! Dress the Syrian refugees as cats and dogs so people will give the crisis some needed attention. This solution accommodates for the attitude of people worldwide regarding the aiding of Syrian refugees. The dying refugees would be sent to a place where they are safe, although they would be stripped of any self-pride or self-worth. People taking in the refugees can continue to make sure the refugees are dehumanized. These refugees are struggling daily to live, and this solution might be the only way spectators around the world will be willing to help.

Bella Reynolds

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Journalism

Diving into a Better Season

Swim teams more determined after successful previous seasons

The air was a mix of intensity and humidity, as the smell of chlorine stung the eyes of the swimmers. Onlookers paused what they were doing as the divers prepared to leap into the pool with a renewed boldness. After achieving their goals last season, the swim teams wanted to be even more successful this year.

“We started tapering at our practices,” junior Hailey Valen said. “Tapering is when you go hard at the beginning. You go shorter distances and get faster times. I feel as though it helped us improve with our times, especially when it came to long-distance.”

The goal of strengthening the swimmer’s endurance seemed to be in reach due to the new training techniques provided by head coach Kianna Sams. The techniques were meant to test the strength of the swimmers and to confirm that they could swim long for long periods.

“The main goal of a taper is to slow down and eventually stop the breaking down of your muscles,” Sams said. “It gives your body the chance to rebuild and refuel. This allows the swimmers to be able to refuel while they are still swimming.”

As for the boys swim team, head coach Brian Anders helped and supported them to find the motivation they needed to succeed. Anders also tried out some new swimming techniques for the team’s lengthy practices. It seemed to help improve the swimmer’s abilities in the pool.

“[Senior] Joe Riche, [sophomore] Kayden Dereks and [senior] Nicholas Kim are really trying to qualify for state this year,” Anders said. “I’m really proud of how far they’ve come and it’s all due to their hard work and perseverance. The team is full of hard-workers which is why I taught them some new techniques, I knew they would utilize their time outside of school and really practice these moves so that they would improve.”

Swimmers from both teams placed in the 200 Medley Relay, the 100 Breaststroke, the 100 Butterfly and the 50 Freestyle. According to junior Alex Myers swimmers were motivated after they placed and knew how they could improve for the future. Myers believed that everyone could improve if they tried hard enough.

“If you want to get better, then put in work,” Myers said. “And if you want to do this, then you just have to have the drive and determination. Determination is most important thing, if you don’t have determination then you’ll never be able to exceed your goals.”

Last year (2015) the boys swim team were conference champions. Sophomore Chris Toranto agreed that the win motivated him to work harder this year.

“Making conference championship last year is probably my favorite memory,” Toranto said. “We worked really hard to win and it was a very rewarding experience. Everyone really wanted to win again this year so we had longer and more intense practices to make sure we felt prepared. Although we didn’t win I still feel as though it benefitted us as a team.”

Jaxon Rhoads

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Learning Curve

I knew I wasn't the brightest kid when I was 7, who really was? Yet I tended to learn lessons a lot slower than other kids. If a kid trips in an indentation in the ground they would avoid it the next time. I, on the other hand, would do the same thing over and over and over without realizing it. Until my ignorance caused me much more pain than I will ever feel in my life.

The garage was filled with the humidity of the day. I looked over at my cousin Collin and saw his face fixed with a smirk.

"Dude, the day feels amazing! Grab my scooter and watch this!"

Without protest, I went and grabbed his old, red scooter and gave it to him. He gracefully took off and started to do tricks, doing things that left me in awe. I always thought of him like he was so much better than me at everything he did. He seemed more athletic, stronger, and funnier at most times.

"Jaxon! Hey, wanna try? I can even show you some stuff!" His glee was the only thing I could see.

"Sure, but I don't know how to ride," I mumbled to him. I didn't know why I felt so ashamed but I did.

"Like I said, I will show you!" He started to laugh and pulled me over to his scooter.

I was terrified as I put my hands on the handlebars. Collin told me where to place my feet and showed me the motion to gain traction. The process took only ten minutes before I could ride through my neighborhood with ease. Why did I think it was so hard?

"So how do I do some tricks?" I hopped off the scooter.

"You won't." He said firmly, "It took me a couple of years Jax to do anything you see. You can't learn after ten minutes of practice."

I knew he didn't want to be so strong with his words but he couldn't lie.

"We can do some tomorrow. Let's go back inside!" He offered, back to his normal self.

"Actually I'm going to ride through the neighborhood again and try to learn some more."

"Suit yourself. I'm going to eat."

I turned with the scooter back toward the hills in the sidewalk and rode down. The wind felt so amazing. No wonder Collin loves this. I couldn't get enough. In my glee, I yelled a "WOOH" as the

scooter turned sideways. Everything seemed to freeze and I started to lurch forward. I couldn't stop myself and the concrete was feet away. Somehow I got my elbow out in front of me in time. It dulled my pain, yet it still pained nevertheless. The screeching cry from the scooter filled my ears. I rolled over clutching my elbow that pillowed my fall. I didn't cry or do anything. I sat there and let it pass. The red stain in the concrete was the only thing I could look at. After minutes of silence, the pain faded. I grabbed the scooter and dropped it off in the garage. I didn't want to talk about it, especially with Collin. After a short conversation my dad, I got the torn flesh wrapped up and secured. No one talked to me the rest of the night and I wanted it to stay that way. The night was peaceful as I drifted off into a slumber.

I woke to Collin and my brother Connor shaking, yelling, and doing whatever they could to wake me. They pulled me upward and forced me to do whatever they wanted. We chased each other around the house even though I was still trying to wake up. The day seemed to go on as normal with the three of us. Nothing phased me, even when we went through the garage and passed the scooter.

"Hey, who wants to go on a bike ride to the lake? Heck, grab some fishing poles and let's go fishing while we are at it!" Collin brought up. Everyone seemed to be in agreement on the plan and rode the day away.

The sun had set over the water and we returned home. No one said anything as we packed up our poles and rode back through the hollow trail. As we got to the house, Connor went straight inside and disappeared, leaving Collin and I out on the garage floor.

"Wait a minute, I still need to teach you on your scooter skills," Collin joked. "Come on and get up. I'm not giving you a choice."

"Really? I'm tired dude." I sighed.

"Like I said, you have no choice," He laughed like he was having fun torturing me.

Once again I got on the scooter. He taught me some new techniques and "moves". An hour or two had passed and I had learned almost nothing new as he started back to the door.

"Come on let's go, Connor is probably dying without me," Collin waved over to me.

"I'm going to stay out longer again and try to learn something new."

"Fine by me, see you inside."

I was going to be just as good as him.

I felt the same feeling of thrill as I rode. Trying some moves I had seen Collin do and was determined to master the slender beast. Lap after lap after lap. I didn't want to stop. Then I got to the top of the sidewalk hill. It was steep and full of potential. I didn't slow down and rode right on down it. Halfway down the scooter started to act as if it had a mind of its own. Then it jerked sideways. This time I was not going to be able to stop myself. I was going to plunge right into the concrete.

Once again the world around me froze. My body wouldn't budge as my slow descent to the earth was

inevitable. The scooter flew out from underneath me and I fell face first onto the ground. The initial pain was excruciating. Gravity kept me pinned on the surface, dragging my head on the concrete. All I could see was blood. I wanted it to stop, but I flailed to no avail. All I could do was feel my flesh being pulled from my head to the concrete. I kept going until my limp body did an entire flip back onto my head. I screamed in agony and started to crawl myself back toward the house. I looked around for people to help. I only saw men working on the roofs of neighbors, completely helpless to my cause. My vision was blurred and uneven. After minutes of struggling, I finally got back to my front door. I couldn't even reach the doorbell and had to pound against the door. Then the familiar face of my aunt stood over me. She muttered God's name under her breath and took me in.

"Oh my god Jaxon, what'd you do?" Aunt Michelle's eyes darted to the bathroom. "Bernie come here now!"

Michelle pulled me into my parent's bathroom. My parents arrived and stared in shock.

"Jaxon! What happened to you? Oh god," My mom looked deranged.

My mind was racing, full of dark thoughts of what happened. I tried to tell her the story but the gaping hole of my mouth wouldn't speak on command. Then behind my parents, was the giant, wall mirror. I saw a creature staring back at me. It looked like a replication of myself, torn and beaten. I couldn't look away, neither did it.

"No! That's not me!" I cried in denial. "Just stop it, please! Please, someone, fix it!" I saw my parents suffering as they listened to my helpless cries. The chipped tooth, torn flesh, drizzling blood, offset nose, were all features of the "new" me. They all stood there trying to comfort me and tending my wounds. I wanted the day to be over and wake up from the nightmare I was in. Honestly, I didn't believe anything was real. No one dared to say a word, trying not to say anything that could set me off.

"Come here Jaxon," My father comforted me in a quiet voice.

He spoke to the other adults and they left as on cue and he guided me into his room. There he gave me a spot to lay and think. He lay next to me and comforted me the entire time. I laid there for hours until I finally fought off the attacks on my mind and washed the day away.

The experience that had occurred was one of the worst falls I will ever take in my life so far. I had learned a lot from the traumatizing event since then and wanted to explain my story. I was not a very smart kid at the time and was jealous of cousins capabilities. Though the accident helped me learn some important aspects of life, I started to learn that you shouldn't judge people. I walked into third grade like that and hated almost every moment in the beginning of the year. Yet I don't blame them, hence they are 3rd graders but it did help my focus in school somehow.

Honestly, it taught me that I didn't know as much about the world as I had thought. I had started to pick it up in school and set the straight A goal as a student. That goal has been fulfilled ever since. It had helped me with my caution and my ways to deal with hardships. Most of all, I accepted lessons and learned to adapt. I would see patterns and learn from my life experiences and helped me through my ride. This experience I honestly love for what it has done for me. All the pain I went through helped me become the person I am today and I thank it for that. I would not trade this moment for anything else in the world.

Ryanne Rhude

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Lies My Mother Told Me

My mother left us one day. Just out of the blue, she never came home from work. I didn't know if it was planned or spontaneous or even why she did it. My brother, sister, and I miraculously ended up together and we were raised by a loving family who couldn't bear the thought of splitting us apart. I thank God everyday for my family, but the doubts remain about *her*, the woman who adopted me and the woman that I called mother for so many years. There are questions that will always remain unanswered about why she did it, but what sticks in my brain are the lies that she told me. I can't get these out of my head. Lies. That's what I lived off. That's everything I learned from my mother, the person who I was completely attached to. She taught me everything supplied on little fibs that turned into much bigger things.

1. I'll always be there for you.

The moment she brought me home from Germany she whispered into my little, five year old ear, "I'll always be there for you." When I first came home to New York City she took me everywhere and did everything with me. She always was there because I loved her so much and couldn't be without her for long because everything around me was new, including our relationship.

These words seemed to fade when she married my father. Being 9 when she married him I could be more independent, but I still longed for my mother and her warmth everyday, everywhere.

You know how it is when a woman who craves a child and adopts one -- she immediately becomes pregnant. There we were, in that same statistic and a year after dad came along, she became pregnant with Jacob. She was head over heels in love with that boy and at 10, again I wasn't sure where I fit in, if I did at all.

But when Kylee came around I had disappeared. The 14 year old me was just a loner, geek who had good grades at school. Her and dad divorced when I was 16 and it just fizzled out from there.

Then she left two months ago, I'm 19 years old now. I walked into the house after school the whole counter was clean and the only thing on it was a note.

It read, "I'll be gone when you read this. All of my belongings are with me and the house is yours. Take care of the little ones and don't try to call, I changed my number. There is a problem I have to take care of. I'm not coming back. --Mom."

No information she was just gone.

2. I love you.

Everyday for 14 years my mom would push open my door and flip on the light. Blinding me to the extent where I would lie there squinting.

"Wake up honey bunches," she would say, "Jezabelle..." She'd shake me once, "Jezabelle honey..." She'd shake me twice. "You need to get up." Then she would lift me out of the bed and stand me up. It would take me a second to balance at that early time of 5:30. Then she'd smile, give me small peck on the cheek, and walk out. She would shut the door whispering, "I love you."

Every time she left or I left, "I love you." Every time I or she was sad or did something absolutely brilliant, "I love you." She told my dad it, my sister, and my two brothers but when she left that cold, foggy Friday morning the counter had a note. No where inside the note did it say, "I love you."

Three years ago my friends and I were driving to our high schools football game and the sop light

turned green for us. We were turning left and a man decided to disobey by running straight through it and hitting the side of our car. We rolled twice leading to the death of my friend Harper. I broke my left leg and the two other girls took barely any damage. When we got to the hospital mom didn't show up, but dad did. He held me in his arms and said, "Honey if you would have been Harper me myself would have died." He smiled and told me, "It's going to get better, I love you."

My mom never called while I was in the hospital for three days. She never came in, but she texted me once, "You could have died, be more careful. Sorry this happened to you. Work schedule isn't being flexible for me to contact you, sorry."

Dad said it, she didn't. Not even when I came home and started walking again.

Love is a strong word.

3. You and your siblings will always be put first over me.

Jezabelle, Jacob, and Kylee. Her four beautiful kids that love her to the moon and back. She always would do anything for us bring us to school events, help us get better when she's also sick, and keep us in the swing of things. She told me one day after she had been sleeping and tired while pregnant with Kylee, "I'm so tired."

I sighed because I had a school concert and it was worth a grade. "Please Mama it's important I get there." So with all that was left in her she brought me to the stupid concert and pushed her own health aside.

She did that until Kylee was born and after it was always her over us. When I wanted to go to a friend's house I couldn't because she was too hungry to drive. What type of an excuse is that?

4. You're happiness is worth any price.

I was crying on my seventh birthday when my mother arrived home with a big box. I opened it and inside was a small Barbie doll that had a card attached it read, "Does this make you happy? I'm so proud of you and I love you with all my heart. You're happiness is worth any price."

I smiled and stopped crying. She did just that for me. She actually did buy me whatever I needed to make me happy. This one wasn't a lie she kept me happy by pulling dollar after dollar out of her purse wasting her and dad's salary on the stupidest things I didn't need. I know now this was not worth it. That's why I added this it was a not needed thing she did for me. Wasteful.

5. Boys can't save you, but family can.

I never thought in my entire life I would love someone more than my family, but I do. I have found the love of my freaking useless life. Holden, a bleach blonde tan hunk of a guy. He's smart funny, enthusiastic and he's always on my side all of the time.

Everyday I wake up and walk across the hall, push the button four on the elevator wall, and walk to his dorm. I knock wait til he knocks back and i let myself in with the second key. I lay down by him and sleep for another hour before we both get up and go to class.

3 months Thanksgiving was another exception and we left early that morning of the 26th to drive back to my home. When we got there it was 7:30 APM and my mother was ticked off. We got there late due to traffic and the dinner was set on the table, cold.

She laid her eyes on Holden before pushing me back towards the door, "5 o'clock I said. That's when dinner was ready. It has been sitting right here since then and you got here two hours late are you kidding me!" She yelled.

She hit me in the stomach with a closed fist throwing me back. Right as she was going to take another swing Holden pushed me out of the way before taking the punch. He gasped for breath while shooing me out the front door so we could leave. He had saved me from my own mother.

6. Being older makes you more superior.

High school soccer. Starting Varsity goalkeeper. All three years so far I sat in the driver's seat pushing everyone around considering that I was the captain. Senior year the new sophomores were trying out and one girl, Delaney was the head of their pack. There were no freshman on our JV and Varsity teams

my junior year.

She was the starting GK for the freshman team and now she was set to take anyone down field players or goalie. The training was hard but she stuck up by me on the runs and other activities. When the list came out it was plastered to the locker room door the list for Varsity had 15 players and at the very bottom read Delaney's name along with mine below her's.

A few weeks into practice he assigned me a starting position and the captain's band. I was very proud of myself and I helped the new sophomores on Varsity with skills. Delaney and I trained together peacefully, until the first game of the season. The starting eleven list was placed on the door and the goalie spot didn't have my name on it. I was furious. I sat out the whole first five games.

Age makes no difference in any skill level you are only superior if you work for the position. I was stripped of the captain's band and it was given Delaney, she was in charge of me.

7. I support all of your decisions.

Freshman year I tried out for soccer and it was the first time I did any sport. I was happy that I was in shape enough to keep up with the upperclassmen. The first two days of the five day tryout mom wasn't around she was on a business trip. She had no idea I was trying out for soccer.

My dad loves soccer and he hates it. I was so excited when I came home from soccer tryouts the third day. I had stopped every shot taken me. I pulled open the front door and ran into the kitchen where my adoptive mother stood glaring at me,

"You are not playing soccer. That is a waste of time for you. There are so many other things you could do. Why soccer? You know I hate it. You are not going to the rest of the tryouts."

She grounded me and said if I wasn't home before 5:30 everyday after school for the next two weeks she would take my phone. It was a good thing tryouts ended at 5:00 she wasn't home until 5:50.

I went to the tryouts trying to not think of her. When the time came for the list to go up I was written down as a Varsity goalkeeper. I was so happy and I ran home screaming, but guess who was home early. She stopped me in my tracks. I still had all my gear on and was sweating buckets.

She never has never gone to any of my soccer games ever. It was my decision to tryout she couldn't stop me.

My 21st birthday Holden took me to the mall to buy me anything. We slipped into Forever 21 and standing in line before us was a mother and daughter probably about 17 years old.

"Annie Joseph." The mother said to the man at the register. I froze. Tears welled up my eyes. When she was done checking out I tapped the mother on the shoulder.

"Excuse me," My voice quivered.

She whirled around and looked right into my blue eyes, unlike her brown ones. I had no words. The daughter looked at me weird and said, "Who are you."

The mother looked down at her daughter. "My biggest and worst mistake of my life," she explained. Her breath reeked of coffee. "Happy Birthday Jezebelle."

She turned away and her daughter looked back at me, She was almost an exact replica of my mom.

They strolled right out of the store like nothing happened. She had been seeing someone else at the same time as my dad. That was her problem. That was my younger sister and I didn't even know she existed.

Olivia Richardson

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Dianne Hirner

Category: Poetry

mess up

A sad hopeless world
Where people strive but are deprived of knowledge
Where people can't get into college because of their place
Inflected by their race
We look out staring into empty space praying for hope
Every day a mother wonders how she will cope with babies getting shot
Because even they thought they were protected
The world's heart is still infected with hate
Cannot one soul even appreciate what we have done for our sons and daughters
Cannot one soul remember that we are the children of the slaughtered
Some ask why even bother
Why even try
Do you not know you shall surely die
But I will not be quiet until they hear my roaring battle cry
For I will shall not be silenced
I will stand up and fight
My voice shall be heard all day and all night
And when they tell me to back down I shall put up a fight
I feel sorry for the man with no voice
But despise the man who had the choices to rise up and conquer a nation
I pity you in ignorance
For you are always blind
But if you came out to the light with me you would have peace of mind
For I see the signs and I hear the sirens that call out to me
I reply begging for sweet serenity
Can no one hear my plea
Can one hear my cry
Maybe they were right
Will I surely die
And even if I die
I died trying
Sweet serenity come to me
Oh world hear my plea
For I hear my ancestor's crying out to me
They tell me not to make their work in vain
Screaming to me saying that even though there was pain there was hope
And now you are giving up your right to vote
I oughta wash your mouth out with soap

For you are a disgrace to my race
Do you not know our place
The place where we fought and clawed and screamed to be
Sweet serenity come to me
For some will never know the nights I have cried
The moments I had lied saying I had pride
But pride comes with understanding
Don't you wish life wasn't so demanding
Oh please sweet serenity go to them
Oh please go to those who don't understand that my cries are now in great demand
For we shall love all and learn to adjust
Please help their ignorant eyes see that this is a must
And we shall hold each other's hands in complete trust
Sweet serenity go to them
Go to those who sincerely believe that there is not a problem
For It is winter and they believe it is autumn
They will never understand how their ancestors taught them to hate
For they can never appreciate how beautiful I am
Never appreciate my brothers and sisters across this land
For you believe you are inferior
But what is in your interior
Racist is not a word that should go hush hush
But instead teach you who not to trust
You try to hurry out of this topic but what's the rush
Is it the fact that you might get caught
That you wish we were still sold and bought
Do not tell us what is and isn't racist
For you are not us and that is not where your place is
If we say it's racist than maybe you should embrace it
I am giving you a challenge and I hope you will take it
Learn from your mistakes
Learn what is your place
Stare trust right in the face
When I close my eyes I can see a world where sweet serenity comes to them
Where we all gather around and sing an old hymn
A world where it is not us versus them
Where we see each others' differences and look at them as great
At night I pray that this is fate
Our time is coming so don't be late
For our nation to be truly great

Abbey Rolofson

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Short Story

Hijacked

She knew she shouldn't keep digging, someone would get suspicious if they haven't already. But something kept urging her on telling her that everything would be okay, that the moment they stepped off this death-trap she could run to the cops. Although, for some reason even The Fates themselves don't understand, she didn't want to turn him in. She had this feeling that even if she wanted to she couldn't, wouldn't. She didn't know why, but it made her stomach churn. Although it was probably just her imagination, she was a good person. She had always done what was good for her community and friends over herself. She had decided, she would turn him in no matter what.

She snapped her attention back to the computer in front of her. She heard footsteps quickly approaching the door, she minimized the tab and dove under the desk climbing into the air shaft pulling it closed behind her. She had the opportunity, she could have just left and ran hoping no one would know its her. But no, of course not, Ashlynn Finn isn't just your average cruise ship performer. Ashlynn graduated top of her class on an athletics scholarship. She was always curious, wanting to know more, to find a way to complete her research. The unknown was not an option for her, she needed all the answers and hopefully that trait would save her one day rather than get her killed.

Her phone vibrated in her back pocket shaking the shaft and making a loud buzzing noise. She quickly pulled it out just in time to see her mom's contact name disappear. Ashlynn heard shuffling and the click of an unlocking door followed by the thump of the door shutting. She shrunk back in the shafts as she watched the legs take agonizingly slow steps towards her. She wondered, not for the first time, how Stacie had felt. She shook her head to try and clear it. She wasn't going to think about that. Ashlynn's arms shook as she held herself up at the top of the shaft to avoid making noise. Her arms had never been the strongest considering she was only involved in soccer and track but she did work them out some, she prayed to everything that some was enough to save her life.

The mystery person was only there for a few minutes and Ashlynn was grateful for that. Although she couldn't see their face there was no doubt about it by the grace in how he stepped, the man had been Alec Kienster. Ashlynn had met Alec the first day of the cruise when he had walked into her dance rehearsals and said he was a guest for the crew, that he would be performing with them. Ashlynn had done the only thing she could think to do, she laughed in his face. Her boss came in and when she informed Ashlynn that he was in fact the guest she apologized and led him to the dance room. Alec and Ashlynn had become close through rehearsals that day and continued on through the cruise. They talked and laughed relating through the arts. He was so graceful she was mesmerized every time he performed. Alec had such a playful and caring energy around him that Ashlynn couldn't help but be his friend. She would have never expected Alec Kienster of all people to be involved in something as big as this.

"It's always the cute ones" She mumbled as she scrambled out of the vent and pulled her page back up. Too many thoughts to comprehend floating through her mind. Maybe it was just a misunderstanding? Yeah, Alec isn't bad is he? Had she just been missing all the signs? Ashlynn decided she couldn't think about the facts with all these opinions clouding her mind so she cleaned up any trace of her and crawled through the vents back to her suite. When Ashlynn arrived she changed into her jogging clothes and put in her headphones to start her jog around the massive boat. When Ashlynn stopped to rest she decided

it would be the perfect time for her to call her mom back. She quickly pulled out her phone dialed her number. The phone rang about three times before her mom answered the phone.

“Ashlynn?”

“Hey mom.” She sighed. She hadn’t had the comfort of her mom’s voice for awhile.

“Honey are you still working on that stupid ship?” Her mom asked.

“Yes mom, the 24th cruise just started remember? Two weeks long and then I get my four week break.”

“Oh I know I just wish you had realized you have so much potential to change the world. I mean we didn’t spend that much money on your talents at college for you to waste them on a cruise ship stage.” Her mom screamed. “You didn’t even come home after college for more than two days. You just graduated and moved onto a cruise ship. I haven’t seen you for a year. I need my baby.” By now she could hear sniffing on the other side of the call.

“Mom are you crying? I’ll be back in four days.” She giggled.

“I know I’m sorry it’s just you’re so smart.”

“Trust me mom, I know what I can do.”

“What th-” Ashlynn didn’t let her finish her question as she had already hung up. The call hadn’t been comforting as she had hoped, if anything it just made her more stressed out. Now not only did she need to figure this all out but she also had to do it in four days. She wasn’t really in the mood to jog anymore so she turned and went back to her room.

Ashlynn took a quick shower then went to go get dressed for the dinner tonight. The dinner where she would be performing with Alec. She laid out her costume, an elegant yet practical dress with intricate designs. She sighed knowing how long it must have taken. Ashlynn dried her hair before putting it on so she would not ruin it. Once she was finally ready it was dark outside. She checked the time seeing if she didn’t leave now she would be late.

When she arrived other performers were already stretching. They were all so stunning Ashlynn didn’t feel she belonged. She was good but the person who made her feel at home here was gone. She had left Ashlynn here alone. In her thoughts she hadn’t noticed Alec until he was right in her face.

“Ashlynn?” Alec scanned her face looking genuinely worried for her well being. She grinned. Her smile quickly dropped, she remembered. She hated that she wasn’t sure, he was amazing. He made her feel childish the way she starting crushing on him. Honestly she was a woman but she felt like a girl, afraid to talk to a cute boy. She looked to his brown orbs. She wished to brush his blonde hair to the side so she could see them clearer.

“Just thinking.” She beamed earning a bright smile. The dancers gathered for one more run through. Despite her efforts her eyes drifted to Alec. The way he moved was beautiful. Who gave him the right? Nothing, he didn’t need permission. He was oblivious to her care. This was it, the biggest performance of the whole cruise.

Ashlynn nudged the door open dragging herself through. She was in a trance until her head hit the pillow, she was out like a light. Ashlynn woke to a bang. She rushed to the window and laughed. Alec laid on the ground in a pile of vase. Her face etched with worry she helped him up, blood streaming out of his arm. “Any particular reason for you trying to sneak around the staff suites?” She questioned him raising one eyebrow. Alec’s face turned pink and he moved to scratch the back of his neck.

“I could have just been coming to talk to you.” Alec raised his eyes to meet hers and they both quickly glanced away. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Alec looking at his injury with worry.

Ashlynn’s face turned serious and she moved forward to start working. Alec refused to make eye contact with Ashlynn, but it wasn’t like she was trying. She had been focusing on taking care of him. She finished cleaning and bandaging his wound. Alec glanced at the wrap covering his upper arm before pulling his short sleeve shirt down, hiding it.

“But really,” She started getting his attention “Why were you wondering around here?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yes” He nodded and turned to look her in the eyes. He waited a moment searching her eyes and debating whether he could actually drag this girl into the pit he’d dug.

“Okay, but not here. Follow me.” Alec crept along the walls dragging Ashlynn slowly behind him until they reached a place Ashlynn had never been. Ashlynn was being cautious now that they weren’t near people. After she had seen him earlier she was afraid he was the criminal she had been tracking. She was suddenly aware of what she was wearing. Her face turned pink as her arms flew to cover her body. Even though she had little clothes on that covered her decently, she had never felt more naked in her life. Alec didn’t seem to notice her shift in mood since he had been looking around, making sure no one was around.

“Ashlynn I made a mistake, I- I got in the middle of something I didn’t belong in. I found someone smuggling drugs onto the ship.” He said, his voice laced with concern. She sighed and lifted her head to look him in the eyes.

“Are you telling me you are trying to catch whoever it is?” He slowly nodded in response to her question. She hugged him tightly catching him by surprise but it didn’t take him long to hug her back. She started sobbing into his shoulder making it hard for him to understand what she was trying to say. “Ash, calm down please I can’t understand you.” He lifted her head to look at him and continued “now try again.”

Ashlynn took a deep breath and nodded before diving into the twisted story of how she found out about the drugs. She didn’t realize she had started talking about the one thing she promised herself she would get over. Stacie.

“Ashlynn, are you telling me another performer was murdered while on break?”

“Yes” She whispered. He nodded looking into the distance his face showing he was calculating something. Ashlynn would of laughed at his ridiculous face if they hadn’t been in the situation they were in. But the problem was, they were and that wouldn’t change until they figured this out.

“I didn’t want to drag you into this, but I should have known you were already in the middle of it.” Alec mumbled to himself. Ashlynn was sure she wasn’t supposed to hear that.

“Ash?”

“Yeah?”

“What if the other performer-”

“Her name was Stacie” She mumbled

“Okay, what if *Stacie* had found out about the drugs and was killed because of that?” Alec said putting emphasis on Stacie. Why hadn’t Ashlynn thought of that? It was so obvious now.

“Oh my gosh” Ashlynn gasped, her hand instinctively flying to her mouth. “Stacie said she needed to tell me something but I didn’t get to talk to her before her break.” Ashlynn slowly slid down the wall until she was on the ground but didn’t have any tears left to shed. Alec started to walk towards her but was cut off by someone stepping out from the shadows on the side of the building. How long they had been there, neither knew. Alec stepped forward almost protectively and spoke out, his voice ringing in the empty space. Ashlynn cautiously rose up, her knees still shaking from crying, until she was standing beside Alec.

“What do you want, Jasper?” Alec sneered. Ashlynn was taken aback by his attitude as she had never seen this side of him.

“Oh nothing” Jasper replied, seemingly unfazed by Alec’s threatening tone. “But you have something I want.” he held up a gun and pointed it at Ashlynn. “Alec tell me how much you know before I shoot the girl.”

Ashlynn’s heart was beating in her ears, she could hear the blood rushing. She recognized the man. Zain Jasper. He was a regular on the cruise, which would make it easy for him to transport drugs. She couldn’t see his face anymore, all she saw was down the barrel of the gun.

“I won’t tell you, and you won’t shoot her.” Jasper laughed at Alec.

“And why would I do that?”

“Because I won’t let you.”

“Is that a challenge?” Jasper smirked. A shot rang out and a thump sounded as Ashlynn fell to the ground. But the thing was she hadn’t been shot, she had been tackled. Ashlynn rolled over to see Alec laying on the ground with a puddle of blood slowly forming around him. Ashlynn rushed to his side and held his face.

“Alec? What did you do? Why?”

“Ashlynn, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t have the guts to ask you out. I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you sooner. I’m sorry I was so obsessed with protecting you I didn’t think about protecting myself. I’m sorry.” Alec whispered gripping her hand. They cried their tears running together with the blood making a disgusting but poetically beautiful mess. She cried onto him and his grip loosened, until it wasn’t at all. Ashlynn cried harder as she looked at his now lifeless body. She turned and ran, she ran and ran until she couldn’t run anymore. Alec had died for her, she couldn’t waste that. Ashlynn hid behind some crates and whipped her phone out quickly dialing 911. When the click sounded tell her someone had answered Ashlynn hurried her words.

“Jaileen Jones Cruise Ship Services, ship 3, a man named Zain Jasper is on board dealing drugs. He killed Stacie Lane and Alec Kienster.”

“Thank you ma’am. A helicopter will be there soon”

“Come and face me.” She yelled into the wind.

“I’m right here no need to yell.” Ashlynn whipped around to face the monster. With a sudden burst of courage Ashlynn lunged at him. She grabbed the barrel of the gun before he could shoot and pushed his hand off the trigger. She had the element of surprise on her side. She stepped back and looked at him aiming the gun at his head.

“Don’t move” her voice was surprisingly calm and strong. Once everything registered, the man sneered.

“Why would I take orders from a little girl? You probably don’t even know how to use that gun” A wicked smile spread across his face. Ashlynn snarled at him, moving the gun downwards, and shooting him in the shin. The man howled in pain jumping around and holding his leg. It sounded bad but Ashlynn hoped they would have to amputate it. She wanted the worst for this man. She returned the gun to his head and repeated the orders. The murderer slowly raised his hands. Ashlynn stood unmoving, a stone face to match. Jasper’s eyes widened as he watched the scene unfold. A helicopter was landing on the main dock behind Ashlynn, who was still not budging, and police rushed out towards them. They ran past Ashlynn and wrapped Jasper’s hands in cuff behind his back. He was still dumbfounded. A wicked smile crossed his face and he looked at Ashlynn then Alec, his eyes flicking back and forth. His smile widened and he relaxed.

“Don’t worry sweetheart,” He directed towards Ashlynn “I’ll find a way, I’m going to find you, and you will be able to join your boyfriend real soon” Jasper’s eyes were crazy as he struggled to get away from the cops and move towards her. She watched him, the pig he is, get dragged into the helicopter. A young cop approached her and said another copter would be there soon to get the body. No ‘I’m sorry for your loss’ B.S. and she appreciated that. She watched the helicopter fly away until it became just a dot on the horizon.

Ashlynn walked up to Alec’s body and just collapsed. She told him everything, what she had wanted to tell him, things she had never told anyone, everything. She knew she could trust him, who was there for him to tell now?

Ashlynn hadn’t realized she was crying until her vision became so blurred she couldn’t even make out the fine white scar she had noticed on his collarbone. His only imperfection. Something she would never get to ask him about. Aslynn was always strong on the concept of time is precious and to live every moment like your last. She knew if but it had never mattered to her as much as it did now. Now

she knew, you could be alive and well, perfect, one moment. Just seconds later you could be dead, not breathing, not moving, nothing. Gone forever. Everyone likes to tell you, as long as you don't forget them they will be with you forever. They won't. Those are all lies because just thinking of them isn't going to bring them back to you. To be held in their arms, to be happy and feel the warmth that radiates off their body, off the body of all living human beings. You won't have that. So what's the point? It makes it more difficult to forget.

Harry Rubin

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Adam Dunsker

Category: Humor

Admissions

It was the winter before Tommy's third birthday, and he was getting ready for his second interview. His parents combed his short brown hair, picked out the perfect pants and little shoes for him to wear, and walked him to the Starbucks where his interviewer was waiting. The parents watched from outside as Tommy sat down on a booster seat across the table from his interviewer, an alumnus of the Happy Sunshine Early Childhood Center. All they could do was hope he didn't shove his plastic dinosaur in his mouth and slobber all over the table.

Two weeks earlier, Tommy had interviewed with Little Flowers Preschool, known in the early child care world as "the Harvard of day cares." Unfortunately for Tommy and his parents, just as the Little Flowers graduate asked Tommy what he did in his free time, Tommy spilled the interviewer's coffee and screamed. As they walked home from the Starbucks that day, Tommy's parents felt horrible. Tommy didn't mind, but his parents knew that this one interview could have ruined their son's toddlerhood.

Tommy's parents had taught him a lot since the Little Flowers debacle. They had told him about enunciating his words, making proper eye contact, and demonstrating good posture. Now they were watching him through the window of the cafe, as he slobbered all over the table. They looked at each other. Maybe they were wrong. Maybe Tommy wasn't destined for a highly-selective preschool. Tommy's parents didn't want this to happen.

They had heard stories about community day care students ending up picking up trash from gas stations. They thought of all the other parents. Little Stevie down the street had already gotten accepted to one of the country's top public day cares early admission, and Tommy's parents could not be upstaged by Stevie's.

They walked home from Starbucks very quietly that cold morning, Tommy chewed on his plastic dinosaur the whole way. As they walked past Stevie's house, they tried to ignore Stevie's dad, who was fetching the newspaper.

"Interview didn't go so well, huh?" Stevie's dad remarked.

Tommy and his parents kept on walking, as if Stevie's dad had said nothing.

"Not to worry, our Stevie threw spaghetti during his first interview," said Stevie's dad.

Tommy still had one big advantage over Stevie-- his standardized test scores. On the ACT, Stevie tore and scribbled his way through the test. Tommy, on the other hand, had been carefully trained by an ACT tutor. For two hours every Wednesday and Saturday for the past six weeks, Tommy had been practicing filling in bubbles. On the day of the test, Tommy was able to fill in 50 bubbles, 6 of which

resulted in correct answers, putting him in the 94th percentile for his age group.

Tommy was almost a perfect boy. In his infant play group, he had been captain of the debate team. While all the other infants sat on the carpet slobbering, Tommy also sat on the carpet slobbering. However, Tommy's parents had started coaching a debate team and made Tommy captain. He finished the year with a 3.9 GPA, collecting all A's except for sharing. His parents blamed the bad grade in sharing on the fact that Tommy was sick on the day that sharing was covered. Tommy had gotten the highest marks in his class for both sitting still and keeping quiet. He had gotten a letter of recommendation which stated that he is a joy to teach. The only thing he needed to perfect was his interview.

