

Missouri Youth Write

Scholastic Art and Writing
Missouri Region

Gold Key

2018

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2018 Gold Key Winners

Missouri Region

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Jessica Asher

Grade 12

Metal and Pain Pills
Science Fiction/Fantasy

Central High School
Springfield, MO
Teacher: Bethany Kelly

She stares at herself in the mirror. It's still her, she tells herself. A chunk of metal on her left side isn't going to change that. She's still the same General Mantha, conqueror of the Lost Sector, feared of enemies.

Her hair is short again, the formerly long bits sitting in the sink in front of her. It's a bright splash of color against the dull metal. She feels numb. A formerly lit cigarette that's burned down to just warm grey ashes in the bottom of a cold metal ashtray.

She has a meeting in one quarter-hour. She can hear the soft whine of the electricity humming through her metal arm. It drones through her mind and wipes out thoughts like a boot crushes out the last wisps of smoke on the pavement. She leaves the hair sitting in the sink and moves to get dressed.

There's something wrong with her, she knows. They did something to her mind when she was under and they were making her flesh into metal. She can feel something foreign swirling where her spine meets her skull.

The pain medicines kill more than the ache of surgery, if she takes enough of them. Two is what the doctor recommended, but she's never been good at following orders, only giving them. Four's a number she likes better anyway. She takes her pills with a shot of alcohol, something she shouldn't have but does anyway. She does a lot of things that she shouldn't, these days.

She taps out a message to her commander that says something that she thinks means she won't make the meeting. It's the third one she's missed since the explosion that took half of her away. She has more important meetings to attend, like the one happening between her and the chair.

It's worn and soft, and the misplaced fabric staple that once dug into her left shoulder doesn't bother her anymore. She closes her eyes and drowns "Sir, we need to retreat," and "General, look out!" and "You're going to be alright, sir, you're going to be alright" beneath a layer of drug-induced sleep.

In the dark of her bunk, Lestin Mantha finds her own brand of peace.

When the lights come back up, and he comes to check on her, Captain Firrel finds his own worst nightmare. Needless to say, it is not a pleasant surprise.

At some point, she has fallen out of the chair and onto the floor. She doesn't even stir when he says her name. Her eyes are closed, and she doesn't seem to be breathing. For a minute, all he can do is stare and feel the panic wash over him.

Then, he's kneeling beside her, screaming into his comms for Stitches to come, to hurry. He's rolling her onto her back and shaking her shoulders and shouting at her to wake up, to get up, and he's checking for breathing and not feeling any air past his fingers and then Stitches is pushing him back and all he can do

is watch as he carries her away. Even after they're gone, he remains, sitting on the cold metal floor, staring at the spot where she used to be.

He's not entirely sure when Six comes in. All he knows is that one moment, he's alone, and the next there is a warm arm wrapped around him and a warm cup of something caffeinated in his hands.

"She's gonna be okay, Firrel. Stitches has her. She'll be alright."

"What's wrong with her?" His own voice sounds so small in the empty room.

"I don't know. Stitches won't say anything. I'm pretty sure he knows, though. He seems..."

He trails off, leaving the sentence to hang in the air.

"She scared me, Six. I thought," he swallows hard, "I thought she was dead."

"Nah, don't worry." Six nudges him playfully. "It'll take a lot more than some sickness to get our general down. She's too tough. I bet she's telling off whatever it is as we speak for even daring to afflict her."

Firrel smiles at the mental image of Mantha yelling at some oversized germ while it cowers in a corner. It's stupid and comedic, but at that moment it's exactly what he needs.

Together, sitting on the cold bunk floor, they find some strange brand of relief.

The peace fades slowly, and Mantha comes to by degrees. The dryness of her mouth, the ache in her skull, the dull chill of pain where metal meets flesh. Next is the sharp, quiet beep of a vitals monitor as it counts out her heartbeats and blinding lights that stab at her pupils. She squeezes her eyes shut again with a tiny moan. Her tired mind struggles to figure out why she's in the medbay.

"Sir."

She pries her eyes open again to see Stitches holding a cup for her. She reaches for it, but he shakes his head, pressing the straw against her lips instead.

"All of it."

She drains the cup, and the water helps a little with the headache. There's some strange aftertaste, undoubtedly some sort of medication. It's bitter, and she frowns a little. He turns away to refill the cup, then sets it on the table next to her. His movements are stiff. She knows him well enough to see that he's aggravated.

She would say something, if she had something to say, but her brain is still trying to work out why she's here.

After a moment, he speaks, tone sharp.

"As of 0730 hours, you will be placed on a 6 week medication ban. This means you will not be allowed use of painkillers, muscle relaxants, or any other form of medication until the designated period of time is completed. Do you understand?"

She nods. It hurts her head.

“If you are found with any sort of medication or recreational drug in your quarters, or anything else that may affect your mental state, you will be subjected to immediate disciplinary action from the highest officer rank available. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Her throat burns, and her voice is hoarse.

“At 0730 hours, your quarters will be subjected to a substance search. This is following orders from a commanding officer. You may not take any action following this should any personal items be missing or damaged. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Her brain reels to understand, and she feels like a new recruit again, being berated by her captain for the first time. Only this time, she doesn’t know what she’s being punished for.

“By agreeing to this statement, you acknowledge that you have behaved in a manner that is deemed unseemly or criminal. You also acknowledge that you will receive punishment for this behavior, and will be unable to be assigned to any other post or mission until your punishment has been completed. Once disciplinary action has been taken, you will be allowed to return to your previous post or be reassigned. Do you understand?”

“No.”

Stitches blinks. “State your misunderstanding.”

“I misunderstand the causation of my punishment.”

He frowns, and his fingers tighten around the folder in his hands. “You have been found guilty of deliberate misuse of medical substances. You have been found guilty of possession of forbidden substances on a government vessel. You have been found guilty of use of forbidden substances on a government vessel. Do you understand?”

The world becomes crystal clear around her, and her chest tightens. “Yes.”

“Do you now understand the previous statement on disciplinary action?”

All too well. “Yes.”

“At 0730 hours, your medicinal substances ban begins. You are to stay in this room, on this bed until that time. That is an order. You will not be allowed visitors until that time. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“If there is a visitor inside this room before 0730 hours, you and the visitor will receive immediate disciplinary action, no matter the intent of the visit. The disciplinary action will be taken by the highest ranking officer available. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

With that, Stitches marches out of the room, leaving her alone to realize what it is exactly that she’s done.

Her fingers grip the sheets tightly, and she closes her eyes and presses her head into the pillow. She can feel the choke beginning in her throat. The headache is slowly getting worse, and she turns to the window. The stars shine on, regardless of her crimes. She watches space go by.

Stitches comes back at 0730 to tell her the search of her quarters has begun. All she can do is nod. She knows what they'll find. Two bottles of alcohol, bright pink hair lying in the bottom of the sink, and a half-empty bottle of pills that was supposed to last her another month and likely wouldn't have made it a week. She wonders if her hair is as faded as she feels, now.

He sits with her when the report comes back. He doesn't hold her hand, doesn't even look at her, but he's sitting in the room in a chair at her bedside as they expand the list of charges. She's not sure if it's forgiveness, solidarity, or simply a required presence. She can't decide which one she's hoping for.

They read the list of items of concern in a monotone voice. The two bottles are greeted by the three empty ones in the trash. Her prescribed pills shake hands with her own brand of medicine, which was too many cigarettes and not enough space. The hair isn't a concern, but she knows that it'll be brought up when she sits down for her psychiatric exam. She's not looking forward to that, but then again she's not looking forward to much of anything right now.

When they leave, Stitches stands to hand her the cup of water. There's no taste this time. The ban is officially in effect.

"You didn't do Firrel's mental health any favors."

"In my own defense, Firrel wasn't supposed to find out."

"No one was, I'm sure. You thought you'd pull the wool over our eyes and get away with it, didn't you? You underestimated us, just like always. You just couldn't think beyond yourself."

There's nothing to say to that. There's nothing to say in general. She was wrong. They both know it. He'll yell if he wants, but she knows that he doesn't. Stitches has never been the type to yell.

At her lack of response, he sighs and stands up. "As of now, you are allowed visitors again. If any come for you, I'll send them back."

"What if I don't want them?"

He looks at her, eyes flat and cold. "As a criminal, you are officially the lowest-ranking person on this ship. The recruit that's scrubbing the entire ship with a toothbrush ranks higher than you. What you want is irrelevant."

The word "criminal" hits her like a truck. She watches Stitches leave, watches the door close behind him, but the true seeing is obscured by that word, hanging low and large and heavy over the room. It hadn't felt criminal. It hadn't felt wrong. But to them, it was, and so now she and the word are one.

For the first time in a while, she's sure how she feels. It's disgust and shock and shame and horror and fear. The fear is a strange taste in her mouth, and one she was not expecting, but it fits right in among the others and so she lets it stay. The fear of what they'll do to her, the fear of never going back, the fear of the withdrawals and what her men are thinking and who is going to run the ship while she's out hits slams into her to pin her to the bed. All she can do is stare at the ceiling and try not to hyperventilate as the tears stream down her face.

She hasn't cried in years, and she can feel her carefully created bottles of emotions exploding inside her. Corks fly and the spray leaps upward like champagne that was shaken before opening. Everything streaks down her face at once, and she sobs to herself and finds the words "I'm sorry" on her lips. She's got so much to apologize for, and she's not sure if she's apologizing to herself or her men or the universe but she doesn't think it matters.

Then, she's screaming, long and twisted with pain and sorrow and one million apologies that will never be enough. She grips bright pink hair that's reminiscent of a happier time and screams out all the words that she can never say. The pain along her scalp is nothing compared to what she's pouring into the room.

The screaming stops eventually, choked off by a need for air and a need to regain her sanity. This isn't right, and it's not how she should act. General Mantha does not behave like this.

But in the moment, before her ban has had a chance to affect her, she doesn't feel like General Mantha. Her world is dissolving around her, and she doesn't feel even human. All she is is metal and pain pills, and she's coming apart at the rivets.

Jessica Asher

Grade 12

Nickles and Dimes
Science Fiction/Fantasy

Central High School
Springfield, MO
Teacher: Bethany Kelly

She spends her days picking up extra shifts at the five and dime by Schwan's. She sells stale bags of chips and overpriced water to "just passing through," and glares at the flickering fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling that management refuses to replace.

She spends her days dragging herself home, exhausted by the day's work. She hangs her coat and bag and drops a handful of "keep the change" into a bowl by the door. She sits on the couch with a beer and a cigarette and begins getting ready for the night.

She spends her days putting on cheap lip gloss and clumped face powder that would look terrible under natural lighting. It doesn't matter, no one can tell under the neon lights of bars and nightlife, and it's all going to get messed up anyway. Besides, she knows the colors will look good surrounded by red. She puts on clothes that are nice enough and goes to meet her client.

She spends her nights being murdered for extra cash.

It's not that she actually dies, no, that would be ridiculous. Death only happens once, and you don't come back. No, she just gets murdered by "I want to see if I have it in me" and comes back every time. It's just like falling asleep, and then a few minutes later she wakes up and walks back home to clean up. There's not even any pain anymore. The first few times she thought she felt something, but now there's just a strange emptiness and then nothing at all.

Her little business started innocently enough. She got mugged on her way home from work and "give me all your money" got a bit antsy with his gun and shot her on accident. She bled out in a back alley, gasping for breath and hoping that it wasn't the end. It wasn't, but not by the help of any good Samaritan or passing aid. She just woke up with a bullet sitting beside her and blood all over her clothes.

The second time was a drowning. Some drunk hit her with his car and knocked her over the bridge. She wasn't even sure what had happened when she woke up, all she knew was that she was soaking wet and "oh my God are you okay" was far too in her face for her liking.

Since then, she's monopolized on her little talent, and made herself quite the sum doing it, too. Not just anyone offers to let you murder them. She didn't even mind being killed so much; she just knew that she could charge them more for her time than she could charge her boss.

Tonight, she's got an appointment with one James Stroth. Her heels click along the pavement, and she ignores "where you goin', baby?" and "damn, sugar, you lookin' fine" and the wolf eyes and whistles that follow her up the street. It's all about the picture when the murder's said and done, and it's satisfying to know that they will not be whistling when she walks back.

She takes her seat on a sticky bar stool and orders a drink purely out of formality. She carefully watches it

being made, then lets it rest in front of her when the bartender slides it across the counter. A man sits down a few stools away a few moments later and orders a White Russian. That's the code drink. She slides down the bar to take the seat next to him.

"Are you James?" She doesn't believe it's his real name, but she doesn't care. She didn't give him her real name, either.

"I am. Are you Rosemary?"

She nods. "I am."

He takes a sip of his drink. The movement is fluid and beautifully even. She wonders how this one is going to see her die. She wonders what his reaction will be. Some of them are shocked, others horrified, and still, others will try to save her. Those are her favorites, because she always knows it's a futile exercise.

"Shall we go? I'll get your drink."

He slaps some money on the counter and they both stand. Her heels click on the barroom floor as they make their way outside.

"Let's walk for a while. I'd like to gather myself.

,"

She nods in agreement, and they turn left down the street. The wind tosses her hair behind her, and she pulls her coat a little tighter around her.

"I've heard of a lot of people like you. People who have abilities that they can't explain. They're all over the internet."

She stays quiet.

"It's so strange, what people will do once they've had a taste of the supernatural. Some check into hospitals or mental wards, some go out and commit crimes or try to stop them, and then there are the people like you, who use their little ability for monetary gain. It's so interesting to watch, to see where they end up. For you, my dear, it seems like you're going to end up dead in a back alley."

"Wouldn't be the first time."

He smiles at her a little. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Not at all."

"James" lights up, and the smell wafting by reminds her of work and her usual "pack of menthols" customers.

"Rosemary, if that's your real name, I have a proposal for you."

They turn a corner. "I'm listening."

"Clearly, you're desperate for money. You work a terrible job that doesn't make a living. The only thing that's allowing you to scrape by is a small community of psychopaths looking to try their hand at murder. That's not much of a life."

“It’s what I’ve got, and it’s done me just fine so far.”

“You could do a little more than ‘just fine,’ Rosemary, if you’ll hear me out.”

He takes another drag on the cigarette, and she watches the smoldering end eat the tobacco backward toward his lips.

“Nobody knows what’s going on with the people like you. Where did your abilities come from? Will they go away? How long have you had them? There’s a lot of people asking questions and a lot of people who’d like to answer them. I represent the latter.

“We’re asking for your help, Rosemary. We’d like to investigate a little further into your abilities, and in return you will be handsomely rewarded. You’ll be able to live nice and cushy for the rest of your life.”

“You’re going to pay me to be a lab rat.” Her words are as flat and cold as the concrete under her shoes.

“That’s a very undesirable way of putting it.” They make another left and walk between two buildings.

“But accurate. I’m going to pass.”

He sighs then and puts his cigarette between his teeth. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

Then, he’s swinging out at her. She leaps back. He follows, punches shooting toward her. Her steps are quick and hurried as she tries to dodge. Running is her best option.

She’s not quite sure what happens next. She remembers pulling the pepper spray from her bag. She remembers the glint of a knife in the moonlight. Suddenly, she’s standing over a dead body. There’s blood everywhere. She’s not wearing her shoes. Nausea hits her like a truck. She grabs her heels and runs.

She spends her days calling her boss and cancelling her shifts at the five and dime by Schwan's. She sells stale lies to “your ass needs to be at work on Monday,” and empties her apartment of everything that she’s too poor to replace.

She spends her days running from her home, exhausted by the night’s events. She grabs her coat and bag and drops her collection of "keep the change" into a plastic bag as she walks out the door. She sits at the train station with her suitcase and a cigarette and begins crafting up her next life.

She spends her days putting in discount hair dye and fake earrings that she knows look cheap under natural lighting. It doesn't matter, no one will be looking at her, and it's all going to get changed later anyway. Besides, she knows the colors look plain compared to the people around her. She puts on clothes that are different enough and runs to the other side of the country.

?

She spends her nights trying to wash the blood off of her hands and lives with the knowledge that this time, it’s not hers.

Rebecca Beall

Grade 12

Not a Novelty

Personal Essay/Memoir

Platte County High School

Platte City, MO

Teacher: Angela Perkins

My blood boils, and my teeth are clenched so tightly I feel as if they will crack. meanwhile my face contorts itself into a delicate yet convincing smile. This is a feeling I know too well. I feel every comment etched onto my skin, like a wound that refuses to heal.

“It's a waste of money for you to go to college, you'll just end up a housewife. ”

“It must be hard being such a pretty girl in a man's field.”

“If a girl could do it, you boys have no excuse.”

Every comment, though with no malicious intent, is a burden laid on my spirit. It leaves me with a persistent fear that I will never be able to surpass the stereotypes set against me.

I am a woman.

I am multiracial. I flourish in STEM.

But I am not a novelty.

Growing up, I was the strange kid. I loved science books and shrunken heads. I was different and that made me an easy target. In kindergarten, I lost my immigrant mother's British accent because every time I would speak, the other kids would correct me. In third grade, I was diagnosed with depression and I was promptly medicated. Because of my deep insecurities, I never fit in with the girls or the boys. Every step I took in school left me feeling confused and unsure.

That all changed in 8th grade. As though by divine intervention, my life was set on track through a series of chances and unexpected opportunities. I was dropped from our schools spanish class because it was overfilled and I was placed into our schools brand new engineering class. To say it was a rough start would be an understatement. The first day of class, a student made a tasteless joke about hispanics. I was unsure how to react, how could he know that I, the little pale girl, sitting across from him has a hispanic father. I told the teacher in private and the boy got punished. I felt guilt (why did I feel guilty?) and was labeled as a tattletale. However, that was not the end of my endeavors. Every day in that class, I would listen to the boys talk in vulgar tongue, labeling parts of women as how they viewed them, I was disgusted. Yet if you were to ask me what my favorite class was, I wouldn't hesitate to tell you engineering, with a cheesy smile across my face.

I loved bringing measurements on paper to life using the AutoCAD software installed on our computers. I even went as far as to download the beefy software at home and spend hours practicing on it. I loved that I was good at it, and I loved that in return it made me feel smart.

Eventually the boys matured and high school was a breeze. I learned to ignore the sexist remarks, and I gained respect within the circles of people I cared about.

It's a tragic trick of life: it'll make you believe that life is wonderful, but it's all just a false front. And soon the wonderful lie will crack like eggshells and leave you raw and vulnerable. My life reached that cracking point my sophomore year, when I started dating. It was a strange time, my life was splayed between two conflicting emotions; how I felt I was, and how he told me I was. I would celebrate my achievements, and my peers in the engineering classes would celebrate with me. But at the end of the day when I told him of my pride, he brought me down. When I won the great honor of the title of State Champion at the Technology Education Association Of Missouri for my robotic arm build, he was quick to respond “To be honest, that's really not that impressive, you're a little full of yourself?”. And when I

told him of my plans to go to college for engineering, he told me I should abstain and plan to be a housewife.

Eventually, I began to believe him. And I traded my video game and study habits for makeup and clothes. Some people called me beautiful, some told me I was a slut. But never did anyone comment on the mind that sat under my overly painted facade. I felt like others saw me as a china doll, weak, beautiful, and painfully unopinionated. But to myself, I was worthless.

For a year, I played a delicate game of balancing my femininity on top while trying desperately not to lose grip of my true self. My saving grace was the leader of the robotics team pursuing me to join his team. He cut my tightening noose of social expectations, and I learned to fall back in love with who I was: a nerdy, socially awkward, aspiring engineer. I broke ties with the boy that dragged me into my deep pit of self loathing and replaced him with math and robotics. Once again, I went through a metamorphosis: I stopped wearing makeup, I embraced sweats and I adopted a life style of speaking loud so I could be heard.

Within two years time I would grow to lead the robotics team that brought me hope.

Although I found my confidence, my journey is no fairytale.

The men of the engineering related fields make sure of that.

My junior year, I had a teacher who had a nasty habit of making fun of me to his all male engineering class. And even using my prided achievements as the baseline of what they should be able to accomplish, simply based on my gender. And on another occasion, I was placed on a panel by our school, our job was to talk about the STEM programs at our school to a board of administrators. I took the opportunity to bring awareness to the great disproportionality of women joining our programs. They were very interested in talking to me, and I was pleased because they took my opinion very seriously. They also praised me on my achievement as being the first female student from our school, on track to finish the engineering program. However one interaction left a bitter taste in my mouth.

Towards the end a large elderly man approached me and said, "It must be hard being such a pretty girl in a man's field." After all I had endured, am I still merely judged on my gender and my physical appearance? A surge of emotions overcame me, but I just laughed and shook his hand. I was furious, on both occasions, but I know I cannot blame old men for their transgressions, for they were raised in a different environment.

I am young, I am educated, and I have the whole world ahead of me. I plan to become an environmental engineer, so I can protect what has even less of a voice than me, and fight against the corporate agenda that leaves a trail of destruction in its wake. And I have finally been recognised for my achievements. My first choice college has accepted me into its ranks, with a plethora of scholarships to aid me on my journey. I look back upon all those men who have told me I can't, or see me as a joke and thank them. I am thanking them because their comments were the tinder that lit the fire in my heart that kept me moving on, so one day I could finally look upon the world and with full certainty say watch me glow. But until I have fulfilled that promise, I will continue to do whatever it takes to get where I need to go. And along the way I will remind those who have forgotten, I may be a woman with a love for engineering, but I am not a novelty.

Ethan Blinder

Grade 11

The Mud Runs Warm
Science Fiction/Fantasy

John Burroughs School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Megan Zmudczynski

“No! Please, Clarence, you’re being unreasonable! Please just stay here!” Mayella wailed as her hands clawed deep into her husband’s sides. She was crying her eyes raw, on her knees and had dug her nails deeper into Clarence’s flesh. He grabbed her thin wrists with his own fists, tan and worn like old leather, and tightly and pressed deep into the tendons to force her to release him.

“Dammit Mayella, you can’t tell me I didn’t see what I saw! I saw you bring that black boy into our room, now how can you tell me I saw different?” Mayella collapsed onto the floor around his feet, and continued to wail, this time with deep long sobs and choked breathing. “Please, Clarence, you must believe me. I brought him in to clear out the mosquitoes under our floorboards that’re suckin’ us dry. He was comin’ door to door, offerin’ to clean out a house for a couple dollars, nothin’ more, I promise! Please, Clarence, you must know, I would never be unfaithful!” However, these words seemed to roll off Clarence like water streaming across a polished stone. Clarence, having caught his breath, began to speak again in a softer tone, to the relief of Mayella. “Mayella... just tell me his name and where to find him. I want to go talk to him.” Though his cadence had mellowed, upon hearing these words, Mayella was sent again into a maelstrom of wailing and moaning. “Oh no *please*, Clarence, please don’t hurt him! He’s just a boy, can’t be older than 17, he is, just leave him be! I promise you on my word, nothin’ happened between me and that poor boy!” The anger which had appeared to subside within Clarence immediately resurfaced. He stooped down and grabbed Mayella on her shoulders, dragging her up to eye level with him. “Mayella, tell me where he is, *listen to me*, tell me where he is so I can find him and talk to him!” He repeated himself, louder and more violent, until he was satisfied that he had been heard. Finally, Mayella had appeared to fade away slightly, as she gave in to her husband’s request. “His name’s Milo, he lives out with the other black folk... Please, Clarence...” Satisfied, Clarence released his wife, allowing her to collapse onto the floorboards. Mayella curled into a ball, without her audible wail from minutes before, if only for the reason that she had run out of moans for her lungs to produce. Instead, she continued to weep silently, and crawled to the nearest bedpost. She held onto it, clutching it in her embrace, like a sailor might hold onto a sturdy mast during a great sea storm. Clarence, however, had already put on his hat and jacket and was beginning to leave. He said nothing regarding the pleadings of his wife, feeling little love for her himself.

Clarence proceeded out of his clapboard house which could have been mistaken for a shed, letting the screen door to the house slam behind him. His house arose from stilts no less than two feet above the muddy ground. Even with this great increase in height, it was not uncommon for his floorboards to become soaked with the overflow of the swamp. As a result, mosquitoes plagued the house year round, often taking refuge within the warpings of the wood floor. Clarence had not been unknown to spend large portions of time completely covered in blanched welts of the mosquito bite, his skin so misshapen and swollen that many would think he had been afflicted by a terrible disease. The itching which inevitably accompanies mosquito bites no longer resonated when they afflicted Clarence. Instead, his skin had been made terribly sore, to the extent that he had not infrequently become bedridden with aches. During these periods, he was forced into the care of his tender wife, who was more or less unaffected by the pestilence. While Mayella placed cool rags soaked in water upon his forehead, Clarence looked with terrible jealousy upon her completely smooth and beautiful face.

Before proceeding, Clarence stopped at a familiar haunt of his: a small gin shack with unpainted wood

walls and a roof with as much rust as metal. His hands began tensing up and shaking uncontrollably, a pounding headache had begun to erupt, and he found himself unable to focus on the task at hand. He ordered himself a hearty quantity of drink, and devoured it quickly without second thought. Over the course of the hour, the sound of his emptied glass hitting the table began to take on the sound of encroaching artillery. Any seeping aches of grief or heartache had been transmuted into the bile of unfettered rage. To Clarence, his consumption felt as if he were providing gasoline to a great machine previously sputtering on fumes. Now, with his desire satiated, he felt prepared to continue onto his task at hand.

After many inquiries and many more hours of searching, Clarence found his mark in an isolated turn in the swamp. Milo was standing alone, expressionless, neither engaged in a task nor lost in thought. Clarence found every aspect of his structure offensive. Every thought circulating through Clarence's mind was of acidic hate and vitriol towards Milo. Remaining hidden, Clarence observed his prey for many minutes more. The water level of the swamp had steadily remained at his ankles, but the temperature seemed to turn icy as his gaze shifted towards Milo. Clarence pierced him with his gaze for many minutes more, before igniting into the violent affair.

Though not without struggle, Clarence's attack seemed to cause Milo to almost buckle as if only by the mere touch of his attacker. In this instance, Clarence became nothing more than the sum of his primal instincts, and attacked Milo with equal parts anger and confusion. The strikes of Clarence's hands were not the skilled and deliberate punches of a trained pugilist, but rather were the lashings out of a dog who had been forgotten, tied up to a hitch without food for two days and two nights, and had just then gnawed through the leash. For each ounce of venom that Clarence exuded, Milo confronted it with grace in movement. Attacks were never countered nor even completely blocked, but rather, Milo moved about the small piles mud with such grace that it was a frustrating endeavor for Clarence to land a single blow on him. Finally, Milo was thrown down into the muck, held down by his wrists, Clarence's knees on his stomach, yet he still appeared to make little effort in resisting Clarence's attacks. It was only by the impressive girth of his aggressor that Milo was pressed into the mud such that both his nose and mouth were held below the water level. Once this position had been reached, Clarence continued to hold him there, bracing his muscles for any sort of spasm of resistance. However, those convulsions would never truly manifest other than in small efforts by Milo to free himself or to catch a sip of air. Ultimately, these already small motions were diminished further as he was slowly drained of life, his breaths and gasps for air becoming infrequent and shallow. Finally, once Milo remained completely motionless, Clarence remained upon the young man, holding him down by his wrists, his knees on Milo's abdomen, as he settled deeper into the mud for many minutes more. When ultimately satisfied with the completion of his task, Clarence slowly raised himself off of the corpse and began to collect himself. The body of Milo was almost completely submerged in the water and mud of the swamp floor, such that only the point of his nose and the tips of feet remained at all visible.

For the next two hours, Clarence had attempted to make his way back to town, even though it couldn't have been more than a mile away. In all of the commotion of the struggle, he had lost his sense of direction, and it was late in the evening before he began to see the buildings he recognized. He decided once again to pay a visit to his gin shack, in the hopes of relieving a bout of sickness he had encountered on his way back. Even though he had already consumed what would normally be considered by him to be a respectable quantity of drink for the day, he drank in equal measure that night which he had that morning. However, rather than a feeling of strength, all that was to be gleaned was the sensation of increasingly powerful blows to the back of the head by an iron pipe. This served to alleviate his sickness only to the extent that the new splitting headache forming his temples made the prior uneasiness in his stomach unnoticeable in comparison. Satisfied that the drink could do no further good, Clarence began the process of stumbling home, pausing to rest and catch his breath once every five minutes or so.

Many weeks more passed. Though the instances remained ingrained in Clarence's memory, they slowly receded and he was able to continue with his daily routine of work and leisure. What remained at the forefront of his mind instead, however, was a new wave of black workers moving into the area, kept there as strikebreakers by the company which employed near every working man in the town. He learned

of this over drinks with two other of his colleagues from work. “Fore you know it, they gon’ cut our hours in half, and let them swoop in and take our jobs when we try to raise a fuss.” one named Simmons added. The other, a man named Hiram, and Clarence nodded solemnly in agreement. “Every day, I’m workin’ my fingers to the bone in that mill, running the machines for damn near 12 hours of the day, and I’ll be dead and buried before I let them just cast me aside just so they can lower their bottom line to save a nickel.” Hiram interjected. Simmons took a hearty swig of gin before standing up to deliver his own words. “I tell you, give it five years, this little county of ours will be run into the ground. All the good men up here will be bum out of a job, and any money that’s left is goin’ straight into the hands of *them*.” The last word lingered in the air like a foul stench. “They ain’t got no sense of decency, the whole moral fabric of this quiet little town is gonna sink down to the bottom of the drink.” Hiram slammed the table in agreement. “Hear hear!” They all took long drinks of their respective concoctions.

The night dragged on, the talks continued and the drinks piled up on the tabletop. “What do you make of all this, Clarence? I ain’t heard more than two words outta you this whole night.” Simmons asked, motioning towards Clarence. At first, Clarence shrugged and waved his hand. “Sim, I don’t even have an opinion. But I like what the both of ya’ll are sayin’, I really do.” Simmons, left unsatisfied, leaned in with an intense glare at Clarence. “What do you propose we do, then? I’d like to hear your input. C’mon, Clarence, give us the solution.” Clarence shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, hushing “I really just don’t know” under his breath. Simmons dragged his chair closer towards Clarence, leaning in even closer, inches away from his face. “Now that’s a real shame. You see, I would’ve thought you would’ve been the one leading the both of us on this, seeing as what one of them did with your dear Mayella. But I see you’re more than willing to let them just take advantage of you and yours.” Clarence sprung up with fury, domineering over Simmons. “Sim, you better take that back right now ‘fore I take out your eyes and feed ‘em to the dogs.” Simmons sprung up to meet him. Hiram leaned in on the edge of his seat with anticipation. “Well I ain’t gonna take it back, but I’ll tell you what you can do. You can either knock me senseless, or you can tell me your plan for how we take care of this new problem.” Clarence didn’t give an inch. “I say... we make an example out of just one or two of them shacks. Let ‘em know that they ain’t welcome round here, and to go back the way they came.” Simmons whooped and hollered with excitement upon hearing these words. “That’s what I like to hear! That’s the Clarence I know! Meet me out by my back porch ‘round two thirty, then we can head off.” Though his colleagues inhaled more of their respective drinks with great enthusiasm, Clarence was hesitant to join them, as he felt a new pain beginning to form in his chest.

“Now y’all know what to do. Now’s the time to give them somethin’ they ain’t never gon’ forget.” Simmons instructed to the others. The moon was high in the sky, and the swamp was all but silent. Simmons handed the other two conspirators a narrow log, with towels soaked in kerosene on the end. They approached the edge of the community, which was in itself difficult to find, without a single light on in any of the houses. Finally, Simmons fished in his pocket for a pack of matches, struck it against the side of one of the shacks, and plunged it into the head of the towel. The head came to life with a huge gust of flame, and with this, Simmons touched each of his companions’ torches, anointing them with what they felt to be the power of self determination. Though Clarence continued in the ritual, attempting to force his own enthusiasm, he could feel the pains stirring up again, his stomach becoming a centrifuge.

“I want Clarence to start us off.” Simmons demanded, glaring accusingly at Clarence. He shook his head feverishly. “This is your idea, you’re gonna be the one. I followed you this far, I’m gonna keep goin, but you gotta be the one, Sim.” Clarence met Simmon’s accusing stare, equalling it in his own ferocity. “You okay, Clarence? You’re lookin a little green...” Hiram interjected, with the tone of a worried mother. Simmons ignored him. “Clarence, start us off before we all get caught, c’mon now. *Do it!*” Clarence’s pains became excruciating to the extent that his vision was doubled and blurred, and his eyes became so raw that he struggled to glance at his own torch, even in the pitch darkness of the night. Eventually, Clarence slowly touched his torch to the side of the first shack. Upon the instant of contact, he felt a shock run through his body, all the way through his bones, as if he had been struck on the head by a gargantuan tuning fork. He pressed onward, twirling and rubbing the torch all along the shack. However, it refused to catch alight, as if it had been underwater moments prior. The pains continued to deepen, and

soon it felt as if every piece of his body held ten times its weight. Suddenly, his eyesight was struck to be a deep crimson, and he flailed about in fear, dropping his torch, which was instantly snuffed out. Hiram extended a hand and held up a torch. "You okay, Clarence? Lemme get a look at you..." Clarence had made no acknowledgement of Hiram's concern, instead he was entirely consumed by own suffering, unable to stand up straight or focus his eyes. Sweat drenched his face and thoroughly stained his clothes. The pain became dizzying before Clarence soon collapsed to the ground on his hands and knees, spit cascading from his lips into the mud. Just as Hiram extended a hand to Clarence's shoulder, a spew of blood and bile erupted from his mouth in a great quantity. It was at this point that his whole body appeared to unravel. As Clarence tugged on his own hair in anguish, tufts were easily torn out, with white singing at the stem. From the sheer force of his grip, his fingernails too began to work their way out of his hands, leaving bloody nubs in their absence. As he grit his teeth in agony, many proceeded to fall out or break, leaving Clarence's mouth a bloody mess. Clarence turned to his comrades, his eyes, had they not already been completely bloodshot, begging for aid and mercy. No help was to be given, however, as both Hiram and Simmons inched away from the sight before quickly turning and fleeing, leaving Clarence to his own misery.

Clarence continued to spew more of the bloody bile from his mouth, emptying not only the contents of his stomach into the mud but seemingly much of his own body along with it. The course of the events had left Clarence completely lacking any strength, and he soon lied facedown in the mud. A small pool of blood began to collect around his mouth, and soon all air was blocked from entering his lungs, but Clarence no longer possessed the vitality to save himself. Instead, he allowed the pool to accumulate, the warm fluid lending heat to each new section of his face it touched, as his vision began to grow softer and dimmer, and the noises of the swamp, the buzzing of the flies and mosquitoes, began to surround him with a soft, dull drone. As his vision darkened, he closed his eyes for longer and longer intervals, before finally closing them, unable to open them again. He slowly sank into the mud which surrounded him, the murky depths acting as his final resting place.

Maya Blumenthal
Grade 9

This Is Your Brain on Machines: The Ethics of Brain-Machine Interfaces
Critical Essay

Pattonville High School
Maryland Hts, MO
Teacher: James Frazier

One of the ultimate journeys of humankind is to find better ways to share our ideas with the world and build on others' ideas, in order to make ever-greater inventions and discoveries. We as humans have gone from isolated brains, to spoken language, to writing, to the printing press, to typewriters. Now, we have computers that can fit in our pocket or around our wrists. But where can we go from there? How will this journey culminate? Some experts are arguing that the answer lies in brain-machine interfaces (sometimes called brain-computer interfaces), or BMIs—computers that can be merged with one's brain. Right now, BMIs are in their very early stages and are generally only used for the disabled, but they are slowly getting more advanced, powerful, and available to consumers. Many scientists and developers have vivid ideas of what more advanced BMIs might allow humans to do in the future. Their most ambitious dream is that of a "whole-brain interface," which is a BMI that merges its own technology and Internet connection seamlessly with one's own brain. However, as BMIs get more powerful, more and more experts are arguing about the possible ethical issues that come with them. Is it ethical to merge one's mind with a machine if they are not disabled? Essentially, is it moral to make a person superhuman? How will society change when people have computers and Internet connections directly in their brains? Should BMIs even be developed at all? There are very vocal experts on both sides of this issue, but if one looks at the future of society and humanity from a zoomed-out perspective, the answer is clear. With the impending revolution of technology and the implications for the human race, the merging of one's mind with machines is not only ethical, but necessary.

Before debating the ethics of brain-machine interfaces, there is one important question on which scientists are divided: Is it even possible to build BMIs—specifically, whole-brain interfaces—at all? At this point, of course, scientists have a long way to go before they can develop the coveted whole-brain interface. Neural technology is quite impressive as it is—our current technology can give deaf people the ability to hear, paraplegics the ability to move artificial limbs or play video games, and people suffering from epilepsy the ability to alleviate their seizures, as described in Malcolm Gay's *The Brain Electric*—but building effective brain-machine interfaces is a huge challenge for two reasons. The first reason is that the human brain is simply so *complicated*. Neuroscientist Morgan Cerf has observed, "If the human brain were so simple that we could understand it, we would be so simple that we couldn't" (qtd. in Urban). The second reason is that physically working with the brain is also hard. The most powerful BMIs are also the most invasive—some require physically cutting open one's skull and putting a device directly on the brain or even *in* the brain itself, and the ones that are not as invasive generally only record broad averages of what is going on in the entire brain. The goal for BMI developers is to create BMIs that are non-invasive and can tell what is going on in all areas of the brain, where it is happening, and when it is happening. Eventually, in the long-term, their goal in making a whole-brain interface is to create something that can carry out all the functions of the brain and more, without being too invasive. They want this technology to be available for those who are not disabled, but is this even *possible*? If so, when will it happen? This is hotly debated by experts: Elon Musk says, "I think we are about 8 to 10 years away from this being usable by people with no disability... It is important to note that this depends heavily on regulatory approval timing and how well our devices work on people with disabilities" (qtd. in Urban). But others believe that BMIs being usable by people with no disability will take much longer than a

human lifetime. Ultimately, however, whether BMIs take 10 years or 100 years to be usable by people with no disability, there is no reason to suspect that they are completely impossible. After all, the iPhone X may have seemed impossible to people in the era of Alan Turing's first computers, and it would *definitely* have seemed like unthinkable magic in the era of scrolls or stone tablets. We are in the very first level of BMI technology, and admittedly, what we develop at this point will be faulty. But technology keeps progressing, and it progresses at an ever-faster rate the farther in history one goes—futurist and AI developer Ray Kurzweil calls this the Law of Accelerating Returns (39)—so there is no reason to think non-invasive, large-scale BMIs as described above will never be developed. In fact, there is a very good chance they will happen within the next century, and that the same flaws that we have in BMIs now will not necessarily be there in the BMIs we have in 2050. But with the advent of BMIs and whole-brain interfaces come societal and ethical issues that are very important to think about.

