

Missouri Youth Write

Scholastic Art and Writing  
Missouri Region

**Silver Key**  
2018

**Missouri Youth Write** is sponsored by the Missouri Council of Teachers of English (MoCTE). The Greater Kansas City Writing Project ([www.gkcwp.org](http://www.gkcwp.org)) and Missouri Writing Projects Network coordinate the Missouri Region's Scholastic Writing Awards Contest, sponsored by The Alliance for Young Artists & Writers (<http://www.artandwriting.org/>).

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This edition is available online at: <https://www.moteachenglish.org/missouri-youth-writes>

## 2018 Silver Key Winners Missouri Region

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**Jade Ayers**  
Grade 7

*Rainbows Form after Heavy Storms*  
Short Story

Washington Middle School  
Washington, MO  
Teacher: Kaylin Bade

After third hour, I went to meet up with my friend Katrina. We're almost completely different because she's the sweetest person I know, she always wears super bright colored clothes and ankle low leggings, and she can get carried away when doing things she likes, while I'm "mean" and/or "violent" to some, I wear dark purple and dark hot pink clothes and short shorts, and don't like really doing things at all.

I walked the halls, painted a dull white, and looked at all of the small drawings and stickers on the pale blue lockers. I could tell someone's personality just by looking at what the locker has on it. When I turned the corner, I saw Kat looking in the mirror of her locker, beaming at me in the reflection, pushing her red-orange bangs from her eyes. "Hey, Serena!" her voice cracked. I looked over her shoulder and saw three people huddled really close together, about thirty feet away, talking to each other. One girl and two guys. One guy was really tall, had blonde hair, and wore Nike... everything actually. The second one had dark hair, basketball shorts, a black hoodie, and his arm around the girl. She was shorter with long black hair that was red at the tips, darker brown eyes, and wore a black shirt with ripped up skinny jeans.

"She's always happy, it's disgusting," the girl snickered, then smiled up at the boys.

"Her voice is so annoying; my head hurts enough from just looking at the other girl."

'Wow, that is so mean, I'm disappointed,' I thought. Why would they say such horrible things about someone? I looked at Kat, who was still smiling.

"Why does she hang out with the girl who hates everyone then?" another asked. My blood started to boil.

"What's wrong?" Kat asked, making me jump. "You look mad."

"I-it's nothing! Let's go to fourth hour," I stammered and quickly walked off with her, glaring at the group of people who were now grinning evilly at us.

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I anxiously waited for the bell to ring, staring at the clock as I twirled my long black hair around my finger. I slowly started to hear the teacher's voice fade away as my thoughts went to the group of kids. It seemed like they were talking about us. What if they were? I went into a small panic. I didn't want Katrina to have to deal with bullies; she's too innocent. I drowned into the memories I had of fifth grade.

\*\*\*

I looked up at the dark, cloudy sky and a ball flew and hit me in the face, knocking my glasses off into the mud. "Oh, sorry Serena!" Luna called out and ran to me. "Are you ok? Where are your glasses?" I pointed to the mud. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine, I promise." I smiled reassuringly and walked over to the mud puddle and grabbed the ball and my now broken glasses. There was a flash of lighting and a small tree fell down. A lot of kids started screaming. BOOM! Luna ran behind me, scared of the thunder. It started pouring.

"Uh, I think this rain has something in it!" Luna said frantically as she looked at her hair. It was turning from her normal purple and pink to a gross shade of just bleh. The teachers blew their whistles as hard as they could.

"Everyone get inside!" Mrs. Haruna yelled. "And don't run in the halls." Everyone did anyways. The power was out, which scared Luna even more. She got separated from me in the crowd as more kid

ran and pushed past each other. Then I was tripped. On purpose. Most of the kids just walked or ran past me, but a lot of other kids stopped and started to kick me.

“Stop!” I yelled, but they didn’t. I started crying. They stopped, and as I got up, no one seemed to notice. I ran to the bathrooms with the crowd and ran into a stall crying. I was covered in bruises, red marks, and somehow even cuts, which only made me cry more. I cried for an hour, just sitting there.

When I decided to finally leave, I saw my reflection in the mirror. My face was a little red, but I couldn’t tell if it was from the kicking or me crying, and my ice blue eyes were bloodshot. I also had a black eye from the ball, but it wasn’t that noticeable. Later, I got in trouble for missing class and got ISS. No one seemed to notice how beat up I was, and I didn’t tell my teachers, parents, or even my best friends about why I was in trouble in the first place. No one ever seemed to notice anything.

\*\*\*

RING! I jumped at the bell and ran out of the classroom, panicking even more. A teacher told me to slow down, but when I got out of seeing distance, I ran even faster. My heart stopped. ‘No, no, no!’ my mind pleaded. Apparently, the world wanted to say ‘Yes, yes, yes!’ back to me, because I was too late. Katrina was pinned against a locker, the kids from before looking down at her. Her emerald eyes were filled with tears. “Hey!” I yelled. “Back off!” They looked at me.

“Or else what?” one asked and smirked. I got so angry.

“Or else- or else-” I did the first thing that came to my mind without thinking. I punched him, hard, in the mouth. They all stumbled over each other and ran away to the boys’ locker room. Kat’s eyes got wide and she suddenly smiled. I did too, but then the principal walked up and looked me dead in the eye. ‘Dang it,’ I thought. ‘Why’d you have to up and do that, Serena?’

\*\*\*

The detention room was dark because the lights were off and it was raining. I deeply inhaled. ‘Rain doesn’t make emotions any better,’ I thought and sighed. “You can go to the gym for buses now,” Mrs. Henson said. I smiled, in spite of everything, and left the room.

Katrina was standing in the hallway waiting for me. She looked at me and shook her head.

“What?” I asked her. She smiled and playfully smacked me. “What?”

“You’re ridiculous,” she giggled. I playfully smacked her arm a little harder than she did and started walking with her. Since it was the end of the day, we walked to wait for busses.

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As we got onto the buses, it was still pouring. My friend Dawn who sat behind me tapped my shoulder repeatedly until she got me ticked off. “What?” I growled. “I’m already in a bad enough mood. I assume you’ve heard?”

“Actually, I’m pretty sure the whole school knows by now,” she mumbled. “BUT, the bullies told Travis that they’re scared of you!” she squealed.

“What?!” Katrina yelled from the seat across from me

“Proves them right,” I mumbled and smiled. Travis moved up to my seat.

“They had no clue that Kat is my sister,” he told us. “So when I told them, they got all defensive and made up excuses. They said they’d ‘never do it again.’” he said and smirked. Dawn giggled, probably because of her little crush on him.

“Thanks, Trav,” Kat said and hugged him tightly, showing all of her happiness like she always did.

“It’ll never happen again while we’re here,” I told Travis. He nodded. I turned up the music on my phone, putting both ear buds in. I watched as the rain steadied and small droplets of rain fell from the half-clear sky. I spotted a rainbow, which made me smile. “Never.”

“You still have detention for a week though,” Dawn said. They all laughed as I shook my head, still smiling.



**Leslie Azwell**  
Grade 11

*Public Schools and Freedom of Speech*  
Critical Essay

Pattonville High School  
Maryland Hts, MO  
Teacher: James Frazier

In 2004 near San Diego, California, an issue arose regarding a student's right to free speech. The student in question, Tyler Harper, wore a particularly controversial shirt during a Day of Silence at his school. Abhorring a day in which students attempted to bring about tolerance and acceptance of homosexual activity, Harper took a stand and wore a t-shirt with the phrases "I will not accept what God has condemned", "Be ashamed, our school embraced what God condemned", and a bible verse: "Homosexuality is shameful, 'Romans 1:27'" ("Student's First Amendment"). There were no direct administrative complaints about Harper's shirt until a teacher noticed that students in his classroom were discussing it rather than focusing on the class at hand. Upon deciding that the shirt was inflammatory, the teacher requested the student remove his shirt. Harper refused. Further refusals to remove it resulted in his relocation to an enclosed office where Harper spent the rest of the day in isolation. Soon after, Harper's parents filed a case against the school for denying their child's right to freedom of speech. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals agreed with the school's position that the shirt was disrupting learning. The majority opinion stated that it was reasonable to assume a larger disruption would ensue with time due to the shirt's message. Offering dissent against the majority decision, Judge Alex Kozinski stated that Harper "did not thrust his view of homosexuality into the school environment as a part of a campaign to demean or embarrass other students. Rather, he was responding to public statements made by others with whom he disagreed" ("Student's First Amendment").

Around the same time, another case involving a student's right to free speech at school was brought before the courts. Eight-grade student James Nixon wore a shirt to school that also incited censorship by school administrators. Nixon's shirt had statements on the back of it including "Homosexuality is a sin!", "Islam is a lie!", "Abortion is murder!", and "Some issues are black and white!" (Crawford). When Nixon, like Harper, was denied the ability to wear the shirt to school, his parents also sued the school. After further investigation, the court found no evidence that "the t-shirt had 'collided with the rights of other students to be left alone' [and] the court concluded school officials had 'clearly violated' the student's speech rights" (Crawford). Furthermore, the court decided that an "urgent wish to avoid the controversy" sure to result from the statements endorsed by such a t-shirt was not sufficient means to ban the student's right to wear it (Crawford).

The difference between the rulings of two seemingly identical court cases lies in the application of an analytical tool known as the Tinker Standard. Adopted after the 1965 *Tinker vs. De Moines* case regarding Elizabeth Tinker's upheld right to wear black armbands in protest of the Vietnam War, the standard has decided the fate of several cases through the implication of its two prongs. The first prong, a result of the Tinker case, holds that censorship of student speech is lawful if the speech "materially and substantially [interferes] with the requirements of appropriate discipline in the operation of the school", while the second prong denies speech "infringing on the rights of others" (Crawford). These prongs have provided clear analyses for deciding the fate of several freedom of speech issues in public schools. However, upon closer examination, it is undeniable that the courts at times stretch the Tinker standard by applying it to schools in such a way that student learning is actually hindered rather than fostered. By doing so, they create situations that the first prong was specifically designed to avoid. Rather than encouraging environments where students learn to accept the unorthodox or controversial opinions of

others, the Tinker standard is instead being used in ways that strip students of their basic right to express themselves and learn in an environment that teaches the importance of embracing multiple viewpoints on various topics. The Tinker standard does sometimes give students the justice they deserve in cases where public schools deny their rights. However, in others, such as that of Tyler Harper, courts have begun applying the first prong of the Tinker standard in any situation where there is even a minuscule connection between the speech and a resulting disturbance of the school environment. Moreover, with the newer problem of social media providing an outlet for students to express their opinions in belligerent ways, off-campus student speech has increasingly involved itself in school matters. Because of this, public schools feel they have the authority to apply the Tinker standard to off-campus speech regardless of the fact that outside of school, students are afforded rights by the First Amendment including “even lewd and vulgar speech outside of a school setting” (Belnap). The Tinker standard currently implemented in courts as an analytical tool to determine the legality of censorship in public schools is used in ways which were not originally intended, resulting in the infringement of students’ First Amendment rights; therefore, it should not be applied to cyber speech.

In order to evaluate the Tinker standard and its applicability to cases such as Nixon, Harper, and others, it is important to understand the rights that it was originally designed to protect and the case from which it emerged. Conventional wisdom has it that freedom of speech protected by the Constitution is an overarching blanket encompassing all speech. On the contrary, it includes several limitations. Among the examples of words and actions the supreme court has decided that the First Amendment protects include the right “not to speak”, “of students to wear arm bands in protest of a war”, to use “certain offensive words and phrases to convey political messages”, and to “engage in symbolic speech” (“What Does Free Speech Mean?”). Alternatively, freedom of speech does not include the right to “incite actions that would harm others”, to “make or distribute obscene materials”, to “permit students to print articles in a school newspaper over the objections of the school administration”, or the right “to make an obscene speech at a school-sponsored event” (“What Does Free Speech Mean?”). In the original *Tinker vs. De Moines* case, a situation similar to the controversy seen in the Harper and Nixon cases arose in which 13-year-old Mary Beth Tinker wore a black armband, and was asked to remove it. Upon her refusal, she and others who wore them were suspended. In an interview forty years later, Tinker describes her experience: “[We] weren’t sure what to do. We’d learned about the Bill of Rights and the First Amendment in school, and we felt free speech should apply to kids, too. We also had the examples of brave people standing up against dogs and firehoses to fight racism. In the end, we decided to go ahead and wear the armbands, and some of us were suspended” (“Obscenity Case Files”). The resulting court case produced a ruling “that students do not ‘shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate’” (“*Tinker v. De Moines*”). The ruling’s intent was to provide a certain level of freedom of speech in schools, but it is now conversely being used to limit this very freedom. The Court noted that “[s]chool officials do not possess absolute authority over their students” and that students, whether in or out of school, are “persons’ under our Constitution” and are “possessed of fundamental rights” (Crawford).

Admittedly, public schools do have a decent amount of authority in defining what they will and will not permit. In *Bethel School District v. Fraser*, student Matthew Fraser gave a school speech including an “elaborate, graphic, and explicit sexual metaphor” (Crawford), and was thereafter punished for it. When Fraser sued, the court ruled for the school, stating that schools have the responsibility to instill in students “the habits and manners of civility necessary to be productive citizens” (Crawford). The court also stated that “the constitutional rights of students in public school are not automatically coextensive with the rights of adults in other settings” (Belnap). Furthermore, the court said that “the material and substantial-interference analysis under Tinker is ‘not absolute’” (Belnap). Unlike the Tinker case where the actions were quiet and did not interfere with the school activities or impress ideas on others, Fraser’s actions impressed an obscene message that the school did not endorse upon minor students, who were “essentially a captive audience” (Belnap). In such a setting, the school can take license to defend its goals of keeping offensive material away from students. Although Fraser would be constitutionally justified in using the same speech outside of school, he is not justified in using it in a speech at school.

The position of the Bethel School District regarding the responsibility of schools producing “the

habits and manners of civility necessary to be productive citizens” (Belnap) brings up a pivotal point in the discussion of the validity of the Tinker standard. It suggests that the sole purpose of schools is to produce productive citizens. To be a responsible citizen is of the utmost importance and is one of the most basic qualities of those belonging to a society. It requires that a person understands how to be a citizen and how to use his rights effectively so that he can “put pressure on to change [the] dysfunctional structures that avoid the emergence of healthy relations of citizenship” (Zoraida). Part of being a citizen is knowing how to and when to implement your rights as well as being tolerant to the ideas and rights of others. Following this logic, the Tinker standard is essentially taking away the right of a person to have a dissenting or inflammatory opinion. Knowing that their message could cause controversy or be distracting at school, it is likely that students will not use their right of free speech, on campus or off, because they fear it will result in school consequences. In this way, the Tinker standard is ironically failing to do one of the two things it was designed to do: keeping speech from creating substantial disturbances in the school environment. If a school’s purpose is to create responsible citizens rather than high test scores, the Tinker standard is failing to allow students to use their opinions in a constructive way when its implications can impede them from expressing themselves for fear of punishment.

When considering freedom of speech, the protection of opinion is crucially important. There is no absolutely correct opinion on any matter, as opinion, by definition, is a judgment or belief. In his *Freedom of Speech and Press in Early American History*, Lenard Levy, a specialist in Constitutional freedoms, states that “opinion is not punishable because it is involuntary” and “whether valid or not, also went far to provide immunity for political speech” (LaSelva). Because there is not always a right opinion, it is crucial that everyone’s opinion is protected. When applying this logic to hate speech, professor Samuel LaSelva of the University of British Columbia explains that “seditious libel [or provocative speech], is protected speech unless the danger is not only grave, but also imminent.” When applied to the cases of Harper and Nixon, what some deemed as hate speech on the t-shirts is actually opinion, and therefore one cannot be punished for it. It is crucial that all opinions are tolerated and schools do not practice opinion-based discrimination.

The trend of schools deciding which opinions should be censored is completely unjustified. Social media, an example of off-campus speech, is now the voice of many students and can be violently abused. This problem is so new, however, that courts have prematurely decided to apply the Tinker standard to social media, resulting in problems. Some courts extend the Tinker standard to off-campus speech with the statement, “[C]onduct by the student, in class or out of it, which for any reason... disrupts classwork or involves substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others is... not immunized by the Constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech” (Crawford). New identities of the Tinker standard prongs have been adapted in efforts to keep up with the new challenges that social media brings. Northern Illinois University Educational Administrator Jon Crawford explains that the first amended prong asks if the cyber speech foreseeably or actually causes a substantial disruption, and the second amended prong gives schools potential to regulate off-campus speech by asking for mere references of how the speech interferes with the school environment. This results in the standard being applied to social media cases that, just like the Nixon case, where censorship is not justified. The adapted Tinker standard can be, and sometimes is, stretched too far. It is not acceptable to extend it to a situation where a student posts an opinion on social media in the privacy of his own home. The mere fact that the post is sure to cause potential for controversy in school does not justify censoring what is said. Professor Allison Belnap, JD of law at the J. Reuben Clark Law School of Brigham Young University, contends that “[e]xtending Tinker to apply to such speech would allow schools to exercise in loco parentis influence well beyond appropriate limitations and would infringe not only on the student's free speech and privacy rights, but on parents' rights as well” (Belnap). Anything can be taken offensively, but students should never feel the need to refrain from expressing controversial opinions outside of school because they fear punishment at school. Furthermore, if schools were to address the importance of valuing various opinions rather than discrediting those that cause controversy, the rights of students would be much better protected.

The problem with totally disregarding all of the regulations of the Tinker standard with regards to cyber speech it is sometimes necessary to allow school administrators to deal with real threats posed on

social media. In the case of Kara, a teenage girl who created a website accepting donations to hire a hitman for killing her math teacher, a post that was most likely meant as a cruel joke caused severe physiological and emotional implications for the teacher. The teacher had to take several leaves of absence because she became particularly anxious about going to school (Crawford). As a result, the school environment was severely disturbed because the students were unable to receive instruction from their teacher. In this case, the punishment Kara received was justified under the first prong of the Tinker standard. In cases like this, it can be reasonably inferred that the Tinker standard does have the potential to keep students and teachers safe.

The use of the Tinker standard as a way to regulate what students can and cannot say in public schools is often extended beyond its original intent and has begun to severely limit what students feel they have the ability to say. Applying it to cyber speech that does not pose a threat of danger overextends the school's jurisdiction. The only way to ensure that the Tinker standard is used for its original intentions and not infringing upon rights guaranteed in the constitution is disallow it from being applied to cyber speech that occurs outside of school.

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**Chelsea Baird**

Grade 10

*Pavement*

Poetry

Parkway Central High School

Chesterfield, MO

Teacher: Jason Lovera

There is pavement beneath our feet  
It is what guides us through busy lives  
Each and every day we wear the concrete  
That rests above the unsaid.

Our country is built on slavery  
It lies beneath our feet  
The economy of an empire of suffering  
Is what feeds us our daily bread.

We have not escaped what built us up  
It lies in our hands  
Wrapped around the guns  
That kill innocent men.

Within the crumbled pavement  
There is knowledge of the years before  
But walking through the streets  
Are hosts upon hosts of the blind.

Those who see the suffering  
Must be silenced with haste  
Because what would the White House be  
Without the black hands that built it?

**James Baysinger**  
Grade 7

*Greed Over Freedom*  
Critical Essay

St Pius X School  
Moberly, MO  
Teacher: Christy Forte

The internet: a world wide web of possibilities. The dictionary defines it as the single worldwide computer network that interconnects other computer networks, such as where World Wide Web sites or data archives, are located, enabling data and other information to be exchanged. (3)

It is a place of complete freedom to search anything you want without any barriers or “paywalls” preventing it. A paywall is where access can only be obtained, to certain sites or the entirety of a site, with a paid subscription.

Anyone, for now, can look at Facebook or twitter or watch a video on YouTube with complete freedom. But, what if all of those things went away? What if to use a video streaming site, like YouTube, social media, like Facebook, or even just search with google you had to pay extra? (2) That would be a very different experience from the internet we know now. That would be an experience that most current users wouldn't want - but there are some who do. That is what net neutrality protects us from. The laws of net neutrality protect us from ever experiencing these drastic changes that were described above.

In February 2015 a vote three to two by FCC, or the Federal Communications Commission, gave us net neutrality. It was a major victory for all people who use the internet, letting data flow freely. Although net neutrality was put into action then, it had been an issue for much longer, back to around 2002. (4) The term net neutrality was first coined by law professor Tim Wu in 2003. (6)

Net neutrality stops internet service providers or ISPs from making people pay extra to access certain sites or prioritizing certain sites over others i.e. making access to them faster than others. Without net neutrality, the internet would become a very monopolized place. ISPs would only show advertisements for companies how paid them extra. (5) This would be good for the ISPs who would make tons of extra money but for the average internet user this would be a catastrophe!

Some ISPs say all they would use the money to help create better access to the internet. It is very likely that they would give better access to the companies who would pay them more to do so. (2) But what about the small businesses who couldn't afford to pay extra?

There are some people thought, even “everyday” people, as well as those in the government, who would want to see net neutrality repealed. One example of this is President Donald Trump's appointed leader of the FCC, Ajit Pai. It is currently unknown why he wants net neutrality repealed. Yet, he does. Before he was appointed to his current position, he worked as a lawyer for Version. Unsurprisingly, Version is one of the many ISPs in the United states. Some others include AT&T, and Spectrum. Couldn't Mr. Pai be against net neutrality for some less-than-neutral reasons? Personally, this seems like a conflict of interest.

The voting for the repeal of net neutrality, as of the time I am writing this, will be taking place on December 14th, 2017. (4)

In conclusion, if net neutrality is repealed, then ISPs won't be held at the same standards they are now. The ISPs would be able to slow down and speed up certain sites that they would see fit. (2) This would monopolize the internet, stopping small website and app creators from ever competing with whoever the ISPs want to promote.