Before his final interview, this time with the Smiling Faces Preschool, Tommy had been trained by a highly paid interview counselor. He was trained to sit still and nod at everything. As Tommy entered the Starbucks for the last time, his parents waved at him through the window. From outside, they could see Tommy sitting still, nodding as if he understood what the interviewer was saying. He even shook the interviewer's hand as they finished up. On the way out, the interviewer said to Tommy's parents something about how nice a boy Tommy is. Pleased with their son's performance, Tommy's parents bought him ice cream.

That spring, Tommy's parents received an envelope in the mail addressed from Smiling Faces Preschool. Excited about the contents, they decided to let Tommy open it, for it was he who had worked many hard hours to get a good lower-lower education. He grasped the envelope, crumpled it in his pudgy fingers, and promptly swallowed it.

Anna Ryan

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Raytown Senior High School, Raytown, MO

Educator: Brad McTighe

Category: Flash Fiction

A New Adventure

It has an inescapable gelidity. Not like the biting, brutal teeth of a winter gust or the smothering, icy palm of a sea wave, but more like the creeping chill that comes upon you right after a warm embrace when the physical and emotional connection is gone and you feel a little bit colder, a little bit lonelier. You are alone, yes, but it's not necessarily a haunting kind of loneliness. It is better described as the kind of peaceful isolation you would experience when you go to sleep with the windows open and wake up in the middle of the night hours later to just gaze up at the twinkling stars above and be content with that quiet moment where it is just you and the universe. It is a sort of solitude where only you and your thoughts occupy an infinity of time and space. This cannot be confused with complete consciousness of one's mind, though. It is more of an awareness, like when you are dreaming and half of you takes notice of your familiar pillows and blankets but the other half is engaged in some wild fantasy. Likewise, it is more of a faint illusion, one that distracts you from reality until you wake up to new future.

That faint, lonely, dark illusion is all at once limitless and confining. Your thoughts and feelings ricochet in perpetual reverberations, forcing you to reflect on who you are and what lies ahead. Contemporary to this seemingly endless expanse of freedom is also the sensation that you are restrained by some incomprehensible force that lulls you to relax in silent reveries, an indefinable entity that makes your mind sluggish and your willpower apathetic.

You are also aware of a stillness that defies all possible explanation. There are no sounds, no movement, only the clinging remnants of indistinct voices and visions that still linger like a bright light still flashes beneath your closed eyelids. They are similar to when you stumble in late to a meeting or class and the previous state of raucous laughter and talking fades to murmurs and whispers as all attention is on you. You remember what it felt like but it all happened so fast that you did not have a chance to pinpoint any one specific person or conversation. That is what It feels like, with some kind of shroud causing reality to seem hazy and disjointed.

A pervading aroma is also present, one that is not so much characteristic of any one leaf or flower, but of comfort. It is the scent of your mother's perfume when she tucked you in at night, or the faint trace of salt and sun-bleached sand in the breeze when you fell asleep in a hammock on the beach. Whatever It is, It does not really remind you of the moment when you experienced that event, but of the feelings linked to those events. The taste is familiar too, like when you are still in bed in the morning, barely awake, but you can smell blueberry muffins from the kitchen and almost taste them in your mouth despite the fact that it still tastes nasty from sleeping so long. It is the anticipation of something good to come rather than an acknowledgement of the present situation that makes your current state so bafflingly enjoyable.

And then a light. Not a piercing, blinding light like waking up to a blaring alarm clock after four hours

of sleep, but more like when the clouds part on a chilly day and the sun's rays meander down to warm your cheeks and chase away the last clutches of winter. With those rays and that light comes a new embrace, one that banishes all previous darkness and solitude and ensures protection against anything that may come. And then that embrace, like an eager child pulling their parents to see what hides around the next corner, takes your hand and guides you into the future. Life was a journey indeed, but death is not the destination. It is a whole new adventure.

Mary Salazar

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Ft Osage High School, Independence, MO

Educator: Tim Dial-Scruggs

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Crashing Down

I see my sister standing at the emergency room entrance as I get out of Lucy's car. Quickly walking to her, I see our family friend Jessica standing there with Andrea and I hug her.

"Is everything okay?" I ask her worried and she just smiles at me sadly. "Wait where's Miah?" I ask as Andrea gets off the phone with my dad. Her face is stained with tears and her nose is red.

"Jeremiah, I had to take him home he started freaking out when mom started breathing weird. So I called Jessica and she came." She says and wipes her cheeks.

"Well.. is mom okay?" I ask her scared and her lips quiver as she opens her mouth to respond.

"Jessica tell her.." she whimpers and I look at Jessica and she wraps her arms around me pulling me to her chest.

"They made us leave.. Mom isn't breathing on her own so they wanted to put a breathing tube in." She says her voice breaking at the last part. Instantly my stomach drops and I feel tears brim my eyes. "Mom had a stroke Josy..and she's not responding." She says.

I whimper and began to cry not able to hold back my tears any longer. "No..no no no!" I cry louder. Pulling closer to Jessica, burying my face in her chest I cry. Feeling as if I was going to faint. Jessica notices and has me sit back against the brick wall on the side of the entrance. I slide down and bury my face in between my knees. Crying so hard my body shakes and I hiccup, sniffing I look up to see my sister on the phone again.

"I don't need any drama Dad. I have Josy here hysterical, this is about mom." She says and wipes her nose. I wipe my eyes as I finally calm down. My throat clenching with the need to cry, but I push it down. *Be strong Josy.* I think to myself, I stand up and readjust my clothes.

"Can we sit in the waiting room?" I ask sniffing and my sister turns to me.

"Yeah. Of course; let's go." Andrea says and we walk inside and sit down. I feel a soft pounding in my head and I close my eyes to lessen the pain and sit in the soft cushioned chair. Everyone is silent, no one knows what to say. We sit and Jessica, Lucy and my sister begin to talk but I stay silent. Finally my dad shows up, I get up and hug him then sit back down. I sigh as

I rub my temples trying to get rid of this worsening headache.

"I'll go see if they're ready for us to go back in now." Andrea says and gets up and goes to ask. My heart beats rapidly, scared of going to see her and unsure why because I practically begged my sister to have someone come get me from Nancy's house. She comes and waves us back, I slowly follow behind. We push the button for the doors to swing open and see her room. Room 28. I stand frozen in place as the wooden door is closed and so were the curtains the hospitals use for privacy.

"Do you need a minute?" My sister asks quietly and I shake my head. She nods, and she pulls the door open. There she is, lying there with a machine. Her hair all spread out on the pillows. I feel tears brim my eyes and a lump in my throat.

I take a deep shaky breath as I move closer to her, my hands shaking as I grab her left hand. Sighing in relief, her hands were not cold like I expected. Instead they were warm, I rub the side of her thumb while looking at the butterfly tattoo on her hand. I feel tears well up in my eyes and I let them fall silently down my face as I feel that burning sensation to cry again. The male nurse comes in, he's

dressed in a dark pale blue uniform with black shoes, he looks young like he was fresh out of college.

"I'm just here to check all her vitals." He says as he looks at the computer. I step back out of his way and sit next to my dad.

"When will she get a room?" Andrea asks, the room feels so crowded with all of us in it. It's making me claustrophobic. I swallow down the tears and wipe my eyes.

"We are waiting for a room to open up in ICU it should but about an hour and a half." He says, we all nod. Then the doctor comes in he stands on the right side of her bed and checks her eyes seeing if they would respond to the flashlight. He chews his lips nervously then steps back and looks at us.

"Well we ran a lot of tests, and we have concluded that she has had a stroke. We will have to do an MRI to see how many, and how old. She's not responding to the flashlight and she wasn't breathing very good on her own. Can you tell me exactly what happened today?" He asks and my sister sighs, she's probably told the story a million times.

"I was at work and my brother Jeremiah said that mom had fallen asleep. So when I got home we tried to wake her up and she wouldn't wake up, I called my dad and he told us to call the paramedics and so we did. We got her to sit up and mumble but after that nothing." She says, I look at her and take a deep shaky breath.

"Has she had a stroke before? From what you said she was in the hospital earlier this year for heart failure?" He asks and my dad steps in

"Yes, she had blisters on her legs and we did not know why. Eventually it got to unbearable for her and we came to the hospital and found out she had heart failure and that is what caused the blisters to form." My sister says.

"About 2 months ago, when we were going to Andrea's to pick up the kids. Martha was driving and suddenly she said she couldn't feel her left side. So we pulled into a gas station and when I helped her out of the car she was dragging her left side. I told her to let me take her to the hospital but she said no. Once we left and got on the highway she was normal. Luckily she took an aspirin because all that day she had a migraine." He says as the doctor writes on a piece of paper.

"And you said on her left side?" He asks as he pulls up the blankets over her legs and he examines them. I watch his every move, looking at the old scars of her last visit to the hospital. Her various horse tattoos. Wanting to remember every last detail just in case.

"Yes her left side." My dad repeats and we all look at each other.

"Alright well, we will try to get her a room and we will figure this all out." He says, and gives us a sympathetic nod, leaving the small room.

"I'm gonna go to quick trip and get some stuff to drink. Josy have you eaten?" My sister asks and I shake my head. "Alright I'll get you something." She says and asks everyone what they want to drink. Jessica, Lucy, and her leave. It's now just me and my dad. We sit there silently and he goes up and talks to her. I just sit there and listen silently letting my tears fall as I watch him look over her face. He hasn't cried, he doesn't even look like he wants to.

"I'll be back." He says and walks out and I watch as the door closes. My palms are sweaty and I fidget with my hands. I stand up and walk over to her, grabbing the stool I sit and grab her left hand.

"Hi mom." My voice croaks. *I'm not gonna cry*, I think to myself and clear my throat. "I hope you are okay mom. I'm sorry I didn't come back home yesterday with you and Miah." I swallow and lay my face next to her hand. "I hope you can hear me too, I don't want to seem crazier than I already am." I say laughing a little and I feel her softly grip my hand. I freeze and bite my lip. "Remember what you said before you left mom? You said to call you if I needed you, well I need you mom." My voice breaks and I let out my sob, my tears falling onto her white blankets. The smell of hospital all around me makes me want to hurl. "Please don't go. Please." I whisper and sniffle looking up at her.

"Remember you told me on Friday that you weren't ready to go yet." I whimper and I feel the headache come back.

I watch as the only person who has always been there for me, look so vulnerable. I'm too scared to even squeeze her hand. "I love you mom." I whisper and cry softly my tears slipping down one by one. I stare at the butterfly tattoo and kiss it softly. "So much..." I say quietly.

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The halls fill with students shouting and joking around. I walk across the breezeway, heading towards my sixth hour. Glaring at the back of heads who walk too slow. I push my way through and finally get to biology. Hannah walks in as I sit at my desk and sits behind me.

"Josephine and Jeremiah Matthew please come to the High School office." The front desk lady says over the intercom. I sigh and set my bag on the floor.

"I have a bad feeling about this." I say to Hannah as I get up and walk to the office, as I turn the corner I can see Andrea's red work shirt. Her back faced towards me her long blonde hair put up in her usual bun. As I open the door she looks at me her eyes red from crying along with her nose. My heart stops as I think the worst and I freeze shaking my head. "No...no.. d-don't tell me she's gone." I whimper and she grabs me and hug me.

"She's not gone..." she whispers rubbing my back. Jeremiah walks in and just stands there silently.

"The hospice house called and said that we should get down there. Her body is freezing cold and her breathing is shallow. It's time to say goodbye. Do you have your stuff?" She says her voice breaking but she doesn't cry.

"No..I left it in class." I say and my sister asks the front desk to have someone bring it. I sob and the front desk lady goes to get my counselor. Mrs. Demo comes out and she wraps an arm around my shoulder. "I am so sorry sweetie. Do you have someone getting your stuff?" She asks as she rubs my arm, a waft of her sweet perfume comes over me and my sister rubs my back.

"Yeah the office lady has someone bringing it from her class" Andrea says and I nod and pull away wiping my face. Andrea hands me a tissue and I wipe my nose. After about five minutes Richard, who is too tall comes in wearing my small backpack, kind of making me want to laugh. I walk towards him to grab it.

"Here you go Josephine." He says looking down at me as he hands me my bag.

"Thank you." I sniffle and put on my bag. I walk towards my sister and we leave towards the car. I sit in the front and listen as my sister tells me what was going on with my mom. A ten minute drive down the road we get home, then head to the hospice.

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Andrea, Jake and I leave the hospice house. Jeremiah decided to stay and wait for my dad to pick him up with my uncle Victor. I sit in the car and listen to the radio humming softly. My sister is on the phone with my aunt Mary telling her we just left. I look out the window, the stars for some reason seem brighter.

"Yeah, oh hold on aunt Mary I'm getting another call." Andrea says and answers the phone. "Hello." She says in her usual cheery voice. I watch the side of her face intently and watch as it pales. "Y'-Yeah we are turning around right now." She sobs and instantly, I know. I look around everything spinning and just cry.

My heart feels so empty and I shake my head as I cry feeling my whole world crashing down. What am I gonna do without my mom? It's not fair for *my* mom had to die. I question everything I believe in. Jake instantly swerves to cross the highway to get off on the next exit. We turn around and drive back to the hospice house.

As we arrive, the front desk already knew and they apologized for our loss. We walk back to her room, room 8. I take a deep breath and we walk in. My little brother sits on the couch as my uncle stands with his arms crossed. My mom is laying there on her back, her hands on her stomach wearing her white gown with a pink and purple floral pattern. Her hair in a ponytail braid. She's still and looks so peaceful, tears silently fall down my face. My sister sits on her left side and I sit on her right and lay my

head on the side holding her cold hand bringing it to my face.

I love you mom, please always watch over us. I think to myself as the tears blur my vision, I don't understand why my mom was taken away from me and I never will but I know that she will always be in my heart and I will never forget her. In just one moment my whole life went crashing down, and will never be the same.

Victoria Sansone

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Poetry

Complications with Concluding Juvenescence

My Dandelion Sky

artists dream dreams of dandelion skies
and trees that don't cry in the wind.
i held my hand in the air and tried to dance their dance,
and i was happy with my own dandelion sky

or perhaps my juvenile self was
happy without the phone calls and long nights and goodbyes
happy without knowing any other sky
than the one streaked with shining kisses that stained the sun
and i love you's that breathed into the underworld

i can't remember the exact time the kisses
turned into doubt sweeter than vengeance.
perhaps when the dandelions corrupted
the gentle grass with their own beauty

my dandelion skies faded into
ebony dreams of nothingness
and every tree i passed mourned for the life
i could no longer picture brighter than laughter

emerald squares of tree bark
replaced dreams of jubilation
and when i ripped every last weed of insatiability
out of my meek garden,
i could not remember why i had let myself
dream of yellow snakes

i inhabit a state of onyx-colored dreams
and fluorescent eggshell lights,
and when i see a dandelion,
i taste salt on my shaking lips
but cannot remember the feeling
that once penetrated my every breath,
instead marching on to my future of
white walls and poetry.

Sunday

On the road
the bop
 bop
 bop
of the freeway jolts my nerves
like it did the first time
and every time since,
but you no longer feel
the need to watch me.

From the corner of my eye
looking
 at
 you
I see your head buried in a book,
glasses drooping on your nose,
hair disheveled and shiny.
You look familiar and homey,
like the smell of our house
or *Wai Po's* Chinese food
and I love the way you are now
and I wish you were always this way
with me.

But Monday comes so soon,
and away go your wire-rim glasses
and loose
 wavy
 hair.
Out come the suit jacket and hair product,
and somehow it is this father
that looks more familiar to me,
but I find myself wishing
it was the other.

The Coven

Think of jade leaves littered with midnight speckles,
Wrinkled mahogany skin of cyclops trees,
Stygian stoicism of immortal rock.

The flesh of an undisturbed coven,
Invisible to the naked eye.

Think of small bare feet

Imprinting their arrival in wet summer grass.
Fears and responsibilities
Melting into emerald landscape.

Think of the hunger for eternal youth in a fleeting Eden,
Decrepit branches an aegis for the outside world.

It is a battle against reality,
Time the only victor.
Imagination left deserted and debilitated,
Forgotten in the frenzy of adolescent life.

Now the memory of a world that once concealed the brutality of existence
Lies discarded in the industrious mind.

Think of the empty abyss
left in the soul of a child
who was once
unbridled in oblivion's bliss.

Isabel Scamurra

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Central High School, Saint Joseph, MO

Educator: Kyla Ward

Category: Short Story

Motherhood

Preface

I am ten. I am spinning, spinning, spinning, arms outstretched. I fall on the soft green grass and watch the clouds move in circles above me. The ground hugs me close and I am safe. I close my eyes and let the warm red of my eyelids wash over me.

In a dream:

I sit up, hair bouncing, and she is there: Mother. Even here, sunglasses reflecting, lips crimson and pointed, floppy hat tipped to the side. Perfection in a sundress. She gestures to me, and I run to her, tumbling over myself...

I crinkle my nose, open my eyes, the sky is solid again.

Mary

There are moments in life when your world stops. When the proverbial blanket is pulled out from under your proverbial feet and you are left lying on the proverbial ground, scared and cold. In my life, there have been two such moments. The first happened at the peak of my childhood, the second on the eve of my thirtieth birthday. The first started with sunglasses and ended with the feeling of falling. The second began with a phone call and ended with the sickly feeling caused when the past slinks back into your mind.

I am different now, than I was.

...

I remember hearing words. I acknowledge that sounds came out of his mouth, traveled through the cell phone, and reconstructed into more tinny sounds which entered my ear.

“Your mother is trying to contact you.”

I blinked. The words were still there, sitting in my ears, jumbling my thoughts. The part of me that remembered what speech was whispered an expletive.

“Mary? She wants-”

I hung up the phone. When my thoughts returned, I contemplated the end of that phrase. She wants... to be in my life again? She wants to make up for the last twenty years? She wants...? The more I thought about it, I realized the unfinished phrase couldn't be a more perfect descriptor for my mother. She wants... and wants and wants. New clothes, new men, new life. And she got that. So why, after all this time, would she want me?

Lola

I love my daughter. Of course I do. But, there is a difference between the feeling of love and the action of loving, and I was never very good at the second one. I remember when she was born. It was snowing outside, practically a blizzard. I looked into her tiny face and felt like I was drowning. I remember the moment when fear turned to apathy, on her first birthday. She was saying my name, over and over again. Mommy, Mommy, Mommy. That's when I knew, I couldn't do it. Eventually, I realized I didn't have to do it.

I was young. I was so young. I never wanted to be a mom. Other girls played house, served plastic

casseroles to their perfect husbands and smiling children. That wasn't me. The white picket fence simply didn't have appeal. So when I found out I was pregnant at the tender age of eighteen, I pretended I was living two lives. One with baby, one without. In one, I loved my child, in the other, I loved my life.

I tried motherhood. For ten years, I was Mother. My daughter grew and learned, and didn't seem to need me. She was independent, had always been. In her tenth summer, I packed a small bag and walked out the front door. I didn't leave a note. Her father was smart, he would figure it out.

Leaving felt like waking up from a deep sleep. I breathed in the fresh air and prepared to restart my adult life.

Mary

Before the phone call, things had been going pretty good. Steady job, steady boyfriend, steady life. I went to the movies, walked my dog, and did my best to ignore the gaping hole my mother left. But now, as I stared at the phone in my hands, thoughts flooded my head. Thoughts that I thought I'd put to rest years before. Thoughts that hurt. And suddenly, I was ten again.

The hot July sun is setting, and I am thinking about Christmas. I will ask for a horse for Christmas, I think. Maybe Mommy will show me how to ride. I've seen a picture on her desk of her riding a shining stallion. She looks like me, except braver. Like me, except brighter. I want to be that brave and that bright, so I ask my mother for a horse for Christmas. She is distracted. She is always distracted. She says, sure honey. Her words make me feel exhausted. I take the picture from her study and fall asleep, imprinting the shining image of my mother riding in my mind, free.

When I wake up, she is gone.

Lola

For a long time, I didn't allow myself to say her name. When she appeared in my thoughts, she was "daughter," and then she was pressed into the depths of my subconscious, destined to only make appearances in the backdrops of my dreams. In this way, the guilt crept into my life. Everything reminded me of her. I saw her hair in the autumn leaves. I found myself painting the kitchen pale yellow, the color of her smile. With guilt came her shy little sister, shame. She was what kept me away. I would pack my bag, buy the ticket, open the door, and she would be there to greet me. She would remind me why I left in the first place: I am not meant for this. I am bad at this. And I would close the door, cancel the ticket, unpack my bag and sink further and further into her.

Without my knowing, a desperation had grown in me, the strength of which I didn't understand. I knew I could never be her mother. Shame told me that fact everyday. But, I could see her. Once the idea was planted, it sprouted up through my stomach, past shame, and nestled deep in my chest. I moved back to our town. She grew up. I watched as she changed before my eyes, unaware of my existence. She was strong, I could see it in her stride as she walked across the stage at her high school graduation. She was different from me, in all the right ways. And when I couldn't stand it any longer, when I finally reached the cliff, I jumped. Thankfully, her father hadn't changed his number. I reached out, blind to everything but the three words that had circled my mind since before I could remember ever thinking.

I need her.

Mary

Another night, my father is chatting to me over the phone again. "Hey, honey," he says. "Are you ready to talk about your mother?" The truth: no, I am not. The truer truth: I will never be ready. "She really wants to see you," he says.

In my mind, dual perspectives argue over each other. She left you- *I miss Mommy*- She is interested in you now, but- *I need Mommy*- what about in ten years, two months, a couple weeks?

I need her.

“Okay,” I tell him. I am ready.

Epilogue

Sunlight streams through the patio furniture in the porch cafe on thirty second street, casting holey shadows on the cooling cement. A bicyclist pedals peacefully; a terrier nips a biscuit from unsuspecting fingers. Two women sit on wire chairs, cautiously conversing. They don't know each other yet, but they are learning.

Ella Schmidt

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Poetry

Atonement

Sing me the Beatitudes;
I never went to Sunday School.
My father is a caricature of a religion scholar;
his glasses are round but I think
they are undercover octa-
nona-
decagons.

I believe in geometric secrets and
labored edges where wire appears round –
I call it growing up Girl. I call it part of the problem.
My mother is doing Vinyasa. She does not have
a pocket Bible with the guts-and-glory, down-at-halftime story
pages folded down, but while I was solving for the circumference
of moral scrupulosity, did you ever go to Hebrew school?

Skip the one
about the pure of heart – my Confession cannot be contained in the drive home,
and I can't draw a cross without lifting my pen or else
trying to unravel the overlap.
Sing instead of the day I will be comforted,
or comfort me. I'd like to hear you hum the pulse of
hyphens and colons separating double-digit numbers, see, *John 7:50-51* is poetry
that has never seen a pity-smile, never cringed at itself or apologized.

In the condensation of your
breath on the passenger window draw
stick figures, and label them *Children of God*.
Wedge *righteousness* in my pajama drawer, that
unwieldy vocable; rewrite the Ten Commandments
as post-it note reminders on milk cartons.
Dot the *i* with a heart when you spell out *f-o-r-g-i-v-e-n-e-s-s*,
and I will go a day without coveting or craving;
Heaven will suit me like chewed fingernails.

Sing me the Beatitudes,
and sing me out of sin
the way only you can: cynic's eyes unaffected by light,

molecular-sentience-jean-jacket-on-Easter –
because you never asked what I did wrong
to need this.

Ella Schmidt

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Poetry

Helen Half-Open

I offered to tie her hair back, and the night
was delirious and phobic. Helen's hair is green
as in up-and-coming, and with green hair Helen
says Baby bad life's like a tattoo, more painful
in erasure and clinical decay. And so we repent
the creation of green-haired Helen, her crescent
frowns and scheduled cynicism, fatigued
longing counting the notches on an invented belt,
singing Baby I'm sadder than I used to be, swearing
this house didn't always have such corners, singing
Alchemy is missing me when the day is misanthropy
and afraid of being alone. Green-haired Helen
singing Gratitude for the things we don't remember,
polio and Y2K and a few years ago, you shoulda seen me.
Green-haired Helen is deliberate and mangled, says
Let the light in for the sake of the shadows. Sleeps
with a window half-open, committed to the in-between
and the impulse of the uncertain, singing to her in
the frantic still of the witching hour:
Baby you'll never know what you wanna be,
just that you gotta be something.

Ella Schmidt

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Poetry

How to Run in Place

When the first rusts to resignation, it is best
to tack on layers of sleep over bike rides down
the hill toward the eleventh house, when we relinquished
control of the pedals and skinned our knees, reeling.
Best to swallow thought of the kids' table and grow up quick
while the manger-woman is weeping. Best to weep with her,
to display our sameness at the meridian of mourning old times

and regretting the things that haven't happened yet.
To wake after dark, when a playhouse is by flashlight
nightfall unknown, and there is no proof of anyone
having gawked at the smokers on the porch, braided
morning glories around fences, tossed little-league defeat
to nesting wasps. Best while unable to discern the left-handed
scar, the mangled features of God's stairside portrait, and there

is no proof that anyone has lived in this framework
house, this framework body for the last nine years at all.
The gray house is chimneyless and ritual, and His
wool-spun features are hung by my bedroom,
a subtle imposition of Christ as mother's reflex
and unrecognition of a fearsome God where
perhaps the so-spoken comforting one is needed,

or a taught inability to tell the difference.
In the red jet-car of the second city's landlord,
I devise myself a military father, voice spanning
base camps. Best to fabricate for ease of explanation.
To cry blushing tears like a child half-attached,
with rainboots in some small-town puddle and a throat
on the third-grade stage.

Best, for the sake of strangers, to play casualty
of the Recession as he shuts off the electricity
for the last time. Best, for the sake of ourselves,
to pretend it is the vault of vacation home set
to June's return. Best to unsee the bolting of
our latest past as men fold schooldays into cardboard
and paint over growth-stalking graphite.

The science-class psalm that migration demands return is neglectful of our flight, the way leaving is as addictive in abandonment as in prospect. Withdrawal allows for the unwitnessing of snow days, sick days, days we stayed in bed for the sake of staying, just once. Best to find this dormancy does not suit us, to become restless in learning to grow up, to become blithe and expectant in learning to leave behind.

To learn to leave behind. Best to eat German chocolate cake with a spoon in a college brother's room and nail down an east-coast eleventh birthday. To know the impermanence of places and the young durability of memory. Having never searched for the spirit's sketch in this third birthplace, to see Him now would be different. Threatening to unfear and unneed Him, obliged to the unsuccessful.

Best to sit at the top of the stairs with knees-in-chest and, by the old sound of the new grown-up dinner-party laughter, marvel at the sameness of it all. Best to run hands over notches in the kitchen logging the growth of a smaller brother at the late pitcher's mound and thrill in the likeness of the walls against which we each stood tall, time-zone separated and otherwise indistinguishable. *Guide for Moving* becomes *How to Run in Place*. It is best this way.

Best to count the times I call my mother from each airport terminal that sports the same furniture as the last and a different area code. To fly alone when each new place is noontide familiar. Best to rest a head on her shoulder when she is waiting at baggage claim, to wrap an everywhere-postmarked body in the arms of my parents, and in the airport-office-hotel of His clockwork choosing, be returned to the place I grew up.

Emma Servey

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Poetry

i met an angel once.

i met an angel once.

but she didn't speak much.
her eyes always spoke for her,
round and pale like milk.

she had some hair, white and wispy,
but most of which were covered
in soft roses and baby's breath.

when she held out her palms to me
i turned to look at the lashes
of another pair of eyes.

i counted the pairs of eyes
on her shoulders and neck
and spine and back.

54 more pairs of milky blues
which blinked on their own.

and she told me once,
of course, without a voice
that she once had a pair of wings
to match her eyes.

but as she weeped,
the story of the small
feathered stumps on her back
became all too apparent.

her frail knees looked as if they'd snap
under the weight of earth's gravity.

so, after many nights of taking the feathers
from doves and swans,
i made her a pair of neatly glued wings
stitched to light sticks and wire
and still sticky and tinged red.

proud, i made it my duty to present the project
i had so desperately and intimately worked on

but as she gazed upon them,
55 pairs of glittering sad eyes
weld up in dribs of sea water
and her figure leaked with tears.

one could guess
how dehydrated an angel could be
after crying 55 times over at once

and with hands clasped
over the eyes on her ears,
she turned from me,

the onlookers on her back still staring
at the apparent monstrosity i had created
and she left for the ocean.

i could see the sand stick to her eyes
the gentle ones on her ankles
but their lashes simply swept them away.

a naive angel, she was.

and as she skirted the edge of the waters
she looked my way one last time.

only now do i realize,
it was a chance for me to ask her
to forgive me.

but i didn't say anything.
my eyes spoke for me, in her opinion.

and with that, she dropped like a porcelain pin
shattering upon impact
against the razor sharp sea.

i met an angel once.

with these wings i've made for her
i grabbed a bottle of daniel's
who kept me company on my way
up the stairs to the rooftop

i put on the wiry wings
and as i flared them, they stretched into an arch.
small, angry droplets roll from my eyes

and with the last of the jack's gone,
it shattered on the concrete
as i leap
from the top of my apartment building.

i flew through the clouds
into the sky with eyes closed.
i would fly to her, to the ocean
where we met.

then i landed, against the sea of people beneath me.

Emily Siskey

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The Lucky One

I reach for the cookie on the platter. Usually I'm very careful to look at the toppings, break it open, look for any foreign substance and then, with my gut clenched I take a bite.

I roll the sugary substance around in my mouth and I think it passes the test.

Roscoe starts barking furiously. I put the cookie down and see what's going on with him. He's a needy little dog. Sweet but needy. We have a lot in common. He has a squirrel treed and I call for him to come inside. As I do, my voice stops in the middle of calling his name.

"Rosco--" I stop talking because I can't. My throat is closing rapidly. I start to panic. I know the signs. The tell-tale sign of what I have lived with for the past fourteen years. I know that if I don't move fast, this situation could turn tragic quickly.

I've never had an Epi-pen, the allergy doctors I had been to assume I would never need one. My allergies had never been bad enough to prescribe one. I scrambled over to the cabinet to sift through the bottles of allergy meds, antibiotics, cough syrup...there it was. I grabbed the bottle of Benadryl quickly and ran to the sink to fill a dirty glass with water.

Hold on, hold on, try to relax your throat. I was giving myself directions in hopes that I wouldn't pass out before the medication took hold. I look at the things scattered on our kitchen table. A cup of tea, half full, from this morning, I drink as much as I can. I look at the package of cookies, the font blurry, *chocolate chip with walnuts*. I hear the front door open and see my mom come in the small kitchen.

"There were walnuts in those cookies?" I ask. Mom glances at the counter and then at me, pale white and struggling to breath.

"Get in the car!"

I sit in the front seat, shivering, although the heat is on full blast. "Can you call your dad?" my mom ask my sister, who sits in the back seat, handing her the phone.

I try to stay awake, looking out the window, mindlessly scrolling through social media on my phone. The ten minute drive seemed to take hours. I could only tell how much time was passing based on the soft Christmas music playing on the radio. My sister asks if I wanted to talk to dad, I took the phone, "Hi Dad," my voice barely above a whisper.

"Hey, Em. How are you doing?" I don't know how to respond. I hoped it was a dream. Something like a movie where my dog jumps on top of me and I wake up.

"I don't know," I mumble.

"Okay, do you want to give the phone back to your sister or do you want to keep talking?"

I hand the phone back. We pull into the parking lot. I race to the front doors and then to the door marked emergency. We waited another fifteen minutes, but they might as well been years. My dad came in the large doors and sat next to me. I try to stay awake as the man on the right of us next to us fills out paper after paper, and the woman on the left weeps on the phone. I'm pulled into a small room, the nurse asks my height and weight. She takes my blood pressure and heart rate. She asks if I feel light headed. I say yes.

I'm taken back into the small exam rooms and an IV is hooked into my arm. I turned red, the same

color as the Christmas ornaments hanging outside the room. After an hour a young nurse came in the small room and unhooked the tubes from the IV. I try to fall asleep on the uncomfortable bed but the nurses talk too loud and come in too often. Another hour and a different nurse came to take the IV out of my arm. When I changed out of the hospital gown I saw how many hives I had, and how many scars had been left, it looked as if I had been attacked by mosquitoes.

Two days later I go to the doctors for a follow up and they draw blood. They would test for new allergies. They said they would call with the results, but they didn't think much would come up.

I knew they were wrong. I knew that there would be more added to the lists of NOs. I could guess the results, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to know. I didn't want to see the papers because that would mean it was real. I didn't want validation that I had gotten worse. I could tell you that I can't eat nuts or pork or fish or chocolate, but then I could just be over dramatic. But if it was on a piece of paper it was official. I didn't want to see it on a piece of paper.

The doctor hands my parents a stack of papers and begins explaining the test results, I don't understand any of them, but I am shocked at what the report says.

My life has, with just one tiny vial of blood, completely changed. For the worst. I begin to breathe shallowly and quickly. I recognize this as a quasi-panic attack. My life literally flashes before me. No more quick ice cream runs. No more eating out with friends without looking at the menu through a microscope. No more school lunches and I'm even going to have to sit at a "special" table for lunch. Do you *know* what that's going to do to my social status at school? Do you have any idea what it's like being singled out?

I slumped forward and then the tears began. My doctor is droning on and on while my mom takes detailed notes on her iPhone. My world, as I know it, has ended. Melodramatic? Of course, I'm a teenager.

The list? Is is endless.

Allergic to:

All nuts (no big deal -- can live without these)

Chocolate (OMG -- are you kidding? Can you imagine life without the sweet taste of cocoa?)

Wheat (no bread -- ever -- I'll never be able to pop into our beloved Italian restaurant and have my favorite dish.

Pork (no Chinese, no BBQ? For God's sake, I live in Kansas City, barbeque capital of the world.)

Alcohol (ok, it's fine right now, but in twenty years? Try being Irish and Catholic, family parties are full of food cooked with beer and wine.)

Citrus (no apple pie, orange juice, strawberry smoothies -- I love smoothies)

Seafood (Why on earth would you want to eat something with scales at a wedding?)

Potatoes (no French fries, no loaded baked potatoes, no mashed potatoes. Again-- Irish--I would eat Shepherd's Pie every day if I could.)

Corn (totally ok-- didn't like it anyway)

Eggs (have you ever had to turn down your own birthday cake?)

Carrots (no chicken noodle soup on sick days, no carrot cake-- is that even good?)

Lettuce (sounds like a dream, but salads look so good, and hamburgers, sandwiches, AND tacos are very bland without their toppings)

Tomatoes (Dear sweet ketchup, RIP)

Turkey (I'm really annoying on thanksgiving)

Beans (Mexican food, chili-- two of the best things in the world and their both NOs)

Rice (the guy at the Chinese restaurant gives me extra chicken-on-a-stick -- so it's cool)

Coffee (Lattes, cappuccinos, espressos, iced coffee -- the whole Starbucks menu }

Let's go outside for a walk? No

OK everybody, we're heading out to the outdoor classroom now. No

Field trip to hike in the hills of Weston? Absolutely not.

A new restaurant? Never

Family camping trip? Torture.

My condition isn't taken seriously by many and I don't understand why. Any brush with a nut or any inhalation of nut dust or even pollen for that matter can land me at Death's door. I'm not being melodramatic -- this is just the way of my life. It is ruled by the almighty Epi-pen, by the allergy warnings on my school profile, by the bracelet I wear, and by the stacks of diagnoses sheets in my file at the hospital and in the doctor's office. It is ruled by the once-a-week shots and the almost constant headaches, by the scars left from the daily reactions, marking my arms, legs and neck with spots. I am ruled by the stinging look from strangers when I say "pass" on the cake at parties or when I send the food back because it may have a hint of an allergen.

I still have to step back from all of this--the "NO" lists, the stigmas, the misunderstandings, the warning labels, and everything that having this represents, to say a prayer of thanks. Thanks for understanding parents who give up a normal way of life to spring into action or to take me to the ER, to watch over me and make sure that I am protected, to spend countless hours not to mention money to make sure that my life is as normal as possible. I say a prayer of thanks to my twin who has to take a back seat at times so that my parents can focus on me and everything that comes along with having a child with a life-threatening condition and who loves me and protects me anyway. It's so easy to look at everything that is wrong and to think that I have been cheated out of a normal life, but I haven't. Because of the love that I receive and the love that surrounds me in the form of family and friends, I truly know that I am the lucky one.