One important societal question in the age of brain-machine interfaces is whether people without disabilities who have BMIs in their head will still be “people.” What legal rights will they have? Corin Faife points out that corporations are regarded as people and New Zealand has a river with legal personhood status, and yet slaves were not regarded as people for a long time. He posits that humans need to determine what defines a person: “What level of sophistication will artificial intelligences need to attain before we consider them people—and all the rights that entails?” (Faife 120). This problem is easily solved by *merging* humans and AI, as is the case with the whole-brain interface—but that brings up a mass of other problems. Will people with the whole-brain interface be more than people, in a legal sense? Will those who use them for professional purposes—for instance, gaining a military advantage—*still* be superhuman? As humans, we have never before dealt with something that would have *more* legal rights than us. Jens Clausen, in an article entitled “Man, Machine and In Between,” suggests that brain-machine interfaces will not affect one's brain any more than, for instance, antidepressants (people who take antidepressants are not considered more than people), and moreover, criminals will not be able to blame their crimes on the BMI because the interfaces will not alter the free will of humans. On the other side of the spectrum, Elon Musk, founder of Neuralink, argues that the whole-brain interface will be a “digital tertiary layer” for one's brain—in addition to the cerebellum and limbic system, now there is a digital system as well that connects humans to the entire world. But, he argues, this is only a logical next step from having the entire world in our *hands*, in the form of computers and cell phones. “We already have a digital tertiary layer in a sense,” he has said in an interview, “in that you have your computer or your phone or your applications.... The thing that people, I think, don't appreciate right now is that they are already a cyborg. You're already a different creature than you would have been twenty years ago, or even ten years ago” (qtd. in Urban). To merge the opinions of Clausen and Musk, the invention of whole-brain interfaces *will* be an exponential leap in humanity, and they will probably alter the brain more than antidepressants. But since they will only be a tertiary layer in our brain, and the BMIs will be an *extension* of them, humans *will* still have free will and won't be able to blame crimes on the computers in their heads. After all, criminals never say that their cell phone made them commit their crimes. For that reason, humans with whole-brain BMIs in their heads will not be given more rights. At the least, society will naturally come up with a set of rules as brain-machine technology gets more ubiquitous. Another necessary question to ask is that of hacking. Computers can be hacked. Right now, in 2017, that is not as big of a problem, because although we use them for a lot of things, they are not *actually* us. But what will society be like when our actual *brains* can be hacked? Our identity and our life is the thing we hold most dear—perhaps it can be the only thing that can be said to be truly *ours*. But what will happen when Internet trolls can hack one's brain and read all about one's personal life and deepest secrets? Furthermore, what if terrorists or radical extremist groups develop the technology put information *into* people's brains, such as plans to murder someone or strong feelings about voting for a certain candidate? Many anti-BMI activists highlight this as a reason why whole-brain interfaces should not be developed: Christopher Markou points out that “because Neuralink is essentially a communications system there is the small matter of regulation and control...I cannot imagine a scenario in which there would not be an endless number of governments, advertisers, insurers and marketing folks looking to tap into the very biological core of our cognition to use it as a means of thwarting evildoers and selling you

stuff.” This is indeed a scary prospect. But it has already happened in the past, with the invention of the Internet: in fact, with every new technological innovation, the risks have increased. But as humans, we have overcome these risks. After all, we are not all going around in some dystopian lawless society murdering people left and right, are we? The risks may have increased, but so has our capability to overcome them, and there is no reason to think this pattern will not continue with brain-machine interfaces. Perhaps some innovators will produce a new industry of “brain security,” the logical extension of cybersecurity. But whatever happens, there is no reason to be scared. Writer Tim Urban has said, “New technology...comes along with real dangers and it always *does* end up harming a lot of people. But it also always seems to help a lot *more* people than it harms. Advancing technology almost always proves to be a net positive...And I bet, if given the option, people in the [era of brain-machine interfaces] wouldn’t for a second consider coming back to 2017.” With brain-machine interfaces *will* come a lot of societal questions and problems, but as technology progresses, so will society. Perhaps there is really no way of knowing what society will be like and how it will change with the final step in the human journey of communication, but it is nonetheless important that humans think about and prepare for these concerns now, because the future is closer than it may seem.

Besides the societal and technological hurdles, there are some large-scale ethical issues to consider—issues that may redefine not only what future humans will do, but also what future humans will *be*. One ethical risk that is often considered is the risk of the computer in one’s head crashing or getting a bug. Does that kill them? The short answer is yes—or at least, it might leave them in what is essentially a vegetative state, since the BMI would be an extension of their brain. This seems very scary, and it is. But so is the fact that people regularly die from hurtling down superhighways at a mile a minute in four-wheeled metal contraptions that crash into other four-wheeled metal contraptions, and yet people still drive cars every day. Therefore, the fact that BMIs can crash does not mean they should stop being developed altogether. Besides, isn’t the idea of mental illness basically the computer that is *already* in your head getting a bug? Mental illnesses happen, and it is very sad when they affect people. But not everyone gets them, scientists are working on “fixing” them with things like antidepressants, and no one would give up their *entire brain* just because of the prospect of mental illness. There is no reason the same logic would not apply to BMIs. But there is an even bigger ethical concern at play with the *entire concept* of BMIs: is it even ethical to do what brain-machine interfaces are doing in the first place? Implants for paraplegics, deaf people, and people with epilepsy are one thing, but is it okay to make ourselves superhuman? The short answer is that we have already done this before. After all, humans were only built to move 15 miles per hour on average, and yet we have cars that regularly move us 60 miles per hour and planes that speed us *thousands* of miles per hour. In that sense, we are already superhuman, and we are surrounded by superhuman qualities every day. The invention of BMIs is just the logical next step—moving the superhuman qualities to our brains. Of course, the possibilities brought on by whole-brain interfaces are *far* more exciting than that of any leap we have taken before. Paraplegics being able to move artificial limbs is one thing, but imagine being able to drive cars with your mind, communicate with others using only thought, send an image or song in your brain to other people, instantly know any fact by calling on the internet to retrieve it (almost like Googling something with your mind), or even be able to sense something through someone else’s eyes and ears! This is only the beginning of BMI scientists’ vision for the future. In the age of whole-brain interfaces, doctors might be able to control tools using only their mind to operate on people. Writers could implant emotional signals directly into their books to make the reader feel happy, sad, or angry. Video game developers could revolutionize the virtual-reality industry by inventing devices that could stimulate sensory neurons to give players signals for a virtual world they could experience with all five senses, as if they were actually *in* that world. Moviemakers could play out an entire movie in their head exactly as they envision it and be able to send it to anyone who wanted to see it, without the expense of hiring actors, building sets, or spending time animating. Astronomers might be able to control rovers on other planets with their minds and even see through the rover’s “eyes” while sitting comfortably on Earth. Ivan S. Kotchetkov and Brian Y. Hwang envision brain-machine interfaces helping soldiers “to perform and succeed in combat missions...making [brain-computer interfaces] a paramount contribution to the national security, which citizens, including

physicians, have a social duty to support.” The possibilities are endless, and so are the implications for humans! The kinds of whole-brain interfaces that BMI developers envision could let us colonize the entire universe. They could fix anything in the body that started to deteriorate over time, essentially reversing aging and letting us conquer our mortality. They could eliminate any illnesses, mental *or* physical. This may sound like science fiction, but it is a reality that is very possible. BMIs are an immense leap in human history, perhaps more immense than any leap before. But leaps are okay. In fact, if we ever want to progress as a species, we cannot be afraid of transcending our own biology—it is what we have done with every technological innovation in the past, and it is something that no other species has done as well as we have. BMIs are a leap that might make us superhuman, but in essence, there is nothing *more* human than taking leaps.

In conclusion, the emergence of commonplace of brain-machine interfaces is definitely plausible, and a future dominated by BMIs is a real possibility, but it is not a possibility to be afraid of or to shy away from. There are very few ethical issues with the emergence of BMIs that either have not already been solved or will not be solved in the near future as BMIs get more common, and none of them are severe enough to necessitate stopping the development of BMIs altogether. Whole-brain interfaces are the logical next step in the human journey of communication and progress, and they will get here very soon—so we should be aware of and maybe even celebrate their rise.

Rhianna Borovicka

Grade 12

In Crossing
Flash Fiction

Republic High School
Republic, MO
Teacher: Lisa Deckard

Time crawled to a halt in the face of the suddenly abrasive ambiance she found herself gazing towards. Fearful, bitter, she made every attempt to shake it away as the rubber heel of her shoe pivoted seamlessly in the opposite direction, giving way to slow strides that felt like leaps over caverns. Hyper-aware of every movement around her, feeling the breath of a whisper that took place yards from her form, hearing the tapping of a pencil five classrooms down the hall, seeing the blurred colors from water-laced, lifeless eyes.

It was common when it came to him. It was inevitable, anticipated, feared, accepted. Every step he took forward prompted her to take a step back, until she couldn't move any further, and he caught her like a deer in headlights, unable to think. Unable to see. Unable to move.

Unable to run.

Glass shattered over her like crystalline rain, the horn never ceased to blare, and the only concern in the eyes of the driver was reserved for the vehicle, not the victim. She meant nothing. Walking mindlessly through halls, down stairwells, across crowded rooms. All that mattered was the corrosion he'd inadvertently, or perhaps intentionally, let cascade over her.

Exhaustion, overbearing fatigue, tiredness. Each one no different than the last swarmed over her as her arms encircled her head, and at last, the blood spilled. The moment her nose grazed the tabletop surface, the shadows of her limbs shrouding her from sight, the tears trembled past tightened cheeks, jittering jaws and quivering lips. They pooled before her, small droplets forming a meaningless puddle that would be wiped away a though they'd never been. Cast aside, the value they held irrelevant as they splattered over the hard flooring.

The sniffles ceased slowly, her own heart both forgotten and represented by the small reservoir of unspoken emotion, which she allowed to soak into her sleeve. It was trivial, a meaningless sentiment, but the idea of even the most trivial things finding a place of support gave her a fragment of hope. Even along the lonesome roadside, there was comfort in letting the grass along the ditch she lay in graze against the doe's fur, something so trivial offering a place of peace.

Headlights had come at her before, abrupt, harsh against the nighttime shadows, so sudden that she never had time to reach the safety of the other side of the road, but there were times like today when the grass was enough to rejuvenate her strength, and she would stand again, approach the road again, and cross. There were times when a kinder spirit would stop by the roadside and offer a helping hand. There were times when the driver was able to slow down and leave nothing more than a scratch.

Like a deer in the headlights, the fear was always there, lingering, the delicate stance taken so easily garnering abrasions.

Like a human, she learned to stand again.

Kenzie Clement
Grade 10

Connotes of the Zodiac
Poetry

Platte County High School
Platte City, MO
Teacher: Angela Perkins

Aries,

What has made you so bitter?
Pill underneath that candy-coated tongue,
gets you in trouble and out of it, too.
Like juice squeezed in the dark mornings before the lights are turned on,
pulp stuck between your teeth.
It is hot and muggy and summertime where you are,
panting with that tongue that make you a sweet-talker.
Candy.

Taurus,

Carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders.
The crick in your neck.
You bend over a lot more, now.
Maybe you were made from mountains or maybe the other way around.
Every vertebrae like granite, worn smooth by touch.
You are a sanctuary within yourself, weathered down and down again.
You can break a temple down but is it still holy?

Gemini,

Tell me what tragedy is.
How the poets always drowned in the lake and
the songbirds left when the waters froze over and
there was no one left to mourn.
Tell me what it is to cry wolf and mean it, a needling
so loud and deep in your heart
it all comes out howling.

Cancer,

Your hands buried in the beach sand - not bone white, but soft.
The warm golds and browns of the living earth.
Your hands quieting the washed-up things and returning them
to the tidal pools and sea foam.
The clinging of an octopus to your shoulder like the hands of lovers
pried off one at a time.
The waves crashing to shore are too loud to hear them now.

Leo,

Bared teeth. Think: my skin turned to stone, to glass, to bark.
Your palms coated in sap hardened to amber.
Honeybees stuck all in them and wings stretched like trying to go
somewhere that isn't here.
Apologies stuck all in them, in the thorns.

Hear: a quiet I cannot bear to break.

Virgo,

A jar of those strange bright cherries you seemed so fond of
sitting on the piano we found, the ivory half broken and the wires,
maybe chewed through or maybe just so out of tune it sounded like it's dying.
You, writing half-formed melodies
straight onto the music desk with liquid paper, playing them back and grimacing.
Cigarettes stubbed onto the second lowest A-sharp and flicked underneath the pedals.
"There's really nothing I can do with this," you say.

Libra,

Not sugar, not salt, but vinegar: sour and acidic; sharp.
Soft fruit turned unwanted and sun-rotten.
Stains scrubbed out and pressed from your starch bedsheets in stinging water.
This is how you learn shame.
This is your body laid to siege.
Has biting teeth.
Has unforgiveness.
Has unholy.

Scorpio,

Pocketful of dry-cleaning receipts tucked away in your camel hair coat.
You tuck your foot into your lap when you drive,
fingers rubbing knots out of the arch
like the columns we saw in Rome -- all cracked and bony but beautiful, all the same.
In this moment the world looks like a Vlaminck painting,
colors so bright they break your heart.

Sagittarius,

A magpie's affinity for gold.
Black coffee and dark chocolates and cigarette smoke in the afternoons.
Your head in the dirt as the river turns molten in the sunset.
storm, but only in the corners.
The air turned still and heavy on your chest.
Cicada shells and peach pits.
Matchstick streetlamps guiding you home.

Capricorn,

The ocean has been still for decades now.
The hands of your father turned onto you, with the same lines
and the same hooks.
You, with your father's sea-glass bottles and your mother's ocean wailing.
Soft knuckles where the waves have smoothed you down,
but still in shades of blue.
What can you do?

Aquarius,

Did you ever? By this I mean: the daffodil that died on my windowsill
because I was too busy trying to coax the taste of springtime from your mouth.
By this I mean: the taste of soap bubbles clinging to my tongue;
wanting to wipe myself clean.
By this I mean: your hands around my throat, your teeth on my skin.
By this I mean: how dare you?

Pisces,

Every last stanza.
Sitting in the snow at four in the morning and hot packs between your hands.

Your father's pick-up with the windows frosted over and the rattle in the heater.
Sweetened wine and the cold light of the stars.
The empty moon and your
goodbyes held somewhere
in the haze you breathe out.
Every last line.

Danielle Davis

Grade 12

The Matador and the Mooncatcher Novel Writing

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Teacher: Mallory Hilvitz

Brief summary:

The Matador and the Mooncatcher follows the story of Valentina Dorado, an eighteen year old princess tasked with saving her kingdom, Lunacita, from the wrath of the Spanish Inquisition. The year is 1491, and Lunacita is the last Spanish kingdom to remain independent of Catholic influence. Its inhabitants belong to the Follower faith, a religion ruled by the god of death and his divine subjects. But as the Catholic Monarchs' power reaches a daunting height, the king and queen of Lunacita promise their eldest daughter, Valentina, to a Catholic prince in the hopes of gaining an alliance. All is well until the prince organizes a massacre that leaves Valentina's entire family dead. His true nature revealed, she flees the palace in search of allies. She meets Santiago, a matador born to be king, and Lorenzo, a friend from her past that can harness the power of the gods. As the Catholics' influence surges, and their methods become bloodier, Lunacita descends into violent warfare. But when Valentina learns of a deadly curse that has haunted her family for years, Catholicism its only anecdote, she questions where to place her loyalty. Facing pressure from her own ruthless gods and the venomous Catholic prince, the war is as much a battle for Valentina's soul as it is for the faith of Lunacita. At the novel's climax, Valentina decides to devote herself to the Follower faith despite the consequences, and uses the power of the gods to eradicate the Catholic prince's forces.

Excerpt:

Null

The Crystal City, Lunacitan Palace

Deangelo despised Lunacita. He despised the food and the alcohol scented air and the tangled wads of seaweed that billowed out of the shore. This was a land of heretics, he thought. This was where God sent the most low, undesirable dregs of humankind. It must be a sin to breathe Lunacitan air...to stand by its shores and admire its castles. The Devil himself could not have created such an apt playground for demons and monsters. If not for the Pope's command, Deangelo would never have stepped foot on this disgraceful strip of land. But the princess was not particularly revolting. And for this reason, he stayed.

Deangelo trusted in his ability to silence the heretics that dwelled here. It was true that the mooncatchers posed a unique threat to the Catholic Monarchs, but he would not let an army of sinners halt his pursuit. If Spain was ever to become a wholly Christian nation, Deangelo's presence here was required. The Pope had chosen him above every prince and clergyman in the Vatican to lead this crusade. That must've counted for something.

Princess Valentina frolicked by the ocean's foaming rim with her legs bare and her chest to the sky. Deangelo lifted his eyebrows and scorned himself for it. No sensible Catholic maiden would allow her skirts to rise so far from her ankles. But, then again, the princess was not Catholic. Not yet.

Valentina laced a hand through the waves of her skirt and donned a brilliant smile.

Awfully free-spirited, isn't she? mused Deangelo. *I must take care of that.*

A ferocious wave smacked Valentina in the back. She tumbled into the sand, dark clumps of hair sticking to the sides of her face.

"Get away from there! You've ruined your dress!" Deangelo called.

Her head snapped up. “Make me!” The princess rolled onto her back, arms outstretched, and basked in the swelling sunlight. Another wave sheeted over her. She squealed in delight. Deangelo snuck up behind Valentina and snatched her wrists, dragging her through the sand. “Hey! Hey! Stop that!”

“Never!” Deangelo teased. “We have a party to attend to, Your Highness.”

Valentina wriggled out of his grasp and jumped to her feet. “I won’t go.”

“It’s your *birthday*.”

She attempted to stifle another burst of laughter, failed, and pounced on him, sending him to the ground. Pinning her hands to his shoulders, her voice dropped to a whisper. “My prince, I *refuse*.”

He shook his head. “The king and queen will not be pleased.”

“Look, my prince,” Valentina breathed, casting her dark eyes to the sky. “Winter approaches. I wish to enjoy the sun while I can.”

“Have you forgotten already, *mi amor*?” he said through a grin. “In the winter, we shall finally be married.” She rolled off of him and stumbled to her feet. Deangelo followed swiftly. He had to keep such close watch on her. “Doesn’t that excite you?”

Valentina glared past him, toward the green sweeping hills and the lavender palace in the distance. “Will there be Inquisitors at our wedding?”

“Yes,” said Deangelo. He brushed a hand across her cheek, turning her face to his. “But that shouldn’t worry you.” He tilted his head at her, kissed the skin between her neck and her earlobe. “I am an Inquisitor, *mi amor*.”

She nodded, edging away from his lips. “Yes, but...*must* I convert?”

Deangelo furrowed his eyebrows. What didn’t she understand? Followers were so stubborn...so attached to themselves and their gods. “A Catholic man cannot marry a Follower woman. That would be a null union,” he explained, as slowly as his mind would manage.

Fear quickly overtook the joy in her eyes. Deangelo watched them turn. They were like the last breaths of summer—small, warm, wheezes that gave way to the cold.

“My people will kill me,” she said absently.

Deangelo took her hands. “I won’t let them, Valentina,” he vowed. “You are the future of Lunacita. Act, and they will follow you.”

Valentina squeezed the blood from his fingers. “Wouldn’t it be easier just to kill me?” She released a devious little laugh. “That’s what you did to the Moors. That’s what you did the Jews. That’s what the Reconquista is, Deangelo...”

He bristled. The princess clearly had the Devil inside of her. He nestled between her ribs, Deangelo imagined, his nimble fingers threading her thoughts together. “The Pope requested a peaceful crusade,” he reminded. “No bloodshed will come to your kingdom.”

Valentina slid her hands out of his. “What a shame. Nothing exciting ever happens here anymore.” She staggered onto dry land, her skirts heavy with sea water. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a party to attend to.”

Deangelo rolled his eyes. She would be easy to contain, when the time came. But he had seen how her people were. How they lived. It was sin at its finest. Would they convert as easily as her? “I shall find a way to break them,” he whispered to Valentina’s fading silhouette. “In the name of God, I shall break them.

Peaceful Crusade

The Crystal City, Lunacita Palace

The god of death sat watching Princess Valentina from his black-bough perch above the sky. His lips, pale and wanting, produced a disappointed grin. She was brushing her hair that evening, untangling the long, dark wisps that haunted her shoulders, with such intensity that he was sure she’d break the comb. Something sharp and fearful fixed her eyes. Plastered them to the mirror. *Tonight is her eighteenth birthday*, the death god recalled. *This is when the Catholics will test her loyalty*. He watched, amused, as Princess Valentina’s fiancé emerged behind her. The Catholic prince was an enigma. A villain riddled

with charms and lies. He bowed, pressed his lips to her cheek, and presented her with a birthday gift. The god of death leaned forward, folding his hands as Valentina unwrapped the satin covering. It was a Bible.

She sighed wistfully. "It's beautiful. I love it, Deangelo."

"I promised I would make a Catholic of you, Valentina Dorado, and I never break my promises," said the prince.

Her smile cracked at the edges. "What if I say something wrong?"

"You won't."

"What if I mess up?"

Prince Deangelo kissed the top of her glistening head of hair. "*Mi amor*, I swear on my father's blood, you will *not*. How long have you studied for this?"

"Weeks. Months," she muttered. "But your people still call me a heretic."

"They won't after you are baptized."

Anger flooded the death god's veins as he watched. The princess belonged to the gods of the moon, and she always would. *So why does she lie to herself?* Then he tasted it...her fear wafting through the air. Delicious, savory fear. Valentina was terrified of disappointing the Catholics. The faith that ruled her future husband. The god of death shook his head. "Oh my precious Valentina," he whispered. "It seems I am the only one who has not wished you well on this...the most important birthday of your life. I shall pay you a visit. I shall make you remember who to fear." He leapt from his black perch in the sky and soared to that glorious Spanish kingdom that laid on the sea between Morocco and Aragon. Lunacita. His home.

The palace where she prepared herself buzzed with activity. The princess's birthday ball would be a night long-remembered. Tonight, the heir to the throne of Lunacita would submit to Catholic rule by submerging herself in the cool waters of baptism. Lunacitan nobles from every corner of the island flooded the halls, chatting and laughing and sipping wine. None of them could see death weaving through the masses. But his invisible hands and soundless laugh was enough to make them shiver. The candlelight flickered weakly and the air stiffened as he passed the crowded Entrance hall. He was hungry tonight.

Princess Valentina was humming a Follower lullaby when her throat went dry. She touched her neck, felt bumps rising on her flesh, and heaved a raw cough. The god of death ran a thoughtful hand over her shoulder. She could see nothing, but the pain that racked her bones was enough... "Vicente," she gasped. That was the name the mortals had given him. The death god smiled. The mirror she'd been holding clattered to the floor, and a flock of maids scurried to clean it. The princess watched with paralyzed concentration as they swept her reflection away. When they finished, Valentina dismissed them and fluttered to her knees. "*¿Su Majestad Divina?*"

He touched her chin, lifted it. "Happy birthday, *princesa*."

His voice snaked through her ears. It was barely a whisper. But the whispers of gods sounded more like distant thunder. When she heard it, she stumbled backward in shock, tucking her knees into her chest. "Is it...is it today?" she asked the air. "Is it today? Are you taking me today?"

Vicente silently considered the taste of her life. His hunger was very hard to control.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry...I know he's a Catholic. But my parents—they need this alliance more than anything." Tears swallowed her voice. "Merciful gods, I'm sorry..."

Vicente narrowed his eyes. "You're sorry," he said flatly.

She pressed two hands to her heart. A Follower's gesture of reverence. "*Si, Su Majestad Divina.*"

There was a great, wafting silence before he spoke again. "I have use for you," he said.

"Anything."

"You are heir to the throne of Lunacita," reminded Vicente calmly. "It would please me greatly if the Catholics no longer resided here...condemning our people as heretics and burning them at the stake. You have the power to be rid of our invaders."

"I can't just...I can't just get rid of them," muttered Valentina under her breath. "Our alliance is too important..."

"*What* alliance? The Catholics wish to conquer, not cooperate," he scoffed. "Who do you fear

more, Valentina? Them or me?"

The princess shook her head, cheeks glazed with tears. His presence always left her lungs small and shriveled. "You," she breathed hoarsely. "You, of course, *Su Majestad Divina*."

Vicente smiled down at her. "Good answer," he chuckled. "Now go to your ball. You may feign fealty to the Catholics as much as you wish. But I will know your true intentions. I will know if your loyalty sways to favor them..." He knelt in front of her rigid, trembling form. "I tuned your heartstrings, after all, Valentina Dorado."

She nodded quickly, chin wet with tears. Vicente leaned into her, his lips grazing her cheek. She swallowed a rough breath as his mouth closed around her skin in a devastating kiss. They lingered there for a while before Vicente's form evaporated, swept away in the winter wind. When he was gone, the princess stood and coughed over her vanity. She held her ribs and lungs in place with a trembling arm, then called on her maids once more. They dressed her in purple and led her to the ballroom.

The first thing she noticed was the still, flat pool of water waiting for her. A massive wooden basin. Nobles, both Follower and Catholic, lined the outer rims of the ballroom. They were deathly silent. The gazes of the black-cloaked Inquisitors clung to her every step. Valentina dared not breathe. To them, blinking the wrong way was heresy, and they possessed a labyrinth of torture chambers where heathens went to die.

She walked up the narrow steps that led to the rim of the basin. Her Catholic prince, Deangelo, was sitting at a table with her parents, the king and queen of Lunacita. Deangelo fixed her with a glassy stare. There was something deadly in it. Valentina had a feeling that if she really did mess up, he would devour her with that gaze.

The priest appeared behind her and the baptism began. She professed her faith in Christ with perfect confidence, and renounced all opposition to His commandments. Her throat was raw from Vicente's visit, and her stomach churned with fear, but she allowed herself a thin slice of pride for this performance. The cloaked clergymen proceeded to strip her clothes off, revealing the thin white garment underneath. For the first time that night, Prince Deangelo grinned. This moment marked his success. From now on, the public would know her as a Catholic. But Valentina made a promise to the death god as she plunged into the icy black water, held her breath, and squeezed her eyes shut. A promise that her heart would forever belong to the Follower faith.

For a moment, it was still and quiet. Suspended by the glassy pool, Valentina listened for the priest to give his word. A mangled scream met her ears instead.

Valentina's eyes shot open. Nothing. Blackness. Her mind raced. *The palace is under attack*. She opened her mouth to gasp and sucked in a mouthful of water. Panicked, she shot to the surface and heaved. Deangelo met her eyes. He pulled his blade out of her mother's chest and wiped the blood off on his leather gloves. The queen of Lunacita collapsed in a flurry of silk and jewels, lips agape and crimsoned. "Mama...no..." whispered Valentina. "No!" Two Catholic soldiers approached the princess from behind, took her arms, and hauled her out of the water. Now captive, she kicked and screamed for release, water spilling over her lips. *It isn't fair. It isn't fair...*

Catholics leapt on Followers, driving blades between their ribs, decorating the floors with their entrails. "Deangelo..." mumbled Valentina. "Deangelo!"

The Catholic prince was smiling at the chaos. He'd planned for this. He'd planned the baptism, the scream, the slaughter. His men locked the ballroom doors, trapping every innocent Follower inside to be killed. They pounded their fists on the walls, pleading with their gods of the moon for mercy. But no mercy came. Among them, invisible to the world, the death god stood collecting black furls of life. They wafted around him like a brilliant, growing cloak.

Valentina, hair sopping, limbs weak, wriggled out of the soldiers' grip for a thrilling moment, and staggered up to Deangelo. "You..." she growled, "You're a traitor!"

He grabbed her by the neck and shoved her back against one of the ballroom's marble pillars. "I am your *sovereign*."

"This...is no way to rule a kingdom," she choked, face paling, eyes widening. "You will be killed

by your own subjects!”

His sword fell heavy and cool against her cheek. “Speak like that again and I’ll rip out your tongue.”

The god of death’s words rang against her skull. *Not today, not today.* She kned him in the stomach. While he struggled to regain balance, she stumbled into the battlefield. It was a forest of flashing swords, screaming nobles, dying Followers. *Merciful gods, how do I escape? How do I escape...?*

“You *heretic!*” screamed Deangelo from behind her. “Get back here, Valentina! Face me! I want you to see this.”

She whipped her head around and stared into his dark, unblinking eyes. He delivered an order to one of his soldiers but she could no longer hear his voice. Instead she watched, paralyzed in her place, as the Catholics pinned her father to his knees and sliced off his head. Valentina screamed, clutching her stomach. Bile rose at the back of her throat as she collapsed in the center of the ballroom.

Two men in purple cloaks stared down at Valentina amidst the bloodshed, faces pinched in concern. Mooncatchers. Praise the gods.

“The window,” said one. “Escape through the window. While they’re distracted.”

“*Si, si*, I shall,” said the other. “But what about you, *tu gracia divina?*”

“They will take me alive.”

Valentina blinked again and saw Vicente’s face above her. The god of death cradled her in his arms, long black tendrils of life suspended behind him. “I am not partial to sparing the lives of mortals, *princesa*, so you’d do well to remember this act of mercy,” heeded Vicente. “Go with them. And do not forget that you were saved to serve the gods. I expect repayment, Valentina. I expect unhindered loyalty. Do you understand?”

She brought her hands to her heart. “Trust me, *Su Majestad Divina*. I...I will not disappoint you.” Her eyelids fluttered shut. “I will restore the faith, I promise.”

The mooncatchers exchanged a tense glance. “I’ll take good care of her, *tu gracia divina.*” Someone lifted her off the floor and began to run, and her blood pounded to the rhythm of their ragged breaths as the glass shattered around them and the window to freedom fell open.

Emily Francis
Grade 11

Rethinking Bathroom Bills
Critical Essay

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In an age full of exhaustive political discourse that has become widespread through sensational media, it is not a surprise that people have reached the point of arguing over something as basic as allowing someone to use the restroom in public. For a majority of people, using a public restroom is a simple act that does not require much thought, but for an estimated 1.4 million members of the US population (Hoffman), it is a frightening and uncertain experience that has become a platform for harassment and discrimination. Barring transgender and gender nonconforming individuals from using the restroom of their choice is discrimination, and while progress is being made in support of the rights of transgender people, many of the solutions are unsatisfactory and progress is slow.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, “at least 24 states considered ‘bathroom bills,’ or legislation that restrict access to multiuser restrooms, locker rooms, and other sex-segregated facilities” (Kralik). These bathroom bills would prohibit transgender and gender nonconforming individuals from using the public facilities of their choice on the basis of not matching their assigned sex. This is not only discrimination, but it is harmful to the mental health of transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. In the largest survey of transgender people conducted in the US, forty-one percent of respondents had attempted suicide in their lifetime (Jamwa et al. 8). For the general US population, Harvard professors and clinical psychologists Matthew Nock and Ronald Kessler found that the suicide attempt rate for the general US population is 4.6 percent (616). This means that transgender people are tragically almost nine times as likely to attempt suicide than the general population. Dr. Kristie Seelman released a report that analyzed data from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey and contends that transgender and gender nonconforming people that are denied access to a public bathroom “are 1.32 times as likely to have attempted suicide” than their peers who were not denied access (Seelman). Despite the evidence that denying transgender and gender nonconforming people access to their preferred public facilities is dangerous to their health, public opinion is still split. In a 2016 survey of American adults conducted by Pew Research Center, about half of respondents said that transgender people should be allowed to use the restroom that corresponds with their gender identity, “But nearly as many (46%) take the opposite position” (Lipka). The rationale for why so many people oppose what appears to be a basic human right is varied.

Not everyone who opposes anti-discrimination bills is inherently transphobic and doing it out of malice. Instead, the most common argument wielded by people who want gender nonconforming individuals to stick to the restroom of their assigned sex stems from one idea: safety. Ideally, bathrooms should be a quiet, private place free of danger. There is a fear that having people with different genitalia in the same restroom would lead to sexual assault, particularly victimizing women and children (Brady). This concern is unfounded because save for one case from Seattle Parks and Recreation in 2016 in which a man (who did not identify as transgender) undressed in a women’s locker room and allegedly used an anti-discrimination law as motivation, there have been no public cases of assault as a result of anti-discrimination restroom laws (Grinberg and Stewart). Sexual assault is already illegal, so barring transgender and gender nonconforming people from restrooms will not solve the issue since these people

are not the root of the problem (Tannehill). Transgender and gender nonconforming people are not inherently dangerous and are more likely to be harassed and assaulted than their cisgender counterparts, as seen in a survey conducted by UCLA that found that 70 percent of transgender and gender nonconforming respondents experienced some form of harassment or even physical assault in a public restroom (Ford). The issue at hand, the feelings, and the risks behind it on both sides are complex, and so are the potential solutions.

Rather than force people into a bathroom that they do not wish to use or allow them to use the one that best matches their gender identity, a seemingly innocent solution has risen: private unisex or “all gender” bathrooms. In theory, this seems to be the perfect compromise. Cisgender people who are uncomfortable with sharing a bathroom with someone that was born the opposite sex or presents differently would not have to worry anymore, and transgender people would not have to fear being assaulted. When implemented in the real world, as some major corporations such as Target have begun to do (Marans), telling transgender and gender nonconforming people to only use unisex bathrooms is inconvenient and victimizes them even further. This is because requiring transgender people to use a third designated restroom while their cisgender peers still have access to gendered bathrooms is not achieving equality but rather a sugar coated form of discrimination. In today’s American culture, if a private restroom was made with the purpose of segregating individuals due to their race or ethnicity because it made people unlike them more comfortable, it would spark immediate controversy and be shamed by media and citizens alike. It is just as discriminatory when the word ethnicity is replaced with gender.

Turning all restrooms and locker rooms respectively into public “all gender” facilities is a solution that is less prejudiced than condemning gender nonconforming people to segregated private facilities, but it is a solution that comes with two issues. First, converting all restrooms to be inclusive to all genders and sexes would raise just as much social controversy as allowing transgender people into the restroom of their choice because people with different genitalia would still be occupying the same facility. The other problem is that converting public gendered restrooms into public unisex restrooms would require all restrooms to be modified to meet everyone’s needs according to commercial bathroom codes. This is possible on a smaller scale, as universities such as Portland State have done in recent years; however, the conversion of these restrooms is still dependent on private funding and variable expenses (“Portland State University All-Gender Restroom Policy”). Since both types of unisex or “all gender” restrooms are costly and come with their own problems, the only feasible solution left is to allow transgender and gender nonconforming people to use the restroom of their choice without policing their gender.

In the case of transgender rights, matters of anti-discrimination should be taken into the hands of the Supreme Court rather than left under the authority of individual states so that progress can be faster, uniform, and more effective. Reports by CNN and the American Civil Liberties Union assert that approximately nineteen states may have anti-discrimination laws established, but these laws have varying degrees of protection and lack the uniformity that could be created by the Supreme Court. Other states have written discrimination into law, such as North Carolina’s infamous Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act. This puts transgender people and gender nonconforming people in an uncomfortable position because they are more or less equal to their peers and cisgender people depending on where they are in the country. This is not a matter the Full Faith and Credit Clause could be applied to like the issue of same-sex marriage was in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. Instead, the demand for equal treatment and protection against discrimination under the law reflects the ideals of the Civil Rights Act and the fourteenth amendment. In a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia on behalf of transgender high school student Gavin Grimm, the ACLU reasoned that requiring transgender students to use private alternative restroom facilities as opposed to communal ones is “unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment and violates Title IX of the U.S. Education Amendments of 1972, a federal law prohibiting sex discrimination by schools” (“*G.G. v. Gloucester County School Board*”). The Supreme

Court was set to review the case before the Department of Education's guidance was rescinded by the Trump administration, so the case was returned to the lower circuit before any real change could be made. This lawsuit proved that discriminatory bathroom policies are questionable under the constitution, and since matters of the constitution are under the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court, a decision should be made at the national level.

The issue of discriminatory bathroom policies targeting transgender and gender nonconforming people, regardless whether they are put in place due to transphobia or a misdirected fear for safety, should not be written into law. Bathroom bills are harmful to the physical safety and mental well being of those they are put in place to victimize. The issue should be taken to the Supreme Court rather than individual state legislatures to achieve a uniform, nationwide policy of equality. The solution of turning all restrooms into "all gender" facilities could be an acceptable compromise; however, the cost and inevitable controversy that it would spark makes the solution more trouble than just allowing transgender and gender nonconforming people to use the restroom of their choice. Above all else, acceptance and understanding are the key to progress, not fear and bigoted legislature.

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Alison Gill
Grade 12

The Myth of Individuality
Critical Essay

John Burroughs School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: John Pierson

Individuality endures as the greatest hoax ever perpetuated. From birth, we espouse the virtues of this fictitious ideal, elevating its gilded veneer into a golden egg. Each generation, in pursuit of such ovarian excellence, ascends the beanstalk time and time again, only to learn that the higher the climb, the farther the fall. For thousands of years, in every generation and in every civilization, we have sought true individuality; at this point it's fair to wonder whether such an ideal exists -- or ever did. The evidence of science, religion, literature, philosophy, and popular culture all point to a definitive answer that the myth of individuality is just that: a myth.

As in any argument, definitions prove crucial -- what exactly is individuality, and how do we define it? In abstraction, individuality is a separate existence, one wholly singular and wholly original; we derive our lifestyle only from within, each decision seeks to further no agenda but our own. Expectations and society lie outside the realm of consciousness, and so our exclusive inspiration are our whims and fancies. We choose what we do, unburdened with preconceptions and misconceptions, and our sole resources lie internally, completely devoid of external influence. Our judgement reigns supreme. Anecdotally, the true individual is the man (or woman) who embarks on the solitary mission into the woods. Uncorrupted by man or its manufactured institutions, the individual subsists on his guile and instincts. The man procures all happiness, sorrows, satisfaction, disappointment from himself, and, in his dying breaths, can reflect on a life well lived.

In this interpretation, it becomes abundantly clear that individuality no longer exists. What we often cite as individuality is, really, the manifestation of free will and unique decision-making -- two unassailable constants. Every day, we lose more and more of our sacred singularity as our contact with fellow individuals and institution deepens, and, as the world has evolved, so our individuality has devolved. Individualism has passed from a rarity into a nonexistence, bred out from our beings biologically, theologically, intellectually, and culturally.

The death of individualism began, essentially, with the birth of humanity. We are inherently social creatures. From a purely survival standpoint, the value of a pack cannot be understated, and the nomadic tribes of yore discovered this value. A pack proved the best strategy to hunt game and to protect ourselves from rival predators, and to continue our lineage. The individual who strayed from the pack or willfully disregarded its security became an easy victim for the preying mountain lion or subject to the unforgiving perils of starvation and dehydration. The chemical balances of our brains reinforce the Darwinist necessity of a pack. Four primary neurotransmitters -- dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, endorphins -- govern our happiness and survival, and different interactions activate each chemical. Oxytocin, commonly referred to as the "Love Hormone," is directly linked to human bonding and the fostering of trust and loyalty; with this chemical necessity, we are genetically predisposed to create the relationships which gradually degrade our individuality. We biologically require sociality, and, through the achievement of such sociality, our individuality perishes. We seek external approval and bonding, regardless of who we are. Jonah Berger, a marketing professor at the University of Pennsylvania surmises in an interview with *The Boston Globe*: "We might see ourselves as acting in a way that's unique, where we're just being similar to a smaller group of people... What it comes down to is being optimally distinct, being similar enough that we don't feel alone and different enough that we feel unique. This are the two

key human motivations that dictate the way we behave.” Conformity is a human disposition, literally programmed into the wiring of our conscious, and so true individuality defies the very science of our existence.

Throughout the history of civilizations, where the packs settled into communities, cultural divisions have generally aligned with religious differences, but the nonexistence of true individuality unifies the major religions. Throughout the scriptures of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, the common themes of trust in a god and the belief that this god inhabits all cracks of people emerge. Within the Bible, Corinthians 12:4-6 states, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons,” while Corinthians 12:14 adds, “For the body is not one member, but many.” The concept of humanity as vessel of God’s will reappears in the Qu’ran 6:61-62: “And He alone holds sway over His servants... Oh, verily, His alone is all judgement.” The Buddhist scripture, *Questions of Milinda*, addresses the nonexistence of individuality through the meeting of King Milinda and the sage Nagasena, in which Nagasena enlightens Milinda: “But in the strict sense there is no individual in [any] matter.” Religion, the opioid of the masses, promotes the disregard of people as individuals and encourages that individuals are but a reflection of God. It is difficult to believe, that after thousands of years of religion as a central element to life, humanity hasn’t internalized this notion as truth and sought to enact it as truth.