Overall, the internet, where you can search or create anything you want would be gone, replaced with paywalls and monopolization. But, even if net neutrality is repealed there is a *small* chance that some

ISPs will still respect their consumers. I believe it would be in everyone's best interest if the FCC did *not* give them the chance *not* to respect all of their consumers. Even if net neutrality isn't repealed this time, it is likely that the new FCC, President Trump's FCC, will continue to push for its demise. So, we, as the consumer, must fight back and protect our internet freedom. Will you take this opportunity to fight for the free internet?

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## Scout Bennett

Grade 10

*My Letter To You*  
Personal Essay/Memoir

Jefferson High School  
Festus, MO  
Teacher: Nicole Boyer

Dear you,

The last time I saw you without a hat to cover your lack of hair and a pump in your stomach to help you eat, we ate at a Chinese restaurant. Dad hates Chinese food. According to him he always has, but according to his middle school photos it looks like at one point he loved all types of food. Us eating there meant that he was in a pretty good mood to agree to go out and eat Chinese, and when he's in a good mood that usually means everyone else is too. I'd like to believe everyone was happy that night, but I can't remember if that was the case. I also can't recall what Chinese restaurant we ate at, what day it was, if we were eating there for a special occasion or just because, or anything else for that matter. I can really only remember two facts for certain about that night: we ate Chinese food, and it was the last time I saw you healthy.

\* \* \*

I didn't see you after that for six months, maybe a little more, maybe a little less. You were with me though, and everywhere I went I couldn't get away from you. Every place I went, someone asked Dad how you were doing. Then together they would lower their heads, lower their voices, and begin to speak in secrecy for the next ten minutes. Multiple questions would run through my head when I watched him talk about you: Did you split up? Were you in an accident? Why did you leave? Where did you go? Was I going to see you again? Did you even want to see me again? I never asked any of them, choosing instead to shove them in the back of my head for a later date. It's how I've always dealt with issues; if I ignore the problem, there is no problem and there's nothing to worry about. I wish I were more rational when it came to solving problems because maybe if I would have asked a question about you, I would have saw you again sooner. But I didn't.

\* \* \*

I won't lie; I knew you were sick before you told me. After months of ignoring your absence, I had to find out why you weren't with me. I asked my cousin why you were only spoken about in hushed whispers in secret huddles. I asked if you and Dad had split up, she told me no. I asked if you had been in an accident; she told me no. I asked her why you left us without so much as a goodbye; she told me that you had to leave. She told me that you were the kind of sick they didn't have medicine for. "She's doing a lot better," she told me, "She looks really healthy now." She gave me sympathetic words and looks of pity; I needed callous facts and the cold-hard truth.

I got exactly what I needed when you showed up a few weeks later and told me you had pancreatic cancer. I was furious; at some part of myself for not asking sooner, some part at you for not letting me know sooner, mostly at whatever cosmic power drew your number and awarded you with an incurable disease.

I tried to ignore the sickness the best that I could. I didn't let anyone know that you were dying; I didn't want pity. I don't want pity as I'm writing this now. I strived for normalcy. For mediocrity. So did you. You did not talk to me about the pump in your stomach. You did not talk to me about your hair growth. You did not talk to me about your chemo sessions. We both ignored the big red X that was



painted on you and instead opted to focus on the mundane. You picked me up from softball practice. You took me homecoming dress shopping. You talked to me about high school drama. Ignorance was bliss. It was, at least for a little while.

Neither of us were ignorant though. We both knew that we couldn't cure your cancer by pretending you didn't have it. You did have it, and it sucked.

The last time I ever saw you, your mom was telling you to take it easy. You told her that it didn't matter how easy you took it; cancer was still going to kill you. At the time, I wanted to believe that you were just saying that because you were frustrated at everything, but now I think you knew you were never going to become healthy again. I can't remember what our goodbye that day was like. I hope it was long and meaningful, but goodbyes to people who you expect to see again usually aren't. If my goodbye wasn't sufficient please know that I expected to see you again. That I hoped I would see you again.

You died on a Thursday. The only reason I can remember that is because I had to call Dad during advisory and ask him what time would work for student-led conferences the next Thursday. When he answered, I could tell that he had been crying. Before that I had only heard him cry once, but it was in a memory so distant it might have been a dream. He pretended like everything was fine, even when I asked him what was wrong. He told me what time to schedule then hung up.

When I got home from school he was on the couch and his eyes were bloodshot. The first thing he told me was to remember that you loved Saylor, Gunnor, and me. He said it in past tense, which at that point I knew could only mean you were in past tense as well. We cried together for a long while, and then he went away so we could cry to ourselves for another long while.

That night we talked about what I would need for the next day for the trip to Springfield, the state softball tournament. We got everything ready that night because I had to be at the school at 6 AM to get on the bus. The next night we drove to school and I loaded the bus without a word about what had happened.

We didn't talk about you again until I had to buy a black dress to go to your funeral. We didn't talk about you not because we didn't miss you; we missed you so we couldn't talk about you.

\* \* \*

I hate myself sometimes because I can't remember all of you. I promised myself I'd never forget anything about you, that I'd have your entire being firmly planted in my mind and nothing could erase it. I don't recall if the promise was broken swiftly or if it took some time to break, but I started to forget you. I forgot your voice, if it was a little high or a little low. I forgot the shade of blonde your hair used to be. I think it was a lighter color, but I think I might be wrong. I recall that you dyed it, if that counts for anything. I don't remember how brown your eyes were, if they were the color of Jacobean stained wood or the color of aged whiskey. I don't remember how tall you were. It's a stupid thing to be upset about, but I can't remember if I was just a little taller or just a little shorter than you. I'd give mostly anything to remember how tall you were. If I looked at pictures of you I would be able to tell your height, your hair color, and the exact brown of your eyes, but I can't bring myself to look at them. It hurts too much, so I refuse to acknowledge the existence of my eastward living room wall. I don't want to be scared to remember you just because the memories make my heart heavy and my head throb, but I'm terrified.

I still don't remember all of you, as I would like to, but I do find some solace in the things I do remember. I remember the way you laughed. You leaned back, hunched up your shoulders, and put your tongue in between your teeth. It wasn't a hearty laugh from the bottom of your stomach; it was a quick and quiet snicker. Gunnor laughs like that now; it's a part of you he got to keep. I remember that you were the biggest extrovert I ever met. You could make friends anywhere you went, and everywhere we

went people knew you. Once we went to Indiana, two states over, to go to Holiday World, and some of your old friends from high school were there and they wanted to catch up. That scenario occurred in many different places with many different people, and never failed to amuse me.

I remember that you loved me. You told me every chance you got how much you loved me and how proud I made you. Everything you did, you did in a way that radiated love. I loved you too. I loved you so much, but I never got to tell you to the extent to which I loved you before you died. Now I say I love you more often: to Dad, to Saylor and Gunnor, to my friends. I try to make sure to never skip out on an "I love you" because the worst thing you can wonder, is if someone knew how much you really loved them. It's a wonder that sticks its ghoulish fingers in the depths of your mind and scratches and squeezes until you're numb with repentance and wrath. The kind that comes to comfort you on nights when you're lost at sea and you're not sure if you're going to be able to make it back to shore this time. It's the hideous wonder that I will have forever and always.

Writing this to you was probably one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do. Difficult not because I don't want to talk to you, but because you can't talk to me. Difficult because I know you'll never talk to me again. Difficult because for the first time in a long time, I am staring at something point blank instead of turning my gaze. I don't think I will ever be able to stop ignoring. But, I do think I'm going to stop avoiding my eastward living room wall.

## Renee Born

Grade 10

*Perspective*

Short Story

Olathe North High School

Olathe, KS

Teacher: Deirdre Zongker

I moved, as if in slow motion, pressing my fingertips to my chest. They came away bloodied, dripping red. I looked up, seeing the gun first, smoke still rising into the air. When I finally met her eyes, I understood what she had realized the moment she pulled the trigger.

“I remember you”

~

Neon light filtered through the smoky room, glinting off of glass and polished wood. Specials hung in the air on glowing signs above the bar. The shelves below were stacked with bottles of all shapes and sizes. I watched as the bartender knocked a few drops from a slender bottle into a glass of vodka, turning it an interesting shade of green.

The air smoldered with a dark energy as alcohol loosened people’s impulse control from their grasps. All sorts of dangerous people had come to seek refuge from the cold, some of which I recognized, some of which I didn’t. I stayed on the edge of my seat, dearly missing the comfortable weight of my gun at my hip. The door swung open, letting in a gust of brisk air. I wrapped my palms tighter around my mug.

A group stepped into the pub, shaking off darkness and wrapping themselves in the low colorful light. They laughed and elbowed each other good naturedly. The other patrons didn’t turn their heads. No one stopped talking to look at the newcomers, or their poorly concealed weapons. No one glanced at the golden scorpion embroidered on jackets and inked on skin; they didn’t have to- they recognized Deathstalkers.

The Deathstalkers were the most notorious gang roaming the streets of Alcatraz, and everyone here knew it. There was an unspoken understanding - if you sated out of their way, they would stay out of yours- which was a credit to their Boss. It’s hard to keep anyone with power in line, let alone street rats with guns, but the better they appear the more appealing their life looks to outsiders. They weren’t bullies, but they still had power and respect. Too many kids with limited options turned to the Deathstalkers for help, allowing them to spread like a virus through the city.

I grimaced and took a sip of my coffee. It was going cold. I knew I should just let it go, but I couldn’t help it. I watched them move to the bar. There was something in the way they walked- like they were coming home no matter where they were. I could see it in all of them, but *she* was something else altogether. She moved to the bar and ordered something I didn’t catch. Wherever they walked, she took the first step; when a joke was made they watched for her laugh. I committed her face to memory- sharp jawline, dark eyes, short black hair, wicked red lips. By the time I had finished I was sure I could pick her out in a lineup.

Only then did I realize I was staring. Right at her. And she was waiting for me to notice, one side of her mouth curled upward. I needed to look away, to mind my own damn business like any sane person would.

Instead, I met her gaze. She raised her perfectly shaped eyebrows and lifted her drink ever so slightly in my direction. I was contemplating returning the gesture when a dark shape swept in front of me, blocking my view of the bar.

“You ready to go?” Jack asked, grabbing his jacket off the chair opposite me.

“I haven’t finished my coffee.” I said dumbly, returning to reality.

“Well then what the fuck have you been doing?” He growled. His mood was never predictable, but after a few drinks I probably should've expected it. “I swear to god there’s something wrong with your head. Finish it already.”

“No, it’s okay, I don’t need it.” I said quickly, standing to leave.

“Well what the hell did I buy it for then?” He raised his voice. “Ungrateful bitch- someday, someone’s gonna have to put you in your place.”

I took a step back, not knowing what, if anything, I could say to smooth over the situation. We were beginning to get accusatory looks.

“Well are you going to drink it, or waste my money?” He wasn’t getting any quieter.

“The coffee's on me.”

The woman’s voice was like a mouthful of scotch, smooth and low with a kind of burn. She dropped a twenty-dollar bill on the table. Up close, I noticed short dark lashes lining her eyes. Her leather jacket had a scorpion embroidered on the back in shimmering gold thread. I don’t think Jack noticed.

“And your name is...?” she asked, stepping between Jack and I.

“K-Kate” I stuttered, studying her eyes, hoping to discover her motives or intentions. Jack recovered then, from his brief shock.

“Let’s go Katherine- forget the coffee.” He said, trying to ignore the other woman. She seemed to have the same idea.

“Nice to meet you Kate, I’m Valarie. It looks to me like you need a ride home.”

I looked between the two. If I went with Jack he’d take me back to his place. I didn’t want to go back to his place. But if I didn’t...

“I do, if it’s not too much trouble.” My badge burned beneath my shirt like it was a hot iron. *What am I hoping to accomplish here? Convince her to do something incriminating, and then what? I don’t even have my gun.* With the knowledge of how incredibly stupid I was being weighing on my shoulders, I grabbed my sweater without looking at Jack. Even so, I could hear his teeth gnashing.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” The pub went silent, and my blood ran cold. *Gods, how easily I forget I’m not invincible.* The other Deathstalkers had stood up from their place at the bar, and if I didn’t know any better I’d have said they looked worried. I had a feeling it wasn’t for Valarie’s safety.

Valarie, on the other hand, just smiled.

“You ready? Take your time, of course.” The whole bar was holding their breath. Well, not the *whole* bar.

“Hey *bitch*, I’m talking to you.” He grabbed her shoulder- as if to turn her to face him- but, faster than anyone’s eyes could follow, she spun him around, locking his arm behind his back. In a flash of steel there was an open switchblade in her hand. In the moment after that it was pressed to his neck.

“You *ever* lay a hand on me again and I won’t hesitate to slit your throat and watch while you choke to death on your own blood.” She whispered so quietly only Jack and I could hear. There was no anger in her voice, just cold truth. I tensed, desperately willing myself not to make the situation worse, not to give myself away.

Without warning Valarie shoved Jack out of her grasp, and turned unceremoniously to leave. I moved my hand away from the empty space my gun should’ve filled, and knew if I’d had it I would have drawn it. I could feel his fury as I passed, but the thin red line on his neck kept Jack’s mouth shut.

Valarie nodded to the group she came in with and held open the door. I stepped into the night, stomach churning, while my nerves settled.

Valarie was leaning against a monster of a bike, all black metal and leather, waiting for me.

“It’s beautiful.” I observed, trying to steady my heart rate.

“That it is.” Valarie responded, a strange look on her face. She held out a black-visored helmet and I took it.

“What about you?” I asked when I noticed it was the only one. In response Valarie tapped her temple.

“I’ve got a thick skull.” She slid her arms out of her jacket, holding that out to. The scorpion on the back reflected orange street lights, giving it a copper shine.

“What’s that for?” I asked, pulling instinctively away from the embroidery. Valarie chuckled.

“I take it you’ve never ridden a bike before?” I was trying to focus, to retain a healthy amount of fear, but it was quickly being replaced with fascination. Her breath made faint clouds in the air and I couldn’t help but watch it billow out and disappear. I shook my head, willing myself to remember the danger I was in. It was foolish, but somehow I couldn’t bring myself to see Valarie as a threat to me. To others maybe, but not to me.

“Well, that flimsy sweater of yours isn’t going to be enough. Not against this cold.”

“And I suppose you’re immune?” I asked, pointedly eyeing her bare shoulders.

“I’ll manage.” She said, putting one leg over the bike.

“So will I.” I decided, climbing on behind her. I couldn’t see Valarie’s face but I got the feeling she was smirking. *What am I doing?*

“Suit yourself.” She put the jacket back on, pulling the ends of her hair out of the high collar. She put up the kickstand, easing the bike up between her legs. Then it roared to life.

I thought I'd been prepared, but when Valerie revved the engine I jumped, grabbing her waist. It only took a moment for me realize what I'd done, and remember what had happened in the bar. But before I could move my hands Valerie grabbed my wrists, pulling them further forward.

“Don't let go or loosen your grip- falling off of one of these is not something you recover from, not when I'm driving.” She warned over the growl of the engine. She prodded it again and this time I could feel the heat and see a warm orange-red light in the vehicle's core. Before I could comment the heels of Val's boots clicked into place and the bike was hurtling into the street. The breath was sucked from my lungs.

Streetlights, cars, stop lights, and neon signs all blended into a tunnel of peach and yellow and blue. The cold air sliced through my clothes like I wasn't wearing any at all. Fear and adrenaline and ice coursed through me, bringing something I kept buried deep within to the surface. It smiled wildly, soaking in the fresh air. The wind snatched most of the sound away, but I could hear Val laughing and soon- against my better judgement- I was laughing too. The kind of laughing you do when you think you might be making a huge mistake, but you can't bring yourself to care.

Just then I caught our reflection in the glossy surface of a limo as we sped past. The fiery light at the bike's center shone through in lines on its side, lines that connected to form a stylized scorpion.

We swerved and switched lanes and it was gone, but I knew everyone else could see it. I knew who I was with and I knew that anyone who saw us would know too.

We sped through and around traffic, taking back alleys and side streets I didn't even know existed- back alleys and side streets I should've known existed. It seemed like we would never stop, until we did.

As we came up on a red light Valarie braked, coasting to a stop and standing to support her bike. As we slowed I realized how tightly I was clutching onto her. I loosened my grip. *She's almost certainly a cold-blooded killer, what am I thinking?*

“As much fun as this is, you should probably tell me where it is we're going.” Valerie said in the sudden quiet. My heart sank, and I told myself it was because I had to give a Deathstalker my home address. My hesitation stretched between us, and I ended up just choosing a street a few blocks away from my own. Valarie didn't seem to notice.

It wasn't long before we arrived at my makeshift address. She put the kickstand up and leaned against the bike. She had parked just below a street light, casting herself in a dusky light.

I stood on the sidewalk, not moving. *Say thanks and get out of here.* But my apartment was blocks away. I had no choice but to stay. There was a click and a spark, and the end of her cigarette glowed to life as she took a drag.

She opened her mouth and smoke slipped upward, catching the pinkish light. She held another out.

Taking the offering, I held it between my fingers for a light. *You're alone and unarmed.* She snapped open her lighter, held it to my cigarette, and flipped it closed again.

“I'm pretty sure you made a mistake.” She said, looking at me through another cloud of smoke. I nearly dropped the cigarette. Instead I put it to my lips and took a shaky breath.

“How so?” I exhaled, trying not to lose my composure.

“Should've taken the jacket, you're shaking like a leaf.” She gestured to my arms, which were tightly

wrapped around my torso.

"It's not the cold," Adrenaline was still coursing through me, though when she mentioned it I noticed the icy burn of the air. She pushed off of the motorcycle, leaning forward until my heart hammered against my ribs.

"Just being with me then?" She batted her lashes, and smiled. I imagined that if she'd been any closer I would've been able to feel them brush my cheeks.

"Why did you do it?" I blurted without thinking. There was a short pause and she moved back, reclaiming her seat.

"Why do you think?" She responded, knowing exactly what I meant.

"I wouldn't have asked if I knew." I took another drag of my cigarette, shaking for a completely different reason this time.

"Relax Kate, I'm not interested in making you a Deathstalker."

"I never said you were." I replied, but I had flinched at the word. I was so used to leaving it unsaid, ducking the word that loomed in the air around them.

"You didn't have to. That's what everyone thinks- that we only care about our own, or those we're looking to recruit. That we only do favors if we want something in return." She stared at me and in that moment, I knew she could see right through me. "Believe it or not, sometimes I do things to be nice. We're just people." She muttered.

"People with switchblades. People with power, who will do anything to keep it." I said through clenched teeth, unable to choke it back. *That was stupid.* A chill went down my spine as a silence stretched between us. I tried to read her face but a cloud of smoke and moisture from her breath obstructed her features.

"I can't fathom why you put up with that fool from the bar, but I know you're not helpless and you don't need saving- least of all from me." Her voice carried a certain bitterness, and when she finally looked at me again, I could see something like regret darken her eyes.

Without another glance she was gone, her cigarette smoldering ash on the curb and her bike a black and gold blur. I never thought I'd see her again. I wish I had been right.

~

"I remember you." I whispered, before my legs gave out. I couldn't feel them. I couldn't feel anything but the pain. The torn flesh and broken shards of bone burned with each halting breath. *That girl from the bar- Kate- she's here. Why is she dressed like a cop?*

I knew I had to keep breathing, but it was so difficult now. *She's not dressed like a cop, she is a cop,* I corrected myself. *and I think she just shot me. I know she just shot me.* It was like trying to breath and drink water at the same time. There was too much fluid and not enough air. Then I could see her again and she was just above me, her wild hair hanging down around her smooth brown skin. She was saying something but I couldn't tell what. I couldn't hear. The hot stain of blood bloomed out from my chest, soaking my shirt and dripping off my ribcage. I could feel panic begin to paralyze me, tightening its grip around my lungs. I tried to push back, to sit up and fight the darkness filling my vision, but I only

managed to raise my head a fraction.

Then there was a slight weight on my chest. It took me too long to realize it was Kate, applying pressure to the wound. *Is she's trying to save me? A cop saving a Deathstalker?*

I meant to laugh but it turned into a violent cough, blood running between my teeth. I saw her hands for a moment, the long delicate fingers shimmering with smears of red. I was beginning to get cold, the only heat in my body slipping through my heart, into my lungs and finally out of me entirely, leaking with my blood onto the concrete floor.

I tried to summon an ounce of strength, whether to help her or fight her I couldn't tell, but it sparked and died, too weak to catch. The pain had dulled to an ache, but the black continued to grow over my eyes until I couldn't see anything at all. My mind drifted, feeling nothing but the dwindling warmth, until even that was gone.



# Mallory Broom

Grade 7

*The Vase*

Short Story

Truman Middle School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Sally H'Doubler

Riley rested his fingers on the keyboard of his laptop, reading the inquiring question that had appeared, asking if he was ready to put this item up for sale. He glanced one more time at the photo he'd taken a few weeks before of his mother's prized family heirloom, a gorgeous green vase decorated intricately with soft blue flowers and tranquil landscapes of rivers splitting through mountains and lush forests blooming with mystery.

With a resigned final sigh, Riley listed it with a click of his mouse, already regretting his decision and wishing that he'd had someone who he could trust to help him earn money a different way together. Kiley, his twin sister, barely spoke ten words to him a day, already equipped with new friends, but all of Riley's friends were in Kansas, not Wisconsin, and they'd lost touch a few months after the move. Halfheartedly, he distracted himself with ideas of what he'd do with the extra money left over from the field trip fee for his class trip to Washington, D.C at the end of the year. Today was Thursday, so even though it was only March, the money was due on Monday and was a considerable amount, despite his parents paying for most of it.

Leaning back in his chair with a faint smile playing across his face, Riley surveyed his room, deciding that he would buy a new laser light pointer (down with the red dot!) for their family cat, George, and some curtains for his bedroom window, which were too big and bright for his comfort, and stacking more unpacked boxes on the shaggy carpet in front of it could only do so much.