Collin Smith

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Short Story

Last Kiss

It must've been at least my hundredth time. Shit, that only makes it worse. God. I'd driven down that road so many times. It was late, I guess, if that's any excuse. We were driving home from the hospital with our newborn daughter. I just wanted to get home. I just wanted to get home so I could be sure she was safe.

Five forty-three is what they told me. Five forty-three on February nineteenth in the year nineteen ninety-four.

I crested the hill less than a mile from our house. I knew it was there. The old walnut tree where we were going to hang a tire swing for our daughter. The walnut tree I'd driven past *so* many times. The walnut tree that our beat up Civic wrapped around.

By the time I had regained consciousness, a heavy snow had begun falling. I felt something warm glide across the bridge of my nose, and down past my eyes. Only then realizing what had happened, I looked to the back where my wife had been sitting with our baby. She was breathing laboriously, eyes shut. I couldn't see the baby from my seat. Out in the distance I heard sirens echo throughout the hollows surrounding our house. "Soon, soon we'll all be safe... Soon we'll be a family" I remember thinking to myself. I forced the door open, and got out to help free my wife and child from the wreck. The radiator hissed softly in the background as I pried open the back door, helping my wife out onto the shoulder. I sat her down, and as I cradled her head, I noticed that she was bleeding profusely from the nape of her neck. Something—I don't know what—had cut her severely. She opened her eyes, and looked into mine, saying "Just hold me, a little while longer." A thick knot lodged itself in my throat. I choked back tears and told her that it would all be okay, that we'd come out of this alright, we always did. The sirens must've only been a quarter mile away when she left me. Her eyes closed peacefully, and I kissed her our last kiss. I lost my love, my life that night.

I woke up in the hospital about a day later. The same hospital we had left earlier as a family. Me, my wife, and our daughter. Now only I entered, my wife dead, and our daughter gone without a trace. Two policemen came in to ask me a few questions about the crash. A bigger one and a skinny one who looked like a high school kid. I answered their questions, and as they were leaving, I asked them about my daughter. They met me with a quizzical look. "You're what?" they asked simultaneously, the bigger one folding a sheet of yellow paper back on his notebook, jotting a few things down. "My newborn daughter, we were taking her home" I insisted. The younger officer whispered something to the nurse, and she shook her head, giving me the same puzzled look. "We have no records of a child under your name, sir" the nurse replied. I knew she was real. I knew I held her in my arms. So why would they lie? Weary from a sharp pain in the front of my skull, I passed out again.

They discharged me the next day with a bottle of painkillers for my head, and some "routine antidepressant" that they issued to victims of "tragedies". I called my friend Paul for a ride home. He offered to stay with me, but I didn't want to bother him.

I crawled up on the couch, and looked down the hall to where we had built a nursery. Where I expected to see the nursery, I instead saw the office which occupied the room a few months before. I got up to investigate, and sure enough, there was no sign of a cradle ever having been there.

Three days, nineteen hours later, I buried my wife. It was a small gathering, just her family and me.

It was hard seeing her parents, and I couldn't stop apologizing. Her mom insisted that they didn't blame me, that god had a plan or some bullshit. Her dad just stared at the horizon.

I guess my drive back was the first time since the crash that I had passed the tree alone. It looked menacing with its leafless, scraggly branches and the fresh scar in its trunk. As I passed it, a piercing wail exploded in my mind, the same wail my wife let out the night of the crash. I slammed on the brakes and pushed my head between my knees, sobbing.

I suppose that was the first time it really hit me, that she was *really* gone. I got out of my car and traced my hand across the scar in the tree's trunk. I heard her voice again, whispering "Just hold me, a little while longer." I assured myself that it was the painkillers talking, not her. I drove home, and collapsed in a fit of tears as soon as I got to the front hallway.

It's weird, how empty the house felt without her. The house was small enough to begin with, and it was just the two of us before, yet it seemed unbounding without her. The first couple of mornings, I unwittingly poured two cups of coffee. Over time I forgot the little habits like this that I had with her. The house somehow felt vacant, and I too felt as if something was missing.

On my way back to work, about a month later, it happened again. The scream as I passed the tree. I choked up a bit, but continued on my way. Soon it was like that every day. As the months passed, I grew desensitized to the scream. As the months passed, it seemed to fade away entirely. As the months passed, she barely even crossed my mind.

February nineteenth, nineteen ninety-five. Exactly one year since the crash. I drove past the scrappy walnut tree on my way back from our old favorite park. Maybe that's what did it—going to one of our favorite places. Whatever it was, I heard it again, and I heard it louder than ever before. The scream ripped through my eardrum and reverberated throughout my skull. I drove on, but the scream didn't cease. I forced myself into bed, covered my head with a pillow, filled my ears with wadded up tissue, but I still heard it — heard her.

Determined to put an end to it, I jumped out of bed, and bolted to the shed behind our house. I grabbed my chainsaw, and set out for the tree. As I approached the old walnut, the scream seemed to become even louder. I revved the chainsaw and cut into the trunk, at the base of the scar. As the tree fell, the scream cut out as if it were never there. Laughing, I slumped against what remained of the trunk, only to see a shimmering figure emerge from the jagged base of the fallen tree.

The figure of our infant daughter.

My hysterical laughter soon turned to choking gasps for air. I was right, she did exist — I wasn't crazy. I shot up and ran to where the tree had fallen. As I went to grab the figure, it vanished in a cloud of mist. As soon as it disappeared, I heard the cries of an infant farther in the forest. I plunged into the woods, a wall of trees closing behind me. The cries echoed across the forest floor and each time I felt sure that I was coming up on the figure, the origin of the cries suddenly changed. All night I went on like this, tramping through the snow in nothing more than a ratty pair of jeans and a flannel. As dawn broke, I collapsed, exhausted from the pursuit.

Lying there, on the rock hard earth, the cries crept up right behind me. I turned and faced the figure. It had the face of our baby from what I remembered, except where her eyes belonged, there was nothing. Two empty voids. Screaming in terror, I leapt to my feet and darted through the forest. I returned to the chainsaw, grabbed it, and headed back to the spot where I saw our daughter. Hands numb from the cold, I fumbled to open the gas cap on the saw. Once it was off, I splashed the fuel upon the dry pine needles at the base of a tree. I struck the blade of the chainsaw against a rock, and the sparks ignited the fuel. As the flames licked the base of the tree, the cries of the figure turned to screams. Suddenly overborne with guilt, I ripped off my shirt to beat the flames out, but the fire was already too big. I turned to run, but was unable to find my way out. Trapped, I collapsed against the base of a tree, sobbing.

I woke up in the hospital a day later. As I came to, I felt a singing pain in my side. I tried to lift my arm

to assess what was wrong, only to realize I was strapped to the bed. A trio of doctors filed through the door, seeing that I was awake. They told me that a team of firefighters had found me rocking back and forth amongst the burning forest, babbling about a screaming baby. They were going to run a few tests, they said, and assured me that the straps were for my benefit, that they were merely precautionary.

The next day, the test results came back. An MRI revealed a tumor about the size of an egg pressing against my prefrontal cortex. This, the doctors explained, was likely why I had been hearing the screams and cries. They promised that it could be removed with a fairly routine surgery. I agreed, and underwent the surgery. After a few weeks of rehab, I was cleared to leave the hospital. While walking out, I thought it odd that I only ever heard the screams whilst passing the tree. I pushed the thought away, reassuring myself that the pain I associated with the tree triggered the screams.

My parents picked me up, and drove me home. They stayed the night to make sure I'd be okay on my own, but left in the morning. I lay in my bed most of the day, staring at the wall adjacent to my bed. My eyes fell to an outlet near the base of the wall. Two empty holes, side by side. Just like the figure had. The cries slowly crescendoed in the back of my head, eventually regaining their full strength.

"Enough!" I shouted to the empty house. I grabbed this video camera, which I had intended to record my daughter's first steps, and sat down to record my [this] story. I say this so that you, my parents, my co-workers, my friends — whoever sees this — all know why I've made this decision. I couldn't bear the uncertainty, the guilt, and the fear I was living with. I hope I don't come across as selfish. I love you all so much. It's just that, I just... I just can't take it all anymore. I'm sorry... I'm so sorry.

The camera falls as if kicked out of the way. A metallic rattle, like that of a belt buckle, can be heard in the background. Suddenly, a large thump, the sound of airy gasps, then silence.

Journey Smith

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Kimberly Gutchewsky

Category: Dramatic Script

Love in the Evening

LIGHTS FADE TO BLACKOUT

Scene opens in a family room. There is a couch STAGE LEFT, A Christmas tree STAGE RIGHT, presents beneath the tree STAGE RIGHT, a chair beside the tree STAGE RIGHT, an oriental rug CENTER STAGE, and a coffee table atop it CENTER STAGE

River by Joni Mitchell softly plays in the background. EMERSON enters stage LEFT and sits on the couch. EMERSON places her flute of champagne on the coffee table and sighs while examining her phone.

AMELIA ENTERS.

AMELIA: Emerson? (*walks in from STAGE RIGHT*) There you are. (*she smiles widely and they embrace*)

EMERSON: (*excitedly*) Amy! (*sits on the couch*)

AMELIA: (*sits next to EMERSON*) You're gorgeous, I love that dress.

EMERSON: Really? I was just looking in the mirror and I wasn't sure.

AMELIA: You look great.

EMERSON: Well thanks, I love your dress too.

AMELIA: Thank you, it has pockets! Jackson was pretty impressed.

EMERSON: How *is* the married life treating you? (*nudges her playfully*)

AMELIA: (*clasps her hands*) It's like no time has passed at all, it just feels new and easy and wonderful.

EMERSON: What has it been eight? Nine months?

AMELIA: Eight months, thirteen days.

EMERSON: The first year is always the best.

AMELIA: And what about year three?

EMERSON: Ah, you'll see.

AMELIA: (*suddenly*) So. I have something to tell you.

EMERSON: What? Are you okay?

AMELIA: (*squeals*) Jackson is head of cardio!

EMERSON: That's great.

AMELIA: Can you believe it? I'm so proud of him. We're going to Cabo next week to celebrate.

AUGUSTE: (*enters from STAGE RIGHT and stands beside Christmas tree*) Jesus I've been looking for you everywhere. (*notices Amelia*) Hi Amy, pretty dress.

AMELIA: (*rises to give Auguste a quick embrace*) Thank you sweetheart. You look so grown up, and beautiful too.

AUGUSTE: Thank you.

EMERSON: (*turns to Auguste*) Is he still not here?

AUGUSTE: (*pacing downstage*) No, and he promised he would come.

AMELIA: What's going on?

EMERSON: You remember Finn don't you?

AMELIA: (*crosses legs*) Oh, that dark haired boy?

AUGUSTE: He isn't just some boy!*(sits on the edge of chair STAGE RIGHT)*

EMERSON: Right, of course not.

AUGUSTE: *(turns to EMERSON sharply)* Just because you have everything figured out doesn't give you the right to patronize me.

EMERSON: Auggy,- *(gets cut off mid sentence)*

AUGUSTE: I hate when you call me that. *(sharp and visibly upset, stars pacing)*

EMERSON: Do you really have to be so melodramatic all the time?

AUGUSTE: He said he'd be here.

Emerson and Amelia exchange knowing glances at Auguste's theatrics

EMERSON: *(rises and touches Auguste's hair)* He'll show up, you shouldn't worry.

AUGUSTE: You're right. I trust him. *(turns to Emerson)* Where's Richard? I haven't seen him all night either.

EMERSON: *(visibly stiffens as she walks and sits on the edge of the coffee table)* There was an emergency at work so he can't come until tomorrow.

AUGUSTE: He can't get off on Christmas Eve? That's weird.

EMERSON: It was all very last minute.

AMELIA: I'm so grateful Jackson went the medical route, at least if he's away I know he's saving lives. *(laughs lightly)*

AUGUSTE: *(rolls her eyes at Amelia)* Well you tell Richard that his presents better be incredible this year if he's missing the party.

Mood lightens and all the girls laugh

EMERSON: *(takes sip of champagne)* I wouldn't expect anything less.

AMELIA: How's college going?

AUGUSTE:*(sits STAGE LEFT of Christmas tree)* Finals were fine. I thought I'd do better in my philosophy class but other than that I love it. I feel like I'm a better writer already.

AMELIA: I'll have to ask Jackson to save a shelf for your books in our library once you're a famous novelist.

AUGUSTE: If only. *(takes a sip of Emerson's champagne and sits on the couch, patting it for Emerson to join her.)*

EMERSON: *(sits between Amelia and Auguste)* You're so talented, I can't wait to see all the amazing things you do.

AUGUSTE: *(kisses Emerson's cheek and rises)* So are you.

EMERSON: Hm. Right.

AUGUSTE: What?

EMERSON: Nothing.

AUGUSTE: Oh please. You *know* you're amazing.

EMERSON: *(forlorn smile)* No, I think my time to do amazing things has passed.

AUGUSTE: What? You're not that old. You have still have plenty of time.

EMERSON: *(laughs)* I'm glad you don't think I'm that old.

AUGUSTE: *(rolls her eyes)* I hate when you're negative about everything. If you want to do amazing things then do it, nothing's stopping you.

EMERSON: It's not always that simple.

AUGUSTE: It's always that simple. *(begins to walk away)* Anyway, I'm gonna go and see if Finn showed up yet.

AUGUSTE EXITS

AMELIA: She's right, you know.

EMERSON: God, I'm getting so old.

AMELIA: What do you mean? I'd say you're still pretty young.

EMERSON: It's different, though. She's still figuring it all out. Meanwhile...

AMELIA: Meanwhile?

EMERSON: Meanwhile, well, I guess this is kind of as good as it gets right? We've found our careers, husbands.

AMELIA: You say it like it's a bad thing.

EMERSON: I don't know. Don't you remember when you wanted to dance professionally? (*stretches across the couch*)

AMELIA: Yeah, but that was a long time ago.

EMERSON: I remember going to your recitals, you were obviously the best. I never understood why you stopped.

AMELIA: (*uninterested in the conversation*) What always happens, people change. Life gets in the way.

EMERSON: But isn't that such a cliché?

AMELIA: Maybe, but only because it's true.

EMERSON: How? I mean, I thought it was your dream.

AMELIA: God, what's gotten into you today? Dreams aren't always realistic. You should know that by now. Jackson wanted me to stay home and take care of the house and the kids. Being a dancer and having recitals every night wouldn't exactly work in that scenario.

EMERSON: So he decides if you have to give up your dreams? That doesn't seem fair.

AMELIA: We aren't children, not everything's fair. At some point we have to wake up and be adults and make adult decisions. Besides- he was what I wanted more than anything else. None of that other stuff mattered once we met.

EMERSON: All I'm saying is I'd like to be twenty for one more day just to feel something again.

AMELIA: You don't feel anything now?

EMERSON: (*notices Amelia's worried expression*) Of course I do. I don't even know what I'm talking about, I've been drinking too much champagne and it's got me all confused.

lingering beat of silence

AMELIA: You know if there's something going on...

EMERSON: Nope everything's great. (*rises to get her champagne and downs the remaining contents*)

AMELIA: Right, of course it is.

EMERSON: What's that supposed to mean?

AMELIA: It means that you pretend you don't have any emotions.

EMERSON: That's not true.

AMELIA: What about Charlie?

EMERSON: That was one time!

AMELIA: It most definitely wasn't only one time. You always act completely unaffected by everything.

EMERSON: Like when?

AMELIA: The day you didn't get into Georgetown you pretty much gave up having a political career.

EMERSON: That's not why I gave up politics.

AMELIA: Then why? Because we never talked about what led you to alter your life completely.

EMERSON: I still went to law school.

AMELIA: You work at a corporate law firm. And if I recall correctly, you said you'd rather die than have a job at a law firm.

EMERSON: That was a long time ago. Like you said, people change.

AMELIA: That is exactly what I'm talking about. You avoid confrontation and pretend everything's fine.

Auguste enters STAGE RIGHT,

Amelia and Emerson turn to look at Auguste who is still hovering in the 'doorway'

EMERSON: *(worried)* Auguste?

AUGUSTE: He isn't coming is he? *(stands beside Christmas tree and examines it)*

EMERSON: Now isn't the time to start worrying, it's not even 10 o'clock yet.

AMELIA: Exactly, he'll show up. He promised.

AUGUSTE:*(turns)* But what if he doesn't? What if I'm the stupid girl that waited around all night for a boy that never intended on showing up?

EMERSON: You'll be fine either way. It's not the end of the world.

AUGUSTE: I know it's not the end of *the* world but it's the end of *mine*. *(slumps beside the tree on the floor)*

EMERSON:*(stern, almost as if she's convincing herself)* This is not the end of anyone's world. He is a boy, Auguste. A boy is not your entire world. You have so much more going for you than if some boy decides to show up to a party you're at.

AUGUSTE: *(sharp, hurt)* I know what I have going for me, but he matters to me and when he said he wanted to come I thought that meant I mattered to him to. And I just don't think it's fair for you to dismiss my feelings just because you don't have any.

AMELIA: *(turns to Emerson)* I told you so.

EMERSON: *(annoyed)* Not now, Amy.

AMELIA: *(rises to join Auguste on the floor)* It's natural to feel this way. Despite what you many think; Emerson has had her heart broken and so have I. At the time I thought I'd never love anyone again. But I moved on and eventually I did find the love of my life in Jackson.

AUGUSTE: *(sits on coffee table)* But I don't want to move on- at least not yet. It was so hard last year but that was because everything changed. Figuring out school and him, and how to manage it all was the most difficult thing I've ever done, but now we know better. I mean if he didn't want to see me he would've said that right?

EMERSON: I don't know.

AUGUSTE: *(looking down)* I don't understand, why wouldn't he just say no?

Amelia sits back on the couch

EMERSON: *(sits beside Auguste)* Maybe he didn't know how to.

AUGUSTE: *(becomes even more dramatic)* It's pretty simple, either he wants to see me or he doesn't. He could've just said that instead of making me feel like he still cares about me.

AMELIA: You don't know what he's thinking and you'll drive yourself crazy imagining all the possibilities.

AUGUSTE: I just wish he were here already.

EMERSON: *(tentatively)* Maybe you should take a break from love, just focus on the rest of sophomore year?

AUGUSTE: I can't just decide not to love him anymore.

EMERSON: Maybe it's better not to worry about him or anyone for that matter and just focus on getting the grades and the degree you want.

AUGUSTE: Why can't I have both?

EMERSON: You're twenty years old. There is plenty of time for love and marriage, why rush?

AUGUSTE: It's not about that. *(grows exasperated and rises to her feet)* It's about him and me and whether or not we have a future together.

EMERSON: Well if he's not here then the answer is pretty clear isn't it?

AUGUSTE: *(taken aback, obviously hurt)* Yeah, I guess you're right. uh I'm gonna go... *(searches for an excuse and ultimately turns to leave)*

AMELIA: That was harsh.

EMERSON: *(rises and joins AMELIA on the couch)* She can be so naive sometimes.

AMELIA: Weren't we all?

EMERSON: I'm just trying to save her some heartbreak.

AMELIA: Let her be heartbroken, it's good for the soul.

EMERSON: I'm looking out for her. I wish someone had protected me, because maybe I would've made some different decisions.

AMELIA: What do you mean? You have a house and a happy marriage, that's the stuff of dreams.

Lingering beat of silence

AMELIA: Em?

EMERSON: *(suddenly)* I'm not perfect and neither is my life. Of course I can't help but wonder who and where I would be if I made different decisions along the way.

AMELIA: Like?

EMERSON: I don't know, there's a whole world of maybe's.

AMELIA: But why wonder if you're happy now?

EMERSON: No one is happy all the time.

AMELIA: There's a difference between a moment of sadness and a life full of it.

EMERSON: I know that.

AMELIA: I worry about you, you know? If you're happy, if you like your job, your life.

EMERSON: You don't have to worry about me, I'm fine.

AMELIA: *(continues)* I know you judge my life, you think I settled or something.

EMERSON: *(interjects)* I don't-

AMELIA: I know you do, and it's fine because I'm content with my decisions. But I'm not always convinced you're happy with yours -if you're satisfied.

EMERSON: Sure, I think about who I thought I'd be by now sometimes, what I'd be doing. I know now that I got married too young and I gave up on pursuing things I cared about and I've accepted that. I've made mistakes and I have regrets but there's nothing I can change about any of it now. So what's the point in talking about it?

AMELIA: It isn't healthy to keep all that stuff to yourself, I care about you, you can talk to me.

EMERSON: There's nothing to say. Some days are harder than others, and this happens to be one of them.

AUGUSTE: *(bursts in the room and doesn't notice their somber expressions, is shrieking at this point)* He's here!

EMERSON: Finn?

AUGUSTE: OF COURSE IT'S FINN.

AMELIA: *(laughing)* Why did you come back here then?

AUGUSTE: *(quickly)* I don't know, I saw his car and I panicked and I came back here.

EMERSON: Go back out there and say hi.

AUGUSTE: AHHH. I can't. AHH. *(grabs the pillow from the arm chair and covers her face, is coiled in a fetal position in said chair.)*

FINN: *(enters stage right, his hands are in his pockets)* Auguste?

AMELIA EMERSON and both turn to the sound of his voice, AMELIA and EMERSON look at one another. AUGUSTE immediately rises from her position and smooths her skirt.

EMERSON: *(rises)* I could use more champagne, what about you?

AMELIA: *(rises)* I'll help you with the glasses.

AMELIA AND EMERSON exit STAGE LEFT

FINN: Auguste?

AUGUSTE: *(shocked, grinning widely, trying to pull it together)* Hey, Hilo.

FINN: Hilo?

AUGUSTE: (*mortified, covers her face*) I was gonna say hello and then I changed it to Hi at the last second.

FINN: (*amused*) Hilo Auguste,

AUGUSTE: (*groans*) Oh god

FINN: (*laughing*) You know I'm joking, (*opens his arms for a hug*)

AUGUSTE: (*shyly embraces him*) I'm glad you came.

FINN: (*briefly holds her*) Me too. (*goes to examine the Christmas tree*) Did you decorate this one?

AUGUSTE: (*stands facing FINN*) Yeah, not a lot people come in this room so my parents let me do whatever I wanted. The one in the living room is much better.

FINN: (*Looking at the tree intently*) I saw it, I like this one better though.

AUGUSTE: (*sheepish, embarrassed*) Thanks, it's kind of a mess

FINN: (*looks at her*) You still have Ringo. (*Holds up a half Ringo Starr ornament with cracks riddled throughout*)

AUGUSTE: The Beatles just wouldn't be the same without him.

FINN: How'd you fix it? (*moves closer to AUGUSTE so they're less than a foot apart*)

AUGUSTE: Hot glue gun.

FINN: I thought I shattered it.

AUGUSTE: It took a while.

FINN: I should've just gotten you another one.

AUGUSTE: I like the one I have.

FINN: (*pulls away, looks at Auguste*) You look really pretty tonight.

AUGUSTE: (*crosses to couch obviously pleased and even more nervous*) Do you wanna, uh, we can sit down if you want.

FINN: (*quickly*) Yeah, sure.

Both go to sit on the couch, FINN shifts his body so he is facing AUGUSTE. Both exceptionally nervous.

FINN: How's your family? It's been a while.

AUGUSTE: My Mom just finished a sculpture. She's having a showcase in January.

FINN: At Brown?

AUGUSTE: Yeah, the 27th.

FINN: Are you gonna be able to go?

AUGUSTE: I think so, I still have to figure out my schedule though. What about you? How's your family?

FINN: Mostly the same, Harry just discovered Harry Potter and is convinced he's "The Chosen One"

AUGUSTE: Smart kid.

FINN: He seems to think so.

AUGUSTE: I'm sure it's adorable.

FINN: Except when he's casting spells on innocent customers at Friendly's.

AUGUSTE: He's a little kid, I'm sure they find it somewhat endearing.

FINN: Then you take him to get chicken fingers in a cape with a lightning bolt drawn in sharpie on the center of his forehead.

AUGUSTE: Fine then, I will, and you're not invited.

FINN: (*feigning offense*) I didn't say I didn't want to go.

AUGUSTE: Nope, just me and my favorite boy.

FINN: I guess there's no competing with a seven year old in a cape.

AUGUSTE: You'll lose every time- it's all in the cheeks. and the wide eyed innocence does help too.

FINN: But Harry isn't the one that got you a Christmas present.

AUGUSTE: Neither did you.

FINN: Oh? (*uncovers a small wrapped box, much to AUGUSTE'S surprise*)

AUGUSTE: You didn't have to do that.

FINN: I know, it's not big deal.

AUGUSTE: But I didn't get you anything.

FINN: (*sarcastic and teasing*) Is this the part where I say being with you is the only gift I need?

AUGUSTE: You're funny.

FINN: I think so, open it. (*places the present in AUGUSTE'S hand.*)

AUGUSTE *rips open the paper and uncovers a blue and black ink pen set with her initials engraved on each pen*

FINN: (*a trifle embarrassed*) I figured since I'm not around to steal pens from anymore that you should finally have your own.

AUGUSTE: Finn,

FINN: It's alright if you don't like it I got a gift-

AUGUSTE: No, of course I love it. It's perfect. I was just trying to convince my Mom to let me take her set with me. Thank you, really.

FINN: Yeah, I mean, it's Christmas.

AUGUSTE: I know but I wasn't even sure you were coming, let alone bearing gifts.

FINN: (*pulls back*) I said I would come.

AUGUSTE: I know but it was getting late and I hadn't heard from you and it wasn't like the last time we saw each other ended so well so I don't know, I just thought-

FINN: You thought I stood you up? (*rises to his feet*)

AUGUSTE:(*embarrassed*) I don't know, maybe.

Long pause of silence FINN is standing in front of the Christmas tree

FINN: (*sharply*) I'm not a total dick.

AUGUSTE: (*defensive*) I know.

FINN: You thought I would stand you up? On Christmas?

AUGUSTE: I don't know.

FINN: I'm not an asshole Auguste.

AUGUSTE: I just thought since we're not on the best terms that-

FINN: And whose fault is that?

AUGUSTE: (*struggling to find the right words*) I-I it's no one's fault-

FINN: (*growing angry*) You gave up on me So I don't really understand why you think I'd be the one not to show up when I said I would.

AUGUSTE: It'd been two hours I didn't know what to think I hadn't heard from you-

FINN: I was on a plane! I haven't even seen my family yet you know that?

AUGUSTE:I didn't know

FINN: What did I ever do to you? I was always there, you were the one that constantly cancelled on me.

AUGUSTE: I- I'm sorry I don't understand why you're upset with me.

FINN: I read your piece in the Wrangler.

AUGUSTE:(*realization floods her face*) I didn't know you saw it.

FINN: Your Dad brought a copy into work and showed everyone, including my Dad.

AUGUSTE: I wrote it right after everything. It was how I felt.

FINN: You made me seem awful when *you* broke up with *me*. You said that I-

AUGUSTE: I remember what it said.

FINN: I was trying, you weren't.

AUGUSTE: What do you want me to say? It was the way I felt

FINN: But I don't get it. You don't think I was unhappy too? But I don't know, I thought if I gave you

space, or time, and you still gave up on me.

AUGUSTE: Stop saying that. I didn't give up. I felt totally alone all the time and I had to be selfish but that wasn't me giving up.

FINN: And what about you? You're fickle about everything. The second something isn't exactly like the fairytale you imagined suddenly you're devastated and upset and you run away.

AUGUSTE: No I don't.

FINN: Then why didn't you come to me with any of the things you were feeling? (*sharp, angry, sarcastic*)

AUGUSTE: (*rises to her feet and bursts with emotion*) I don't know what you want me to say. You made me feel small and alone and that you obviously don't love me in the same way I love you.

FINN: Because I'm real, and the way I feel about you is real. But you want me to be like a Hemingway novel or something.

AUGUSTE: And what's wrong with wanting a love like that?

FINN: (*exasperated*) Because it's fiction, Auguste! Because it was made up by a depressed drunk who got married four times before offing himself.

AUGUSTE: (*sits back down on couch, exhausted*) Okay, I get it. I ruined everything and you hate me now.

FINN: (*drawn, serious, gives the kind of smile people do when there's nothing to smile about at all*) You know I don't hate you. That's the problem. (*sits down next to AUGUSTE*)

AUGUSTE: I'm sorry,

FINN: No point in apologizing.

AUGUSTE: (*AUGUSTE covers her face with her hands gives a sheepish laugh*) This conversation went a lot better in my head.

FINN: (*softens*) I'm sure it did.

AUGUSTE: I had no idea... I never meant... I don't know what I'm trying to say but I just- (*Huffs at a loss for words*)

FINN: It's fine.

AUGUSTE: I just didn't know it was this bad.

FINN: It's not, of course I care about you, I just don't know... I don't know what to do.

AUGUSTE: I didn't give up on you, I wouldn't.

FINN: It's fine, I'm over it. It sucked but it is what it is.

AUGUSTE: You shouldn't give up on me either.

FINN: I'm not gonna lie, I tried to.. Didn't work out so well though.

AUGUSTE: Really?

FINN: Hm, yeah.

AUGUSTE and FINN sit in comfortable silence, both going over the events, trying to understand the other and where they go from here

FINN: (*rises*) I guess I should get going, see my family.

AUGUSTE: (*quickly rises*) Yeah, of course. Thank you for coming and for the pens, I can't wait to use them.

FINN: Yeah, and I'm sorry for-

AUGUSTE: Like you said, no need to apologize.

FINN: (*Nearing the door*) I'll see you soon Auguste.

AUGUSTE: Will you?

FINN: Do you want to?

AUGUSTE: Yeah, do you want to?

FINN: (*pauses*) Yeah.

AUGUSTE: Cool, uh, Merry Christmas.

FINN: Merry Christmas, I'll call you later?

AUGUSTE: Yeah.

FINN EXITS

LIGHT GO TO BLACKOUT, *EMERSON and AMELIA enter carrying two champagne flutes*

EMERSON: Did Finn just leave? *(Both go to join her on the couch)*

AUGUSTE: *(nods)* He had to see his family.

AMELIA: How did it go?

AUGUSTE: Fine, I don't know.

EMERSON: Oh Auggy *(puts her arm around Auguste)*

AMELIA: Whatever happens, it'll all be okay.

AUGUSTE: *(turns away from tree and faces Emerson and Amelia)* He was angry, angrier than I thought he'd be.

EMERSON: Did he yell?

AUGUSTE: He didn't have to. *(pause)* Am I too naive? Do I romanticize everything?

EMERSON and AMELIA exchange a glance

AMELIA: Is that what he said?

AUGUSTE: That doesn't answer my question.

Emerson: Yeah, but part of that is because you're only twenty.

AUGUSTE: And the other part?

EMERSON: Is who you are, since you were a baby.

AUGUSTE: I guess everyone knew that except for me.

AMELIA: So where do you stand?

AUGUSTE: I don't know, a lot was said, even more wasn't. He said he'd call, I think he will- maybe he won't.

EMERSON: You don't need him.

AUGUSTE: I know, but I want him.

AMELIA: Oh honey, it'll be okay, *(crosses to Auguste and gives her a hug)* the first heartbreak is always the toughest.

AUGUSTE: I'm sorry, I don't mean to bring down the mood- you guys should go back out to the party.

EMERSON: *(CROSSES to the tree, hands AUGUSTE flute of champagne)* Not unless you come with us.

AUGUSTE smiles and downs the glasses contents, AMELIA rises and joins the girls in a half circle

MERRY CHRISTMAS DARLING slowly begins playing loudly

AMELIA: Do you hear what they're playing? You know you love it- come and join us.

AUGUSTE: Give me a minute, I'll meet you guys out there.

EMERSON: If you're not out there in 10 minutes we're coming back.

AUGUSTE: I promise I'll come out in a minute.

AMELIA and EMERSON exit

AUGUSTE sighs, takes a look around the room and crosses to the Christmas tree. There, she examines it before holding the fractured Ringo in her hand. Suddenly, a phone starts to ring- drawing her from her almost trancelike state. She turns, trying to recall where she left her phone and realizes it's sandwiched between the couch cushions, she goes to retrieve it while still standing.

AUGUSTE: Hello?

MERRY CHRISTMAS DARLING fades and LIGHTS FADE TO BLACKOUT

Chase Strong

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kelly Miller

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

Fallen Down

Me and my friends started this all with a simple hike. We had never gone hiking before, and it was summer break, so we decided to try it. Just me, Jack, Braden, Nick, Ryan, Mika, and Chase Murphy. Simple. Mika, Nick, and Braden were the only ones with any idea how to hike. We were currently climbing up a one-person wide trail. The line went Braden, Chase, Ryan, Nick, Jack, me, and Mika. Braden at the front to lead the way, and Mika in the back to make sure no one fell behind. Braden stops and, very cliché, puts a hand over his eyes and looks up.

“Well, sun’s going down,” he states, “we should find a place to set up camp.” I notice dusk is rapidly fading.

“Aye, aye, cap’n,” Jack says sarcastically. Jack looks at me, points to Braden, and rolls his eyes. Jack has disliked (I say that in the nicest way) Braden ever since they met. It wasn’t that long ago, but it felt like it. We branch off the path and find a cave. Chase slips ahead of Braden to check out the cave. The rest of us stand there, waiting for him to come out. Nick sits down, out of breath. Finally, Chase does come out.

“Alright!” Chase shouts, “inside, it splits into six separate caverns. All caverns are equally small. We gonna bunk here, or what?” Everyone looks at me, expecting a decision. As the silently made leader of our friend group, I usually have to make the decisions. I look up. The sun’s disappearing and I can already see stars twinkling in the sky. That affects my decision.

“We’ll stay here for the night,” I said, “One person will keep watch, and the others will rest in the caverns. When we switch watch, the first one, just ... take the open cavern.” Everyone seems okay with that, so we build a fire, cook some food, and a few minutes later, I’m outside sitting watch. There shouldn’t be a problem; the others can sleep better if there’s a watch. I stare up at the stars and, ironically, space out.

I hear someone approaching me from behind. I turn, expecting to see Jack coming to take watch, but instead see Mika. I should be surprised, but I’m not. She mumbles something about not being able to sleep. Then, she leans against my shoulder and immediately goes out. I blank a bit longer.

“Um... am I interrupting, or...” I turn fast to find Jack looking at me and Mika. I can feel my face burning. I get up slowly as not to wake Mika, then pick her up and walk back to the cave.

“I won’t tell,” Jack whispers. I flip him off. In the cave, I survey each cavern to figure out which ones aren’t occupied. The farthest two are obviously the open ones. I walk over and put Mika in the nearest one. My vision’s starting to get blurry. I stumble towards the open cavern and go unconscious.

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I wake up to a glare of sunlight straight to the face. I immediately slam my eyes shut. I slowly open my eyes, adjust to the light, then stumble out of the cavern. As I walk out, I notice Mika sitting against the wall right next to my cavern opening. She notices me as well, and jumps. She seemed to be half-asleep. She stood up and flashed a meek smile at me.

“Good morning,” Mika says, yawning. I look around, but nobody was there. The fire we started last night was out.

“So, where’d everyone go?” I ask Mika. She explains that, while I was out, Ryan saw a human kinda thing, but Jack recognized the description. The rest of the team went to see if he was right. The weird

thing was, the human thing was doing a weird dance. I suddenly hear footsteps outside of the cave.

“Yo, anyone there?” Chase calls out.

“Where else would we be?” I respond, simultaneously picking up my pack. I begin to head out of the cave, but someone else comes in at the same time. We bump into each other. I can’t tell who it is, because they have their hood up.

“Hey, kid,” the person says, “ You wanna have a bad time? If you don’t, then don’t run into me again.” Then, he stalks off to the nearest cavern. Then, Jack and the others come in. I hear something move behind me. I glance back to see Mika standing behind me. I look back to Jack.

“Sans?” I ask him.

“Yup,” he responds. “ You should have come. Our conversation was SANS-sational. All the puns were humorous.” I glance at Braden and he shrugs. The only thing Jack likes more than puns is better puns.

“So, he wanted to show us something,” Jack adds. He slides a bit closer to the cavern Sans went into.

“Not the sans dance,” I say. Jack shakes his head, then goes into the Sans cavern. I follow, and so does everyone else. This cavern is bigger than the one I slept in. *I thought Chase said they were the same size*, I thought. I looked back to see six cavern entrances. The one we were in must’ve been hidden. This one is a bit longer than the others as well, so it felt like forever before we came to a stop.