Likewise, artists have repeatedly flocked to a universal lack of individuality as thematic element in visual and written works. Perhaps the literary paragon concerning conformity and the death of individuality is George Orwell’s *1984*. Orwell’s dystopia exhibits that the state and the individual cannot exist, and certainly cannot thrive, in duality. In each community we belong to, voluntarily or involuntarily, this belonging comes at the expense of our individuality; as O’Brien tells Winston in *1984*, “You do not exist.” At this point, it would be impossible to detach from any community, whether it be a nation or a family or a neighborhood. We are born into our communities, and, before we can read, our communities have imposed their importance on us. Again, in *1984*, O’Brien instructs Winston, “We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves” -- don’t parents, unwittingly, do that to children, teachers to students, friends to friends? Orwell is far from the only artist to aim their harsh examination onto societal conformity. Playwright Tennessee Williams complained that “the trouble with this world is that everybody has to compromise and conform,” and even the great cartoonist, Charles Schulz, lamented snowflakes as “the last of the rugged individualists.” If art and literature are intended to be the domain of the outsider -- the comparative individualists -- in which to illuminate flaws, then the resignation of artists that individuality no longer exists should be fact enough to convince the rest of us. Our philosophical thinkers have long found preoccupation and struggle in our system which praises individuality yet rewards conformity. As Henry David Thoreau nicely summarized in *Walden*, “Every generation laughs at the old fashions, but follows religiously the new.” The conformity may change masks over time, but it still conceals the individual. John Stuart Mill argues in *On Liberty* that “in a diminishing degree through the long transition from feudality to the present time, the individual was a power in himself... at present individuals are lost in the crowd.” Mill wrote this statement in 1859, and we have only continued this descent into mob mentality since. John Locke pioneered the *tabula rasa* philosophy, and, of humans, he once stated, “We are like chameleons, we take our hue and the color of our moral character, from those who are around us.” Everything we learn comes from our surroundings, and so we seek external experiences and lessons, thereby squandering our individual worth. Friedrich Nietzsche, arguably the most influential philosopher in history, denounced mankind in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same; whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse.” In explaining our human race, some of the greatest thinkers repeatedly conclude that individualism, while a noble theory, has essentially disappeared from reality.

One of the most prominent examples of the modern quest for individuality is Jon Krakauer’s account of Chris McCandless. McCandless’ story -- and failure -- reveal the farce of today’s individuality in two-fold. His search invites the disapproval and anger of others, who labeled him a “kook” (71) and his

journey a “contrived asceticism and a pseudoliterary stance compound” (72). The impassioned responses exhibit that we do not condone individuality, that we prefer unconditional piety to our societal constructs. However, more tellingly is that McCandless, with his extremist austerity, failed to create his microcosm of individuality. The bus, that supposed temple to the individual, was infiltrated with reminders of McCandless’ dependency: the boots with Gallien scribbled across the cuff, the sheath with R.F. inscribed, the books filled with the musings of Jack London or Thoreau. If even an abandoned bus in the middle of Alaskan wilderness and a man obsessed with independency cannot escape external influence, then neither can we. There is no longer any sanctuary of the individual to abscond; no more wilderness to explore or expedition to embark. We, like McCandless, are trapped in a world forever poisoned with conformity and forever drained of individualism.

Our modern world is hopelessly devoid of real individuals. Individuality has gone effectively extinct, already unattainable and slowly dying from the mainstream conscience. In theory, it remains important -- just see the outrage over Dolly the Sheep for evidence. In practice, though, we resist it. Our schools, our homes, our society demand that soul-sucking conformity, but even the nonconformist suffers from a severe lack of individuality. To be a conformist or nonconformist requires an adherence to rules; for the conformist, it is to yield to the whims of society, and, for the nonconformist, it is to not yield to the whims of society. Neither strike as a particularly novel idea. We are not individuals, but rather the compilation of every interaction and every relationship we have experienced. We are the sum of our parts, and our parts are generations-old hand-me-downs. So while the idealism of individuality may last, let us not delude ourselves into worshipping its illusion. If we do, we will find ourselves deceived by false prophets. Instead, let us continue the tradition of humanity and pass down our hand-me-downs to the next generation.

Alison Gill

Grade 12

Passengers

Short Story

John Burroughs School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: John Pierson

Megan had never bothered to get her driver's license, a decision that caused her friends to periodically question her sanity. All of them had rushed off the minute they turned sixteen and, despite their too-wide left turns, lead feet, and distracted lane switches, had earned passing grades from haggard DMV lifers. As more and more wallets boasted the sacred card and more and more cars tore through the school lots, friends relayed to Megan impassioned retellings of their near-collision (or near-death, depending on who was driving) experiences. With stereotypical adolescent awareness, they couldn't understand why Megan felt no compulsion to join their ranks.

She tried to explain her unlicensed status as a matter of practicality: her father had made it perfectly clear that, legally or no, Megan would never possess any vehicle, she lived close enough to walk to school, and, besides, she always managed just fine. She was able to bum a ride from a classmate or public transit if need be. Her friends, half-listening and bored with pragmatic reason, dismissed these statements with a wave, but they eventually relented, only exclaiming indignant disbelief once or twice a month.

Privately, though, Megan was grateful for her indifference. She watched her friends flit about from driving lesson to lesson. They labored over the skills that they would use to attain their license and then immediately disregard once card was in hand. During, she had deemed all the fuss unnecessary. Later, when her friends worried about the scratches and tickets they inevitably accumulated, Megan even considered herself lucky.

Even more privately, Megan vastly preferred the public transit to any other means of transportation—a sentiment that she had no plans to vocalize anytime soon. At first, she had memorized the bus schedules out of necessity. While her mid-size city certainly didn't boast the same quality or quantity of options as New York City or Europe, the bus was still a reliable alternate, cheaper and safer for a seventeen-year-old girl than a solo taxi.

After her first several rides, Megan discovered a reassuring familiarity to the frequent stops, to the hissing doors, to the unforgiving sticky plastic seats, to the fluorescent lights that flickered with each bump. She enjoyed the quiet company and anonymity of the other riders. She marveled at the way that these strangers lived in an easy coexistence and all seemed to follow an unwritten code. They abandoned seats without a word whenever a pregnant woman or senior citizen boarded during busy times; they automatically pulled out newspapers or magazines on their commutes; they pretended not to notice when a homeless person pleaded for a ride from the driver. She observed this wonder, and she refined her own bus etiquette until it was second nature. Now, Megan could spot a rookie rider from a mile away. Expectant eyes as the bus slowed to its stop. Bypassing the coin slot and attempting to hand the fee to the driver. Sitting next to another passenger on an empty bus. Hugging the bag in their lap. Checking their watch at every stop.

So, that night when the girl stepped onto the same bus, it was her casual and apparent experience which first impressed Megan.

It was a Friday night, and Megan had settled in with a copy of *Gone Girl*. She was riding practically the whole line tonight from downtown to the far suburbs. Probably ninety minutes in all, but Megan didn't mind—in fact, she reveled in the lengthy ride. She had several hours to kill before curfew. She had

left her friends at the restaurant, but she also knew that going home at this hour would depress her. Her parents were probably already asleep, and the pantry was almost empty. She pictured herself alone on the couch, shrouded in darkness save for the blue-green TV glow, with a microwaved burrito, chuckling at the witty observations of Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer. On the bus, Megan shuddered at this image, and she pushed it off to be realized on some later Friday night. Instead, tonight, she might head over the county library until it closed or maybe go to the swing set behind the elementary school.

As she considered the dull hours ahead of her, Megan thought that maybe she should have just stayed with her friends, but, even at the mere thought, her headache returned. They were still probably downtown. They were checking their phones every few seconds amidst sporadic conversation and ignoring the salads that they had picked through. Megan had met up with them earlier, but she quickly grew weary of the “oh-my-gods” announcing gossip which shouldn’t have elicited genuine shock like it seemingly did. Normally, Megan could feign interest as well as anyone, but it had been a long and unrelenting week. Tonight, though, the charade wore thin, exacerbated by an unusually slow news cycle within the school grapevine. She sat there for ten minutes with the hope that the conversation would eventually progress to a more stimulating topic—she didn’t expect Nietzsche, for Christ’s sakes, but would a good movie or book suggestion be too much to ask? When the discussion (as impossible as it seemed) had actually digressed to an in-depth recap of a sophomore party, Megan slipped unnoticed to the bathroom and looked up the bus schedule.

Megan returned to the table and proclaimed some flimsy excuse of “a headache, stress or something, I don’t know.” In reality, Megan did have a headache and knew exactly why but thought it unnecessarily rude to inform that they were the cause. Karen had given her a ride, and Megan waved off her offers to take her home. There was a bus station only a few minutes away. At the mention of the bus station, her friends’ eyes darted around in silent disapproval, but they all nodded in unconvinced support anyway. Megan was used to this look. It was the reason she never admitted that she found the public transit relaxing and always echoed its characterizations as “dirty” or “sketchy.” Her friends never went so far as to call it “black,” but they certainly hinted. And, with a goodbye and the pledge to “get well soon,” Megan was free, and her friends immediately resumed their now tighter huddle.

The stop was at the corner of Huntleigh and Dealwood nestled in between office parks. She only noticed because it was rare for any passengers to actually board here, even rarer to do so at 8pm on a Friday evening. It was in the middle of the financial district, and the people who worked in those glass offices drove, or were driven, in black BMWs or Mercedes or Teslas. If any over-eager intern in an ill-fitting suit was caught waiting for the public bus, it would be career suicide. The bus drivers knew the slim likelihood of any fare-carriers at this stop, and so usually it amounted to little more than a tap on the brakes. It surprised Megan when the bus ground to a squealing stop and the doors swung out with a hydraulic rush. It surprised Megan even more when the girl got on.

She was probably ten. Maybe eleven, maybe nine, Megan had never been good at approximating ages. She wore a puffy pink winter jacket, zipped all the way to her chin, and her fur-lined hood covered her hair. In her purple-mitten clad hands, she carried a notebook, and Megan could see the tips of markers poking out of a jacket pocket.

Megan figured that the sight of such an unexpected passenger would raise questions among her fellow riders, but a quick look around debunked this belief. They had cast their perfunctory glances at the newcomer and, finding nothing of interest, had resumed to flipping through magazines or phones. The girl had paid her fare without disruption, so the driver didn’t bat an eye. Only Megan cared.

The girl surveyed the bus from the front, before walking to a seat a few feet away from and diagonal to Megan. From her assured gait to her selection of the perfect seat—not too far, not too close to the other riders—the girl’s ease belied authority of the bus system. Megan watched, infatuated by this elementary expert. She set down her notebook, slipped off her mittens, and peeled off her coat, placing them into the seat next to her. From her coat pocket, she dug out the markers and fanned them in her lap. Next, she uncovered the notebook and flipped to a blank page. The girl chewed her lip as she studied the blank page and the pallet of markers; with careful consideration, she picked up the red marker. She folded into the space between the wall and the seat back, and her notebook angled away from Megan. Then, she attacked

the page with pen, scribbling with a fury. As she worked, her brow furrowed and her lips pursed. She capped and uncapped and recapped her markers each time with a definitive *click*. Her focus boasted of wicked concentration. Megan might have thought that the girl was a nuclear physicist working on confidential calculations, if only her baby-fat cheeks and doe eyes hadn't betrayed her more innocent intentions.

The appearance of the girl consumed Megan. For the better part of an hour, she found herself unable to tear away. Megan scrutinized her, searching for some sort of clue as to the girl's identity. She wasn't sure what she was looking for—a gesture, a noise, a birth certificate to conveniently drop to the ground?—but search, she did. She wanted to know who the girl was, where she was from, what she was drawing, why she was alone, who her confidants were, where she was going, what stories and fears and dreams lay beneath her indiscernible expression.

The fog of mystery swirled around the girl, and Megan was sucked into its vortex. Whether it was because Megan had lingered on Nancy Grace one too many times, or because of a universal tendency among humans for wild speculation, or because of an educational system lacking in outlets for the expression of imagination and creativity, Megan couldn't stop from entertaining the fantastical.

The girl was a child prodigy, a mini-Matisse. She had been in that office park because it was the site for her next commissioned work and she needed to scout its location. She was planning a magnificent display of lights and colors, and that's why she needed to go at night. The girl right now was in the midst of a flash of inspiration, and she needed to jot down every passing thought before they disappeared. What Megan was witnessing was the creative process of a genius.

The girl had ties to an organized crime syndicate. Secretly, the girl was closer to Megan's age but blessed with the demeanor and appearance of a child. Given this guise, she was the perfect perpetrator of criminal activity, and she had quickly risen through the ranks to become the mob's top assassin. The girl was in the office park to steal tax files from the front for a rival ring and, in the midst of the burglary, had run into a janitor. She had shot him through the forehead and discarded the gun. The mittens had ensured that her fingerprints would never be found on the weapon, and so she would escape punishment. The notebook contained the reports of every crime she had ever committed, and she was currently recording the gruesome details of the burglary-murder.

The girl was the daughter of a foreign diplomat from Tunisia. To retaliate for the government's response to the Bardo Museum attack, al-Qaeda had kidnapped the girl and smuggled her into the United States. They had locked her in the basement of an office park outside of a mid-size city in the mountains, considering it the least likely location in which to imprison the family of a Tunisian diplomat. She had escaped and, needing a properly American disguise, had found the mittens and coat in the building's lost-and-found. Before leaving, she grabbed a notebook and some markers, so that she could draw a description of her kidnappers. The girl was working with such intent to insure an accurate depiction of her captors, so that they could be reprimanded.

Megan proceeded like this, tying together dozens of implausible (though, technically possible) stories with the loose strings of what she knew as fact: the outfits, the office park, the age, the notebook. She would've continued to craft these tall-tales had the girl's movement not abruptly yanked Megan out of her rabbit hole.

The girl slammed shut her notebook and, with businesslike precision, began to gather her markers. Suddenly, the girl froze and tilted her head, as if sensing some disturbance. She turned towards Megan and, for the briefest of moments, their eyes locked. Megan, ashamed at the discovery of her nosiness, looked away, shifted back in her seat, and pretended to be preoccupied with the cover of her book. She heard the blood pound and felt her ears and cheeks burning. She focused on lengthening her breathing pattern. She traced the letters on the book and focused on keeping her gaze downward.

After the danger of an impending confrontation diminished, Megan stole a peep at the girl. She was wearing her coat again and the markers rested in their pocket. Her mittens were shoved into the opposite pocket. She was standing motionless despite the swaying bus, and she still aimed her statuesque stare at Megan.

The girl didn't even seem to be really looking at Megan; she seemed to be looking through her.

After some moments under that unblinking scrutiny, Megan wondered if maybe something behind her had caught the girl's interest. She craned her neck to check and saw only a window soaked in night.

In her seat, Megan squirmed. She tucked her hands under her legs. She crossed her legs. She folded her arms. She sought to find a comfortable position, but it was impossible to achieve with the wide, unblinking eyes a few feet away. The girl still gaped at her. Megan tried to retreat, to sink into her seat, to become the bumpy gray coating. She wanted, desperately, to hide but sensed that every fidget only exposed her further. Time crawled, mocking her wishes with its plodding pace.

Eventually, Megan resolved to confront her assessor. She was acting ridiculous; here she was trying to hide from some innocent kid who was half her size. Yet Megan still steeled herself. She lifted her head, and her eyes instantly calibrated with the girl's. At first, she was startled. The girl's eyes possessed depth, and Megan felt like she could see back hundreds of miles in their rich chocolate haze. What was more disconcerting, though, was what those depths contained. In there blazed unrestrained passion and understanding, empathy and ferocity, vulnerability and indomitability, tragedy and euphoria, naivete and providence. Megan struggled to reconcile the girl's youth with that potent gaze, but, perplexing though it was, Megan couldn't look away.

In that stupor-inducing thousand-yard stare, Megan could truly see the girl for who she was. She wasn't some prophet or menace. She had never killed or been kidnapped. She possessed no exceptional gifts or talents. No, all of the fantasies that Megan projected fell away, and Megan's eyes readjusted to this newly stripped down version. Just as the girl saw the truth of Megan, Megan saw the truth of the girl. She saw that the girl was just that: a girl.

The bus wheezed to its stop, and, like that, the spell was broken. The girl pivoted and strode off into the night. Megan let out a breath she didn't know she was holding in and, once again, relaxed. The doors closed, and the bus shuddered to its start. The bus driver announced the next stop. Megan tried to track the girl through the window, but she had vanished in the space between streetlights. Megan peered out at the streets bathed in light; she stopped once she realized that she, now, was only looking at her reflection against a dark window.

Finally, Megan reached her stop. As she filed through the aisle towards the front, she noticed a colorful bundle under one of the rows. She bent down and discovered a purple mitten—the girl must have dropped it when she left. Megan picked it up. She ran her fingers along its seams and studied it over. She must have stood there clutching the lone mitten for longer than she thought. The growl of the bus driver's "Get off or sit down, we've got places to be" reawakened her and reminded her to keep walking. Unsure of what to do, she stuffed the mitten into her pocket and got off the bus.

Once the bus pulled away, Megan decided to go home the long way. Through the darkness, Megan considered the mitten and the girl. She wanted to explain it to someone, but she knew this night was impossible to communicate. Her friends wouldn't care, and her parents wouldn't understand the significance of it. In all honesty, Megan didn't quite grasp it all either, but she knew it mattered.

She knew it mattered. That's why she tucked the lone mitten into her backpack before she walked to school everyday. Why she crammed it into a pocket before she took the public transit. Why, when she finally did get a car, stuffed between the insurance papers and car manual in her glove box, there sat one purple mitten. She wanted to give the mitten back in case she ever saw the girl again.

Katelyn Gillette
Grade 10

The Last Reminder
Science Fiction/Fantasy

Olathe North High School
Olathe, KS
Teacher: Deirdre Zongker

The bombs had fallen. Fast. Silent. Deadly. No one had been warned: no man, no woman, no child, no animal, no android. It brought death and destruction, setting fires and leaving radiation in its wake. Those not lucky enough to die in the initial hit laid scarred and broken, waiting for the reaper to save them of their suffering. The ones left alive became twisted monsters, unnaturally touched by the fallout: a beastly reminder of man's wrath that brought the initial bomb.

Two hundred years had passed, almost enough for the earth to begin to heal. The house still stood after all this time, saved from oblivion by its distance to the epicenter. Its humans had died peacefully in their sleep, a luxury others would have killed for. Surviving them was the house and its many nonliving inhabitants: all of the different creations meant to make human's lives better. For those two hundred years, the robots waited for their masters to come out of their eternal slumber, unable to comprehend the finality of death. They cooked meals harvested from the personal greenhouse, cleaned the permanent soot from the walls, and prepared to once again be useful.

Though they lasted longer than their masters, the robots were not eternal. One by one they began to shut off, the mechanics left unchecked for too long. First was the droid that took care of the human children, her shell originally having been meant for no long term use as the others were. Then went the chef: rusted, the maid: short circuited, the gardener: mauled by a beast. Years passed as the house began to lose more and more of the activity still holding on to it. They had began as numerous caretakers, then a dozen, handful, one.

The assistant was the last to remain, its body ill suited to the dystopian world it now lived in, surviving only by luck. Its chrome sheen, once reflective enough for the lady of the house to do her makeup in, was now marred by rust and decay. No longer did its sensors pick up the commands of the master, only ever hearing the harsh creaking of its metal body moving. Daylight sensors picked up the first morning rays of light, and its day would begin as it had for the last two hundred years.

“Good morning Mr. and Mrs. Wellington. How may I assist you today?” Its audio strains to play the overexerted recording as it knocked upon the closed door. No reply came, nothing new.

Onto the next door; the room once belonged to the son. Once again a knock on the closed door, and once again a morning greeting. “Good morning young Wellington. It is a wonderful day to come out and play some ball.” Once again no reply.

The last stop of the morning routine was the daughter's room. Upon knocking at the door, the hinges gave way after years of holding it up, and the door fell open. For so long this room had been closed off, never having been opened or cleaned since the nanny shut down. Dust coated every surface, and the bed sheets had a few lumps in them, but everything was as it was when the masters had first went to sleep.

The assistant's programming said that the girl must have opened the door, inviting the robotic services in.

Cautiously so as to not disturb anything, it crept in. A few feet from the door, its wheeled legs bumped against a toy. It picked up the toy, a plastic baby doll that had survived through all these years. The new movement prompted a little recording from the babydoll, a little track of childlike laughter. The sound was so foreign, so happy, in the silent wasteland that world had become. For a moment, the robot cradled the toy in its arms.

It was in that position that it finally froze, the mechanics that had fought for so long to keep working finally stilling to a stop. Two hundred years had passed since the initial bomb, and there was finally silence.

Aizlynn Harkleroad

Grade 8

Afraid of Heights Short Story

Bode Middle School
Saint Joseph, MO
Teacher: Josie Clark

A light wind pushed the fading mist over me, infusing my light brown hair with it and pushing the crisp air down into my lungs. An old coffee cup, stained yellow from years of not-quite-clean, sat next to me on the battered and bleached outdoor table, containing about half a cup of, now cold, weak coffee. It wasn't much, but it was enough caffeine to keep me from sinking back into the comfortable oblivion of sleep on a tired day like this.

I squeeze the railing of the rusty black balcony, scratching at the peeling paint with my blunt fingernails. From our- *my* spot on the ninth floor, you could see out over a wide patchwork of rundown brick and cement lined roads until they began to fade into more modern metal office buildings of downtown that finally obscured the rest of the more human places. It took me months to be able to come out here again, but now I found a strange sort of comfort in it knowing he got to see this all one last time. It wasn't the worst way to die. Not for him at least.

I wince sharply as police sirens pierce the near silence of 7 o'clock on a Sunday morning sending a chill down my spine. Their haunting scream blares along the side streets, echoing against the tightly packed walls as they race to whatever accident or robbery they have been summoned to. I remember the sirens. The sirens after a night shift worker found you nine floors beneath me. The day I woke to the sirens instead of my alarm clock. The day that blurred together reality and hopeless dreams into a swirl of forgotten colors and sounds until they were inseparable. It was all blue, red and white. And the shrill shrieking of sirens. It was the day you had enough.

I will never forget how I saw you last, before the shock set in. How it had tormented me for months behind my eyes and deprived me of sleep until I got so used to seeing you sprawled spread eagle on the ground that in my state of exhausted delirium I forgot you were there and the nightmares left me alone.

The image is still razor sharp. Your head was turned sharply to the left, eyes wide open, dark, unblinking, a glossy fly paper like film covered them. Your pale wrists were cut deeply, joining the rest of your scars to make sure the job was well done. The waterfall of red that flowed from them had coated your corduroy jacket, and black jeans, staining them brown. They were always your favorite. You said you wanted to be buried in them.

You were whisked off to the closest nameless hospital after that, so that they could pronounce you dead. Maybe there was some ironic poetic beauty in it that I couldn't see in any way other than a tragedy. Maybe you could have seen it like you always seemed to. Maybe it was like how I saw you.

Because when I imagine perfection, I see a smiling boy with loose red curls, freckles covering him as thickly as stars cover the sky, a dimple poking out of his left cheek, vibrant paint smudged across his rounded face, amber eyes shining out from underneath thick lashes and crinkling around the corners like tissue paper, thin black frames held in place against the ridge of a broad nose, and lips stained the color of the drops of blood that had adorned his wrists like jeweled dew, from his lipstick. But you never saw any of that, did you?

You drew on yourself with ink and razor blades, trying to mask everything you deemed unworthy from the years of torment you endured as you walked down the cold halls, crowded with shadows and insincere remarks that plagued all high schools. The words shouted at you from malicious crowds, poised like vipers, waiting to crush every bit of individuality under their proclaimed tyranny, eventually got

under your skin, burrowing under and burning into your flesh like venom. Neglect from your parents left you to deal with the wounds left over from their barbed words and new found insecurities on your own where they festered, creating invisible mind fields. They were never there for you, not even when you got diagnosed five years before.

Your self care and mental health went out the window in the eleventh grade. There was never enough time for school, food, work, and sleep, something had to give. Each time you brushed your hair or showered seemed less rewarding than the last until they disappeared completely. You ate less and less, disappearing into the walls, barely sleeping.

Eventually you grew numb to the sting of their fangs and so did your fervor for life. The will to live was sapped from your bones because it was too heavy to lift with them as you rolled out of bed every morning to face an unpromising day that never brought you anything except harsh words as punishment for hope and happiness and never got you anywhere other than closer to the undeniable, all-consuming end of it.

I saw it in your face every morning that you wished a little more of you was gone after we left for good to get away from it all. Every single time you wished you were anyone else. That it all was over.

You looked more skeletal and picked over as if vultures had come down in the night and eaten away at your passion until their greedy bellies were full. As if they tore flesh from underneath your eyes until they were hollow, and stripped it off your bones until they were almost gleaming through your skin. But still insisted that you were fine. That you were alive and well under the masquerade of death that you had put on. I knew well enough that you had spent the night silently crying in the mirror, nearly tearing your hair out as you had tried to fight off the dark thoughts looming in the corners of your mind and laid siege to your consciousness to no avail. I knew that you had passed out in the early hours of the morning, exhausted. That you didn't wear the sweaters because you were cold. That when you stretched, the pain wasn't from aching muscles.

It got better for awhile, after the therapist. After the anti-depressants. After you started to care for yourself like your parents should have all those years. But soon these to became a menial task that was no longer worth it in your head. You had survived this long without them, what difference did it make? We were just throwing away money. I would notice you coming home from therapy earlier and earlier, explained away with changed sessions or belly aches until you no longer went out and didn't make excuses. You didn't step outside for four days after. I had to tell the professor you had the flu. Those were the worst days for me.

When you stopped going to the pharmacy to pick up your pills, I got them for you. You would smile, thank me, and throw them away, trying to bury them in the other trash so I wouldn't notice. And I didn't for awhile. I went on believing that things were getting better. You smiled so much more then. So much more that I was oblivious to your nervous breakdowns in bathrooms until it was too late for me to do anything.

Maybe if I had told you what you meant to me again. Maybe if I had told you again and again how important you were until you believed it too. Maybe if I had *made* you go to the therapist or keep taking your medication. Maybe if I had been more observant and realised that this was not normal and didn't get desperately sidetracked by the hope that things were going to be *fine*. Maybe if I had known what to do. Maybe if I were a better person. Maybe if I didn't let you become another statistic. Maybe if I had been awake. Maybe I could have stopped you. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe!

The crash of splintering porcelain against cement rings through the air as a car door across the street slams. My hand hangs over the railing, head down as I stare at the fragments of the broken coffee cup littering the cracked asphalt below. A sigh slips between my lips as I relax. Tears sting the corners of my eyes but lately I've forgotten how to cry.

Rubbing my forehead lightly I turn away from the waking city and tread back inside. I'm already too tired. Shutting the glass door softly behind me my hand lingers on the knob, hovering over it.

Click. The lock turns as I roughly grab at a cord and tug on it sharply, causing the blinds to fall down over themselves in an urgent clatter. It might be a while before I wake up again.

Sarah Hickenbotham

Grade 9

A Ride to...Where?

Flash Fiction

Kirkwood High School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Deanna Hempen

A Ride To...Where?

I love riding on trains. When I look out the windows, I see the little towns we stop by. They bring the best snacks on little carts that I practically force mommy to buy. This train's different than my trains. This train is busy. There's lots of people on this train. So many people that mother couldn't get me a seat by the window. So many people that there's no room for the cart. This train smelled different than most trains. The smell of my old towels oozed out from the floorboards of this train.

"Mommy, is this another train to work?" I ask.

Mommy smiles. It's not a real one though. When she really smiles, her face cheeks get pink and a giggle escapes her lips. This smile looks forced.

"Yes Lena, it's another train to work."

I turn so mother can finish braiding my hair. Mother must want me to look nice. We must be meeting her boss whenever we leave this train. Why else would she want me to look nice?

"Are we buying a new house where we go?" I asked.

I remember my real home. It had a garden that pedestrians would look at and say "What beautiful flowers you have." I had a room all to myself, where I could keep all of my stuffed animals. About a month ago we moved out of our real house, and to a tiny one. We even lived with another family! Jacob and I shared a bed, and I had to give up most of my animals. I never asked why we moved. When Jacob asked, it was like he'd killed someone. Dad yelled and mom cried, but Jacob told me why we moved. Daddy and mommy lost their jobs.

"Maybe Lena. I'll ask daddy when we get there."

Daddy and Jacob left earlier to come wherever we're going. I've missed them so much. I've never been away from them this long. This ride seems hours long, and I can't even see the towns we go through.

The train bumps, like it's sighing from all the weight we're putting on. Suddenly, a squeet escapes the train's lips, and it stops. Finally I can get out and see daddy.

Mommy grabs my hand. I peek at her face. Something's wrong. She's stony colored and looking straight ahead. Her lips are as thin as pieces of paper. She turns, and in the utmost serious tone she says,

"Don't let go of my hand unless someone says so."

I nod. She holds my hand so tight I can feel my bones rubbing together, gasping for air. We file out of the train. A man is standing there. He wears an olive green outfit. He has a hat, looking like the paper sailboats we make in class, also in olive. His face lies emotionless, only talking to the people waiting in line. When we finally reach the front, I've determined this must be mommy's boss. Her hand shakes while holding mine. I can feel her heart beating. I remember after mommy lost her job, we travelled on a train to meet her boss. He didn't wear this odd outfit. Mommy wasn't nearly as nervous. That day, mom never told me not to let go of her hand. Why is mommy telling me this? Why is my heart beating so fast? Who is this man? Why is mommy's hand shaking? Why am I shaking? Only the man's voice pushes my questions to the back of my brain.

"Names and ages" he says.

"What's your name?" I ask. The boss is thrown off guard, as if no one asks him this.

"Lena!" Mommy mutters, obviously embarrassed. He doesn't seem to mind.

"I'm Mr. Kent." Mr. Kent says. I thought he was happy, till he repeats the question seconds later. "Names

and ages?"

"Lena Muller, five, and Ella Muller, thirty-six" Mommy says. Her hand quivers again.

"Ella, to the right, Lena to the left." Mr. Kent says. This clearly isn't mommy's boss. What's happening? Why can't I stay by mommy? I turn to face her. She squats down, as little tears drift onto her cheeks. She pulls me in and mumbles. It's not until her mouth is at my ear that I hear her shaky voice.

"No no no"

No? I feel the beat of her heart against mine. Except mine's no longer a beat, it's a pound, banging against my chest, like my heart is going to burst. All I can focus on is mommy's voice. It's no longer a mumble, but a wail, a cry for help, but I cannot understand what no is. No to this place? To us being separated?

Why do we have to be separated? My mind cannot concentrate any longer. All I focus on is the screeching of mommy's no's. Her tears have turned to waterfalls dripping all over my shoulder. I don't know what's happening. I don't know why my body is shaking. All I know is something isn't right. All I know is I can't leave mommy. I feel her being pulled away from me, but all I focus on is her face. I try running after her, but Mr. Kent beats me to it.

"Go, now!" he barks, and points left.

I sprint left with the other children. There's a lot of green outfit men and women here. I'm standing next to another girl. She's tall with licorice looking black hair. She has big glasses, but the real thing I notice about her is the freckles sprawled all over her face. I guess I'll call her, "freckles". Her face is red and shiny. She must've shed tears too. A small thought begs in my brain to be asked. I stop walking, and turn to freckles.

"I never did know, where are we?"

Mommy never told me, but I bet Freckles knows.

"It's called Auschwitz."

I race back into my place in line, wondering if that information even helps me at all.

Jamie Hill

Grade 10

Sending Postcards From the Gay Side (Wish You Were Here)

Personal Essay/Memoir

Platte County High School

Platte City, MO

Teacher: Heidi Mick

Yellow Gold is an alloy made of pure gold, copper, zinc, and silver. It is the purest color, the most hypoallergenic, and the easiest to maintain.

She is yellow gold. Conventionally attractive, girl next door pretty, some might say. My eyes are always drawn to her. She glows. Whenever I am near her, her golden rays wash over me and everything else melts away. She is the light that drips down from the gates of paradise. She is a sunset, scarlet and tangerine and gold and warm and awe-inspiring. Some people say that sunsets are boring, we have one every day. But there's a reason that after all this time we still take pictures of sunsets. She is soft and beautiful and kind. Her hair is spun by Rumpelstiltskin himself. Her eyes are bluer than the sky, deep and captivating. I wonder if I could ever afford yellow gold, but even if I couldn't I would spend my whole life trying to. I could change for her, I think. I could want to change for her.

Alas, she has found herself a man of steel. He is sturdy and dependable. He is the kind of steel they use in corporate buildings and refrigerators. He is young and tall and strong. There is no rust in his joints yet. I will never be steel. I will never have his faith or his ACT scores or his dick. How can I compete with steel? It is built to last. And what am I?

White gold is made of gold and platinum. It is durable, affordable, growing in popularity.

She is white gold. Bright, shiny, white gold is luminate. It shines. When I am with her my world is brighter. In a universe of void, she is a supernova, dramatic and catastrophic. If she goes down, the world will go with her. She is generous with smiles and laughs and 'i love you's.' She is light. Her hair is strung platinum, electric eyes, and rosy cheeks, and a world of wonder. But supernova are born from death. I know that those who seem the brightest tend to have suffered the most. Sometimes her light flickers. I see her when she dims, when the world becomes heavy and she cannot keep the smile on her face. But I want her to know that she doesn't always have to. I want her to know that she doesn't have to pretend with me.

But she is white gold, bright and light and bold. And what am I?

Rose gold is a mixture of gold, silver, and copper. It is the most durable of the three and the most inexpensive.

She is rose gold, warm and pretty. She radiates. People see her, know her. Who hasn't had a crush on her? Humans are drawn to shiny things. She is pink, her cheeks, her hands, her heart, is pink. She is color in a black and white world. She is copper hair and ocean eyes. She is a flower. Ripe, stunning in full bloom. But flowers wilt. Copper rusts to verdigris. The ocean gets darker the deeper you go. I know she has fear and cracks and dents. I have seen her storms and her whirlpools. Rose gold is not pure. But it is beautiful. I look at it in awe, in all its rosy glory, bright and unapologetic. Rose gold is extraordinary. But I am not. So what am I?

I am not gold. I am not silver. I cannot claim to be precious or eye-catching. I am no luxury. I am not steel, sturdy and strong and real. Chances are I am extremely reactive with gold, and that means we'll never be together, but that's okay. Gold is beautiful, admirable, but not functional.

My friends are mica and obsidian and jade. I am not gold. Probably not a metal at all. But that

does not mean I am worthless. I don't glow, I don't shine, I don't shimmer, not yet. No one has trekked across a country to find me, I don't sit in a chest of pirate loot or on the neck of an emperor. I am not rings or refrigerators or arrow tips or eye shadow. But I am something. I'm not sure what yet. Maybe hydrogen, loose and large, making up a ridiculous portion of our universe. Maybe I'm mercury, volatile and beautiful, one of only two liquids on the periodic table. I don't know. But I do know that I have mass and volume, and I am made of atoms. That means I matter.

Eliza Hurwitz
Grade 11

Science Fiction/Double Feature
Personal Essay/Memoir

John Burroughs School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Megan Zmudczynski

I don't know what it means to be queer.

Ask me about my *identity* and I'll tell you that I'm a GSM (if I'm trying to adopt my school's cool, new, inclusive term for Gender or Sexuality Minorities), a proud member of the LGBTQIA+ community (if I'm talking politically), bisexual (if I'm coming out or filling out a form), gay (if I'm functioning under the assumption that you'll understand the use of the word as an umbrella term for various LGBT+ identities and not only as a term for homosexual men). Ask me to tell you about something *queer* and I'll mention David Bowie as a queer icon, MoKaBe's coffeshop as a hub for queer activity in St. Louis, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as a staple in queer media that I've been listening to nonstop for about two weeks. Ask me about my identity and I'll never say queer. Ask me to talk about something queer and I'll never tell you about myself. I have this sort of mental divide: yes, I am a part of queer communities; yes, I am invested in queer culture; yes, I am not heterosexual; no, I'm not queer.

So I've been thinking a lot about queerness recently – wondering what it means to be queer, wondering why I don't identify as queer, wondering what it is about that specific label that makes me so averse to adopting it – and I think that I've finally found a definition that makes sense to me. A comprehensive definition for queerness: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

I know that doesn't make sense – at least, doesn't make sense at first. But two weeks ago, I started listening to *Rocky Horror* (the 1975 movie starring Tim Curry, not the original Richard O'Brien musical of 1973). And I couldn't stop. Like, really couldn't stop. I think I've listened to the soundtrack about 300 times since a Tuesday night a couple of weeks ago. I'm listening to *Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch Me* as I write this sentence. And I was just so pulled in, so interested in this show. I was obsessed. I am obsessed. It's iconic queer media, right? The movie with the longest single release in history, the movie that brought portrayals of gender expressions and sexualities never before shown to the general American audience, the movie that still has a cult following more than 40 years later. And, honestly, every song on the album is a complete and total bop. But the more I listened, the more I realized that the queerness of *Rocky Horror* isn't just portrayed through its performative, glam rock fun – sure, *Rocky Horror* is queer because they took makeup inspiration from David Bowie, but it's also fundamentally queer in the dangers that the story presents.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show shows why I'm scared to identify with the “queer” label; the queerness in *Rocky Horror* is a horrific queerness. The characters that I see as “queer” in *Rocky Horror* are the aliens from planet Transylvania – that's Riff Raff, Magenta, Columbia (who is technically a human groupie, but I'm grouping her in), and, of course, Dr. Frank N Furter. These characters are, in the connotational sense, queer because they show non-standard sexual attraction. Dr. Frank N Furter is also queer because he is a transvestite (a term, now dated, which could be interpreted to mean either a drag queen, a crossdressing man, or a trans woman). Either way, his gender is performatively female, which deviates from the gender norm and is therefore queer. However, these characters are also “queer” in other ways. The characters at the Frankenstein Place, specifically Dr. Frank N Furter, are extravagant, dramatic, degenerate, licentious, consistently hypersexual, alien, and completely mad. But -- and most worryingly -- these characters are also *dangerous*. Frank N Furter proves to be especially deadly; he seeks to trap others in a life of sexual pleasure, has no qualms about killing humans while pursuing this life, has ideas of consent that are dubious at best and nonexistent at worst. And I am terrified of becoming him.

I am so, so scared of being seen as the monstrous side of *Rocky Horror*'s queerness. I'm still not comfortable holding hands with girls in public. I'm practically unable to make assembly announcements that mark me as a GSM. I fear my own fashion choices, I fear locker rooms, I fear raising my hand to ask about LGBT organizations while on college tours. I fear my identity as it manifests in the world. I fear queerness because its narrative, even in queer media, shows queer people as sinful, as indulgent, as creepy, as alien – as killer monsters. As fundamentally wrong. And, thinking logically, of course I know that there's nothing wrong with holding hands, with making an announcement, with wearing clothes that I like. But there's that association, lurking in the shadows, lurking behind the glitz and glamour of *Rocky Horror*. I don't want to be a monster. By extension, I don't want to be extravagant, or dramatic, or sexual, or stereotypically gay. By extension, I don't want to be queer. I don't want to see a scarlet corset from Frank N Furter become my scarlet letter – I don't want to watch this one unconventional aspect of my relationships become my monstrosity. I don't want to be damned by my label.

But I kept listening to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, even though I found it deeply concerning, even disturbing, in its portrayal of queerness. I kept listening to *Rocky Horror* until I started hearing another narrative. This wasn't the narrative of Frank N Furter's atrocious actions causing the ruination of the other characters; this wasn't the narrative of Hester's adultery causing eternal damnation and total rejection by her town; this wasn't the narrative of damnation or destruction after the sin of being sexually or romantically other. There's that, sure, but also another narrative, too: a story of liberation, of pride, of some kind of real acceptance. Because the human, "straight" characters, Brad and Janet, who stumble upon Frankenstein Place one dark and stormy night? They aren't alive until they meet the Transylvanians. Brad and Janet's opening number is sung as the young couple gets engaged, but the lyrics are anything but romantic. Brad's part in this rhyming duet includes a lot of grand metaphors that mean nothing, and Janet is excited about everything *but* her fiancé -- she's happy about her ring being nicer than her friend's, about the fact that he's met her parents, and about her upcoming trip to go see Dr. Scott -- but not about Brad. Their duet is like two kids playing at romance, or like two robots trying to seem human – it's not real, and neither are they, at least until they get into Frank N Furter's house. With the Transylvanians, Brad and Janet finally show individual agency. Through various sexual encounters, Brad finds out that he's attracted to men, and Janet finds out that she can have sexual agency and desire. Yes, this Transylvanian culture, this queer culture, is seen as monstrous and wrong, but it's also seen as liberating. With the Transylvanians, the humans find a weird, alternative sort of acceptance, a kind of pride in what is seen as perverse, a way to liberate themselves from these completely repressed lives. Brad and Janet encounter queerness and they come alive.