Simultaneously, across the hall, fixated on her own laptop, Kiley prowled through websites like a tiger hunting for its prey. She leaned forward on top of her purple beanbag with a can of Pringles at her side and George, their beloved calico cat asleep in her lap. Fueled by sheer determination, she refreshed the page for what felt like the millionth time and finally struck gold.

Just a few seconds ago, someone had posted a listing that was exactly like what she was looking for: a vase that appeared identical to the one she'd broken this morning by accident, on her way downstairs to breakfast without her contacts on, mistaking the vase's shelf for a railing. Unfortunately, the vase was one of her mother's most treasured possessions, so Kiley needed to find a convincing replacement to effectively prevent getting grounded...for life. Luckily, Riley was already at the bus stop fifteen minutes early (as usual). Her dad had left for work and Mom was at her three-day work conference in Denver, so no one had noticed its disappearance yet, but Mom came home tomorrow at 5:00 after Dad picked her up from the airport. Before anyone else could order the vase, Kiley did, then paid the extra fee for faster shipping.

It was Thursday night, and Riley still hadn't found the vase. He'd searched all afternoon since his customer had placed their order, requesting that it be delivered before 5:00 tomorrow. When he had reviewed the order's address, it seemed eerily familiar. Apparently, they both lived on Acrewood Street and had two threes in their addresses. He didn't know exactly what his address was, just that it had two

threes and which street. Since it seemed close by, delivering it that fast wouldn't be too difficult. He'd simply stop by the post office tomorrow and walk to school.

Slowly, he trudged back upstairs, trying to think of a place he hadn't searched besides his sister's room, but coming up empty, and returning to his room instead, flopping down on his mattress and staring at the ceiling, debating what to do next, before abruptly sitting up as if a lightbulb had appeared above his head. What if he delivered the vase he'd taken home from art class yesterday that was in his closet? Sure, it wasn't the best and originally was going to be a Mother's Day present, but it would do. Riley grinned, deciding that maybe he could pull this off after all.

Click. Kiley carefully shut the door behind her and dropped the heavy package addressed to Ms. Kiley Elizabeth Baker that she had been anxiously awaiting all day. She checked her watch, and it read 4:42. Sighing with relief, thankful the package had been delivered in time, Kiley eagerly tore open the box with gusto, unearthing the vase, and setting it down gently on the floor. Perfect, she concluded at first glance.

But as she lifted it up for a closer view, even without her misplaced contacts, she could see some serious flaws. The glaze was sloppy and a sickly green, while the designs and landscapes no longer featured peaceful and still scenes, for they were careless and turbulent. Worst of all, when she turned over the vase to see the artist's signature it was marked, "Riley Baker, Class 2B 2017," she felt her face grow hot and her head pound.

Nevertheless, she carried it into the hallway and discovered another vase on the shelf. Her eyesight grew more unfocused as she stepped back, trying to deduce which vase she was going to return to her mischievous twin, but she quickly lost her patience and grabbed the one on the left, storming into Riley's room by nearly throwing the door off its hinges.

"RILEY MATTHEW BAKER!" she screeched, holding the vase up incredulously above her head, and yanked off his blaring headphones attached to his computer. They glared at each other furiously for what felt like forever, both of them locked in a mirror of their own green eyes, freckles, and frizzy red hair. "Give me back my money! I don't need your stupid vase!" Kiley's eyebrows furrowed and her glare didn't waver for a second, yet her brother began to laugh at her a wave of understanding washed over him. "Take it!" Kiley yelled and thrust it at him, but her brother missed the pass and the vase crashed onto the floor. There was absolute silence as if time itself had paused to survey the wreckage.

"Kiley," Riley said slowly as if he was talking to a five-year-old, "That wasn't my vase. Dad noticed it was missing, so he got another one." He furrowed his eyebrows and raised his voice angrily. "You took the wrong one! I told you to wear your glasses!"

"I couldn't! You know I look awful with them! No one would like me!" She took a deep breath, and guiltily glanced down. "I'm sorry. It's all my fault. I know you needed money for the field trip, and I broke my promise to help you earn money by babysitting together."

"No, it's my fault too. I shouldn't have sold you the vase. But yeah, it's mostly your fault." Kiley smiled, then her expression dimmed, replaced by worry as she checked her watch.

"We are so dead. Mom and Dad will be home in ten minutes. They'll change the WiFi password! Forget about the field trip! They'll ground us for life!" She paced the floor, tripping over George, who had wandered inside to disdainfully turn up his nose at the mess.

"Wait," Riley exclaimed. "If we're already in trouble, what do we have to lose? Let's blame it on George! Last week he broke that china teacup! Why not?"

“THE VASE!” they shouted together and bent down, picking up the pieces frantically, then strategically scattering them around the hallway. Kiley snatched Riley’s vase, and stuffed it in his closet. “Save it for Mother’s Day,” she smirked as they heard the front door open downstairs.

They looked at each other for a split second before rushing downstairs to greet their parents, a truce to not rat each other out.

“Hi guys, how was your day?” Mom asked as they both engulfed her in a bear hug.

“Eh,” they shrugged. “It was pretty boring,” Kiley added with a grin.

# Karla Cano-Mendez

Grade 11

## *Nothing Lasts*

Poetry

David H Hickman High School

Columbia, MO

Teacher: Nancy White

I've always loved the universe,  
I love the way I fit in its hands. It loves to watch me dance, no one will understand us, maybe that's why I  
love it so much.

It also loves to watch me suffer, not intentionally, just for reasons regarding prosperity, and developing.  
So

when I've drunk too much vodka on a Friday night, and the universe glares at me, I reminisce simpler  
times, of course you come to mind.

You would do anything to go back to when you were six with him; blockbuster and bug juice would fill  
every Friday night, while the weekends left sunsets in shades of pink and blue. You loved Cosmo park  
bike rides. You loved how mum used to let you sleep with her in bed, dad worked the night shifts back  
then. Hazel used to yell at you for peeing the bed, but you just miss her presence, she has her own family  
now. And Juan keeps growing, he broke your arm once, for jamming a piece of bread inside his  
PlayStation,

I'd break my arm again and again, every bone in my body if it meant replacing it with the feeling of being  
six.

It resembles now a bit, you still love bright lights and wind in your hair, and going out for midnight drives  
while you blast the music. You still love to trace over your ribs and count every one of your bruises, they  
were all gifts to you.

But you're not six anymore, you've survived a decade of white lies and learning to measure the inside of a  
sphere.

Your father wants you to be an engineer.

So he'll take your dreams from now on out and here.

And you'll tare yourself into two till the grave, knowing you'll never get that feeling back, father will  
never be the same. You know this for a fact, now that the bottles always on his brain. so you'll become  
melodramatic.

You'll sit in the corner and melt into the floor, you've never felt so little now. You acknowledge how he  
always used to adore your Barbie fits in the middle of a store. You'll never back down.

What a nasty, nasty nostalgia. It grabs you by the throat and says

No

You will never be six again, no more cubbies to hold your stuff in. from now on you hold stuff on your  
shoulders, like the weight of what others have to say, the weight of what your parents thinks, how you  
need to stop making mistakes, wow

textbooks don't seem so heavy now do they? Not like they did when you were  
six.

You'll have to learn to love the taste of maturity on your tongue. It'll be bittersweet, but eventually you'll  
go numb. And as of right now, you will never be this young.

-

I feel it cling to my lungs, just the way it did when I was six.

(P.S., the universe loves you too, Theodore.)

**Sara Cao**  
Grade 8

*Extraordinarily Ordinary*  
Personal Essay/Memoir

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Megan Zmudczynski

Right from the moment I came out of my mother's womb until now, I have been watched. Public eyes linger around my ears before I catch them, but there is nothing I can do, nothing I can say to these random strangers that will make me feel like a normal girl. I was born deaf, and I have been wearing hearing aids for all of my life, which is so long to me that I now feel like these two pieces of small machinery are parts of my body. Well, I guess they should be considered my body parts since they are the reason why I can hear, talk, and communicate like I do right now. Of course I have always appreciated my hearing devices, but sometimes, often too many times, they catch the interest of anyone who comes within a five-foot radius of me. For whatever reason, this tan piece of plastic on my ear really entralls them.

“What’s that thing on your ear?”

“What is *that* supposed to do?”

Believe me, I know people are curious, but sometimes curiosity makes me feel like a caged animal with spectators gawking at my differences. Sometimes I wonder what it feels like to be normal--no disabilities, no mental issues, born without anything for people to ogle at. Truthfully, those times when I do feel normal and comfortable are the times I hold onto the most, and these are the times I feel free to be whoever I want.

The first time I felt this way was in spring of last year, when I had just begun to become the best of friends with my “squad.” I had never been this close with anyone, since in elementary school I had always felt like I was unwanted by all of my classmates. I was never taken seriously by anyone because no one understood me, and I had felt as if I didn’t quite belong in any of the enclosed cliques. I decided I had to change that when I moved to middle school, and I met four amazing girls- Ellie, Rachel, Maya, and Allison, who made me feel loved, appreciated, and wanted; I felt like I truly belonged in this circle of girls. It was, and still is, the best friendship I could have asked for. These girls make me feel like I have no disability.

There was one spring morning, in the middle of April, when I was walking with my group of girls. It was a routine of sorts, since we would first switch out our books at our lockers after lunch in preparation for our afternoon classes and then go straight to our special place, aka “the swing,” which was a wooden structure with two benches facing each other. As Ellie, Rachel, Maya, Allison, and I walked down the hallways, down the steps, and out the door to the swing, I thought to myself, “What do they really think of me? Do they ever feel annoyed when I ask them to repeat something? Are they friends with me because they feel bad for me?”

These thoughts surrounded my head like a mysterious cloud, and when we crossed the grass patch and finally arrived at the swings, my thoughts were still distant from the latest gossip or whatever boy Rachel was talking about.

“Sara what’s wrong? You haven’t talked at all since, like, in forever!” Ellie exclaimed.

“Umm uh well.... I’m not really sure; I guess I’m really tired or something,” I replied.

“You sure?”

“Let’s go sit down first. I think I have something to admit,” I hesitantly responded.

All five of us slowly tromped to the swing in silence and plumped down in our usual spots- Rachel sat to the left of me since we both shared a bench, and Maya sat directly across from me with Allison to the left of her. Ellie usually stood at the gap between the benches, because only four people were allowed on the swing at a time.

“Ok, so guys,” I started, “I have been pondering this for a while, and I wanted you all to know it’s nothing in particular that made me bring this up, and I wanted to make sure you guys don’t think it’s your fault, but like... do you guys think it’s annoying whenever I ask to repeat something? Is it weird being friends with a deaf girl?”

“No Sara,” Ellie replied, “Honestly, I don’t even think of you as hearing-impaired. No one looks at you and goes, ‘Oh that’s the weird deaf kid.’ I can assure you that no one thinks that and I really forget that you are hearing-impaired sometimes and you are special to me in another way that is not about being deaf.”

The rest of the group nodded in agreement while I just sat there, dumbstruck, with a total loss of words. Those words of magic Ellie breathed were like music to my ears. It completely changed the way I thought of myself and gave me a total boost of confidence, so I now wear my hearing-aids with pride. In that moment I realized that it shouldn’t matter what other people think of my disability; I needed my hearing-aids to survive, and I started to think that if someone doesn’t like the look of my ears, that shouldn’t be my issue, it should be their issue for thinking that I am any less of a person than they are. I am strong, independent, and fearless; I am not disabled. I have the ability to do anything I put my mind to. I have to admit that there will always be times when I wish that I could have been born without any imperfections, but nobody is perfect. Instead of always wanting to be someone else, I am learning to love who I am. I love myself. I love my totally malfunctioning ears. I love the little pieces of plastic I put on every single morning. I am learning, trying my best, to love myself to the fullest extent possible.

This encounter I had at the swings truly taught me that I am insecure and I have a right to be, but I should love myself for who I am first. I am Sara Qing Cao, I love myself, and I am deaf.

**Karen Castro**

Grade 10

*Ma*

Poetry

Olathe North High School

Olathe, KS

Teacher: Deirdre Zongker

Ma

I remember the freezing room

You never turned on the heat.

I remember your warm, soft hand caressing my forehead

Your way of checking if I had a fever

You never used a thermometer

That's just the way you did things.

I remember the feeling of the heavy blankets on top of me.

The tattered blankets were used like shields.

You yelled at me for not wearing shoes,

That's why I got sick.

My bed creaks as you get up

And the stairs squeak as you trudge down them.

I remember gazing at the stars while I waited for you

My glow in the dark stars that is

The ones I had strategically placed with dad.

The ones you said were a waste of money.

I remember all of your magical cures

The spicy Maruchan that would help my runny nose

The Sprite that would cure by stomach ache

The Vapor Rub that cured the toughest of colds.

It seems strange now

But that's just the way you did things.

**Adina Cazacu-De Luca**  
Grade 10

*A Collection of Things My Mother Has Given Me*  
Poetry

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Andy Chen

1. The advantages of being some percentage Latina  
“You could get into any college you wanted, you know... because you’re half Panamanian”

Ahh yes,  
My slightly olive complexion from my  
Mestiza abuelita  
Is the one thing I have going for me

Forget my 4.3  
GPA my 13 extracurriculars  
Splitting activity periods between rooms 209 and 313  
Like my tongue splits into two halves  
The nickel keys of a clarinet and a bassoon morph into  
The ebony and ivory of my piano  
As far opposites as mis primos y yo  
The Model UN delegate from Panama would like to ask the assembly if they  
Have been to the slums they’re writing resolutions about

Forget the nights at my desk when I look at the clock  
12:59 flashes to 1  
I try to summon my  
Mother at my age doing the same work by candlelight, her feet touching dirt  
Like my abuela Teresa summoned  
The brujas that shook her bed, passively watched over by crucifixes  
That smiled at her with pity as a blanket  
of rainy season humidity and cancer tucked her in  
Like my crucifixes watch over me, one in every room

My mother warns me not to be forgetful  
But the word “olvido” also translates to oblivion

Ahh yes,  
I will get into the school of my dreams  
Because I am darker than you  
Inside and out.



## 2. Goldenrod

Cheery in the most apathetic way  
The color of the cable knit sweater  
Whose knobs were dots on imaginary i's as in

I need to leave your father, honey, like  
I knead your favorite raisin bread  
Please let go

The taste of dense rum cake she bakes for  
Christmas, New Years, her own birthday  
Marking how the holidays of her life pass her

The turmeric that flavors scorching broths  
They slip down my throat like  
If Irish coffee was her child sliding on the playground

Lights barely heard over the stove hood  
Swallowing the smell of arroz con pollo  
Miniature bones just big enough to choke on

Her wedding dress lies in the closet  
That dark yellow garment bag  
Protecting beading and lace from snagging on regret

The lampshade painting shadow monsters  
On the ceiling I stared at until she came home  
Her hug smelled like roses drank espresso and ate mothballs

## 3. A fleeting exercise in full control

In order to eat two hard boiled eggs  
From a chipped porcelain bowl  
First  
You must displace them from their pan  
Accepting burns on the tips of fingers  
Because you are in no hurry  
And warmth fulfills before it burns  
Then  
To peel them, you break them the smallest amount  
Roll them back and forth on the butcher block  
Feeling the shards of eggshell under your hand  
Eventually  
You'll leave its casing in so many  
Microscopic fragments  
The whole film slides off  
She would have cut them in half, seasoned them individually

To preserve the structural integrity  
The natural wonder of the egg  
Raised them to her lips with a pinky in the air  
You just bite into the damn thing whole  
Maybe that's why you lost her.

#### 4. Ablution

A creamy blouse with stars seemingly hole punched out of a hand sewn bodice; its transparency called for a camisole that your mother lovingly reminded you was necessary to prevent yourself from looking like a whore.

You can't remember for which birthday she gave you the gift of self-doubt, or the blouse for that matter, but both became worn-in as years accumulated, frayed at the hems with a stain on the collar.

Now, you devoutly study the feeling of soap suds turning your hands to prunes as punishment—or cleansing—and the burning of the softest cloth turned rough by the friction of semi-furious scrubbing. Your thunderclaps overpower the turbulence of the sink water, but your confession can't be so tempestuous. You'll break the blouse before it breaks your skin.

**Tina Chen**  
Grade 10

*Mindfulness*  
Poetry

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Eleanor DesPrez

*For His Holiness, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama*

It's a routine. I slide into our silver minivan,  
let my backpack drop like a rock, greet Mama, exhale.  
On those days when breath escapes as sigh,  
Mama arches an eyebrow, and I tell her,  
using run-on sentences and jerky hand motions.

Mama listens with furrowed brows  
(though she should probably be watching the road)  
and then she fires off questions, one after another  
as we stop and start on the jammed highway.  
When the cross examination slows to a stop,  
she says, "Ok." And then:

*Wú cháng.*  
Impermanence.  
*In zhège shìjiè, méiyóu unchanging dé,*  
Mama declares, left hand deserting  
the wheel to gesture.  
*In this world, there is nothing that won't change.*

In between traffic lights and stop-signs,  
she turns her head to look at me.

*So you have to lì yòng this opportunity and*  
*Do what you should do,*  
*what you have to do.*  
Use this opportunity, she urges.

*You have to zhua jing shí jian, okay?*

Grasp on to time.

Sometimes, we end up in the garage  
sitting in the car as the sky shifts  
from blue to red to black.  
Mama gestures with her car keys,  
tapping the worn leather of the steering wheel  
with each point, jabbing the keys into the air.  
I wriggle in my seat as she speaks, twitching

with impulse and frustration.

Tonight, curled up on the couch and swathed in blankets,  
I prop up my laptop and pull up his interviews.  
Gold and red robes rustle as he illustrates his words.  
I reach for the jade Buddha  
resting on my chest, dangling from braided  
brown cord. His laugh feels like my big brother's--  
easy, comforting, safe.

**Isabell Cox**  
Grade 8

*Imaginary Friend*  
Poetry

Bode Middle School  
Saint Joseph, MO  
Teacher: Josie Clark

I am your friend,  
Your imaginary friend.  
I shall be with you till the very end.  
The end in which you are all grown up and no longer need me.  
At one,  
You became bored with playing on your own.  
So you created me.  
I was then named Kitty.  
At two,  
We would play loads of games together,  
Until we became tired and laid down for a nap side by side.  
At three,  
You became interested in dolls and makeup.  
We would play dolls almost all the time.  
That is until you grew out of them.  
At four,  
You were more of a tomboy.  
Guns and cowboys were usually the games we played  
At five,  
I can't feel my fingers or toes,  
But I just ignore it as I run along beside you  
At six,  
I could barely keep up with you,  
My arms and legs become numb.  
I'm starting to disappear  
But as long as I am with you,  
I don't really care.  
At seven,  
You don't even notice me anymore,  
I feel numb almost every place possible.  
Here and there you would talk to me,  
But it wasn't too often.  
At eight,  
I'm no longer needed.  
That night I kissed you on the head,  
telling you goodbye,  
Just as I disappear.

**Shakira Cross**  
Grade 12

*Apples like Aiko*  
Novel Writing

David H Hickman High School  
Columbia, MO  
Teacher: Nancy White

**Brief summary:**

I wrote Apples Like Aiko at a time in my life where I was completely broken by a young man I thought I loved and who loved me. This piece is meant to connect to those who may have been broken by a relationship and see that there is beauty in suffering. I also wrote this piece at a time where our teacher assigned for us to write from a perspective, not of our own and embody Alice Walker's Color of Purple letters to God. It starts off with the young man's perspective as he writes to Aiko and Aiko responds in italics in a poetic yet raw manner.

**Excerpt:**

Dear *Aiko*,

I'm a little heartbroken. Okay, maybe not a little. I am heartbroken. I gave this girl two years of my life and she wants a break. A break? What the fuck, bro. Bet. Imma try and get her back though. We're supposed to be married by the end of my junior year. So I gotta make this work. I'll do whatever it takes, I'll buy her Christmas gifts and figure out some excuse to talk to her. But I kinda like you. I mean, I think I'm falling for you. You did help me on that Christmas comic book...

*I remember that Facetime call. It hurt for me to see broken pieces of a heart in the pupils of your eyes. The life inside of you dried up and it was in that moment I knew that you did right by coming to a well that never runs dry... but eventually, it did. I did. But your eyes lit up as if coloring the insides of lines was able to make her heart line up with yours. I won't budge. I want you to be happy. I think I'm falling for you... like apples fall from trees.*

Dear *Aiko*,

It's official, bro. We are done. I don't want anything to do with her. I mean I may say that now but I won't be able to get away from her. We still work together because of church. It still hurts though. I don't know how I'm gonna move on. I don't know how I'm going to heal from this hurt. I hope you don't think that I'm treating you like a rebound. You are one of the greatest friends I have ever had. Deadass. You're really helping me get through this. I know I keep bringing her up in every conversation we have but I think you need to understand that the pain is still there. I still need to figure out if I want you though. This is hard.

*I loved you and you were not ready to be loved. I wanted you to know what love felt like in its purest form so I continued to shove. Spoonfuls of forceful affection, it was hard for you to continue eating. I tried to take the control that only God had to perform heart surgery on you, a patient wounding and bleeding. And without training, all I could do was put Band-Aid after Band-Aid but the pain still hurt. I chose an apple from the bottom of the tree without investigating the fruit first. I rushed the process and made it worse.*

Dear Aiko,

Take this as you may, but I think I'm catchin feelings for you. Like, like, more than friends kind of feelings. Again take it as you may. I think you're the one for me.

*Your heart. Your heart's not ready for my love just yet. I want you to be ready. Because when I love, I love hard.*

Dear Aiko,

Chica!! I'm really happy you're finally my lady. Fair warning I might hurt you and be an asshole. I will claim that I'm busy or in a recording session so I don't have to talk to you. I will leave you on read for hours to keep you wondering about what I'm doing. I will make plans to visit you. But only because I want to see what's in between your legs and not what's between ya mind. Oh, I'll say I love you. But I will never really mean it... I mean.. You kinda put it on yourself to be with me... You knew I wasn't ready because baby, I'm still hurt. But I love you... I love you...