“All right!” Jack shouts. He jumps forward ... and disappears. I’m right behind him, so I saw what happened to him. It’s so weird that our adventure so far was kinda modeled after this video game we played through. Jack practically studied it.

“Woah, where’d Jack go?” Nick asked. I walk up to the hole Jack jumped through. When I get up to it, I turn around. I salute back to the team, and slowly fall back. Hopefully, that answered his question. In less than ten seconds, I’m completely shrouded by darkness. It doesn’t feel like I’m falling, more like I’m suspended in thin air. With gale of wind coming from underneath me. Okay, so maybe it feels like I’m falling. I can hear a faint Megalovania. Jack must be loving this. I can feel someone grasp my hand tightly. I squeeze back, trying not to let go against the torrent of wind. Megalovania ends and SAVE the World starts playing.

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I wake up in a patch of red flowers. Hopefully, no thorns. I go to sit up, but something pulls me back. I look over to where I was pulled and find myself holding hands with Mika. Holding hands. Mika. Me. I immediately pull my hand back. I sit up and look around. Jack is sitting against the wall next to Sans surrounded by ketchup bottles. Nick landed on top of Braden. Ryan surprisingly landed on his feet, but is still unconscious. I look for Chase, but can’t find him. I stand up to get a better view. Suddenly, something slams into me from behind. The force throws me to the ground. Chase has landed, I repeat, Chase has landed.

“Bro,” I groan, “couldn’t you have landed somewhere else?” But, I wasted my breath, because he’s passed out. I push him off, which is a feat in itself. I’m the only one awake and I’m bored. So, I roll down the hill of flowers like a complete idiot. The idiot part of it is that I face-planted into a puddle of ketchup. Tasted good, though. I hear laughter. I look up to see Sans and Jack.

“ Have a nice trip, kid?” Sans asks.

“ Huh,” Jack responds, “ I didn’t know it was fall!” They both burst into laughter. I stumble up and wipe my face off.

“ Very funny.” I said, “ but if you’re done reciting the Minish Cap manga, we need to figure out what to do next. And stop drinking ketchup! It’s weird.” Sans stares straight at me and takes a giant swig of ketchup. Drains the whole bottle in three seconds. I roll my eyes and walk off to see if anybody else was awake. Braden was awake, shouting at Nick to get off him. Nick was still out. Mika, Ryan, and Chase were also unconscious. I head over to Nick and Braden. Braden is struggling to push Nick

off him. I grab Braden's hand and tug him out from under Nick.

"Thanks ... for..." Braden gasps. I help him to his feet and we stumble over to Sans and Jack. Braden sits down. Sans is out again, and Jack has his earphones in. Probably listening to Undertale AU's. I see Mika slowly slide down the hill of flowers to join us. Ryan also snapped out of whatever he was in and is coming over as well. Chase and Nick haven't recovered yet.

"So, we need to figure out how to get out of here," I say.

"If you want to get out so bad, why'd you jump into the hole?" Ryan asks. Jack finally notices us and takes out his earphones.

"The only reason I came in was to help Jack back out," I say. Jack scoffs behind me.

"I don't need help," Jack says. I spot movement to the left and glance over. Just Sans standing up.

"There's only one way out," Sans announces. "The barrier. And in order to get to the Barrier, you'll need to put some 'backbone' into it. Once you get to the Barrier, one person has to sacrifice himself to let everyone else back." Everyone's silent for a moment.

"Welp," Sans grumbles, "Barriers that way." He jerks a thumb behind him. "I'm off to Grilbb's," Sans adds, then disappears. Nick and Chase are awake now.

/.\

After a couple days, we manage to stumble upon a town. It's been snowing for hours, yet it's only two inches deep. Chase and Braden are both exhausted from the walk. I lost count after ten miles. Actually, Ryan and I are the only ones those miles didn't effect.

"I'm pretty sure I speak (inhale) for everyone when I (inhale) say we need a break," Jack gasps. All but me and Ryan mutter their agreement. I make eye contact with Ryan. He shrugs.

"Alright, where's the inn, Jack?" I ask. He smiles.

"Follow me. And don't worry, I know a shortcut," Jack laughs. I roll my eyes, but follow anyway. The team follows suit. A few minutes of silence go by.

"Alright!" Jack shouts. Braden and Mika both jump. Jack spreads his hands out, as if showcasing the inn. I push past him and open the door. The entire place is empty. We enter the inn and look around. The whole place is full of ... dust. Jack's gone pale. Even more than normal. I didn't think it was possible.

"What's wrong?" Mika asks. I glance at Jack, and he slowly shakes his head.

"Nothing," I tell her, "Why do you think there is?" She still looks sceptical, but doesn't question it anymore. We make our way up the stairs to check the rooms. The stairs creak with every step and the wallpaper is falling off. When we reach the top of the staircase, I notice that there's only six rooms.

"Perfect," I say, "who wants to keep watch fir-"

"Dude," Chase interrupts, "no offence, but it's practically a ghost town out there. I don't think we need a watch." Nick, Braden, and Ryan nod in agreement.

"Alright, then who's going two to a room?" I ask. Ryan, Nick, Braden, Jack, and Chase all smirk at me.

"You and Mika," They say in unison. My face starts burning again and Mika's gets red in the face.

"W-why do you say that," I stutter.

"Isn't it obvious?" Jack asks, "You two are the only couple of the group."

"We aren't a couple!" Mika and I shout at the same time. The guys (excluding me) all roll their eyes and Chase mutters a 'sure'. Then, they all exit the hall into different rooms, leaving me and Mika just standing there. Talk about awkward.

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The next few days have been painfully awkward for everyone. Every conversation we start up, Mika takes no part in. She rarely talks to anyone now and only talks to me if we're alone. So far, she hasn't talked to me. Yesterday, we got through a waterfall/trash dump. Now, we're in some volcanic place. Jack called it Hotlands.

“Woah!” yells Braden. I look up to see a giant lab in the distance. Jack and Ryan start running towards it, followed by Chase and Braden, then Nick. Mika starts to run after them, then glances back at me. I’m still walking. She stops and waits for me to catch up.

“You know,” Mika says, “I’ve been thinking...” *Yeah, I think, about three or four days of it.*

“There’s no clear way back home. We might be stuck here forever,” she starts. “And what the others said about us being a couple. I would rather not die single.” Mika reaches for my hand, and I let her take it.

“What makes you think you’re going to die?” I ask, “we’ve met no one.”

“Instinct,” she responds.

“English, please!” I hear Jack shout. Mika jumps and lets go of my hand. At least we caught up with the others.

/.\

Like everywhere else, no one was in the lab. At the exit, though, there were a bunch of robot parts. We exit into a long hallway that seems to go on forever. Jack starts to sweat. I don’t blame him. After not seeing anybody, it’s easy to predict what’s going to happen next. Everyone runs down the hall. I think we’re ready to get back home.

We pass an elevator, but don’t stop. We finally reach the judgement hall. Jack goes in first and I get in last. By the time I get in, Jack’s already put Sans’ jacket on and Braden’s put on Papyrus’ scarf. We continue on through a patch of dust covered flowers. We get past the room of flowers and reach a gate. There’s someone sitting in front of it.

“Why did you do the genocide run?” Jack asks them. The person looks up and the others gasp in shock. Except Mika, because she doesn’t know him. The person who did the genocide run was Chase Strong.

“What?! I just wondered what it would be like,” Chase S. says. “Anyway, would you like to know how to get out? Silence for yes, walk away for no.” No one says anything.

“Good,” Chase S. coughs, “For a group of eight, two people must use their souls to open the gate, meaning they’ll die. Sans is pretty powerful. Hit me with a fatal blow, so I’ll use myself. You’ll need one more.” With that, he touches one of the two locks on the gate. There’s a burst of light, and Chase S. and the lock are gone.

“So...” Chase M. says, “who’s going to die? Because it sure ain’t me.”

“I’ll do it,” Mika, Ryan, and I say simultaneously. We look at each other.

“I told you I felt like I was going to die down here,” Mika tells me. With that, she runs towards the last lock. I try to stop her, but I’m too slow. Mika reaches out to touch the lock. Another blinding flash of light, except this time, it doesn’t disappear. I feel empty inside. I’ve never told anyone, but I’d had a crush on Mika ever since I met her. And I had let her die.

Half an hour goes by. Then, I see another flash of light. A flash of light in a flash of light. Don’t ask how, because I still don’t know. But, when I open my eyes, I see Mika.

“Star,” she starts, “I’m sorry for dying. But, it was my time.”

“But, that’s not true!” I say, a bit of happiness coming back to me. “You’re here now, so you can’t possibly... have died...” I break off as she shakes her head.

“I died, Star,” Mika says, dead serious. Jack would like that one. “I just came to tell you what to expect. No one, but you, will remember anything about what happened. You’ll be taking the place of Chase Strong, as no one dead, no matter what timeline, can live again. Just carry on with your life. Who knows, maybe one day you will love, again.”

“Wai-” I start, but there’s a burst of light, and everything goes black.

/.\

I wake up and look around. Must be Chase Strong’s room. I’d better learn some more English. Dragonic won’t get me far, as Mika is the only one who understands it. Was... the only one who

understood it.

“Chase!” Someone shouts. Must be his mom. “Get up! It’s the first day of school!” Oh, boy. Eighth grade, here I come.

Chloe Stuart

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

The Note

I don't usually like to blame others. It's something I've always despised. You are to blame for your mistakes. Mom preached that to me since I was a child. I guess I'm kind of a hypocrite if I say this, but I'm writing this because of you. Weird, right? Maybe it was the unaccepting vibe that I felt the second my big toe touched the dirty brown tile floor. How about the time I met you? When you grabbed my neck and pushed me into the bathroom. You shoved me into the stall, it was one of the big handicapped ones. I remember my body hitting the wall. The school bell rung. The halls grew silent. It was just you and me. You stood directly in front of me for what seemed like hours. You didn't say a word. What were you thinking about? What you were going to do to me. All the sudden, I felt your fist smash against my cheek. I tasted blood. Then, you drew your leg back and kicked me in the side as hard as you could. I fell. My head collided with the wall. Kick, punch, kick punch. You alternated in between the two. At this point, I couldn't breath. My whole body shook. You grinned in pleasure.

That's when I heard your voice for the first time, "You were the worst one yet." What did you mean by that? Is this what you do in your free time, beat up girls that you have never met? Your grand finale though was the worst. You stroked my cheek. What made you think you could do that? I tried to fight back but no one heard my screams. You strode out of the stall. I heard the bathroom door slam. I was all alone. That's when everything turned into a blur.

I was in the hospital for a week thanks to that. Being new to the town I knew something bad was going to happen at school but that was the worse first day of school I could've imagined. Do you even feel a hint of gu-

~

"Come grab something to eat." It's Mom. Her voice was feeble from the years of smoking a pack of cigarettes daily. I need to get up before she gets angry.

I slowly pushed myself from off the small wooden chair. I stuff my note book in one of the drawers. I felt strange. Everything in my room was so perfect. My little bamboo is growing so beautifully. My radio is playing my favorite song. I hum along. I have some incense burning. The smell fills the air. It's so peaceful. I know it's only a matter of seconds until Mom yells again so I savor the moment. With all the recent events that had happened this was perfect. Pure serenity.

On the way out of my room I get a glimpse of my appearance in the mirror. My eyes are red and puffy. Great. I brace myself for all the questions Mom will ask. I already hear her say *what's wrong sweetie* over and over again in my head. I slowly walk into the dimly lit hallway. Our house is a mess. Everything was sprawled out on the floor. The paint on the wall was chipping. Everyday a new chip shows up. Ever since the incident at school happened Mom has been a little off. Who can blame her though. She just wants me to be safe and if she could we would be moving right now. Out of this town,

away forever. Unfortunately we are broke. We had spent so much money on this move. There is no going back, at least for now.

The floorboards creak every time my foot hits the wood floors. Mom flew into the hallway. Her smile lit up the room. Even through all the pain and dysphoria she had smiled. I wave. I now find myself staring at the floors. I can't look her in the face. All the trouble and heartache I have brought, it's unsettling.

"I have some ravioli set on the table." She pats my back. The smell of cigarette ash fills our house. Only a faint smell of ravioli eludes. I slowly tiptoe forwards. There it is. The ravioli lying in the most gorgeous ceramic bowl you've ever seen. Our wooden table was filled with bills. Mostly medical ones from my time in and out of the hospital. *I'm a burden.*

I now find myself sitting and eating my ravioli. Mom has now returned to her cigarette and favorite soap opera. Steam floats up from the ravioli. It's delicious. I forgot how much I loved the cheese filled shells that are saturated in sweltering sauce.

It only took me five minutes to finish up the bowl. After dinner, I find myself laying in bed. The room is pitch black. The only noise is the tv echoing through the house.

Night time was always a scary time for me. My thoughts are my only company and their not the most sympathetic.

"Hey," My sheets fly up in the air. "It's only me silly." *Only Mom.* I see the silhouette of her body hovering over my dresser. The floorboards creak as she trudges over to my bed side. My eyelids begin to feel like magnets. I feel her soft hand touch my head, rubbing my temples. "Don't get mad at me," I barely hear her voice.

My eyes jerk open. "Why would I be?" I see in her eyes, she is trying to search for the right words. The room is dead silent. "Mom tell me, I can take it." Still she kept silent.

"You have to go to school tomorrow." Dumbstruck. The world around me is inaudible. Everything starts to disappear. The words echo in my head. The feeling of his hand touching my cheek haunts me. I feel my mom's lips touch my forehead. Followed by the sound of the door creaking closed. I am alone.

I find myself at my desk. Searching through the drawers trying to find my notebook. All I remember is me stuffing it in one of them. Which one? Who knows? I had no light to help guide me on my search. I suddenly feel the smooth cover of the notebook. I pull the notebook out feeling victorious. I grab my reading light of my desk and clip it to the notebook. I knew exactly what page I was looking for. I have seen it many times. It was my secret. My only connection to my past. It was a source of heartbreak but it was also reason to live. Within seconds I'm already on the page. One loose piece of crumpled paper falls to the floor. There it is.

~

I guess this is the last time the world will hear from me. I want everyone to know this isn't their fault. It's my decision.

Esme, my beautiful daughter, I hate to leave you at such a young age. The first time I held you I felt true love. It was the most proud moment of my life. You will do amazing things. Just be yourself. You're

only 8 and your personality shines brighter than the north star. I will forever love you.

My wife, I love you. You kept me alive. Kept me dreaming, when there was nothing left to dream about. I know this will be hard for you but you're better off without me. This cancer is going to kill me and if I decided to live the medical bills would be the end of us. I don't want that for you or Esme.

You are the only people who ever loved me. When winter came around it felt lonelier without you. When I was with you every day felt like spring. You are the reason I woke up every day. You made me feel purposeful.

Unfortunately, my existence is now only a burden. I'm going to hang myself. I heard I will lose consciousness fast. It should be painless. So don't worry.

As I'm writing this, I'm crying for the first time. It's strange. I feel vulnerable. But I already feel more peaceful, knowing eternal sleep is soon. Forgive me. I love you.

~

Dad, thank you. I'll keep fighting for you.

~

"Good morning star shine." The sound of my alarm blares in the background. My eyes start to lift up. I see Mom carrying a tray full of waffles, bananas, and water. My favorite. She gracefully sits the tray at the end of my bed. She then reaches over to the alarm and shuts it off. "I'll be in the living room when you're ready to go to school."

I can't say how thankful I am for her. She's my role model. I love her.

The aroma of the breakfast fills my mind with happiness. I carefully place the bananas on the waffle. I eat a couple bites of my waffle. It's delicious. Arguably better than the ravioli. Which is a tremendous feat. I applaud you Mom.

I make my way over to my dresser and pick up one of Dad's old sweaters and some black jeans. *Off to the bathroom.*

I make my way down the hall. I don't know what happened but that note... makes me feel like myself again. Back to the kid he left 7 years. The kid who fought to be treated well. She is back.

I look at my face in the mirror. My eyes tired from the sleep lost in the past months. Scars from the stitches on my lip. I brush through my hair. The first time in forever. It feels good.

I finish up getting ready in the bathroom. I rush over to my room to fetch my bag. It's strange holding it again. Last time I held it was that day. I remember Mom cleaning the blood of it. Tears streaming down her face. She was heartbroken. She screamed that night, cursing that boy.

I feel something run down my cheek. A tear. *Snap out of it!* I slowly trudge over to the door. When I hear something, I bend down to look at the floor. Under my foot is a crumpled piece of paper. Dad. I bring the paper close to my chest. Reminiscing all the times we spent together. His face was unbelievably handsome. He always dressed classy. His favorite phrase was "dress like today was your last day alive." I can hear his voice so clearly. Like he had never left. He always wanted to be a musician. He taught me everything about music: how to play the piano, violin, he gave me voice

lessons too. He was extraordinary.

I slip the paper in the back of my pocket. *Today is going to be interesting.*

~

“Have a good day sweetie.” I laugh and wave back. As she pulls away my smile disappears from my face. I already feel a sense of dread come over me. Instead of walking in the school. I make my way over to the courtyard. It looked very calm and peaceful; just what I need. As I walk over I slip my earbuds in. Music floods into my ears, filling my brain with serene thoughts.

Music is my escape. This world is obviously not so kind. It throws you so many obstacles. When Dad died all I had was his music he left and the note. He had cabinets full of his recordings. I would listen to them every night. It helped me cope with the cruel reality that is life. It helps calm me. It makes me numb.

I sit down on a blue bench in the courtyard. Only a few others are out here. Most of them smoking before the day. My eyes close. The music soothed my nerves. The cold fall breeze danced on my exposed knees. It’s just me.

~

“Hey cutie, I missed you.” My eyes fling open. It’s him. He stood above me. You could sense how tough he felt. His voice is flat; emotionless. His eyes are haunting. They were glowing bright green. He was so close. Every breath he made sent a chill up my spine. “You don’t look as good as I remembered.” The whole courtyard was watching now. His friends stand proudly behind him. No one is on my side. It’s me against the school.

I need to fight. I need to do this. I feel a cold hand caress my cheek. A crowd is starting to form around us. *It’s now or never.*

Smack. I find my hand raised. He is holding the side of his face. I can feel the tension in the air. I look around at the crowd on last time. Mouths hang open; they were baffled.

-

“You disgusting rat.” He’s at least a 3 feet away now. “You should have been a little more appreciative.” His laugh fills the courtyard. “You could have had me! Now you’re in real trouble.” His body starts to get closer to me. Everything’s a blur. The world begins to become mute. It’s only me and my thoughts. *Run.*

My body all the sudden lurches to the side. A crowd of disoriented people stands in my way but it doesn’t phase me. I push through the crowd. Some of them try and pull me back but their strength can’t match my speed. *Look in front of you. Face what’s in front of you.*

I hear footsteps, tramping right behind me. I feel my leg start to give out. I wasn’t supposed to have too much physical activity. I feel my body race faster. I’m not ready to throw up the white flag. The footsteps become heavier; more people have joined. I then realize, I have nowhere to go. My house is too far away. I can’t run away from this one. My feet suddenly stop moving. I hear the crowd come to a

halt too.

“Bring her to the parking lot.” It’s him; the same apathetic voice. I feel a hand touch my wrist. It’s a strong grip. He pushes me back. I hear a faint noise. The school bell.

I look at the guy holding my wrist. He was one of the guys in his posse. I rummage through my mind trying to find something to say.

“What’s going to happen to me.” His laugh is deep. Like one of the laughs from a horror film. We walk in silence for a minute. The parking lot becomes in my view. A crowd of people are huddled around a car. Something is tied to the rear of the car. What could that be?

“You’ll see.” His voice trails off. “You should have kept running.”

Within a minute we reach the car. It was beautiful. It looked newly washed. Not a scratch.

He starts to emerge from the back of the crowd holding a rope. He walks closer to me but my focus is on the rope. It’s tied to the car. The guy releases my wrist but before I can run he throws me to the ground. Head first.

~

I wake laying on the ground. I go to sit up when I realize my legs are tied. My head flings around only to realize the crowd has grown massively. Their chants ring in my ears.

“Step on it!” With those words the car lurches forward. I can feel the car accelerating. My legs burn as I’m dragged behind the car. I hear the cheers turn into screams. Guilt. The imbeciles better feel guilty. I feel the car jerk to the side. It’s a corner. I feel him step on the gas. My body flings to the right.

Smash. Excruciating pain races through my body. I have hit the curb. I hear everyone screaming. The car slows to a stop. My whole body is burning. *I’m not going to die*, I reassure myself. *You have been through hell and back. This is not the end.*

“Want me to stop.” I see his face sticking out the window. He looks amused. The whole crowd behind me is silent. Despite the burning sensation rising up my body, I rise to my knees. Tears surge down my face.

“Is this all you got! Go faster!” Everyone gasps. I see his eyes widened. He was shaken to the core. “I will not let you win like this!” My voice feels weak but I’m sure the whole town heard. “Drag me till I’m dead! I dare you.” The engine revs up.

This might be the end. Pathetic. I could have saved myself from this horrendous fate but no. I want to go down with dignity. Maybe it’s because of the note. How it mentioned my personality. How I never let bad people win. Maybe I’m just stupid. Who knows anymore. Right now all I can think about is Dad, the music you sang to me every day and Mom’s mouthwatering cooking. How much I’ll miss it. Too bad I am going to survive. He can drag me as long as he wants but I will prevail.

Elyssa Taylor

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Oak Park High School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Ann Elder

Category: Short Story

The Importance of Blood VS Water

There was not a single cloud in the night sky as a lone figure appeared on top of a high building, a few stars were twinkling silently over her head. Maria knew that her training would be more than enough to complete the task that the Society had set out for her, considering that after all, she was the leader's daughter. A quiet wind blew her dark brown ponytail over her shoulder as she crouched on the ledge of the building, contemplating how she would enter it. Her outfit was composed of a skin tight shirt and matching pants that were as dark as the sky above her, camouflaging her body against the rooftop. After peering over the edge for a few moments more, Maria stood and took a few paces back away from it, only to then run and hurl herself over the side of the building and into the nothingness below.

The wind raced through her hair and whistled in her ears as she plummeted towards the quiet street. Once she was a few stories down, Maria thrust out her hand towards the building on the other side of the street, a thin black cord extending from her sleeve. It wrapped around the railing of a balcony as if it were a vine wrapping around a tree, and pulled tight as it supported Maria's weight. She swung towards the building gracefully, and landed on another balcony a few stories below the one her cord was tethered to. Her feet made no noise as they connected with the patio floor, showing that her training had prepared her in the art of stealth. She gave the cord three short tugs and it came undone, coiling back into her sleeve for another time.

From a small pack around her waist, Maria pulled out something that resembled a small pocket knife, which gleamed silver in the moonlight. She walked with confidence over to the glass door that was all that stood between her and achieving her objective. She inserted the small tool into the keyhole on the doorknob and waited for the click that would grant her access. Why a balcony door that was twenty stories above the ground had a lock on the outside was a mystery to her, but she wasn't complaining for it made her job far easier. When Maria heard the quiet click of the lock sliding out of place, she couldn't help but be a little bit disappointed that this whole thing had been so easy.

Her father had given her this job specifically because he had claimed it was supposed to be difficult, but it seemed like this was one of the many times that he was wrong, she thought. The most infamous mistake he had made was when Maria was a mere sixteen years old. He had assigned her to one of her first solo jobs, one that he assured her she could handle with no problems. Maria was midway through her mission to steal a record sized ruby from an upscale jewelry store in New York City, when the alarms in the shop started blaring and red lights started flashing. NYPD officers busted down the door with guns aimed at her head before she could ever make a move to escape. What Maria didn't know at the time, was that her father had been manipulated by an undercover cop into giving her this mission. The NYPD had been after her entire family for generations, and had snuck their way into the heart of it and in the process putting all of them in jeopardy on that night because of her father's mistake. Maria had been able to narrowly escape capture by using a small smoke bomb and a broom to cripple the police officers standing in her way.

Maria could feel the chill of the metal door knob through her black glove as she quietly turned it and stepped into the dark apartment, pushing the memories of that long ago night to the back of her mind. There was no reason to worry about getting caught with stolen gemstones this time, for what she was looking for couldn't be turned into jewelry, although it was just as valuable if not more so.

Warm air gently caressed the exposed skin around her face and neck, filling her nose with the stale smell of coffee and old books which reminded her of a library. She shut the door quietly and pulled from her pack a thin pair of glasses which she placed over her eyes. When she pressed a small button on the side of them, the entire room became illuminated in a green light that only she could see, showing that she was now standing in a living area. Silent as the night itself, she slipped through the living room and down a hallway, hoping that it would lead to the room she sought.

By chance or by fate, it happened that the first door she opened revealed what she had been looking for: an office. Maria's mother had always told her that a room reflected the person who inhabited it. As she entered the room she couldn't help but think that if this were true then Mr. Johnson- she read the name off of an identification badge laying on the desk- had to be the most organized man to ever walk the Earth. The pencils that lay on his desk were all sharpened to exactly the same length and laying perfectly parallel to one another, a few books were lined up exactly with the corner of the desk and alphabetized top to bottom, and a stack of folders lay color coded beside a closed laptop.

Bingo.

Maria softly closed the door behind her before walking over to the laptop. From her pack she removed another small tool, but this one was in the form of a flash drive. As her thumb slid the metal end of it out of the protective covering, she opened the lid of the laptop with her other hand and inserted the flash drive into the USB port on the side of it. When the screen came to life and light illuminated the room, Maria pushed the button on the side of her glasses to be able to see in normal light. The screen showed a login screen, which in any other situation would have prevented her from completing her mission, but the flash drive did the work for her by automatically filling in the password. The light from the laptop reflected in her eyes as she scanned the screen, waiting for the drive to find her what she was looking for.

When a little box appeared on the screen flashing *download complete... download complete*, she shut the laptop and removed the flash drive. As Maria discretely slipped the precious device back into her pack, she simultaneously made sure that as she exited the office she hadn't disturbed anything from its precise spot on the desk. She didn't particularly care if Mr. Johnson knew that all the data from his laptop had been swiped, but she liked the idea of it being a surprise to him in the future. For now, he would know nothing, and all the fun would happen later on.

Maria disturbed nothing as she exited the apartment, which made her quite satisfied with herself that it seemed as if she was never there to begin with. Her father would be pleased not only with her work, but with her success at gaining the data he needed as well. She and her father, along with everyone else, would be happy that she had not run into any issues like on that day that still plagued her memories. Today was an easy day, a different day, and it had been even better since it had ended in a victory for her family.

She watched the outline of her own shadow on the balcony door as the little tool that she had used earlier relocked the bolt. Right as she heard the quiet click, she felt something slam into her from

behind, pressing her cheek flat against the cool glass in front of her. A hand was gripping her by her hair and another was pressed between her shoulder blades, both causing her to breathe harder and fog the glass.

“Ah, Maria,” a low voice growled in her ear. “What a nice surprise to see you here.”

The stranger could feel her relax under his touch as she heard his voice, so he promptly released her from his grip. She turned to look at him with an angry expression on her face, but as their eyes locked her stony exterior dropped and she smiled at him. “Matthew, it’s good to see you too. Although you had to know we would run into each other on the job eventually, it’s not like there are many families like ours out there.”

Like the girl standing before him, Matthew too was dressed in an outfit composed of all black. This, however, was not the thing that made him different from her. It was his eyes: black, like endless voids even in the light that shone from the moon. Not only was the color itself strange, but the coldness that could be seen in the depths of them was unsettling. None of this seemed to bother Maria, for she found comfort in the darkness.

He looked her up and down before gently taking her hand and leading her over to the balcony railing. Their faces were both cloaked in shadows on one side, and bathed in night time light on the other, thus making them look like living paintings.

“So, I assume it is safe to say we were here for the same prize,” Matthew said quietly, dropping her hand. At a nod from Maria he added, “And I assume it is also safe to say you already retrieved said prize.”

“Of course I did,” She said claiming offense. “I was trained by the best.”

Matthew laughed coldly. “Yes, that father of yours, quite the man. Fortunately for you and unfortunately for me, you succeeded. Now I must think of an excuse to tell my own father as a reason to why I am returning empty handed tonight.”

“You are really going to return to him with nothing?” She asked in surprise. Matthew and his family were notorious for being skilled thieves, and merciless while they were doing it.

“I couldn’t steal from you, now could I?” He smiled at her as he said it, but what Maria failed to see was that the warmth never came close to touching the coldness in his eyes.

“You’re sweet,” She said softly as she looked away from him and out at the city below them.

“I’m glad you think so,” He said in a low voice. He took a step so that he was behind her and he wept her hair away from her neck, leaving his hand where it rested against the side of it. “You’re familiar with the phrase ‘blood is thicker than water,’ aren’t you Maria?”

She tilted her head away from his touch slightly, a chill creeping up her spine. “Yes, I believe I am.”

He nodded slightly at her response. “In some cases I would have to say that this is true. In some

friendships, some *relationships*, sometimes have a greater value than that of a loyalty to your family.”

“I’m glad we agree on that then,” she murmured quietly.

“Mmm, if only we did dear one.”

Maria’s sudden confusion was cut off as Matthew drew a blade gently across her neck. Her body slumped against him and he supported her weight, lowering her slowly to the ground. She looked up at him with betrayal in her eyes, and they seemed to be screaming *why?*

He sighed as he returned her gaze. Matthew gently unzipped the pack that was around her waist, and retrieved the small flash drive that was buried within it. “I did say that in some cases the differences between blood and water weren’t significant, but I did not say they were always this way.”

He stood up and slipped the drive into a pocket in his pants. He left her there on the ground as he walked over to the railing again, only glancing back at her once before he left for good. “In some cases dear Maria, the differences between blood and water are very important indeed.”

Shillan Thaithi

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Mother Tongue

My mother's accent carries
her vivacious attitude,
in the brinks of her swollen African hips.

It rises like the sun in the chalk filled air of her country
It brings you to her perspective
It allows you to become one with her nature;
It is the window to her soul.

Before she speaks nothing is expected but as the soft ringlets leave her mouth
You are forced to strain your ears and understand who she is.

My mother is Zambia, Zimbabwe, Morocco, Congo
she is the melting pot of her continent.
The words that roll off her tongue are carried by the farasi of her childhood.

Her r's turned into l's so rails turn into lails
Water is no longer a substance but sustenance that has to be proclaimed like a hymn
WATER! She sings disregarding vowels and consonants.

The language that she has been forced to contain does not hide her past or determine her future
She carries in her breath the struggles of her childhood
and the allowances of her future.

My mother's accent is decorated with the guns of her father's war
and the spirit of her mother's religion
my mother's accent does not waver,

there is no altering the contortions of my mother's tongue.
Patterns of the English language do not exist in my mother's accent
her rules are her own.

My mother is the kiboko that can only be awakened by the simba of her sahara;
my mother's accent is her's and her's alone.

Shillan Thaithi

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Fact

"Black is a choice" four words,
made me bolt from my seat;
copious words running through my head as I try to process this image,
In the moments thereafter I am put into awareness
There is a stance I am obligated to take against the blasphemy
that is being held over my personal identity.
The phenomenon of child birth begins with a sperm meeting an egg,
an amazing scientific journey takes place
If God wills upon it a miracle is ensured in the form of a child
Who is innocently brought into an angry and developed world
it has no choice upon its gender, race, or sexual orientation.
These decisions alongside many others have been predetermined.

I will further break it down, for those still in a state of confusion
My big black ass did not play
chameleon voodoo in my mother's womb.
I did not skip back and forth from black to white:
I did not choose my privileges, my place of birth,
my skin tone, or my society.

The arrogance and uneducated nature of the pupil is baffling
such hateful and demeaning comments
backed with ludicrous facts instill danger in our society

Let us all pray for the buffoons that walk around disguised as human beings,
that have the audacity to say and create
such hurtful and fabricated concepts so proudly.

Shillan Thaithi

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Military Regiment

Growing up as a Kenyan female comes with its own precedence and hardships. You are trained to be nothing but above average; a soldier for the excellence army wearing nothing but the achievement decorated shawl. Money and God are above all, with pride seeping itself into the complicated mix. So when you voice to your parents that your life's calling is to teach children, they laugh and say the one thing you dare not forget: "We did not come to America for you to become a teacher; a professor we could entertain."

I have had to fashion my dreams around the rules of the camp that I live in. Fun was a laughable idea. I was drilled in the art of football, the concepts guaranteed to sharpen my brain. My father specifically chose the goalie position, ignoring the fact that I was the fastest runner the team had. "A goalie learns perspective, deductive reasoning... life is a match darling." He always speaks in incomprehensible riddles, and as a five year old I thought nothing of it and continued playing my position with high accuracy. With every game I played, those words ran through my head: "life is a match, darling." Yet the love was never there. I always wondered what it would be like to sing or dance something other than a game where strategy was the basis of its conception--something that wouldn't require so much thought.

I grew up in the most unorthodox fashion, which is comical considering my religion. I consider myself American in the essence of the world, but I grew up calling soccer "football." I also spoke odd languages that other children wouldn't understand. As a child, all I needed was "normalcy." I wanted go to sleepovers, invite boys to parties, and play with the "wazungus"(white people). But as my father's child I was not eligible to do any of those things. Nevertheless I argued the matters with high vibrato, but only to receive another complicated answer: "That is not something that we do." That is when I began the quest to find out who "we" are and why we were so different from others that we couldn't dare to just be normal.

Pushing boundaries is my strongest skill, with arguing taking a very close second. I have been pushing boundaries since the day I was born. I started out slowly in my quest; wearing clothes that the major did not approve of. After he got used to that I started hanging out with people who weren't Kenyan. To the point where I had no Kenyan friends at all. I soon learned that if I gave my parents what they wanted in terms of education and religion, they had no ground to stand on in account of my personal endeavors. So for a long while I did what they wanted I went to school, got straight A's, and made sure I payed attention at every mass. By the end of three years I could have been a theologist; throughout these years something phenomenal happen; I got fat!

I had not realized that in giving up the army standard I would give up my main and only source of physical activity. To me my weight was not an issue, but to my mother this was the biggest obstacle of her life. This was around the time that I entered high school and the gym became my best friend, but so did food. For a while I loved being fat because it angered my parents and I was a master manipulator,

but soon afterwards I realized that I had lost at my own game. I decided things needed to change.

During my fat reversal journey I began to question my faith and my path in education. Somehow I had convinced myself that I wanted to become a plastic surgeon working unbelievable hours and living without a life. I consider myself an artist of the mind. I love singing and writing is my favorite pass time. Although I would be good at this job that my parents have happily adorned me with, I would be a miserable specimen. Therefore I secretly reverted back into my teaching dreams. As far as faith is concerned things began to change when I was bombarded by an abundance of ideas as I walked through the chapel of high school. Everyone had their own special inquisitions and I was itching for one of my own. Every breath I took felt manufactured by my heritage and rules I was accustomed to living by. Nothing in my life felt unique so I decided to change that.

Throughout my very short journey I have discovered that “Life is indicative of heritage, but not of personage.” I am obliged to respect and consider my ancestry through the decisions that I make, but my own motivations need to come into play. Life is about being who you are and setting your own standards regardless of those that have been set for you.

Kimberley Tran

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Maya Inspektor

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Tapping Into Creativity

- *The struggle*

I was in prison. In the suffocating darkness, the blue light beaming from the computer screen assaulted my eyes, already drooping with fatigue. Letter shapes blurred as my chin slumped on my bent palm--a foreboding premonition. *No, wake up!* I cautiously typed a sentence on the document, but the pitifully-phrased words cried out for help. My fingers scrambled for the backspace key to erase all traces of my wrongdoing.

Guilt coursed through my veins as *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant mocked me from under piles of syllabi. *Can't you see that your rewrite is violating my story? You're unworthy*, the dog-eared paperback taunted. It was right, but I couldn't waste precious minutes dwelling on its doom and gloom. The creative writing assignment was due tomorrow. In retaliation, the menacing brick wall obstructing my mind quadrupled its reinforcements. My arch nemesis--writer's block. The villain of language I wanted to vanquish, but always lingered just out of my reach. I should have reined in this abomination long ago. Whatever phantoms of innovative ideas I hadn't yet discovered dissipated. *Hopeless*.

- *The inspiration*

As a child, I devoured books with more desperation than my lungs demanded oxygen. Going to the supermarket? There I was, perched inside the shopping cart, my eyes swimming with adoration for the story. What about the playground? Forget socializing--I was too busy hiding under the slide or lying in the sandbox with a minty new paperback to care. Fourth of July? The sound of exploding fireworks rattled my hearing. I preferred to cower inside my closet, comforted by the familiarity and warmth of my books.