So here's what I think queerness really is: liberation, and acceptance, and pride. But queerness isn't that simple, and I don't know if I'm ready to accept a label that carries so much damnation in its cultural subtext, a label that could make me monstrous, alien, corrupt, evil. It's like that phrase "not gay as in happy, queer as in f*ck you". It isn't a phrase that I ever used to like. Why wouldn't you want to be happy? Why does queer have to mean aggressive? But *Rocky Horror* is helping me realize that "queer as in f*ck you" doesn't just mean anger, it means pride. It means a commitment to struggling with feeling truly okay with one's own identity in a world that consistently associates it with monstrosity. It means a determination to find a place of acceptance, a place of liberation. A Frankenstein Place. And I might not be totally ready to be totally, completely, *Rocky Horror* level queer just yet. But I might try out the label.

Lauren Keeley

Grade 9

Five Short Story

John Burroughs School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Michael Dee

“Are you lost?” She’s talking at me. I know she’s talking at me because we’re the only two real ones in front of the whole TV wall and Ms Hunt says that grown-up people don’t have Friends Just For Pretend, and even if they do they don’t talk to them out loud unless they’re the kind of people you’re supposed to stay away from. So even though she’s talking at me, I don’t turn around because Ms Hunt says don’t talk to strangers, so I won’t talk to strangers even though this one’s a shop lady and shop ladies are nice, like the lady in the shoe shop Momma used to take me to who gave me green apple suckers and penguin erasers, and I talked to her and I’ve seen Momma and Louisa Whitaker talk to plenty of shop ladies they didn’t know so maybe shop ladies aren’t real strangers, but this shop lady might be saying things out loud to her Friend Just For Pretend and then she might be the kind of people I’m supposed to stay away from and besides it’s mail time on my Blues Clues and everyone knows that you can’t miss mail time and if I were at Louisa Whitaker’s house I could pause it but I don’t know how to pause shop display cartoons and there wouldn’t be a shop lady at Louisa Whitaker’s house anyways.

“Excuse me, son, are you lost?” Now I turn around and frown and scrunch my eyebrows like Daddy used to when he Didn’t Get It because now I Don’t Get It because I’m pretty sure I’m not her son, but I could be because I’m not sure I’m anybody’s son anymore because the men in uniforms took me away from Momma and Daddy and gave me to Ms Hunt but Ms Hunt says she’s not my mother she’s my therapist and she says Louisa Whitaker’s not my mother either because she’s probably only temporary. So maybe I am the shop lady’s son and I just want her to explain. She kneels and smiles.

“Where’s your Mommy?” Okay, she’s not my mother.

“She’s Spending Some Time Alone because it’s not good to want to hurt yourself. She’s not all alone though, she’s just alone from me because the doctor man is taking care of her.” The shop lady Makes a Face like she’s Sad and I want to ask her what’s wrong because Ms Hunt wants me to Show Compassion but then the shop lady talks again.

“Where’s your Daddy?”

“Nobody knows but the men in uniforms are looking for him very hard like we looked for our cat Aristotle when he ran away but we must have been looking harder because we found Aristotle after three days but they haven’t found Daddy for five months and I hope when they find him he doesn’t have the worms because when we got Aristotle back he had the worms and he got very sick and had to go be God’s kitty and I don’t think God needs a Daddy as very much as I do so I’d really like to keep him.” Now the shop lady Makes a Face like she’s very Sad and now I think I’m making her do the sad face and so I should apologize but now she’s asking another question and this is what Ms Hunt calls a One Way Street Conversation so I decide that next I’ll ask a question after I answer hers.

“Who did you come with? Where are they?”

“Well Louisa Whitaker is getting poster markers with Valerie in the cart and Abigail’s getting the bread and Henry Whitaker couldn’t come because he’s at work but Jonathan came and he’s looking for hair dye because he wants to have carrot hair like you and I’m over here because Louisa Whitaker said I could pick one toy to have just for myself and not share so I’m picking one toy.” She’s Making a Face like she Doesn’t Get It but I think that’s better than Making a Face like you’re Sad, so I ask my question.

“Have you ever made a boat in a bottle?” She’s still making the Doesn’t Get It face and not answering which is Being Rude but then I realize I’m Being Rude too because I’m Asking About My

Interests and Ms Hunt says it's good to Ask About Other People's Interests to make them feel comfortable but I don't know her interests so I Use My Clues like her curly carrot hair and the little piece of olive in her teeth and her name tag that says Annie and her clothes that are just shop lady clothes and don't mean anything and maybe she likes olives but I can't ask about olives because Ms Hunt says it's Being Rude to Point Out People's Flaws and Having Food in Your Teeth is her flaw, so I Use My Remembering because maybe she doesn't know Ms. Hunt's Rules for Conversation and she Asked About Her Interests and I decide she's good at Where Questions so I ask

"Where's *your* Mommy?" The shop lady's eyes go big and she laughs, but her laugh sounds more like a dog bark so I scrunch up my face to show her that I Don't Get It. That makes her face go Sad again and she sticks her hand out.

"Sweetie, why don't you come meet my nice friend in the front office?" I shake my head and step away because now I'm pretty sure she's a stranger and I'm definitely not supposed to go places with strangers. I think she knows we're strangers because then she doesn't want to go places with me and she takes her hand back and presses the talking button on her walkie-talkie.

"Alan, could you come down to aisle 9? There's a lost little boy." I Look at My Surroundings for the lost little boy because I want to Show Compassion and make him un-lost by telling him where he is. She just said it: Aisle 9. But there's no little boys and she stands up and doesn't Make a Face like she's Worried so I turn around to my Blues Clues again but now mail time is over and there's no point trying to understand so I don't Pay My Full Attention.

I hear the shop lady talking again after three whole minutes and she's talking back and forth to another voice which is inside a man and the voice's man puts his hand on my shoulder which I don't like and turns me around which he could have Used His Manners to ask for.

"Hi, sweetie. Can you tell me your name and how old you are?" I want to say yes because yes I can tell him all of that but Ms Hunt says when people ask Can You Tell Me questions they usually mean please tell me so I answer the question he meant instead of the question he said.

"My name is Benjamin Alerio Caes and I'm five years, two months, and nineteen days old." He looks at me with a Surprised face for ten seconds but then he makes a Happy face instead and that's a better face.

"Well, Benjamin Alerio Caes," I want him to call me Ben instead because I'm called Ben but Interrupting is Being Rude and Correcting Grown Up People is Being Rude so I don't say anything and I just think that he should have asked a different question because my name is Benjamin Alerio Caes but I'm called Ben and now he's got it all mixed up and I think maybe he Doesn't Get It. "Let's go find your friends."

"We don't need to find them. They're not lost. They're getting the poster markers or the bread or the hair dye." Now I'm sure he Doesn't Get It because he thinks Louisa Whitaker needs to be found but she's a grown-up person and grown-up people don't need not grown up people to go find them.

"You're not allowed to be without an adult, Benjamin. Can we help you find your parents?" He Doesn't Get It. I already told Annie the shop lady that I know where Momma is and that she's Spending Some Time Alone and that there are already people trying to find Daddy and that Ms Hunt says they don't need our help, but this new man Doesn't Get It and I don't want to say it all again because I'm not supposed to be talking to strangers anyway.

"No. You can't help because they're not in your shop and you're supposed to stay in the shop because it's your job and people have to stay at their jobs." There. Now if he still Doesn't Get It it's his very own fault and Annie the shop lady can explain it. He Makes a Face like he's Angry and stands up, which makes him very much taller than me like Daddy said to do to people you're trying to scare but I don't know why this man is trying to scare me.

"Young man, I need you to understand that it is against the law for you to be in this shop without parental supervision. I have half a mind to turn you in to security. They have better methods than I to make you stop whatever storytelling game you're trying to play with me." I frown. I didn't know we were playing a game. I've never played the game when you ask lots of where questions and nobody told me the rules before we started so it's very unfair of him to be Angry with me when I didn't know and I wasn't

playing, like how my friend Samuel at school used to win races before he said we were racing and that was unfair of him.

“I wasn’t playing.” The Angry face turns into a Don’t Get It face for a second which is nice but then it goes back and he starts turning red which isn’t a normal people color so I’m worried because one of the posters in Ms Hunt’s office says that faces turn red when people are choking so I think maybe I should tell Annie the shop lady to use the Heimlich Maneuver but then he talks more and choking people can’t talk so I guess he isn’t choking.

“No, you weren’t. Lying isn’t a game. Lying is wrong. And do you know what happens to people who do wrong things?” I shake my head because he’s asking what’s called a Rhetorical Question which means he’s going to answer and I should let him, but I almost forget not to say anything to his Rhetorical Question because his voice is loud and hard and my bottom lip is shaking and Annie the shop lady was nice to me but she walked away when her walkie talkie beeped and left me with the man with the loud hard voice so I just bite my lip hard to try and keep it still, even though that doesn’t help because I don’t have all my teeth right now so it won’t stop shaking in the gaps.

“Well, young man, people who do wrong things go see those men up front in the uniforms, and then they go away for a long time.” And now I forget about my lip and let it shake because now I know I did a wrong thing and that’s why the men in uniforms took me away from Momma and Daddy and Ms Hunt says when you do a wrong thing you need to Apologize Specifically and Say How You’ll Do Better Next Time but I can’t because I don’t know who to Apologize Specifically to or what wrong thing I did and so now I have to be away from Momma and Daddy for a long time and that’s why Momma is Spending Some Time Alone and why Daddy ran away, because I did a wrong thing and I didn’t fix it and I don’t know how to fix it and now there’s a hot thing behind my eyes and the man is blurry which makes him a little less scary but I don’t think about him because my cheeks are all wet so I’m crying. I haven’t cried since the night they took Momma and Daddy away. But maybe it’s time. Ms Hunt says sometimes its okay to cry.

Grace Kennard
Grade 12

The Cyclicality of Sunrises
Poetry

John Burroughs School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Joy Gebhardt

Last night was one of those nights when you lie awake,
staring at your ceiling and listening to the cars driving past your house.
Somewhere in the ramble of the tires
or the panels of light drifting across the walls of my room,
I expect a voice.
It never comes
So I stay, alone,
somewhere in between abandoned sheets and mismatched pillows,
hoping to fall asleep.

My leg bounces as I sit in class,
everyone ambling around a discussion
on a reading maybe half of us did.
My foot taps an antsy tune as the gum I'm chewing loses flavor.
I hope my mom is making salmon for dinner tonight.

I used to think the scariest thing was getting lost in Target
or the darkness under my bed.
I thought boys were just other bodies swinging on the jungle gym,
that they would never make me cry.
There was a time when three letter acronyms only seemed like a distant chore
and numbers weren't anchors in your sea of thoughts.
A long time ago,
I didn't have to think about childhood cancer or bypass surgeries,
but only what I was going to ask Santa for
and where the Easter eggs were hidden.

I flip through the pages in the book so the letters escape their sentences.
If I do it fast enough, all the annotations jump off the page at me,
like a ball bouncing off the paper.
My finger pauses at will and I reread the underlined sentence on the page.
Oh yeah, I think,
I liked that line.

Sometimes I wonder how teachers and policemen
could make less money than singers and basketball players.
Often, I ask God why bad things happen to good people.
As I kneel and accept my Communion each Sunday,
I think about what he's doing up there,
if he listens to me when I pray.

My classmate's misled comment fades into the background
as a blaring ambulance barrels down the street.
Maybe someone's house is on fire
or somebody just had a stroke.
I hope they're okay.
"What page is that on?"

I hate when the words get caught in your throat
and you want to tell your friends about that one time
or tell your mom about this other time.
You want to, but your stomach squeezes the words
until they're not words anymore,
and whatever they resemble is bottled onto the "Maybe Later" shelf.
Maybe later.

The bell rings a sigh of relief and I zip up my backpack.
I slip into its mold and pine for my bed.
My body aches of stress and my shoulders sulk with pressure.
I chew my nail for a moment, prying off any unwanted memories
and peeling back a layer of nail;
it'll grow back.

Alice Kogo

Grade 12

Oreo Kid

Personal Essay/Memoir

Olathe North High School

Olathe, KS

Teacher: Molly Runde

I've had a complicated relationship with Merriam Webster dictionary. We go waaaay back. In elementary school, I was that one kid who had already read all the good books on the teacher's classroom library and occasionally (to the obvious scorn of my classmates), decided to pick the dictionary. I'd peruse the pages of a 1999 issue, checking out the detailed illustrations of various words: animal and plant cell diagrams next to "endoplasmic reticulum"; ancestral instruments labeled "flute"; and a plethora of woodland vegetation surrounding species of "mushroom", reminding me of those found in *Alice in Wonderland*. When class was almost over, I would close the book. Upon reaching the ripe age of eleven, I got my first ever email address, and wanting a change, signed up for the familiar logo Merriam Webster's "word a day" newsletters. I swore by those email messages, waking up and going straight to the computer to check my IM's and emails. Hemidemisemiquaver—a complicated name for the sixty-fourth note that takes me back to the days of learning the clarinet in middle school, full of doubt that the note was fast for me to play—is one of the major words I gleaned from that experience; it's my favorite word to this day. But alas, 500 unread messages three years later, dictionary definitions began to sour all aspects of my inbox, and the fatal UNSUBSCRIBE button loomed under my mouse clicker. I pressed it.

A complex, interwoven tapestry of memories surrounds my childhood, and upon hearing the terms of an essay assignment in my English class—an essay aimed at identifying one's cultural identity—I had a specific topic in mind. I remember having words thrown at me, people telling me what I was—or should—be, and the confusion of a youth attempting to detangle her different identities in order to have some semblance of confidence despite the lack of representation everywhere she turned for guidance. I looked up the term Oreo today, and didn't expect to find any hits from Google or Dictionary.com.

Oreo: "a Black person who is regarded as having adopted the attitudes, values, and behavior thought to be characteristic of middle-class white society, often at the expense of his or her own heritage." There is no consolation for being a textbook definition. I cannot close the dictionary and remove the negative connotation of my image displayed next to a term or unsubscribe to the jeers and taunts fostering my humiliation. My inability to embrace common culture was written within a book, each word was my guide outlining the rules I must defy and I followed them without a glance at the words. I was born in this skin, swaddled in the comfort of America, and raised within the constraints of necessity. I am privileged to be able to ponder the position of my identity in America because for Black people it was never a question to begin with. I am a second-generation Kenyan immigrant, and my parents' goal was to shelter their family from the way America chewed on the word *African* and spit it out, tainted.

I know what it means to be Black in America. Enough life lessons from racism taught me that the textbook definition is faulty. Cultural differences of Africans don't matter because prejudice rooted in the very fabric of this nation is not based on how easy it is to trace one's heritage to the motherland, but on the color of their skin. My father couldn't get a job for months, regardless of his qualifications, because of his accent, African sounding last name, and the way ebony skinned darkness stands out in a white walled room. Immigrant means adaptability. It means the regulation of differences, a container of white-out poised to edit out the parts that don't belong. But I've never been to my country, how can I bleach the culture stain off my clothing without ever seeing its vivid color? Religious optimism led to deeply rooted ignorance in my home because it is easier to pray about an issue than it is to break the spirit of a child and contest the governmental powers that be. I was not taught to fear or fight the trials of oppression and

racism in America, but to accept the destiny with my head low, so as not to draw attention to myself. This didn't have to be my culture. If my parents had gotten married in Kenya all my family would be together, and I would grow up in the same way that my own parents did. Looking at how my parent's mindsets are, I can imagine that I may never have maintained the same identity I flaunt now, but I suppose that would still be okay.

I remember the stories my mother would tell me about her life as a Kenyan child in the 70s, always juxtaposing her detailed tales with commercials illustrating caricatures of African life on television, air compressed and dry with flies buzzing around bloated stomachs as children desperately clung to the hope of a next meal—and existence. My mother would glimpse the first touches of sunset on the horizon with her thirteen brothers and sisters—she was the eldest—and wake, ready for the start of a new blessed day. She began to prepare a meal such as *chapati*—fried pancake dish—and *chai* with her sisters and mother while her brothers went out to herd the animals and fetch fresh milk to boil. She would then walk two miles to school for elementary, two miles back home for lunch, two miles to school for class, and two miles back home at the end of the day. For her years past primary, she attended boarding school. One thing that remained constant was her active membership in the church, as a pastors' daughter. This is one of the main principles she instilled in my family, the one thing that could be brought overseas and hold the same value.

It's bittersweet to realize that the God my family worships isn't really our own. In 1895, just four decades post the implementation of the slave trade in America, the first bootstrap clad foot stepped into my country, bringing with it their customs, ideologies, and religion. Christianity can be twisted in a lot of different ways to justify oppression, but at the end of the whole ordeal, compliance is really the only outcome, as tribal religion was pushed aside in favor of the shiny new white man's following. After the brutal destruction of the militant Mau Mau rebellion, Kenya was stripped of its resources and force-fed a British education which demanded English as a primary language, a cultural reset button, and the extermination of native African resistance. The only difference between me and a "traditional" Black person, is *when* the white colonizers began to oppress us.

I didn't have to grow up with an ancestral past, purposefully left untouched by public school textbooks year after year. I didn't have to grow up with the reality that if had been born just a few decades earlier, I would have been put into slavery. I didn't have to grow up with people telling me to just "forget about it already, the past is the past, slavery is over, so why can't you just give it a break". No, I didn't experience the rejection of my people in a country which brought them here in the first place, but I am, placed into the category of those who experience this distasteful reality daily.

The words African-American do not mean the same thing as an African who was born in America. I was raised here, and the closest I've been to my culture was the second before the umbilical cord snapped, unlinking me from the person who'd experienced it directly. Black people are not African-American, they are *American*, the builders of this nation, and deserve to be called pure Americans more than anyone else. When a white person *exists* in America, with the ancestral roots of immigrants, they are white, not European-American. White people are white people first and Americans second. Black people are labeled African-American first, already destined to be half of a nationality and American second. It's all a question of identity, and no choices can be made because the outcome was already determined by the majority.

I didn't know about the majority ruling in the 5th grade, or how it equated to prejudice. After years in a predominantly white Baptist academy, it had been exercised so many times that when the practice was not enacted I felt uncomfortable. My family was the odd one out—lone Africans in a swarm of conservatives. Since moving to Kansas, I can still recall that schoolhouse church I'd known for eleven years, the numerous families that I saw from a distance, but never met because of their avoidance of us in the single boxy room we all fit in. The church was nearly 200 people large.

While we remained at the school for church, this environment would soon shift drastically. My old private Christian academy cost more than \$4,000 per year per student, and my brother and I, two years apart, had gone there since kindergarten. Our new school was in the projects and just past a railroad with graffiti-splattered freight trains, the peeling neon paint woven across car bodies.

In terms of race, the demographics listed Latino/a's as making up 50% of the student body, Black people as 31%, and white people as 16%. This new order surprised me, and as I attempted to take steps to fit in, I tried so hard to not be at the bottom of the social ladder. I tried not to "act white" and avoided the people who told me to "go back to Africa". The girls at my school that I wanted to be like were the "in clique" of my Chicago suburb elementary school. They were bold, wore their hair in Poetic Justice braids, and mastered Ebonics with a lyricism that I envied. I was intimidated, being a quiet girl, but they were who I strived to be. I listened to rap (ripped illegally from YouTube) excessively on my hip new mp3 player that I got for Christmas; I sat at the back of the bus and tried to be "bad" and curse; I even "snuck out" to hang with my new "best friend" from across the street who was totally awesome (and always got in trouble). Looking back now, I can see that this was a seriously messed up attempt. Items, appearance, attitude, and music do not define Black culture. These were all stereotypes I had adopted from my limited worldview, in a way influenced by the notion of native African superiority, like the tribalism of Kenyan society. My parents saw Black people through the lens of their colonizers and American media, and even though we lived in Black neighborhoods and communities our whole life, the bias they possessed would inevitably be passed down to me.

I am ashamed to even have believed that token stereotypes could begin to encapsulate a culture so complex in the way that it has no definite label. Resilience. Strength. Power. These words do nothing to describe it in its entirety. The existence of a skewed system allowing our people to be killed, kidnapped, harassed, and denied a peaceful place in society is angering enough, without people attempting place blame on the victim rather than the perpetrator of the crime. My rejection of a need for white approval is what created my respect for Black culture which didn't occur until my last year of middle school. It's likely that if had I just been myself, I probably would've avoided the future complexities of a skewed identity and succeeded in fitting in the first place.

This inability to find acceptance thus began my progression into the rejection of Black culture—or whatever skewed image I had in mind when thinking of it. I told myself that I didn't like Black people, that they were rude, loud, and fake with weaves and sagging jeans, and I told myself that I would never be confused with one of them in my life. This holier than thou prejudice would over time lead to encapsulate Kenyan culture as well. At this point, I didn't want to be Black or African or African-American. I just wanted to fit in.

Over the course of my life, my friend groups have been shaped by who I didn't want to be around. In 5th grade, I was with the Black girls, because I didn't want to be like white people. In 7th grade, I was with the white people, because I didn't want to be like Black people, and thought I could pass undetected. Being the token Black friend in countless situations led to my realization that too commonly, people can't put themselves in another person's skin if it is a different color than their own. I was called an Oreo on many occasions by both friends, and bullies.

I am Black. I am dark skinned, ebony, copper, etc. When I looked in the mirror, I couldn't see myself in the white friends I had been pining after, striving to be like. I couldn't keep up with pretty that came at the cost of biweekly perms which chemically altered the genetic makeup of my hair and left my scalp burning as straight jet black strands touched my shoulders. I couldn't keep up with the pretty that forced me to watch Disney Channel and pretend that Hannah Montana looked just like me. I couldn't keep up with the pretty that left me when the lights turned off because other kids said I was so dark that they couldn't see me. I couldn't. Instead, I could see the similarities in the people I claimed to hate. I saw dark skin and kinky, braided hair. The boldness that I had buried in myself for so long dissolved before its emergence because the pretty picture I had tried to maintain didn't look like me at all. I hated Black people. I hated myself.

So, I cut my hair. All the way short, to about a quarter inch of natural hair, the day before my freshman year. I embraced my physical roots, dealt with the usual teases that came with drastic style change, and then the following summer embarked on a journey of self-preservation, opting to practice mindfulness and self-love before being drowned out by my anxiety. To put it simply, I educated myself that summer, relying on facets of what would later become my go-to syllabus; on civil rights, activism, anarchy, intersectional feminism, all different tools which would prepare me for the move to come.

My first month in Kansas, while staying at a cousins' house, I biked to Price Chopper on a brisk summer morning and visited the Starbucks Café within. I was with my brother and cousin, and after ordering, an older man celebrating his 60th birthday alone invited us over to his table to sit. I'm not sure why we went over in the first place, but after discouraging the two boys about their future in basketball, the man latched onto me. Somehow my brother and cousin had escaped, leaving me with this man. He said that no matter how hard I tried, or how much I succeeded, "there would always be someone above" me, and I could "never be the highest" I could be. Not because I couldn't work hard enough. But because I am a female with a lower disposition for intelligence. And I am a dirty Black. This introduction to Kansas wasn't the finest. I left alone, mentally attacking myself for the way I froze as he said those words and accepted complacency as the best response to discrimination. The idea that the world is not designed to allow Black girls to excel is not a new concept. My femininity is just as big a part of me as my Blackness. The two do not outweigh or cancel each other out. What they equate to is an individual well versed in the ways that lies can erupt from the mouths of so many, in a desperate attempt to find within themselves the conviction to portray black women as if they were never left behind, and therefore receive no burden. A culmination of shared prejudice and the realization that I have potential far greater than what is expected is what led to me being at peace with my identity.

The term Oreo was built for me. It is my continual confusion over whether I should embrace the term that defines me more than anything else. If the definition of the word itself rings true, but the author of the definition has a skewed perception of the word, is it truly valid? I have a history of people in my family being labeled as Oreos. My grandfather ran away from home join the white missionaries in Kenya a few decades after their first introduction to the East African province. My mother and father came to the United States for an American education rather than the traditional one. I can either follow in their footsteps and embrace the label...or create a new one for myself. I just know that I don't plan to sacrifice my culture in the process.

Shane LaGesse

Grade 8

The Walk Short Story

Wydown Middle School
Clayton, MO
Teacher: Sandra Sermos

The sun slowly reached its peak over the cracked and dry desert, casting a brilliant and scorching glow over the landscape. A lone girl cast a shadow onto the earth, walking down an uneven dirt road. A slight limp was visible in her otherwise even gait. Her arms, down by her sides, carried two large buckets which held nothing more than a thin layer of dust. Her bare feet were dirty and rough. She kept her pace, arms sagging lower as minutes dragged on. Her destination was set, in the distance and it was almost as though she could make it out if she squinted her eyes correctly. The girl took step after step, yet it seemed that the small mark on the horizon neared no further. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and she wiped it away with her forearm to clear her vision.

Occasionally another person heading the opposite direction would glance over at the girl, but offered a muttered greeting or no acknowledgement. Those who passed by also held similar buckets, or pots, or other containers, though theirs were filled with murky water. The girl's traced those buckets, intensely focused on the rippling contents.

As her walk continued, the sun climbed further and further, its heat unrelenting. However, as the sun elevated, her destination became nearer, and it was now much larger on the horizon. The sun in the sky felt unmoving, but she pushed on, and by her bare feet, small patches of somewhat green vegetation began to appear more often. More frequently, the occasional lizard began to appear, darting from beneath rocks and the leaves of small shrubs and bladed plants to avoid the heat of the sweltering sun. After what seemed to be decades, she arrived at her destination: a small pool of water, surrounded by a weak growth of plant life.

The sun, now higher than before, easily illuminated the pool of water, turning the clear pool into one of bright reflection and light. Gathered around it were other women, both young and older. All of them had exhausted looks on their faces, and were filling large buckets with the dark yet shining liquid. The girl neared the edge of the water, and placed the buckets down by her side. Though she knew that the water was not clean, nor safe to drink, she reached down and immediately began cupping and drinking the water with her hands.

After she felt as if her thirst had been quenched, she sat back. Beside her, another girl who seemed roughly her age sat down. The new girl also leaned down and began to drink. The first watched for a moment, but then remembering what she needed to do, picked up one of her buckets and dipped it into the pond. She pulled it out, and though the buckets were not entirely too heavy, her worn out arms ached with fatigue. She did the same with her other, and then slowly stood. The others paid little attention to her, focused on filling their own buckets.

The girl looked out into the distance in the direction from which she had come. The road lay ahead of her as if it were a branch from a tree, stretching off into the unseen distance, caught in a haze of burning, cracked dirt and the illusion of movement in the air generated by the heat. The world seemed bare, frozen in a state of blankness and lifelessness. This was what the girl was used to; this sight familiar to her.

She took a breath, her throat calmed from the pool yet still lacking. Again wiping the sweat from her brow with her forearm, careful to not spill the contents of the buckets, she began the long walk home. The buckets' contents sloshed, and threatened to spill out onto the cracked earth and evaporate. The girl stayed balanced, though, and carried them in a way to reduce the splashing. The progress was slower than

it was on the way there, the water acting as deadweight.

Still, the girl pushed on. She had a new sense of purpose, refreshed by the water just as her throat had been. Though the sun was hot, and her body heavy with fatigue, she had a goal, a purpose, and she knew that she could make the journey ahead. So, down the endless, hot, and dry path she walked. Her arms did not hang limp by her sides, they carried the buckets with strength. Her steps were not limping, but firm. Into the horizon she marched, through the barren, seemingly infinite desert.

Erin Lamping

Grade 8

Tumbling in the Waves
Personal Essay/Memoir

John Burroughs School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Megan Zmudczynski

The sun beats down on all of us today, no matter who we are. Glistening sweat drips down our faces, mixing with the glitter face paint that adorns our cheeks, and the sunscreen we had hastily lathered on. So much love packed onto one tiny city street in Columbus, Ohio. Water is passed around, and we down every last bottle. One might wonder why we don't just give in to the sweltering summer weather and go home. Well, we have a job to do: we are marching in one of the biggest pride parades in America! My mom and I are visiting our relatives in Ohio this week in June, and since my oldest cousin, Greta is marching with her church youth group, we all excitedly joined in as soon as we found out. I feel like a tiny fish in a sea of color. I never would have guessed that I would feel so comfortable among one million people I didn't know.

My family is probably one of the most loving and accepting families there is. We love and support each other and our friends, no matter how bizarre we act, or how much we change. My grandfather was a preacher for the United Church of Christ, which is a very liberal, "open and affirming" church that my mom and her siblings grew up in. He would preach about everything from LGBTQIA+ rights to civil rights to women's rights, which is just one of the many reasons I wish I could've met him. Known for helping others and spontaneous ping pong games, my grandpa Paul was a very lovely man.

After what seems like an eternity, people finally begin to move, the whole herd of us shuffling into action. Drag queens and human rainbows on stilts dance around us as our ears fill with the sounds of music and shouts of joy, and our hearts swell with uninhibited pride and glee. We march down street after city street, cheering and laughing with each other, having almost completely forgotten the imposing sweat stains we all wear. We come to a bridge, and as we cross it, I notice that several people have planted themselves along the sides. They too are holding signs, but these say things like "Adam and Eve, NOT Adam and Steve", "Homosexuality is a SIN", and "God HATES you." I feel like a soda bottle that has been shaken up. I am filled with sadness, anger, and too many questions all at once. This isn't the first time I have seen these people, and I know it won't be the last, but I can't help but want to scream in their faces.

I remember my mom telling me about her religious beliefs. Actually, after pondering religion myself, my beliefs aren't much different from hers. I remember her looking me in the eye and saying, "The god I believe in doesn't hate anyone, or want anybody to be anything but themselves. They don't control what happens, or who dies and when." I think I like the idea that there is something out there watching, something bigger than us.

As the parade comes to a close, the crowds begin to thin and my group splits up. As we are walking back to the car, we pass another group of anti-gay protesters, all huddled together and yelling about what horrible people we are. They say we will all burn in hell. I would burn in hell any day if it meant I would be with the people I love, having lived a life full of acceptance, expression, and self-pride.

We walk into a Tim Horton's to get some donut holes and lemonade, and all the while I stare out the window at the protesters, their faces angry, their skin a dead grey. I don't understand how someone could worship a god that hates their own people.

At the beach, there are so many kinds of shells and pebbles, each with its own unique pattern and color, getting tossed around by the tumultuous waves. The water weathers them the same, no matter how rough or smooth, big or small, or plain or intricate they are. With each passing wave, those pebbles and

shells knock together, tumbling and chipping away at one another until what's on the inside is visible. Their rough edges, become soft to the touch, all of the tiny bits running together to create one substance, mixing and mingling until you can't tell one grain from the next. No bit is better than the next just because of its shimmer, and no chunk is lesser than its neighbor because it has a couple rough edges.

Isobel Li

Grade 7

Reincarnated

Science Fiction/Fantasy

California Trail Middle School

Olathe, KS

Teacher: Adriane Taylor

Carla stood up slowly. The group had gathered in a dormitory basement today, and it was finally time for the ritual they did for people entering the group.

Taking up a thin rod, she handed it to the leader, who took it from her, and dragged it across a bed of hot coals.

Carla grimaced as the leader raised the rod, and brought it onto her skin.

...

The old house was believed to be haunted. From rumors that a mass murderer had stayed there for a few months to the reported sightings of an eerie ghost girl, nobody wanted to have anything to do with the house.

Well, almost nobody.

A hidden society of people known as the demon-hunters kept a close watch on the mansion. They were right in being suspicious and casting a watchful eye over the house, because the Satanic cult that met there was dangerous.

The actual mansion was originally the pride of the town. It was made of brick and stone, and flowers and statues adorned the yard. Since then, much had changed and people tried to avoid the house as much as possible.

Nobody really knew what went on inside. All they knew was that it wasn't a place to be explored. Never.

...

"Carla," a voice said in her ear. Carla sat straight up, then groaned. The skin on her arm was tingly, but it didn't hurt.

Seared away in her skin was a small pattern, as well as an identification number.

"Carla, get up."

Carla obliged, and stood up, wobbly. The two people, Aaron and Colleen, steadied her on her feet. Then they led her to a stairwell.

Ascending the stairs, the three members walked into an empty, small classroom.

"You do know what you're in, right?" Colleen asked, studying Carla's face carefully. Carla nodded her head slowly, and looked up at the siblings.

“Tell us what you know then,” Aaron said.

Her entire body ached, and she knew that wasn't the end of it.

“I'm a part of the demon-hunters,” she whispered.

...

Sammi watched from the couch as their house angel assembled the ingredients for a cake. It was her and her sister's birthday the next day, and everyone in their household was in a rush to complete everything.

“There will be a time when you separate, sisters. But don't lose hope. Love is a fierce weapon.” The angel said in a musical voice. Emily and Sammi looked at each other.

They probably should've been slightly panicked, but their reactions were quite mild. Hearing their house angel say these things were pretty normal, so they decided not to worry about it.

“You two should go and finish up your thank you cards,” the angel suggested. The girls nodded, and hurried upstairs.

...

“Look at this!” Aaron said over their communication watch. He sent a link for a video, which Carla clicked on.

“Sammi and Emily Cole, both 11, are missing. If you see them, please contact May and Robert Cole at 1-555-683-2894. The two were last seen at the Jones Mansion, according to their parents.”

The screen was replaced by two tearful parents standing by a blonde news anchor with an outrageous hairdo.

“Again, please contact these parents at 1-555-683-2894, if you know anything about their whereabouts. Please watch for Sammi and Emily Cole.”

The video ended.

“What was that?” Carla messaged Aaron.

“Those two girls are missing, and now the group has decided that we're going to figure out where they went. There's a lead on how the girls are actually *in* the Jones Mansion, and Rob swears that it has something to do with the cult.”

“So..... we're going to meet there today?”

“Yep, at exactly 9:38 pm. Don't be late.” Aaron replied.

“What if the cult is there today? Just because I'm a Demon-Hunter doesn't mean I enjoy killing.. or being killed!”

Aaron cleared his throat. “Um actually, they are meeting today, according to when they've met for the past year. We're going to do some spying, and get the girls out if they're inside.”

Carla sighed. “I signed up for this? Okay, see you later.”

...

Roden and Julie were early to the meeting.

The walls were covered in their graffiti. Much of the furniture was burned or badly destroyed - the aftermath of their rituals.

Julie's dark blonde hair and pale skin glowed faintly in the red light emitting from the basement. Roden joined her at the top of the stairs, looking down inside.

"Julie, Roden. The rest of us are here." A low voice said.

The two turned around, and the rest of the group certainly was there. All of them had gathered in a circle, with an empty spot for both of them.

"Can we begin?" Chrissy, the leader, asked. She had white hair and sickly white skin, and tattoos swirled around her arms.

"We're ready." Calloused hands grasped each other, and the chanting grew louder and louder. A moaning noise escaped from down below. The spirits were *awake*.

...

Emily had been here before, and she was sure of it. The flames licking at her toes seemed like a familiar sensation. The unfriendly looking spirits seemed like family.

Sammi was a few feet away, her tangled hair in a matted mess.

The heat of the air around her made Emily feel strangely alert. Sammi, on the other hand, looked like she had blacked out.

Suddenly, Emily saw a recognizable face in front of hers.

"We're here, Master."

...

Carla had never been on a truly dangerous gig with the other Hunters. She had dressed in the typical attire - black combat boots, black leather pants, and a black shirt. Clutched in one hand was a dagger.

The rest of the demon-hunters had already gathered at the side of the house.

She joined a few others in going to the far side of the building - the back door. The garden was an overgrown mess, and the tangle of shrubs and menacing vines blocked their way.

Tessa withdrew her knife. "C'mon, guys. Let's go." The entire group unsheathed their knives and began hacking at the thorny branches.

"Here," she said, pulling away one last vine. "Okay, we're going to sneak in, but just stay in one spot for now."

The hunters filed into the empty hallway. In their dark clothes, they blended in with the shadows perfectly.

“Now what?” Somebody asked.

“Now we wait for the signal,” Tessa said grimly.

...

“Emily.” A figure spoke out from within the gloom. “You’ve finally come back.”

Emily shifted, and stirred a little. “What is this place?” Instead of her typical voice, the words came out in a scratchy growl.

Sammi shrieked.

“Silence you fool! We are witnessing something amazing!” Another figure roared.

“No! My sister has been possessed by the demonic spirits and I can feel it!” Sammi continued yelling. “Get it out of her now!”

Someone chuckled. “So the girl can sense their presences,” the group murmured. Sammi scowled and thrashed around wildly.

The first figure stepped into the light of the flames, white hair braided complicatedly, eyes on fire. “You are our Master, the fallen angel, the devil himself. Once defeated by the Christian God, you have risen again into the form of a young girl, ready for revenge.”

“Uhhmmm,” Sammi sputtered, “she’s not your Master! She’s my sister!” Sammi continued protesting, trying desperately to kick a nearby person.

The rest of the people grinned wickedly as they stepped into the light.

“No, she’s our Master - the Master that will reign over the world, the Master that will return to glory, the Master that requires a *sacrifice*.”

Sammi shrieked.

“Silence! What is this place?” Emily repeated in the same awful voice.

All the members of the cult knelt down, and said together, “This is the entrance to Hell.”

Emily could now feel the memories returning, the destruction she had caused, the terror she’d stirred up, and the embarrassing downfall.

“Your kingdom is all ready, and has been ready since the Fall. We are prepared to serve.” A boy promised. His tattoos seemed to shift in the flickering flame.

“The kingdom can wait.” Emily was opening her mouth, but it wasn’t Emily talking. It was Satan, the fallen one. “Sacrifice the girl.”

“No!” Sammi shouted and kicked, but she was taken down by the people and led even deeper into Hell.

...

Colleen was part of the group that had been stationed on the west side of the building. Carla’s team had

been sent to the North side, and Colleen watched them disappear into the forestry.

Then she had a terrible realization.

“Oh, no. Janet,” Colleen whispered, “Where’s Rob?”

Janet surveyed the area around her. “Oh no, where *is* Rob?”

“Jacey! Jacey!” A voice cried out from inside the house.

“*What?*” Colleen listened again. “Oh, he’s calling out our initials! What are we going to do?”

Janet looked down and sighed. “Let’s go.” She pressed down on her communication watch twice and all the demon-hunters were alerted with a simple message: it’s time.

...

Hell was a wasteland of sulfuric acid, poison rivers, and flaming grasses.

As Emily/Satan led the procession down the glowing red landscape, a loud thump behind them made everyone jump.

Rob was there, holding a sword to Emily’s throat. Sammi screamed so hard that the cult members involuntarily let go of her. And she ran.

Grabbing Rob by the neck, Sammi wildly pushed him away from her demonic sister. In that moment, Sammi had forgotten Emily was the Devil.

“Get off of me! That’s Satan you’re helping!” Rob shouted out. “J! C!” He shook Sammi off angrily.

The demon-hunter advanced towards Emily, ignoring Sammi’s cut up face and limbs, but a cult member easily disarmed him.

“J! C!” He yelled out once more, completely regretting his decision. He’d been incredibly stupid going alone, and he truly needed the others.

As if on cue, Carla and Janet were the first ones that descended into the fiery land.

Daggers flashing, they managed to make some of the others back off; the rest of the hunters appeared, and the real battle began, with Carla stuck in the middle of the craziness.

...

Essentially, all hope was lost for the demon-hunters. Emily/Satan’s forces were strong, and basically unbeatable. Many on both sides were already wounded.