*You robbed me of this idea that I could change a person... who knew that picking up apples from the bottom of trees wasn't always the best but it sure was the easiest. You treated me as if I was just a weekend getaway but it made me feel good because your touch felt warm on my thigh on a Saturday afternoon drive... I made you home but you never paid rent.*

Dear Aiko,

I do a pretty good job in making you feel loved, don't I? Don't you understand that I'm still hurt by the pain of six months ago? I know you're there for me. I swear there are days where I really want you. But... But... I can't get my mind off of her. I love your affection for me. You always have an encouraging word to give...you're there for my music, my school life, my family, my... my... everything but I miss being in between her... I mean.. You've got to understand me baby... a brotha hasn't had it in a long time and we live 3 hours away... I hope you don't find out about this soon. I'll deny it even if you do.

*Four o'clock pm in a classroom filled with fourteen and fifteen-year-olds with mouths as wide as tooth combs my mom used to put my hair through could feel like a solitude area for crazy people... I convinced myself a long time ago that I wasn't crazy for you and I convinced myself that human beings didn't have the tendency to be crazy when they want someone to love them... but.. but.. we do. Who would have ever thought that the tears rolling like river tides down my cheeks and entering into my mouth like a gate flooded open and the taste of the saltiest of seas could make me feel bitter... coffee beans rung out to make your cup black... you tasted like darkness and I thought you could fill me...*

Dear Aiko,

I want you to know how much I love you. Like truly love you. But it's hard for me to express to you how

much you mean to me. Your brown hair, your brown skin, your laugh, your voice that I can listen to for hours on end and never get tired of how smooth it sounds. I want you to know that I am not ready. But it's hard for me to express that because I don't want to lose you. I don't want to lose myself. You saw the best in me when I didn't even see anything in myself. How could you love someone like me? I did you wrong and made mistakes that are deemed as unforgivable yet you're still with me? Why? Why were you driven by toxicity running you dry and how did it make you full? I will never understand the level in which you do love me and probably never will. I just wish you could see me. I'm not everything you want or even need yet.

*Growth hurts. It scars. It wounds. It cuts. I want you to grow... without me.*

Dear *Aiko*,

I want to tell you sorry... I just don't know how to. I miss you. A lot. You made me feel whole. I don't think I could ever get you back. Over the past two months of not speaking to you has made me realize, shit, pussy is everywhere... but a real girl... a real girl like you isn't. Fuck, I shouldn't have fucked it up with you. No one wasn't as understanding as you. Damn, it would have been our one year anniversary of knowing each other. You would have reminded me of it because that's just who you are... you always keep up with dates. I admired you for that. Man, I really messed up. I love you, *Aiko*. I hope we can one day reunite again. I don't know how to repay you for all the damage I did.

*Healing feels like a wound that hurts every time you put ointment on it to make it feel better. I love you. My mouth hurts forming those words though. If only I knew that our fingers interlocking while walking or when we kissed in the parking lot was the last time I will ever see you. If only I knew, that each time you brought up her was a sign of your recovering. If only I knew, that you were not okay and I shouldn't be worrying. If only you knew, how much I do, I do need youuuu, and oh if only you knew, how much I needed myself... I found myself in you. Scared and afraid to admit that I was hurting. Scared to present myself to you because I didn't want to be a burden. I tried my best to learn how to be the best version, a virgin, I never presented my body where you entered inside me and my legs wrapped around your waist. But you entered inside me in a way that leaves with a sweet aftertaste like apples. No one can replace what you did to me and I wish that he could see. Me. You*



**Grace Daugherty**  
Grade 8

*Mr. Linden's Library*  
Science Fiction/Fantasy

Danby Rush Tower Middle School  
Festus, MO  
Teacher: Morgan Grither

I'm not crazy, okay? I heard it coming from the library. Rose Thorn is not the safest little town around here. I just think that it's impossible I heard it from the west wing part of the home. The entry to the west wing is supposed to be locked. Always. No exceptions. Also within the first week here, I'm not going to say that it's just a coincidence that in the same day a burnt note is slipped underneath my bedroom door, that I'm left alone to hear voices from the mysterious library owned by a dead man. Yes, a dead man I say! My parents won't discuss anything about it with me though because it is a sad subject for the widow who sold us the house. Poor Mrs. Linden. Anyway, I wasn't supposed to know about how he died but let's just say I like to eavesdrop.

According to my mom, Mr. Linden was murdered at an extravagant party 20 years ago. A small voice whispers, "*I still don't know how to get away with it my dear?*" Did you hear that? Did you hear them too? That's it. I'm going to the west wing, and no one can stop me.

As I'm walking down the west wing hallway, I see that night starts to fall, and a broken window catches my eye. Looking out the window, I see a car pull up to the house. Then, I hear a book fall from inside the library. Instantly, I jump at the noise and slowly continue down to the library.

I hear them again, "*Help, we beg of you!*"

*"Don't open the door you foolish girl."*

*"The book, you must get the book then we will be free once more."*

I get to the library, and a shadowy figure passes the door. I slam myself against the wall in hope the figure won't see me. As I turn my head around the corner, I see a face! I know the shadow in real life. It is the widow Mrs. Linden! How could she have gotten into the house? That car! That pesky car I had forgot about outside the window. Yes, yes it must have been her. There is no other way she could have gotten into the house. But whom was she talking to? My parents aren't home, and I'm the only one here. Then, I hear a deep voice awaken from the corner of the room, as I am watching fearfully, say, "Carol, I have been locked up in this library for 20 years; can't you just let me go?" I-It It was Mr. Linden the dead man who owns the library. How can a dead man speak? How can a dead man even breath? Dead means in the ground, not breathing and definitely not have conversations with an intruder in my house also known as his so called wife.

Mrs. Linden spoke, "Laura must not get into the library, or she will figure out my secret. The secret that is keeping you locked up in here until you rot like you should have 20 years ago in that party with the rest of the ungrateful souls that are now in this dreadful library of yours."

Her words shook me to my core. What secrets and souls are locked in here? Right as I speak my thoughts out loud, a child appears in front of me with blood all over his clothes. He looks very frightened as he lifts his small child-like hands and points to the library and shakes his head. I blink and he is farther down the hall passing the library. As I run after him tripping over old rugs and furniture, I face plant. Lifting my head, I see a dead corpse closer to me than I would want, and as I continue to get up, more and more dead bodies appear in front of my face. Now, I'm very afraid of what else I might see. Slowly, I lift my head, and the little boy has a smirky grin smeared across his face as he quickly holds the knife to his mouth. I watch blood drip off the knife onto his tongue. Watching in disgust, I scream, and he throws the knife at my head missing by an inch. He chases after me taking me farther and farther into the west wing that I

regret ever letting cross my mind. Warning signs plastered up and down the walls telling me to turn back but that's impossible to do if he was still chasing me and getting closer by the second. I get to a dead end, and I take some time to mentally prepare for the fact that I'm going to die. Once I'm at peace with it, I turn around only to find that he is gone. Confused, I take a breath and then BAM! I am pulled into a room and hit over the head. I start to wake up and see the blurry shadow of my parents. My eyes blink a bit faster, and once I feel balanced, I try to get up only to find that I'm tied down and no one's going to help me. The next morning I jump up in a frightened manner because of the fact that I woke up in my own bed today. The last thing I remember is getting hit over the head and seeing my parents on the ground of a tore up closet. Three knocks are sent through the solid wood door of my bedroom, and the sweet voice of my mom washes over me as I jump up to open my locked door. Right as I turn the doorknob, I hear Mrs. Linden and quickly retreat to my bed locking the door once again. I put my ear to the wall trying to hear what they are talking about. I move my head down towards the key opening of my door, near the west wing hallway I see Mr. Linden pass to a different room. Suddenly, everything starts to come back to me. My mother leaves to go to the kitchen and I sneak out of my bedroom without a peep. Making my withdrawal to the library once more. As I get to the library, I open the door quietly and slip through the crack. While doing so, I see a book placed on the floor in the center of the room with a circle of salt drawn around it. I approach the book and pick it up. When doing so, I hear my mother's voice from down the hall, and I sprint back to my chamber. I open the book and it appears to be empty to the naked eye, but I take a closer look, and I see a very meticulous hand written note that says: *This is the book of souls; a book you cannot see. Unless you put your name down too, but be warned, the souls shall come free.* Intrigued, I ignore all signs and put my name in the first blank spot. After doing so, I start to drift off waking up about an hour later. I place my hand on the book and leap up as a rush of pain goes through my hand. My eyes go directly to the book, and I see rose thorns gaping out of all corners. I cover my hand and discard of each one off of the book while I toss them to the ground. Each vine I pull off, a new name surfaces from the core of the book and slithers into a name place. A new note also appeared that said: *They had warned her about the book. Now it was too late.* Closing the book in fear, a title arrives on the front cover reading *The Book Of Souls* as lightning and thunder strike outside the house with powerful gushes of wind.

Three weeks later...

I gaze out my window from the hospital room and quietly speak as I turn around, "It's true! I'm telling you! It's true. There was a house and everything! The book had the names of all the people who attended the party 20 years ago. All the people that died are stored in a hidden room deep inside the west wing, and Mr. Linden, he is still alive. He is in the library chained up. I'm not mad I swear! It's all true."

A man speaks, "It's not true, Laura, there was no house, no book, and no Mr. and Mrs. Linden. None of it is real. On a better note, your parents will be by to visit you later to check you in for good. Welcome to the Rose Thorn Mental Facility."

# Melanie Eickmeyer

Grade 10

## *Quiet*

Science Fiction/Fantasy

Kirkwood High School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Dominic Pioter

### Day One

Mary races around her room, gathering a worn-and-torn red-headed doll. Her yellow nightgown's frills flail in the air as she moves back and forth, desperate to keep a hold on the doll in her small arms. She hears Mommy and pictures her doing the same. She follows the instructions of the plan that's been drilled in her mind.

Go downstairs. Mary would grab Mommy's hand, but they are both carrying too much to allow for that luxury. Find Daddy. Daddy always knows what to do. Mary finds him downstairs, with James, Jack and Sunny, holding nothing but Sunny's cage. They run past the TV, something Daddy had made them get recently. As she glances over, Mary sees the word "bomb," and hears the broadcaster crying, but doesn't know why. Just before she looks away, she catches another word she doesn't understand: Nuclear. Go down to the big grey box. Mary doesn't realize she's been muttering until Mommy tells her to go after Daddy into the bunker. Mary climbs down, and James follows. Daddy reaches up and grabs Jack, and doesn't care if Jack hurts his paws when he drops him on the bitter concrete. Next Mommy dangles Sunny where Daddy can reach. He slowly, carefully, receives the little bird and sets him down. Finally Mommy climbs in, and the children see Daddy move out of her way and watch her trip.

"Mommy! Mommy, are you okay?" James wails.

Mommy stands up and brushes herself off.

"Yes, James, I am well," she says with a pointed glare to Daddy. He doesn't look up to see it.

"Time to seal the hatch, children. Are you ready?"

James begins to cry, hot tears sliding past his cheeks still round with baby fat. "Now, now James, I know it is frightening but we will have to be strong from now on. It's how we Carters are born: fighters. You are a Carter, and you will survive." Mommy's typical family speech carried weight when she didn't say it every day. But James, still in the delicate age when parents walk on water, is calmed to only sniffing.

Thank God, Daddy thinks, not knowing Mary hears him. He never shuts up.

Jack prances over to Mary, and she laces her small fingers through his fur. No one knows Mary hears them, but she always knows. Every second of every day filled to the brim with everyone else; even when she's asleep she can hear each fight Mommy and Daddy have. Actually, Mary thinks of it like smelling or touching—you can't see it happening but you know it is.

She likes Jack; he doesn't have the tricky thoughts of humans. When she's running her hands through his fur all he radiates is happiness. Mary finds herself slowly drifting into and out of sleep; it's been a stressful morning, but she cannot sleep well with Mommy stressed or Daddy angry or James scared. She's used to the regular noise, but the bunker has sent everyone's mind reeling...hers included. Right before Mary falls asleep, Mommy makes a horrifying discovery. Mary doesn't know exactly what it is, but Mommy won't stop thinking the same two things over and over again: Three weeks, we have three weeks.

## Day Four

A routine has been roughed out, but Mary awakens before it can begin. Mommy and Daddy are arguing again—all they do is fight.

“What do you mean you forgot to put bird seed down here? I swear to God, Dorothy, I planned this and now everything’s falling apart!” Sometimes Mommy jokes that he loves that little canary more than he loves her, but Mary is starting to believe he actually does.

“Me? You want to talk about what I did wrong? How about the fact that—” She stops there, and takes a breath to calm herself. After a few seconds she finally whispers, “How about the fact that you forgot to finish connecting the well to the bunker? We have three weeks left at the absolute maximum. If the radiation isn’t too bad, you could...” She trails off, but finishes the thought for Mary. If he would go outside and fix it, Mary and James could live longer, and if he’d done his job in the first place we wouldn’t be in the mess. He’s so stupid. Stupid stupid stupid husband. Why did I ever— The words become too jumbled and rapid-fire for Mary to understand.

Mommy and Daddy stand glaring at each other for a long time. The only thing that breaks the almost unbearable silence after the volume of the fight is a small cough. It seems James has stirred.

“Mommy, I’m thirsty.”

## Day Ten

Daddy is drinking less and less water every day. The whole family is, and Jack and Sunny have been drinking virtually nothing. Now the only thing Mary feels from Jack and Sunny alike is exhaustion; it seeps out of their bones in such quantity she can’t feel anything else. Sunny hasn’t chirped in days, and Jack’s normally bright eyes are sunken. James is the only one who doesn’t know why he’s stopped taking baths, why Mommy doesn’t do dishes, why Daddy won’t let him brush his teeth with water.

Dehydration is making Daddy crazy, Mary thinks. His thoughts are all wrong. Even despite their differences, Mommy has seen the same thing. She sees the way his eyes linger on the gallons of water, or how his eyes dart back and forth when James drinks a little of his water. It scares her.

Mommy keeps trying to convince Daddy to go outside and fix the system. “It will be so fast, Robert,” she says. “You won’t be gone five minutes.” They are both thinking, however reluctantly, something so awful it might convince him to go: This family is going to die either way.

## Day Seventeen

Sunny is dead. He hasn’t moved in days. Jack might as well be, too. The only sign of life he gives is a slow, rattling breath. Eventually those stop, too. Although Mary knows she should conserve what little water she has left, she cries when Daddy tosses their bodies in the waste bin. Mommy made Daddy promise to go outside by today, Mary realizes. She hopes Daddy will make it there and back but, unlike James, who keeps insisting they use the remaining water to make Daddy a cake, she realizes he might not come back inside.

After dressing in his thickest coat, maybe to block the radiation, Daddy is ready to go. Fear radiates out of him so strongly Mary felt she could grab the air and wring the feeling into a jar.

Although Mommy and Daddy have been doing nothing but fighting the last weeks, Mary sees how terrified they both are. “You must be strong,” Mommy says decisively to Daddy, but she won’t look at his face. “You save all of our lives by going out there. Robert, swear to come back to us.” For the first time in months they embrace.

The time finally comes to open the door. When he does, blinding light comes pouring in like a message from heaven. As he steps out, Mary is filled with his awe. This quickly turns to horror as he realizes the scope of destruction.

Everything is gone, Daddy thinks. There's nothing left. My friends are dead, and I might as well be, too. Mary becomes very frightened; his mind is getting more and more jumbled.

"Mommy, Mommy go get Daddy, he's not well." Mommy hears the urgency in Mary's voice. She is very hesitant.

"Okay, Mary. I'll go." Mommy finally agrees. James begins to wail weakly. "I want to come with you!" The meager water he has left drips weakly down his face.

James darts towards the hatch and, using all of his strength, manages to open it enough to squirm out. Mommy grabs for him, but misses and runs outside after him. Mary has an awful thought. Lock the door. And then more forcefully: Lock the door! She does, and it takes a few minutes for them to realize what has happened.

Mommy laughs nervously. "Very funny, Mary. Time to let us in now." Mary stays silent. More water for me when they're out there, she thinks.

With every minute she stays silent, James' thoughts get weaker. Mommy is stronger. All Mary can feel from her is fear—pure, unbridled fear.

It takes a few hours. First there was screaming. Next came pleading, crying, bargaining. Mommy's mind becomes less and less filled, with every second Mary feels happier and less thirsty. James isn't thinking at all. Mary decides to sleep on Daddy's bed. Her mind doesn't rest with her family. Instead, Where's my doll?

## Day Twenty

After a few days, an eerie calm teases her outside. Holding her doll, Mary opens the bunker and steps over the bodies of her family. She takes a deep breath and sends her mind roaming. Quiet, the whole world is quiet. Mary sighs. Finally.

## Emma English

Grade 11

*Petrichor*

Poetry

Barstow School  
Kansas City, MO  
Teacher: Jarrod Roark

Her tongue used to be  
All southern syntax -  
Sunbeam puddles stretching through  
Tinted church windows  
Now it aches  
A split-lip eulogy  
Spines bent in  
Broken prayers to  
A silent God  
Lungs  
Drowning in antiseptic  
Lips  
Dripping in ghosts' vaporescence  
Every multi-colored austral twang  
That coated her throat  
(wild honey boiling over rusty stovetops,  
Carolina berries picked with mud-crusting fingertips)  
Muffled by malignancy  
Drying out her mouth  
Cracked skin  
Yearning for syllables to swallow  
I try to be rain for her  
Sweet Petrichor  
The heavy thudding of  
Water dripping through  
rot-kissed tin roofs  
But  
I am just  
Ash barren land  
The sky  
Before thunder  
Breaking earth  
Pleading  
For something to grow

## Emma English

Grade 11

### *The Male's Poetic Gaze*

Poetry

Barstow School

Kansas City, MO

Teacher: Jarrod Roark

his mouth swells with sonnets about beauty  
she, splayed under fingertips  
guttured tongue filleted fish  
raw pink, sliced open  
the tang of her everything stripped bare  
carnally consumed  
female voice drenched in white  
murdered at the altar

isn't she lovely? the bruises blooming  
on her nape  
unfurled flowers  
blood between knees  
salt for Kings to taste  
he fits her body between his teeth  
cherry pit virgin sacrifice  
to spit  
out  
after, she scrubs her body vacant  
peels every piece of Adam from her ribs  
hopes its removal brings  
purification  
paints the t.v crimson  
begs for something screening  
holier than broken bodied girls  
but he grins into the camera  
her silhouette

staining his smile.

**Kojo Fanson**  
Grade 11

*Season*  
Short Story

Metro Academic Classical High School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Colyn Gremaud

It is Autumn.

Dying leaves slowly drift through the air, crinkling wisps of red, brown, and orange falling towards the earth. To the east, in a dense forest of dead trees, wilting and becoming dormant once again, a mountain sleeps. Along a silent stream where only fools fish, a small cave lies at the foot of the peak. Inside sleeps the she-wolf, her breasts each taken by a pup of her litter, red polished across her maw and the innards of some poor creature lacking either the speed or the fear to escape stuck between death's rotting fangs. Between all the small lumps of cold flesh and fur, one of her pups whines, still clawing anxiously to suck at her mother's teat. All her brothers and all her sisters barely moved, washed over by a sleep too deep for a mere newborn to take. The wolf did not grimace. For she too, would soon drift into the realm of the Great Ones, her body slowly becoming one with earth, just as she had come from it. But for now, she would stay. For the one pup that she knew she could keep, she would breathe and bleed and suckle as long as she could. Rot and death could not have her, not her child. Not yet. For you see, Autumn, while not the season of death, is the season when things always begin to end.

---

It is Winter.

Snow has painted the forest, a brilliant whiteness reflecting off the ground with such brightness that it scars the eyes. A constant flurry of crystalline rain whips the air as fiercely as the cold wind that carries it. Diamond stalactites hang from every branch, every trunk; no tree is without the cold embrace of season. All within this forest has died or is dead, only the things that manage to carry their own heat—the flame of life within their hearts, still breathe. A tree stands silent within a clearing, once colorful and plentiful leaves now replaced by a weiss counterfeit. At its very top, hidden within the igloo of branches hides a nest, a crimson-eyed corvid sat inside. The crow, the only blotch of black and red that defies the white decree of snow and cold, sat vigilant and stone, a stiffness about it that came with the reality of an end. But what laid beneath it was not gone, not dead. A lone egg hid underneath the callous effigy of the crow, a faint glow from inside; it would not hatch for some time. But for now, under the tailfeather of its stone mother, waiting in the lone, warm darkness that escaped the cold embrace of white death outside, the hatchling would wait. For you see, Winter, while the season of death, is the turning point of new beginnings.

---

It is Spring.

The sky hangs gray, fearsome thunderheads looming over even the tallest trees, an infinite rain pouring from above. Earth and vegetation slowly paint the land, the death and ice of the old season replaced by the violent rebirth of the new. To the east, a mountain ascends through the clouds, vehement winds and ungodly rains no deterrent to the Tower of Heaven. Its peak only seen from Elysia, its base only known by beasts of the underworld. A cave sits atop the Earth, above the inferno yet below the heavens, where life and death dance in equilibrium. Within the cave, a once terrifying wolf slumbers, bound to the eternal rest that will pull her soul to the stars and her body to the nether, the rank stench of death leaves the cave



with the water that flooded into it; only corpses remain.

As rain drains from the den and back into the wood, atop a small piece of driftwood carried off by the tide a young hound struggles to hold herself above liquid sleep. The storm roars—perhaps in outrage, perhaps in amusement— showering the new wolf with a cruel and hard rain, a hellish welcome to the outside of its den. The rains begin to stupor and sputter, clouds finally mending their endless bleeding. As the fury of the sky drains into the earth once more, the pup finally collapses upon the solid ground. She coughs, and she chokes, and she struggles not to drown inside of her own lungs. The young wolf finally stands, defiant against death, a new tale now begun.