I cherished characters as treasured companions. One summer, I morphed into Nancy Drew's assistant detective, faithfully following her as she investigated a secret will hidden in the Crowley Clock. With the aid of a book light I had concealed under my pillow, I sucked myself into the world of Nancy Drew mysteries each night until I passed out from fatigue. In the mornings, Mom would cluck disapprovingly as she caught me snoring under the covers, a paperback propped on my stomach and my fingers still wrapped around the flashlight. My stubbornness could rival Nancy Drew herself; I refused to rest until I had finished all 175 books of her adventures that year. (I failed--exhaustion betrayed me near the end).

As mountains of library books invaded my bookshelves, the tendrils of a not-so-impossible dream stirred. Maybe I could be an author too, and maybe my characters could be someone else's role models someday. I prepared to surrender my fate to a passion for creative writing.

- *The journey*

I furrowed my brow, pouted my bottom lip, and squinted at Microsoft Word in mock concentration.

My fingers tickled the keys, already thrumming with creative ideas. Words were my superpower--just call me Word Girl. I was ready to be a writer! With a burst of energy, I typed the phrase “The Time Machine Adventures of Flopsy and Periwinkle,” but then cringed at the blandness of my choice. My pigtails wagged in the air as I bobbed my head in shame. *Was that really the most creative title I could come up with?* A shadow of self-doubt closed in as I halted a rush of ideas. If I couldn’t think of a decent title, how could I write a good story? It would never match up to the hundreds of books I had admired. I had failed before I had even started.

I flung Dad's computer carelessly onto my bed, snuggled under the flowery sheets, and hugged Flopsy the Rabbit and Periwinkle the Cat closer for comfort. The gleam of a “#1 New York Times Bestseller” cover interrupted my pity-party. *The Lightning Thief*, by Rick Riordan. Mom had borrowed it from the library for me the week before. *For inspiration*, she assured. *Maybe it can help with that story you’re writing.* But I had let Mom down. Rick Riordan created his own fantasy land, so why was I resisting mine? Flopsy and Periwinkle were heroes like Percy Jackson. Their adventures could be just as great. They could even have superpowers, like Percy’s over the ocean! Ambition glowed. One day, my story could be a best-seller like Riordan’s! I was *creative*. I just needed to trust in myself and my writing. I grinned and reached for a journal, ready to splatter a resumed surge of fresh ideas onto the blank pages.

-
The pride

Dad had granted me express permission to finish producing *The Time Machine Adventures of Flopsy and Periwinkle*, Book #1, past my bedtime. Armed with construction paper, gel pens, and Prismacolors, I lined up my materials with the precision of a sergeant. With hues of blue and pink marker streaked across my palms, I emerged from my arts and crafts fiesta victorious. Sixteen pages overflowing with saturated illustrations and loopy cursive font shone like a Christmas package on the kitchen table. Never mind that Flopsy's ears were dramatically crooked; she was more unique than other stuffed rabbits. Never mind that I had accidentally misspelled Periwinkle's name as “Perrywinkle” several times; I slyly covered these imperfections with daisies among the text. It wasn't perfect, but I was overjoyed with my first self-published novel. Practically bursting with euphoria, I displayed my new creation to Mom the next morning at breakfast. Dad spent a precious fifteen minutes admiring my work at the dinner table. I had tried to give it to my three-year-old sister, but since she couldn’t read, that was unfortunate. My book soon amassed a cult of fans. *Very creative! Write more stories like this!* my parents raved.

-
The opportunity

“Kiddo, come here real quick. I think you’ll like this,” Dad hollered. I skipped from my bedroom clutching my trusty idea journal, the fraying seams now bursting from the magic of a year’s worth of stories. Plopping down on the couch next to him, my excitement deflated. Dad had switched the channel to PBS Kids for me, so we could watch our favorite game show, *Fetch! With Ruff Ruffman*. Instead of a cartoon dog, however, all I saw was a commercial. A rainbow shimmered on screen. A theme song blared. *2008 READING RAINBOW WRITING CONTEST, FOR KIDS IN GRADES K-3!* the headline bellowed.

“I think you could win. You’re a creative kid,” Dad encouraged.

The deadline was in a couple of weeks. I could do this! There was no doubt in my mind. After all, I was a writer.

-
The disappointment

My heart thumped in anticipation. I gleefully sprung up and squished my cheeks against the computer screen. Desperately, I scanned the list of Reading Rainbow winners. My grin faded. *Where's my name?* It was nowhere to be found in the results for the local division. I hadn't gotten a first place prize. Not second. Not third. Not even an honorable mention. Despair and disappointment set in like thunder. My eyes watered. I had worked hard on my story. I was so excited. It didn't matter, though. The judges hadn't liked it. They hadn't liked my story about *The Universal Flower*. They didn't care that Martin and Mary had traveled to a parallel universe to eat a blossom that allowed for them to speak and understand any language. They didn't care that I had pestered the librarians to translate "Hello, how are you?" into Russian and Latin for the dialogue. I hadn't won anything. My idea wasn't creative enough. *I wasn't creative enough.*

I stomped back into my bedroom and stuffed my journal under the mattress. No more stories for now.

-

The separation

Life ebbed and flowed. Homework sucked my attention. Swim team and friends occupied my thoughts. I slept early; books no longer distracted me.

Writing still beckoned. Many times, I cracked open my journal, my pencil poised over the pages. But just as I wrote "The...", I stopped. I teared up as waves of renewed disappointment drowned me in self-doubt. Where was the girl who fantasized about seeing her adventure novels in Scholastic book catalogs? The one who spent hours crafting emails to Jerry Spinelli, pestering him for advice on how to be the world's next greatest author? She was gone, buried under layers of losses and disappointments, and it was no one else's fault but mine. I had abandoned her, left her alone and vulnerable to be stamped upon by shame and sorrow until she had withered into oblivion. Her creativity had fled. Her memory had faded away. Only the ghosts of stories past haunted me still, hissing the chilling temptations of "what if?" into my subconscious. *No more.* I could live with being a coward, but not a failure. I slapped my journal, the forbidden fruit, shut. Back under the mattress it went.

A brick wall formed in my mind. It refused to budge.

-

The triumph

I frantically struggle against the prison bars. *The Red Tent* remains buried under mountains of papers. Reluctantly, I retrieve the book from its hiding-place and reread the scene I wish to rewrite. Its underlying tones of hatred surge through me with a passionate, palpable force. Dinah has been bound, gagged, and kidnapped. The cords crisscrossing her body drip with the blood of her fiancée, whom her brothers murdered in her bed. She curses her mothers for betraying her, for breaking her heart. She will never forgive her family; they have committed the most unforgivable sin.

I absorb Dinah's grief. Her rage radiates from the pages. Dinah demands justice; I feel compelled to help. I must share her story--in my own words.

A flicker of an idea ignites. It swells into a flame. The jail cell slowly crumbles.

I decide to be courageous. My pinky falls off the backspace key, and I begin to write.

Julia M. Wang

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Janet Duckham

Category: Critical Essay

The Wrong Kind of Minority

Note to reader: Aimee Tang and Ed. U. Cation are fictional people, and South Harmon Institute of Technology is a fictional school first featured in the 2006 film Accepted.

The Wrong Kind of Minority

14 March 2018
Aimee Tang
12 Tofu Drive
Orlando, FL 32803
Orange County

Dear Ms. Aimee Tang,

I regret to inform you that after much consideration, we are unable to offer you admission to the elite South Harmon Institute of Technology. I hope you understand that we cannot offer a place to every worthy applicant—despite your high GPA, excellent SAT score, and avid participation in extracurricular activities, we simply do not have enough room in our school.

Thank you for your interest in South Harmon Institute of Technology. We wish you the best of luck for your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

Ed U. Cation
Dean of Admissions

~ ~ ~

16 March 2018
Ed U. Cation
South Harmon Institute of Technology
Harmony, FL 34773
Osceola County

Dear Mr. Cation,

Thank you for your letter. I would first like to state that I am not trying to change your mind about denying my admission to South Harmon Institute of Technology—I know that you cannot accept every qualified student. I simply would like to address an issue with the current college admissions system of affirmative action in hopes of improving the system for future students. While I admire

President John F. Kennedy's well-intended goal of affirmative action "to correct past injustices by implementing policies that favor those previously discriminated against" (1), have these past injustices *really* been corrected?

A few days ago, two of my high school peers, Karen Kim and Aspyr Baker, were accepted into South Harmon Institute of Technology, while I was rejected. Karen scored a perfect 1600 on the SAT, took nine AP classes with a perfect GPA of 4.0 (unweighted), volunteered for more than 150 hours, and excelled at physics and gymnastics, while Aspyr scored a 1380, took six APs with a GPA of 3.7, volunteered for 130 hours, and played the oboe in our school band. They both met your university's admission requirements. But so did I. I scored a 1550 on the SAT, took seven APs with a 3.9 GPA, volunteered for 150 hours, and participated in both my school theatre program and Speech and Debate. But I wasn't accepted. I wasn't accepted because even though I met the university's requirements and exceeded the average GPA (3.6) and SAT score (1390), compared to the GPA and scores of other Asian-Americans (such as Karen's), mine were just average, or even below average. Due to affirmative action, colleges have a limited number of spots for Asians, and as a result, many qualified people are rejected. Does this situation sound like "correcting past injustices" to you?

Some people, such as Khin Mai Aung, the director of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund's equity program, may argue that universities considering all of an applicant's characteristics (including race) can "create the most effective learning environment for giving each student the tools to succeed in our global and multicultural economy" (2). While I agree that colleges should consider all of an applicant's characteristics, I believe that race should impact their decisions less than it does now. Considering race may ensure diversity, but is it possible to have diversity without snatching opportunities away from deserving people, or does diversity only come with the compromise of true equal opportunity?

Although colleges should value diversity, they also need to realize that while affirmative action has helped certain minority groups with college admissions, it has severely harmed other minorities—Asians in particular—by discriminating against them. Did you know that according to the New York Times, "to receive equal consideration by elite colleges, Asian Americans must outperform Whites by 140 points, Hispanics by 280 points, Blacks by 450 points [on the] SAT (Total 1600)" (3)? Why should I have to score that much better than my non-Asian friends just to receive "equal" consideration? Why am I expected to know more than they do? We get to go to the *same* public school. We get the *same* education. We get the *same* opportunities. Why am I punished for my race—something I was born with, something I cannot control?

I do not know.

I do not understand.

I do not understand why the National Center for Education Statistics shows that even though "Asians of college age doubled in the last 25 years, their enrollment rates at Ivy-League schools have stayed the same" (4). In response to this statement, some people may say, 'Oh, you don't have to go to an Ivy League or big-name school. Just go to the school that best fits you!' Some may think that Asian Americans get unreasonably rattled by the idea of discrimination in the college admissions process (5). But when the system doesn't discriminate against you, it's easy to stay calm.

While I agree that elite schools do not fit all, people (including Asians) should have the opportunity to attend any school they qualify for, even if the school is an elite school (unless they commit a crime such as cheating or theft). In my case, South Harmon Institute of Technology happened to be my top-choice university—not because of its prestige, but because I thought it would fit me best.

I also understand that some people have fears about higher college acceptance rates of Asian students. For example, some may fear that without restraint, Asian students could take over the entire school population. But could a single race really have that much power? Every race has hardworking, academically-competent people—no race seems likely to homogenize the school population. But

because this fear still prevails in our country, colleges and universities discriminate against many qualified people. While some people may enjoy the benefits of the current affirmative action policy, most Asians have to battle the consequences of *negative* action. According to The Google Dictionary, the purpose of affirmative action is to favor “those who tend to suffer from discrimination, especially in relation to employment or education”. However, this “affirmative” action has caused Asians to “suffer from discrimination”. Right now, we’re told that we should “accept discrimination for the ‘common good’” (6). But do you see the irony of this phrase? Since when did “common” not include Asians? Since when did “good” not pertain to us? Does our well-being not matter? We should matter, but instead we’re pushed aside. We’re not a minority that benefits from affirmative action—we’re the wrong kind of minority.

But why? Why does checking that one tiny box next to “Asian (including Indian subcontinent and Philippines)”, or writing our last names as “Wang” or “Lee” make colleges automatically pigeonhole us (even if subconsciously)? I am proud of my Asian ancestry, but I am not proud of the way my nation treats me because of it.

On the surface, the current affirmative action system may seem to fight discrimination, but the system itself ironically discriminates against some races by taking away equal opportunity in college admissions. Plus, the number of people of mixed race has grown by 32 percent between 2000 and 2010 (7), and we can only expect that this number will continue to grow—how will colleges be able to label an applicant of Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, *and* Asian descent? To prevent similar issues and to reduce the discrimination caused by affirmative action, colleges could fix the current holistic review process by changing the balance of weights—they could weigh the applicants’ economic and educational backgrounds more than their races. If two students of different races come from the same economic backgrounds and have the same secondary school opportunities, then logically, shouldn’t they also have equal opportunities in higher education? Would you want anything less than true equal opportunity for your own child?

Thank you very much for your time and kind consideration.

Sincerely,

Aimee Tang
Concerned Student

Magda Werkmeister

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

4 AM

a house can feel like a whole world
when you're lying in your bed at 4 a.m.,
too early to rise in a coup against the lingering stars,
too late for the soft black of the backs of eyelids to last long enough,
light switch flipped up so as not to have to stare at the dark
but staring at the slow meandering of the fan is not much better.

the stillness is eerie, unsettling, unnatural,
as though you are invading upon a time too sacred,
a holy time sensing that you have stumbled upon it.
you would think that music could ease the tension
and it does for a while until you hit the space between songs
and that silence screams with a pitch unprecedented.

it's the nervous sort of false serenity,
a deer in a meadow with ever-twitching ears,
ready to flee but not yet sure from what,
and then you realize you are fleeing from yourself,
fleeing from what you are because you don't truly know
when you are the only one alive in the twilight.

4 a.m. exists only in our guts and in our poems;
confrontation of self exists only within.

Georgia White

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Short Story

Hale

As odd as it may seem, bacon sandwiches always reminded Sarah of a beautiful baby girl. One with auburn hair that lay in ringlets, navy blue eyes, with what looked like shards of glass spread around them generously, giving them a look similar to that of ice. And yet this girl always smiled. Truly an angel. Her name was to be Haley, but her nickname would be Hale. Fitting, as her eyes mimicked hale so perfectly.

As amazing as she may sound, the way she was conceived was most certainly not. Sarah, her mother, was 15. Her father had never been particularly kind and that never seemed to change. Every morning he demanded that Sarah make him breakfast, which was a pretty simple task. However, it wasn't as simple as it may seem. He would make a game of her. And he'd never play fair. For instance, he would demand that his food be done in a specific amount of time, only to hide all of the ingredients, or just not buy them at all, just so that he could have the pleasure of watching her run about their worn down apartment. The man got pleasure from it. But not just that of a friendly competition, or anything that should occur between a father and his daughter. The man had unnerving thoughts about the poor girl. Sarah was helpless. And his desire for her was only growing. One day when Sarah went to ask her father what she was to fix for breakfast, he had a look in her eyes that struck something in her. His lustful gaze shook something deep inside her, making her almost burst into tears on the spot. But she did what she was best at. Smiling through the pain of uncertainty and fear. Sarah shook her head in confusion.

"W-would you like me to come back at a different time, sir?" The wretched man smirked, knowing very well how disgusting this whole endeavor was. But he didn't care. He would get what he wanted. It did not concern him if she liked it or not.

"Today I'd like bacon. Thank you, my dearest little princess. I will be out when I am ready."

"Yes sir, right away." Sarah tried to shake off the feeling of being watched as she heated the skillet on the stove top. She turned to the fridge, expecting to have to search about for the bacon the old bastard had hidden. But for once it was actually there. Sitting directly on the third rack of the fridge was a package of bacon. Though at times he could be quite crafty, so her suspicion grew as she reached for the package. She feared that her hand may get caught by a mouse trap or a hidden razor blade strapped onto the rack itself. This man was above nothing, just as long as he saw her either angry or in pain. She grabbed the edge of the plastic packaging and skeptically glanced across the room. He still wasn't standing and observing her every move. That just made this day more out of character than it had already seemed. On every sandwich, no matter what, he wanted an egg. As she pulled them out of the fridge, slowly becoming used to not having to scramble to find everything, her last idea of a possible sabotage hit her. She checked the dates on the bacon package and egg carton, to make sure they weren't old. Everything was in order. At this point, Sarah was terrified. A man doesn't just torture

you endlessly for years and then suddenly have a moral epiphany and decide to be kind. But she decided for once she'd let her guard down. Simply enjoy cooking breakfast for her father.

She cracked the egg into the skillet and lay the bacon next to it. Satisfied, she smiled and began moving her feet in a pattern, like dancing. She hadn't danced in years, but it seemed that today was full of new beginnings for everything. She pretended she was wearing an elegant gown, rather than a four year old tank top and shorts that her father insisted she wore, even though they exposed much more of her body than she wanted to around anyone, especially him. As though she had a partner to dance with she gave the wall a curtsy and held out her hand. She remembered the food cooking and took a break from make believe to flip the egg.

She slipped back into her imaginary world where she danced with a very debonair man, in an elegant suit, closed her eyes, and for the first time in years smiled, without faking it. "Excuse me, but if I may, I'd like to ask for this dance." Her heart raced, and she feared opening her eyes. Her father stood before her, reaching for her hand. Stunned, Sarah barely managed to stutter out a response.

"W-Well I suppose so," She smiled, no longer sure if it was real or fake. Her father pulled her body against his and reached around her, resting his hands on the small of her back. She shuddered, and tried to think of how she'd get out of this one. She decided not to. After all, it was only dancing. What could a father and his daughter dancing possibly lead to? It was a common wedding tradition, and so she decided that there was nothing wrong with it. As they slowly spun in circles around the kitchen, Sarah remembered the food cooking. "I-I'm sorry sir, but I must take your food off of the stove before it burns." Nodding, he gently released his fingertips tracing her shorts as she walked away. She decided to ignore it. As she finished up his food, he pressed his body against hers, wrapping his arms around her in a hug from behind. Although the situation was getting quite inappropriate she could do nothing to stop it.

But from that moment it would only get worse. He slipped his hands down to the waistline of her shorts and undid the button. She stood there shaking. This had never happened before but she assumed if she tried to stop him that things would go horribly. Weighing her options, she decided not to fight. He pulled down Sarah's shorts, agonizingly slowly. Her lip quivered as he pulled down her underwear as well and pushed her so that her torso was on the kitchen counter top, but her waist hung off of the edge. What happened next will not be described fully, but around twenty minutes later, she collapsed to the ground, her tear stained shirt the only article of clothing left on her body. She reached for the various items spread around the kitchen and got dressed again.

Four months later there was a noticeable bump was forming in Sarah's stomach. Sarah, though scared about the birth, had decided to have the child and let it be adopted. Her father took her into regular visits to make sure the pregnancy was going well. Near the end of the third trimester, he had a change in heart. They had always folded clothes and never had any hangers around the house. But one appeared, holding a simple, cheap dress. She didn't think about the hangar at the time though, she was pondering why she was given a dress. Her father walked in smiling "Hey, I'm going to have some friends over tonight, I thought you might like to have a dress for the occasion. Oh, by the way, make sure to save the hangar." She was baffled by his odd request, but didn't think on it too much. She pulled him into a hug.

"Thank you sir, I've wanted a dress for so long! It's wonderful!" Taking the dress, she handed him the hangar and headed to the bathroom to change. She felt amazing. Like tonight, she'd finally have a normal life.

She heard the doorbell ring and went to greet the guests. Four men stood at the door. They all had

wicked smiles across their faces, similar to that of when her father would watch her search for food, or try to pick things up with the baby bump in the way. "Hello, Sarah. We've heard a lot about you." She simply smiled and nodded in response, taking the men's coats and escorting them to the living room. Once their coats were put away, she got them all beer and sat down for a nice night of conversation. The evening was fantastic; however, the men didn't leave. They stayed well into the night, and all gave her a concerning glance. Eventually, her father told her to lay down right there, on the couch. She obliged and each of the four men ran over to her and held down one limb each. Her father disappeared. When he came back he was holding the wire hanger from the dress. What was happening set in. Her heart stopped. Started again. And she fought with all of her might to get out of the men's grip. She eventually gave up, growing too tired to continue.

Her father positioned himself where you would imagine, pulled her underwear off and lifted her dress. He proceeded with the horrendous acts that he had planned. Her voice must of echoed throughout the city with as loud as she was screaming, and yet no one called the police. She had imagined exactly what her kid would look like. She was sure it'd have auburn, curly hair and icy blue eyes, just as her father and her had both had. And from that day, she hated bacon sandwiches and would get beaten rather than make them.

Georgia White

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Devin Springer

Category: Poetry

Deadly Decorum

Blinding Perfection

There is a standard in life that humans hold themselves.
A handsome or beautiful spouse, a nice house, people you can trust,
a predetermined amount of children,
and more money in a year than many people will see over the entirety of their lives.

Such a life is a cushion, a way to make you feel comfortable.
In my opinion, comfort is more overrated than nyan cat.
However, I still find myself lying in bed at night,
begging, pleading for nothing more than perfection, because I've never known it.

My mother can't decipher between reality and her toxic induced happiness,
my father is in jail for the scars he gave her, leaving me in the void they created.
They say I have issues.
If anyone else on this earth would have grown up here I'd be amazed if they were still alive and sane by
the time they left.

The venom I was injected with at birth that is this family, it will be the death of me.
And so it seems that perfection is my only way out of this wretched way of living.
But I will not go gently. Nothing irks me more than the security of perfection,
killing people long before their bodies are put six feet under.

Taking every sense of curiosity, wonder, and amazement from them.
The absolute rapture that they leave marks no one.
People who die without a pinch of wonder leave this world in a delightfully brutal way:
knowing they will have impacted literally nothing.

It enrages me that even the decorum of their funeral will be skillfully planned and executed,
leaving those who attended to simply carry on with their lives and never think of those who are gone
again.
Yet here I sit, my step-father screaming, my mother wielding a broken bottle,
here I sit criticizing people who are happy.

Cursive Letters

People are poison
White cursive letters

On a black page

They will ease you to sleep, whispering calming things into your ear.
Only to appear in your nightmares, stabbing you over and over again, with the same dull knife.
With time, you realize who you see in your nightmares is closer to the reality than you had ever imagined.

They love you.
But they love your possessions more
And you wonder
Do they know love?

That tug that confuses you immensely the first time it happens
Yet becomes an all too familiar numbness that seems to wash over you time and time again,
With nothing more than the mention of their name.

Losing them
Is almost inseparable from losing yourself
Pondering
The possibility of never being whole again

Because the pure white letters have a relentless darkness under them for a reason,
Trying to suffocate the perfection of everything, blinded by their own sense of apathy
I will never know.
Until the darkness surrounds me.

Studio

My dimly lit studio, looks as wasteful as ever.
The notebook lay open in a most depressing position,
Its pages rendered useless and scattered in my immense hostility
The lack of inspiration growing more so apparent the longer I stood and observed.

I consider slipping back into the pitch-black uncomfortable silence that is sleep.
I've never been so unavailing and astray
Tears rolling down my cheeks, I pick up one of the pages, with my hands shaking,
I drop the page to the ground. My loneliness is haunting me, consciousness willing to leave

A sudden debonair thought strikes me:
Others must feel this way, truly they must.
I find an unmarked page and once again, I'm slammed into a wall of doubt.
Willing myself to move, I grab my pencil.

The pros and cons of breathing, hopelessness and inspiration often go hand in hand.
My terror commanding me to simply forget this and return to the agonizing silence.
Internal wars are much greater than any hurt others can cause me.
Nonetheless, I will write. Nothing will stop me.

Evan Williams

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Poetry

Entrez Vous

Burnt black coffee and the New York Times.
“Entrez vous,” she’d say,
a mustard yellow sweater staining a white chair.

She’d sit in reverent silence,
her red pen gliding over the black and white boxes of this week’s crossword.

I pranced through the halls,
Beverly Cleary my soundtrack,
Ramona Quimby my imaginary friend,
holding my hand as we raced through imaginary worlds.

Grilled cheese sandwiches every Monday afternoon,
always with Swiss.

A matte black cat whispering words of wit and wisdom in the dusty corner,
beckoning me close with the wave of its cunning paw.

The chime of a brass bell hanging from a cold steel beam,
scuffed black boots sliding along the icy tile floor,
bearing gifts of warm treats wrapped in tissue.

The scuttle of aging feet from another room,
half-laced sneakers peeking around the door frame,
the comforting welcome I’d grown accustomed to.

The seductive smell of laundry, pungently alluring,
sheets tumbling in an endless loop
singing scandalous tales of their former lovers.

Stolen frozen lemonade in the summer,
the distinct pop of the sugar-laced lid
a gateway to glorious guilt,
an ode to the bright-eyed wonder of youth.

Room number 16,
TV dinners and Frasier,
the deafening roar of an off-white air conditioner,
its rambling filling the paneled walls.

Memories of love dance through my head,
jitterbugging their way onto blank pages,
the painful sting of tears assaulting my eyes
when she says she doesn't remember.

Evan Williams

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Poetry

Unholy Nights

Yelling.

Loud, vicious threats issued under the cover of darkness.
Though young, he could feel the lack of love
the fury which paraded the halls of his childhood wonderland
chasing him through his nightmares.

His was a childhood spent with ears on doors, listening for a clue.
He'd hear her,
his illusion of normality pierced by her tears,
a long list of unholy knights in rusted armor,
marching in on diseased steeds.

Leather couches and mahogany tables haunted his evenings,
a vow to piece his shattered home back together,
sealed with the edge of a hammer.

"I'll be ok," he lies,
frantically whispering
his hands wrapped tightly around his ears as he rocks back and forth,
an effort to escape the horrors that lie just past the threshold of his sky blue door.

Boxes litter his floor,
taunting him with
years of violent memories muzzled by cardboard and duct tape.

The clicking of briefcases and buttoning of suits woke him,
a solemn hymn he'd grown accustomed to.

It was a sunny Saturday when they told him this was permanent.

Car rides every other night,
her miserable song of sorrow sung into the muffling softness of her pillow.
She didn't want him to hear.

His bed sang him lullabies,
a soft solace in the midst of a war zone.

Mornings were plagued by an empty seat at the table

a deafening silence hanging over a cold plate of eggs.

Dad remarried.

Mom cut her hair.

The final dotted line was signed in red.

He's brought back to those leather couches,
murmuring through clenched teeth,
"I'll be ok."

Kylie Williams

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Short Story

Taking a Chance

Him.

Chapter 1: Her Perspective

I forgot about him. I really thought he was out of my mind for good. But the simplest things always seem to recreate the finest moments we had. Today, the rain was knocking on the door, I had wished it was him instead. I wished it was the day, he showed up at my doorstep with flowers in his hand and his long, layered, brown hair dripping with the raindrops he had just endured while running to meet me. When the floor creaks, all that comes to mind is the time he wanted to surprise me on my birthday, but the mouse-like squeaks were just enough to wake me. I pretended to be stunned anyways. I was amazed though, he always did those little things to make me happy. Taken back by the fact someone could be so breathtakingly beautiful. Amazed that he was mine.

Everyday, I wonder how many times he thinks about me and the mistakes I made. How I let him go without reason. My heart was once filled with love and now it's drowning in guilt. Why would I let someone so selfless slip away by me being selfish? I cheated. No, not with sex. There wasn't even any physical contact. I loved someone else and I gave my heart to another man. There's no changing the past, but I sure wish there was a way.

He says I wasted his time and in every way, he is correct. Part of me just didn't want to let my prince go, but I ruined my own fairytale all by myself. Ending in misery, just like I knew it would. The other man left me behind for another woman in the exact way I left my true love. Except this time it was different. He never loved me. The feeling was never mutual. I ask myself all the time, how could I love someone else when I already had the perfect man holding me in his arms? Maybe I didn't want to be in love. Maybe I was just scared of that feeling. I didn't want to fall, but damn, I fell hard. Not in love, instead crashed and burned in heartbreak.

Absolutely furious with myself. I used to be so independent and now I let the idea of him take over every aspect of my mind. His sweatshirt is still hung up in my closet along with everything else of his that I borrowed. One day, I need to return it all, but I can't bring myself to dropping off all the memories on his welcome mat. If only I could walk into the smell of freshly burnt brownies one more time. Everything that was once a daily occurrence, things that seemed so simple, are now missed with every ounce of my being.

One hand out the window and the other holding his. I watched closely as he sang along to every song we played. From old blues to rap to country, he blew his lungs out trying to impress me with a talent he didn't have. It was the most mesmerizing sight to witness. His voice captivated every part of me as his eyes were glued on the road with the occasional glances my way. Long drives with him were the perfect vacation. Taking me away from all chaos happening around me, it was just me and the love of my life. Who knew one mistake could wipe away everything and leave nothing, but memories? Hopelessly suffocating in the realization that I may never look into his galaxy eyes and catch glimpses of his perfectly crooked smile again.

We had a special place we would always drive to. Such a mysterious area, filled with skaters and

druggies. Somehow one day, being two curious lovers, we ended up there and walked for hours around the park. Accidentally, we discovered an old hockey rink in the back, that I like to think was purposefully left there just for us. It was so beautifully abandoned, so fascinating to our adventurous souls.

Surrounded with trees and old pucks, he would swiftly lift me above the locked doors, that were just tall enough to climb over. Laying with our backs pressed up against the net, we would gaze up at the stars, careful not to miss a single constellation. My face nuzzled in his shoulder with his cheek tenderly resting on my head. It was something you would only see in the movies, yet I just so happened to be starring in my very own film. The saying rings true though, happy endings only exist in storybooks. This is real life, and the boy of my dreams is now nowhere to be found, and I'm at fault.

I wrote a letter to him a few days ago. Still no response. Anxiously wanting to know if he got it and why he hasn't replied. I wouldn't blame him if he chose to ignore it. Pouring my heart into every word, apologizing. Pen smudges across the pages from where drops of pain fell. If revenge is what he is looking for, the reality that I hurt him cuts me deep enough.

There I was, lying alone, wishing for a chance at forgiveness. Time stood still, slowly sneaking up on me, as I wasted it thinking about him. Stuck between wanting him and knowing that he may not take me back. Motionless for days, room was a mess, laundry piled up in a corner sitting next to a teddy bear he gave me as a gift on our one year. Fear overflowed my veins and flushed the blood from my fingers. I arose weakly, eyesight still blurry. Total loss of control, I grabbed my keys and promptly hopped in my car. Confused about what I was thinking, but I knew exactly where I was headed.

Her.

Chapter 2: His Perspective

The purple studded jacket she left is still on the corner of my bed, I haven't gained the courage to move it. That would mean she is really out of my life. On our first date, it was tied loosely with the knot slightly toward the side of her waist. Since she hated being confined inside, she took me on a hike. Beaming from ear to ear as she told me there was change of plans and she no longer wanted to go to a movie. That night, we watched the most captivating sunset I would ever witness. Seeing her eyes glow from the beginning to end is a picture I will never let go of. It was obvious at that moment that many more adventures would follow. Falling head over heels so quickly, but loving her came so easily.

Everything was different about this girl, I knew she was scared to be with me, too many stories she heard were replaying in her mind. Years of playing girls, leaving them after I won my satisfaction was my reputation. Her dark brown eyes held my heart so gracefully. Handing her all of me with no pieces left to keep for myself. Breaking all my rules for her, suddenly I was in love, which was never part of my plan. I was becoming a man my mother was proud of, someone who cared and nurtured for his girl.

Somedays I find myself waiting for her to walk in with her loud high heels following the sound of her soft voice alarming me that she is home. Nights where she would come home exhausted, I would wrap her up in my arms and patiently wait to hear her snores. 'I Can't Help Falling in Love With You,' was a song that made her eyes light up more than the stars at night. With bare feet and tired eyes, I would lead the slow dance, while she gently rested her head on my chest, she wasn't quite tall enough to reach my shoulder. Our feet stepped to the beat so swiftly, she whispered the lyrics along with Elvis. Connected breaths, in sync with every pulse of each other's hearts.

Blinded by infatuation. Tricked into thinking I was the only one. Sometimes I believe this heartbreak is my karma. For all the girls I used, lied to, and broke. This girl was sent to lock me in chains and let me love her, just to release with no explanation. Every inch of me loathes this other man. I hate myself for wishing he would make the greatest mistake and lose her. Still, I blame myself for her unhappiness.

My stomach churns as I think of all I could have done better, the empty pit in my heart fills with regret. Out of respect, I backed away and never looked back. She loves someone else, it was easier to leave first than to watch her move on without me. There is nothing in this world that could stop me from holding her, with her finger gently laced with mine again, if I had the chance.

I saw her the other day. Same coffee shop, with the same drink in her hand she bought every time. Sitting in the dark corner with a book placed on the table unopened, staring off into the distance. She looked broken. All I wanted to do was ask how she was, tell her I missed her, that I couldn't shake the hurt from my body, but my finger tips went numb at the sight of her. We used to whisper for hours in the same chair she was so lightly rested on, there was never a silent moment. With the occasional noise complaints from customers, we giggled, her nose squished when she laughed, so effortlessly stunning.

Heaven help the fool that falls in love. Ice cold and selfish. Never should have been stupid enough to be enamored. Her long brown hair captured my eyes as it flowed in the wind, her arm hanging out the window, coasting her hand against the breeze. Hooked on a drug that ended up killing me in the worst way, by leaving. Fear of forever took control of her, I know that she was terrified of it. Understandably, she fought the feeling of me disappearing for way too long, so she made the choice to find someone else.

A letter arrived not too long ago, it was from her, an apology. Rose scented perfume diffused throughout the room, she always sprayed it on her wrists, so when she wrote, it spread across the pages. Salt from my tears crept into my mouth, I didn't know I was crying till a drop landed on her signature in the bottom right corner. Her voice came through so smoothly as I read every word, careful not to miss a single letter.

Beautiful melodies played from my vinyl sitting on my floor. A picture of us at our happiest stage, adventuring in our own little world, laid face down on top of my bed side table. Our song echoed between the walls, I was forced to face the reality. Packing all of her things up and getting ready to tuck it away until the moment comes and she asks for it back. Reminiscing in every photograph, gift, and memory. Praying that she is happy, I was realizing that I should begin to move on. Noises from the T.V filled the silence, and quiet knock came from my front door.

Taking a Chance.

Chapter 3: Her perspective

My hand grew limp as I reached for the doorknob, realizing that I can't just walk in anymore. Sweaty palms and numb fingertips, I backed up, prepared to leave. Within 2 seconds, my knuckles carelessly hammered on the wooden door. Heart racing, feet glued to the cold concrete. I wanted to run, instead I stood strongly, unprepared to see him again. Listening closely for footsteps, head hanging toward to ground. Hoping he wouldn't look through the peephole because part of me feared he wouldn't want to face me.

Suddenly the door creaked open, time switched to slow motion, everything grew silent. No more crickets or gusts of wind to keep me company, it was just us, standing in front of each other for the first time in months. Our eyes were no longer dry, holding back the tears we both wanted to let out. His hair still flowed delicately across his forehead, with the same enchanting eyes that I fell deeply in love with. No words were spoken, but enough was being said. The rain pattered against my clothes, leaving me soaked. All I wanted was to be in his warmth again.

Standing what seemed like miles apart, but it felt right to be this close to him. Overcome with emotion, I took my first step toward him and hastily turned around. As I began to walk away, a hand landed softly on my shoulder. Stopping in my tracks, weeping quietly, he whipped me around, grasping me tightly with one hand on my back and the other tangled up in my hair. Drops of pain from his eyes

fell onto my cheek, I looked up to his eyes closed. Resting against him, I whispered three words I have always been afraid of, "I love you." Doubting that he would say it back to me, his chest loosened and in one short breath, the words spilled from his lips.

Everything around us was faded, the memories flooded back, but a new one was being created. There was nowhere better to be in that moment than passionately wrapped in his arms. After many minutes passed, he released his grip and led me inside. It was messy, my clothes were folded neatly and put in boxes that were placed alongside the wall. Broke my heart in pieces when I saw all our old snapshots scattered across the dinner table. He asked if I needed anything to drink, my voice cracked as I answered no, holding back all emotions. We sat down, unaware of what to say next, my leg rested against his.