Carla wearily slashed at an advancing figure. When she got a better look at her opponent, she was surprised to see that their eyes were an intense red.

“Carla,” the girl said easily, “why don’t you just give up now?”

“No,” Carla said, breathing heavily. She jabbed at the red-eyed girl, who easily sidestepped it.

“Be logical. Surely you don’t think you’ll win,” the girl added slyly. “After all, I’m Chrissy. The leader.”

With a piercing yell, Chrissy began attacking viciously. Carla, being very inexperienced, nervously stepped to the fight.

Around her, the forces of Satan were overpowering their failing opponents.

It really didn’t look so good.

...

12 years ago and 100 miles away, a girl and her dog Lucky were skipping around on the sidewalk.

Aurora’s red blonde hair bounced around with every step, as she played catch with her pet.

Suddenly, the ball rolled into the street. Lucky lunged for it, and Aurora found herself running after him.

Sprawled on the ground, lay an unconscious girl, her dying dog licking her tears away.

The impact of the car was the worst, and one of the last moments of her life.

...

Dr. Lahey had dealt with lots of people in his life. The annoying cries of a toddler were well known to him. Fussy parents and friends who insisted on seeing their patient were all a familiar thing. Grieving parents often passed through the doors of the Sunrise Medical Complex as well.

He watched as two sad faced people entered his office.

“Is Rory alright?” The red-faced woman asked. Her eyes matched her complexity.

“Aurora, our daughter.” The man clarified.

Dr. Lahey sighed, clasping his hands together. “Your daughter is barely living, and it’s your decision whether or not to take her off life support.”

The woman shook her head repeatedly. “Keep her on support,” she said, choking up a little.

The man closed his eyes. “Barely living is the same as not living. She’s suffering. We have to relieve her of that.”

The doctor waited patiently as the two argued through tears. Finally they agreed on a decision.

“Take her off,” the man said softly.

“Okay,” Dr. Lahey said gently, “would you like to see her?” He looked up at the mournful parents quickly.

Both nodded. The doctor led them to a room where a few nurses bustled around, busy. The nurses silently moved out of the room when they saw the doctor and parents.

Aurora’s eyes were open, showing the green eyes her and her mother shared. Her hair had been pulled back away from the tubes with a blue barrette, which matched her hospital gown.

The woman looked away, fresh tears running down her face. “Take her out of her misery, doctor. I want to leave.”

The doctor nodded and escorted the pair out of the room.

Aurora still lay there, an eerie expression on her calm face.

...

She tried to move, but found she couldn't. Then she saw her parents enter the room.

“I'm not dead!” She wanted to scream. But no noise came out of her unmoving body.

Then the doctor left the room with her parents. Aurora really wanted to call them back, but she wasn't able to.

The doctor returned after a few minutes, stepped up to her bedside machine, and everything went black.

Aurora's thoughts dissipated. Her breathing slowed to a stop.

A bright light began to glow gradually in front of her. It was like traveling through a tunnel, with light shining from the other end.

Aurora was finally able to move. She was in a place of clouds, and nothing more. A low voice rumbling through the sky made her jump up, startled.

“Would you like to live again?”

Aurora hesitated. “I think I'd like to go back down,” she decided finally.

The voice sighed audibly. “Very well then.”

...

The baby weighed 7.5 pounds, and had a head full of red-blond curls. Her proud parents admired the girl, smiling.

“We'll call you Nora,” the mother decided, “Nora Elise Carlson has such a nice ring to it.” The father nodded in agreement.

“Okay, Nora,” the mother said happily. “Your sister will be so glad to see you. Meet Julie.”

...

Carla wearily slashed at the red-eyed girl. Chrissy chuckled, sensing her tiredness.

“You'll never make it out of here alive,” she snarled. “Behind us stand the forces of Satan himself.”

Wheezing a little, Carla dodged the advancing girl and suddenly had an idea. It was huge risk, but if it worked... She tapped her tattoo twice. A pain seared up her arm, and she dropped her blade and stumbled onto the ground.

Chrissy laughed meanly, and raised her sword. Carla flinched. “What did I tell you?” the girl laughed.

And like knights in shining armor, the rest of the demon-hunters wielding knives and swords charged into the fray.

Two of them hurried straight to Sammi, who accepted a dagger of her own.

“Summon them,” Chrissy rasped, angry. Emily/Satan struck down the gates of Hell, and a torrent of angry spirits and ghouls whisked out.

The spirits were easy to defeat, but there were so many of them. Suddenly, there was a loud banging noise.

The door fell down, and a girl stepped into the room.

...

Nora was ten now, Julie sixteen. Their relationship was very bad now - they were drifting apart.

Julie had been hanging with a bad crowd, and Nora was even more appalled to hear that she wanted to live with that group.

“Nora, stop asking questions.” Julie grumbled.

Nora sighed. “I only wanted to know where you go those nights.”

Julie ignored her, and hurried up to her room where she grabbed her bag of supplies, and climbed out the window where her friends waited in a car.

She didn’t even notice Nora following.

...

Nora grinned when their car tire blew. The group was reduced to walking on foot, which made it easy for her to follow them to the house.

Inside, a battle raged, and she wanted it to stop.

...

“Who is that girl? We have to get her out of here,” Janet worried.

“Oh, she’s not going anywhere,” Julie smirked. “Right, sis?” She twirled her sword around, advancing slowly.

All fighting ceased, as everyone watched intently.

“Jules..” The girl mumbled.

“I don’t go by that anymore.” Julie said, slashing off Nora’s shirtsleeve, which revealed a small, familiar tattoo with an infinity sign.

“She’s the forever,” Aaron whispered.

...

The fighting resumed quickly, as a few demon-hunters surrounding Nora protectively.

“There’s still time for a sacrifice,” Emily/Satan roared. “Get Nora, Sammi, and as many of the others you can!”

“Nora, you’re the Forever,” Carla whispered to the girl. “Love is Forever. Truth is Forever. Use your power.”

Nora looked utterly and hopelessly confused.

“Perhaps we’ll have the hunters watch the sacrifices,” the Devil mused. “It’d dampen their spirits.”

Nora felt a pulsing sensation in her veins, and she knew what to do. The flames of love combatted the burning hatred. The pureness of truth shoved away the Satanists.

They were free.

The Devil roared in anger, and its power pulsed through the air, where some hunters stood. Nora stood in front of them, absorbing the shock, and dying.

Satan slunk away into deeper Hell as Sammi and the rest of the group mourned for the Forever.

...

In a nearby hospital, a girl with red-blond hair was birthed to a young couple.

“Her name will be Laura,” the mother proclaimed, “and she’ll be an impact to this world.”

But unbeknownst to the parents, she already had.

“In the midst of death there is life.”

Anna Lindquist
Grade 12

A Pronoun, a Name, a Transformation
Journalism

Francis Howell North High School
Saint Charles, MO
Teacher: Jani Wilkens

He was in early ninth grade when he first heard the word transgender.

After years of trying to find himself, of searching to understand the raw feelings of discomfort, junior Adrien Fiely had finally found a label that seemed to explain how he had felt all his life. He came out to his friends and family as a transgender female to male last year.

“When people would refer to me as she, when they would refer to me as my birth name, it didn’t really click,” Fiely said. “It’s as if someone were to get your name wrong and keep calling you that name. You feel kind of like ‘Oh, that’s not right.’ That’s how it felt with me and the pronouns I was born with.”

The initial coming out process wasn’t a big spectacle, according to Fiely. It happened over a period time, his parents slowly realizing he wasn’t comfortable with his pronouns.

“When people would call me male or refer to me as he at a restaurant or something with my parents, the server would hear my voice and be like ‘Oh. Sorry, ma'am,’” Fiely said. “I would get upset when they would try to explain to people that I was born female. From there, my parents sort of realized something was wrong. They realized that maybe this isn't how I feel. So my mom came to me and asked me what was going on. It took me a little while to explain to her and everything. My mom has become more supportive. It wasn’t immediate, and even now my mom still struggles with the whole topic of calling me by the right name or by the right pronouns. I'm her kid. Of course, it was going to be hard for her.”

For his friends, though, it was different. He had told a group of his friends he was questioning his gender and experimenting with what he thought he would feel more comfortable with. They were automatically very supportive of his decision.

“I really just went down the spectrum at first,” Fiely said. “I thought maybe I feel more comfortable as neutral gender, maybe I’m more comfortable identifying as demiboy, maybe I want male pronouns. I would then tell my friends what pronoun I preferred until I figured out I wanted male pronouns. It was a whole transition of me accepting myself and gradually becoming more masculine. I just figured out how I was more comfortable.”

Even before he had truly settled on his pronouns, he knew that he wanted to change his name. His birth name, Jada, felt too feminine and didn’t match the person he felt he was. At first, he felt afraid people weren’t going to call him what he preferred, but decided it would be best for him. He also decided to change his appearance to coincide with how he felt he should look.

“I use binders and I ended up cutting my hair really short,” Fiely said. “I used to try to be what would stereotypically be masculine. I tried to take that stereotypical image of what is male and apply it to myself, but now since I've progressed, I am more comfortable with how I am and how I look that fits my

personality and my style but isn't necessarily the typical male fashion. I'm coming into my own personality. I like to dye my hair. I can wear whatever colors I want.”

Fiely said he can't get sex reassignment surgery, a surgery that changes the sex of an individual, because of the medical costs, but he hopes to one day fully transition. Some transgender individuals, like Fiely who want to transition but can't, feel gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is the distress a person feels when they don't believe they were born as the right gender.

“Because I can't get the surgery, it's been hard for me,” Fiely said. “Before I could do binding, because they're slightly expensive, I would use unhealthy methods to try and cover myself. Sometimes, [gender dysphoria] would really hit and I'd have to talk to my friends about it. They told me to look to the future. They told me that it feels like a big thing now but you kind of have to look at yourself and think to yourself, ‘This is how I was born, and I can't change it right now. You have to overcome the locked-in-yourself feeling and look toward the future and what you want for yourself.’”

After fully coming out to his friends and his parents, finding himself and feeling comfortable with himself, he decided to tell some of his teachers. Having a positive learning environment was important to Fiely. He thought that maybe teachers would get the wrong impression from him if he said he preferred to use male pronouns.

“I didn't mention it to some teachers because that was the first time they had seen me,” Fiely said. “So I would write my name and then in parentheses my birth name, just in case, because that's the name that's on the roster. My history teacher actually came up to me and said, ‘So, you prefer to go by Adrien?’ because I said that and I put it on my papers. I feel like that reflects about how much teachers understand if you want to go by a different name. It made me feel a lot better about it.”

During the time Fiely was questioning his identity, he decided to join the club Gay-Straight Alliance to find more people to connect with. He immediately joined as a representative for his grade and has been involved since.

“I loved having people that could talk so openly and share experiences,” Fiely said. “It was such an amazing thing to me for people to come together and talk about this and for no one to be really targeted. This made people feel safe.”

This year, he has become president and is a leader to the students who join.

“He's a role model in GSA,” sponsor Amy Field said. “He's very approachable. He has shown a lot of leadership. He shares his experiences, and he has always been there for the students.”

GSA is a positive, safe place for LGBT students at FHN, but outside of that community, transgender individuals feel afraid of persecution, according to Fiely. Already in 2017, 18 transgender people have been killed for suspected hate crimes in the U.S., the Human Rights Campaign reported.

“I fear going out in public and being attacked because I get stares and everything,” Fiely said. “I'm not sure why they would look at me. At first, I don't know if they're threatened by me or if I'm just different. I rarely use restrooms out in public. There's a fear of someone freaking out on me, and it's the panic and the anxiety that goes along with going out in public.”

Because of the fear of going to the bathroom in a dangerous environment, Fiely avoids using it throughout the day, even here at FHN.

“I used to not drink water during the day, and completely, no matter how badly I needed to go to bathroom, I would not go to the bathroom at all,” Fiely said. “I would have waited all day. I won't use guys restrooms here because I know a lot of people will look at me. I gravely fear being attacked so I get a pass as a last resort when I'm not likely to be with anyone.”

If someone is persecuted or attacked or ridiculed at FHN, GSA goes as a group to the principal to report the incident.

"It's kinda like we stand together instead of one person alone," GSA vice-president Bree Williams said. "If you have a group behind you, you feel safer and they take us more seriously."

Even though the fear of being assaulted is constant, Fiely tries to present his true self anyway.

“Now that I've learned more about myself, I've learned about what I'm comfortable with,” Fiely said. “I've gotten a lot louder. I used to be quiet and shy and clinging to the closet, and now I can be bubbly and talky. I'm happy talking with people and saying, ‘This is my name and this is my pronoun.’ Now that I've come out over and over again, you get used to it. I've accepted myself.”

MacKenzie Mansel

Grade 11

A Lesson in Loss

Personal Essay/Memoir

Republic High School

Republic, MO

Teacher: Lisa Deckard

Some things in life have to be experienced to be understood. When someone talks to you about what it feels like to send a child off to college, you can nod and say it must have been hard. When someone talks to you about falling in love, you can share in their joy as if your heart knows that feeling. And, when someone talks to you about loss, you can pretend to understand the pain while helping them grieve. There is only so much you can seem to have empathy for. It is only when one of these things happens to you, *really* happens, do you finally understand.

Two years ago, when I was fourteen years old, I could truly empathize with loss of a loved one. My grandmother, at the young age of sixty-four, died of ovarian cancer. Before I go into the feelings, heartache, and process of the experience, there is something she would want me to say. My grandmother was the most stubborn and headstrong woman a woman could be, and that is saying quite a lot. Never once, in the two years she was very sick, did she allow herself to say she was in pain; or that she needed help; or that she was not going to make it. To her, every trouble she had experienced in life was just a small roadblock to overcome.

The attitude and hope she possessed helped my grandfather a lot. However, it did not fool my mom. I remember talking to her after my grandmother had passed. I had asked when the cancer's symptoms really began. My mother had sullenly replied, "Your grandmother had been sick for as long as I can remember. She was just amazing at hiding it."

At the time, I was angry. Angry at my grandmother for making her overwhelming sickness such a surprise; angry that she would allow all of us to have hope ripped from our grasps; angry at myself for not realizing it.

Now, I can look back at it and understand. Sometimes, when it comes to love, it is best to keep things hidden. It is better to hide something than expose it and see the pain it inflicts. I can finally understand that my grandmother loved my family so much she could not bear to see us grieve with her still alive. In the beginning, it started with more frequent phone calls between my mom and her dad. Her phone would ring and she would hide away in the bedroom, keeping her voice low as my grandfather updated her on his wife. My mom never told my brother or me right away what the news was. I knew part of it was for our sake, but I also knew it was mainly because if she were to tell us what was happening, it would make it too real. Too concrete.

Eventually, the phone calls were not enough. It was time for my family to visit my grandparents in St. Louis where we could see for ourselves and offer support. I remember the first conversation between me, my brother, and my mom. This was when the ovarian cancer was pronounced official, so it was still the very early stage.

"There's something your father and I have been needing to tell you," my mom had said. Ironically, my father was never part of these conversations.

"What is it?" My older brother asked.

"You know your grandmother has been struggling for a while- in and out of hospitals. Today she had a consultation with her doctor. He informed your grandparents that she has stage four ovarian cancer."

"What is that?" My brother asked. I was not able to speak, taking time to process the news.

"It's a form of cancer that badly affects the ovaries. It's still early on, so we don't know exactly what's to happen from here. We just know that your grandma will be very sick for a while, probably out of it

often as well. I just wanted you to be prepared for that when we visit.”

My brother, being the wannabe doctor he was, had asked more questions. He had asked about cancer treatments, what the stages meant, even costs. Whatever my mom could not answer he would research. He became a good source of information for my parents to go to when they had questions about future treatments. I was just glad someone in the family was keeping together.

When we arrived at their house in St. Louis, the first thing I noticed was the big brown piece of furniture replacing my grandmother’s favorite reclining chair.

“A friend of ours gave us this chair to replace the old one. He said it would be better on your mother’s back when she’s home from the hospital,” my grandfather had explained to my mom.

It shouldn’t have been a big deal, that new chair. Even so, it was not the chair itself that struck a chord in my heart, it was the change. My grandparents had been the same sickeningly romantic, humorous, loving, spoiling pair since I had been born. I always knew what to expect when we visited. This...this was a hint at what to come. A hint that nothing would ever be the same as it was in these four walls of their house.

Hospitals. The stinging scent of antiseptic, the dim overhead lights, the constant beeping of machines every few steps. This building, over the next month, would become as familiar as my own home. If an acquaintance were to ask me today why I hate hospitals I would simply say it is because of the noise.

What follows, however, is the true reason.

My grandfather explained how grandma would have frequent visitors. She was always a loved and known woman. Her visitors ranged from church friends to close sisters. However, my family’s first visit with her would luckily only be us.

“I figured she would be sleeping,” my grandfather said as we stepped into the cramped room. She shared the space with another lady whose bed was hidden from view. The walls were white, the lights were dim, and every blue curtain by the two beds were drawn closed besides the one that would obscure my grandmother from view.

My mom silently walked to her mother’s side. We all watched as the older lady’s chest moved up and down in ragged breaths. “She doesn’t look too bad,” my mom whispered. I glanced at my grandmother’s face. She looked the same; the only difference being the absence of the brown and poofy hair she once prized. My brother later explained to me that hair fell out as a side effect of chemotherapy.

Not long after, she opened her eyes. Her slim smile greeted us, too hazy to form words. “Hey mom,” my own mother broke out, grabbing her hand, “how are you doing?”

My grandmother cleared her throat. “Alright. When did you get here?”

“A few minutes ago,” my grandfather replied.

“Do you need anything?” My mom asked. She shook her head. She usually did.

We did not stay very long, for it was late and we knew she needed rest. My grandfather insisted on staying another night in the hospital room, sleeping on the uncomfortable chair. I knew my mom would have as well but we could not stay in her old home without her; It was already going to be strange without the two people who gave the place heart and warmth.

We were up in St. Louis for three days. Each day we visited the hospital, staying for both breakfast and lunch. (Hospital food is not the worst thing, as most people believe.) She seemed to get better each visit.

She stayed awake most of the time, coming as a surprise to everyone. Even though I was young I did not mind staying in that small room, rotating turns sitting in the big chair. I entertained myself with iPads, books, and drawing. At fourteen years old I knew the importance of family when one was sick.

We went back home to Springfield only when the nurse informed us grandma would be out of the hospital soon. She was going to be off the chemotherapy for a while. My mom did not seem relaxed by that news, however. She continued to have phone calls with her dad every night. She was determined not to be surprised again.

A week later was when it happened. She got the call that would drastically change the upcoming few days for all of us.

I was not home at the time, so I was the last to hear about it. My parents broke it to me when they picked me up from Dairy Queen after a speech tournament. I had my ice cream with me in the car, happily telling them about my day.

“We have some news to tell you,” my mother started when I finished talking, glancing at me through the rear-view mirror. “Your grandpa called to tell me about grandma. He uh, he said that she’s back in the hospital.” She paused to let that sink in. “He also said that she,” my mom could not look me in the eye anymore, “she doesn’t have much longer to live. So we’re going to head up there tonight to see her.”

I dropped the ice cream cup onto my lap, staring down at the spoon now dripping with chocolate syrup. My lip trembled and I breathed deeply.

“Do you have any questions?” My mom asked in the saddest voice imaginable.

My eyes watered over as I mumbled out a no. I could not hold back the tears any longer, letting it spill over my forgotten ice cream.

“I’m so sorry. I’m sorry we had to tell you this tonight, ruining what appeared to be a good day,” my mom cried. I shook my head, wanting to tell her it was not her fault, but too angry and upset to do so. When we got home I had to pack quickly, for everyone else already had. I did not want to know how long they had been sitting on the news. My brother was stone cold, eyes puffy, face red. I had never seen him cry up to that moment. We headed straight to the St. Louis hospital, arriving around ten at night. My grandfather was already there to guide us to her room. She had been placed in a bigger space. Her roommate this time was set up diagonally from her, not very common in hospitals. All the lights were off and my grandmother had blankets pulled up to her chin.

My mom took her usual place to the right of the hospital bed. We all peered at the still and sleeping face. She looked ten years older. Pale, yet gray; White hair barely even wisps atop her head; Her wrinkles jiggling on her sagging skin with each breath.

My brother could barely look at her. My mom could not look away.

“How long has she been sleeping?” My dad asked, standing to the left of the bed.

“She’s barely ever awake. It’s been a couple of days,” my grandfather answered, staring at his wife. We stood around the bed for a while, not talking. None of us wanted to leave. Nobody wanted to admit this could be her last night.

Then her eyes opened. A machine started beeping.

“Pat?” My grandfather calmly said. Her eyes were barely squinting, her head turning to each of us, no recognition forming.

When her eyes found my dad she stopped. “Richard...”

Nurses came in as she fell back into what we hoped was sleep. My mom began to cry as she realized her mom had forgotten our names, besides my dad’s. My dad had to pull my brother and me out of the room, his own eyes welling up. The three of us left the hospital that night, hearts weighed down by a stone of guilt. We did not want to be gone when it happened. But not all of us could stay there until morning.

The next day was filled with visitors. It seemed that everyone who knew my grandmother wanted to see her one last time. She would have been happy to know how many people came.

It is funny how sickness, and death, can bring families together. People you only see twice a year, coming together to help console and heal broken hearts. My great aunt and uncle, my cousin and her husband and her brother, my dad, my brother, and I. We came together as a team with one common goal—help my mom and grandfather through this impossibly tough time.

My great aunt loves talking. In times like these, I am thankful for that. She kept the atmosphere as light as it could be, talking about her fondest memories with her sister-in-law and best friend that was my grandmother. It helped bring a smile to my mom’s face. My grandfather tried but just could not bring himself to relax. We did not make him.

My grandmother died that same day. All of us were in the room, my grandpa holding onto her hand. My mom and great aunt were sitting on the couch next to the bed, talking about one of the memories of her. I was standing next to the couch listening and picturing it in my head, thinking of my own memories.

I remember the exact moment it happened. Call me crazy, but the air seemed to shift. My aunt even paused in her story, both her and my mom turning to look at my grandmother. We all watched as her eyes opened for a split second. My breath released, almost in relief.

Then her chest rose. And fell. And her complexion turned milky white.

My grandfather screamed. My mom and great aunt jumped up, calling for a nurse. I stared, numb. When

nurses arrived my dad yet again pulled me and my brother out of the room to a space across the hall that acted as a private waiting area.

I did not allow myself to cry for the longest time. I would not allow myself to believe it. Not when my grandfather screamed. Not when he refused to leave my grandmother's side as the nurses tried pulling the bed out of the room. Not even when my mom came to tell us he was going to take a moment alone to say some things to her lifeless body. It would be a while before it hit me.

That moment, now forever engraved in my brain, would change me. It would help me realize a few things. First, family is the most important thing a person has. They are who will be right by your side when things are bad. They are the ones that are going to put you back together when you are breaking inside and out. Family is not to be taken for granted. It is to be cherished.

Second, love is truly the strongest bond between two people. It will make you do crazy things. It will make you neglect your own basic needs when the one you love is in need. Love is what kept my grandfather stable. It is what drives him to this very day, two years after his wife's death. He knows that a love as strong as theirs will be what greets him in Heaven. But, he also knows that the love of his life would want him to continue on without her. Love is something that needs to be handled carefully, but it is needed for our own well-being.

Finally, grief is for the living, not for the dead. A loss is an event that will happen to everyone at some point. When it does, it is a chance for us to be reborn in a way. We are able to figure out what we need, what keeps us grounded, and who is there to help. After my grandmother died, that side of the family became very close-knit. In fact, we still are today. Loss brings people together because grief can only be experienced with those who understand. Loss is to be remembered.

When such a traumatic event happens to someone, it is that person's choice if they let it forever haunt them or if they let it give them new room to grow. My grandmother will forever be missed, but I know she would be happy with the outcome of how we handled her loss and how we turned out to be. When someone dies they will still be in your heart to guide you to get stronger, to overcome things in life without them. It is up to us to welcome that and allow it to make us stronger.

Tessa McGee

Grade 8

Exonerating Burdens

Short Story

Platte City Middle School

Platte City, MO

Teacher: Kim Roesle

The first thing Abigail Evans saw when she woke up was her laptop sitting on her desk. All it was made of was wires insides circuits and circuits contained inside a metal frame. But to Abi that computer was more than just physical features. It was on that computer that Abi could access the one social media page that dictated her life. Getting up and doing her best to ignore the laptop, Abi went to the bathroom. When she looked in the mirror, staring back at her was an average build, blue-eyed, brunette who looked like Abi. But Abi didn't feel like the 'popular' girl in the mirror that everyone else saw. She instead felt like a monster, a parasite, a miscreation, a coward. Abi caused people pain, and they didn't even know it was her.

On the walk to school, Abi wondered if today was the day. If she would walk into the school library and Jessica would be there ready to hand Abi a piece of paper with an unfortunate person's name on it, just like she had been doing for the past two and a half years. Jessica, to everyone around them, was Abi's best friend. To Abi, Jessica was her biggest nightmare come true. No matter how Abi illusioned herself, Jessica controlled every part of Abi's life. Not only her hair, clothes, and attitude, but also her persona. Abi knew who she wanted to be, it was the obstacles in her path and her burdens that suppressed her from being able to become that person.

On the days that Jessica handed Abi a piece of paper with someone's name on it Abi would go home or to the library and open a social media page. The name of the page was "The Reality of Darwick High" and Abi had written every single one of the 230 posts. Each post trashed a different person who went to Darwick High School and each post meant social harassment for the person who was posted about. Abi regretted every post that had been made and what it had done to the people she trashed publicly. It all boiled down to one choice that Abi wrestled with every day, every post, and every false smile. But did she really have a choice when standing up to Jessica meant sacrificing her future? Abi thought herself too weak for something that would take that much courage.

Reaching the school Abi opened the front doors and walked to the library. Shaking her head, Abi sat down at a table and focused on a mundane task to keep herself busy. She opened her backpack and pulled out her history book and homework that was due tomorrow. The first question asked, Why do we study history? Mr. Jefferies put the same question on every single one of his worksheets. When Abi had asked him why, he said, "Because the question's answer is something that I want to instill in my student's learning curriculum. It's important to the decisions you make as an adult and to the decisions you will make as a citizen."

Abi still didn't understand what he meant. She was more so looking for the answer he wanted her to put down, not why he included it. So, Abi wrote down the same answer she had for the other worksheets. Just as Abi had finished the worksheet, Jessica walked into the library with Logan. Logan and Jessica had been dating since homecoming and were the power couple of the school. Jessica was five foot tall, had long, straight black hair, a petite frame, brown eyes, a heart-shaped face, and was of Latino background. Logan was 6'1, had blonde hair, green eyes, and was stocky. They looked like pieces from two different puzzles, Abi had always thought. But to everyone else, they were couple goals.

Trailing after Logan and Jessica, was Logan's best friend Wes. Wes was 5'10, tan even in January, had floppy brown hair, pale blue eyes, and was broad shouldered. As everyone sat down at the table, Wes ended up next to Abi. He smiled at her and reached down into his backpack. Sitting back up he handed a

blueberry cake donut to Abi.

She took the donut and smiled a genuine smile at Wes. “Thanks so much. You don’t realize how much I needed this today.” Abi took a bite of the donut and closed her eyes. It was still warm.

Wes laughed. “I feel like that might have been an over exaggeration Abi E.”

Abi grinned, she liked it when Wes called her by the nickname he gave her. “Nope, this donut just really tastes that good.”

Abi’s day brightened a little after Wes’s surprise. Even though he didn’t know it, Abi counted Wes as her only true friend.

Besides the obvious public show of friendship, Jessica left Abi alone for the most part during the rest of the week. That was until science on Friday.

Jessica slid into her usual seat next to Abi. “I can give you a ride home today if you want.”

Abi knew that Jessica actually meant that she had an idea of who she wanted Abi to trash on the next “Reality” post.

“Thanks,” Abi replied. She took a deep breath and silently thanked her luck when Mr. Stim started class. Abi didn’t think she could go on for another minute pretending to make small talk when she knew what the end of the day entailed.

After the final bell rung, Abi met Jessica in the school’s student parking lot.

“Here, you forgot this in science.” Jessica handed Abi a piece of paper.

“Oh, thanks.” Abi summoned a false smile. Knowing what she had to do next, Abi looked around as if remembering she forgot something.

“Darnit, I forgot my social studies.”

Jessica played the concerned friend perfectly. “Do you want me to wait?”

Abi shook her head. “No, I can walk, go ahead.”

With a nod, Jessica pulled out of the parking lot. Watching her leave, Abi could almost remember the girl who had been her best friend until freshman year. The short girl whose parents had just gotten divorced, looking up at Abi with her doe-like eyes, to stop the people who kept calling her unwanted and unloved. That was another time, Abi reminded herself and she turned around and headed back into the library.

Once she was at the farthest corner from the doors, hidden behind the bookshelves, Abi opened her computer. After she pulled up the “Reality” page, Abi pulled out the piece of paper Jessica had given her. On it was the name Wes Adams.

Sucking in a deep breath, Abi sat for a minute. Could she really do this to the only person she could even remotely call a friend? Lost in her thoughts, Abi didn’t notice when someone walked up to her.

“Hey, are you okay?” Wes asked Abi bending down to sit next to her. “I’ve been worried about you lately.”

Abi couldn’t bring herself to look at Wes, she was a monster, he shouldn’t care about her. And here I am about to trash one of the most amazing people you can ever meet, she thought. Tears welled up in Abi’s eyes.

“Hey,” Wes turned Abi’s head with his hand. “What’s wrong?”

Abi glanced between the laptop and the paper. I can’t tell him, she thought. But when Wes scooped up the computer and piece of paper, Abi didn’t make a move to stop him. Maybe it was that she wanted it to be over, or that she wanted to stop faking her life, or simply because she couldn’t hurt Wes. Whatever it was, it stopped her from taking the computer back.

Wes’s face contorted as he realized what Abi was about to do. Bracing herself for the hate that he would now have for her she closed her eyes. She heard him close the computer slowly and rip up the paper.

“Abi, why?” Wes’s voice came out in a whisper. All the disappointment and hate Abi felt for herself was mirrored in Wes’s voice.

She could’ve lied and told him some made up story neither one of them would really believe. She could’ve protected him this way, instead, she was selfish. Wanting to release herself from the burden she felt, Abi told Wes her story.

“I guess this all started when Jessica and I became best friends in kindergarten. We were impossible to separate and everyone wanted to have a friendship like ours. In sixth grade when my mom left me and my

dad, Jessica was the person who helped me through the feelings of wondering if my mom loved me still or if she ever loved me at all. There wasn't a thing we didn't know about each other. I'm a leftie, she's ambidextrous. Jessica was supposed to be a twin, I was born in Idaho. We thought that nothing could ever come between us. That was until freshman year. Jessica's parents started to fight really bad at the beginning of the school year, two months later in October, they got divorced. Her dad moved to California, he didn't even tell Jessica goodbye. Because flying from South Carolina to California is expensive, he comes only once a year to visit. All the juniors and seniors would laugh at Jessica and ask her if her Daddy moved so he didn't have to live with a midget. All the things they would say about her height, appearance, and her mom and dad really hurt Jessica. Every day when we would walk home from school together, Jessica kept her emotions in until we stepped in the door of her bedroom. As she would close the door I would sit on the floor next to her bed. Setting down her backpack, she would always lean her head on my shoulder and her body would rack with silent tears. I knew what she felt, I knew every bit of that type of pain. So, for a year I would sit there holding my best friend as I lost her piece by piece. At this point, I was breaking right alongside her. While she became full of an overwhelming sadness, I became filled with hatred. Hatred for the people who made my best friend cry. Hatred for the people who didn't realize what they were doing to my best friend. Hatred for my mother and Jessica's father for making us feel unloved and causing us this pain. Hatred towards myself for not being able to help Jessica. This led me to create "The Reality of Darwick High" page. I poured all of my pain and Jessica's pain into trashing those girls who had dared to laugh at Jessica. The first 15 posts came as a shock to the school. How could someone hate these girls, they walked on water. I became able to essentially rule the school. After the first 30 posts though I thought I had proved my point. The girls hadn't even looked at Jessica and me since the page went up. Jessica no longer cried on my shoulder after school and I had thought I had gotten my best friend back. When I told Jessica that I was the creator of the page, her response scared me. Instead of a how could you or what were you thinking, I got a smile. She told me that this was, 'Wonderful,' and glanced towards her desk where her computer sat. She opened it and told me to log into the page. I told her that I wasn't planning on keeping the page, I just wanted to stop the bullies. She shook her head. 'Jessica,' I told her. 'I'm not keeping the page up.' Jessica told me that I would or she would expose me to the school board. 'You do realize that cyberbullying is punishable by expulsion. No medical school would want to accept someone with that on their record.' It was then that I realized my best friend was gone. Jessica was a shadow of who she used to be. Later it was agreed that we would be public best friends and I would post about whoever Jessica told me to on the page. I realize now that I brought this upon myself and never should have created the page in the first place. Everyone that I've written about doesn't deserve it, even the nasty girls from freshman year. It's been two years and a half years and as a senior, I still feel as lost as I did as a freshman. I've dug myself a hole that I'll never be able to fully climb out of."

Abi finished talking, tears and mascara streaming down her face. She had never told anybody about this before and was waiting. She didn't know how Wes would react. As stupid as it sounded a tiny part of her hoped he wouldn't hate her.

When Wes raised his face from where it had been buried in his arms while she talked, Abi noticed a red ring around his eyes.

"I can't understand the hurt you've gone through, but that's no excuse for what you did. You hurt people Abi, real, living people. You can't undo what you've done, nor can you fix it. The Abi I know wouldn't lay down and give up, she would fight and accept the consequences. I don't think I could ever hate you for this, but I can't forgive you either." Wes's voice held a tone of disappointment, sorrow, and finality. As he got up from his spot next to the wall, Abi realized that her friendship with Wes was over. He was now apart of the long list of things she had screwed up in her life. Abi watched as Wes walked away. After five steps he turned back around. "I hope you figure this all out Abi. I really do." Abi knew he was really telling her goodbye.

When he turned back around Abi broke out in silent sobs like Jessica did as a freshman. The difference was that Abi no longer had her best friend beside her to lean her head on.

Once she had cried herself out, Abi gathered all her stuff. She just wanted to go home and lay in her bed.

As she zipped up her backpack a piece of paper got stuck in the zipper. Pulling it free Abi glanced down and realized it was the homework that Mr. Jefferies had given her class. Like always the first question read, Why do we study history? Suddenly something clicked for Abi.

She realized that this all started because Abi wanted to make people feel the same pain she did. All it did was cause a chain reaction, hurting people who didn't deserve. If she didn't stop repeating her history, she would never be able to move past and create a future.

"We study history because we not only want to know about the past but because we don't want to repeat past mistakes," Abi whispered out loud.

Before she could think too much about this brash decision, Abi grabbed her backpack and made her way down the hallway into the office. Only one thought circle her mind endlessly, I'm just like them. As she entered the office the secretary on the phone gave her a concerned look.

Hanging up the call she turned towards Abi. "What do you need darling?"

Abi took a deep breath. This was the moment she could take a step forward or have her feet cemented in the position they were in now forever. Everyone made a moral decision like this seemingly simple, but it wasn't for Abi. Maybe that made her a terrible person, but honestly, she was past that. It was now or never to get her life back on the course she had dreamed about as a third grader. Meeting the secretary's gaze, mascara trails along her face, Abi squared her shoulders and uttered the words that would drastically change her future and give her a chance to exonerate the burdens that she had been given and the burdens she had inflicted on herself.

"Can I talk to Principal Leon?"

Mary Meyer

Grade 10

So This is Depression Poetry

Platte County High School
Platte City, MO
Teacher: Angela Perkins

Inspired by "So This Is Nebraska" by Ted Kooser

So This is Depression
The grey clouds arrive in the blink of an eye,
over the head of its victim like a shield,
completely swallowing any emotions
casting them across into an impervious place
caught only by the golden line of God's fishing rod.

On either side is the struggle of light and dark, the
fight becoming nothing but fatigue,
like driving a car without gas,
the hopelessness securing its place in
the frigid body of its prey.

So This is Depression. A Monday night;
August. Pacing through your home,
hand squeezing the cold air trying to grasp at
anything that's left for you.
Your hand hits a wall.

Behind the dullness of your eyes,
lost in the agony and ache of absolutely nothing
but everything. The cloud blackness over your head,
erasing every trace of the person
you thought you were.

You don't want to feel like that; you feel like letting
it take you away, completely engulfing you into
its flames, in all its ghastly beauty. You feel like
swaying lifelessly in the smoke, listening to
the crackling of the inferno against your skin.

You feel like letting spiders forge webs across your soul,
You're nothing but tree stump in desolate woods,
the squawking and squealing of crows driving you
insane, the web of the spiders growing stronger,
you battle and clash against them. You feel like

winning. You feel like punching your weak hand through

the toughness off the web as it dwindles into nothing. You
leave your body still, instead closing your eyes, lying down,
falling asleep to the sounds of silence. You leave your hand
against the wall, searching for hope.

Ria Mirchandani

Grade 8

Cantaloupe Seeds

Poetry

John Burroughs School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Shannon Koropchak

I hate the taste of cantaloupes,
but oddly not of their seeds.
I love their earthy, crunchy sound;
Their flattened and smooth textures,
Blending contrasting flavors
in my mouth.
These flavors,
Seemingly harsh at first,
Slowly become sweet,
lingering an extra second,
Reminding me
of the painfully brief period of time I had with my grandfather,
Who took care of the seeds, like a proud parent,
Dressing them with his warm hands,
in rich, moist soil
Bringing them to life with his love.
I know,
Buried inside the fruits,
Waiting to be found
And savored,
Are its seeds
That help teach me that what may be unpleasant at first,
Over time can change
To something sweet to be savored gradually.
Like memories.

Madysen Naeger
Grade 10

Rubber Gloves
Personal Essay/Memoir

Jefferson High School
Festus, MO
Teacher: Nicole Boyer

In a disposable, everything-can-be-thrown-away kind of world, they say you can learn a lot about a person by the items that they keep: the contents of their purse, the knick knacks in their nightstand drawer, the change at the bottom of their pockets... And if you look really closely, and think really hard... If you close your eyes and count to ten and hope for a miracle, maybe you can use the physical things they keep to unravel what they hold deep in their hearts. Maybe, if you're lucky, you can use the bags and the pockets and the drawers to make sense of it all.

Last year I was given such an opportunity. I tried to find a pattern in all of the boxes I went through, all the bags of trash I threw out the window. I tried to hold my breath and pray that maybe it would make sense to me, that maybe at the bottom of one of the ceiling-high stacks I would find a purpose, a meaning to all of the things she kept. And looking back on it, I think now maybe I have. This personal narrative is not personal; it is not about me, not about my life, not about some world-altering, ground-shaking experience. It's about learning how to dig, and dig, and to make sense of the things you uncover. And that sometimes, things aren't even close to how they seem.

If you saw my grandmother's house from the outside now, you'd never suspect a thing. Maybe you'd roll your window down and wonder at who lived there, a nice family with two little kids and a dog, running around in the spacious yard, playing pretend on the green, grassy hill around back. Maybe you'd think of an elderly couple, finally free of their children and excited to have grandbabies to spoil. You could probably think of a lot of things. But I can almost guarantee you that in all of your thinking, you'd never consider the truth. You'd never picture a woman, in her 60s on her own, stuck in the cycle of the cigarettes that killed her and the landfill that she called her home.