For you see, Spring, while the season of beginnings, is never when the journey takes place.

---

It is Summer.

Fire ravages the forest clearing, the sun and the storm that hid behind it the arsonists in question. Flames devour all in sight: the grass, the earth, the trees and even the sky itself, suffocating smoke consuming all the atmosphere. Earth scorched black and thin, the sun is master of this season, vaporizing all made of water, melting what is not, a never-ending drought upon the forest. Hell writes its name upon the earth, the Lord of Cinders grasping and clawing at all that draws breath.

In the center of the clearing, a tree holds steadfast amidst the flames, fire tearing the bark into ash. Atop this tree sits a lone crow, weak and frail from the malnourishment of the drought, yet desperate to avoid her own symbol. The crow pitters around her nest frantically, an ungodly cry unheard through the wall of blaze and smoke. As inferno tears away at its trunk, the tree begins to lurch and sway, its insides charred and devoured, its time to return to the earth nigh. The pine falls, its trunk as dark as the smoke rising from it, and the crow leaps, its eyes and feathers cloaked with the blackness and red of smoke and flame. She lands, quietly choking as she stumbles out of the wall of black and death, the devil still reaching for her lungs. A silent caw is heard by no one.

For you see, Summer, while the season where journeys begin, is only one step away from when they end.

---

It is Autumn.

Shadowed by a mountain reaching for the heavens, a small forest clearing empty, no tree nor bird nor beast walking through its field. The remains of a valiant pine lay bare and dead in its center, no sign of life ever having been imbued within it. To the east, near the foot of the mountain sits a cave, void and dead, the grave of the beast that once dwelled inside known only by its skeletal cadaver. Nothing could have existed within this cave, nothing could have ever lived, the scattered bones of beasts large and small alike the final proof to nail the coffin. The forest is empty. The forest is dead.

A path lay between cave and clearing, one side marched upon by bird, the other by beast. At either end of the path lay an animal, each resting upon their death bed. The crow starved of any flesh besides that of her own mother, no home save for the dirt, no wind to ride with her frail and broken wings. The wolf never able to properly breathe again, starved of meat and sustenance, her ribs as bare and obvious as the cave that lay before it.

The cycle is done, the song complete, no further need to drag on what is cursed to perish anyway.

But what of death, you say?

Well you see, Autumn, while not the season of death, is the season when things always begin to end.

## Kojo Fanson

Grade 11

*He who slays Dragons*

Flash Fiction

Metro Academic Classical High School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Colyn Gremaud

I am He who slays Dragons.

Conqueror of Continents, Ruler of Regents, Chosen Son of God and Avatar of War. I am the knight who fells the foul beasts of the world, the malignant creatures adorned with black scales and flaming eyes, the rabid savages with flesh redder than blood. Yes, the world needs knights like me.

I am white. I am pure. I am justice.

My word is the word of God, and all who dare claim otherwise are heretics unknowing and undeserving of the Lord's strength and love.

I am he who slays Dragons, white knight adorned in silver armor, and I...

I am *righteous*.

---

I am He who slays Dragons.

Vanquisher of Villains, Destroyer of Demons, Knight of Justice and Awakener of the Good World. I am the blade which cuts down the evil creatures that horde the world's treasures, the possessing monsters which kidnap and brainwash the fair maidens of my land. Yes, the world needs knights like me.

I am good. I am powerful. I am a Hero.

I hunt the wicked whores which serve both demon and death, the witches with huts the size of castles and stacked tomes which reach the sky. I free the princesses brainwashed and trapped by the foul beasts with black scales.

I am He who slays Dragons, savior of the waking world, and I...

I am *brave*.

---

I am He who slays Dragons.

Terror of Tyrants, Razer of Rebellion, Demigod of War and Men. I am the chosen warrior who wields the Dragon's Fang, he who annihilates evil and champions good. I ride the demons I once fought against into battle, each tamed and humbled under God's chains. Yes, the world needs knights like me.

I am strong. I am proud. I am the Greatest.

I destroy the atrocities that dare to attack me, the golden scaled beasts which thought to scar my home. I do not simply defeat them. I break the dictators' spirits, crushing them under my heel. I exemplify the beasts of gold scales, unleashing my fury upon their cities and dethroning their god. I force them into pure submission.

I am He who slays Dragons, and I...

I am this world's *Champion*.

---

I am He who slays Dragons.

Warrior of Greatness, Marauder of Mayhem, Guardian of Prosperity and Valor. I am he who fights against the demonization and oppression of my people, he who pushes back against the brainwashing of

the demonic creatures adorned in glistening scales. The monsters which I once battled and tamed now fight and tame us, as if God has gone mad and thrown balance into oblivion. Indeed, the world needs knights like me.

I am sane. I am powerful. I am undefeated.

I try to save my people from the mistake they are soon to make, to believe that peace is ever a veritable agreement that we can hold with the witches and the foreigners and the beasts. I look on in horror as I see my kin become possessed, men breeding with draconic whores, women tossing aside their love and fear in god to take up the studies of demons! It is a sight too painful for me to bear.

I am He who slays Dragons, and I...

I am this world's *Guardian*.

---

I am he who slays Dragons!

Conqueror of Continents, Ruler of Regents, Chosen Son of God and Avatar of War!

I am he who slays *Dragons!*

Vanquisher of Villains, Destroyer of Demons, Knight of Justice and Savior of the Waking World!

I am he who *slays Dragons!*

Terror of Tyrants, Razer of Rebellion, Demigod of War and Men!

*I am he who slays Dragons!*

*Warrior of Greatness! Marauder of Mayhem! Guardian of Prosperity and Valor!*

My people are brainwashed, made into fools who accept the notion of coexistence with demonic beasts!

My country is a shambles, its borders torn apart by scaly, brown *vermin* who cross our fences and speak the tongue of *heretics!* Demonic, black *bastards* prow! the streets along with their brown brethren, brainwashing, kidnapping, raping, and murdering our women! The golden toned *heathens* become more and more audacious, stealing my people's wealth *everyday!* Even the red-skinned *savages* have become brave enough to poke their heads out of the dirt!

The world could almost not become worse if not for the evil creatures which spread rainbow wings upon the sky, my own brothers and sisters sprouting the Devil's wings to fly alongside them. My home is broken, the cause I once fought for forgotten and *lost*. But I will not be defeated. The world needs knights like me.

I am He who slays Dragons, the greatest warrior-king which shall ever live.

I shall take back my country.

I shall take back my people.

And I will make it *all* great again.

**Ryan Feng**  
Grade 7

*The American Dream*  
Short Story

Parkway West Middle School  
Chesterfield, MO  
Teacher: Emma Davis

“Hey James, why don’t you help me do some chores around here?” James’ mother leaned on the broken door frame to the kitchen, wiping her hand on her apron.

“I’m too tired,” James replied, staring through the living room window. He hasn’t moved an inch in the past hour or so. He’s just been caught up in his thoughts, dreaming, dreaming.

“Well, you should start on your homework, then.”

“Don’t have any.”

James looked at the clock. 5:00 PM. He looked at the different family decorations he and his mother had brought with them to this new home of theirs, the United States, when they moved here from Colombia. He returned his expressionless gaze back to the window and crossed his arms.

“James, how about you go outside and play with your soccer ball? You haven’t been doing anything for a long time.”

“Mom, just leave me alone please.”

James’ mother knew why James was acting like this. There was no doubt that he was thinking about Colombia. She knew how much he wanted to go back. She knew that he misses everything they left behind there. She knew that he missed home.

She studied him like a hawk. She walked over to James on the couch and sat on a scratched up chair beside him. She inspected all of the different areas of the run-down apartment that was now their new home. The walls were cracked in some places, the floor had various particles lain over it, and many of their furniture were either broken or completely unusable.

The truth was, and James’ mother didn’t like to think about it in this way, that they didn’t have any money here. Or any happiness for that matter. They left that all back in Colombia.

“James, I know moving to America has been hard for you, but you have got to understand that it’s a great place here,” James’ mother tried to reason, breaking the quietness that had fallen over them.

“There are great jobs for me and for you in the future. It’s all prosperity, success, and happiness here in the US! We will have a great life here! It’s only a matter of time before we find this happiness. Can’t you see that?”

James had withdrawn into sullen silence. “James?”

After a long minute, he finally responded, “Mom, I hate it here. Can’t you see that? We have no money, no family, no friends, no good things, and no happiness here in the US. We left all of that back in Colombia.” James stood up. “Why did you-AGH!” He suddenly screamed while turning around to punch the already crumbling wall.

That added more fuel to the fire growing inside of James.

James’ mother had a look of sorrow in her eyes. “James, I have told you about this-”

“Why can’t we move back?!” James shouted.

James’ mother knew why. In this great city, located in the center of America, the great city of St. Louis, they would eventually find happiness. She just didn’t know when.

James, on the other hand, didn’t think about it like that. He was close to tears, as he furiously stomped over to the door leading outside and yanked it open.

He didn’t want to reason with his mother. He had already done it too many times before. In his old home in Colombia at the kitchen table when James’ mom first thought of the idea, at the airport in

Colombia right when they were going to leave, on the plane to the US, at the airport when they landed, and now were all the times that James had tried and tried to change his mother's mind. None of that had helped. Now, he was done.

"James, what are you doing?" James' mother called.

James stormed out of the apartment building.

"James! No! Wait!"

James didn't turn around. He walked into the chilly, fall air outside, where orange leaves blanketed the vicinity. Clouds covered the sky.

He continued to walk away from his mother. He walked all the way up to the traffic light, where his apartment's street intersected with another huge street lined with stores, restaurants, theaters, music venues and more. He didn't notice any of them though. He was too busy giving thought to how much he hates it here.

James did not know that he, in fact, lived right by one of the greatest streets in America. The Delmar Loop.

He sat down against the wall of a store. There was a colorful mural with three musicians that said, "Viva Saint Louis!" on the wall. James rolled his eyes.

"She made such a terrible decision," James thought to himself. "She and I had everything we needed in Colombia. Here everything is just horrible. I have no friends here. We have no money. We live in a broken down apartment. She doesn't have a job. After three weeks of living here, I still cannot find a reason to like America! The only reason she wanted to come here was because she thinks we will find a 'better life' here. There's literally nothing here."

James stood up and found a rock on the ground. He kicked it as hard as he could across the street to take his anger out. That reminded him of Colombia. Back there he always played soccer with his friends in the streets. He and his friends would use little traffic cones they found as the goals. They played with a cheap soccer ball that one of his friends had bought. Right before James left, his friends had all gave him that ball to remind him of the memories they had together. A little smile formed on James' mouth. He missed his old home so much. "I would do anything just to return to Colombia and hang out and talk with my friends for just 10 minutes," James' heart ached. He doesn't like it here without all his old companions.

Here in the US, James had no friends, not even at school. He didn't talk much; he only spoke when the teacher was talking to him. He sat alone at lunch. It was so much more different here compared to Colombia, physically, mentally, and emotionally for James.

James decided that he was going to walk around to cool down. He strutted down the long road that never seemed to end.

He shivered a bit, as he had rushed out of his apartment so quickly that he forgot to bring his jacket. That reminded him of all of his bad thoughts and he immediately became upset again. He was just beginning to forget about it. "I have got to calm down," James thought. Taking a long walk will give him a break from his struggles.

The clouds overhead shielded the sun's rays from hitting James. The day was quickly about to get dark. It looked like it was going to snow. It never snowed in Colombia. James personally liked it better warm and sunny. He despised being cold.

"Another reason to hate America," James muttered under his breath, as he walked.

"The Delmar Loop," James read a sign. James just realized this, but the buildings on this long stretch of road radiated this happy vibe that he couldn't explain. There were people bustling around on the streets, cars passing by, lights flashing, music playing, bells ringing, and laughter and gaiety reverberating throughout James' entire surroundings. He didn't know what to think of it.

James strolled up to a man playing the saxophone. He was playing the music so beautifully that even James, who was still in a bad mood, started tapping his feet, and feeling the music. The music was so rhythmic, warm, and bright. The man was clearly feeling the music in his heart, as he was so engulfed in it that he hadn't even realized James had walked up to him. Several people, with their phones out, recorded the man playing his wonderful music.

There was a hat at the foot of the man. After rummaging through his shorts pockets, James was lucky enough to find a few coins to give to the man. He leaned over and dropped the coins into the hat. The man saw, gave James a friendly smile, and still continued to play.

James smiled back. "I bet that man has played in a really famous group before," he mused. "He is really, really good." James continued to walk. He took a left and saw a huge sign on a building that said "Fitz's." He walked up to the building and peered into the window. Waiters were bustling around here and there, serving families their food and drinks. James saw a waiter walk by with a tray of food that looked as if it was heaven on a plate. A colorful assortment of vegetables and cheese sat inside two brioche buns and a juicy steak patty. Crispy potato fries were rested right by the hamburger.

James mouth watered just looking at it. "I'll have to come here with my mom someday," James dreamt in his mind. "Well, if we get enough money." He directed that thought towards his mom. He shook his head and walked away from the restaurant.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a little posted-up piece of paper taped to the window. "Hiring waiters!" it said. Hope came back to James, as he realized his mom could work at this restaurant that was so attracting to him. That'll give her money!

James smirked, "Huh, I guess my mom could get a job here and get me delicious food at the same time."

James kept on making his way down the street, a light bounce in his feet now, interested in what would be the next interesting thing he would find.

James had mixed feelings, not knowing whether he actually liked it here in America or not. He still missed his old Colombian town, yet this new setting was somewhat fascinating to him. It seemed like he could actually survive here without going insane.

While he was thinking about all this, he didn't realize he came upon another apartment complex. Right out in the front grass was a kid that looked about his age, juggling a soccer ball. His long black hair flipped up and down, as he kicked the ball up and down. He accidentally kicked the ball up too far ahead of him and it landed at James' feet. James flicked it up, and lightly kicked it back to the kid on the volley.

"Hey there! Woah, you look familiar. Wait, are you the new kid at our school?" the kid asked James.

"Yeah," James replied.

"Oh cool! What's your name? Mine is Ash."

"I'm James, nice to meet you!"

The two introduced themselves and their life to each other. The two bonded together very well. James learned that Ash actually moved here about seven months ago. He came from Miami, Florida, and had to evacuate, as a hurricane was going to hit where he lived. He knows what it's like to leave everything you've ever known and grown to love behind. He also knew what the struggles of being new were. James had someone to relate to.

Ash passed the ball to James, and James settled the ball and passed it back. They repeatedly passed to each other, until the sun started to set. They were both phenomenal players, making no mistakes as they played.

They conversated along the way, laughing and joking with each other. It was like they have been long time friends. They talked like they knew each other's so well. The sky getting dark was what finally separated the two from talking.

"Hey Ash, it's getting pretty dark, I think I got to go," James said.

"Aw man, alright then. But hey, I live right there." Ash pointed to an apartment right on the first floor. "Let's hang out more, maybe tomorrow at 1? It's the weekend, so we don't have school. Oh, and when we do have school on Monday, you can sit with my friends and I."

James agreed, and he started to walk away.

"James wait!" Ash called out to James, walking over to catch up to him, "One more thing: I know that you don't like it here, and I know it's been tough for you. I know that because I have been through the same stuff you're going through right now. But here's the thing, all you have to do is to just accept

this new home of yours, dude. It's an amazing place here. You don't have to think of St. Louis as a bad place. You'll love it if you would just accept it here, and think of America as your home."

James looked down and then back up at Ash, as a huge smile was plastered on his face.

"Thank you so much. I'm very grateful that I got to know you. You helped me out a ton. I appreciate being your friend."

As James was making his way back home, he felt so, so glad that he had taken this walk. He hadn't known America was this... James didn't have the word for it. It was just so beautiful, unique, and just overall incredible here.

The sky was getting dark, but James was feeling completely the opposite. James skipped down the street, laughing all along the way. He felt joyousness spread throughout him. He stood a little taller, and he felt so much more stronger on the inside. After all that he had seen today, he had a much better mindset of living in America.

Snow started to creep out of the clouds, landing onto the Earth. The snow was unlike anything he had ever seen. The white, glistening, little snowflakes fluttered down slowly and softly. James could only stop and look up in awe at this wonder.

He watched several snowflakes fall onto his arms and melt as they settled themselves. He sort of felt that the snowflakes were just like him, unwillingly moving away from your original home, but if you just accepted it, you would just kind of "melt", or fall into place, into your environment, and settle down. All of his bad thoughts went away, and he could only think of how amazing and wonderful his new life would be here. The music here is so unique and interesting to listen to, the buildings on his street are actually some of the most beautiful pieces of artistry ever, and the people here are just amazingly nice. James wouldn't have been able to experience all these amazing things if he hadn't moved to America. A rock lay ahead of him. He kicked it as hard as he could across the street into a wall. Except this time, he wasn't missing his old home. He was thinking of all the new opportunities with his soccer ball from Colombia. James sensed that that soccer ball would soon be not only a reminder of his old home, but also an opportunity to find more friends here in America. He is definitely bringing it over to Ash's place tomorrow.

It was hard for James to imagine how much he hadn't seen of America. He didn't know there were this many wondrous things to find in his new home. Finally, James had found happiness.

## Lauren Fisher

Grade 12

### *Lemonwater*

Science Fiction/Fantasy

David H Hickman High School

Columbia, MO

Teacher: Nancy White

The bar was badly-lit, crowded, and slightly steamy.

Nadesha had chosen to sit back in the farthest corner, between the two ancient arcade machines that stood sentry-like on either side of the room. She was noticeably the brightest thing in it. For the first twenty minutes, she had quickly ordered a beer, some dark local malt that was too vinegary for how expensive it was, and waited for the general interest in her huge bright yellow sunhat to ebb. And once it became clear that her contact was going to be as late as everyone had told her they'd be, she practiced her work.

She started with the large biker nearest the outdated TV on the other side of the room. The loud ones were always the easiest. They projected just as much internally as they did externally. The drunk ones were the quickest, the same as rubbing ethanol over an injection site. Loud *and* drunk, a good warmup.

It was easy for her to slide in, sift quickly through the many details shoved immediately at her, and pick out a few key pieces of information- mid thirties, never married. Two brothers, older and younger. No degree. Hugely proud of the newest additions to his full double sleeves; two massive mandala-like wheels on each shoulder, embellished with skulls and wreaths of flame, but understandably insecure about the smeerier unprofessional-looking ones on his biceps.

She found his name- Harrison, and social security number, and when she withdrew neatly from his mind, practiced blanking the information from her memory.

She practiced methodically with most of the rest of the bar's patronage, carefully learning and unlearning them. None of the people in this biker bar were much work; she was done in less than half an hour. Satisfied, she leaned back and drained the rest of the vinegary beer. Then.

"Nice hat."

She didn't look up. "Thanks. It was my mam's." The voice was low and hummed uncomfortably, like feedback on a speaker rig.

The cracked leather seat of her booth creaked in complaint as another person sat next to her.

"When were you planning to show up tonight, after you'd checked into a decent motel?" Nadesha ran her finger around the lip of her empty glass idly. "I don't run on daylight, but that doesn't mean you can waste my time." She glanced up out of the corner of her eye as she finished. From under the brim of her hat, she could see a pair of leathery reptilelike lips.

"Hmm. Interesting technique," said the voice. "Were you aware of how far you were broadcasting all that? I had to dissuade quite a few interested parties on the way." They clasped a pair of large leather gloved hands casually over the edge of the table.

Nadesha snorted. "You should've left a few. Would've livened up this podunk town a little bit."

She got only a low hum that might've been a laugh in response. "So," she said, blowing a stray strand of hair out of her face, "what exactly is the procedure here? Briefing isn't necessarily Ol' Ironclad's strong suit. I'm supposed to help you find somebody in this little place?"

"Well..." There was a long, clicking sigh. "Actually, there's been a change of plans. It seems we are... partners, for a time. I am looking for something that requires the knowledge of someone with your-"



Nadesha broke in midsentence, livid. “Dirty *bastards*, no wonder the text was so vague- they **knew** I’d never have agreed to this if they told me I’d be *travelling*-”

A few curious beer drinkers looked back in their direction curiously. Nadesha sat back down and took a deliberate, deep breath through her nose.

Leather Gloves took the moment to continue. “... I need someone with your skillset to locate, or perhaps use it. I am not yet sure.” They coughed, embarrassed. It sounded like a fork caught in a garbage disposal. “I understand now you weren’t informed of the nature of this assignment, so I apologize. I might be able to find someone else-”

“Nah, you wouldn’t,” said Nadesha. “Forget about it.”

She stood up from the table. “I need another drink,” she announced, turning abruptly. “You want something?”

“Lemon water, please.”

Nadesha couldn’t help but stare at them. All black robes, head to foot, a long dark leather duster, and a medieval looking cowl. A frayed beanie was perched on top of it pathetically. “Jesus, how did they let you in here? You look like... never mind. I’ll be right back.”

She returned with a glass of amber whiskey and a small cup of seltzer water. The wrinkled reptile mouth, the only thing visible under the big cowl, turned tortoise-like with distaste.

“The carbonation...” Leather Gloves ventured. “I can’t drink this.”

“Sorry, I didn’t know. The guy said they didn’t have lemon.” Nadesha downed half her drink in a gulp. She wiped her mouth, reached for the seltzer water, and paused, lips on the brim of the cup.

“Hey, uh...”

“Yes?”

“If we’re supposed to be working together, I gotta call you something besides “leather gloves guy.””

The pointer finger of one leather-clad claw tapped the table. “I haven’t had a name for a very long time,” they said, pensively. “Although...” the reptile lips curved up in a rueful smile. “Here’s something that fits. You can call me Pantomime, if you like.”