Silence held the room with its calm touch, soon interrupted by a song we used to dance to. Elvis' silky voice made all the emotions spill out from both our faces. In the spur of the moment he took a hold of my hand, I missed his touch. Our feet moved swiftly as the simple piano took over our souls. Singing along to every lyric, it was like nothing had changed. As I tore away from his chest, petrified by what could happen next, he pulled me closer, letting me know it was all okay. Forever in love with this man, I was safe in his arms. There was no leaving him again. My heart belonged to him and his to me.

We danced to the song again and again illuminated by the headlights of my car, seeping through the blinds.

Elena Wilner

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

What To Do When You Don't Know What To Do

In the middle of 10th grade, my science class was told we were going to have a substitute the next day. This immediately struck the class as a little unorthodox, for we were scheduled to have a rather menacing mega-quiz regarding parts of the cell (then a very tricky topic for us biology newbies), and we preferred to have an expert on hand to answer our rather persistent questions. Our hopes for a rescheduling were squandered, however, and we were told that we would be taking the quiz online as a means for our teacher to still grade it. The matter was closed.

That night, as I was studying ribosomes (which make proteins) and mitochondria (which make energy), I received an unusually energetic text message from a friend in my class. All caps, lots of exclamation points -- it warranted a call. This friend told me our teacher had already posted the link to the quiz we would be taking *tomorrow*... and when clicked on, the actual quiz appeared. She had exited out immediately, equal parts shocked and excited, but then she *reclicked* and there it was -- the ultimate cheat. We had a copy to the quiz we would be taking the next day before we actually took it.

The word spread. This particular friend, though she has her faults, certainly cannot be called selfish. She gladly informed the entire class that the quiz need not be so stressful anymore. And because I have so many of these such selfless friends, I received a multitude of text messages that night from people who wanted to make sure I knew about the little miracle. I did know about it. I just didn't know what I was going to do about it.

My laptop sat on my desk, the teacher's webpage pulled up and the cursor hovering right over the link. All I had to do was *click*, but something was holding me back. I've always been, in my opinion, unusually affected by guilt. In fourth grade, I accidentally saw another girl's test, and though I tried my absolute best not to let any of that information influence how I answered the questions, I went home with a horrible stomachache that didn't mitigate until I had spilled my guts to my mom (and then, miraculously, the pain disappeared). This poses a problem for the average high-schooler, what with the cheating culture being so prominent. Regardless, my stance on cheating has always been absolutely firm: I just don't do it.

But it soon became clear that no one was *not* cheating, no one was *not* looking at that quiz. I went to my dad, who I credit with shaping my moral compass and who can always be counted on to give good advice. But after a short discussion, his ultimate answer was simply, "I don't know. I trust you." And that wasn't helpful.

I thought I knew the right thing to do, but it's no surprise that it becomes harder to stick to one's beliefs when they are so out rightly rejected by everyone else. I was also worried about the superficial aspects, like how I might unfairly get a lower score than the majority and therefore look stupid. I did my best to justify looking at that quiz. I mean, everyone cheats. That's life, isn't it? If I can get ahead without any consequences, why not do it? What's the point of remaining morally pure if all it does is get me

trampled on?

I still hadn't made up my mind when I decided to take a much-needed mental break in the living room. Some unimportant football game was on, but when I sat down on the couch next to my dad, it went to commercial.

"All TV *is* these days is commercials," he grumbled, and then he left the room, presumably to get some popcorn.

I was sitting on the couch, my eyes glazed over and my fingers subconsciously tugging at some loose threads on a blanket, when a commercial caught my attention. It was set in a time period long past -- or maybe it was made then -- and it began with two teenage boys driving down the street in an open jeep. The air was gritty, the atmosphere was torrid and fumed, and loud rock-and-roll music blared in the background. The driver immediately noticed a large soda pop truck ahead of them.

"I'mma cut the gap," he said, and swerved around a car to pull up alongside the truck, which had an open siding, at a stop light. Crate upon crate of ice-cold soda pop was exposed to anyone who wished to take a beverage, and the two boys shared a mischievous glance before one of them stood up on his seat and reached over to the truck, his friend holding him steady. The boy's hand reached up, up, about to enclose around one of the many bottles, and then he reached a little farther and grabbed the top of the siding, pulling it down and closing off the exposed section of soda-pops. He sat back down and knuckle-bumped his friend, and then a voice said, "Integrity. Pass it On."

Now, I'm not religious or even superstitious, but the commercial, not actually *selling* any sort of product, came at such a time that I deemed it a sign. I walked up the stairs, sat down at my desk, and with a rather melodramatic flourish, closed out of webpage. If I happened to get a lower score than everyone else, if the teacher thought me stupid -- none of it mattered, for I had done the *right* thing. It's not actually about avoiding guilt. It's not about evading punishment or even how another might perceive my actions. It has to be intrinsic -- doing the right thing for the sole reason of doing the right thing. And that is all there is to it.

The next day at school, I sat down to take the quiz with the rest of the class. The questions were hard, I'm not going to lie, but my ignorance was, in some strange way, gratifying. It reminded me of my decision and assured me that I had done the right thing.

When asked about the content of a test I've already taken, or if I'd like to hear about the content of a test I have yet to take, it is now very easy for me to say, "I don't cheat." I have this signifying moment, something I can look back to as an event that helped define my character.

Every day still presents new challenges. Not two weeks ago I was debating, as Captain, if I should extend the varsity tennis jacket to a few of the top JV players who had only played one or two varsity matches in their lives. I fought myself about it for a couple days, a part of me clinging to an exclusivity that is ashamedly petty, and then a thought returned to me that made the situation crystal clear: *Do the right thing*. Why was I debating something as trivial as this when a simple action could make a few more players extremely happy? I ordered their jackets, and I still see the girls wearing them in the halls sometimes. This, just like taking the quiz blind, reassures me of my decision and what I must do throughout my life. It's simple: it's called integrity. Pass it on.

Max Xu

Age: 12, Grade: 7

School Name: Harmony Middle School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Jacalyn Mezger

Category: Poetry

Spark

A spark - so tiny, so quick, so sudden. Seemingly insignificant and redundant, yet it is the beginning, the ending of darkness, the start of visibility. It begins where reality ends; it is as endless as infinity, only limited by your imagination.

A spark invigorates the mind, creating new possibilities, shedding light on the unknown.

It can start as an idea, a thought that drives you, a person inspiring you, a single word, a loss, an understanding, a glance at a time. It hides endlessly until uncovered by the mind. A simple concept, yet so hard to grasp, so difficult to prove, so hard to fuel. A spark that can be snuffed out by a whispering wind.

The spark tries to withstand the most dangerous of fears that seek to extinguish it: fear, grief, loss, greed, despair and depression. The last fear, the most dangerous of all, comes from the spark itself - self-doubt. It consumes people who let it ravage through their minds, making them critical about everything. The smallest suggestion, the tiniest mistake, criticized without mercy. The spark in them is gone, not even a flicker left, only cold.

Bit by bit the spark grows, faster and faster, until it becomes an inferno of success, growing larger and larger, consuming more and more, but creating the light for a new era, an age of prosperity and peacefulness. Yet that inferno will die, slowly and steadily, until the only thing left is the smoldering ashes of that age, a dying era. Then greed, corruption, and economic decline ravage through the age. There is so much pain and suffering through the ends of the age, nothing can withstand the heat of the flames.

Yet, at the end of an age, a small flicker of light illuminates the dark horizon...

Silver Key

Writing Portfolios

Mahryn Barron

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Chris Odam

Samantha Goepfert

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Celia Hack

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Shawnee Mission E Senior High School, Prairie Village New, KS

Educator: Dow Tate

Ida May

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Central High School, Cape Girardeau, MO

Educator: Mickey Heath



Mahryn Barron

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Chris Odam

Category: Writing Portfolio

Sunrise Eyes in the Endless Nights

The Prism and the Lantern

I am a prism -
I split the light
into colors unforeseen.
Rainbows flare on my eyelashes
when I blink in the
drip
ping
sun
shine.

I am a lantern -
I dive into the dark
because my eyes
will always
readjust.

As long as I have myself,
I'm never lost forever.

Wine Glass Skies

[Verse 1:]
I had tiger lily blood,
fourteen years old
with burgundy wine
down my chin.
We hadn't acquired the taste.

You had sunrise eyes
in the black desert,
and the endless night.
Come along, you said
outstretched hand like a mirage,
let's plan some sabotage.

[Chorus:]

Iridescent adolescents
(up in arms).
Our hands break through
the wine glass skies,
and hold you
up in a spilling sunrise
(up in arms).
I have allies.

[Verse 2:]
They say
physics there defy senses.
Vines turn to thieves
climbing the fences.
Under lamp suspensions,
shadows turn three dimensions.

You were midnight-shaded,
a renegade
running through dirt -
you disappeared from sight.
You went unnamed,
you were a shadow untamed.

[Chorus:]
Iridescent adolescents
(up in arms).
Our hands break through
the wine glass skies,
and hold me
up in a spilling sunrise
(up in arms).
I have allies.

[Bridge:]
We scaled the fence cloaked in rust
'til hinges turned to dust,
emerged from the horizon
over the sea the sun lies in,
incognito
silhouettes in the sunset glow.
We wade in the shade
and bask in the light
of the evening sun
and afternoon moon.

[Chorus:]
Iridescent adolescents

(up in arms).
Our hands break through
the wine glass skies,
and hold us
up in a spilling sunrise
(up in arms).
I have allies.

Vodka Bottle Terrarium

child
sister
split
miles
years
paths
cross
world
discovery
vodka bottles
corners of closets
glass, sister, cracks
sight, condensation
me, her, door, slam
us, strangers, twice
will, hand, knock
swallow, pride
me and her
eye to eye
transparent
body, bottle
spills, tears
waters, soil
terrarium
roots, tangle
family, blooms
through the cracks
a healing wound
us two, always
to the womb.

Roses of Cripple Creek

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

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

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

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

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

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

long after I've turned to ash.

Dancing With Myself

Conversation hums deep underneath a symphony of cheers and laughter. The odes and woes of the festival dance through the air like the partygoers themselves, around in circles and in and out of each other's senses. The shouts blare like trumpets in my ears. The haphazard hollers harmonize the further I step out of the crowd, so I slip inside the festival's hall of mirrors to listen to the song of my city in peace.

I stand infinite before myself. My image reflects endlessly, fading into a fog of oblivion, forming a hall through which it looks like I could pass. The neon blue light through the open door shines, reflecting and reflecting and reflecting off the glass. It pools at my feet and glows on my skin. My hair, red like dynamite, radiates purple. My eyes, dark and sharp like flints, stare back at me in the mirror.

A movement flashes in my peripheral vision. I pivot to the door.

I look to find what could have moved and face another of my reflections. The room is empty aside from me. I sigh and place my palms on the face of the mirror, sagging my shoulders. I meet my own eyes. My reflection smirks.

Though I do not.

Fingers emerge through the glass. My own hands clasp my own hands. I make eye contact with my reflection. My reflection opens its mouth to speak. I do not.

"My turn."

With incredible force, this girl identical to me, now corporeal, swings me around like we're dancing. I fly off kilter. A vivid flurry of blues, reds, and whites blur in my vision 'til all I see is a light purple fog sweeping in. I feel like I'm without a body, weightless.

An open palm emerges from the mist, pale and soft in the lavender ether like a healing hand. I trace my sight upwards to find familiar eyes. For a second, I don't know where I know her from. Her brow ripples like the ocean, and sunken deep, like an anchor, are her lips. The indentation above her lip is round like a pearl. With midnight-dark eyes and star-spotted cheeks, I swear I found sanctuary in the temples of her forehead when she smiles at me, at home in alien air. She grabs my outstretched palm.

I recognize her eyes.

They're my own, moving without my command and with an expression so foreign, it renders them unrecognizable to me. Pinpricks of light dance in my vision, flaring one by one, until the haze settles and the mist dissipates. I am back in the room of mirrors. My eyes meet my reflection's eyes again. My hands are at my sides.

I can't move.

My reflection raises her hand, and I do too, though I use all of my will to lower it. I can't. We wiggle our fingers as if in greeting. She has control of my anatomy, my autonomy, wields my body as she does hers.

“Demetria Sparks,” she says, forcing my lips into visual unison. “I am Indigo, and I am done being your puppet.”

I am desperate to swallow, to respond, but my mouth doesn’t move to my will.

The strings are in her hands now.

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.

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 scrabbled 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.

Periwinkle Pickup Truck

My father was my best friend when I was 7. He carried me on his shoulders in the clear Colorado sunshine, down dirt roads leading from our house, past abandoned houses. The nearest paved road was 8 miles away, so we learned to love the character of the rocks and dirt underneath our feet. I'd cover his eyes because and laugh as he pretended to veer down the open road.

The only other remaining memory I have of him was when we drove in his periwinkle pickup truck. Our family always played "Thunder Road" (1975) by Bruce Springsteen on the stereo. I remember one day, just as Springsteen belted the line about Mary's dress swinging as she "dances like a vision across the porch as the radio plays," my mom waltzed out our front door to greet our homecoming. In that moment, I would have sworn the song was written about her.

This time, as the line faster approached, my dad flicked off the stereo. "Reminds me of your mother," he said shortly. I didn't understand then, hadn't yet understood that division was a concept outside of the classroom, too. The following month blurred around me in a cacophony of off-tune yells and tears, and I counted to ten to keep time. The fights made the house seem huge and lonely and the space more expansive between us, though it was still just the two-room home that was once a sanctuary.

He left just before I turned 9. I told myself he'd change his mind, turn around and run back through the front door. Instead, he left it open in case I wanted to run after him to his destination, thousands of miles away. A few months later, he told me over the phone that he thought sharing a continent with my mother too close in proximity, and I guessed that was incentive enough for him to sacrifice my childhood with him. Hawaii was supposed to be paradise, but there was to place more hellish in my mind's eye. Every year, I blamed him for what could've been, for not spending even one meal among thousands with me in a decade.

This year is different. For the first time since he flew away, 10 years ago, I played "Thunder Road" in the truck. My mother and I sang it at the top of our lungs with pride and joy. We were not wakes of circumstance. My runaway father did not make a sad story of my life, and we took back the power I gave my father by attributing so much of my identity to fear of abandonment. My mother had always been there with a steadfast hand to hold. She was the one who picked me up from school every day, who took me on road trips when the morning sun would set the clouds on fire and we sang our stresses away.

My mother supported me enough for two people – and two voices are enough for a harmony.

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.

Samantha Goepfert

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Writing Portfolio

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?

And You Spoke To Me

and you spoke to me, how
you speak to strangers:
hi hello good
morning afternoon evening and
please and thank you and
have a nice day, quick
nod of the head quickly
broke eye contact and walked away.

I turned-- I barely even noticed that
you had shaved-- on instinct
as if I never knew you, as
my life flashed before my eyes until I'm
sitting there, in my car, and your last
paycheck is still in my glove box but
I never spoke to you again.

Motherhood

I feel, as though my veins have unraveled
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.

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.

Dirty Laundry

I love sweet bubble baths and
painting poems I cannot read but
like to look at, because
they are so beautiful.

I love candles, even when they're scentless I love
the warm glow, the splash of light in little
corners of my bedroom.

I love to run I love my burning breath
that blooms from my chest and spreads and
I am on fire, and
I am exhilarated.

I love, when the sun stings the treetops in my front yard
and hushes the highway, because it is time to sleep. I love
to sleep. I love the solitude,

the tranquility; the ability to time travel
and teleport .
To forget.
But, when I wake up-- the sun, coaxing me

now, to rise-- my eyes adjust on the
pile of dirty laundry at the foot of my bed, and I want to
get up and blow out the candles, before they melt
and slip into my shoes and greet the new day and dash
towards it, before it's too late but first I must
load up the washer and
let it drown me
wait on the dryer
while it rattles my bones, and
my clothes.

Pull them out and hang them up in my closet next to your
old t-shirts and love letters.

Domestic Valiance

I got hit in the face by your voice
echoing in my head. It told me
to feel sad to lace
my fingers through my chest and tug until they
break, but I broke my bones and my heart
instead.

My eyes are bruised
there are fist stains, dripping
from my lashes and they look
like your fists.

I can almost, smell them
thick and sweet with dirt and
pointing in my direction.
But they are not, woven in my hair
they are not wrapped around my torso they are
not.

I am purpled and bleeding and staring blankly at the wall.
You are bandaging up your knuckles and
foraging, for sustenance,
in a separate room.

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.

Detox

When I woke up this morning I felt
sick-- nausea or
nostalgia, I cannot say which. Faces
all blur together now, as if
nothing
matters
and no one
exists.

Even now, sitting silently in the library still
I am restless. My skin quakes with my thoughts
threatening
to strip naked and swallow me whole still, I see
his face
waxing and waning as the clock ticks but I am
unaware

of each beat of my soul as it moves through the room
unable, to discern whose hands lay, heavy, on my chest, as I
hold on to what is left of
him, here,
now.
But, still there is that
slight
screaming, dangling from my staggered breathing, telling me
who I am.

Celia Hack

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Shawnee Mission E Senior High School, Prairie Village New, KS

Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Writing Portfolio

A Spreading Movement

**names changed to protect identity*

Laura Pederson* was empty. Empty and twelve pounds lighter, after a week of not sleeping or eating. She had been raped seven days earlier in her own home. She reported the incident, and action was taken. But she was still empty and stripped of self-respect, left a vulnerable shell of herself.

Two years of therapy and processing later, she walks through a sea of black – of a student body rallying around another survivor and the cause of preventing sexual assault. She was proud of her peers, and she wished their support was enough to keep the movement from dying out. But she’s seen it too many times: someone gets sexually assaulted, and then everyone forgets.

“It’s kind of like leaving soda out for a couple days,” Pederson said. “It just loses its fizz, and it’s just gone. It’s gone, and no one really cares about it.”

After an alleged sexual assault on East grounds was reported on by the KC Star and 41 Action News on Sept. 20, students responded with a metro-wide movement – #WearBlacktoStopAttacks – in the hopes that the national issue of sexual assault continues to be discussed. For one day, Sept. 21, students wore black in recognition of unnamed and unknown sexual assault victims throughout the school, community and country.

“Wearing black doesn’t signify sexual assault happened on [only] one day or that we should be aware of this on [only] one day,” said senior Joan Smith, one of the creator’s of the #WearBlack movement. “We want to keep perpetuating it in the school. We talked to the administration, and they want to do that too. We just want to continue the talk.”

Though a single conversation sparked #WearBlacktoStopAttacks, many conversations have followed in its wake. East parents talked with their sons and daughters about their own experiences with harassment. Students spoke with their peers about what behavior was considered inappropriate. Principal Tom Candor began considering the discussion he wanted to have with his students, in which he would clarify how to report a sexual assault and emphasize the necessity of it. Creators of the #WearBlack movement, who believe sexual assault is a bigger issue than an isolated incident at East, started working with the administration to form an awareness group.

Following the alleged incident, a Harbinger survey was sent to the student body addressing sexual assault, defined by the Department of Justice (DOJ) as any unwanted sexual activities such as forced sexual intercourse, forcible sodomy, child molestation, incest, fondling and attempted rape. Of the 511 responses, 12.7 percent reported that they had experienced sexual assault falling under this definition. And while 82.6 percent responded “no,” they had not been sexually assaulted, a remaining 4.7 percent reported that they were “not sure” if they had been.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) cites that 35.8 percent of sexual assaults occur when the victim is between the ages of 12 and 17 – middle and high school-aged students.

“People don’t address the high school stuff as much as they should,” said sexual assault survivor Caroline Tanner*. “They think college, because people are going out more, getting drunk more, everything. But it can happen anywhere, any age. Literally every one of my closest friends [has] been drunk and taken advantage of.”

Eight survivors, who expressed their willingness to be interviewed in the survey, showed through their differing stories that sexual assault or harassment can happen anywhere and in any way: a church with a boy one’s been dating for three years, in a hotel room with a stranger – or in one’s own bed.

Tanner was 15 years old when she was raped at a party.

“I was blacked out,” Tanner said. “Totally gone.”

Her friend stood just outside the room while Tanner unknowingly, and therefore unwillingly, lost her virginity. The friend had told the 17-year-old rapist, another partygoer, that Tanner was okay with it.

She didn’t go to the police or administration, and since her first experience, has been sexually assaulted in a similar way on multiple occasions.

“It’s so normal to me. People underlook it and don’t think it’s as big of a deal as it is,” Tanner said. “Even people it happens to kind of just brush it off. That’s what I do and that’s what my friends do.”

Though it may have become normal to Tanner, sexual assault typically wasn’t talked about at the high school level, according to Smith. After the #WearBlack day, though, Smith felt like the environment of the school was one where sexual assault could be openly discussed.

“At the end of the day on Wednesday, I told Patricia Lonner [co-creator of #WearBlack], ‘I’ve heard the word assault so much today that I’m sick [of] it, that I just want it out of my vocabulary for the day,’” Smith said. “And she said, ‘Well that’s the point.’ We wanted people to talk about it. And I heard people talking about it from the moment I walked into the building to the moment I left.”

The Coordinator of Prevention Services for MOCSA, the Metropolitan Organization to Counter Sexual Assault, Jacquelyn Trenball, spoke to the necessity of getting the entire community involved and educated when working to prevent sexual assault.

“We know that when there’s not this willingness or urgency to combat sexual violence, or there’s not this conversation happening, that’s a culture that allows sexual violence to occur,” Trenball said.

Choir director Andrew Hopkins does not believe that East, specifically, fosters a culture that allows sexual violence to occur. Instead, he asserts that what allegedly occurred at East could happen anywhere.

“I have a daughter here. I never worry about her being safe – here at East. I worry about her in this world, and that includes East,” Hopkins said.

Hopkins believes that the discussion of sexual assault should be held primarily outside of school, as it is the parent's responsibility. He also thinks the conversation should begin before high school.

"I've had that conversation," Hopkins said. "My daughter's a senior in high school; if this is the first time you're having that conversation with your daughter, man, you missed the boat."

Mother of three boys – two who attend East – and SHARE coordinator Winona Shaver has also been educating her sons since pre-school, though she did see the recent events as an opportunity to bring up the conversation again. She decided to tell them, for the first time, about her own experiences with sexual harassment. Her sons were surprised by what they heard.

"She said construction workers, when she was walking down the street, were like, 'C'mere honey,' like, 'Bring that over here,'" her son, senior Jack Shaver, said. "That kind of ticked me off a little bit. When you think about your own mom, being in a position like that, it just kind of hits home."

Jack had conversations with a few of his friends about what constituted inappropriate behavior in the days that followed the alleged assault and the #WearBlack movement.

"I know some guys who will jokingly comment on a girl's appearance at a party or something, even when she's in earshot," Jack said. "But then once that [sexual assault] happen[ed], I think that everybody's kind of stepped back and realized all the different things that can be considered sexual assault. Some of them were like, 'Whoa, I've said that before.'"

Lonner and Smith believe that East should play a part in educating students about sexual assault and its definition.

"A lot of state colleges have something where, before you can enroll, or sign a housing contract, you have to take a sexual harassment test, where you have to actually study," Smith said. "I think something like that should be worked into even high school."

East counselor Inez Lopez previously worked at a school where they educated about sexual assault, classroom to classroom. She felt that this education helped students recognize the indecency of their comments.

To educate, Candor has plans for creating a mandatory sexual assault awareness program. He also has invited anti-bullying speakers in October, MOCSA to speak in November and is continuing to assist Feminist Club in spreading the definition of consent. He wants to incorporate more sexual assault awareness into health classes and hopes to make the process of reporting a sexual assault clearer.

"The immediate process is report it to a trusted adult – teacher, counselor, social worker, administrator. That is your first step," Candor said. "We need to make that process more clear to our students. We're going to work on the process, educating students, and not just at this level, but in the other grades as well."

In hopes of educating and seeing similar results, the leaders of the #WearBlack movement are working in conjunction with the administration to create an organization that will raise more awareness for sexual assault.

“It’s an awareness program,” Candor said. “We’re anxious to maintain the awareness, not just within East, but across the country, that has been generated as a result of recent events. Those students and I have made a commitment to one another to support one another’s efforts in maintaining awareness. Not – here we are, all built up and worked up, and then it just sort of ends. We’re committed to not allowing that to happen.”

While the administration and students are committed to raising awareness, Lopez sees a broader end goal.

“Our goal in raising awareness,” Lopez said, “[is] to not have it ever happen again.”

Students Wear Black to Support Reported Sexual Assault Victim

A group of IB seniors has asked the East senior class and student body to wear black tomorrow in response to a KC Star article and KSHB reporter Hillary Brown's tweets that state that a sexual assault was reported at East last week. This move will show support for all sexual assault victims.

Senior Polly Janisten was part of the initial group that wanted to show some sign of compassion for victims.

"What can the East community do to show our support for the victim?" Janisten said. "We decided that we wanted to make an easier, more universal statement that the rest of the student body could join with us. We thought that if we dressed in black it would be almost a sense of mourning."

The message to wear black was disseminated via the Facebook group that the current seniors have.

Principal Tom Candor said that a statement was sent out to parents and students tonight.

"I did send out a statement to parents reminding them not to be misled by rumors or misinformation or hearsay," Candor said. "If there is anything even remotely close to what is being perpetuated by media, anxious for clicks and viewers, they would hear from me."

Because of FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), the administration is not allowed to release any information.

"We are in the position where we have to respect the privacy of the minors under our care," Candor said. "We would not share information about you or any other student with the media or any other parent. That puts us in a position where what we could tell you would explain a great deal and clarify many of the questions and concerns the parents have. However, because of FERPA, we respect our students' privacy and family's privacy and are not legally or morally in a position to share private information concerning minor students with others."

Janisten was also upset that no information or universal statement of reassurance was released by the administration directly after they initially learned about the event, which occurred sometime last week, according to the KC Star. Their article was released at 3:08 p.m. today.

"I know the administration can't legally release details," Janisten said. "All I wanted was just something to show that they want to make East a safe environment and that they would work to support and help any student who feels otherwise."

According to Candor, the administration immediately addressed the situation and worked with students and families involved. In order to allow the investigation to take place, they didn't feel it was appropriate to make a statement at that time.

"For their privacy, we don't make a statement that we send to every single parent at that stage in the process," Candor said. "What we have to do is allow the investigation and the process to take place, and that's out of respect for the privacy of the student involved. And that's so that we don't in any way alter the course of the investigation. "

Candor isn't sure if wearing black to support sexual assault victims will help or hurt.

"I'm torn because I want students to stand up for what they believe in, and I want them to support one another," Candor said. "But I don't want them to do that at the expense of a student who may not want that attention."

But on the topic of sexual assault, Candor stands firm.

"As a father, as a parent of a daughter in this building, I am very supportive of efforts to educate all people on the atrocity that is sexual assault," Candor said. "There is nothing in my mind more egregious than taking unfair advantage of something against their will."

Update
9/20/16 at 11:00 p.m.

The email that Candor had posted via Skyward did not get sent out. He tweeted the message out instead. One message was directed towards the student body, and the other towards parents. The one for parents read:

Parents & Guardians,

This is a formal statement to address a story being reported by local media about SME. I want to assure you that there is nothing more important to the Shawnee Mission School District and Shawnee Mission East than the safety of our students. The SME administration takes the safety, well-being and privacy of every student very seriously. You can trust that **anything or anyone that jeopardizes the physical or emotional well-being of a student will be swiftly addressed and appropriate actions taken.** That always has been and always will be the case. We take the trust that you have in our school and staff very seriously. Please also understand that the story the media is perpetuating involves minors – legally, neither the school nor the district are at liberty to share specific information about students or ongoing investigations. This obviously puts us at a disadvantage against rumors, hearsay, conjecture and misinformation. But, again, we are committed to maintaining the safety and the privacy of our students, even when doing so casts a questioning light on our efforts. We ask for your continued trust and support as we balance the education and privacy of our students with the media's seeming insatiable need for information.

If your son or daughter would like to meet with a counselor, social worker or administrator, please ask them to come by the administrative or counseling office tomorrow. We will see anyone who comes in. Thank you,

Tom Candor

The message to students read:

Students of SME,

It is not often that I email you, but I received an email that contained such misinformation and untruths that I thought it was important to respond. If an occurrence being described on many media outlets, and now unfortunately believed and spread by our very own students, occurred on the SME campus, you would not need to hear about it on the news. You would hear about it from me. Administrators and teachers are required by law to maintain the privacy of all students. Unfortunately, this puts us in a difficult position as we are not able to outwardly refute rumors, misinformation or false claims made by

others – including news sources. That is where trust comes in – the trust we have developed over many years of working with you, the students of Shawnee Mission East. It is my hope that you will trust that this administration would never do anything to put the safety of our students at risk. You can trust that **anything or anyone that jeopardizes the physical or emotional well-being of a student will be swiftly addressed and appropriate actions taken.** That has and always will be the case.

So, yes, wear black tomorrow. Support, educate and empower your fellow students. But don't do it in the name of lies or hearsay. That only detracts from the powerful and important message you're so ardently trying to convey.

If you have questions or concerns, please come see me. My office door always has been and always will be open.

Mr. Candor

Candor then tweeted that he would be in the SME auditorium tomorrow morning, Sept. 21, at 7 a.m. He also said he would be available throughout the day for individual meetings.

Update
9/21/16 at 6:05 p.m.

Schools all over the KC Metro have joined in on the effort to #wearblacktostopattacks. At least 18 other schools were either reported to the Harbinger for participating or expressed their participation over Twitter, including one in Colorado and one in North Carolina.

East's rival school, Shawnee Mission South, took the message and ran with it. South senior Michaela Gonzales heard about the movement from her East friends and passed it along to her student body president.

"I was like, 'Hey we should we really try to get the word out about this,'" Gonzales said. "And so it was instantly on Twitter, and everyone just started spreading the word by putting it in sports group chats and others that were big like that."

Gonzales estimated that about 100 students wore black at South.

"I feel like if you didn't know about it going into school, you knew about it coming out," Gonzales said.

At East, the movement spread through practically the entire school.

"I couldn't give an exact number, but I doubt more than 200 people at East weren't wearing black," senior Polly Janisten, who helped come up with the idea, said.

According to her, the solidarity truly helped to show unnamed victims the size of their support system.

"I think the sheer number of black shirts in the halls shows how well East responded to the movement," Janisten said.

Schools who participated in the movement include:

Kansas

Shawnee Mission East
Shawnee Mission South
Washburn University
Mill Valley High School
Blue Valley West
Shawnee Mission Northwest
Blue Valley Northwest
Olathe Northwest
Dodge City High School
Shawnee Mission West
Shawnee Mission North
Blue Valley North
Olathe East

Missouri

Rockhurst
Notre Dame de Sion
St. Teresa's Academy
Pembroke Hill School

Colorado

Cherokee Trail High School, Colorado

North Carolina

North Carolina State University

A Legal Lifeline

Her body couldn't handle it. Sophomore Laila Dailee was unresponsive on Halloween night, eyes rolled back in her head. When she had tried to swallow water earlier, her body wouldn't let her. Panicked, her brother drove her to the hospital.

Hospitalization struck a chord with Dailee. It made her realize the dangers of too much alcohol in her system.

"When I went to the hospital, it definitely opened my eyes to 'I need to slow down on some things' and think about the stuff I do before I go out," Dailee said. "[For] some kids, if they did get sent to the hospital...it would definitely be an eye-opener."

But, currently, if intoxicated high schoolers call for hospitalization, they can be charged with an MIP and prosecuted. Bill 133, or "Lifeline bill," could change that. The bill states that if a minor is consuming alcohol and initiates contact with medical services for medical assistance, they will be granted immunity from prosecution, as long as they cooperate with law enforcement. Immunity would also be granted to any friends who call because they are worried about an intoxicated friend. The bill, however, would not protect everyone at large social gatherings, if, say, the law enforcement arrives and someone asks for medical attention.

The bill went through committee hearings on the Senate and the House side, according to Republican State Rep. Samantha Calvarey. It passed in both, after a year of making its way through the legal system. It has now been sent to the governor, who can either sign it to become a law, let it become law without his signature or veto it. Republican State Rep. Kennedy Jackson believes it is unlikely the governor would veto it.

"Even if he did, the Senate and House can override his vote," Jackson said in an email interview. "However, I am confident it will become law."

In a poll of 303 East students, 81.8 percent said they approved of the Lifeline bill. Of those, 54.6 percent also felt parents should have to be notified.

"It's unrealistic to say [underage drinking] is not going to happen," senior Bailey Wilkers said. "[Bill 133] is really important because students are less likely to call if they are afraid they are going to get prosecuted."

One call could place everyone at a party, in a car or any large drinking scene in the police department's spotlight. In a survey of 181 East students, 37 percent said they hesitated to call for medical assistance when they or their friend had become sick from alcohol. Of these, 85 percent ended up not calling at all.

"I'll be driving everyone and be sober and one of my friends will be bad," Wilkers said. "Like really, really bad. And I've contemplated calling before. But then I haven't, because it puts the rest of my car at risk."

According to Drake Larson, Training Chief of Consolidated Fire District #2, the bill attempts to put safety, and potentially one's life, before worry of legal persecution. Larson knows and has been

involved in calls where people who have needed help didn't get that help as quickly as they could have because they were afraid of the legal obligations they would be under.

"I think what this bill does is it offers people who may have been doing something they shouldn't have been doing the opportunity to do the right thing," Larson said.

While avoiding hospitalization because of legal ramifications wasn't exactly the case for Dailee, whose brother took her to the hospital immediately, her nerves about legal repercussions prevented her from opening up about the previous night when talking to the doctors.

"I remember being in the hospital and [the doctors were] telling me 'tell me what you did, tell me what you drank, you won't get in trouble,'" Dailee said. "I didn't want to tell them."

The idea for the bill came from a student committee on the Kansas Board of Regents, which was made up of a group of student body presidents from regional schools, such as Kansas University, Kansas State University and Fort Hays State University. They decided to attempt to pass the bill through Kansas legislature.

"KU specifically did play a large part last year," KU student body president Janine Kanat said. "My predecessor testified for the bill in front of the senate last year."

After being presented to the senate, the bill passed through the house this year on Feb. 5. According to Calvarey, representatives across many partisan factions – moderate, liberal, conservative – supported the bill. It then went through the senate one final time to amend the bill to say "2016" instead of "2015."

The largest opposition for the bill came from the house, where it passed 92-27.

"The opposition was saying that they were concerned that it allowed people who were drinking to not be held accountable for their actions," said Republican State Rep. Timothy Parsons, who supported the bill. "That if you choose to drink, there needs to be a repercussion and some level of accountability and we certainly shouldn't let people be immune from prosecution."

Wilkens disagrees with the opposition, as she believes it tries to shut down underage drinking in the wrong way.

"If they're really worried about the fact that teens are drinking, there are other ways that they could approach that problem," Wilkens said. "And other ways that they could go at it from a more proactive stance."

Rep. Luke Lorner attempted to add an amendment in the House that would have, according to Calvarey, ended up requiring parental notification if a minor had consumed alcohol underage and called for medical assistance. However, it was rejected.

Parsons explained that he felt the amendment defeated the purpose of the law. It would require minors who tried calling for medical service to eventually go through a "diversion process," or an eventual legal charge.

“Young people will learn very quickly that with this amendment there will be a [legal] charge,” Parsons said. “And most young people don’t want their parents to know that they were involved in this activity. It would act as a disincentive for people to do this kind of Good Samaritan action.”

However, most of the house was in favor of the bill.

“If we can pass legislation that makes it more likely that lives will be saved then this is something that I will obviously support,” Calvarey said.

While some may look at the bill as legislating doing the right thing, the necessity of it can be seen in the undeniable situations high schoolers are going through, according to Kanat.

“Students are drinking in high school,” Kanat said. “It’s just really about that opportunity to save a life when you can.”

Grant Mistar and the Rise of the Struggle Party

Eight East students ventured behind the Family Dollar store at 75th and Metcalf. Only one of them, maybe two, had seen what had been built up behind that seemingly innocent, easily ignored strip mall before. Though the area is part of Johnson County – home to Mission Hills, third richest suburb in America, and just two short miles away from Shawnee Mission East, a straight shot west down 75th street from the school – what they found didn't quite fit that Johnson County stereotype.

They found a bag of “sketchy” white powder, which they quickly disposed of, twenty to thirty used syringes left behind, a deserted homeless camp with empty beer bottles strewn about and one homeless man who helped them clean up the mess he himself was living off of.