For what seems like eternity, every weekend I was woken up early in the morning, and rolled out of bed to put on the shabbiest clothes I could find. I rode the whole way with my headphones in my ears, listening to my anxiety build in my chest with the beat of the music as the thought of going back there twisted my stomach into knots and brought tears to my eyes. But I didn't let them fall. I pushed the nausea back down and locked it in a box, where I told it to shut up and stay. I didn't tell anybody how I didn't know how to feel, how angry it made me. Not because she left this for us, not that even though I spent my life begging, same as my mom, for her to stop, she puffed her way to death anyways and left us her mess to clean up. Not even because of the panic attacks and newfound anxiety it gave me, the nights it kept me up, the hours I laid there telling myself that it was okay now, that I was in my own house, clean, with no boxes and piles and mice hiding in the corners. But because of the way it hurt the people around me. Because even though she is gone now, and there is no longer the need to save her feelings and pretend that all of this is normal, that it's okay to have thirty five lighters on the kitchen table, to keep Santa Claus wrapping paper by your bed in the middle of spring, and to not be able to see the floor for the maze of filth... We still have to pretend. Because if we look this place in its rotting, weed-choked face and confront it on the effect that it's having on my family, the dream-like feeling would drop and everything would become real. This would really be our lives. And it would really be the way that she lived hers.

I can see the place now in my mind's eye when I think about it; I've never in my life witnessed so much garbage, actual literal garbage, piled in such a small space. But it all has to go, and this house has to be sold somehow, and nobody can know about the things that took place here. Nobody can know about

the television sets burning in the backyard. Nobody is supposed to guess at what I scrubbed out of the ugly green bathtub, or how I held my breath, trying not to be sick and trying even harder not to let my mom see the emotion on my face as I sprayed bitter orange cleaner everywhere, the artificial citrus scent stinging my nose and covering my world as I stand watching the nicotine run down the refrigerator like water on a windowpane. Nobody's supposed to realize that that place, right there, right in that bedroom floor, is where she laid for God knows how long, stuck in her hallucinations until we broke the door down and rushed inside. Nobody's supposed to know about the four days that she spent in that nursing home before she finally gave up, the four days I spent watching her, tubes running in and out of her body, wondering when she would go and where she would land when she did, and the lump that rises in my throat when I pass the building to this day. Everything is not as it seems in that fading white doublewide with the glass bedroom doors.

Inside those four rotting walls I found a truth along with the crunching underfoot of the bodies of decomposing bugs and the memories of a heart doing the same. This house is a mixed drink: it tastes of loneliness spiked with a shot of liquid lack-of-courage, with the mellow numb of depression slung back like a chaser. And to think that she lived her last days this way makes my head spin. But it's over now, and done with, and now it's down to clearing out the hangover she left behind.

Clad in yellow rubber gloves that stretch back to my elbows and a purple bottle of the strongest degreaser a small amount of money can buy, we sprayed our way through the clutter, which is an understatement to say the least. I couldn't even tell you how many boxes we went through, how many times we were absolutely horrified by what we found, or how many times I had to sneak outside and just breathe, taking deep drags of blessedly clean air to keep the claustrophobia at bay. But every once in awhile, I would stumble across something that took me by surprise, bringing a smile to my face and making me remember the woman that I had forgotten about, dulling the pain of the past few years and resurrecting old memories of the person I adored through my childhood.

Among these things were a pair of vintage dollar sunglasses that were too big for her face; boxes of letters from my great grandparents, my stoner uncle Larry, and other long-gone family members; a tiny military uniform from someone that must've been not much bigger than me; old makeup from circa 1980-something; and just a faded vibe of hopeful thinking... This was her, hidden under piles of papers and tucked away in the back bedroom she swore my uncle was always coming back to, long after he'd moved out. But when we got there, much to our surprise, the door opened right up and inside was a perfectly preserved, yet no less messy, representation of the awkward, gangly teenager my uncle used to be, the little boy that became her everything after her marriage failed. The room was packed to the brim with old memories. Bed in the corner, board games in the closet, bows and arrows against the wall, and his very first driver's license laying on the floor, sixteen year old Marty beaming in all of his awkward teenage glory, face up for the world to see. All of it, all of her, hidden here in this cramped space, just waiting all these years for someone to come along and blow the dust off.

She was a complicated person, one I don't think I really understood until now, and probably still don't comprehend fully. But through clear space comes clarity, and I've finally decided to open my mind all the way to try and understand hers. Through the twists and turns of her small home, I felt myself also walking through the halls of her heart. I think that she was alone. Maybe she kept on smoking through her cancer because she felt she had nothing left, nothing left to live for. Maybe she just didn't want to continue. After all, when you're stuck in a house with that much stuff and so many memories and only your own thoughts to keep you company, I can only imagine how hard it must be to find motivation. Maybe the cigarettes were her friends, the only things she felt she could count on to always make her feel something other than hurt. I don't know. However, I do believe that though it was hard to decipher, and despite all of the various stages of anger and disbelief we went through at her leaving us like this, she was selfless in her own way.

She kept everything that she did as a form of coping with the things that were hurled at her, using boxes and stacks as a shield after her divorce, a way of controlling things, doing things he never would have let her before. She never thought she was good enough, so she gave all of herself to those around her, trying to be the best mom she could be, given her circumstances. But she stacked her boxes up over her head and

buried herself beneath them, locking herself inside her own mind. Through her depression, she struggled with coming around, and distanced herself from those who cared about her most. But I know that she loved us. She just did it in her own way, sending cards for every holiday, written in her small print and addressed to “Ms. Mady Naeger,” something she used to do when I was a kid to make me feel fancy. Sometimes what you need comes from where you’d least expect to find it. Sometimes, in fact, it comes when you stop even looking. Sometimes it comes when you think all hope is lost. But sometimes, it just comes in the form of an experience. I didn’t expect to learn any lessons by going there, except maybe one on how to clean up a crime scene. I was not looking for a great revelation, which is good, because I’d be lying if I said I found one. But I did stumble across some forgiveness, buried deep down at the bottom of the smallest box in the dirtiest closet, wedged between two TVs and some costume jewelry. Which honestly was not what I expected to find in the same house where the water heater exploded, leaking all throughout the tiny closet into her bedroom and spraying us all with the calcium-choked liquid in our mad dash to find buckets and towels and bowls. But it taught me something being there, and not something I’m likely to forget. In the months of choking on cigarette smoke, bleach, and the anxiety that filled me upon my arrival at her house every time, I learned that sometimes you just have to dig your way through the crap that surrounds you and uncover the truth that lies behind it, underneath all of the random things that get piled up over your head and forgotten about. Because if you really, truly look, you can use the things you find to figure out something about that person, and maybe even about yourself. And sometimes, you’ve just gotta learn to deal with it and dance in the rain. Or rather the stream shooting from the water heater. Because sometimes, even though things aren’t at all how they seem from the outside, it’s better that way. After all, the proof is in the pudding. Or maybe just the ten-year expired jelly jar we found in the fridge. Close enough, right?

Alex Newett

Grade 11

Comrades in Arms
Science Fiction/Fantasy

Pattonville High School
Maryland Hts, MO
Teacher: James Frazier

“So, troopers, as you can see, the mission will entail holding this essential point along the front line. It is vital to the invasion effort here on Monthar Prime. If you fall, the enemy has a straight path to Central Command. You don’t have to be a general to understand how bad that would be. Additionally, you will be accompanied on this mission by Binarians. I know that you may question our decision to allow non-humans into our ranks, but command has deemed it necessary. They will serve a strictly noncombatant role, as they will be carrying ammunition for the heavy support weapons. They have been instructed to follow every order from any human member of the force, so do not hesitate to enforce your commands.

“As your leader, I have great confidence in this group. You are battle-hardened and ready. Your loyalty to Earth and humanity should not be questioned by anyone. I wish you all good luck. Destroy the enemy and assert your dominance!”

“YES, SIR!” the regiment shouted. With a final salute, General Brown stepped down off of the stack of ammunition crates.

“12th Regiment, dismissed!” Private Henry Richardson relaxed from attention. Slinging his M-Pattern plasma rifle onto his shoulder, he walked towards the barracks. At his bunk, he prepared the last few items that would go with him into battle.

“Hey, Dick,” said Private Samuel Jones. Sam was one of Henry’s numerous friends in B Platoon, and called him Dick despite Henry’s protests.

“You hear what Brown said about these ETs coming with us to the front?” Sam asked.

“How could I have not?”

“Well, anyway, what do you think? I mean, it’s not even their planet, why are they fighting with us?”

“They aren’t fighting, remember? They’re noncoms. Anyway, I can guess that they were probably forced to by Earth Command.”

“Yeah, serves them right. You know about Binar, right?”

“Didn’t the Binarians lead the alien resistance against the Terran Corps for around a decade?”

“Seems that Earth-Com decided to enact revenge.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Henry replied, and zipped up the last ration pouch on his pack.

“B Platoon, head to the transports!” Captain Niedermeyer, the commander of B Platoon, began herding his troopers to the awaiting dropships.

“Ready, for this, Richardson?” asked Niedermeyer, a slight smile splitting his large beard.

“Yes, sir,” replied Henry.

“I’m ready, too, sir!” interjected Sam. Niedermeyer guffawed and pushed Sam towards the transports.

Henry caught a glimpse of the Binarians as he strapped himself in the transport. They stood about 8 feet high, had grey skin, and two large tusks curling out of their large mouths.

“Ugly son of a gun, ain’t he?” Henry turned and saw Roberts, a squad mate of Henry’s, gazing disdainfully at the nearest Binarian. “I wouldn’t wanna invite him over to my house.”

“Yeah, he’d probably knock himself out on all your door frames,” quipped Rodriguez, Roberts’ friend and the squad communications man. Roberts and Rodriguez chuckled at the mental image. Henry

laughed along. The Binarians did look rather out of place. Their simple fatigues were almost covered up by the vast numbers of ammunition belts. Steely-eyed discipline officers watched them suspiciously, hands on Tasers just in case. The Binarian who sat across from Henry, however, sat down gracefully, as if worried that his immense bulk would dent the metal bench. Henry scoffed as the transport lifted off.

A week later, B Platoon had dug themselves in along the front line. Communications antennas and mess tents had been set up. Despite being dropped into a “hot zone,” B Platoon had not seen any action.

Henry had spent his time doing menial tasks and messing around with his squad mates. Rodriguez had a penchant for gambling, and soon most of 1st squad and all of 2nd squad in B Platoon had joined in. Without any action, B Platoon had gotten complacent.

Henry’s morning on Day 8 was much like the previous seven. He scarfed down a hot breakfast of boiled protein cubes and stood watch until lunch time. He had just joined Rodriguez for a game of poker after lunch when Rodriguez’s radio crackled.

“B, this is Delta Command, B this is Delta Command. We’ve picked up enemy movement south of your position. We recommend immediate recon—“

No one in B Platoon heard the rest of the message. Plasma bolts began ripping through the camp, felling dozens of soldiers in only a few seconds. B Platoon jumped into cover.

“Where are they, where are they?” Roberts shouted.

“The transmission said south of our position. Look for muzzle flashes in the treeline.” Captain Niedermeyer had seemingly appeared out of nowhere. “Don’t worry, boys, we’ve been through worse! Remember Delios VII? Now, up and at ‘em! Pick your targets! Don’t waste shots! We’ll get through this!”

Henry, despite the situation, grinned and began searching for enemy targets. Every so often, he would let off a burst of plasma from his rifle, hoping that he had scored a hit. Despite the numerous kills that Sam, Rodriguez, Roberts, Niedermeyer, and Henry had made, the enemy fire did not seem to die down. Niedermeyer ordered a retreat and rendezvous with the rest of B Platoon, which had taken up a better position on a low hill.

Henry scrambled into cover beside the heavy machine gun, which chattered away at barely visible enemies down below. Henry heard the gunner scream for a reload. Through the gun smoke, Henry saw the Binarian open the gun and struggle to insert a new belt of ammunition. The discipline officer behind the alien cursed and yelled, and struck the alien with a baton. The Binarian cried out in a remarkably human way and slammed the belt home. As the gun started up again, Henry saw the Binarian wince with pain and prepare a new belt of ammunition.

At this moment, Henry peered through the smoke and saw enemy tanks advancing on the hill. Henry ran back to where Sam and Rodriguez had dropped into cover.

“Sam, where’s Rodriguez? He needs to call in an airstrike. There’s enemy armor down there that’ll blow us to pieces!”

Barely audible over the din of battle, Sam replied with three words; “Rodriguez is dead.”

Henry stared in disbelief. He was about to comfort Sam when the first tank rounds hit the hill around them. Screams of maimed soldiers rang out around them. Slowly, B Platoon fell back off of the hill, shells raining down amongst them. Henry pushed the traumatized Sam down the hill and into cover.

Henry heard his name yelled out over the din of battle. He found Roberts in a shell hole, both legs blown off and bleeding out fast, too traumatized for words. Henry hoisted Roberts up and began to run back to the cover where he had left Sam when it was destroyed by an enemy shell. Henry, still holding Roberts, was thrown backwards and knocked out by the shockwave.

Henry came to. With a groan, he sat up and surveyed the destruction around him. Bodies, soldiers he had known, littered the ground around him. He looked around for Roberts and found him dead on his back, having bled all the way out. Henry struggled to his feet and limped to where Sam had been in cover, but found nothing but burnt dirt and ashes.

With a heavy heart, Henry picked up what remained of his gear and began the long walk to friendly territory. He didn’t know whether the enemy had successfully pushed into friendly territory, but Henry saw no other choice but to head back.

He had not been walking long when the underbrush to his left rustled. Henry, with drilled precision, brought up his plasma rifle. "Who's there?" he shouted.

A bruised and battered Binarian trudged out of the shadows of the trees. It stared at Henry with confused and suspicious eyes.

"So, you made it out, did you?" Henry spat. "You alien scum made it out, but Rodriguez or Sam couldn't have? I should just shoot you right now. I could do it, you know. Why am I even talking to you? You can't understand me, can you?"

The Binarian stared at Henry, shifting uncomfortably. It seemed to sense Henry's aggressive tone. He noticed that it was carrying a heavy machine gun of the type that the Binarians carried ammo for. This weapon, too heavy for one man to carry, seemed to be easily handled by the silent grey figure. Henry, in his rage, had not noticed that the alien was armed.

Henry promptly put his gun down, gave the alien a nasty stare, and walked off, leaving it looking angry and bewildered in the clearing.

After a few hours, he realized that the Binarian was following him. Henry was about to turn around and yell at the alien some more when he heard rustling in the woods to his south. Henry dived for cover, leaving the Binarian once again in a clearing alone. An enemy patrol sauntered through the woods where Henry had been standing. Seeing the Binarian, the patrol stopped and shouted at the alien to surrender his weapon. Using this distraction, Henry jumped up and cut down two of the enemy troopers before having to duck back behind cover as the other troopers in the patrol began firing.

Henry realized he was completely pinned. Some members of the patrol could keep him hiding behind the rock with covering fire while the others moved around to kill him. Realizing his hopeless situation, Henry rose from behind cover, determined to take at least a few of the enemy down with him.

Before Henry could shoot, the Binarian charged out of the underbrush, firing wildly with the machine gun, killing two of the patrol. Another member of the patrol who snuck up behind the Binarian was met with a grey fist that shattered their skull. Henry took out the last member of the patrol with a precision shot.

Henry walked up to the Binarian. He could see that the alien was shaken by what it had just done. He knew that look. It was the look of every green recruit who experienced real battle, not just propaganda films, for the first time.

What bothered Henry was that he was completely confused on why the alien had saved him? Was it mutual hatred of the enemy? Or was it something else? Henry had no reason to believe that the Binarian respected him in any way. He had been handled and controlled by aggressive humans. There was no lost love between his race and the alien's.

Henry gave the Binarian a hard look. The alien returned the look. The anger was still there, but it was a focused anger. Henry realized that the Binarians were not to be messed with.

"Hey, I know you can't understand me or anything," Henry said, "but thanks for helping me out." The words felt odd in Henry's mouth. All his life, he had been taught that humanity was superior, that it was a good thing that humans were conquering the stars. Now, he was giving thanks to a race that had been humanity's enemy. The alien said nothing, but its gaze at Henry suggested something other than anger this time. Something like respect.

Henry began the long walk back, this time closely followed by the silent Binarian.

Days later, Henry reported to Captain Niedermeyer. Henry had been found nearly unconscious near B Platoon's new camp. Once he had recovered enough, Henry made his way to the command tent.

"I'm glad you're back safely, Richardson. I can't imagine how you managed to find your way here alone," Niedermeyer said.

"Thank you, captain. Although, I didn't make the journey alone. A Binarian from B Platoon accompanied me. It even saved my life once."

"A Binarian, sticking up for a human? I've never heard of such a thing. You've got no reason to lie about this, so I'll take your word for it. Did you catch which alien it was, Richardson?"

"No, sir, I never learned that."

"Oh, well, that's unfortunate. Well, get back to the medical bay. I want to see you fully recovered for our

next offensive. Dismissed!”

“Sir!” Henry saluted and walked out of the tent.

Henry lay in bed. He thought back to his experiences before the disaster. His comrades would never be there for him again, he realized.

He also thought about the unnamed Binarian. He had gained a bit of respect for something that he had been taught from youth to consider inferior. Maybe they’re not so bad after all, he thought.

Outside, the sun set on the quiet camp. The Binarian lay in his quarters. The human he had traveled with did not seem as bad as those who ordered him around, he thought. Maybe they’re not so bad after all, he thought.

Tess Patti
Grade 8

Voices
Dramatic Script

Robert H Sperreng Middle School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Christine Johnson

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MOLLY LEVAN-EVERDELL: Twenty-seven year old who has Generalized Anxiety Disorder and depression

WHISPER: A looming feminine figure dressed all in black that appears behind Molly

WAVE: Another looming figure in black behind Molly

AUGUST EVERDELL: Twenty-eight year old, Molly's husband

ALICE LEVAN: Molly's mother. Never heard, but Molly has a brief phone call with her

Laguna Beach, California, a small house a few miles from the beach. The windows flood the empty living room with light except for DL and DR. Birds outside chirp as MOLLY EVERDELL, a young newlywed enters stage left.

MOLLY: (sighs) Welcome home, Molls.

Her husband, AUGUST, enters stage left, sets down two boxes and walks over to wrap his arms around her from behind.

AUGUST: So, did we do good?

MOLLY: Yeah, I'd say we did good. Two bedrooms, and the lighting is spectacular. I can see living here for the foreseeable future. (She smiles faintly up at August)

AUGUST: Foreseeable future? I hope you mean the rest of our lives.

MOLLY: If you become a world renowned mathematician and I get back into the film industry, we could move to LA, live in a mansion, have a million beautiful babies, and live happily ever after.

AUGUST: Your optimism is adorable. I'll go get the last of the boxes, unless for some reason you want to help me.

MOLLY: Mmm, no thanks.

AUGUST: (sighs) Very well. Let me embrace the stereotype of the muscular, boorish husband while you, the tiny, weak wife enjoy the breeze and the California smell.

AUGUST starts to walk off stage and **MOLLY** calls after him

MOLLY: You're a nut!

AUGUST: (Calling back) I know! (Exits)

MOLLY wraps her arms around herself in a tight hug, smiling gleefully as she looks around the bright room. DL, a spotlight flicks on to see WHISPER, smiling at MOLLY.

WHISPER: We made it, Molly! You went from just another girl in the Midwest to a one-hit wonder in show business, and I've been with you through it all.

Crosses over to MOLLY and places a hand on her shoulder as the spotlight fades

MOLLY: Not today.

WHISPER: (Nods) Today.

MOLLY: I just moved here. Can you give me twenty-four hours?

WHISPER: You see, I would, but then I'd have to call her instead. You don't want that. Would you rather worry about everything you do or spiral down into your inner turmoil and bring down August with you?

MOLLY: Neither!

WHISPER: It doesn't work like that, sweetie. It's been how long? A week or so? It's about time we came back.

MOLLY: I'm trying to be happy.

WHISPER: We can't all be neurotypical, Molly. So, who do you pick?

MOLLY: Do I even have a choice?

WHISPER: No.

MOLLY: ...

WHISPER: ...

MOLLY: Okay, just one thing, then.

WHISPER: God, what?

MOLLY: This, you whispering to me, isn't going to affect August, is it?

WHISPER: Keep quiet about it, and he doesn't have to know. God, why do you care so much about that man, anyway?

MOLLY: Because I love him!

WHISPER: And what the hell makes you think he loves you back?

MOLLY: He says so.

WHISPER: People say a lot of things. People lie. He's opened you up, made you weak in the knees, smiled and winked at you and made you feel something, but once he's done, he'll get rid of you and move on to someone else.

MOLLY reaches out to slap WHISPER, but WHISPER grabs her wrist, smirking triumphantly.

WHISPER: And yet, you can't let him leave. You need him.

She releases MOLLY'S wrist.

MOLLY: Fine. Do what you do best, but don't even think about saying that about August.

WHISPER: I'll say what I want. It's not like you can stop me.

Footsteps are in the distance

WHISPER: Oh, that's my cue. I'll be right over here.

Crosses back to DL, sitting down on a small chair and crosses her arms and legs, smiling at MOLLY as AUGUST enters stage left carrying three more boxes. The spotlight on her fades as AUGUST begins to speak.

AUGUST: That's the last of them, your Majesty. Your royal moving van should be here tomorrow.

MOLLY: (smiles sadly) Okay.

AUGUST: What's wrong? Did I say something?

MOLLY: (shakes head slightly and smiles genuinely) No. I'm fine. We're fine. I love you.

AUGUST: I'd hope so. I married you in front of people.

MOLLY: I know, I was standing across from you.

AUGUST: You're sure you're alright?

MOLLY: I'm fine, August, really.

AUGUST: Whatever you say. (Pauses) Your dad called, by the way.

The spotlight on WHISPER appears again as she rings a little bell. AUGUST freezes at the sound of the bell and WHISPER begins to speak.

WHISPER: What did that pause mean?

MOLLY: Nothing.

WHISPER: God, you are so naïve, aren't you?

MOLLY: I'm naïve because I'm not reading into a small pause? He's tired. I'm tired. We've had a long day.

WHISPER: Believe what you want. It was a pause. Pauses can mean things, like ‘Why did I ever marry this woman’ or ‘I hate her’ or ‘I don’t love her’

MOLLY: Or it means nothing.

WHISPER: Whatever.

The spotlight on WHISPER fades.

MOLLY: Why’d Dad call you?

AUGUST: He loves more than you, obviously.

MOLLY: Very funny.

AUGUST: No, he just has my number in his phone as “Molly and August”.

MOLLY: What’d he say?

AUGUST: Just checking in. Told me to say “I love you, Marshy.”.

MOLLY: (chuckling) Twenty-seven and he still calls me Marshmallow. Probably always will.

WHISPER gives her bell a small chime. AUGUST freezes again.

WHISPER: Obviously, since you abandoned him back in Michigan.

MOLLY: (distressed) Shut up!

WHISPER shrugs and AUGUST speaks again.

AUGUST: I’m starving. I saw a cafe a few blocks from here. We might even meet some neighbors.

MOLLY: Neighbors?

The spotlight on WHISPER brightens as she rings her bell again and stands up. AUGUST freezes once again

WHISPER: Neighbors! First impressions! The people you’ll live near for the foreseeable future!

MOLLY: They’re probably very nice people.

WHISPER: Or judgemental jerks.

MOLLY: (frightened) Or both.

WHISPER: That’s the spirit!

MOLLY: I don’t have time for this.

WHISPER: (mocking) I don't have time for this! I have a busy life and a busy husband and a busy neighborhood! All I do is whine. God, you're pathetic.

MOLLY: I'll just try my hardest to give a good impression. We probably won't meet any new people anyway.

WHISPER: Okay, have fun, sweetie. Make friends, tell me all about it.

AUGUST: If you don't want to go that's-

MOLLY: N-no no! I do... I uh, just don't think I look well enough to meet neighbors.

AUGUST: You look great! We probably won't meet anyone, anyway.

Spotlight on WHISPER, who sends a skeptical look at MOLLY.

MOLLY: Okay. It's fine. I'm fine.

AUGUST: You ready?

MOLLY: Yeah.

WHISPER: Fine. Whatever. I'm coming, though.

WHISPER crosses to MOLLY and ties a small string connecting their wrists. MOLLY sighs and gestures for her to come along. MOLLY, AUGUST, and WHISPER exit stage left. Fade to black.

THREE MONTHS LATER

The living room has much more furniture in it, though it's devoid of people, curtains swaying slightly in the breeze. MOLLY enters stage left, fatigue showing on her face. A spotlight flicks on DR to see WAVE, grinning at MOLLY. WAVE crosses to MOLLY in a swaggering fashion.

MOLLY: Not today.

WAVE: Today.

MOLLY: She just visited me a few days ago.

WAVE: She and I have different schedules. What, is it a bad time?

MOLLY: Yes, actually. August and I are going to dinner with the Reginalds.

WAVE: And are they nice?

MOLLY: Very.

WAVE: They're faking it. Why would anyone be nice to you?

MOLLY: Because I'm a nice person.

WAVE: Nice people are obnoxious and pointless. Let go of your little Midwestern shtick and be what people want you to be.

MOLLY: What do people want me to be?

WAVE: Quiet. No one needs to hear your opinion.

WAVE shoves MOLLY down onto the couch angrily. MOLLY falls so that she is lying down on the couch in a fetal position. The lights begin to fade.

WAVE: You'd think with all the talking you do that husband of yours would've never said 'I do'. (Flatly) Face it, Molly, you don't matter. If you ceased to exist right now, nothing would change. Nothing. August would move on, meet a woman that actually deserves him. Your parents wouldn't hear the news for weeks because you abandoned them back in Michigan and your friends? The people that 'care' (WAVE does air quotes) about you? They wouldn't even blink. So go on, lay there. Let the world spin without you in it. You lose, Molly. You lose, you lose, you lose.

Footsteps are heard from offstage. WAVE looks up, alarmed, and scurries away to her corner sitting, balled up, as her spotlight fades once more. AUGUST is seen briefly before exiting quickly, never seeing MOLLY. Fade to black.

ANOTHER THREE MONTHS LATER

A small rotary phone on a side table rings loudly as MOLLY enters stage left. She runs to pick up the phone.

MOLLY: Hello? Oh, hi Mom! I'm great, thanks. Yeah, August and I are fitting in perfectly. Everyone's a delight here. Mom, what's wrong? You sound so... deflated. Mom, what is it? Just tell me.

A look of surprise washes over MOLLY'S face for a moment before she sits on the couch slowly.

MOLLY: Oh. He... oh.

WAVE'S spotlight flicks on. WAVE smiles and waves at MOLLY cheerfully.

MOLLY: Two weeks? Well gosh, yeah, I'll try to get out there, but I don't know how booked some flights are. I know it's just Michigan, Mom, but... Yeah. Mmhhh. I'll try to get out there as soon as possible.

WHISPER'S spotlight flicks on. WHISPER smiles, arms folded triumphantly.

MOLLY: Of course I care about my own father, Mom, and I'll try to get out there as soon as possible, but... yeah, okay. Alright. I'll call you when I have the flight booked. Bye, Mom. I love you too.

MOLLY hangs up the phone and slouches into the couch, mouth barely open. WAVE and WHISPER run over to her, sitting on either side of her on the couch. They smile at each other before turning to MOLLY.

WAVE: (mocking) Well! Isn't this just heart wrenching?

MOLLY: My dad's sick. Leave me alone today, just for a day.

WHISPER: If you don't go out there, you'll probably never see him again.

WAVE: But if you go out there, you might watch your father die, knowing that you could've done something.

MOLLY: I don't like either option.

WHISPER and WAVE: Exactly.

MOLLY: I kinda just want to lie here...

She begins to lie down but WHISPER pushes her back up forcefully.

WHISPER: You might lose him!

WAVE: Nothing will change, whether you leave or stay. Stay.

WHISPER: Go!

She tugs on MOLLY'S arm. WAVE grabs her other arm and tugs on it. They fight over her, shouting "Stay" and "Go". This continues for a brief period of time until the sound of a loud ripping. They drop her suddenly like a limp doll. MOLLY sinks to the ground, lifeless, but eyes still open. The lights fade, except for a spotlight on WHISPER and WAVE on the couch.

WHISPER: What did you do?

WAVE: What did I do? What did you do?

WHISPER: I didn't do anything.

WAVE: You tugged on her arm first.

WHISPER: I wouldn't have if you hadn't insisted on her staying.

WAVE: What are we supposed to do?

WHISPER: As if I know. What did we even do? You heard that ripping sound, I presume.

WAVE: Obviously. Her clothes are fine. She still has a pulse, and I think she's breathing.

WHISPER: She's definitely still alive. No blood. What did we do?

A light offstage flicks on. Cheerful whistling is heard as footsteps grow nearer and nearer. WHISPER and WAVE look at each other, terrified, before running off to their separate corners. Their spotlights fade as AUGUST enters stage left, book in hand. He crosses down to where the limp MOLLY is, not aware of her.

AUGUST: (calling) Molly, where are you? Are you ready to go for-

He sees MOLLY down on the floor as she makes a small whimpering sound. He drops his book, startled, but sits on the floor next to her, wrapping her up in a tight squeeze.

AUGUST: Molls, what's going on?

MOLLY: ...

AUGUST: Molly, talk to me. You're scaring me.

MOLLY: ...

AUGUST: This isn't funny, Levan. I can tell you're still alive. Stop messing with me.

MOLLY: ...

AUGUST: Please, talk to me. I don't know what-

WHISPER and WAVE'S spotlights turn on. AUGUST looks at both of them before their spotlights dim again.

AUGUST: No, you'd tell me. We tell each other everything. I know everything there is to know about you.

MOLLY: ...

AUGUST: Unless you didn't know. That's possible, right? I mean, lots of cases of depression go undiagnosed. I think I read that somewhere. And anxiety is one of the most common mental illnesses in the country, probably the most common.

MOLLY: ...

AUGUST: Jesus, Molly. If I'd've known we could've gotten you help. (Pauses) No, we're going to get you help. I can't bear to see you like this. Just talk to me, say one word. Tell me what you need to get you out of this state right now, and we'll get you all the help you need.

MOLLY: ...

AUGUST: Okay. Then I'll just sit here through it all. I'll be here until you're ready.

They sit in silence for a moment before WHISPER and WAVE'S spotlights come back on. A trickle of a smile appears on MOLLY'S face through the tears. WHISPER and WAVE look at each other and exit as lights dim.

Bridget Pegg

Grade 11

Potatogate (an Indepth Investigation)

Humor

Incarnate Word Academy

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Claire LaMarche

Morning

Southwestern Idaho, 4 AM. Dazed caribou graze at the base of a creek while I watch them from inside my car, sipping fast-food coffee. I got the coffee back in town - five large cups because they “didn’t have” triple-shot, cold-drip espresso - and it has long since turned cold, cream scumming the rim of the Styrofoam container. I’m roughing it, out here in the Idahoan wilderness, five minutes outside of the suburbs, to meet with my contact, Albert Young.

Albert called me a few months before, when I was fresh from breaking a gripping story on congressional paper usage. (As detailed in *Papergate: A tale of American Corruption*, older senators print out an obscene amount of articles on how to make the printer work.) Albert wouldn’t say much, but what he alleges is highly alarming: a government development about an hour south of Boise is being kept hidden from the public. The development is so secret that Albert, who works there, had to call me from a payphone, since he believes his phone is bugged.

“They still have those?” I wondered aloud, during the first call.

“Only one, I think, that they keep open for whistleblowers.”

The line suddenly shrieked with the squeal of a whistle.

If a government property could drive someone to use a payphone, I decided I needed to see it for myself. The property’s officials were cracking down on reporters’ access due to the high presence of leaks, which according to the Agriculture Department, “contaminate gratin recipes.” When I reached out to them asking for recorded incidents of reporters leaking classified potatoes, they had no comment. In light of this, Albert and I made a plan to sneak myself, undercover, into the development. I packed my Prius with some flannel shirts and a loan from my mother after an argument on my reporting prospects, leaving for Boise the next day. Once I found a motel to camp out in, I called Albert’s payphone back. He picked up on the first ring, and we decided to meet where there’d be no one else: the middle of Idaho.

Albert doesn’t show up for hours. At seven, with only one coffee left, I decide to give up entirely and head home, but just then, a pickup pulls up alongside my car. The window rolls down and I see a gruff man of about forty in the driver’s seat.

“You’re early,” Albert says.

“You’re *late*. You said to show up at four in the morning!”

“Four o’clock *Eastern Time*, I meant: eight-ish here.”

“Four o’clock Eastern Time is two in Mountain Time!”

Albert pauses, thinking. “No, you forgot to carry the three, and then you’ve got to subtract the five, for cultural differences.”

“Well, you’re here now. That’s what matters. I’m?”

“You’re the reporter, right? Explains why you’re driving that can. I’ve gotta ask, how’d you even get that thing up a *hill*, let alone the Rockies?”

“It...struggled.” I admit. “But it’s a good car, really. I’ve gotten across half the country with one tank.”

“I have to refill Matilda twice a day,” Albert says, “But at least she doesn’t look like a tiny zit.”

“The red is sporty.”

“It’s *something*. Did you read what I told you to?”

I nod. At the motel, Albert had emailed pages on Idaho’s potato industry, the key to the whole conspiracy.

Potatoes

For years now, potato consumption has been on the decline, leading to a dive in Idaho’s economy, which is ninety-six percent spud-based and four percent pun-related royalties. Within the last eighteen months, however, the stock in some of the state’s leading potato conglomerates has rallied. Publically this is attributed to Oprah’s latest Weight Watchers ad, which features her chowing down on poutine, but sources deep within the Idahoan government tell a different story. Recently, Governor Smith’s Hotmail account was hacked by cyber-activist group “Russia,” leaking important classified information, namely that Idaho *had* a government. (Up to this point, it was assumed that they used a tribal-based bartering system.) Within this data dump was a seemingly innocuous memo from the Governor to the Head of Agriculture: “How’s our little plan going?? Lol poor West Virginia.” This wasn’t just any light hearted, innocent “lol” but a direct reference to a cruel plan that had been years in the making.

Starting back in 2014, potato magnates were slowly bought out of their companies. Mr. Pringle famously testified before congress that he had been bribed by men in “cheap looking suits, with USA pins,” (a hallmark of the middle-aged bureaucrat) to convince his shareholders to sell, and is now living on subsistence wages as the President’s substitute toupee.

“You can’t imagine all the threats to presidential hair,” Mr. Pringle told me when I spoke with him a few weeks later, “And I’m only subbed in when there’s clear danger, like a windy day.”

The shares in Mr. Pringle’s company were hidden in offshore accounts such as the “Floating Bank of America.” With government control over the industry safe, Idaho officials have escalated the pace of their planned ascension up the corporate ladder. The Idaho Department of Education head now works as the marketing director for Ore Rida, and the State Supreme Court spends their time judging chip flavors for Lay’s.

“This whole thing’s all messed up.” Albert is matter-of-fact. “Everything there out in the open and nobody caring. They tell *me* I’m weird for having these articles printed out on my walls. But the articles remind me, every day that I need to be aware of what’s happening. And that I need new wallpaper... write that down, before I forget.”

I oblige, only to be stopped by Albert.

“Not on your phone, in your little reporter’s notebook!”

“We don’t use those anymore.”

He scoffs. “That’s ridiculous. What happened to journalistic integrity?”

“Probably the internet.”

“Not funny, kid. I’m risking my neck with this, big time. Cops are following me around?I don’t know how they could’ve found out about the whistleblower payphone, but I think they did?and I had to spend all morning incognito.” He pats the side of the truck, and lowers his voice to a whisper. “Matilda’s name is really ‘Agnes,’ but don’t print that. And I want to be called ‘Johnny Q.’ or something like that in this article. It isn’t safe for me otherwise.”

“Okay, Johnny.”

“Not right now! *When you write it!*”

“Oh. Okay...Albert.”

“Johnny on paper though, right?”

“Right. Johnny.”

“But Albert.”

“Yes.”

Caribou

Through the window, Johnny hands me a pair of overalls and an employee ID card. It reads: Spudhub* Employee. Underneath the text is a note: *may or may not exist.

"What's 'Spudhub?'"

"That's where we're going, the warehouse. Everyone calls it 'Spudhub' ?more likely to get funding if it's catchy. It's embroidered on the overalls, too."

He looks down at his own pair. "You'd better go change. There aren't many trees around, but if you don't mind ticks too bad, there's a spot of tall grass out by those caribou...*hey?*"

I turn towards where the caribou were grazing; they've stopped, and instead stare at us.

Johnny hisses, "Don't panic...It's the cops!"

He steps slowly out of the truck, gesturing for me to do the same. I shuffle after him and he wraps an arm around my shoulders.

"Howdy, officers!" Johnny indicates me with his free hand, "Cousin. From out-a-ways, in *New York*. Touched in the head."

Hearing this, the caribou split into two police officers each, half fur and half uniform. A disappointed hunter, about fifty paces behind with rifle aloft, starts cursing and slinks back to her tent, shouting, "Didn't use deer urine for this!"

Unruffled, the head officer (distinguished by antler size) stands up, offering Johnny his hoof.

"Johnny!" He says, "Nice to see you! And your...*cousin*."

The two share a terse moment, broken by Johnny.

"So...we'll be on our way..."

"Now wait a minute. We were just innocently grazing here, waiting to speed-trap some poor sap from out west who's been inhaling the devil's lawn clippings, but instead we see your cousin camped out, muttering something about 'potatogate.'"

The officer taps his antler. "Amplifying microphones. But it begs the question: is this cousin presuming to interfere with our potatoes?"

"Nope." I say. "I'm just here for the mountains. And rivers. And Boise."

"Your cousin *is* touched in the head..."

A deputy officer holds up my hand and squints. "Preliminary testing says that everything's whi...alright, I mean."

"Hmm." The head officer checks his watch. "You'll miss work if you don't hurry up."

Johnny lets out a breath. "Thank you, officers?"

"Yes, well, we'll watch out for you..."

The cops fall back into caribou formation and gallop away. Once they're no more than a speck in the horizon, I ask Johnny, hesitantly, why the Idahoan police force would dress up as a herd of caribou.

"To catch idiots like you, and tourists from Portland. Caribou *don't live in Idaho*; they stay in the North Pole, except on Christmas. Oh, you can bet they're onto you. It's that...*zit* you ride in. We've got to get rid of it."

His eyes flit from my car to the creek and back again.

"I'm all for integrity and informing the people," I say, "But I draw the line at my car. My mother had to save for that, you know."

"It's about as sore-thumb as it gets. People'll either think you're trying to reveal their criminal government activity or trying to get directions to a ski resort, both equally bad. We could hide it in the creek..."

"But that's my starving artist car! That can't be environmentally friendly!"

"The beavers needed a new house anyway."

Spudhub

I have changed into the Spudhub uniform, and driven my ill-fated four-seater into a muddy creek; its death may be the first casualty inflicted by Idaho's caribou, and only makes me more aware of the dangers of this story. As Johnny drives towards Spudhub, we talk, to avoid mentioning the Prius, of his job. To the discerning journalist, Johnny's "legal" job...at least the one that's listed on his employment records...is a portrait artist for driver's licenses.

"My cover means that nobody ever asks me to take pictures of them," Johnny says, "And sometimes that hurts! But you gotta do what you gotta do."

His cover makes sense given that the Spudhub is known as "DMV #5" on government forms, and with good reason: who would ever want to look into a DMV?

"It's true that lots of sixteen year olds randomly show up, and we have to, ah, take care of them, but believe me when I say *nobody* misses them. Their parents are relieved, and it saves the youth from falling into a hash brown habit."

Spudhub turns out to be a bunker, built into a mountainside on the edge of the Sawtooth Basin. It was originally a nuclear shelter during the Eisenhower administration, then repurposed as a cult hideout and later a tax shelter for reclusive billionaire Jack Stanley. As he said before locking himself inside, "If the IRS can't get *in*, they can't make me pay *out*." The state government ended up seizing the property anyway. They discovered an elderly Mr. Stanley on his bearskin carpet with a wad of cash in one hand and Nixon's tax code in the other; Mr. Stanley had forgotten to close the bunker door, letting the cold mountain air in and freezing himself to death. The bunker today carries period details from its former identities: brutalist architecture from its shelter days, unidentified smells from the '60s, and Mr. Stanley's bearskin carpet. There's minimal security at the entrance...a flash of my ID, and I'm through...and, as Johnny leads me through the main hall, it's clear why.