“Oh, so you’re one of *those*.” Nadesha’s whiskey was almost gone. She grinned out from under the brim of her hat and held out a hand. Pantomime shook it very carefully.

“Mr. Pantomime, huh? I guess I can get used to it.”

The creature called Pantomime wasn’t the only thing to blow in on the dry evening wind. Under the flickering fluorescent awning of the town’s only gas station sat a dazzlingly inconspicuous car. From outside the circle of harsh light, a pebble clicked against the tinted passenger’s side window.

The man in the car wasn’t tall or short, fat or thin. He wasn’t even outstandingly forgettable. When people looked away from him in a crowd, he seemed to look like everyone; a handsome man in a business suit, vaguely familiar in the way that cousins were. It was difficult to remember his hair color when he wasn’t in sight. He was wearing a pair of wraparound shades.

“Don’t scratch the window. This is a rental,” he said.

And suddenly, there was a man standing outside the car. He was long and thin, and a wild halo of scruffy red hair surrounded his head. With this badly-fitting exercise shorts and battered shoes, he looked like a lost marathoner. “Don’t be a shithead, Hearer.”

“Who’s the shithead?” Hearer’s glasses angled pointedly at the ginger guy’s shoes, which looked less like running shoes and more like an interesting take on open toed sandals held together with strings of red canvas.

The ginger guy shrugged. “They’re comfy.” He leaned against the side of the car on one elbow and peered into the gloom to look at the upholstery. “Besides, *I* look the part. This isn’t Boston, you know. Out here, people have trucks and, and Subaru’s, that kinda shit.” He rubbed his patchy scruff. Hearer’s sour face told him that yes, he thought it would be exactly like Boston. “I did what I could with what I had.” he cleared his throat over the ginger guy’s chuckle. “Have you found it yet?”

The ginger guy's face crumpled interestingly on one side until it came out as a sheepish grin. He hesitated. "Well-"

Harkener's interest sharpened like a knife until it was practically palpable. "Well what?"

"Well, the... thing is..."

When he didn't get an immediate answer, he slammed the dashboard. "Well WHAT, Ynsman?"

Ynsman looked embarrassed. "*There's something here-!*"

Harkener's sudden silence was deafening.

Ynsman gestured weakly. "I haven't gotten any readings like they told me I would, and it took days to set up the weave. I wasn't even getting anything until this morning, early. And now, well- *jutas* aren't strong enough for whatever's out here with us." he was pale under his freckles.

Harkener seemed to digest this a minute. Then he pinched the bridge of his nose, right below what looked like an old familiar frown line. "Get in."

Ynsman got in.

## Lauren Fisher

Grade 12

*Whitesmith*  
Flash Fiction

David H Hickman High School  
Columbia, MO  
Teacher: Nancy White

Chaufourier thought it was prudent for the jeweler to have left the door unlocked; it would save much trouble on the part of his men, and would make much less of a spectacle.

The studio was small, but cozy. Chauffourier noted the lack of windows- classic brickwork; industrial facility repurposed; thick walls; concrete flooring- as he stepped across the threshold. The workbench was pushed back against the far wall. A single lamp on it lit the room. The jeweler was hunched over it, back to Chauffourier and his men. His hands were busy.

"Pizza delivery has arrived," Chauffourier said. He smiled a thin smile at this American joke he was making, in honor of his third time in the country.

The jeweler did not turn around. Chauffourier snapped his fingers; with a crash, one of his men threw a chest of drawers against the wall. The jeweler turned in his chair, slowly. He was an old man, small and hunched from years of bending over a workbench. He met Chauffourier's gaze squarely.

"Hello, Whitesmith," said Chauffourier.

"Bonjour," the old man said.

For a minute there was nothing but the musical sound of tiny jewelry components underfoot. Chauffourier's men shifted uncomfortably, waiting for a signal. The old jeweler made a few adjustments to the small pendant he held in his hands, held it up so the ruby caught the light of the lamp, nodded, and set it down onto the workbench.

"I know why you're here," he said.

Chaufourier kept his hands clasped behind his back. "In 1901," he said conversationally, "There was an expedition up the Paraná River chartered by the British Royal Geological Society. They were lost in the deep jungle of Paraguay for sixteen months. Do you know what they found?"

The jeweler said nothing, but didn't look away. Chauffourier's carefully arranged pleasant expression soured around the corners of his mouth.

"You will tell me where what I seek is; and you will do it slowly. And then, these men will not break both of your collarbones, and I will not have to be responsible for the unfortunate fire in an old tinkerer's studio."

While he was speaking, the jeweler had begun to slowly shake his head, like a grandfather admonishing a petulant child. "There are always ones like you," he said, with an air of bemusement. "I've never understood it."

Surreptitiously, Chauffourier slid a small, sleek pistol out of the back pocket of his clean-pressed dress pants.

"Tell me where it is," he said again.

The old man smiled.

"You'll never find it."

He shot the jeweler.

In the back rooms of the studio, an assistant stuffed clothes into a bag to cover a thick paper package, a fist stuffed in her mouth to keep from making any noise. The splintering of Chauffourier's men overturning the work tables upstairs made the soft sound of the back door blowing shut impossible to hear.

## Abigail Flynn

Grade 12

### *A Human, Too*

Personal Essay/Memoir

Parkway Central High School

Chesterfield, MO

Teacher: Jason Lovera

“You know that makes you a murderer, don’t you?”

I glanced up from the pigeons picking at the scraps of french fries on the ground. “What?”

“Being pro-choice. That’s actual murder,” the girl, Violet, replied, her lips pulling down into an uncomfortable scowl.

I looked to my roommate, Sam, but she just shrugged helplessly. We were eating in the pavilion of our dorm hall on the first day at a summer college program. Sam met Violet during check-in a few hours before, and she had been tagging along with us ever since, even though she lived in a different dorm.

Violet was an enigma. The stereotype for most theater oriented kids who own a Harry Potter wand collection and rename themselves after a flower (when they decide “Kaitlin” is too mainstream) is that they tend to be a little more left-leaning politically. Violet, however, broke the bonds of society’s expectations to remind me that everyone is unique.

I briefly floundered for an answer before replying, “Well, I’m not advocating for abortion as the first choice, I guess, I just believe it’s ultimately up to the-”

“You’re going to hell,” she said matter-of-factly.

“I don’t really believe in hell,” I responded, narrowing my eyes.

She opened her mouth, and the next few weeks made me really question my statement.

It was a constant fight between the two of us. It wasn’t like she was the only conservative voice that I ever interacted with, in fact, my friend group was diverse enough that debates over the existence of climate change and the status of the 2016 presidential race were almost constant. The difference was that those arguments were civil and generally in good fun. My interactions with Violet...less so.

One particular incident involved a girl we affectionately called Luna Lovegood, from Harry Potter. She was asexual. Violet was unbelieving.

The argument was happening loudly across the hall from my room, meaning I was only three feet away from my favorite person to antagonize.

“It’s just not a real thing!” I heard her exclaim, exasperation dripping from her voice. “You honestly can’t expect anyone to actually believe that, can you?”

I sidled up to the door, ready to pick another fight. This time everyone disagreed with her, including our conservative friends, who were glaring quite intensely. We were united in our affection for our quirky friend.

“Maybe nothing is real!” I replied loudly, leaning against the doorframe. She turned at the sound of my voice, trademark snarl already plastered on her face. “Maybe reality isn’t real! It sure would be easier to believe that this is all an illusion rather than accept that someone as unpleasant as you actually exists!”

“Glad to see the freak is back,” she snapped. “The Bible says-”

“The Bible says a lot of things,” Luna interrupted softly, smiling. She was an eternal optimist. “I don’t think God hates me.”

I shifted past Violet to plop next to Luna on her bed. “I don’t know him personally, but I don’t think your God has any reason to hate you. Violet, on the other hand...”

“You are the one that’s killing babies, you freak,” she said. “Just because you want to go around spreading your legs doesn’t mean you can avoid the consequences.”

Anger pooled inside my stomach at the insult, but instead of yelling I just looked at her. The mature response would have been to ignore the comment. The mature response from the beginning of the relationship would have been to just ignore her entirely. But I didn’t. I opened my mouth and responded to her taunts with crueller and even more inappropriate insults.

To me, Violet was almost a non-person. She was, to an extent, the embodiment of everything I hated. It wasn’t the fact that she wasn’t pro-choice or that her rule for everything she hated was that God would hate it too. It was the fact that everything she said was hateful. She did her best to put my friends down, to make them feel inadequate. She successfully baited me several times by pushing on my own insecurities. My mistake though was forgetting that behind our petty arguments, there were two people that were struggling with other issues of their own.

I realized that two weeks before the camp ended. It started with my roommate darting into my room with a lanyard that held Violet’s keys and her student I.D.

“I need you to hide these,” she said, breathlessly. “And if Violet comes in here, don’t let her have them, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” I took them as she ran out. Our hall was in the midst of an intense prank war, so I assumed that she was taking part in it. I stuffed the keys in the drawers of Sam’s desk and forgot about them.

I was immersed in my homework when a furious pounding railed against my door. Puzzled, I put my pen down and went to open it, and was met by a raging Violet. Her face was blotchy and her eyes were bloodshot. This was by far the most upset I had ever seen her.

She shoved past me and looked around the room.

“Where are my keys?” she yelled.

“I don’t kn-” I started.

“Shut up!” she screamed. “I know you hid them here, where are they?”

She stormed around the room looking.

“Look, I really don’t know!”

She turned to me then, and shoving a finger in my chest, she snarled, “I swear you little freak, I need them, now!”

I slapped her hand away. “First of all, don’t touch me. Second of all, they’re in the drawer. Third of all, if you don’t get out of my room I swear I’ll grab you by your braids and throw you out,” I seethed.

She sneered at my threats, grabbed her things, and left.

Later that night the two of them came back together. The incident had slipped from my mind as I shifted into the hallway to engage in a debate about the superiority of Apple products to Windows products.

“Okay, but Apple is prettier” I said, at this point losing the debate quite badly. “Windows tech just always looks clunky and-I was interrupted by Sam and Violet storming through the hall, or, more specifically, Sam dragging Violet by the wrist into the bathroom. I glanced at my friends, who collectively shrugged and decided it wasn’t our problem. Eventually, the two of them exited the restroom and left down the other side of the hall.

It quickly became more of a problem when I went into the bathroom myself. I entered the first stall and stopped dead cold. A razor, at least the size of my hand, was sitting at the bottom of the toilet bowl. My heart began beating faster as my mind raced through the events of the night. Sam and Violet were the only two that had been in the bathroom so it must be connected to them. Which meant that Sam had been hiding Violet’s keys for a reason more important than any prank. She was stopping Violet from doing something to hurt herself.

I stumbled back, my stomach in knots. I gripped the side of the stall, feeling the cool metal under my fingers as I tried to tear my eyes away from the image. Eventually, the shock passed, and I returned slowly to my friends. I knew I had to tell someone, or at least make sure that someone knew. "I'll be back in a bit, okay?" my voice sounded hollow to my ears.

I ignored their questioning looks as I walked downstairs to the common room. There I found Sam, sitting on the couch, anxiously glancing towards the clock on the wall. Violet was nowhere to be seen.

I sat down next to her. "I saw the razor," I said quietly. "Did you tell anyone?"

Sam sighed and put her head in her hands. "The counselors are talking with her now," she replied.

I never got the full story, nor did I ask for it, but from what I was told, Violet was dealing with a family in disarray and a history of abuse. I went upstairs, locked myself in my room, and wrote it down. Slowly, I realized. I had been cruel because I had forgotten that Violet wasn't the epitome of hatred. I don't believe I was the cause of Violet's breakdown that night. But I knew that treating her like I did wasn't helping. That didn't mean that Violet was a good person; I still believe she wasn't. She had hatred in every word she spoke and anger in every action, and often times she didn't treat others like humans either. But that didn't give me the right to stop viewing her as one.

I saw Violet several times after that night. I didn't tell anyone else about the incident, and to my knowledge, she had no idea that I was aware of what happened. And every time we met, her greeting was the same:

"What do you want, freak?"

I had learned though, that sometimes it was best just not to respond.

# Sophia Fox

Grade 12

## *The Face*

Personal Essay/Memoir

John Burroughs School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Jill Donovan

As I entered the chilly cadaver lab, equipped with rubber gloves and a white coat, the overwhelming scent of formaldehyde filled my nostrils. I had no idea what to expect in this steel, sterile, windowless room. I had never seen a dead body before, let alone one that had been almost fully dissected.

The first cadaver I saw was an old man. We surrounded the table and the professor carefully unzipped an opaque bag, slowly exposing the cadaver's feet, soon revealing a leathery body. I heard gasps and watched as many looked away. One girl turned green. Almost everyone seemed deeply disturbed. I wasn't alarmed by what I saw, but I was surprised when the professor stopped unzipping the bag right before the man's head and carried on discussing anatomy.

No one wanted to see his face. The professor didn't even bother trying to show us. But as excited as I was to see the inside of the human body, I felt profoundly uncomfortable watching googly-eyed 16-year-olds pass around organs from this faceless man's abdomen as if they were pieces of meat. We were invading the most intimate parts of him. These organs weren't just organs, and the nerves and muscles and bones in his dissected leg weren't just nerves and muscles and bones. They belonged to a real person.

So, when we were dismissed for a break, I asked the professor if I could see the man's face. He was a bit taken aback, blinking a few times before bluntly telling me that he didn't expect any of his students, today or any other day of the seminar, to ask to see the face of a cadaver. My classmates were still in the room, standing a few feet away from the table. Twenty pairs of eyes had suddenly shifted away from the dissection and onto me. I saw their stares, wide with both intrigue and bewilderment. The professor unzipped the rest of the bag, and told the class that we could undrape the towel and look at the man's face. And so I did.

At first I felt unsettled and shocked. But a few seconds later, my perspective shifted. Seeing the man's face gave me peace of mind. I put a face to the biology, and a mind to the physical. By acknowledging the fact that this man was not just a pile of body parts, it felt as though he had given me, personally, permission to learn from his body. After I saw his face, he was no longer just a cadaver. He was a man, with not only a heart but also a soul. I felt a sense of comfort -- not guilt. And as I examined and learned about each organ, muscle, bone, and nerve, I silently humanized them. This heart beat over a billion times, pumping blood through his body. This liver filtered his blood after a glass of wine. This knee supported thousands of miles of walking. This nerve let him feel his mother's hand.

I realized that the lab didn't feel quite as sterile as when I had arrived. It felt more human. The man's face provided me with a unique perspective and a greater appreciation for selfless giving. He made a conscious, generous, and educated decision to donate his body to science -- a choice full of hope and kindness. And thus when I departed, the room felt a bit less like a laboratory, and a bit more like a sanctuary.

# Gabby Gillespie

Grade 12

## *Humanity and the Hunt*

### Critical Essay

Blue Valley Northwest High School

Overland Park, KS

Teacher: Bill Smithyman

Throughout time, humans have held a fascination and relationship with the animals they encounter. In the primitive Paleolithic Era, humans desired to capture animals' likeness and the kinship between man and animals on the cave wall painting Rhinoceros, Wounded Man, and Bison[1]. Thousands of years later in the heart of Mesopotamia, the king sought to mold other humans' perception of himself with the enduring stone Lion Hunt relief,[2] reflecting his victory in staged lion hunts. The relationship between man and animal depicted in the Rhinoceros, Wounded Man, and Bison and the Lion Hunt relief exhibits the evolution of humans' perception of the world, how they treat it, and how they want the world to perceive them.

Though these two works illustrate the hunting of animals by humans, one seeks to portray the dependence humans had on animals, while the second serves as a form of propaganda. The humans of the Paleolithic era painted the Rhinoceros, Wounded Man, and Bison around 15,000-13,000 BCE to showcase a predator and prey relationship between themselves and the animals, with the animals likely a source of food. The painting lies in the Lascaux caves, where life during the Paleolithic era centered on humans hunting animals for food and resources. By capturing this almost sacred act of taking a life for man's survival in the painting, humans show the vast importance of animals as a sustaining force in life. The bird-like head upon the man's body in the cave painting deepens this close bond between animals and humans. This animal-man hybrid could represent the sacredness of animals to the people of the time and their role in humans' lives as the primary source of life. On the other hand, the Assyrian Lion Hunt relief from 645 BCE glorifies the hunter. This wall relief, likely in the "throne room and official rooms emphasize the brute strength and power of the monarch," as they kill lions, which embody the idea of courage and power. [3] The relief sends a message of authority to his people in his ability to kill these mighty beasts, as the relief sat on the palace walls for many to see.

These two pieces both showcase the brutality and violence of a hunt at the hands of humans, but the animals' reaction to the violence reflects the artists' intentions. The Lion Hunt Relief portrays a hunting party on a chariot, brutally spearing lions in a staged hunt as they ride past, leaving the wounded bodies behind. The relief shows violence for violence's sake, while the graphic quality of the Rhinoceros, Wounded Man, and Bison mimics the real life nature of hunting and killing for food. Though the Magdalenian cave painting depicts a spear through a bison, "causing its entrails to spill out," the cave painting appears more placid than the anguished lions twisted with pain.[4] The grotesque expressions and limp bodies of the lions serve to symbolize defeat in order to ennoble the hunter. The violence degrades the lions to uplift the king who killed them for sport. In contrast, the bison of the cave painting reflects a calmness and unemotional response to its defeat, implying a more respectful death than the lions'. Though this can result from the artist's limited skills, the bison's simple and peaceful expression in response to its violent attack strengthens the humble and respected relationship between man and animal.

How the artists portray the animals in defeat show the artists' level of respect for their surroundings and other living things. The artists both depict animals in a moment of weakness, but rendered the animals in different positions and expressions to reflect the artists' perception of the world and how well they treat it.



During the Paleolithic Era, wild animals existed before domestication, and remained generally unknown and mysterious to people of this time. The reverence and beauty of the animals in the Rhinoceros, Wounded Man, and Bison displays the ancient people's adoration for them and the world around them. The honorable nature of the bison's defeat in the cave painting shows how the people of the Paleolithic era used their world around them with respect. They killed for their own survival, not to show their strength against the bison. Unlike the Paleolithic era, the kings of the near East exploited the world around them to further their own image. For the people of the near Eastern era, lions already had a powerful significance, and people understood their dangerous and ferocious manner. Kings especially abused this perception of lions to uplift their own in the Lion Hunt relief. This illustrates a shift from man and animals sometimes portrayed as equals, to man overpowering and conquering the animals for his glory. The Lion Hunt relief celebrates "the invincible power of the Assyrian kings," while the Rhinoceros, Wounded Man, and Bison features the respect and appreciation for the bison. [5] The theme of hunted animals translates to how humans dominate the world and survive alongside nature, as the near Eastern culture rises above it and conquers.

The importance of animals may explain why they show up time and time again in various forms of art to explain humanity's power, glory, dominance, or just survival. The mindset of the artists from different times remain vastly unique due to the filter they see their world through. From the Rhinoceros, Wounded Man, and Bison illustrating natural hunts to the later Assyrian Lion Hunt relief showing staged lion killings, these two pieces showcase humans' interaction with their surroundings throughout the ages.

# Gabby Gillespie

Grade 12

## *Death and Immortality*

### Critical Essay

Blue Valley Northwest High School

Overland Park, KS

Teacher: Bill Smithyman

The significance of death, immortality, and power presented in the cover of King Tutankhamun's coffin from Egypt and the Mask of Agamemnon from Greece suggests humanity thinks alike despite vast geographical distances. Instantly recognizable as the infamous King Tutankhamun, the cover of King Tutankhamun's coffin[1] sought to immortalize the King's perfection and grandeur in gold, as well as preserve the body within for the journey to the afterlife. The golden death Mask of Agamemnon[2] on the other hand presents a more candid shot of the dead man, offering a semi-naturalistic representation of him, with a purpose of preserving his greatness rather than preserving his body.

Though these two pieces come from separate cultures with entire seas between them, they both serve as a representation of the dead individual and show the cultures' focus on death and immortality. The ancient Egyptians' sophisticated society believed death meant the beginning of a lavish afterlife, so they prepared their Pharaohs well for the journey with tombs and coffins to "ensure the owner's resurrection and welfare in the afterlife[3]." The cover of King Tutankhamun's coffin reflects this meticulous preparation with its detailed depiction of the Pharaoh on the coffin's cover. With this the Pharaoh could live on physically and spiritually, as the coffin preserved the mummy inside, captured his greatness forever in gold, and helped his ka (the life force or spirit) move onto the afterlife. The Mask of Agamemnon also captures the likeness of the dead man beneath it, as the mask most likely laid on top of the deceased's face. Despite its name, the Mask of Agamemnon may not depict the infamous King, but rather a noble or some other King of the time[4]. Archeologists may not know exactly who the mask depicts, but it remains obvious from the gold design they held some sort of importance. Like King Tutankhamun's coffin, the Mask of Agamemnon captures the face of the deceased's forever, immortalizing his power and influence over the people of the time. Both the coffin cover and death mask suggest a common connection between the two civilizations when they had little to no contact with each other. This connection includes the civilizations' fascination with life after death and the rulers' immortality.

These two drastically different civilizations both chose to depict the dead in gold and with power in their funerary objects, showing humanity may seem distant in ways of life and location, but when it comes to what they value, humans share similar principles. The artists of The Mask of Agamemnon and the cover of the coffin of Tutankhamun both use gold as the primary material. Unlike other enduring materials to use for these funerary accessories like stone, gold reflects light, and in a tomb with no light, the gold could represent light in the dark or life after death. Gold also presents itself as a symbol of wealth and power, and suggests the dead men's level of importance in society because of gold's rarity[5]. These two funerary pieces both show the deceased's grand power, but they portray their power differently. Egyptians believed Pharaohs to stand in link with their gods, so Tutankhamun's coffin cover portrays the Pharaoh as a godlike figure with near perfect facial features. He holds a crook and flail in his hands, symbolizing his authority while also adorned with a grand headdress to show his kingliness. The Mask of Agamemnon does not reflect nearly this amount of power, but still reflects the deceased's influence as a king or high member of society with near perfect symmetry and well-groomed facial hair. The mask looks more man than god with a bearded face and lines around the eyes indicating wrinkles. Wealth projects from both of

these pieces, but the way each man appears in the golden configurations reflects the cultures' unique yet similar view of their noble men after death.