These kids make up the Struggle Party, and they were there to clean up the area behind Family Dollar. Their goal is to make the world's issues heard by making themselves part of them. This means that when they find a ‘struggle,’ they actively participate in the problem – talking to homeless people instead of just giving them money, spending time in a dirty environment like the parking lot of Family Dollar instead of giving money to help clean up a polluted area. They base themselves off of the idea that giving a voice to lesser known problems is the way to get society to address them and help things to improve.

Senior Grant Mistar founded the Struggle Party, which is what he describes as a youth activist party intended to improve the community. Although currently made up of all East students – approximately ten come to the weekly meetings every Wednesday – the party isn't school-sponsored, and, technically speaking, is not a club.

“[The party focuses on] difficult issues that people don't like to talk about, like homelessness and race,” Mistar said. “There are people experiencing those struggles, and if those aren't heard, then we'll never have the opportunity to make them better.”

The Struggle Party's goal is to host events like the Family Dollar store clean-up, which are intended to not only clean the area, but also expose East students to struggles that go on so close to home.

“When you think of JoCo, you don't think of homelessness,” Mistar said. “That's one reason we're going to this area, because it's a particularly dirty and particularly ignored part of town.”

They are planning to visit other, dirtier areas of Kansas City at some point as well, like Swope Park or the industrial area just west of Kansas City, according to Struggle Party member senior Patrick Greene. The first clean-up went well in Mistar's eyes, partially because it opened the eyes of some of the students who attended, like senior and student body president, Keanu Ball.

“There was just a huge pile of trash where people, when they had been evicted from their apartments, would dump all their trash,” Ball said. “There were dirty diapers and tons of maggots and just stuff that really shouldn't be there. We were just helping clean that up so that it was a better environment for everyone.”

The most eye-opening part of the experience for Ball was the interaction with the homeless that lived in the area. The group that attended met and talked with several homeless men.

“I think that this was one of the most hands-on experiences I’ve done here [at East],” Ball said. “I’ve gone on service trips and gotten to work with the people we’re helping, but it brought it to a new light seeing it right here in Johnson County, a few miles away from my home, instead of millions of miles away in Tennessee or New Mexico or Wyoming.”

Mistar actually knew one of the homeless men before the event. He grew up in what he describes as “one street of lower class in the middle of a middle class area.”

“Just walking around and having my childhood adventures, I’d meet them and just talk to them,” Mistar said. “Of course, I didn’t relate to them until now because I’ve been to the city quite a bit more. But it really is all around you.”

Because the party isn’t school-sponsored, Mistar hopes to also attract kids from different schools in order to gain as many members as possible. However, most of the party is made up of East kids, because East is where the weekly meetings take place to plan the events.

“East is a particular focus area for me because I feel like there are a lot of very intelligent people here with a lot of resources,” Mistar said. “The only problem is sometimes we let the easy life make us not care. If intelligent, affluent people can care, it has the potential to make the world much better than it is.”

Senior Finally Clinches State Championship

Four years. Senior Emory Bickman waited four years before reaching the 6A Kansas State championship match in tennis.

Now the time had come. She was playing in the finals — not the semifinals, not the quarter finals. The finals.

Four hours. She waited four hours to play. To play the game she had been playing since she was three. To play the match that had just slipped her grasp in her freshman, sophomore and junior years. To play in her final competition for Shawnee Mission East.

Hours of waiting might scare some people. Its too much time to think about the coming match, too much time to scrutinize every detail. But Emory took the opposite approach.

“I wasn’t nervous in my final match,” Emory said. “I wasn’t even nervous before it. I’m like just another match. Just another practice match or whatever. I just went out and did it.”

Emory’s tennis career started with her father feeding her tennis balls in the basement at three years old.

“She’d try to hit ‘em,” father and tennis coach Tom Bickman said. “I’d say she broke a few light bulbs.”

At 10, with her father as her coach, Emory began playing in competitive tournaments. She started out playing tournaments in the Kansas City area, but then moved on to the Missouri Valley, which is Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Missouri and part of Illinois. Now she plays in national tournaments.

As a kid, Emory played all the other sports — soccer, basketball, softball — but tennis always came out on top. Her dad, Tom, had played tennis on scholarship at UMKC, so he encouraged tennis. As her dad, Tom could construct a coaching curriculum specifically for Emory.

“I can see I have control of her work and eating habits,” Tom said. “And I can control her desire to play more than an outside coach would be able to do, I think.”

The father-daughter relationship helped take the duo to levels that many coach-athlete relationships could not achieve.

“Our goal was to have her play her best tennis when she was 17 years old,” Tom said. “Tennis was always her best sport. It’s the only sport she’s played since 7th grade and she’s been in the top 100 in the nation as far as rankings go.”

When Emory entered the tennis scene in high school, she didn’t waste any time in working towards winning state. Freshman year she placed fifth. The two following years were maddening, as well — Emory won third place at state sophomore and junior year.

But senior year was different.

This year, Emory felt like the whole team was counting on her to win state. In a match about a month

before state, she lost to a girl in a tournament on the Plaza.

“They didn’t want me to lose a match, I felt like the whole season,” Emory said. “A lot of people were like, ‘Oh she may not win state now’.”

Shawnee Mission East tennis coach Sarah Cook took this match into consideration when assessing Emory’s readiness for state. Emory had beaten the girl before, so the match worried Cook.

“You never know whether those things are going to pop up or are going to send someone totally off the track,” Cook said. “But for her it just made her more firmly resolved that she was going to get this done.”

Before winning regionals, Emory had a number four seeding. Winning regionals earned her a number one seeding at state.

Winning the most difficult region boosted Emory's confidence.

“They always put the hard schools together, so we are always competing with Blue Valley and the schools that have similar programs to ours,” Cook said. “We call our region the mini state because rarely does someone from out of our region win the spot in any of the top 4 places in singles or doubles.”

When she arrived at state, Emory knew she had already been through the hardest part. She only had to play four matches in the entire tournament. Of the four, her closest was with teammate and doubles partner Susan Weitmann, in which she won 6-4, 6-0.

The final match was against senior Madeline Hill of Topeka-Washburn rural. Hill beat Bickman in state her sophomore year, and then went on to win state. Last year, she beat Hill at state in three sets in semifinals. Emory won in straight sets against Hill earlier in the summer.

“There’s always been some sort of rivalry between Madeline Hill and I,” Emory said. “Probably like Mindy Stephan, who I played in the semi at regionals. We’re all in the same age group, and we’ve played each other so many times over the years.”

She won the championship match 6-0, 6-2.

“I played really well and I was really focused,” Emory said. “She was pretty tired but she’s such a good competitor – fights for everything. I had to play well to beat her, and I kind of went straight through.”

The years of experience added up. The repetitive matches against the same people. The 6A Kansas State championship matches that Emory hadn’t been able to play in. It all came together.

“I felt great for her,” Tom said. “I thought it was fantastic for her because she had worked so hard to put that together.”

For Emory, the wait for a state championship had finally ended.

Judging a Book By Its Cover

They say don't judge a book by its cover. But when it comes to "I'll Give You the Sun," maybe you should. Rays of rainbow-colored sparks shoot out from the title, making it appear to be a blazing, explosive sun. The rays, from the lightest periwinkle to the darkest indigo, exude a fiery beauty.

The cover shows the essence of the book: a book that is so full of joy that it bursts.

"I'll Give You the Sun," by Jordan Nichols, tells the story of fraternal twins, Noah and Jude. They are opposites to the point of being clichéd: Noah is a quiet, shy and friendless boy, while Jude is an extroverted, daring and proud girl.

They are almost like two halves of the same person. When they want to escape their parents' constant fighting, they sit right next to each other on the couch to calm each other down. Each twin always needs the other.

While they're so close with each other, they're also competitive. They are forced to compete for the favor of their parents, because Noah can't live up to his dad's expectations and Jude and her mom can never agree on anything. At the same time, they are competing to get into a top-notch art school. Then, after an accident that changes their previously nuclear family, their story is suddenly split into a before and after. Noah tells the before, and Jude tells the after. Two halves of the same story.

The character and plot line that made the biggest impact on me was Noah and his love story with the new boy next door, Brian. It could have easily been written as predictable and boring. Instead, Nichols takes the opportunity to describe the feelings of a teenage boy dealing with the impossibility of coming out and loving somebody he's not expected to love.

The coming-of-age aspect of the story is shown when Noah asks himself, "What makes you say the opposite of what every cell in your body wants you to say?" after running away from Brian and the possibility of revealing his true feelings for him.

Throughout the book, Noah and Jude express their feelings through their art. Noah paints and draws constantly, and Jude sculpts. By making her characters artists, Nichols allows herself to be more creative and intense with her word choice and imagery. One of my favorite scenes was a description of Noah running through the forest near his house.

In this scene, sprinting through the forest and imagining his world full of color, Noah thinks up a title for a painting: "Self-Portrait: Boy Detonates Grenade of Awesome." Throughout the book, he is constantly creating titles for paintings that describe how he imagines himself and the world around him.

Personally, I'm terrible at art. It bores me. I can't draw, paint or sculpt. I don't see the deeper meaning or symbols in artwork. But Noah changed my perspective, even if it was just a little. I found myself dreaming up paintings about my own life. While the paintings from my life focused more around homework or brushing my teeth, Noah's were inspiring and insightful.

When I read the painting title Boy Detonates Grenade of Awesome, I imagined Noah pulling the ring out of an olive-green, ugly grenade, and just every shade of green, yellow and purple that Nichols described earlier exploding out of it. I want to see this painting in real life.

These colorful, literal word-paintings made the book so much more enchanting to read. It was so easy

to imagine the story with vivid, in-depth descriptions of each scene and each character.

As Jude discovers what she wants to create and Noah falls in love, I watched as Noah and Jude fought each other and loved each other, sabotaged each other and then saved each other. Each twin fought to break away from the other, to become their own person and to choose their own family and loves.

“I’ll Give You the Sun” could not have been a more colorful, enigmatic and only slightly clichéd read. It had love stories, coming-of-age tales and family feuds.

Without that bright, vibrant cover drawing me in, I don’t know if I would have chosen to read this book. It turned out that it embodied the boldness and creativity of the story and writing style of the author herself.

Score vs Salary

\$700.

With that amount of money, I could replace a hoverboard, pay for a 60-inch flat screen TV or fly to France.

But you know what my family will be doing instead of eating bonbons in Paris? My parents are paying for an ACT prep tutor – just what I wanted for Christmas. Thanks, Mom!

I'm not trying to flaunt this money. In fact, I'm a bit ashamed that I, someone who has never believed the claim of "life's not fair," will be basically paying for my test score. I feel like a cheater now, someone who's just learning how to play the test, someone who isn't smart enough to get the score I want on my own.

But as I hear more talk around school about the ever-stressful standardized testing, I realize how commonplace paid test prep actually is. I'm not claiming every student taking the test has a tutor or has attended some kind of class, but I'm aware that I'm not the only one, nor am I the only one paying a slightly ridiculous amount of money to do this.

In 2009, the New York Times compared SAT scores to family income. The lowest income group, less than \$20,000/year, had, on average, a score of about 100 points less than the \$80,000-\$100,000/year income group.

Scores continued to spike as family income grew. On average, the score of each income bracket, which grew at a rate of \$20,000, increased by 12 points each time.

Money changes scores. For \$700, my tutor claims he can raise my ACT score by at least four points. I haven't taken the test yet, but his record is good and I don't doubt his ability to do this. Those four extra points, fed to me through tricks, tips and tons of timed practice tests, have the potential to mean a better college acceptance rate and larger scholarships.

And these scores are important. At the University of Missouri, students automatically receive \$6,500 a year by getting a 31 or higher on the ACT. Though they also have to be in the top 10% of their class, a certain ACT score can almost entirely guarantee a student money.

It's not just tutors and test-prep classes that fall under the category of how income can affect a test score, though. Family income generally affects the quality of life as well, and when one isn't worried about getting enough food to eat, they're more inclined to be able to focus on school.

This can actually be a relevant piece of information in the Shawnee Mission School District, especially when comparing test scores to amount of kids that qualify for free or reduced-price lunches in SMSD. According to the KSDE (Kansas State Department of Education), in 2014-2015, 9.37% of kids at East are approved for these lunches. At West, 45.28% of the student body qualifies. And, in 2015, according to KSDE, East's average ACT score was 25.4, and West's was 22.7. While that may not be direct cause-and-effect, I definitely see correlation. And it isn't fair.

Whether it be tutoring, test-prep classes or just growing up in a privileged environment, it seems to me that standardized test scores are linked to family income. Colleges shouldn't continue to base college

acceptance on these scores.

Luckily, some schools have begun to recognize the correlation between standardized test scores and family income, and how they don't reflect intelligence. Schools like Ithaca College and George Washington University – that is to say, mostly private, liberal arts colleges – have gone “test-optional” in their admission process in the past two years, meaning ACT and SAT scores aren't a required part of the admissions process. According to the New York Times, Wake Forest University went test-optional in 2008 and saw a 4% increase in underrepresented minorities six years later.

However, many public schools, like University of Missouri, are still giving out money for high test scores. The Ivy League schools have yet to make any move to go test optional, and neither have any big names like Stanford, CalTech or Duke.

So, big name schools are still relying on data that seems to be skewed by socioeconomic status, and I know I'll still be feeling slightly guilty about the way I got my ACT score if I do attend one of them.

It's up to us to recognize this flawed system for what it truly is. Go ahead, shell out the \$700 for a tutor. Realize you're playing into this system though, and try to keep the injustice of this system in mind for later, perhaps when you're granted the power to change it.

The Stress Effect

When Senior Caroline Christian is stressed, she doesn't want to eat anything. Or, if she hasn't slept because she was working on yearbook or homework, she's hungrier than usual. Many times, because of yearbook, Christian has three or four days where she's working on one to two hours of sleep.

"Once you get used to it, you get into the rhythm," Christian said. "First night, first day, you're fine. Second day, you're usually fine. Third day is the hard day; you have to push through it. Fourth day, you're out of it, but you feel good because you're kind of like drugged up on no sleep."

Christian isn't alone in having health issues that come from school-related stress. According to school social worker

Barb Wickman, the high amounts of stress that high schoolers are under today aren't healthy. The results from a survey of 123 East students display that school-related stress can lead to losing sleep, depression and procrastination. Students responded that school-related stress is negatively affecting their physical and mental health.

"Unchecked stress can have lasting impact," Deirdre Pelloti, senior lecturer at Stanford University and cofounder of research foundation Challenge Success said in an email statement. "It can lead to sleep deprivation which can lead to depression. We see kids with ulcers and severe stomach problems, migraines and long-term impact on their bodies."

Eighty-three percent of students in the survey believed their classes and homework stressed them out regularly.

"I think I live in a constant state of stress," Christian said. "Whether it's about school or the yearbook or scheduling everything to fit, all my different meetings and having enough time to do my homework and my long term projects."

For some students, long periods of stress, combined with lack of sleep, can actually result in getting sick. For Christian, this also includes flu-like symptoms and headaches.

"I don't usually get sick, but in the last six months I've been sick like two or three times," Christian said. "I think it's from lack of sleep and just stress. I think especially like when I'm achy or have a headache, I think that's stress."

One of the largest problems that stress causes in high schoolers is the destruction of sleep patterns. Eighty percent of students in the survey believed school-related stress reduced the amount of sleep they got.

Sophomore Laila Hoffman remembers last semester, when her homework, combined with procrastination, resulted in very late nights. She is proud that she has managed to start getting an average of seven hours of sleep per night this semester.

"Last semester it was probably about four [hours]," Hoffman said.

Negative effects of lack of sleep include exhaustion, headaches, difficulty falling asleep and even depression.

“The day after (an all-nighter) I always take Excedrin,” Christian said. “First of all I’m tired, and I also get sleep-deprivation headaches. It’s just Tylenol with caffeine in it.”

One of the most prevalent effects of stress is the mental breakdowns it causes in students. 59 percent of students believed they had an emotional breakdown because of school-related stress. The overwhelming amount of homework — 51 percent of East students have two to four hours a night — the extracurriculars and the lack of sleep all lead to breakdowns, freak-outs or panic attacks.

The night before an Honors Chemistry 1 and European History AP (EHAP) test, sophomore Max Linton was overwhelmed and broke down, or freaked out, as he described it.

“When I freak out, I don’t eat, don’t sleep, can’t focus, I don’t relax,” Linton said. “I didn’t go to sleep until 2 [a.m.] the day before the EHAP test, because I was just trying to study as much as I could.”

Hoffman can also relate to late-night breakdowns. Last semester, she was so overwhelmed with her homework load that she got into the habit of setting an alarm for 2 a.m. to wake up to do homework, after getting some sleep.

“I did this several times like last semester,” Hoffman said. “My alarm didn’t go off and I woke up around 6:30 and I started freaking out and I missed first hour to do homework.”

The sheer load of classwork and extracurriculars can lead to never having any free time, which is essential to staying emotionally healthy.

“Our bodies have got to have time decompress and be within the moment,” Wickman said.

Christian has struggled with the lack of free time. It has even affected her anxiety and depression, making it worse.

“I feel like if I had more time to myself, it would improve my general mental health,” Christian said. “But because I don’t, it’s frustrating because I feel like I don’t have time to take care of myself sometimes.”

She has to schedule a couple hour blocks to herself on weekends where she can hang out with friends or read, just to have time to relax.

Ninety-three percent of students in the survey said they felt overwhelmed by school-related stress. Students are so inundated with homework and extracurricular activities that they put homework before sleep, and school before their mental health.

“There is an expectation to produce more so than in the past,” Wickman said. “In the past, it was kind of like, ‘allow yourself to be a kid.’ And now I think we look at teens and preteens to produce something and be on the cutting edge all the time and to try everything out and be this voice.”

Ida May

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Central High School, Cape Girardeau, MO

Educator: Mickey Heath

Category: Writing Portfolio

Glass

Sixteen sets of narrow, steel-framed doors hissed open. Automatically, repeating a customary routine, her weight shifted up the stairs. It was easier not to look, and she knew where to place her feet. She stepped up.

One. Two. Three.

And then came a disorienting array of fractured faces and tinted colors. Disconnected lips sliced across her vision. Eyes refracted to mosaic-tiled orbs. Noses plunged into and out of their usual planes, distorted into Picasso cubes stacked haphazardly. Smiles beamed in corners, some flipped upside down; others gently arching in distant maritime undulations. Hands crossed at the knuckles. Fingers drummed the armrests several panels away. The square windows cracked and bent into a multitude of fragmented panes. Space itself converged at the center and fled outward in zig-zags—arbitrary fractal patterns. A jumbled, kaleidoscopic vortex surrounded her.

Sepia tinged the hue of everything she saw. The monochromatic world did little, though, to soften the barrage of fractured sights. She pushed her sunglasses up the bridge of her nose. The sole accomplishment of the tinted curtain was safety. When she had to open her eyes, it simplified visions for her. It filtered out, if only partially, the cacophony and discordance she would otherwise have to make sensible. And it was a shield, too. For she had discovered in inconceivable wonderment that everyone else only saw one set of doors instead of sixteen. What did it matter that her sunglasses were incongruous with her rain-soaked rubber boots? Life was easier this way.

A gentle mechanical sigh swung the doors closed behind her. She closed her eyes. What bliss it was to be free from the visual onslaught. Navigating by memory, she walked to an open seat, her boots squishing transient, dewy footprints into the floor of the bus, quacking methodically over to a slab of worn gray leather. The soothing chatter and rustling of other patrons enveloped her. A click as a woman snapped shut her powder compact. Hurried stamping of a man behind her trying to shake off the water. Muffled adolescent laughter and popping camera shutters. Pages crinkling in an ancient, rediscovered book. Muddied phone conversations blurring into one another.

She relaxed into the seat. The chill of the outside weather emanated from the window next to her cheek. But the world made sense again. No more scrambled parallel sequences; here was the present, flowing lazily along the tide of time, no longer glinting off the face of a cut and polished diamond—just one flat sheet of perception for her to absorb.

With a loud wheeze, the bus rolled forward. She careened with the motion before her muscular and skeletal systems had time to check the effects of inertia. She was jounced along the potholed roads, swaying inside a thin aluminum can adrift on choppy seas. The rumbling journey down Lock Street

was predictable, every motion rehearsed millions of times before, never deviating from routine.

~ ~ ~

“Good night, Bedelia.” Tender, motherly hands tucked her in with three folds of the cover.

One. Two. Three. Just like routine.

But unlike the norm, sounds of aberrant firecrackers blistered the mid-September night. Thick, hot-headed firecrackers.

~ ~ ~

“Don’t be afraid, Bedelia. Look.” A huge, calloused hand wrapped around her small, chubby fingers. The cape of safety guided her hand toward the dormant firecracker.

A spark as the lighter met the fuse. Then chortling crackles.

She jumped back when the first fireflies shot out at the speed of light. She hid behind a large, khaki-clothed tree trunk.

“Bedelia, look. Isn’t this fun?”

“Go on, Bedelia.” A comforting voice with tender hands nudged her forward.

She peeked out from behind the great, safe leg. Green and blue sparks flew as the firework spluttered on the ground.

“Not like the Olympics, but this is great, huh?”

She walked tentatively to an unlit firework.

“Let’s try another, whatcha say?”

Her eyes lit up.

~ ~ ~

The room lit up.

A deafening explosion of metal and gun smoke. Abrasive yells splintered her ears as shards of glass rained down on her exposed arms. Another yell, pained this time and not angry. She opened her eyes, and they shattered like the gaping window beside her. The comforting voice would speak no more. Tears and blurry lines sliced across her vision in the indigo canvas of the night. Stars spilled their glittery inkwells; specks of color floated in the corner of her eyes. Sharp, jagged lines etched themselves indelibly into the thin film now smeared with tears. Fractured, cleft into a million pieces.

Her voice joined the wail of the siren, a double-edged scythe that spun out from the epicenter of the

shredded glass and shattered lead shell, from the pinpoint of the beginning of the webbed fractures that would last a lifetime.

~ ~ ~

She tucked her arms in close to her sides as she glided off the bus. She opened her eyes again and looked down the wobbly pier hovering spectrally over the misty lake. There, to the side, the creaking, rusted Ferris wheel stood still, a snapshot as it paddled somberly through the air. What had it been like in a bygone lifetime? Spidery rails and crooked beams collapsed outward from the central rivet. Giant metal flakes dangled off the weather-worn limbs; the acid-eroded leaves hung tenuously from brittle branches. She saw it as though it had passed through a corrugated, tesseract-pockmarked sieve. In her world, great structures rose without grounded support; pieces singularly levitated high above the ground. Nothing was connected; reality was suspended in her shattered vision.

Her mind spun, teetered on the verge of vertigo. She commanded the blissful shutters to drape once again over her eyes.

The gentle, droning drizzle pattering on Lock Street wrapped around her. Indistinct murmurs and marketplace bustling colored the background. Hungry pigeons squawked. Splashes of busy feet rippled, one after the other. It was a typical rainy day.

But then, a soft cooing rang in her ears. Not from a bird. It was a watery whistle. Tones, music, skated across the damp chilly air. They sang with single notes and a tapestry of unspoken melodies.

Her feet turned from the path she had traversed innumerable times in the past. She left the crowded sidewalk for the gates of the Ferris wheel. The music bent in curves, lifting and sinking with joy and sorrow, with a feeling she couldn't quite place. It rose above her and carpeted the ground beneath her. It pushed her forward at her back and hummed with longing in front of her.

Soon, she stood at the foot of the Ferris wheel, soaking in the sounds, internalizing the lingering vibratos.

“How are you today?”

She opened her eyes when the music stopped. Facing her, a young woman with soft, feathery hair—an empathetic softness that could not be hardened even by the cracked shards of her vision—rested her twenty crystallized fingers over a broken field of water-filled glass cups.

“That was lovely.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I appreciate that.”

The lips moved in separated, shifted pieces, each with its own magnification.

“I haven’t heard you before. Do you normally play here?”

A shaking head trailed and multiplied across her visual fragments.

“Sure is a first time for everything.”

Drumming raindrops filled the ensuing silence.

The musician said, “If you don’t mind my asking, why are you wearing sunglasses on this fine cloudy day?”

“I suppose, perhaps, for the same reason that you’re out here playing music on this jolly rainy day,” she replied.

The musician laughed. “I promise you I’m not usually this crazy.” Her bemused expression reflected off the fragmented jewels of a thousand chandeliers.

“What is it like, to play music in the rain?”

“Liberating, calming, I suppose. You might imagine it, understand it, but before today I never really *knew*.”

She looked up at the Ferris wheel, frozen in jumbled tumble, and she turned away. “Not really for the same reason then.”

“Reason for what?”

“Why I’m wearing these.” She touched the dark lenses obscuring her eyes.

“Why, then?”

The words escaped, a breath upon the air, carried by the invisible wings that had carried the music to her. “To protect and disguise my shattered eyes.”

“What do you mean?”

“You wouldn’t know what it’s like.”

The musician touched one of the glass cups, releasing a single, sustained note. “I can imagine what it’s like. I can understand how the world must appear when you’re looking at it through broken glass.”

She turned to face the musician again. A chorus of warbling, dainty notes resumed their diaphanous echo.

Barely audible through the haze of the rain, she heard: “Your ‘self’ is contained in you. My ‘self’ is contained in me. But when we walk together in consciousness, through awareness, a greater, transcendental self is created. I can understand.”

She tucked her sunglasses on top of her head, and because she understood what it was like to play music in the rain, she walked with the musician down Lock Street, even as the musician continued to waltz her fingers across the tops of the water-filled wine glasses at the foot of the Ferris wheel.

Down by the river

Down by the river,
a chainmail of aqua scales,
a jewel-toned giver,
a dragon's swaying tail,
cotton pearls the horizon,
Breathes its way downstream,
as steamboats march—a herd of bison—
along the Missouri-Illinois seam.
Clamors and chatter melt—
laughing freshwater branches—
to feed the great Mississippi belt
Winding by cabins and ranches.
and two iron horses
Rear from opposite shores,
Singing in their aerial courses
a song of half-finished lore.

Down by the river,
a smear spitting green,
a bubbling liver,
an ochre eel of unctuous sheen,
Dark wool swathes the eye—
spins out from concrete towers—
as engines roar in artificial night,
Stampeding in myopic glower.
Pipes belch muddy paste—
Rumbling legs of bruised water—
to buoy the centipede drowning in waste
in its crawl past factories gathered
around the welded embrace
of two iron horses
Bridging, leaping, over the face
that cries beside coal-fired forces.
They collide, stand,
Race invisibly against time—
against the concrete-encased hands
toiling amidst grime.
They challenge the legs
of the centipede coughing below
to their mane-tossing speed renege
and to above their freed majesty flow.
They eye the glistening stallion
just starting to step out
from the stables of a new battalion

farther down the river's route.

Down by the river,
a stained, corrugated wire,
a misty-eyed shiver,
a stretched, deflated tire,
Two bowed, rusted horses look
upon the silent concrete towers
now streaked by eroding, acidic hooks
of lonely, drenching showers.
weather-beaten tears
Forever scar the cheeks
of brick fists that leer
with empty eyes through the weeks.
wrinkled hands float listlessly
across the rough stone walls,
Etching in the faces indelibly
the loss to all.
hollow, echoic clanging drifts—
ghostly sighs from the past—
to accompany the river as it shifts
down the winding, steel-dotted mast.
but a great new stallion leaps,
Sailing between the shores,
Outrunning the ancient two-horse heap
that mournfully stretches one time more.

Down by the river,
a ribbon of dust,
a turbid, tight-lipped quiver,
a serpent of distrust,
soybeans quilt the land,
while corn guard its keep,
leaving the river to quietly reprimand
the tear-stained stone blocks in sleep.
now, a single horse dashes
between the Mississippi's shores,
Flying to heal freedom's gashes
And rear, unvanquished, above the war.

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 .

Fundamental

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She looked up, eye level with a laminated backstage pass and a press badge. She unfurled from her

kneeling position and grasped the hand in front of her.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Rachelle,” she said.

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

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

“Alright, let’s go.”

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

~ ~ ~

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

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

She remembered looking at the weed-cracked sidewalk when she walked with her mom, holding her hand, past the pond filled with geese and ducks and swans. A blanket of laughter always encircled the edge of the water. Children squealed, tossing in pieces of bread to feed the community pets. The birds were the hungriest in the winter, like her, when no one had a need for her mom’s green thumb, and no amount of labor could conjure sprouts from the frozen ground. She remembered how the swans would tuck their infinite necks deep into the hollow between their wings, a warm nest of feathers, a warmth against the frosted curtains that descended from icy clouds. It was a warmth she tried to imagine, scratching rudimentary pictures of great swans flying across summer sunsets. It was the picture she drew over and over again in the ice gripping the window of her five-by-seven room. How glorious it must be to fly! Huge wings lighter than air, purer than snow, splashed with fiery hues of red and yellow and orange, sailing across oceans. The rays of the sun transform them, reflecting the feathers a thousand times over the perturbed water beneath them. The reflections shine brilliantly—the facets of crystals that do not melt—the pieces of everlasting diamonds breaking out in perpetual flight, flying across the Pacific, flying across the stage. Leaping, turning, bending in lines and waves of organic motion. Living, breathing, dancing with the same unmitigated happiness that infuses a swan when it flies.

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

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

"Incredibly, yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

The stories spilled out of her. "The mirror is always there," she said. "And it isn't about glamour, but on stage, it's different. You cannot see yourself, but you can feel the pull of the music, the speech of the movement, the ties with those watching—those who are breathing with you. That's all there is. And all the hours you had spent in the studio are suddenly released. You tango with freedom—freedom from inhibitions and cataloguing eyes. The sense of being *observed* disappears."

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

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

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

"Exactly. And you are certain in your uncertainty. Without a mirror to check, you don't know if your

feet or hands or head is perfectly where it should be, but you keep moving. The motion of a fantastic dream launches you forward constantly.”

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

“Yes, they are separate, but inextricably intertwined.”

“There must be moments of free motion and pauses for reflection.”

“Both are fundamental.”

The last word rang over and over. It filled his senses. Through the transparent hologram of sound, he saw his younger self bent double over engrossing articles that fought to reveal the mysteries of the universe and enticing stories that wove their own mysteries with words. He remembered feverishly penciling the answers after wading through pages of calculations and penning verses before the fleeing inspiration could run out.

What about the days of the fundamentals? he thought. Nothing was the same after those days, when he learned that everything was, at the same time, collections of particles and never-ending waves, and that the instant you observed one, the other collapsed—the dualism irretrievably lost until you closed your eyes again. Those were the days he head-butted universal uncertainty, the days he felt cornered by the textbooks and books of poetry stacked on his desk. Everything was irreducible; truth was relative. How his pens had snapped when the pencil-leaded numbers stared at him so. What was the point if he could not pursue both?

But he had been wrong; his wrongness was an unmysterious law. There was still an immense volume of truth to find, but the deepest ones—the ones broiling in the core of the Earth and at the heart of the singularity—these could never be wholly and perfectly drawn out. They were fundamental, meant to be experienced but not to be observed. And they would always be there, just one more meter away, tantalizing but unreachable no matter how far and arduously he stretched. They existed beyond comprehension, in a realm of magic. Progress, strivings, they could only take you so far. The mirror could never reflect the stage, but without one, you could not have the other.

“And with both, you are timeless,” he whispered in his reverie.

“How true. Time passes so quickly on stage, and yet I feel as though I could keep dancing forever.”

Dancing in the fragile magic that defies probing scrutiny—a scrutiny that would cause the entire enigma to collapse. But if you don't fight it, tackle it, smother it, it will always be there. “Do you ever try to understand it?” he asked.

“How can it be understood? I let it be, and that is when I feel all of my younger selves and the audience and my friends beside me—everyone throughout time and with me in time—dancing.”

By now, the lobby was mostly empty, and lonely footsteps echoed in the grand hall. The chandelier had become one with the stars, and the glistening light pink shoes lying next to Rachele, unburdened by watchful eyes, kept on dancing.

Flutterbird

I

She hummed in the garden on an earth-and-grass bed
with red trumpet flowers serenading overhead,
blowing a golden tune of sweet, sunlit scents
that danced with a flutterbird who fluttered and went
to hover by her shoulder, beating the air
with thin wings that belied their powerful share
of the energy that pulsed through the dewy leaves
and ran with the light beams that shot past branches' sieves.

Back foliated with feathers of twinkling iridescence
and invisible wings beating with flighty evanescence,
the flutterbird slipped by the trumpet for a sip
of the golden music wafting from its lip,
a garnet reflection of its partner in dance,
who had a throat of ruby and a beak like a lance,
who hummed and hovered, a dazzling gem drop
with the freedom to fly and swoop from tree tops.

The flutterbird hummed and swooped, spiraling away.
She paused when it left, bid her hummingbird good day,
and hummed in the garden while with quick, flighty hands,
she caressed the greenery that feathered her land—
her small plot of land.

II

She hummed in the kitchen while she set out the plates
filled with fronds she had picked from her garden of late.
She peeked through the blinds in the settling night
and watched as, with a hum, the flutterbird did alight
on the air that the red trumpet proudly still breathed
out like a bellows, softly stirring the heath
fanned by fluttering wings during late evening tea
between her ruby-throated hummingbird and she,

Who startled in dread at the sound of a thud
and uneven footsteps that dragged as if through mud.
The flutters quickly hid, and the trumpets laid still
when she clutched with one hand at the windowsill.
A lumbering hand swept the plates to the floor.
Crashes and shards spilled like the words he swore,
slurred together, booming with erratic gunshots
aimed to strike and pierce her hovering heart stretched taut
where it was suspended, a ruby in her throat
that beat with the hailstorm of fists ending her float,

bruising her arms and tearing for her ruby heart
while lightning crackles of words shot for her face like darts.

Thunder raged by the window with the whipping wind outside;
the howling maelstrom clawed at her garden, her pride.
It smashed the trumpets mute and searched all around
for the flutterbird that knew the taste of the sound
of unadulterated joy painted by nature's great artists
that filled the songs of operas and the chords of harpists.
It searched in the swirling mayhem for the single red gem
cradled by emeralds greener than the trumpets' stems.

A roar filled the bowels of the blinded darkness
as lightning caught the sky in a blinding harness
and glared at the flutterbird fighting the tempest,
flailing against an anger more wrathful than a wasp nest.
One heave of the storm clouds launched a serrated rock
to smash the wings and deliver a lightning-fed shock.
Down came the flutterbird; down came she
under a drunken fist tossed by a drunken sea—
a memory-void sea.

III

She hummed in a raspy voice while she tried to calm her mind
tortured by fears of what's both in front and what's behind.
She stared at her ceiling that didn't blink with stars
and lay in the night that clouded her hummingbird's scars.
For years was she gripped by an unwanted battle
that sickened her food and made her nerves fragile,
even when the sun rose on her long, sleepless nights
and she listlessly roamed the garden now smothered by blight

And yet was still home to the flutterbird nursing its wing,
broken by the callous storm and slow in healing.
She looked at the powerful creature wrenched from flight,
and it looked at the woman with a face twisted by might,
an incensed might that had finally pulled down
one side of her wearied face into a broken frown.

With shaking hands, she smoothed the trembling feathers
ripped by hail and crumpled like discarded leather.
The flutterbird wobbled when it tried to flutter
past her shoulder and into the weedy, leafy clutter.
She turned her face and peered into the green shadows
and saw her hummingbird by the trumpet below—
a single trumpet below.

IV

She hummed by the trumpet flower she tried to mend,
wrapping its stalk supportively and smoothing its bends.
The sun raced tirelessly across the sky—
once, twice, thrice—as many days went by,
and the trumpet flower raised its head bit by bit
until the sun's rays skated across its petals and lit
up the instrument to trumpet once again
and resound the majesty that had before then
lain mute in destruction but now burst forth,
proclaiming its golden notes and their immeasurable worth.

The trumpets lifted the glory, sent music to the sky,
and framed a blazing flutterbird preparing to fly.
Emerald wings thumped the air with diamond-strength might,
fanning a rain of dazzling gems to catch the light.
Her hummingbird hovered in the trumpet's fanfare,
royalty of nature and renewal's heir.
It lifted with the music and skimmed her one cheek
that her palm had hid but now lifted with the wingbeats.

The flutterbird flitted and flew out of sight,
leaving echoing music and the sparkling red light
of its crystal ruby throat surging with power
that the storm could not rampage with its fearsome glower—
a power that neither hail, nor lightning, nor rain,
nor booming thunder could replace with searing pain.
The power belonged to the flutterbird and now to her;
it sang in chorus with the trumpet's musical liqueur.