A banner draped from the ceiling reads BRING *THAT* COUSIN TO WORK DAY.

"Shoot, I forgot about today," Johnny mutters, "I should've brought Angelia..."

Fellow New Yorkers, ironically clad in overalls, mill around.

"Wow," They say, "It's so *quaint*."

Overall, Spudhub gives the impression of a poorly decorated dungeon: a typical office space.

"Where's the *good* stuff?" I ask. "Secrets. Potatoes."

"In the growing floor." Johnny heads to a door at the end of a long corridor. His hand hovers on the doorknob. "Promise me you won't lose it."

"I won't, I promise."

He opens the door, and the first thing I am struck by are all the wires, strung up across the ceiling, nearly a foot wide, and connecting into potatoes. Row after row of them, russets the size of SUVs.

Johnny whispers in my ear: "They're crossbred with those magic expanding pills at the dollar store."

I lose it and pass out, to the sound of sirens: my cover is blown.

Hans

I wake in a small cubicle overlooking the growing floor, tied to a chair. Johnny stands, flanked by caribou, making sure he doesn't escape. Sitting in front of us is a man in a lab coat, balding and mustachioed.

"Hello, Johnny." He says, "And I suppose I should introduce myself to *you*, too. I am Professor Hans, not university affiliated."

He doesn't sound German.

"*Hans?*" I ask.

Hans smiles.

“My mother named me Hans because she knew that I would grow up to achieve dubious scientific fame. But please, call me Professor.”

“Well, Professor?”

Hans holds up a hand, turning towards Johnny.

“*You* first. Our best potato-sorter, betraying us. How *could* you?”

Johnny stiffens. “I...well...it seemed to me that what was going on wasn't quite right.”

“I expect loyalty from my employees,” Hans sighs, “Confiscate his truck.”

Johnny lets out an awful scream as he's dragged away by his keys; Hans smiles even wider.

“Now, onto the freelancer. The caribou told me you'd be trouble, but I don't think so. Do you know my occupation?”

“...government contractor?”

“Of a sort. I work with governmental support, but I consider myself an artist. Spudhub is my magnum opus, my Sistine Chapel, and Idaho the Vatican, were Michelangelo to paint potatoes. If my name isn't familiar, then perhaps my signature invention is: *the potato clock*.”

I have flashbacks to hazy science fairs, blue ribbons and cardboard graphs.

“Yes, *that* science project. Naturally, I take it all in stride. Did I change the world? Yes. Could Bill Nye make a *clock* out of a *vegetable*? No! But there are other, more worthwhile discoveries, like the Easy Bake Oven, or the Bacon Bowl. Of course, when Spudhub is at full capacity, I'll be considered the foremost scientific authority.”

“Full capacity?”

Hans laughs maniacally. “My friend, I've nearly perfected the potato battery! I will single-handedly make Idaho into the primary energy state!”

“But that would mean that the balance of power...”

“Would be entirely obliterated. Upended. It would take some getting used to, Idaho being more than the butt of a joke. The unlimited potato-battery power will make Idaho rich...at the cost of other energy states. Montana. Texas. West Virginia. If they found out before we're ripe to take over the industry...we'd be ruined. They'd cut off the supply of cowboy hats, or worse. Those cousins out there, they think this is a ranching resort...they don't pose a threat, but you do.”

“Are you going to put me with the teenagers?” I whisper.

“No sane adult deserves *that* fate...but precautions must be taken.”

Home

Hans sends me back to my mother's on his jet with a new tattoo. For weeks, I camp out on her couch; even old tapes of Walter Cronkite reassuring the nation cannot pull me out of my despair, to the bafflement of my mom.

“I thought you were working on that news thingy?the one that's supposed to change the world?”

“It didn't work out.”

“But that nice man flew you in his plane! Although I'd like to know what happened to my Prius?”

“It drowned, Mom, it drowned...”

“Well, drowned or not, I need it back by Thursday. The girls and I are going out Sam's Clubbing. And I want that news whatever done by then! The girls think I have a miserable slacker for a child, so it'd be nice to prove them wrong for once!”

“Look at *this*.” I roll up my sleeve; just above the elbow is a two word warning, *no-fry*. “If I publish the story, I'll be a 'no-fry'...on a potato blacklist. No chips, fries, gnocchi, starch, *meat*...potatoes are used in feed...and that's just what they told me about. Nobody can live on bread alone!”

“You just aren't putting your mind to it.” She drags me, feet first, off the couch and onto the floor. “Either write your little conspiracy theory, or no allowance.”

In the face of adversity, many lose their principles. I was nearly one of them, silent with fear. Spudhub is simply too dangerous to ignore, however. Governor Smith and the Idahoan Government must

be held accountable for what they've created: an errant science project cloaked in lies. The consequences of its completion would be dire. The shifting economy and cultural devastation for other states could lead to a mass exodus to Idaho, with other states suffering labor shortages. Families would be torn apart, and a constant short supply of potatoes could lead to another famine; McDonald's would likely go out of business, and the flame of American entrepreneurship with it. Eventually, Hans' massive potatoes could become sentient, destroying the world entirely.

Please, take action. Stop Spudhub. And protect investigative journalism like this by donating money to me, or even better, a new Prius.

Samiya Rasheed
Grade 11

i cannot speak my mother's tongue
Personal Essay/Memoir

Blue Valley North High School
Overland Park, KS
Teacher: Shelley Moran

One Two Three Four Five Eight Ten Twelve

These are your patchwork numbers parroted in younger years. You've outgrown them since. You can count to fifteen in Spanish, thank you public schooling. You can count to twenty in Latin, a language *long* dead, and how funny is that? You can count one two three four five eight ten twelve in Bangla; your mother's tongue is pale shale broken bone while prose of millennia old marble holds.

Decay.

Loss intangible because it's only words in monsoon clouds, and it it loss if you never truly held it. Maybe its just a tragedy by proximity.

Rokon. Thick black hair, middle part, fourteen inch braid. Kohl lined eyes, wide petunia lips. Pale in the grey-sepia tone photographs. She's beautiful and young and when Abba is asked why he fell in love, he stumbles on the words, *she was— was just so joyful. So bright. Alive.* You can see the open rice fields in her gleaming film gaze. She's a child of sun, ponds, streams, farms— uncontainable. You couldn't trap her in a maison jar. You couldn't trap her in city smog.

Rokeya Begum is a housewife now, drowned in overcast suburbia. She's rapid colloquies and wide smiles, but the heft of this horizon, two daughters, a house, a husband— they pick at her seams. You were not easy to bear. Sunshine caught in her larynx, but you've heard her cry too: falling apart like hastily glued cheerios on your school projects. Chock full of tales you could not grasp.

You asked for Bangla fairytales once, and she said they're all the same to her, so you found a book on Asian Gods and learned more about Hinduism that you will ever need.

(Your mother says there is no need for fairytales under the light of Allah, but your janamaz grows dust like fine snow, cold and foreign, far far away.)

Winter 2009, Bangladesh. In that sweltering, mosquito hurried heat was the only time you'd set foot on that coconut skin earth; every ancestor before you— with your blood, with the curve of your jaw, your hard nails, peeling callouses— all the salt water people before you walked here, grew here, bled their first here. And you, looking upon kaleidoscopic streets with chlorine stained eyes, had three weeks to stumble through dialogue in your grand fifty word vocabulary. You understand what the say to you, but reciprocation gets stuck someplace between the cerebellum and soft palette, and you are left choking on the emptiness and the humidity.

Eight years passed; you remember little, Bangla dwindling in turn. Your hands fill pages upon pages in blue ink words as some clunky conciliatory gesture to self, and your souls sings poetry that Maa will never understand.

(You were born of Bangladesh. You spend more time pining after her than anything.)

It's in these cement prairies you were raised, high on toiling shoulders of people who bled to *make it* and call back across a thousand mile sea to home. And you cannot honor them with their own language in their home. And you're told, *oh you're told*, it happened to every first, second, third, fourth generation child whoever grew in a disconnect. You exist in the crevice between Bangladesh and America, *but how on earth would that make it easier?* Knowing that every other child with different roots tracing tributaries across the globe was simply the same? The cloying pressure of losing something you don't think, don't know you ever had.

Your mother, your father, you, but in between something fell. something dropped.
So you fake well enough: when asked *something in Bangla?* you respond *amee janina* — I don't know— because its all the same— skin deep for them where it grates into your cherry veins.
Congratulations, you're an imposter in your own potting soil skin.

It was just one of those things.

Samiya Rasheed
Grade 11

Disconnect
Personal Essay/Memoir

Blue Valley North High School
Overland Park, KS
Teacher: Shelley Moran

My mother mourns leaving her own country so deeply it runs through her veins into mine. Bangladesh is what she knows and what she loves. She spends her time showing me her culture: spinning through dances, running through poetry, and wading through history. I, in turn, cannot read her Sanskrit language. My Bangla is passable, but the prose she serves leaves me helplessly thumbing through a Bangla-to-English Dictionary. Bangladesh. A slowly sinking country of dark brown soil and dark brown people that I have only ever loved by proxy. Her holidays are mine. Her foods are mine. Her blood is mine. Yet I hear of the trailing, frayed tales of the Liberation War beginning with a genocide of *my* people, and I feel the disconnect. It happened when my mother was eight, but I cannot imagine it.

I am defined by Bangladesh, but also defined by the split between her and me. My mother was born in the Barisal. My father was born in Dhaka. My sister was born in Perth, Australia. I was born in in Omaha, Nebraska; I have never lived far from it. My first tongue is English; so are the songs I dive into, the words I weave, and the past I drape myself in. Here, miles away from any tumbling ocean, are my roots. I spend my days willingly, cashing in hours for creating stories and people that I will never know. The earth travels its spin, and my tales appear lazily in smudged, inky English. Sometimes, I cash in my hours to imagine the salt-water people of Bangladesh: riding rickshaws in the ever boisterous city or on tin roofs under coconut palms. I ask my mother of prettier, formal words for this and for that as I try to paint her home into something I can understand. The roads form in a dusty copper traversed by a thousand feet in all manner of shoes. The cars must travel slowly; the foot traffic will not stop for them. The air is filled with smoke and spice and the overlaying voices of both symphony and cacophony. The people wear anything from rich, embroidered saris of any color to tucked dress shirts and trousers as they amble, shop, and yell up at boys playing badminton on roofs, holding their birdies. There is no English plastered on the walls. There is little familiar to a girl who has lived in Midwestern suburbs her entire life.

It is not real. I have only loved Bangladesh from a distance, and these dips into her image do nothing to make her clear to me. I am creating newness that will not translate into my mother's sepia toned past. Neither can I ask her to change what I have made. Her eyes glide over the double-spaced, 12 point lines I gave days to and get hitched on certain syllables like getting splinters from wood. In trying to explain, I end up looking into identical brown-black irises and being struck silent at the gap.

She once told me, as we drove home on an innocent little road in Leawood, Kansas, you learned the important one. That she wished she could carve words in English like I did. Yet *these words*, formed mindlessly in careless Bangla, struck like a bullet. Is that truly what she thought? That it was better to leave behind generations of heritage for the clinical English I wield in America? How does one judge? I am Bangla, and I am American, but one is a country I have breathed for sixteen years and the other is a country I have visited twice. What did I gain and what did I forfeit?

I don't know if I'll ever find out. If that's a given or a decision. I try to keep them both: Bangla American and most definitely first generation: defined by Polaroid's of Bangla coasts, soles in American prairies, and dreaming of the Pacific passage. But the line between what I am and long to know is crust, mantle, core, adverb, participle, noun, and I haven't keep pace.

I suppose that's entropy; natural law. Heat and history lost over a thousand miles, ruling it greed to crave both ends of the Earth, leaving green-ink English a cold comfort, and weaving tributaries into the

great river of my bloodline.
(The distance aches.)

Fiona Richards

Grade 9

LNBS: Great People Don't Always Do Great Things

Humor

Mary Institution & St Louis Day School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Meghan Clark

When I was about four years old I was obsessed with a great many things. Looking back, I was a very well-rounded child. I loved food, especially carrots, Diego (for those who don't remember he was Dora's way cooler cousin), my stuffed animal Lolly, and Horatio Nelson. If you are unfamiliar with this naval admiral, he lived from 1758 to 1805. He proved the royal navy's supremacy over the French, most famously saving his country from the threat of invasion by Napoleon's army at the Battle of Trafalgar. To this day, my family and I have no idea where this obsession started, only that I loved this obscure naval hero. I referred to him as, and I quote, "Lord Nelson Boat Sailor" or "LNBS" for short. My family's best guess is that my dad told me about this man, and something about him spoke to me. I looked up to him in childlike wonderment and curiosity, intrigued by his exciting lifestyle and heroics.

The tales of his daring and heroic deeds and many near-death experiences ignited my sense of curiosity. From the beginning, I was fixated by his skill at overcoming obstacles, most notably the time he lost an arm during battle, but somehow returned to fight a half hour later. Not only did he continue to fight bravely in the naval battle, he survived. Not letting his loss of his right arm put him off his game, he learned to write with his left hand, no small feat. Believe me, I tried to become ambidextrous once, and after a few wobbly scribbles, gave up. While I have never experienced a setback as large (or as painful!) as some of the ones Nelson faced, he inspired me to challenge myself and keep trying.

A few weeks into my obsession, my parents bought me a book titled *Nelson*. It was a book from a series of simple, non-fiction books for early readers called "Ladybird Books." It was blue, about 6 inches tall, smelled like old paper, and had a portrait of Horatio Nelson on the front. Not knowing the word non-fiction, I referred to it and other books in its genre as "fact-books." I was a little kid, and despite the best pleas of my parents would not try the learn-to-read BOB books they got for me. This book motivated me to start reading better, despite the simple reading level. Nelson was not the most detailed or scholarly of books, it was basically a highlight reel of his greatest moments, not his defeats or shortcomings as a person. In my four-year-old mind this "greatest hits" style of writing contributed to his God-like standing in my eyes. The book described his ability to overcome challenges, as well as his intelligence, making him the perfect role model.

I was so obsessed, I didn't just read the book, I wrote my own. This early "fan-fiction" was complete with both illustrations and words. With an arsenal of washable markers, brightly colored construction paper, and crayons, I got to work. With the help of my mum I was able to "publish" this book by binding it together with ribbon. I poured my heart and soul into this work, as though my whole short life had been leading up to this point. In many senses, it was preparing me for writing assignments to come, like my essays for school, or this personal essay.

A few months later, my family and I were in England visiting relatives, when my mum found out about a museum of the one and only Horatio Nelson. The minute I found out about this museum, I insisted we go. While I was only four years old, I still managed to be very assertive when it came to my passions. When we arrived, I ran from one exhibit to the next, gazing up at them in wonderment. I was captivated by the wide array of artifacts concerning his life and legacy. I couldn't believe I was that close to something he had touched! The museum was like the chance to actually talk to him. Visiting the museum only deepened my interest. Before, all I knew about my hero came from the little blue book, but now my mind

had been opened to a wider view of his history. This museum was created by a group of Nelson enthusiasts much like myself. Despite my young age, in some senses, I felt understood and at home.

Almost ten years later, I was reading the January 2017 issue of *History Revealed*. I was engrossed the minute I saw the cover, as it featured a massive picture of Nelson, and below it the headline:

“Commander, Rebel, Lover.” In addition to being a hero, I learned he was an unfaithful and bad husband, leaving for months at a time and having long-lasting affairs. I was disappointed and shocked. For the first time in my life, I began to think about whether there was more to him than his accomplishments. While impressive, his victories aren’t what made him a brilliant admiral and role model, but rather his defeats and ability to bounce back from them.

As a little four-year-old, I may have not been able to wrap my mind around the fact that Nelson was human, not just the superhero he was portrayed as in my book. This is similar to the way kids look up to their parents and older siblings in wonderment, not realizing that they are just as human as anyone else. Humans fail, and disappoint themselves and others, but also have the ability to love. In the article, it said, “The desire for an unblemished hero led later generations to blame Emma [Hamilton] for the affair, but the reality was more complicated.” It turned out that my hero had been involved in an affair with a married woman, who he claimed was his soulmate. We will never know whether his heart was with Hamilton, or if he really was a snake. As an innocent four-year-old, I assumed the best in people, it not even occurring to me that there may be more to people than their victories. Now, while I am not a sage, I have seen a little more of the world, I know that everyone is human, and that there is no such thing as a real life superhero. Coming to terms with that has made me realize that humanity is not only okay, it is something that should be treasured. The people of the world could benefit from a touch of that child-like naivety, before judging or hurting others. Nelson’s personal mistakes do not make him any less of a military genius, or a key figure in victory over the French. My evolving opinions of Admiral Horatio Nelson show my journey to the realization that people who do great things are never ever perfect humans.

Sarah E. RiemanJohns
Grade 12

The Painting Son
Poetry

David H Hickman High School
Columbia, MO
Teacher: Nancy White

He is something tall and lean and there-not-there. A buzzing, grainy shadow of a man, perfect for the skeptics' papers or the believers' guides.

I'm not sure if he likes to be looked upon. For years, every time I saw him lurking in the corner with his questioning tilt, I would draw up my covers and hold my breath. Now, I just bite down hard and pretend he's not there.

The painting in the dining room is cut into the wall, and my mother says it was made by the previous owner's son. The upstairs bedrooms are for sons and daughters. My mother's bedroom was mine and her brother's my brother's and hers her parents. We are two daughters and a son in the sleeping house, and frankly I'm not sure how she stands it.

So I wondered if he was the painting son. Kept here perhaps because the brush strokes on the water didn't properly reflect the trees. I haven't tried handing him a palette to blot over years-ago mistakes, though that might prove a sound solution.

He is strongest on a dry winter night, lit by the pinkened clouds in the crack between the curtains. But he smells like sticky summer and old velvet; maybe he was born in June.

I don't think he means any harm, really. It's just that sometimes I fear it's not him there. A hyena-shaped mass that lurches its back until the ceiling itself is consumed. A cloaked skin-changer with a maw the size of my dresser. We all have our inner demons. He has no innards, so I suppose he takes their own form, haunted by the haunting he's become.

Daniel Rinder

Grade 12

Glass Castle

Flash Fiction

John Burroughs School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Anita Hagerman

He was a king, and he was running for his life. That was all he knew. Room by room, he hurried through the glass castle. He was surprised at his unnatural ability to remain calm in the face of the unbelievable carnage taking place. Chaos was rampant. His men were falling all around him. If he looked closely, he could almost see their bodies being carried off to the unknown place. He wanted desperately to help them but he knew that he couldn't take the risk; he was too important. His men would need the leadership of their liege when this was over. But he was starting to doubt that any of them would get out of this alive.

The king thought back to when it began. It started off innocently enough. He was strolling aimlessly through the gardens when the bells began to toll. One of his high-ranking officials notified him that there were tensions brewing on the front line, and the two sides were preparing for direct conflict. Protocol was immediately implemented; the king was quickly transported to the East Wing, deep into the heart of the castle, by an escort of a few of his trusted bodyguards. It seemed as though it was only a few minutes later that the enemy found them. They burst in through the front entrance of the bunker. The king barely escaped out a side exit. He didn't look back, but he knew that the guards that were with him had sacrificed themselves. Or maybe they were sacrificed. Maybe they didn't have a choice.

And here he was now, struggling to find his way through the seemingly endless maze of the castle. Not there was anywhere to go; there was nowhere he could truly hide, and he knew it. But his instincts told him he had to keep moving. He constantly surveyed his surroundings, searching for his guards, but they were all gone. It was just him and Them. He didn't know exactly who They were, only that They were the enemy. He knew this instinctively because it was ingrained in his very being. He could feel their presence around him; he could feel their malice.

Every step he took had to be the right one or else he would die. The enemy was around every corner, and They were cutting off his paths to escape, forcing him into the corner of the castle. And sure enough, he was there now. There was only one room left he could go. But he knew even before he got there that he was doomed. One of Them would be expecting him there, and would deal him his fate. And as he stepped through the doorway the wretched realization hit him. The glass castle. The alternating red and white rooms. He had no control over any of it. He was just a glass piece, roaming a red and white world to which he was confined by space and time. And now that time was up. The king thought he caught a glimpse of his nemesis, his anti-self, on the other side of the castle. His queen was not by his side. She had sauntered into the room directly in front of him, leaving him nowhere else to go. His only comfort was knowing that he would not have to feel the final blow. The king slowly sunk to his knees.

Checkmate.

Brooke Sams

Grade 8

Colors

Poetry

Kirbyville Middle School

Kirbyville, MO

Teacher: Marilyn Yung

Colors

“Claire, what’s your favorite color?”

“Pink.”

“Why?”

Because it reminds me of when I was little.

When I was happy.

“It’s just pretty.”

“What’s your least favorite color?”

The color of the containers prescription pills come in.

“Yellow-orange.”

“Why?”

Because it symbolizes dying and death.

Because it’s the color of weakness and vulnerability.

Because I see it all the time.

Because I never wanted him to need

Those

Stupid

Pills.

“I’m not sure.”?

Irony

I am a cat,

Stuck in a mouse trap.

I am a therapist,

In a straight jacket.

I am a shining star,

In broad daylight.

I am a spider,

Caught in a web.

I am held captive,

In a place that I’ve been crowned queen.

I am a cat,

Stuck in a mouse trap.

Tick

My depression is a bomb that's tick-
Tick-
Ticking.
And if it's ticking,
I'm still kicking.
Kicking my friends away,
Because if this bomb goes off,
No one is safe.
Tick-
Tick-
Ticking still.
Most will not,
Believe it's real.
It's all your fault,
You made this bomb,
You lit my fuse,
And walked away.
No one,
Is safe.

Closer to you

Pearly snap buttons,
On a silky country top.
My favorite.
Now,
And then.
Red,
Like the fresh blood gently oozing from a pinprick on the thumb.
With cheetah print strewn across it,
As if black paint were softly dripped on.
My favorite shirt,
Now two sizes small.
But I'll never throw it out.
It stays at the top of the closet.
Closer to heaven,
Closer to you.

Kialynn Sanders

Grade 8

Beauty: The Beast
Personal Essay/Memoir

Braymer High School
Braymer, MO
Teacher: Garrett Durbin

Kind. Loving. Serving. Just a few words to describe my grandma. Oh. And don't forget about The. Silver. Afro. This was her signature thing, like a bright moon on a dark, starry night. No . . . Her fro was more like the silver, wrapped around a Hershey's Chocolate Kiss. And her brilliant heart lit up everyone's lives, but smoking fogged up hers. When we'd travel to see her in Indianapolis, Indiana, the ride was a long, cold (usually during winter break), 8-hour trip, but we warmed up the car with laughs and good memories. And movies. And the heat from the car. And games. And food. Look, we were really prepared, and that made it really fun. But one thing we were not prepared for was that cancer. Lung cancer. I wish I were talking about the zodiac sign: "Oh, wow! You're a cancer?" Not, "Oh. Wow. You have cancer." She had it four times; it got her once. My birthday.

Birthday 2009-

I am five. We party at Chuck E. Cheese's.

? "Mom, can I go cash in my tickets?"

"Sure" said mom. I go get a Hershey's Kiss. After I get my prize, my mom calls me over, "Grammy wants to talk to you." she says handing me the phone.

"Hi Grammy!" I giggled.

"Hey Elizabeth!" said Grammy. Elizabeth - Her middle name and my middle name.

"What are you doing for our special day?" April - Her birthday month and my birthday month.

"I'm playing games. Eating pizza. Laughing. Getting prizes from the Chuck E. Cheese's store. And talking to you!"

"Aw. What did you get?"

"A big Hershey's Chocolate Kiss."

"Really? I just bought a bag of Kisses. You wanna eat them together?" From then on, eating Hershey's Chocolate Kisses became our together thing.

Birthday 2013-

I am nine. We party at the skating rink. I have the phone ready.

"I have the Kisses." says my mom.

"I'm gonna call!" I say.

"Got the Kiss?" Grammy says when she answers my call.

"Yes ma'am."

Birthday 2016-

I am 12. We party at my house. It's a sleepover. Lots of my friends come.

"You can put your bags over here." I say taking them into the sunroom, where we will stay. During the

time they spend here, we jump on the trampoline, watch movies, eat pizza, and do our nails. While they are eating, I go to call my grandma. "Happy Birthday, Grammy."

"Happy Birthday, Elizabeth."

"Got your kiss?" we say at the same time.

"Yes ma'am." I smile in reply. After we eat it, I ask how she's doing . . . How she's really doing. She paused, and I heard a sad silence in her voice.

"Well, recently, I finished my last round of chemo, and I should be cancer free."

"Yay! That's exciting!"

"Yes, it is! But not as exciting as partying. I wish I were there with you all. Now go on and eat some cake for me."

"Yes ma'am. I love you!"

"Love you more. Bye Elizabeth."

"Bye Grammy."

My friends and I stay up until around 3:00 a.m. The next day, we wake up at 10:00, still tired, even though it's almost afternoon, and eat breakfast. Then, we go outside again, and make and eat snow-cones while we jump on the trampoline. Parents start to arrive, and the party is coming to a close.

"Thanks for coming." I say

"You're welcome! See you later."

"K. See ya."

April 2017- It got her once.

It is our birthday month. I am 13. I invite three friends to go to the movies with me. We watch the new Beauty and the Beast. Then we buy candy for the movie. I don't bother buying Hershey's Kisses because I know Grammy is no longer able to talk. No longer able to eat. And if we get a call it would be the hospital telling the reason I would no longer share Hershey's Kisses on our birthday. We would listen to the hospital telling us that my Grammy, the Beauty who fought like a Beast, Was . . . No . . . Longer. "You're welcome!!" my friends sing, after I thank them for coming. Later, I overhear my brothers whispering,

"Have they told her yet?"

"Tell me what?" I wondered . . . when I noticed my dad. He wore worry on his face.

"The hospital called." he hung his head.

No longer than what seems like a lifetime, we're going to Indianapolis, the weather is warm outside, but our hearts hold a heavy hope as cold as winter break. Yet and still we plan to party at Mount Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church - my Grammy's church.

"Ain't no party like a Holy Ghost party 'cause a Holy Ghost party don't stop!" chanted my dad as he delivered the eulogy. As if it were rehearsed, the congregation repeated the chant. Compared, most funerals are mournful and quiet, however; this celebration was both tears of joy and sadness. It was sunshine and rain. A rainbow and a silver lining. And as expected, testimonies of her kindness, love, and service were big reminders of why so many people loved such a woman. After the service was over, my parents placed a Hershey's Kiss in my hand . . . a sweet, forever memory.

Ana Schulte

Grade 12

Supernova Sings Goodnight Short Story

Olathe North High School
Olathe, KS
Teacher: Deirdre Zongker

7 am

Giant star rises in the east to greet the girl buried in the heavy duvet. Her arm is draped over the stomach of her onetime lover, rising and falling slowly. Golden light dances on the ceiling above her, refracted beams from the curtain swaying to the beat of the ceiling fan. She quietly rises up and swings her feet to the edge of the bed, finding her ground. On her way to relieve herself, she stops to admire her onetime lover, who has red hair— which reminds her of her little sister—and a scar that runs from left temple to chin. *Good.* She thinks. *To be here last night.*

10 am

She watches herself in the mirror, foggy from the steam of the shower. In between brushing her teeth, she sings to herself. Hums as she gargles mouthwash. *Water pressure,* She thinks. *Is subpar in hotels.* She shakes her hair out unto her back, admires the way water droplets perch atop her freckled shoulders. She lets the towel slip to the tile floor beneath her feet and leaves it there as she exits the bathroom. Waiting.

12 pm

She can't decide between the history channel and entertainment news. It's been a thirty minute battle between the two, and the remote has taken the beating. But it's not like it's *her* remote, and it's not like it's *her* TV. She is free to do whatever she wants in this hotel, though she is limited to the space of her one bedroom suite. *One man's weekend business trip rendezvous is another girl's playground,* She thinks. She settles on entertainment news. A blonde woman is describing a fight between a notorious reality star and her well-to-do mother. She sits cross legged and listens to details of the fight in anticipation.

3 pm

I should call Mom. She thinks. *Let her know I'm okay.* She reaches for the landline, traces patterns across the display of numbers. Punches methodically. *Dial one!* Says operator. *Dial two!* She nestles the phone between her ear and her shoulder, weaves the cord through her fingertips and steps towards the window. The phone rings four times before she hears a small click, and static pours in from 2,403 miles away. "Hello?" A woman's voice. Muffled cries of baby.

"Hey! I'm calling for Mom."

The other line drops something on the floor.

"Oh my God, hold on. Stay on the phone!" Hushed demands across the country. Calls for attention.

Probably of the husband. *Good man.* She thinks. *Good smile.*

"What's up? Just put Mom on the phone."

A pause. She imagines her little sister handing off her little daughter to a highchair. She imagines little sister rushing up the stairs.

"Where are you? We've been trying to get a hold of you for weeks."

"Ohio."

"Ohio? Who are you staying with?"

"I'm staying at a hotel. Is Mom there?"

Little sister is quiet.

“Which hotel? Are you sure you’re o-”

She hooks the phone back onto its home on the wall.

7 pm

Alright, she splurged on room service. She never orders room service, because she hates the clutter of silver plates and folded napkins. But dammit, this hotel has this beautifully boozy menu; dessert comes with wine and the sandwich bread is *toasted*. So yeah, she splurged.

Now she lies on her stomach and forks haphazardly at the piece of cake on the silver plate. The TV is still on. She stopped watching hours ago.

8:30 pm

A dark sheet of clouds looms over Ohio. A young girl stares dreamily out the window of the room she is cleaning, watching fat drops of rain race down from the sky. She holds a wet mop steady behind her in one hand. She shakes herself out of her bored stupor and drags herself down the hall to the next room.

“Cleaning! Are you occupied?”

No reply.

She raps on the door. The hallway is silent. The girl sighs and stares into the keyhole. She raps more urgently, fiddles with the door handle. She calls out once more. She presses her ear to the door and listens carefully. She imagines she hears the muffled sounds of a shower, and a woman singing softly. She raps once more.

Nobody answers. She moves on.

11 pm

She steps out of the shower. She does not bother drying herself; the towel still lies in a damp heap on the floor where she threw it this morning. *It’s time to go to sleep.* She thinks. *I am tired.*

She rummages through the pile of clothes in the corner of the bedroom. Pulls out a phone and detangles ear buds, carefully places one in each ear, and presses play. A familiar tune spills out and fills the empty room.

Somewhere, a long time ago and a long time from now, she is dancing to this song. Vibrant lights swim around her body, turning her fingertips pink and gold, and they carry her to the ceiling. She rests there for a while, looking down at the universe below. She sees her Mother sunbathing in their old backyard in Columbus. Across the galaxy, little sister makes anxious phone calls to relatives and friends. A boy she dated in high school waves to her and begs for her to come down to meet him. She politely declines. She is made of starlight, an enigma of the cosmos. *Dessert wine! Red hair!* She defies gravity.

She cannot lift herself off the floor.

“Goodbye,” She sings. *Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.* Softer, and softer. “Goodnight.”

Divya Srihari
Grade 11

A Plaid Dress
Short Story

John Burroughs School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Shannon Koropchak

The distant flash of lightning outside instantly draws my eyes to the window. As I close my book, my eyes widen in awe at the sight of the ominous darkening clouds overhead, leeching the sky of its blue tone and staining it a deep, bloody scarlet hue.

Sighing, I look around my store, a musty old antique book shop. The walls, lined in dust-veiled storybooks of all kinds - almost all of which I have read at least once - wrap themselves around an old red couch sitting in the corner. The smell of old paper seems to somehow always fill the tiny, dimly lit store no matter how many air fresheners I buy for the place. I feel my eyes slowly droop, and with a sharp breath quickly pry them open and pick myself up. "Mary, don't look at me like that, it's been a long day," I chuckle, shaking my head in lighthearted disapproval at the image of a blonde-haired girl painted on the cover of *The Secret Garden*. Pausing for a minute, I then impulsively jump to my feet and begin to straighten up my desk for about the fifth time that day, stacking and restacking some books, moving my cup of tea to the opposite corner, dusting off my favorite photo of my parents and I, and placing my name plaque neatly in the center - "Harleen, store clerk." Another hour passes by, and I find myself spending it staring at the harsh red lettering of the clock hanging across the room - a usual daily occurrence. At every jingle of the door opening, I desperately look up, only to find a passerby asking for directions. I spin around in my swivel chair, my bag of chips clutched close to my chest. Reaching in the bag for another one, a sigh of desperation escapes my lips; I realize I have emptied yet another bag, far too quickly.

I've long since given up on book keeping, a job that makes even sitting around seem enjoyable, and feel myself begin to nod off. After all, what more can I do? *I have* read almost every single book in this store - the characters now my very best friends I could divulge even my darkest of secrets to, the many captivating settings and plotlines polluting my acting as my refuge from my existing life, polluting my conscience. I settle in my chair and try to fall back asleep, when I hear it.

A jingle.

A small, tiny, *miniscule* jingle - the one that accompanies the creak of the old, wooden-frame door when it swings open to let in a new customer. I all but scramble out of the chair, nearly tripping over myself and hitting my head on the desk in my hurry to see who it is. The door shuts, swinging back and forth just the slightest bit, and I glance around, seeing nobody in the cramped little bookshop. "Hello?" I call out uncertainly. My brow furrows in suspicion, and I feel my eyes keenly scan the store, focused on finding the intruder. I'm sure the door chimed, and that it had opened, too. "Hello? Is anybody..." I almost have the courage to finish my sentence when I realize that I am more scared than I thought, and settle back into my book. "*Oh* Mary, what the *heck* is happening to me," I roll my eyes at myself and giggle. *The wind*, I tell myself. *The wind pushed the door open*.

It is 5:36 pm. It's been three days later since that incident occurred. I almost miss the jingle of the bell when the door swings open this time, and maybe I would have caught a glimpse of the person coming in if I my eyes weren't glazed over, shifting quickly between the clock and my book, my fingers mindlessly tracing the outline of the gold embossed lettering on its cover.

I slam down the book and pushed a stack of dusty notebooks aside. My footsteps were heavy on the groaning floorboards, and the door sways open and shut just the tiniest bit, taunting me as I looked around, panting. "*Hello?*" I asked, my breathing quickening. "Who's there? Is anybody there?" This time, I am even more sure that somebody is hiding behind the bookshelves, crouched behind the red couch.

Deliberately pacing the room, I make three circles, shouting occasionally, "Hey? Who's there?" Nothing. The air *whooshes* out of me, and I creep back to my desk, turning my back on the bookstore - when I hear it. A sure thumping of feet, just like mine had sounded on the aging wood. I spin around, my heart racing and my eyes frantically searching, but whoever it was had sped to the door first. *It's nothing*. I tell myself. *It's nothing*. My mystery visitor leaves me staring open mouthed at the jingling door as it swings back and forth, letting the cold air prickle my skin and send shivers down my spine.

A day later, the jingle of the door instantly draws my eyes from the clock to the door, but when I look up, I see no one. "Okay," I begin, ready to lecture the person who has been sneaking around. I stand up and peer over my desk, and to my surprise, see a little girl walk through the door, her face dull and solemn. "Hi!" I exclaimed. I feel ecstatic at seeing a new face, and wonder what she was doing here, of all places. She couldn't have been more than eight, and this store definitely didn't seem like a place any second grader would walk into. She made her way towards one of the bookshelves and traces a stubby little finger over the spines of the books, although it did not seem as if she could even read them. All the while, my eyes are narrowed with curiosity. "Hi!" I repeated, louder. "What's your name? Can I help you?" Can she hear me? I wonder. That's when I stop short—the little girl is wearing a plaid dress - a green and red plaid dress. *It almost looks like...* I smile to myself softly. *I had a dress like that once*. A flash of that somber memory drifts into my head, and I briefly drift into thought, thinking about what happened that night.

It was the day of my piano recital, and my mother had bought me a new plaid dress. I wore it proudly, prancing and twirling in delight at the soft wispy fabric.

"I like your dress!" I try again. She simply looks back at me. So she *can* hear me! I opened one of my drawers, and begin walking towards her. On hearing my footsteps coming towards her, she turns around and faces me. With a comforting smile, I kneel down and offer her a lollipop, and am flooded with relief when she snatches it from my fingers and reciprocates my action with a small, mischievous smile. She skips out the door, her two dark braids dancing in the wind as she prances away. *Funny*, I think to myself. My mother always used to braid my hair, just like that. Softly smiling to myself, I run my fingers through my own hair, a sigh escaping my lips.

Its 10:30 am, and I wait. Wait for her. I don't know who she is, where she's from, I don't even know her name for God's sake - but somehow, I feel an odd connection to her. When I look at her, something stirs deep inside me, something unexplainable. It makes me want to burst into tears but embrace her at the same time. I feel myself acting odd that day, my breathing become heavier and quicker. My eyes fixate on the door, waiting for her to come. When would she come? I shake myself in realization - I was being delusional. I don't even know who she is. But at every jingle of the doorbell, I find my eyes jumping to the door, waiting excitedly to see if it is her that walks in.

It is 5:20 pm. I hear the familiar jingle of door opening. It sends shivers down my spine. There she is. I see her standing in the doorway with her bright, mischievous smile, but somehow underneath it all, her eyes reveal a sense of grief - loneliness even. Is that why she is here? I feel a pang deep in my chest, and lower my eyes sadly - I know how it feels. Turning my head, I quietly observe her actions. She innocently shuffles around the room, peering at the towering shelves of books she probably can't even read. I stay quiet, my head turned inquisitively to the side, observing her for a little longer. I walked over to her, "Hi, what's your name?" I asked. She turns her head, smiles shyly, and proceeds to continue staring at the bookshelf. Before I can do anything, though, she is out the door.

She does this everyday. Torments me with her silence. Her presence is comforting, but her *silence* tortures me - leaves me wondering for *hours*: Who? What? Where? Why?

The following day, I find my eyes wandering around the room, and they land on my favorite photo of my parents and I as a child. My heart heaving, I sigh. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was taken on the day of my piano recital - the night my parents died. I was all dolled up, wearing my mother's lipstick, my hair in two meticulously done braids, and my favorite new red and green plaid dress. My grandmother drove me home that night. My parents drove home separately, but never made it back home. I caress the image, and quickly look away.

It was 4:16. The jingle of the doorbells light up my eyes. There she is, again, at the door. I gulp,

steadying my breathing. Slowly, she paces back and forth, peering inquisitively at the bookshelves. “Hey! What are you looking for? What are you here for?” I ask accusingly, raising my voice. “You don’t read any books! You decide to come in here, but don’t even talk to me, what do you want?!” I gulp, my voice cracking and my hands trembling. Why was I reacting this way? *This isn’t good. This isn’t right*, I tell myself.

She didn’t smile today. Simply started walking out the door. “Wait, no! Where are you going?” I called after her desperately. “Come back here!” My head spinning, I close my eyes; overwhelmed, I take a deep breath, frantically choking back hot tears of confusion and anger. “STOP!” I yell, “DON’T GO!” I race after her, but turn back a few steps later, reaching for an object on my desk in a sudden burst of anger and frustration. With a scream, I chuck it after her, and wait, hunched over, my eyelids pressed tightly together, listening for the jingle of the door signaling her departure. I wait. I listen. The only thing I can hear, though, is my own pounding heart and my own staggered breathing, heavy with fear. To my astonishment, when I open my eyes, there is no girl, no braids, no dress. The only thing that lies in front of me is the shattered photo of my parents and I, laying in a million pieces on the floor. Was she never even there? Trembling, I frantically make my way towards the door, and peering into the shattered photo frame, catch a glimpse of an image. A little girl, wearing a plaid dress, her dark hair worn in two waist-length dark braids. Another look, and I see my own reflection in the warped glass - long dark hair framing my face, my eyes frightened and red; a single tear, stained black from my mascara, trickling down my face.