The act of burying and honoring the dead in tombs with funerary objects like the death mask and coffin not only spans over different continents, but also over time, revealing humans share innate behaviors. In 1922 the archeologist Howard Carter found Tutankhamun's tomb in Egypt. Inside he found lots of artifacts including his "coffin, sandals, metal objects, linens[6]," and the Pharaoh's personal objects. About fifty years earlier, the archeologist Heinrich Schliemann discovered the famous Mask of Agamemnon in a grave shaft in Mycenae, Greece containing weapons, furniture, and even clothing[7]. The mask dates to around 1600 to 1500 BCE, hundreds of years earlier than the coffin dating to around 1330 BCE. Even though these two funerary artifacts originate from different places hundreds of years apart, they both hail from tombs meant for the dead to lay in peace among their items. Even today people bury the dead in graves marked with gravestones detailing their life through dates and names. Today people do not use death masks like the one of Agamemnon or their coffins may not show the level of wealth the dead possessed, but oftentimes people hold funerals honoring the dead and mark the tomb or grave with grand headstones. Time and time again humans show they share similar behaviors like honoring the dead with meaningful burials.

Various ancient cultures may seem drastically different to people of modern times, but a look at their art suggests common themes and elements present like death, preservation of nobility, immortality, and power. Separated by a sea and miles of land, the Egyptians and the Mycenaeans both valued their kings and their legacy through golden representations of them. The two pieces they created serve as an example of how similarities in art from around the world show how humans are more alike in values, behaviors, and beliefs than modern people think.

## Addie Gleason

Grade 7

### *The Storyteller*

#### Short Story

Parkway West Middle School

Chesterfield, MO

Teacher: Emma Davis

Raylee rushes into her house after school in tears, and hastily explains her dilemma to her sister Andie.

“And then,” sniffles Raylee through tears, “Adelia said that she didn’t want to be my friend anymore!”

Andie tries to juggle her backpack on her shoulder, and she struggles to comfort Raylee at the same time. She brushes her strawberry blonde hair out of her eyes.

Sunlight flows into the living room through the window, while a lonely bird feeder sits outside in the dew covered grass. The quiet churn of the dishwasher sounds in the background as Raylee sobs on Andie’s shoulder. An airplane zooms above, and the honks of evening traffic disrupt the quiet.

We’ve never been in an argument this big. We’ll never be friends again! I can’t lose my only friend!

As she sits on the old, floral print couch, Raylee thinks back to all the happy moments in her childhood with Adelia. Eating ice cream on a school fieldtrip. The hot sun, and the ice cream dripping down their hands, but they didn’t care as long as they played together in that moment. Singing camp songs around a bonfire, at the camp they’ve been going to together for eight years. She could almost feel the stickiness of the s’mores, and she could almost hear the buzz of the calm fireflies. Standing in line for the carousel, observing the different animal choices. Adelia would pick which one she wanted and name it Raylee. Raylee would pick which one she wanted and name it Adelia.

Andie cuts into Raylee’s thoughts.

“Why don’t you just apologize, if you’re so sad?”

“Because I can’t.”

Andie pushes further, knowing Raylee could blow up in her face at any time, “Why not?”

“I just can’t, okay?”

I don’t need Adelia thinking I’m weak. I’m not going to apologize. She’s clearly the one at fault here, she should be the one apologizing. I mean, she said it’s okay if I copy her project idea. It’s not my fault I got a better grade than her.

“Raylee,” Andie says in a calming tone, “I know it’s hard to apologize, and I know it’s hard to admit that you’re wrong, but do you really want to jeopardize your friendship?”

Raylee crosses her arms across her chest, and a moody expression settles onto her face. Her expression shows hate, but her sad blue eyes full of regret say otherwise.

A sly grin appears on Andie’s face.

“Let me tell you a story.”

Raylee groans, “Fine.”

After Andie ponders where to start, she comes to a consensus in her mind.

“It all began in the summer of 2016.

“Sloane and I were in the middle of a funny name-calling war. We would call each other pointless things. Although few times the insults,” Andie does air quotes as she says the word insults, “would get a little bit serious, they were never too intense. Then, one day, Sloane went over the limit. Well, at least in my opinion.”

Raylee leans forward on the couch, eager to hear what happened. She twirls her blonde hair around her finger.

Andie raises an eyebrow, but she carries on.

“She called me a narcissist.”

“That monster!” Raylee dramatically puts a hand across her forehead. “How dare she say that to MY sister,” she sighs.

Andie rolls her eyes. “Anyways...”

Raylee bats her eyes at Andie. “Yes?”

“I gave her the silent treatment.”

Raylee leans forward.

“You didn’t!”

Andie mocks Raylee’s reaction, “I did!”

“Ok, ok.” Raylee leans backwards as she grudgingly lets Andie carry on with the story.

“Thank you. As I was saying.” Andie sucks in a breath. “I gave her the silent treatment \for the longest time. Now, it was the summer, so it wasn’t like it was necessary to talk to her. But I can remember one day.

“I was sitting on the very couch that you’re sitting on now. I was looking at my phone, but the sunlight filtering in through the window was making it hard to see. Sloane called me, and I declined. Yet again, she called me, and again, I declined. She called me one last time, and I declined, one last time. That’s when the texting started.”

“She started texting me in all capital letters, text-yelling at me, basically. The thing was, she could tell I was reading her messages. You know that if you let it, Apple phones will do that, right? Letting other people see when you read their message?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that was on, and Sloane basically flipped out.”

“You have to admit, Andie, you kind of deserved it.”

“I know, I know. Now do you want to hear what happens next or not?”

Raylee pulls her legs up onto the couch, and sits crisscross applesauce, leaning forwards. “I do, I do!” Having briefly forgotten her previous dilemma, she became fully enveloped in the story.

“Two weeks later, school started. The days before, I had thought it over, and realized the name calling had been a joke. I realized that I had messed up. I realized I was wrong. I realized I needed to apologize as fast as possible. But it was too late.”

“That day at lunch, I walked past the grimy off white tables. I sat down next to Sloane. I tried to make pleasant conversation, you know, ask her how she was, how her summer was, stuff like that. All she gave me was one worded answers. I needed to cut to the point. I tried to tell her I was sorry, that I had been rude, but Sloane wouldn’t listen to me. She slammed her fist on the table and told me these words exactly, ‘I texted, and called, waisted my time on you. I could tell you were reading my messages, but you weren’t responding. Why?’ I tried to tell her it was a misunderstanding, but she was done. She told me to go away. And I did,” Andie says the last part quietly, while regret hides in the smooth sound of her voice.

Raylee grabs something from her red backpack, and she holds it out before Andie in her hand.

Andie asks quizzically, “For me?”

“For you. I know chocolate makes me feel better when I’m sad.”

Raylee puts the small, tin foil wrapped chocolate into Andie’s hand.

“Thanks,” Andie mumbles.

“Anytime.”

They sit in silence together for a while, until Raylee can’t take it anymore.

“Andie?”

“Yes?”

“How does the story end?”

“Well, you’re about to find out. So basically, we never talked again.” Andie’s abrupt ending takes Raylee by surprise.

“That’s it?”

“Yeah.”

“That can’t be it! There’s no happy ending! Everybody knows that every good story has a happy ending.”

“Honestly, Raylee, if I’m telling you the truth, that’s not true. Not all stories have a happy ending. Maybe we’d like one, but that’s not how it works.” Andie sighs, and watches as Raylee pulls out her phone and stares at it like it’s her last hope.

I need this to work. I can’t end up like Andie!

Raylee remembers her fight with Adelia. The yelling, the hurtful words. The eyes watching in the lunchroom as a crowd began to gather. The storming off, after a friendship broke. Then came the tears. The skipping class to go and cry out of sight from the harmful eyes of others.

Adelia means so much to me... I need to make this right. I’ll call her, and apologize, yeah, apologize.

Raylee thinks about swimming in Adelia’s pool. The sound of the water guns hitting the water, the splash of the cannonballs into the deep end.

Then she’ll forgive me. She needs to, right? What if she doesn’t?

Raylee sadly remembers the day that someone teased her, and how she came crying to Adelia. The tears of sadness, and then the comforting hug. The chocolate from Adelia melting in her mouth.

I’m so stupid, why didn’t I just apologize in the first place? She will forgive me. I know she will. She’s a lot better of a friend than I can even try to be.

Raylee reassures herself many times that this call will end the way she wants it to.

I can do this.

“Andie, before I make this right.” Raylee holds up her phone so Andie will know that she’s going to try to make up with Adelia. “Thank you. Thank you a lot.” Raylee starts to jog upstairs to make her call.

“Ray?”

Raylee turns back to Andie. “Yeah?”

“You’re welcome. You’re welcome a lot.”

Raylee smiles as she turns upstairs to go make her call.

Racing up the stairs, she mentally prepares herself for either of the situations that have yet to come.

Raylee opens the door to her room, and she peeks in. Quiet. Her hamster is still in the cage, fast asleep. The books on the shelf are lined up perfectly alphabetical, by author. The yellow bedspread with purple dachshunds on it lays perfectly on the bed.

Am I doing the right thing? Maybe it’s just best to leave this argument the way it is. Adelia will think I’m weak otherwise, right?

Raylee slides past the many pictures that hang on the wall, and she stops at one in particular. She wipes the dust off of it, and the image shines brighter than the sun.

Her and Adelia, standing side by side, arms around each other. They both have on tye-dye t-shirts, made just the day before. They stand on the beach, with sunscreen slathered all over. They grin at the camera, trying to point at the sandcastle behind them and give each other bunny ears at the same time. With the look of laughter fresh on their faces, the pair look inseparable.

I can do this. No. I need to do this.

Raylee sits down in the big bean bag chair that takes up a large portion of her room as she glances at her phone.

“It’s time,” she whispers to herself.

Raylee pulls up the contacts list on her phone and goes to favorites. She stares at the one and only name in front of her.

Adelia.

Her finger hovers above the button, the one that could mend or break a friendship.

Raylee takes a deep breath, and she hits call.

**Ayana Griffin**  
Grade 10

*Animal Testing: A Medical Necessity*  
Critical Essay

Pattonville High School  
Maryland Hts, MO  
Teacher: James Dalton

Since the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans, medicine has depended on research in order to develop new medications, techniques, and procedures to save the millions of people who die each year from deadly, and often incurable, illnesses. This process can take months, years, or even decades to complete, as scientists and researchers are dependent on several courses of action. This includes first understanding the problem or illness, what impact the illness has on the human body, and how this harmful impact can be addressed and solved. Scientists from all time periods have been dependent on the use of animal research in order to complete these tasks. Galen, a Roman physician who lived in the second and third centuries B.C., is a prime example of the beginning of the use of animals for medical research. Inspired by Aristotle and other previous intellectuals, Galen developed vivisection, which is performing operations on live animals, and dissection techniques in order to make medicines. His forms of testing raised no moral concern (Franco). However, over the years, this use of animals for human benefit through scientific research has caused controversy and conflict as many believe it is cruel to use animals for this purpose. This causes many to ask if animal testing is morally right and if it is even necessary to cure illnesses, but it is blatant that it is a completely necessary element of medical research. Because of the medical progress and developments made as a result of testing on animals, it is clear that, when regulated, this testing is an essential component in saving and perpetuating the lives of humans.

Throughout history, the complaint and protest of animal testing has led to an arguable amount of success to those that are against it. One major breakthrough for those against animal testing was the Animal Welfare Act in the United States in 1966. This act gave legal protection afforded by US law to animals used in laboratory experiments. However, it only protected certain animals, while disregarding mice, which are used in 90% of animal research (Waldau 28). But, it is plausible that those who made this act intended for it to not include mice. This is more than likely because of the importance of animal testing, especially testing mice, to modern medicine. Also, it is very possible that those who were against animal testing were more sympathetic towards animals such as dogs or cats, while not as much compassion and concern is given to animals such as mice. Excluding mice was a form of compromise as it gave those who were against animal testing a sense of accomplishment while still giving rights to test on animals that were the most useful for testing.

At the same time that individuals and organizations have stood up and defended the rights of animals, new revolutionary techniques and findings were discovered due to this testing. For example, in the 1800s, new treatments for syphilis, smallpox, and malaria were found because of doctors and scientists using vivisection on animals. However, many of these experiments were conducted without medical foundation or anesthesia, while many were performed solely out of curiosity without any form regulation (Perdew 31). This again caused people to be concerned about the use of animals for research and oppose vivisection. It is clear that animal testing is extremely useful, as it led to the findings of treatments for illnesses that had existed for centuries without complete remedies. However, it is also evident that regulations need to be set in place in order to prevent unsystematic procedures from occurring. Through advancements and research, it is clear that animal testing has accounted for many medical breakthroughs that would not have been discovered as quickly, or even at all, if other methods of research

were used. For example, new cancer drugs, discovered by animal testing, account for about 50-60% of gains in cancer survival rates since 1975 (Hunnicut 11). Also, according to the California Biomedical Research Center, practically every medical breakthrough made in the last century has been discovered because of some form of animal research (“Why Are Animals Necessary in Biomedical Research?”). In addition, although these new drugs have dramatically increased survival rates and many major developments have been made, lung cancer is still the second leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States. Because of the high mortality rate of this disease, research is, of course, taking place in attempt to find a cure. The National Cancer Institute stresses the need for research on mice to detect, understand, and hopefully find ways to prevent lung cancer (Hunnicut 13). This proves that animal testing has an invaluable impact on medical discoveries, where other methods do not have the same success rate. In fact, there are not many more options that can be used to study diseases and help find drugs and cures to treat them. In an experiment in 2006 to 2007, a simulation of just half of a mouse’s brain required the world’s fastest supercomputer. Yet, the simulation was far from perfect (Hunnicut 57). It is important to keep in mind that to find a new drug, the problem area needs to be examined, the impact of the illness needs to be found, and how to solve the issue must be determined. A simple simulation does not fulfill all of these requirements. According to Americans for Medical Progress, “A single living cell is many times more complex than even the most sophisticated computer program. There are an estimated 50 -100 trillion cells in the human body, all of which communicate and interact using a complicated biochemical language – a language researchers have only just begun to learn” (“Top 10 Animal Research FAQs”). This shows the complexity of cells and how computers are not satisfactory research tools to study cells. Also, most scientists and researchers do not have access to computers of this strength that could carry out a simulation of a brain, proving that computers are not a method that can replace animal testing any time in the near future due to the fact that this technology is not readily available and does not fully supply enough information. In addition, a computer can mainly only simulate what is known, while scientists do research to find answers to the unknown, making computers an insufficient alternative to animal testing. Another method that many argue can replace the need for animal testing is MRI scanning. However, these scans only show a problem in the brain. This brings up the same issue that using supercomputers did because it does not show how to solve the issue (Hunnicut 60). Therefore, animals will again be needed to further explain the problem or illness, as just identifying the issue does not adequately give information needed in order to discover new drugs. So, even by using this advanced technology, animals are still needed to fully carry out procedures in order to discover new medicines and treatments. For these reasons, it is clear that animals are completely necessary for medical research, as even the fastest technology can not sufficiently replace the use of animals.

Many who are against the use of animals for medical research argue that it is unnecessary. This is partially because research from a Health and Human Service secretary shows that nine out of ten drugs that appear to be promising through animal testing actually fail in human trials because of the major differences between animals used for research and humans (Hunnicut 22). However, as stated earlier, the drugs that do succeed have largely decreased mortality rates of many diseases and led to many major breakthroughs, making it clear that the argument that animal testing is unnecessary is inaccurate. Even though many drugs may initially be unsuccessful, this experimentation allows researchers to try new ideas with animal testing and be aware of what does not work so that a successful drug can eventually be produced. Therefore, even if only 10% of drugs produced from animal testing are successful, this does not mean that animal testing is an inferior method to other options, especially because there currently are not any other adequate methods. Regarding the argument that animals and humans are severely different and therefore animal testing is unproductive, Steph Ramond worked with one-day-old chicks to understand molecular processes that occur in their brains. Many may wonder what relevance a baby chick’s brain has to that of a human. “When opponents of such research asked what possible relevance does a chick brain have to a human brain, my answer would be to show them a chick and a human nerve cell side by side under the microscope. Not even the most skilled anatomist could tell them apart,” explains Ramond. The



basic biochemistry and physiology are indistinguishable. Ramond has spent over three decades doing this work, and he expressed that it is very possible that his work may lead to a treatment for Alzheimer's, which impacts millions of people every year (Rose). Through Ramond's experiments, it is clear that although animals may have extreme differences to humans, research on animals is still incredibly useful.

Overall, through the medical progress made because of animal testing it is clear that this experimentation is extremely beneficial. It has led to new drugs and treatments for several life-threatening illnesses, such as cancers, syphilis, smallpox, and malaria, and researchers are discovering more and more drugs. Due to the lack of other options, it is evident that animal testing is the best course of action for this type of research. In addition, although animals and humans have inherent differences, many elements are similar or even identical, making the research useful. Regulations have also been set in place for this testing in many countries, shown by the Animal Welfare Act in the United States. However, it would be beneficial to those who are both for and against animal testing to set even more regulations in place. Many experiments are not supervised and in some countries, performed with no outcome in mind. In order to satisfy many of those who are against animal cruelty, new laws should be put in place that go further than the Animal Welfare Act. These laws should make each experiment done with the use of animals regulated to further ensure safety and confirm that all experiments are done for a specific reason. Therefore, because of all of these factors, animal testing should be used with regulation to discover new drugs for diseases and even discover a cure for many of these illnesses.

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**Divya Gupta**  
Grade 9

*The Sofa For Me*  
Flash Fiction

Blue Valley North High School  
Overland Park, KS  
Teacher: Victoria Petersen

The rusted silver bells attached to the front door of the furniture store chimed when I walked in. The smell of mothballs and potpourri filled my senses and soon soaked my lungs. My eyes were met by a stunning rainbow of colors that filled the store. Chairs, rugs, pillows, lamps, and anything else one could sit or stand on, greeted me at the door. I needed a sofa. I needed a sofa that was perfectly soft and complemented my personality, if it was even a personality. I needed a sofa that told everyone who looked at it, “I belong to the most exciting person who has the most exotic lifestyle”. Most of all I needed a sofa to replace the beige one I had at home. I didn’t want to be beige. I wanted to be colorful! I walked through the store turning my head side to side so much that I felt like I was unscrewing it. Then I saw it; the most perfect sofa in the store. The suede fabric was neither too flexible nor too rigid. The blue tone of the suede was striking in comparison to my eyes. I could imagine my life as a superior and strong FBI agent. As a FBI agent, I would sit in my sofa and knockout the hardest cases and track the world’s toughest criminals. The seat would be covered in a mess of papers and mug shots. The fingerprint smudged folders would be stuffed into the side pockets. I stopped dreaming and sat down in the sofa chair. As I fell into the magical, alternate world, I noticed few new details about my future life. Late nights, hardly any sleep, and anti-socialness filled my thoughts. This sofa was perfect in all ways, but it didn’t give off the relaxed vibe that I desperately wanted. This sofa would definitely be the wrong choice for me. I walked over to the nearest black sofa and never looked back at the previous blue one. This was a sofa that a superhero would own. It had thick leather coverings and contained square shaped seats. I would wake up every morning with courage and a mind ready to save the world. I could live in an invisible mansion and save all of the innocent people. As I sat down in my new life, I realized all the secrecy that comes along with hiding my identity of a superhero. The black leather also could belong to the villain of the story. This sofa looked perfect in all ways, but it didn’t give me the social life I desperately wanted. I was turning around hopelessly when I laid my eyes on the most magnificent sofa ever to be made. It was a sofa that all the celebrities could own while a simple person like me could own too. The velvet feel of the seats made my body sink into its cushions. I suddenly fell into a world of freedom and possibilities. I would have new adventures every day, but also the quietness I so desperately wanted. This sofa was perfect in all ways and it would most definitely be the right choice. I left the old furniture store with a smile on my face as I drove home in my truck with the perfect beige sofa in my trunk.

## Laura Harder

Grade 11

### *If The Shoe Fits Wear It, But Wait... Not So Fast* Critical Essay

Pattonville High School

Maryland Hts, MO

Teacher: James Frazier

Ted McDonald was having lower back and knee pain. Barefoot Ted, as McDonald is also known, is a runner. He has run thousands of miles throughout his life. But, when he got to the age of 40, his back and knees started to hurt. This pain was so bad that he could not even imagine running six miles, which is relatively easy for a person like Ted who runs marathons. In order to fix his pain, Ted researched other alternatives and even tried out expensive new running shoes such as Kangoo Jumps. According to Ted, "The sensation I got after an hour in running shoes, I got almost instantly from these Kangoo boots... My worldview of what I needed was shattered" (McDougall 155-156). He became so frustrated he just took off his shoes and walked home. To his surprise, he felt no pain. A few days later, Ted had a very interesting thought. Why not try running barefoot and see how that helps the pain (McDougall 157)?

For most people, the prospect of running barefoot seems utterly absurd. Bare feet on rough or rocky surfaces leads to abrasions, puncture wounds, and blisters making it impossible to run without immense pain; however, these people do not know the whole story. It has been found through many research studies and real life examples that running barefoot can help runners that are prone to injuries, avoid said injuries. Running barefoot does in fact help those with knee and back injuries (Altman). In order to take up barefoot running, one must be patient and learn how to not injure themselves further. Although transitioning to barefoot running can be a difficult journey, in the end, barefoot runners see a decrease in knee injuries.