So the flutterbird hummed around distant flowers,
and she hummed in the garden by red trumpet flowers—
the serenading red trumpet flowers.

To Solve a Rubik's Cube

He twiddled the pencil around his fingers and looked up from his books to the narrow shelf over his head. A neat row of various Rubik's cubes sat: a four-by-four, one that looked like a Mondrian painting, another that looked like those infinity lamps they sell at the mall, all sorts of variations of the classic puzzle, a collection amassed over six years. His Grandma had bought them for him—out of love, pity, generosity, or a mixture of the three. The original, though, was absent from his collection; it was hiding and collecting dust where he had shoved it under his bed when they first arrived at Grandma's.

"You can't come to my graduation, can you?" his sister's muffled voice was on the verge of tears in the next room.

A pause in the silent winter.

"Why did you have to do these things? Why? You know no one at college or at work looks at me the same way anymore."

Turner laid down his pencil and clenched his fists. He reached on the shelf for the octahedron variation he had just gotten for his sixteenth birthday. He scrambled it and looked intently, memorizing the layout of the colored pieces. Then, he closed his eyes and began to spin the pieces back into place.

"No. Only Turner and Grandma will be there. Grandma doesn't know where Mom is either."

Click, click, click.

"I'm done. With you under house arrest and Mom God-knows-where... That's it. I'm done. I don't expect anything anymore."

Click. The last piece. Turner replaced the finished puzzle to the shelf. He sat briefly and then jumped up, bubbling with resentment. He grabbed his jacket.

"Grandma, I'm going to the store around the block." He wrenched the creaky door open.

A half-moon lay cradled by the stars and clouds. Indigo velvet blanketed the world.

He pulled on the store door. A rusty bell dinged. In the flickering light, Rick paused in his inventory cataloguing and said automatically, "Can I help you?"

"No, thanks. I'm just looking."

The extent of their communication had simmered down to a couple of terse, polite necessities.

Turner roamed the small selection of shelves and displays. The old book bags, dog-eared books, and miscellaneous thrift goods imparted a feeling of comfort and settled-in peace.

In the corner, something caught his eye. The sharp light glinted off the surface. It was his old cube. No, just one that looked like it—down to every worn corner and even the missing central white square. But, his was at home. This couldn't be his. The great cube that had laid dormant at the back of his vision began to whirl again now.

He reached out, one inch at a time. When his fingers touched the cube, the squares lit up. The luminosity rippled and shifted colors. Stunned, he pulled his hand away. The cube regained normalcy. He looked at his former friend. He was still organizing the inventory as if nothing had happened.

Turner reached out again, and the surface undulated in Technicolor splendor. After a while, he began to feel that something about the cube didn't look right. He looked behind him and was startled to see no shadow attached to his feet. He whipped around and—yes—the cube had no shadow either. He glanced at Rick again and suddenly came face-to-face with his own shadow, now standing upright and holding the shadow of the cube. They wavered in the glaring light.

Turner's shadow put the cube's shadow in its pocket. Turner felt a weight drop in the jacket. The shadow leaned backwards and fell on the ground, instantly collapsing back to two dimensions. The shadow moved with him. He looked at the shelf; the cube was gone. He felt his jacket. Nothing bulged out or made the fabric sink, but a curious weight remained.

“Bye, Rick.”

The inventory continued. He really hadn't seen anything.

Turner exited the store.

~ ~ ~

Sitting at his small, wobbly desk again, Turner reached into his pocket and took out the cube that his shadow had given him. Every touch made the lighted colors shiver and change. Well, here was a new puzzle. He tried turning the cube to line up the colors. It was no good. Every touch sent the colors spinning off to different squares.

He laid the cube down and got out a sheet of paper. With one finger, he touched a single square. Blue changed to yellow. He made a note. Using the same finger, he touched the same square again. Yellow changed to white, and then red, and then blue, and then orange. He tried a different square. There was no discernible pattern. The color changes were completely random. He made lots of notes late into the night and tried to decipher if there might be some other more complex pattern, but he couldn't see any. At last, he went to bed, feeling both exhilarated and confused by the intractable puzzle. Colored squares swirled before his eyes like luminescent fireflies until he finally dropped off to sleep.

The next day dragged by. When he got home, he sat down and started working on the cube again. No matter what he did or what calculations he made, the cube could not be unscrambled. The magical colors and lights fluttered across the surface, evanescent as the wind. The only constant he could find was the missing sticker. That square never changed colors. He found himself staring at the blank plastic. In the next room, his sister was on the phone again and saying, “You can't come to my gradu—”

Turner felt like someone had punched his stomach. Something was squeezing him from every side. He looked behind him, but no one was there. He looked again at the place for the missing sticker, and he felt a tug on the top of his head. Without warning, he was instantly pulled headfirst down into the plastic block. He tried to scream, but no sound came out, and then his feet disappeared into the cube.

~ ~ ~

He woke up to blinding light. Inside his room, artificially bright light flickered through his window. He ran to the window. Monstrous shelves filled with a hodgepodge of materials surrounded him. Across a wide chasm, a gigantic Rick was conducting inventory. He looked as far down the window as he could. There was no shadow.

A rusty bell dinged.

“Can I help you?” a rumbling voice asked.

That was yesterday. Yesterday. Turner’s mind clicked. *Oh no, oh no, oh no. It’s a cycle.*

“No, thanks. I’m just looking.”

He clutched the sides of his head with his hands. Turning his back to the window, he paced gravely around his room. He tried the door. It was locked. The cube that he had sat on his desk the night before was gone. He checked under his bed. His old one was still there, collecting dust. Everything was the same in his room as when had left it, except the duplicate, shadowy cube.

A huge finger reached out to his window. Turner ran to the window.

“NO! STOP!” he yelled.

Magical lights danced around his room. The room revolved, and he was thrown violently against a wall. Amazingly, nothing fell. The window remained still, but now the ceiling was where the floor should have been, and the floor where a wall had been. He got up and jumped in front of the window.

He waved his hands frantically in front of his face and shouted, “STOP! STOP! GET AWAY!”

The finger came again, and Turner hurriedly flattened himself against the floor. The room spun and shifted under the dancing auroras.

“What’s happening? Why am I here?” he asked the ceiling. “Get me out of here!” he bellowed. No one replied.

A fuzzy cloud crossed his window. Lint from the inside of his jacket stuck to the glass.

Enraged, he took his old cube from under his bed and threw it against the window. Small cracks splintered the glass. The cube came to rest on the floor. He heard a slurp and looked up. The glass mended itself.

“What is this? What is this? *I’m just supposed to be stuck here?*”

He kicked the wall and bruised his toe. His sneaker left a small mark, but no dent.

He sighed and held his face with his hands. With nothing else to do, he collapsed backwards and fell asleep on the floor.

~ ~ ~

“Am I just supposed to be *stuck* with you? Is that what you think?” His Mom’s muffled question from six years ago came back to him in a dream.

He saw his sister, and then there was a heavy thud. They both jumped. Something smashed against the wall of the living room. Their parents’ mountainous voices clambered over each other.

“Get in the car,” his sister ordered. “We’re going to Grandma’s.”

Turner couldn’t move. He clung to his shadow—a shadow of the past. A shadow that remained on the porch, pushing with all the weight of his ten-year-old self, pushing in disbelief on the door that would not give way. He couldn’t move if his shadow refused to come with him.

The singing birds and rocking trees grew ever more unreal. With each passing second, the colors brightened, and sounds became more rhythmic and mechanical. The world bent into a cube. Forms contracted and stacked themselves into squares of the six basic colors he knew so well. They turned as the wind turned, except the one red block of the fury-filled house that was jammed in the cube and refused to budge. It squawked in protest.

A robin lifted off the tree branch it had been sitting on, leaving behind a wake of motion and a piercing cry.

Shouts fired like gunshots in the air. More robins squawked. That jammed piece of the world-encompassing cube squeaked erratically.

“Get in the car,” his sister ordered. She pushed Turner to the driveway. A tenebrous rubber band between him and his shadow stretched to its limits. He looked back for a split second and saw a portion of a thin, dark line like those separating each of his cube’s colored squares—a thin line shaking the handle of the door and finally capitulating with a snap. His shadow angrily returned.

He sulked far down into the passenger seat, as far as the seatbelt would allow. His sister launched the car into drive mode and squealed out of the driveway. The squares marching in color-coded regiments crumbled and devolved into war—a massive jumble of meaningless shapes and a soup of the six basic colors.

He looked at the scrambled cube in his hands and flipped it to the face with a central white square. Every time he started solving the cube, he always arranged the squares a certain way around this central square. He stared blankly at the road that his sister’s car was gobbling up and began picking at the corner of the sticker. After a while, he rolled down the window and held out his index finger with the sticker lightly attached to it. The rushing air grabbed at the waving piece of paper, and within seconds,

it flew off, spiraling chaotically in the air current.

~ ~ ~

He woke up to blinding light. He gasped and looked around his room. His old cube was sitting on the floor, forlorn. A dark mark discolored the bottom of a wall.

When had those gotten there? he thought.

A foggy memory of a cracked window flashed through his mind.

Ding!

“Can I help you?” a booming voice asked.

He snuck to the window and saw a gigantic version of himself and Rick exchanging niceties in the thrift shop. Then, he saw himself from the past walking over. Nausea hit Turner.

It's repeating. I'm stuck here. I'm doomed to repeat this day over and over.

“NO! NO! STOP! *You don't know what's going to happen!*” he screamed futilely at the finger drawing closer and closer to his window.

Out of instinct, he fell to the floor and braced for an impact. The room spun around him in disembodied colors.

“GET AWAY!” he tried to warn the Turner from the past.

This is never going to work.

He sat glumly on the floor as the evening wore on in dazzling, nauseating, multi-colored plumage. On a whim, when he saw a block of color fly past him on the wall, he planted his palm on it, capturing it. To his surprise, the square stopped moving. When the room came to a still again, a single yellow square remained on the otherwise white-washed wall. His mind sparked.

The room began revolving again, and he army-crawled across the floor and slapped his hand on another yellow square when it crossed the wall. It stayed, and two yellow squares stared at him from the wall opposite the window.

In the transient steadiness, he scrambled to his desk and scrawled a note. He looked at the old cube and the scuff mark. An overwhelming motion slammed him against the desk, knocking the air out of him. He crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

~ ~ ~

Voices from the past echoed in his dream. “You didn't *know* what was going to happen, did you?” Rick, two years younger, asked without meeting his eyes.

Turner opened and closed his mouth mutely.

Rick buckled and unbuckled the watch around his wrist.

Sounds from long ago filtered through his fourteen-year-old mind.

His friend seized a button on the side of his watch. "31.85 seconds," came the pronouncement, followed by the addendum, "Turner, that's your best yet."

A crowd of schoolchildren gathered around the picnic table gasped in the shade of the maple tree. The noise and chants of "Go! Go! Go!" had blown away, grains of dust upon the air.

He leapt off the picnic table and tossed his worn cube into aerial somersaults. Clouds of dust rose around his sneakers, the remnants of an ancient cough.

"He does that all the time when he doesn't have any friends to play with," someone said in contempt.

"You didn't have to watch if you didn't want to. I never asked for any of you to come." Turner stuffed his worn, solved plastic cube into his jacket pocket. "Let's go, Rick."

Even after he and Rick had left, the other children chattered and whispered around the picnic table, feasting their eyes on the somber emptiness of a timeless guardian maple tree.

The memory faded with Rick's next words. "But time is too important to give away. That's what my parents told me, anyway, when they saw the story in the paper about your father's arrest. I'm sorry, Turner."

He crumpled his freshman class schedule in his hands. "Alright. Bye, Rick."

~ ~ ~

He woke up to blinding light. Soon, he heard himself telling goodbye to Rick.

How many times have I heard that? I'm stuck. I'm stuck. I'm stuck.

He panicked. When he looked around the room, he saw his old cube deposed from its hiding place under the bed, a mark on the wall, and a note. Curious, he crept closer to his desk.

Hi, Turner of the new cycle. I'm Turner of the past cycle. You're going to be stuck in that cube you got from the store and keep going in this 24-hour cycle if you don't solve it. And you're going to have to solve it from the inside. When the colors come by, press your hand—

A long pen streak slashed the page. Something must have happened.

He felt a rumble. The room began to move. He got on the floor. He lifted his eyes and saw two yellow squares on the wall. The pieces clicked together in his mind.

When the colors flew by, he slapped his hand against the wall. In a topsy-turvy room, Turner moved

slowly along the floor, capturing and matching the colored squares to the walls. Gradually, with continuous revolutions, tile by tile, the sides, floor, and ceiling became painted expanses of yellow, blue, red, green, orange, and white.

You're going to have to solve it from the inside.

He went to the window and looked out. When he touched his palm to the glass, a burst of white light blinded him. He turned his face away and felt his feet floating off the ground. Gravity flipped upside down. He was pulled feet first out the window.

~ ~ ~

And then he was sitting at his desk again. He shook his head. His old cube was in front him, and the place where the central sticker had been missing for six years was filled in again. Shocked, he went to the window and looked out. To his relief, he saw not the flickering thrift store lights, but a serene night.

He touched the surface of his cube. The magical colors still danced across the surface. He dashed to look underneath his bed. The cube that was supposed to be there wasn't anymore.

He spun the segments of the strange cube around. The fluttering colors never rested long enough for him to solve it. The outside of the cube was and always would be chaos.

You're going to have to solve it from the inside.

He placed the cube on his shelf. *It is solved from the inside*, he thought. *Time moves forward again. I'm out of the cycle.*

Turner looked behind him at his shadow. It was in its place, healed from the snapping jaws of resentment. It was at peace.

Scorpion Vaulters

“ ’ey ’dere, litta fella.”

The scorpion scrambled away from him. He reached out a grimy, rubber-gloved finger in an extension of friendship, but the scorpion wasn't interested. It scurried on the parched ground and burrowed into the sand underneath a mountain of glass shards.

He licked his cracked lips, every drop of moisture quickly evaporating under the cloudless sky. It hadn't rained for eighteen months. The water rations had tightened, squeezing the reservoirs for every last drop. Crops were failing. The food rations were strict, too. His stomach grumbled.

Beads of sweat ran effusively down the side of his face and neck. They pooled on the backs of his hands. At least they had finally managed to keep the temperatures somewhat down. Lower than what they had been, anyway.

He remembered the days when fires swept the land, roasting everything alive. He remembered running and hiding in the underground tunnels when the alarms for the wildfires came. The heat had scorched his nostrils whenever he tried to breathe. It was impossible to go outside for any longer than ten minutes at a time. It was simply too hot.

The terror of the heat had ended, though, a couple years ago.

Parents in the tunnels were telling their kids the stories their great-grandparents had told them about what it had been like to lay in a bed of snow and make snow angels.

Someone had remembered about the ice. The great sheets of ice that had slid, inch by inch, into the hungry depths of the sea.

They reflected the sunlight, the person had told them. That kept the planet cool.

Another person had been taking one precious sip from his glass bottle. The bottle had reflected murkily in the dusty brown lights of the sanctuary tunnels.

Reflected.

Everyone started buzzing with anticipation.

It just might work, a former scientist had said. We can always try.

So the glass factory was born—or rather, the glass breakory. For they did not *fabricate* any glass there, but instead smashed any glass object they could find into a million pieces. The objects went through a rusted, solar-powered funnel first, though; the funnel sucked all the colors and dyes out of them. When they were transparent, clear, they were fed into the yawning mouth of an iron, sunlight-fueled bear that chewed and spit the glass shards out.

The people working at the glass breakory pushed the shards together into giant mountains. Lumps of sparkling smithereens. From a distance, you could imagine skiing down the sides of the glass

mountains like the lean alpine skiers your aged relatives used to talk about. From a distance, you could pretend they were the glacial mountains you had heard about but had never seen.

They rolled across the desert plain, the icy claws of a slumbering beast reaching toward the sky. The claws had managed to keep the heat at bay. The heat was by no means gone, but the white glass mountains that worked tirelessly to bat the sunlight back into the sky had subdued the fiery claustrophobia so that it was now tolerable to go outside.

Legions of people had been repurposed for the glass breakeries. When the set of glass on top got too dusty, it was sent inside to be polished, and a new haul of clear broken glass would replace it. When a set became too dirty to even polish, it was retired. New glass was broken. They would always need new glass as long as there wasn't enough water, and there never was enough. Fear of running out of glass loomed in the backs of people's minds, but no one was really *that* concerned about the precarious situation. The collective consciousness always parroted the words, "We'll think of something when we get there."

Their grandparents and great-grandparents *had* gotten there, a long time ago, and hell had descended on Earth.

He shifted his gaze to the metal skeletons glinting in the raw desert sun. People had lived in those a long time ago.

The skeletons had flesh back then. They were called...

What were they called? he thought.

Buildings. Yes. Sky-scrapers, the pride of the world. People had been so sure of themselves back then. The buildings had been corpulent, bursting with life and goods and numbers of intangible worth. They had always been after those numbers, flashing across the screen—faster and faster and faster, a glare of blinding light and information.

The bomb had sent a glare of blinding light, too, but a much larger one—one that had mushroomed across the sky and tore the flesh from the towering sky-scrapers.

Now, they were skeletons. The old iron bones and steel beams shimmered in the orange heat.

He coughed and fought for a breath of oxygen. A blanket of carbon dioxide, ammonia, and methane threatened to close in on him.

He set off for the metal skeletons. The settlement leaders had decided at an emergency conference several days ago that there would be no hope if it didn't rain soon. They had activated the last remaining contingency plan.

At the foot of the tallest skeleton, he craned his neck. The metal seemed to run on forever, even in its reduced glory after the bomb. Its long arms kissed the cloudless sky.

He pulled out a grappling hook that was buckled around his waist. Turning to look behind him, he checked the pack of cloud-seeding dust strapped to his back. Everything was primed and ready to go

for the long journey ahead. At strategic locations in other settlements, people like him were preparing for the vertical climb.

There was no other way. Planes were useless without fuel, and the solar cells they managed to forage from the debris were too weak to power the avian monstrosities their ancestors had built.

We have to bring the clouds back. We have to fetch the rain.

He swung the grappling hook around his head. Another tiny scorpion hustled along one of the lower beams and jumped to the ground.

The Earth trembled. He let the hook fall. Glass shards made a twinkling, chiming sound as they tumbled down the face of the faux-snow mountains. He turned.

The glass mountains were growing taller and taller. Their usual mound shape became more defined. He heard crystal clinking together.

He whipped his head around. To the side, a mountainous scorpion was clicking its claws together. All around the settlement and in the distance, more glass scorpions were rising.

Transfixed, he stared. *Is this really happening?*

The lumbering crystal scorpions walked, slowly separating in different directions. He noticed they were fanning out in a complete circle—to all the settlements. One started in his direction.

Something the scientist had said in the tunnels rolled to the front of his mind.

It's almost like early Earth out there, my friends. The scientist had chuckled sadly and shaken his head.

The buildup of the gases: the carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen, hydrogen, ammonia, methane. All from choices their ancestors had made. Compounds they had sprayed into the air had burned a hole through the protective ozone film of the atmosphere. The ultraviolet rays had flooded in. He remembered hearing about the days when hordes of people blistered under the briefest time outside, fried alive by the sun. He thought about the high pressure and temperatures that punched his lungs every time he breathed.

A veritable soup of nasty stuff out there, the scientist had said, wrinkling his nose.

And he remembered all the times when people gathered on their doorsteps, eagerly watching the sky. The sound of thunder had been beautiful; the sight of lightning wonderful. It would mean rain. But, no rain had come. The settlements had wailed with disappointment.

So many times, the lightning had gotten their hopes up, and then sent them crashing down when the rain had slinked away. Of course, perhaps they should have known better. He remembered thinking how strange it was that the lightning had cracked without clouds. It was a fluke of the bubbling atmosphere.

But life began in that awful soup, the scientist had whispered. What kind of life do you think would

begin in ours now?

The glass scorpion in front of him bellowed a war cry. Far away, its companions echoed the call. The overpowering sound shook the dusty ground.

He breathed heavily, leaning against the metal skeleton.

The glass scorpion clicked its claws together again. It curled its tail upward, sending ripples of light and shadow to collide on the sand. Back arched, it pressed its claws on the ground and jumped straight up a little ways. Tremors made the ground quiver when it landed. Some glass shards rained down.

He backed away and scooted quickly to one side.

The glass scorpion followed him and roared. It arched its back again and thumped the ground with its claws.

He looked into the scorpion's eye.

The scorpion flicked its tail. Crystals twinkled.

He stepped forward tentatively.

The scorpion slowly lifted one of its legs and brought it down on the ground. The sand coughed.

His mind raced. "D' you wan' me er jump?"

The scorpion turned away and loped away from the skeleton. It pivoted sharply in the desert, sending a spray of sand and dust to wrap around it like a cape.

"You wan' me er jump. You'll 'elp me jump."

The scorpion arched its head. It lowered its tail to the ground.

He grabbed onto the raindrop-shaped tip. The scorpion stamped the ground, and it began running. Tugged along, he sprinted with the glass creature. They gathered speed. Sand whipped his face as they flew by.

In the rush, time slowed down. When they were almost at the foot of the metal skeleton, the scorpion quickly ducked its head and angled its back so that its head was the farthest down. He felt the scorpion lifting its tail, and he bent his knees, preparing to jump. He pushed off with both feet, clinging onto the glass. The scorpion curled its tail in a semicircle with both ends grounded. He saw the world tilt. The sky hung on the ground, and sand sparkled where the sky should have been.

The scorpion pulled the semicircle closer together, gathering energy in the ovoid elasticity. Heat brushed his skin as the scorpion lifted him, up and up and up. The ground diminished. The sky grew larger. Blood rushed to his head.

The air chilled. He had left the heat of the surface. He felt the scorpion flick the tip of its tail. He

continued vaulting, shooting straight up into the sky like the celebrated pole vaulters of a bygone time—up and up, but without a pole.

The glass scorpion shrank beneath him, eventually turning into a bleached version of the little fella he had met, and into a speck, and then into nothing at all because he was too far away to see. The air was thinner, less crowded. He took one slow breath.

We have to fetch the rain.

He felt his upward rocketing slow down. He twisted to find the bag of cloud-seeding dust.

A long moment paused with him as he hovered at the highest point of his trajectory. He pulled out the bag and flung it into the sky. The dust scattered in waves.

He righted himself and began gathering speed, falling feet first to the ground. His heart leapt to his throat. Organs shifted, nauseating him. The air turned him so that he fell through the sky on his back.

The speed wiped out his mind. His eyes closed on a field of pitch blackness as he heard muted glass claws chiming and felt a soft bed of sand sinking with him but also pushing up gently, gradually decelerating...

~ ~ ~

A burst of lightning seared his vision, startling him awake. He sprang up from the cot he had been lying in. A clap of thunder made the dingy room shake.

He got up and padded over the dusty floor to the window on bare feet. Outside, it was like everything was captured under a dark blue and black bowl. Rumbling storm clouds spilled light and sound as far as he could see.

A drop fell on the window, wiping the ancient dust away.

Another followed, clearing the pane.

Hundreds of drops began to fall. The arid ground sighed as it soaked up the long overdue rain. Torrential sheets of water cascaded from the skies, filling his ears with the sound of a million sliding glass shards.

The door creaked open.

“Doc, another ‘unuf ‘em ’as conshers!”

“ ’ere am I?” he asked the doctor’s aide.

“ ’N the re’ab unit. Aft’ whurt you all reps from the set’ments did, vaulting like ’at wit a scorpion’s tail erstead of those poles the ole people used er use, I’m s’prise any one of you still ’as conshers.”

“ ’ow you know all this?” he asked

“Eh, the guy woke up ’efore you, he said something erbout some grea’ big scorpion. An’ the guy woke up aft’ ’im, he said the same thing,” the doctor’s aide replied.

He turned back to the window.

“They all callin’ you all scorpion vaulters now. Ev’one who’s heard erbout the story.”

He looked out the rain-streaked window. The mountains of glass had collapsed onto the ground. The shards were spread all over, washed by the rain. Faintly, barely audible over the drum of the rain, a tiny scorpion clicked its claws on the dusty floor.

Not a Pawn

“Your turn,” Rira, his older sister, said. After moving a pawn, she folded her hands, her wispy fingers billowing and curling with the puffs of clouds swirling all around them.

He contemplated the layout of the board. One side of the pieces reflected the scarlet orb hanging in a perpetual sunset. The opposite side cast long, indigo shadows.

Memories resurfaced.

~ ~ ~

He stepped forward like a dutiful pawn, an eager and regimental soldier.

“Look what I made, Ma.” He offered his new contraption up for inspection. An enormous stingray, a creature of half flesh with metal plates and circuit boards stitched on, rocked in his hands. It lifted its head, and a glint shot off its flashing, neon green eyes. Its flicking tail crackled with electricity. Dangerous yellow and white sparks flew, breaking apart the otherwise uniform, gentle red glow of the Cirromonde, the Cloud Kingdom.

His mother peered at his newest creation. “Jallax, you mustn’t cart off the Humans’ animals like this all the time to your laboratory. They are there for a reason.”

He felt deflated. Every time, it was the same. Never praise, always the same gentle remonstrance to leave the Humans’ creatures alone.

“But look what it can do,” he protested. He tucked the flapping stingray under his feet, and instead of plummeting to the surface of Earth like usual animals, it hovered above the ground of rosy clouds. Its tail snaked side to side while he guided it in a circle around Ma.

She was not impressed. Floating on her small, personal cloud puff, she frowned. “We are to live in harmony with the Humans. Return the creature where it belongs.”

A storm gathered on his brow. He stepped off his stingray hover-board and back onto his personal cloud puff. All those hours filching wires and metals from the Humans’ trash heaps, welding and twisting them in his lab, melting them seamlessly into a stingray from the depths of the ocean. His work fell on blind eyes.

Yes, they were blind. All of them. These self-proclaimed Cirrusapins. The cloud people stuck in a past time. The ones guarding giant rain barrels to tip over when they became full and send the rain back down to Earth. The ones jabbering in the cabins and knitting the rainbows to toss after the rain. The ones dragging a plow with the Sun and Moon for its wheels across the furrows of the sky.

Did they still think this was the stone age? Soon, their powers would be outdated, relegated to the tales Grandfather Time spun around his ticking finger. There was a new power rising, ripe for the taking. And the Humans were the ones struggling to harness it, and *himself* with them. That would be the real reward—to control a force that would eventually put all their rain-watching, rainbow-knitting, sky-plowing powers to shame.

Yet, they refused to change. Even with the rain schedules in mayhem, leaving some poor Watchers to dump two buckets at a time and others to sit idly while the Earth lay parched in drought. The Humans had done this. They and their new power that made them look ever higher. And here was Ma telling him “We are to live in harmony with the Humans.” They were desperately trying to patch up whatever harmony there remained, but the Humans, the ones they were supposed to protect, the Humans had left the circle of harmony long ago.

“Yeah, sure, Ma. I’ll put it back,” he grumbled.

“I know you think this is fun, Jallax, but there are other ways to have fun, too. Just look at your sister.”

He looked over Ma’s shoulder to a translucent promontory. His sister stood at the summit with a bellows in her hand. She pumped the handle of the bellows, pushing in more wind to feed the Jet Stream. A wide smile was spread across her face. She enjoyed this life, just like the rest of them.

“Sure, Ma,” he resisted the temptation to roll his eyes in disdain.

She patted his head and watched him leave.

When she was out of sight, he pushed on the stingray’s nose and the tip of its tail with the flat of his palms. It shrank with a small *pop*, and he tucked it away in an interior pocket of his robe.

~ ~ ~

“Your turn,” Rira said again, forcing him back to the chessboard.

Just look at your sister.

It’s always “your sister.” My sister. My sister. My sister.

Return the creature where it belongs.

Just look at your sister.

Rira crinkled her forehead. “Jallax, what’s wrong. Are you feeling alright?”

Just look at your sister.

“Is something the matter?”

“AAARRRGH!” He jumped off the cloud cushion and swept all the chess pieces off the board.

His sister paled and gasped like a fish out of water. Still seated cross-legged, she leaned away from him. “What are you doing? Jallax, what’s come over you?”

He took the chessboard in his hands and snapped it in half over his knee. He tossed the halves to the side and reached in his robe’s pocket.

“I’m not going to sit here, a fool like the rest of you,” he snarled. Lightning cracked in his eyes. Thunder rolled off his words.

“Jallax, wai—”

He took out his stingray, holding it by a wing. With a flick of his wrist like he was playing with a yo-yo, it immediately inflated to all its enormity. He hopped on the stingray’s back and pressed his thumb to the first ridge on its spine. The stingray unleashed a piercing cry, and electricity fizzed around the ridge where his thumb was held. As neon green sparks shot past his finger, his wrist, his arm, scales of steel armor plated themselves over his wispy cloud skin. The metal pieces clinked into place with the sound of a blacksmith repeatedly striking an anvil with his red-hot hammer. Rira watched in terror.

When the last piece locked over his toe, he released his thumb and drew to his full height. Green sparks shot from his eyes. “Did you want to play chess, sister?” he boomed.

He turned away, and the stingray sped over the cloud tops, leaving behind neon green darts of light. Rira watched him disappear as he sent the stingray into a perpendicular dive down through the clouds.

She narrowed her eyes and set her feet into her cloud puff. Bending down, she blew some air into the cloud and stamped twice. The cloud puff kicked into action, and she raced after her brother, following the trail of obliterated clouds.

When she came to the gaping hole in the sky where he had dived, she took a deep breath and pushed her cloud puff away from her feet. Instantly, she dropped, free falling out of Cirromonde. Air rushed by her. The sheer speed stole her breath away.

The Earth shook when she landed on the ground. Desert, now obscured by fog due to her and her brother’s presences, stretched for miles in every direction. She crouched low to the ground, unmoving, and she felt a rumble through her legs. Her brother was moving. She heard a cackle.

“And my pawn shall take your horse.” The voice was ghostly, floating through the dense, misty air.

She whipped her head around. Behind her, Jallax stood triumphantly in his gleaming armor with a team of wild horses clutched in his steel-plated hand.

“Stop!” she gasped.

He cackled. The horses neighed frantically, pawing in distress at the air. Pinching their muzzles together, he pulled the horses’ faces out, stretching their necks longer and longer. The neighing gradually stopped as the horses transformed into iron. He skimmed his index finger down the horses’ legs, and they melted together into iron bars. The hooves disappeared into a metal plate. The tails became starched into rusted iron. He dropped what had become of the team of horses. A glowering oil rig crashed onto the sandy ground. Where the horses’ heads had been, a metal pipe ran into the ground. What used to be the horses’ backs seesawed up and down.

“And my horse shall take your rook.”

He grabbed a fistful of cacti and squeezed out their precious stores of water. Shaking the cacti dry, he plopped them back down on the desert in the form of a belching smokestack.

Jallax laughed and walked farther away, his footfalls making the earth tremble.

A desert bee flew to Rira's ear. It buzzed urgently. She nodded, and the bee lifted off, zipping in a line for Jallax's back. From the land it flew over, thousands of dormant bees and wasps arose, shaking off the sand and dust. In a great buzzing cloud, they swarmed at Jallax's back and stung his armor. Many fell in self-sacrifice. One managed to find a crack between the steel scales.

Jallax turned around when he felt the sharp pain. He narrowed his eyes and swiped at the angry army. Waves upon waves of new stinging insects flew in to replace their fallen brethren.

While he was occupied, Rira clapped her hands together and scooped a torrent of air toward her. The air current swept through the forests of the Earth and pulled the woodpeckers from their tree-priming duty.

Jallax laughed when he had brushed off the last bee, but stopped when he heard a flock of furious squawks. Dots of black and white rushed at his face and arms. The woodpeckers descended upon him. They latched onto the metal and drilled. Steel scales fell off and crumbled when they hit the ground. One of his hands became fully uncovered. Thick cables of pink, yellow, red, orange, and blue wound in coils where his fingers should have been. Neon green sparks snapped from the cables.

He roared and reached with his other hand into his robe pocket for his stingray. He pulled it out and swung the electrified tail around him, smashing it into the birds clinging to him. By the dozens, the woodpeckers fell under the crackle of electricity. They pierced the fog with their screams as they tumbled through the air.

"You are all fools!" Jallax screeched. He turned and leapt across the desert.

Rira sprinted after him and crossed into a tropical rain forest.

With his remaining good hand, Jallax sliced through the trees in sweeping arcs. Primordial trees groaned and collapsed to the ground. He got out his stingray and cracked its tail like a whip, singeing the ground and turning it to dust.

"Stop! We are Cirrusapins. We are guardians of harmony, protectors of peace."

Rira curled her fingers around and rotated her wrist. The deafening sound of royal trumpets filled the air. A herd of elephants made of roiled waves bounded over the foggy forest. They sprayed umbrellas of water around the epicenter of Jallax's destruction.

He cracked the whip-tail of his stingray again, but it slapped the surface of the saline water uselessly.

"Do you think you're the only one that can do that?" Jallax growled at his sister.

He tugged on the air as if on a rope, and a wall of dark, turbulent water overshadowed the land. A snarling bull emerged out of the rearing waves. It charged with the water and plunged its horns into the

elephants' sides. Cries spun up as the water umbrellas were extinguished. Seconds later, the tsunami dove and inundated the land.

“What are you trying to accomplish?” Rira shouted over the roar of the waves. “You are destroying *everything* we have created and protected over billions of years!”

“There is a new power, my sister. One that rises out of the people you all think you're living in harmony with. And I will not allow it to come first and destroy me!”

Jallax hovered his good hand over the drowning forest, and the water flew upwards. It collected into a shape-shifting teardrop. When all the land was dry, Jallax heaved and pushed the water ball over the horizon and into the sea. He lifted his palm parallel with the sky and clenched his hand into a fist. The sky darkened. All sound became muffled under a thick cloud of insect squeals.

Rira tilted her head up. The sky was filled with locusts.

Jallax laughed with glee and jumped up and down, sending seismic shock waves that rippled all across the Earth.

The locusts launched themselves into the remains of the forest. Upon contact, they instantly condensed into gasoline. Rira watched in stunned disbelief as innumerable legions of locusts coated the land with a dark, glistening goo.

“I will conquer the new power! I will be its conqueror!” Jallax declared.

His eyes flashed with neon green as he whipped his stingray's tail once more and lit the forest with flames.

Rira pulled down clouds from the sky and wrung them over the forest, trying to put the fire out, but the flames were persistent. They consumed everything in their path. A wounded tiger scrambled on the ground. It looked for an escape, but it was caged in a box of fire. Rira watched the flames swallow the king of the jungle whole in one rapacious gulp.

“The new power is stronger than the ties of harmony! And I will be a conqueror, not a pawn!” Jallax careened with the fearsome, awesome future ahead of him.

The forest burned. Tears fell from Rira's eyes and fizzed to steam when they hit the red-hot ground.

She heard a low rumble. A gust of broiling air swept past her face. She opened her eyes.

A tiger made of dancing flames and curling shadows sprang out of the burning forest. It closed its jaws around Jallax's uncovered hand. He screamed. The fire bit into the cables. Electricity jumped erratically. His metal scales vaporized into steam under the immense heat that the cables spread. He slapped at the fiery tiger and pulled his hand away, his palm burned. He yelped in terror and futilely shook the uncovered hand. The tiger sank its teeth in deeper.

One by one, the steel armor scales vanished, leaving behind a being made of warped cables. The last scale over his heart puffed into steam, and he thudded to the ground. Rain poured from the sky.

The tiger saluted Rira and was washed away by the rain.

Rira sat down beside her transfigured brother. The cables lay quiet. Shards of broken glass expanded and contracted with the beating of his heart.

She walked her fingers on the rain-soaked forest ground, summoning a string of leaf-cutter ants. She sharply turned her fingers, and they marched off.

She held her hand over his heart, feeling the jagged edges of the broken glass beneath.

The ants returned, carrying a single leaf. It sparkled with bubbles of crystals and shifted colors regularly from blue to green to purple to silver and back again. She held the leaf up to the sky and listened to the patter of water as the leaf filled up. Cupping the leaf in her hands, she swirled the water around. It chilled and granulated into snowflakes. She placed the leaf over her brother's heart and blew. The snowflakes floated out, bobbing, and lengthened into delicate dandelion fluffs. Like a soft blanket, they covered his face.

Rira closed her eyes and clasped her hands together. She lifted her face to the sky.

I wish he may return. What he decides about the new power he speaks of will be up to him, but I wish he may return so that we may talk again. So that we may be healed from our separation again. I wish—