Oviya Srihari
Grade 8

Sugar Thorns
Poetry

John Burroughs School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Joy Gebhardt

Your words,
 Dulcet-toned,
 Tinged ballet-slipper pink—if they had a color—
 They speak volumes under the
Saccharine rose veneer.
I really don't know if you think I can't tell
 That the honey to all those sentences is just slow, amber
 Entrapment
And that the cheery blush-pinks that adorn your every syllable
 Are a rushed paint job over
Dusty grays and sable
Your words,
 Sweet and slow and pink
 Are just thorns,
glacé and sugar-
 coated.

Lauren Wagner
Grade 12

Tell Me Your Story
Dramatic Script

David H Hickman High School
Columbia, MO
Teacher: Nancy White

CHARACTERS

WRITER: a writer; any age, any gender

DANCER: a dancer; 20s, any gender

PAINTER: a painter; 20s, any gender

ACTOR: an actor; 20s or 30s, any gender

PLACE

An artist's studio.

TIME

The present.

(A mostly bare studio space. The back wall is lined with windows and a ballet barre is bolted to the wall beneath. There is a duffel bag on the floor under the barre. CS is an easel, a stack of blank canvases, and a table crowded with paint and brushes.

DR the WRITER sits on the floor working with a laptop, a manuscript and a pen.

The DANCER enters UL with a bottle of water, a phone, and wireless headphones. They toss the bottle on top of the duffel, and start working. They frequently rewind and repeat the same section.

The ACTOR enters DL with a script, sets it down and starts to warm up.

The PAINTER enters with a finished painting, crosses C, shoves it into the mess on the table, sets a blank canvas on the easel, prepares a brush with red paint, stands in front of the blank canvas for a long time, eventually takes down the blank canvas, sets up the finished one, and starts with the red.

The WRITER crumples a page of the manuscript and tosses it backward into the DANCER's space. The DANCER stops, opens and skims the paper, then crumples it back up and throws it at the WRITER's head.)

WRITER: What the-

DANCER: Pay attention. You're not the only one trying to work here.

(The DANCER gets back to work. The WRITER considers the paper, then turns and throws it back again.

The DANCER stops, deliberately pauses music and removes headphones. The two glare at each other for a moment. The DANCER picks up the paper, opens it. The WRITER hurries to stand.)

WRITER: No-

DANCER: Have you seen the Artist think? (The WRITER attempts to steal the paper back.) He thinks in lines and shapes, in shades. But never colors, never curves. (The WRITER succeeds in ripping the paper out of the DANCER's hand.)

WRITER

Please, don't read that.

DANCER

You threw it at me!

WRITER

You threw it at me first!
DANCER
I was hoping to smack the negativity out of you.
WRITER
The what now?
DANCER
Negativity. I can feel it. It's messing me up.
(The PAINTER laughs.)
DANCER
Shut up. I can feel yours, too.
PAINTER
Right.
DANCER
I'm serious.
PAINTER
I can see that.
(The DANCER sighs and picks up the WRITER's laptop.)
WRITER
Please, put that back. (attempts to take it)
DANCER
No. (slips out of reach)
WRITER
Please.
DANCER
No.
WRITER
Why are you doing this?
DANCER
I'm cleansing my environment.
PAINTER
Oh, my god.
DANCER
No, listen to me. You look miserable. How can you work like that?
WRITER
I've- (tries and fails to grab the laptop again) -been working on the same scene for hours.
DANCER
So?
WRITER
Can I please just have my computer back?
DANCER
Not until- until...
WRITER
Spit it out.
DANCER
I'll give you your computer back when you want it enough. (Runs US to deposit the laptop)
WRITER
I do want it.
DANCER
No, that's not what I meant. I'll give it back when you want to write.
WRITER
Don't pretend you've been prancing through daisy fields back there.

DANCER

Okay, but I don't look like a dancing corpse. I'm just... struggling. Dealing with a challenge. It's fun, actually.

WRITER

Oh, you've been having fun?

DANCER

Yes! I can't not have fun when I'm working. Even when it's pissing me off.

WRITER

Well, aren't you lucky.

DANCER

Oh my gosh. Sit down.

WRITER

Please give me back my computer.

DANCER

No. Sit down. I'm telling you a story.

WRITER

A story?

DANCER

Yes. Sit. (The WRITER gives in) Okay, so it's the middle of August. Hasn't rained in weeks. And I'm having a really bad day.

WRITER

Sounds familiar.

DANCER

Shut up. I go for a walk, alone, and I end up at this dried up creek. I climb down the bank and I'm just kind of kicking gravel around and I find this puddle of brown water that hasn't dried up yet. I stare at it for a long time. I can see my reflection. I get down and put my hands in the water, and it's cool. It shouldn't be, it's too hot outside, but somehow it is. (The WRITER is not paying attention) Hey. Listen to me. I'm down with my hands in the water, and I stay there for a minute, and then... I start dancing in the creek. It's not choreographed, it's not good, but I can't stop. My body is just moving however it wants, however it needs to. For a minute I forget why I walked down there in the first place. I stop thinking. And when I stop, I'm ready. I turn around and go straight home to have the conversation I've been avoiding all day. That day made me realize that I love dance. (beat)

WRITER

What was the point of that, exactly?

DANCER

Seriously? Just... think about it.

(The DANCER moves US, keeps working. The WRITER is left pondering. The ACTOR turns C just as the PAINTER takes a pair of scissors from the table and prepares to stab the painting.)

ACTOR

(alarmed, crossing to PAINTER)

What are you doing?

PAINTER

What's it look like?

ACTOR

Is that the one of your grandma's house? With the crabapples?

PAINTER

Yeah.

ACTOR

Aw, I liked that one.

PAINTER

So did I. (sticks scissors through it.)

ACTOR
I thought you sold it?
PAINTER
I did. Last month.
ACTOR
Then why do you have it? (The PAINTER continues mutilating the canvas.) And why are you stabbing it?
PAINTER
I bought it back today for ten bucks at Goodwill.
ACTOR
Oh. (The PAINTER keeps at it with the scissors.) That doesn't mean you have to cut it up.
PAINTER
I know.
ACTOR
Or that you should.
PAINTER
I know.
(They step back to look at the broken canvas. Satisfied, they knock it to the floor and set up a blank one, stare at it, prepare a brush with light blue, hesitate, change to dark blue, then set down the brush without doing anything.)
ACTOR
What's wrong?
PAINTER
I've got nothing.
ACTOR
You just ripped up one of your own pieces with a pair of scissors.
PAINTER
And?
ACTOR
How can you have nothing? Aren't you angry?
PAINTER
I'm not angry.
ACTOR
Then why the scissors?
PAINTER
I dunno.
(The PAINTER puts black on a brush and takes the canvas to the floor, crouches over it, staring blankly, paint dripping. The ACTOR examines the trashed painting.)
ACTOR
This is... still kind of cool, actually.
PAINTER
Thanks.
ACTOR
I mean it.
PAINTER
It wasn't that cool to start.
ACTOR
You said you liked it!

PAINTER
The person who bought it didn't like it.
ACTOR
So? (The PAINTER lays down under the table and starts painting one hand black.) Repeat after me.
PAINTER
What?
ACTOR
I am an artist.
PAINTER
What are you doing?
ACTOR
Just say it.
PAINTER
Why?
ACTOR
Do it.
PAINTER
No.
ACTOR
Please?
PAINTER
I am an artist.
ACTOR
I am an artist.
PAINTER
I am an artist.
ACTOR
I make art.
PAINTER
I make art.
ACTOR
I make art because I love it.
PAINTER
I make art because I love it. Why-
ACTOR
Shhh. I make art whether other people like it or not.
PAINTER
I make art whether other people like it or not.
ACTOR
There is no backup plan.
PAINTER
There is no backup plan.
ACTOR
If you think I should go into engineering, screw you. (The PAINTER hesitates.) Come on.
PAINTER
If you think I should go into engineering, screw you.
ACTOR
Say it like you mean it. (out) Screw you!
PAINTER
I still don't- (The ACTOR grabs them, turns them out, gives them a shake)
ACTOR

Screw you!

PAINTER

Screw you.

ACTOR

You can do better than that. Screw you!

PAINTER

(slightly better) Screw you! (beat, then fiercely) Screw you! (throws the black brush at the ground) Screw you!

ACTOR

Do you feel better?

PAINTER

I don't know.

ACTOR

Do you want to make something?

PAINTER

Yes.

ACTOR

Do it.

(The PAINTER puts the canvas back on the easel with the paint-covered hand, drags their fingers across it, and puts orange paint on a brush. The WRITER flops down on the floor.)

ACTOR

Now you.

WRITER

I'm sorry?

ACTOR

Did you get the point yet?

WRITER

You heard that?

ACTOR

I was like... fifteen feet away. Yes, I heard.

WRITER

Ugh.

ACTOR

Okay, listen. It was opening night of the spring play my sophomore year of high school.

WRITER

We have to do this again?

ACTOR

Please let me help you. You're obviously struggling. (The WRITER relents.) Thank you. (starting again)

So, high school. I entered from the balcony at the top of the show- a bunch of us did. We had to walk around the outside of the auditorium to get there- up the stairs off stage right and then around through the second floor. Only half the lights were ever on because it was after hours. Anyway, we were walking up there like we had dozens of times, but that night it was different for me. I got this warmth in my chest.

Right here. This energy. I had to smile. And cry. I ended up doing both at the same time. Like, there I was surrounded by wonderful people, about to do this show that we were all so proud of. Even the kids I wasn't close with, I got to share something special with them, out of all the billions of people in the world. That's awesome. I ended up running down the hall with this giant grin on my face, arms open. I just had to run. When my cast mates asked me what I was doing, all I could say was "I love this." (Beat.)

WRITER

So you're just... telling me about when you realized you loved art.

ACTOR

Yes.

WRITER

Why?

DANCER

(nearly collapsing onto the PAINTER)

Ow!

(all turn to DANCER as they remove their headphones and examine a foot)

PAINTER

Jeez.

ACTOR

You okay?

DANCER

I'm fine.

PAINTER

You don't look fine. (crouches down to the DANCER's level) You look sick.

DANCER

Didn't anyone ever tell you that's rude?

PAINTER

No, really. You have eyebags. You never get eyebags.

DANCER

I'm fine.

PAINTER

How long have you been going?

DANCER

Fourteen hours.

PAINTER

Straight?

DANCER

Mostly.

PAINTER

You should take a break.

DANCER

I don't have time for that. (gets up)

PAINTER

Oh, my god.

DANCER

What?

PAINTER

You *have* time to take a break.

DANCER

No, I don't.

PAINTER

Yeah, you do! When was the last time you ate?

DANCER

Breakfast.

PAINTER

At like, what, 6 am?

DANCER

Something like that.

PAINTER

Take a break. Eat dinner.

DANCER

No.

PAINTER

You've been doing the same thing on repeat all day.

DANCER

And?

PAINTER

Nothing's changed. Actually, you might be getting worse. I think your turns are getting sloppy.

DANCER

What do you know about turns?

PAINTER

Sit down for like, five minutes. I am begging you. I don't want you knocking my stuff over. (The DANCER ignores them, starts testing their foot.) I can feel your negativity.

DANCER

Ha!

PAINTER

(to ACTOR and WRITER)

I'm not wrong.

ACTOR

I think a break might be good.

WRITER

I agree.

DANCER

I'm fine.

PAINTER

You're not.

DANCER

I don't know about you all, but I was taught to push myself and do my best. I'm not gonna quit because I'm a little tired.

PAINTER

You're not "a little tired," you're exhausted.

DANCER

I'm not exhausted, you're distracting me.

PAINTER

You're not doing your best like this. (The DANCER ignores them, nearly runs into the easel.) Oh my god, sit down. (attempts to physically restrain the DANCER, who shoves them away.)

DANCER

Don't touch me!

ACTOR

Hey, guys, take it easy. (They aren't listening.)

PAINTER

You have to stop.

DANCER

I really don't. (Purposefully gets closer to the easel)

PAINTER

You're going to hurt yourself. Again.

DANCER

I know my body. (Just misses the easel with a fan kick)

PAINTER

Yeah, and I know what the human face is supposed to look like. It's not that.

DANCER

Seriously, that is so rude.

PAINTER

Just being honest. You look like death.

ACTOR

Guys, please. (getting up)

DANCER

Well, I never asked for your input.

ACTOR

Guys!

PAINTER & DANCER

What?

ACTOR

Calm down. (to DANCER) You, take a break (before they can protest) Just take five. Get a drink. Breathe for a second, please. (The DANCER stalks US to PAINTER) You, come help me with my monologue.

PAINTER

What?

ACTOR

Please? (The PAINTER gives in and follows the ACTOR DS.) Okay, so I don't really know what to do with this... (shows the PAINTER the script)

PAINTER

What do you want me to do?

ACTOR

I don't know, I just- I don't know.

WRITER

Can I see? (The ACTOR waves them over and shows the page. The WRITER reads.) Ooh, I like this.

ACTOR

What?

WRITER

I really like this.

ACTOR

It's just... me talking about my day. Like, traffic and weather.

WRITER

I know, and I love it.

ACTOR

It's so boring!

WRITER

No, no. Look. It's establishing the relationship between these two characters in a realistic way. Look at the stage directions. Your scene partner is totally fascinated through this whole thing, which means she cares about you enough to want to hear about all the boring little details of your day. That's how real people talk. Who's this playwright? (Flips to front cover)

ACTOR

But this is the opening scene. The audience doesn't care about my character as much as she does. How am I supposed to make them interested in my commute to work?

DANCER

You can't.

PAINTER

Oh, my god.

ACTOR

What?

DANCER

You can't. (approaches, shoots the PAINTER a look) You can't make your audience do anything. All you can do is be honest and hope they respond.

ACTOR

But it's so boring.

DANCER

(eyeing the WRITER) Clearly not.

ACTOR

Okay, fair. What did you say?

DANCER

One of my teachers used to make us stand in front of a mirror before every performance, look ourselves in the eye and say "Be honest. That is enough." That's all you can do. It's all you need to do. Otherwise we'd always just be trying to do whatever looked the coolest. And what's the point of that?

PAINTER

You- (The DANCER faces them. "What now?") You aren't wrong.

DANCER

I know.

PAINTER

It's the same for me.

DANCER

It's the same for all of us.

PAINTER

(thinks for a moment, then to ACTOR)

Repeat after me.

ACTOR

What?

PAINTER

Do it.

ACTOR

Are you using my own-

PAINTER

Yes. Just do it. (the ACTOR gives in) I am a real person.

ACTOR

I am a real person.

PAINTER

I am fascinating.

ACTOR

I am fascinating.

PAINTER

Uhh...

DANCER

I am enough.

ACTOR

I am enough.

PAINTER

Got it?

ACTOR

Yeah... I think so.

PAINTER

Good.

WRITER

(Looking up from script, to PAINTER)

Tell me yours.

PAINTER

What?

WRITER

Your story. About when you fell in love with your art. Please, tell me.

PAINTER

Oh. Um...

WRITER

Please?

PAINTER

Okay... I was Eighteen. On my way to Texas to see my dad. (The WRITER collects the pen and crumpled paper. The others follow. The WRITER sits and starts scribbling something down while the PAINTER is still talking.) For the first time in a few years. I, um... you know that feeling you get when there's something wrong but you can't explain it, you don't know what's wrong just that something is. I'd felt like that all day. Like... a rock in my chest, kind of. I'd been driving all day, and then all night because I couldn't bring myself to stop, for some reason. I don't know. I got to this truck stop diner place, and I was sitting in a booth and I had a pen and I started drawing on a napkin and the waitress, she- she was exactly that sweet- and-wise kind of woman you'd expect to find working in a truck stop diner- anyway, she came over and she saw my drawing and she, she just looked at it, and then up at me and she said "be brave, honey." I looked down at the napkin and realized it was a picture of me driving down the highway into this dark... thing. I don't know. But somehow, she got it. This stranger just got it in a matter of seconds, and I didn't have to find the words for it. So, yeah. That's when I fell in love. With art. (The WRITER sits back. The others crowd closer.)

DANCER

Can I...

WRITER

Yeah. Yeah, now you can.

DANCER

(Takes paper, shares it)

Have you seen the Artist think?

PAINTER

He thinks in lines and shapes, in shades.

ACTOR

But never colors, never curves.

PAINTER

His figures leap into the sky, painting pictures on the clouds.

DANCER

They scroll and pivot through the air, ever changing.

ACTOR

But never colors, never curves.

DANCER

The Artist sits. Sets down his pencil. He looks at his lines and weeps, remembering colors and curves.

PAINTER

Tears fall to paper, warp the page and blur the lines. In the wake of a droplet the paper puckers and a figure curls.

ACTOR

A single curve writhes among its rigid siblings.

DANCER

The Artist studies it, thumbing the edge of the page.

PAINTER

He cuts his finger. White blossoms into a tiny streak of red.

ACTOR

His finger stings. His eyes burn.

WRITER

But there is color, and there is curve.

END OF PLAY.

Evan Williams

Grade 12

The Irony Of Priestly Virtue Poetry

John Burroughs School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Megan Zmudzynski

The hypocrisy of a man of faith,
a facade of piety and virtue,
the mask of patriarchal society,
beneath which lies a grotesque abuse of power,
the ability to brush heinous crimes under the rug,
shirking all responsibility and accepting none of the blame.

The irony of a man of vice preaching virtue,
akin to a murderer employed as an executioner,
pulling the noose around the neck of a woman,
and declaring that she killed herself.

The cowardice of powerful men,
hiding behind that woman which he wields,
a human shield amidst a torrential downpour of ignominy,
the withered corpse of her reputation merely collateral damage.

The underhanded moral tenets of the holy man,
an oxymoronic exception becoming common,
the corrupt morality of the mouthpiece of God,
an affront to all that is good in this world.

When, then, shall these absolving officers reconcile their crimes?
Their mumbled prayers of penitence a dull roar,
drowned by the deafening cacophony of their sin,
a secret which will remain tucked within the torn pages of a King James,
the clergy quickly forgetting, and the public never having known.

Kylie Williams

Grade 11

The Chair. Flash Fiction

Teacher: Kathryn Hart-Williams

Her back immersed so deeply into the chair that it was becoming a part of her. She took a sip from her glass. It was one in the afternoon and alcohol already consumed her body. Hair thick as sticks, un-brushed and tangled. For years, she told herself she would never end up like her mother and she wasn't. She was worse. Red and blue lights used to be her alarm clock. Waking up at dawn, not knowing if she would be sleeping alone the next night. At least she made the right decision to not have kids. She didn't want to make the same mistake of raising them to grow up too fast. No childhood, an adult before she was a teen. Taking care of her sister like her own. She has no memory of happiness. Drinking away her problems. Bright eyes never shine for long.

Hardly an income and living lonely, she sunk farther down and the wood pinched the middle of her spine. It felt good to hurt, she's been numb for too long. Flashbacks of broken windows and slammed doors come when there is any sudden noise. She flinched at the ring of her phone. Checking it to find out she was fired. 3 jobs tried and failed. Not a surprise. Empty eyes and dreaded headaches. She didn't care, she knew it wasn't going to work out. Failure was routine she scheduled for herself and it was right on time. 4 missed calls. 21 unread messages.

9 am – "I'm sorry."

10 am – "I should have listened."

11 am – "You were right."

12 pm – "Please call me."

1 pm – "I am trying to love you."

Each buzz tingled her fingers, she leaned her head back and rested it on the top rail of the chair. She wasn't scared of rejection. It was actually, expected. Love is what was feared. No heart meant no heartbreak. Shut down and shut out. She grabbed her phone to turn on 'Silent Mode.' Forgiveness wasn't in her vocabulary. No second chances and absolutely, not a third. There was something about this man, though. Something that changed her, she was afraid of it. He made her want to be better and that meant he had control. He spent months trying to warm her cold shoulder but she was always facing away. She saw love when she looked at him so she never turned around.

Her grip tightened around her wine glass and she tipped her head forward to rest it on the table as her feet wrapped around the legs of the chair. Tears fell. She hated crying more than she hated love, but every time the phone lit up, she felt her heart drop into her stomach as it ran marathons in her chest. Often, she found herself reliving memories of real happiness. She knew not to get too close because hello always meant goodbye. Beginnings always had endings. One mistake. One choice. One decision to fall in love really changed her life in an instant. Straw grass, baby birds and simple melodies made her mind pound with joyful regrets.

Not getting up, she grabbed the wine bottle not even bothering to fill up her glass, she slumped and let her lower back uncomfortably curve to hold her up so she didn't fall off. Before he got the chance too, she was quick to end things. If she is going to have a broken heart, she should be the one to drop it. No one should have control of her emotions, so she hurt herself before someone else could. Dead rose petals scattered across the table with notes still pinned to the stem. She meant everything to him and that meant nothing to her. Seeing love as a compromise, she didn't want to have to give up any part of herself, even the pieces she loathed.

Salty stained drops slipped into her mouth through the crevice of her lips, she despised the taste, so she

drowned herself in another glass as she peeled herself forward to lean on her elbows because her spine was falling asleep. Always left behind and fighting disappointment. Her mind was relentless and her heart couldn't handle loving anyone. It was in her blood. She wished she could take out what was in her DNA. Bruised hearts and naked souls, she was only following in the footsteps of the ones before her. When the path ended, she'd be the one to continue. Not knowing where her dad's steps led, she assumed he was worse. Maybe a drug addict or abuser. Only thing that was certain was that he disappeared with the sounds of sirens blaring in the midnight sky on her ninth birthday.

Burning photographs lit up the room and she watched her pale hand flicker, she wrapped her arms around her stomach and brought her knees up to protect her heart. The chair was the only companion she could feel safe with. It held her up and she allowed it to. Light peered from the sides of her phone, laid face down. Each ring was a skipped heartbeat. A sigh leaked from her lungs, she looked up and the numb tears rolled into her rough hair.

9 missed calls. 32 unread messages.

8 pm – “I guess it wasn't meant to be.”

9 pm – “Nothing...?”

10 pm – “I gave you more of me than I should have offered.”

11 pm – “You are not worth the wait anymore.”

12 am – “I should have never tried to love you.”

Alice Wu
Grade 11

Hot and Sour Love
Personal Essay/Memoir

Blue Valley North High School
Overland Park, KS
Teacher: Katherine Buchanan

I fell in love with the first taste of that awakening flavor. The clouds of egg drops melted on my tongue and were followed by the dark earthiness of wood ear mushrooms. I thought I was drinking liquid amber, bright with acidity and warm with the red kiss of chilies. My father then told me it was called hot and sour soup, and when a last whisper lingered on my lips as my family left the restaurant, I knew I wanted more.

I also knew I would be disappointed. We almost never went out to eat, and I had no hope that I would be able to recreate the dish on my own. With my slippery hands and flitting mind, my mother didn't even trust me to touch knives or let my hand waver above the stove's electric flames. Moreover, my family's attempts to cook something new always ended in regret. I remember the linguini swimming in red foam (a dish we called spaghetti) and the separated curry floating on a island of oil. Because my mother's rule was that nothing could go to waste, I also remember those foods being thick and full in my throat as I washed them down with a glass of water. There was a reason why we settled for an empirical formula of rice and stir-fried vegetables, and I willed myself to turn thoughts of the soup away.

One day, however, I let my nose and ears guide me down the stairs to our plain white kitchen, and I paused in the doorway with round eyes. There was my mother, cubing tofu and whisking eggs by hand. A black curl drooped by her glossy cheek, and her voice mingled with steam as it rose in the songs of her distant childhood. When she ladled a hot bowl to the brim for me, I formed the only words I could think of: *Xie xie*. Thank you.

My mother began making the soup with astonishing frequency, and, not believing in written recipes or the measurement of ingredients, her creations varied every time. Sometimes, sesame oil would come through and form golden bubbles. Other times, the gentle sweetness of carrots was what sang. She teased that she would never have to cook that soup again if I drank it too often and tired of it, but how could I? It was sure heat when winter was wet with heavy snows. It was sharp clarity in the torpor of summer sweat. Most of all, it was a mother's love, flowing fast and constant through my veins.

There were times though when I struggled to find the magic. The broth would be too thin, or the excess salt and white pepper would coat my tongue. One time, my mother's hand slipped while she was pouring the vinegar, and the resulting soup pinched my throat and made me wince. As she watched the color of my mood change, my mother pursed her lips and furrowed her brow.

That night, she sat down alone with a bowl of the soup before I wordlessly joined her. Her red-rimmed gaze met mine, and I wondered: Why do we pursue love when it doesn't taste sweet? Neither of us could find the words to answer, so we let them fall away instead. We simply filled with silence with the clattering of spoons and sips of a four-letter word I was only beginning to understand.

Ann Zhang
Grade 10

A Woman's Place
Science Fiction/Fantasy

John Burroughs School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Andy Chen

Edwin tucked himself into the corner of the loveseat, flipped on the cooking channel, and waited for the Woman of His Dreams (TM) to arrive via two-day delivery.

"I hope she's smart," he said, thinking out loud.

Mona, Edwin's roommate, replied, "Hm?"

Edwin sighed. "I marked a three out of five on the request sheet. For intelligence, I mean. I didn't want to seem like I was asking for too much, since I marked so high for... y'know, other stuff."

"Hm," said Mona. She was trying to interest herself in the TV, but she'd already seen the episode that was playing — an Asian-themed special of *Easy Living with Liv*. For the next dish, Mona remembered, Liv would whip up some mango pudding, a dessert that Edwin had been dropping hints for Mona to make "the authentic way" — "'Cause you're half-Chinese, right?"

These cooking shows, Mona thought, had skewed Edwin's expectations. She could hardly boil spaghetti.

Mona's thoughts were interrupted by the growl of the mail truck outside, bumbling down the rugged asphalt. By the time Mona looked up, Edwin was already out the door, intercepting the coffin-shaped package directly from the mailman.

Edwin lugged it inside, kicking the door shut behind him, and began to demolish the tape around the cardboard box, giddy like a child on Christmas morning. Inside sat several layers of bubble wrap, and at the very core, Edwin unfurled exactly what the website had promised him —

"My God." Edwin blushed a deep crimson. Standing before him was, truly, the Woman of His Dreams (TM): a replica of the Spanish teacher he'd hopelessly fallen for in seventh grade. Except this version had golden hair, and slightly larger breasts, shown off in a strappy sundress — perfect for the ongoing Floridian hot spell.

Mona didn't want to be impressed; she wanted to be on the side of the feminists chanting "Sex shouldn't sell!" all over the news, but she couldn't help herself: There wasn't a single inaccuracy, any missing piece or a stray wire, that made the robot look less than human.

The Woman, programmed to cut right to the chase, brushed a glistening strand of hair from her face and stepped closer to Edwin, so their toes kissed.

"We finally meet," she said to him. Her voice was low like warm apple cider.

Edwin shivered with delight.

Mona and Edwin were both upper-middle-class rich kids, but Mona differentiated herself as the type of rich kid whose kids would grow up twice as rich. For example: Mona, at age 27, already had a house within walking distance of the beach because she'd sold her dad's old surfboards online for big bucks; Edwin had a house because his mom went to Bible Study Group with Mona's mom, who claimed her daughter was lonely and offering a room for only \$300 a month.

"You were classmates!" Mona's mom had defended over the phone when Mona, upon hearing the news, exploded.

Mona snorted. "Yeah, in a high school of seven hundred kids! Besides, I was a senior while he was a *freshman*."

"I'm just worried about you. Living alone. Are you sure you can take care of yourself?"

Ever since, Edwin had occupied his favorite couch in Mona's living room, day and night, dozing off at odd hours. Kind of like a watchdog, Mona liked to tell herself. If watchdogs snored like motorcycles and captained fanpages for Liv Murphy, the titular star of *Easy Living with Liv*.

But this Saturday at noon, when Mona ventured out of her room, the loveseat was empty, with an indentation in the cushion where Edwin usually sat. Indecipherable whispers slipped out from the kitchen, along with a rich, buttery smell. A short burst of laughter rang throughout the house.

"You're up, Edwin," Mona said as she made her entrance. She opened the fridge and stuck her head inside, unsure what she was looking for. The cool air tickled her sleep-soaked face.

A light tap on Mona's shoulder almost sent her flying. Behind her, the Woman laughed — a light, tinkling laugh. Was Mona imagining it, or did the Woman's laugh sound exactly like Liv from *Easy Living*?

"Here, we made brunch for you." The Woman was holding out Mona's favorite plate, the one with orange roses in the center, except presently the roses were hidden behind a stack of steaming chocolate chip pancakes. A single whiff was enough to hustle Mona's taste buds to the ready. She accepted the plate and cradled it with her entire body.

"I didn't know you cooked," Mona commented to Edwin's back. She was doing her best to ignore the Woman, who was now balancing two more plates of pancakes, one in each hand. The Woman set both down at adjacent spots at the table.

Edwin, the first to , devoured a forkful of pancake before speaking. "It was all my Woman's doing." He jabbed his chin towards the Woman, whose dirty apron — one of *Mona's* aprons, Mona couldn't help but notice — testified to Edwin's honesty. The Woman shrugged, her lips flattening in a modest, wholesome smile.

"Um, wow," said Mona. Suppressing the compliments rising in her throat, she headed over the table, aiming for the chair on the other side of Edwin. But en route, her legs fumbled and twisted on top of each other. The pancakes she was carrying scattered like frisbees throughout the kitchen. Mona's favorite plate skidded the across the floor, unharmed.

"Here, take mine. I try to avoid butter anyway," the Woman said. She kneeled to clean up the debris. To Mona, she added, "Did you know that too much low-density lipoprotein cholesterol can clog your arteries?"

"She really *is* smart," said Edwin, grinning with a mouth full of food. "And selfless, too."

Blinking, Mona reassembled her limbs and pride. She climbed into the spot next to Edwin. Poked at a pancake.

You don't even have arteries, Mona wanted to say to the Woman. Instead she pulled her chin to her chest in a nod.

In the evening, as per routine, Mona squeezed into her trusty black one-piece and flip-flopped down to the Atlantic coastline. To avoid summer crowds, she liked to swim in the evening, to push her body slow and steady against the waves — the hard part — and then ride the tide back.

It was a fun workout, Mona thought, and she'd invited other friends to join her in the past, but they'd all managed to invent last-minute excuses. Sure, Mermaid's Beach was a popular bull shark breeding ground, but the sharks only followed the smell of blood, and Mona stayed home when she was on her period, so she was totally safe.

Normally when his roommate left the house, Edwin would seize the opportunity to video chat with other *Easy Living* fans. But this evening, his Woman was sticking some chicken tetrazzini in the oven, so Edwin decided to return to his post in front of the TV, where he had better access to the delightful scents.

The Woman set the timer for half an hour, slipped off her oven mitts, and plopped down next to Edwin. "What are we watching?" she asked, nestling her head in the dip between his neck and shoulder.

"We can watch this one show I like?" Edwin turned on the cooking channel. Commercial break.

The Woman squeezed Edwin's hand. "*Easy Living with Liv*? I love that one."

Then she lifted her face to his, so she was gazing up into his eyes, and she creased her brows slightly, perhaps analyzing his current state of being — his heart rate and blood pressure — or simply trying to

seduce him.

Either way, Edwin was a teenage boy at heart, so he thought it was hot. He returned her stare, allowing his eyes to wander down to the skin sneaking out of her dress. One spaghetti strap slipped halfway down her forearm.

Edwin wasn't objectifying her or anything. The Woman wasn't a real woman, no matter how well she passed for one, and you can't objectify an object, he told himself.

Edwin squeaked, "Y'know, I've never... y'know... before..."

This was the cue. Now the Woman was turning, draping her body over him. She cradled his chin in her hands, his hips between her legs. She asked, "Do you want to?"

"Uuuuh," said Edwin.

The Woman traced a trail of kisses from his jaw to his chest. She was laughing softly, like a field of wildflowers opening up to the sun. It was a sexy laugh, in Edwin's opinion. He'd specifically requested for his Woman to have the same laugh as Liv Murphy.

As the dark pressed on, that very laugh filled Edwin's ears, his hands, his chest, his thighs. Every stubborn inch of him.

At one in the morning, when Mona returned home from the beach with a towel wedged beneath her armpits, she discovered Edwin and the Woman curled together on the loveseat, their respective scents ripening like sour milk.

Mona choked back a mouthful of vomit — the acidic graduation of the pancakes she'd earlier enjoyed for breakfast. It wasn't that Mona had any affection for Edwin; she just didn't like seeing him with the Woman. Partially because it meant he'd spent almost all his money on a goddamn robot, so Mona was doing him a massive favor by letting him continue to board... but mostly because the Woman was just like another *person* — showering each day, eating and pissing even though she didn't have to, radiating that faint smell of roses — which made it a lot harder for Mona to dislike her.

Mona should just kick Edwin out. Yeah, that was right; she would kick him out right then and there. She would push him off the couch to give him a good scare, and then she would tell him what he'd better do — step away from the cooking channel and find a damn job, for instance — and she would throw him out the front door right alongside his Woman and yell "Sex doesn't sell to my house!" so all the neighbors would hear.

Mona plunked her feet one in front of the other, inching closer to Edwin and his stench and his unbuttoned corduroys. She tried to put a little sway in her step, to awaken her confidence.

"Uuuuh." Edwin groaned in his sleep and rolled over, flopping his hairy arm to the side.

Now Mona could see the Woman's pale skin echoing the moonlight, her limp body encased in sleep, or recharging, or whatever robots did at night. Skirt bunched up around her thighs. Eyelids moist. A triangle of space between soft, red lips.

Mona kept staring, and right then it struck her; her gut was right: Any metal contraption could be programmed to talk, walk, or cook like a human, but it took heart to sleep like this — chest rising up and down, head folded into a man's sweat-slick shoulder. There was no way that this Woman, this being, could possibly be anything less than human. Sure, maybe the Woman's heart was only an assemblage of nuts and bolts, but it was a heart nonetheless — something inside of her, coughing and undoing itself to keep a body alive.

Mona turned away from the sleeping couple, her stomach caving in on itself. Then she trudged upstairs, ripped off her swimsuit, and stumbled into bed, her skin still grimy with sea salt.

Edwin awoke around noon to a foreign smell. His body would have preferred to lie beside his Woman on the couch for another hour, but his curiosity could not be suppressed. When was the last time Mona had made breakfast? Maybe, Edwin hypothesized, she'd finally run out of cereal bars.

With a yawn, Edwin lifted himself from the couch. His Woman, like a well-trained dog, rose alongside her master.

"Hey," Mona greeted the two from the kitchen. She licked some sugar off her thumb.

Evidence of Mona's labor set the backdrop: saucepan cooling off in the sink, dirty blender still plugged into the outlet, dusting of gelatin across the counter. Meanwhile, Edwin and his Woman were scrutinizing the kitchen table, where three glass cups of school-bus-colored sludge posed like centerpieces, each with a mint leaf resting on top.

"It's mango pudding," Mona explained, hoping it didn't need explaining. "Like from *Easy Living with Liv*."

Edwin scratched his head. "Oh. Wow. It looks... authentic!"

Mona had already turned around. "And, um. I found this in the oven?" She opened the fridge, gesturing to where she'd stored a tray of cold but otherwise perfectly prepared chicken tetrazzini.

"Oh," said Edwin. He was blushing redder than ever. The Woman giggled and squeezed his hand.

Thankfully, Mona was still talking. "Look, I just wanted to show you that I get it. That you love your Woman. Even though she's not totally... you know."

Mona peeked at the Woman out of the corner of her eye. The Woman smiled.

"Yeah," said Edwin, more to himself. "Yeah, I do love her."

"And... ah, I'm sorry. I should've been nicer to *you*, especially." Mona forced a smile, holding her arms out to the Woman — an invitation for a hug.

The Woman leaned in. "It's alright." She gave Mona a tight squeeze. Her golden hair spilled into Mona's eyes.

Mona blinked. The Woman's embrace felt nice, actually. Like human contact. Human warmth. She exhaled softly. Closed her eyes.

At dinner, Edwin and his Woman offered to tag along to Mona's nightly swim, and Mona enthusiastically agreed.

"We'll just hang out by the shore," Edwin shouted from the couch. He couldn't even doggy paddle, which Mona knew. Though maybe he could ride on his Woman's back? — she was programmed with expert swimming skills.

"Sure!" Mona called from the other side of the house.

She was digging through her dresser drawers. Her black one-piece, she'd decided, wasn't good enough for company, due to a spot of worn-away fabric between the butt cheeks.

Aha! Mona wrenched out her hidden treasure — a bright yellow and white striped bikini. She remembered her mom once saying that yellow wasn't right for their kind of skin tone, yet here Mona was, slipping into the lightweight fabric just as she pleased.

Mona eyed her reflection in the mirror. She placed one hand on her bare stomach. All the swimming's paid off, she told herself, beaming.

When Mona stepped into the living room, Edwin's face flashed first with confusion, then surprise. He felt his gut churning with a new feeling that he couldn't quite place until half an hour later, at the very end of the walk to Mermaid's Beach: disgust.

Disgust was like a shock collar; each time Edwin looked at Mona, his mouth stung and he had to avert his eyes. It was her thighs that bugged him most: how at the tops, they leaned in on each other, barely touching. And her stomach, too — her bellybutton was sandwiched between two scar-like, horizontal creases.

Edwin glanced at his bikini-bound Woman for sweet relief. His Woman's skin was tight like plastic, and it would always stay that way, Edwin delighted.

"Woohoo!" Mona shouted when they finally reached the beach. She raced across the lumpy sand, twirling in drunken circles, arms outstretched. Then she paused to turn back. "Are you sure you guys don't want to swim? Please?"

Edwin shrugged. "Go ahead," he told his Woman. Then he sat down at an old picnic table and watched his Woman's glossy legs trod across the sand.

In the distance, Mona waddled through the shallow water. Once the levels reached her knees, she dove into a whitecap and paddled towards the deeper sea.

The Woman followed suit. Edwin noted with satisfaction that his Woman's technique — smooth

strokes, subtle breathing — far surpassed Mona’s homespun freestyle.

But Mona wasn’t swimming anymore. She’d stopped still, her arms pin wheeling hopelessly. Then she dipped underwater, head and all.

She’s *really* not a good swimmer, Edwin thought, especially considering how much she practices. And then he noticed the fins in the water — almost pitch black, like the rest of the sea and the clouded midnight sky. The bobbing triangles looked tiny, really, in comparison.

“Oh,” said Edwin. Then louder, scrambling to his knees: “Oh!”

He saw two pale heads bobbing amid the darkness. Circling fins, glimmering ripples on the surface. Mona’s banana-yellow swimsuit was an obvious patch of brightness, even from where Edwin was standing. She must have been pretty stupid to cross into Mermaid’s Beach with such a gaudy outfit.

Then, sweet relief — the Woman was riding the tide, racing expertly back to shore. Her angelic figure clambered out of the water and collapsed into Edwin’s chest, shivering, her hair stringy and dripping. Edwin rubbed his hand in circles against the small of his Woman’s back.

“They got both of us,” the Woman breathed.

Edwin took a step backward. Only then did he notice the jagged cut on his Woman’s left calf, deep enough to draw blood — but instead, it exposed a snaky vein of aluminum.

“So then I punched one in the gills,” the Woman continued. “That’s the best way to fend off an attacking shark, you know.”

Edwin gawked. “And it followed you?”

“No.” The Woman glanced over her shoulder, at the widening sea.

Edwin followed her eyes for a moment. The sun was rearing its head out over the horizon, and the water began to glow with dawn’s fiery reflection. Edwin opened his ears to the waves but heard only their steady, pounding rhythm.

Edwin imagined that somewhere at home, there was silence. His heart longed for his favorite spot on the loveseat. Liv Murphy’s tinkling onscreen laugh. The tray of chicken tetrazzini waiting in the fridge.

Edwin entwined his fingers with the Woman’s. “Let’s go back,” he said.

The ocean roared.