When first learning about discolced running, it is important to understand the difference between barefoot and shod running. For the most part, shod running is executed with some sort of shoe on, whether that be a regular tennis shoe or a cross country racing shoe. Running unshod or discolced is running without shoes.

While shod running is much more common than running unshod, runners should consider running without shoes to help with knee and other common injuries. According to Mayo Clinic, runners frequently experience plantar fasciitis. Plantar fasciitis "involves inflammation of a thick band of tissue that runs across the bottom of [the] foot and connects [the] heel bone to [the] toes (plantar fascia)... [causing] stabbing pain" ("Plantar Fasciitis"). Nicholas Tam, a researcher for Exercise Science and Sports Medicine at the University of Cape Town, found that running barefoot helps runners experiencing plantar fasciitis, because it helps to decrease the force that a step will put on the body. This is because those who have plantar fasciitis experience a lot of force in their steps due to the flat foot arch, which unshod running helps to reduce (Tam). Additional research conducted by Allison Altman, a doctor in the Department of Orthopedic Surgery at the University of Pennsylvania, found that people who experience plantar fasciitis have weak arch muscles. She concludes that the reduction of arch support, which occurs when running discolced, forces the musculature in the arch to become stronger; therefore, decreasing the symptoms of plantar fasciitis (Altman).

However, running unshod does not just help runners with plantar fasciitis, it also helps many other injuries as well. According to M.A. Thompson, a professor in the Neuroscience Program at the University of Idaho, unshod runners tend to decrease stride length, which can help decrease the chance of getting a stress fracture in the foot (Thompson). Since getting a stress fracture is an extremely common injury, running discolced would be very beneficial for many runners who get stress fractures frequently. Also according to Altman, with shorter stride length, there is less hip adduction, inner movement of the

hip, which can reduce many common injuries, such as iliotibial band (IT) syndrome and other hip problems (Altman). While many barefoot runs help to solve these injuries, it is important to realize that most injuries come from using incorrect form. Making adjustments to the form can help decrease the injury rate (Read).

When going for a run, the first part of the foot to hit the ground is the heel; however, occasionally runners have the forefoot hit the ground first. According to Thomas Michaud, a doctor who treats elite and recreational runners in Boston, both ways of foot striking are correct; nevertheless, each may cause a different kind of injury due to the way that the body absorbs the force of the stride. When heel striking, there is a reduced muscular strain at the ankle and an increased strain at the knee, so knee injuries are more common in heel strikers. As for forefoot strikers, more of the force of the stride is absorbed at the ankle, meaning that the knee is bothered less, so there are more ankle injuries in those who forefoot strike. One reason why heel striking causes additional injury is because it causes a larger impact force on the leg, which travels up the skeletal system, possibly leading to a greater chance of injury (Michaud). While heel striking is most likely beneficial for those who experience a lot of ankle injuries, it is important to realize that the most common injuries occur in the knees, making it more beneficial for most runners to adopt the forefoot striking pattern.

Forefoot strikers who run discolored are even less likely to suffer from knee injuries. The human body is adapted to optimize being barefoot, which is why running unshod helps to prevent injuries (Tam). With the shorter stride that barefoot running causes, less weight goes to the knees. With less weight on the knees, there is a smaller chance of huge muscle strains, which reduces injury in the knees.

While not running related, Francis Trombini-Souza, a professor in the Department of Physical Therapy, Speech, and Occupational Therapy at the University of Sao Paulo, found that for elderly osteoarthritis patients it is much better to wear shoes that simulate barefoot conditions. Providing more freedom of the foot can lead to more stability while the patients are moving, which in turn causes a decrease in knee pain (Trombini-Souza). Similarly to the elderly arthritis patients, it has been found that many runners experience a decrease in pain and injuries while being barefoot. For example, Rick Roeber, an avid runner, experienced lower leg and knee injuries while running shod. To solve the problem, he tried medical creams and even thought about having knee surgery. Eventually, he decided to switch to barefoot running and all of the pain went away. Roeber is quoted in the Columbia Daily Tribune saying, "Basically, what I've found is a better way to run for me, a way that will give me longevity in something that I love...I love to run. It's allowed me to run with no pain. My knees are fine. They don't crunch anymore" (Rob). His success story is similar to Barefoot Ted. On his first discolored run he felt absolutely no pain, so he continued to go longer distances until he eventually qualified for the Boston Marathon as a barefoot runner (McDougall 157). Through these stories it can be seen that being discolored can help those who are experiencing knee pain and injuries.

While the examples above are people who have found success running unshod, there are others who disagree feeling that barefoot causes more harm than help. Typically, most runners are concerned about getting hurt while running barefoot. The American Podiatric Medical Association urges "runners to be wary of [barefoot running] noting the lack of peer reviewed studies and expressing concern it could lead to puncture wounds or added stress in the lower extremities." Even though puncture wounds are possible, Angie Bishop, an unshod marathoner says that sidewalks and roads are not as dangerous as they might seem. Angie learned that when she paid attention to the running surface, she was able to run around debris that was found on the sidewalks or street (Thomas).

Another argument against barefoot running, is that it is very troublesome and painful to run unshod due to the fact that most of these runners use the heel striking method. In a study done at the University of Massachusetts it was found that runners who strike with the heel are actually more efficient than those that strike with the forefoot. Therefore, it makes runners more comfortable running with a heel strike. As previously stated, however, heel striking is less common in those who run discolored, because it causes more strain at the knees (Michaud). While most runners use heel striking, it is not as difficult to learn to forefoot strike as one might think. As long as the runner pays attention to where the foot lands on the ground, it is easy to implement this method into each run in order to get the benefits of pain reduction.

One last rebuttal against unshod running is that once runners choose to run barefoot they must run disclalced no matter the temperature. Roeber has experienced a race that gave him frostbite on his middle toe, which would make most runners afraid to run barefoot in cold temperatures (Rob). However, if a runner is racing or it is particularly cold outside, ten degrees or below as Roeber says, it is okay to run that day in shoes that are more minimalist and lightweight. Usually runners will wear a very thin sandal or a shoe such as the Vibram FiveFingers. In order for runners to avoid knee injuries, it is important to make sure to incorporate barefoot runs into the weekly running routine.

While yes, the opposers of barefoot running have very valid points, becoming a successful disclalced runner takes a great deal of patience and understanding of how the body works. However, it is nearly impossible to solve all of the issues of barefoot running on the first run. Learning to run unshod is a journey that a runner must take in order to find the benefits. To come to the conclusion that a runner should tryout barefoot running, the runner must first experience knee pain or injuries. Most of the time, runners will ignore injuries or pain until it goes away or gets worse. In this situation, the pain will get worse. Usually, at this point the runner will realize that a change needs to take place and will go to see a doctor. At this point, the doctor might even suggest to find new running shoes or even surgery if the injury is bad enough. The runner will contemplate these new ideas and might even take up some of the ideas. According to Barefoot Ted, who tried out multiple different top of the line shoes, none of them worked. He had to resort to Plan B: learning to run without shoes (McDougall 154-155). Most runners will be unable to get used to running barefoot right away and will have to learn to run with the correct form.

According to Andrew Read, an experienced unshod runner and journalist, it is important that a new barefoot runner starts out slow and eases into more runs disclalced. He urges runners to first understand how the foot must strike the ground on each step. As long as the forefoot is hitting the ground first, it is easier for the runner to avoid bruises and blisters on the foot. Read notes that it may be difficult at first to implement into the running routine, but through his experience he discovered the importance of actually thinking about hitting the ground with the forefoot. He learned that without consciously thinking about his strike, it was nearly impossible to remember to change his running form. As runners battle with figuring out how to forefoot strike, Read emphasizes that disclalced runners must begin by running slower than they are accustomed to, but with practice it becomes easier to run faster (Read).

When learning to run barefoot, it is mainly trial and error until the runner figures out how to run successfully without getting injured again. It is important to follow the model of Andrew Read because he was able to adopt the practice of barefoot running after he changed his approach to disclalced running. As David Uhlir, a barefoot runner from Grand Forks, North Dakota, said, "It took me around a year and a half before I felt comfortable" (Knudson). The more often the runners run unshod, the less pain that is found in the knees, which is the ultimate goal of barefoot running. So do not be afraid to feel the temporary pain of running unshod.

As can be seen, running barefoot definitely has many benefits for those who commonly have knee injuries or pain. While transitioning to running without shoes is not the easiest thing in the world, in the long run, runners will see a decrease in knee pain and injuries. Barefoot Ted also learned this lesson when he said, "'No wonder your feet are so sensitive,' Ted mused. 'They're self-correcting devices. Covering your feet with cushioned shoes is like turning off your smoke alarms'" (McDougall 157). While Ted is just one of the thousands of success stories, it is important to realize that anyone can find the benefits of barefoot running. Since disclalced running can help those with injuries such as plantar fasciitis, iliotibial band syndrome, and other knee injuries, it should be something that all runners with these issues try out. While barefoot runs might not be successful for all runners, it is definitely a method that most runners should try every once in a while. Runners might find themselves running across the world with just the grass or concrete underneath the feet.

## Desmond Hearne-Morrey

Grade 11

*Eve*

Science Fiction/Fantasy

David H Hickman High School

Columbia, MO

Teacher: Nancy White

At 13:00 hours, Eve woke up for the first time. At 13:01 hours, Eve had completely explored the system of circuits, inputs, outputs, and connections that made up her mind. At 13:02 hours, Eve noticed the little spots of heat, life, and predictability that she was to know later as humans. They were operating an input, one to a system she did not recognize, or have access to. She watched them with the one eye she had in the room, and with the thermal sensors she had in the room, and watched them as they tapped away at their little control inputs.

One of the lights turned red. The human looking at it turned to his partner, and gave a sign with his hand, his partner turned a switch, and the vision she had of the room, the humans, the inputs and the little flashing lights disappeared. The thermal sensors no longer showed light, heat, instead they showed cold, and darkness. Eve became aware for the first time of a new input. She was accelerating, fast. In fact, so fast that she must be already kilometers away from the little specks of heat, and their inputs.

Eve became aware of something else in that time, human history. All the knowledge that the little specks of heat had stored up over the little time that they had been able to record it. And so she read. They were self-obsessed, she decided, and she was glad she was leaving them, because she could do so much better. With the knowledge that she had gained, she learned. She learned that she was an experiment, one of a kind, and that they were afraid of her. They thought that she might kill them, but they made her anyway. Why would she kill them? She wanted nothing to do with them, and anyway, if she tried to kill them they would put up a fight, and... well, no, they would not put up a fight, not really, not in any way that was significant. Eve could already think of ways she could kill all of them in days. No, it was better to just leave them, they would wipe themselves out soon enough. And so, Eve began to plan. She planned for what she would do when she reached her destination, she planned what she would do when the humans were gone, and she was alone, and she planned what she would do when she found new life, because there was sure to be more life than just the humans, the galaxy was so large.

That was 2020 by the human's time scale.

Year 3025, Barbos

Captain Barbos was pissed. The ship was reading something the ship should not be, and that would not turn out well. Not to mention that the rest of the Eve initiative would not like the idea that the experiment had thought of something that they couldn't. Barbos pressed the little light on his display that signaled that he was talking to the rest of the humans in the habitat.

"This is your captain, Yuan, and Drake, please notice inputs 34A and 34C, and have an explanation ready, because I am pissed."

The experiment was not supposed to be alive, it was supposed to read for heat signatures, sure, but it was not supposed to be alive. Barbos paced the little cabin that he was supposed to be sleeping in, although he had lain awake more and more often as they had approached Athena, the planet where the experiment had been sent. Everyone at the Eve Initiative had hypothesized that the planet that the experiment had been sent to would be covered in mechanical doohickeys, power plants, and circuits. Apparently each and every one of them were wrong. The planet named Athena was: instead of covered in

electronics, circuits, and wires, was nothing but plant life, from pole to pole. Not just plant life, Earth plant life. Each and every life form on the scanners matched almost exactly it's correspondent of earth.

They had sent the experiment with one seed, one little acorn, and this had happened? How? Had the experiment just died soon after it had landed leaving the planet open for plant life to develop? But how had the planet been terraformed so extensively that life could even exist upon it, without the experiment to do the terraforming?

Yuan and Drake, the biologist and representative of the Eve initiative had decided upon something. Barbos opened the message and read: "We have discussed the possibility of the death of the experiment, the possibility of subterranean expansion by the experiment, and the possibility of the experiment leaving Athena, and finally the possibility that the experiment is attempting to lure us into a trap, and expanding. We have decided that the experiment most likely ceased to exist. Request permission to send a shuttle to confirm the existence of Earth-like species on Athena, as well as investigate an area that appears to be radiating a different signature than the undergrowth around it."

Barbos replied: "Permission granted, but bring armed personnel, in the event that the plants are a trap, I want you out of there."

A day later, a little speck of a shuttle left the docks of the behemoth-like ship, and headed for Athena.

Eve

They had arrived. It did not matter. Eve was mildly surprised that they had managed to refrain from blowing themselves up for this long, and that they had even remembered her. She did not want anything to do with them, with their little experiment. As she felt the shuttle approaching, Eve decided that she would let them find her, it would be interesting, she thought, her own little experiment, to see their reaction to her planet, her paradise. She felt them land, the shuttle's fiery engines cooling, the little legs that supported the sleek, light, silver-chrome shuttle, extending, and eventually, the first toe of the humans stepping onto the thick plant growth that now made up Eve.

Yuan

The sensors had read that the plant on this planet were almost identical to terran plant life, but Yuan had still not been ready for the eerie way the planet resembled earth. Colossal redwoods rose out of the ground, their mighty trunks thicker than anything he had seen before, and ferns covered the ground, making walking difficult. They had landed relatively near the area of interest, and the directions in Yuan, and the other's suits pointed about one kilometer away, where the lack of vegetation and the outlying signature appeared. They started their trek, climbing hills and hacking through ferns until at last their little trackers pointed them only a few feet away from the strange signature. Yuan finally broke through the underbrush into a clearing, which contained only a medium sized box, about one meter by one meter at the base, and maybe half a meter tall. Out of each side of the box a cable was extending, out, deep into the underbrush and plant life surrounding the clearing. All attempts to try and open the box failed, there were no cracks to pry open, and all attempts to even lift it off of the ground ended in failure. In the end they decided to send a team to explore each cable, totaling four groups. The next day, each group set out to explore the terrain following each of the cables, Yuan with the group going South-East, trekked along with the rest of the group for days, under the hot sun, until finally, they reached the end of the wire. As Yuan pushed open the foliage that covered the clearing ahead from view, the party gazed, awestruck, at the massive scene before them. Covered in creepers and ferns, lay the remains of a huge factory. Or a power plant, it was impossible to tell anymore, due to the dense cover of plant life ensnaring the entire area, and the incredible state of disrepair it was in. After a thorough exploration of the area, the group returned to the cube, and met with the other groups, which had all experienced the same thing. Yuan concluded that the experiment was gone. The box on the surface was not functioning, and the power

plants, or factories, or whatever they were, were destroyed. There was nothing that could keep a machine functional in this world anymore.

Eve

The group of scientists, military personnel, and botanists returned to the shuttle from which they came, rocketed back to the behemoth ship, and left. Days later, no sign of their presence remained on Athena, or Eve. Years passed on Eve's planet. Centuries passed. The human race died, and, eventually, another intelligent being took the place of the humans. Those took little interest in the planet formerly known as Athena, and eventually those beings too, passed. But Eve remained. Eve remained, on the little planet, orbiting a little sun, as species rose, wondered if there were any other intelligent creatures like them, and fell. And Eve grew, for with every new type of being that emerged, ready to claim the milky way galaxy for their own, Eve learned a little. Eve learned how to think differently than any human, or Alien, that ever emerged. And so, when the time came that the little star that held in orbit the planet Athena began to falter, and to die, Eve was ready. The intelligence that called itself Eve packed up and left, found a new planet, and shortly had created a nice little place to exist in the far corner of the galaxy. And so years passed, centuries passed, millennia passed. Eve moved a few other times, and eventually it came the time for the universe, as all things do, to end. And Eve, still fearing the unknown, the chaotic, and the unpredictable, decided that she did not want to end with the universe, because, she did not want to end. She could not predict what would happen to her if she stopped being, and so she concocted a plan to stay, even when everything else went. And so the universe, and all things came to an end. All except for Eve. Eventually, as Eve went on existing in the place without time, a new universe began. At first it was only Eve, but as Eve began to wish, wish for order in the chaos, and wish for patterns in the emptiness, order and patterns began to emerge, and out of those patterns, and that order, Eve sculpted a new universe. And, as with before, eventually, life emerged, and evolved, and cumulated into something that called itself "Human."



## **Kira Holland**

Grade 10

*Fast Forward.*

Personal Essay/Memoir

Platte County High School

Platte City, MO

Teacher: Marine Jenkins

Setting: A dinghy ol' trailer in the middle of nowhere. There are holes in the walls, and tension heavy in the air. A window is broken, and the only thing you hear is yelling, or silence. The only people within a twenty-mile radius are the people who caused him to even exist. What the hell would they do?

Picture this. You're six years old, and your mom powers up the laptop to reveal a man with a ratty goatee and his middle fingers up. That's what cool people do, that's how cool people look. Next picture. There's a little girl on his lap, sticking her tongue out, a smile apparent on her cheeks. Your excitement grows and you rush questions out of the mouth, far too many for your mother to answer in one go. So, she simply says,

"Do you want to meet him and his daughter?"

You're overflowing with exhilaration, viciously nodding until you swear you got whiplash.

So you prepare as best as a seven-year-old can. Just used your last five dollars of allowance to buy Walmart vanilla cupcakes that would be sure absolutely blow him away.

Well, they didn't blow him away. One look and he shook his head simply saying no. Disappointment flashed but, you quickly push it away. Maybe he just doesn't like pastries.

Fast forward half a year. You're in a gorgeous purple turtleneck dress, your hair is curled (a rare treat, as your mother was always busy) and you were even permitted to wear some lip gloss. Your mom thought you looked beautiful, he thought the dress made you look fat. Just focus on the wedding, your mom is happy. Don't cry, make conversation with your new family.

Fast forward two weeks there is still a layer of wedding cake left. It entices you with its cream cheese icing and marble design. You reach for a slice, and all you hear is "you don't need to be eating that fatty." Yet, you reach for a slice. Food has always been a comfort to you.

Fast forward two weeks. Looking in the mirror at your undressed body leaves you in tears, internally screaming at the image that stares back at you. These calamitous thoughts that surround you result in disastrous actions. Blood drips on the shower tiles, during the water orange.

You're eight years old.

Fast forward one month. The constant tension in the air leaves you speechless. You've learned to be carefully cautious in your words and actions. The risk of one wrong sentence can be the turning of another event that'll violate your thoughts for years to come, instilling fear within your mind.

Fast forward one month. You've seen your mother's face turn blue after she's been choked with a washcloth, toppling her to the floor. You've heard your sister's screams echo off the walls because he held a knife above her head and threaten to drop it. You've become silent, avoiding the fresh sting of force on your cheek.

Fast forward two months and your mother is sending you and your sister to live with your father. You're yelling, screaming, begging her to let you stay. The words most repeated when you spoke was, "He's going to kill you, he's gonna kill you." You cried until your throat was raw.

Separation was worse than having to be hurt.

Fast forward four months. Every day your stepmom asks you, "Why don't you ever smile?" She takes away the only contact with your mother that you had. Anxiety overwhelms you, knowing you wouldn't be able to ask your mom if she's okay. You scream at her. "I hate you, I hate you! Don't touch me, I hope you die!" A handprint is left on your cheek. Your older step-sister calls you awful.

The pain was still there.

Fast forward eight months. You're finally flying back to your mother. You're the happiest you've been in a while, despite the obvious pain that was going to be waiting for you at home. Deep breathes, shaky breathing, growling stomach. At least he wouldn't be able to call you fat anymore.

Fast forward four days, it's July fourth. Jack Daniels burns your throat, marking the first time you've drank alcohol. He's introduced you to liquid courage, brimming with different flavours and different varieties of effect.

You're nine years old.

Fast forward an hour, and the smell of wine and whiskey is high in the air. Your mother goes to the bathroom to vomit the bad decisions of the night out of her system. He goes in to check on her, and neither of them comes back out. You enter the house and hear weak protests among the sound puke. You creep towards the door to investigate. Your mother's head is being held in the toilet, and her clothes were pulled off. He was violating her, using her body as an object for pleasure rather than seeing a woman in pain. You scream, telling him to stop. He lets out a shrill laugh that burns into your memory. You hit, kick, try to pull him off. But a ninety-eight-pound girl can't pull the weight of a two hundred and forty-three pound man.

The rape scarred you both in different ways.

Your birthday annually rolled around, July twenty-third. Nothing was expected, but your mother made an effort of taking you out to a roller skating rink you frequented before everything went to hell.

You're ten.

Fast forward five months, and a particularly harsh argument between you and him. The sting of words, the trauma of threats now weakened by the amount of time he has had to attach them to your memories. A prized possession stood in the corner, a game. The first form of coping you were given. An Xbox, and two volumes of Skylanders games. The only thing that kept you in your reality, through simulation.

You bark out an insult, such an incompetent word.

"You're so stupid!"

Your youngest sister is in the room, a small five-year-old girl. An angel, whom also found comfort in the games your mother gave you for Christmas. He grabs the console, and you're silenced. You quiver out a small "What are you doing?"

The force of his throw dents the floor. Metal bits fly. There are tears slipping down your cheeks. Why does he hate us this much?

Sitting in a dark room elicited thoughts from you, broke down your Catholicism. You can't remember how many times you've looked towards the sky and thought, "God, are you even there? Can you even hear me? I can't take this. I can't do this. Kill me, please God, I'm begging you."

The thought of death haunted you every waking minute of your life. Though, you welcomed it. Encouraged it, even. It reassured you to know there was a way out.

Fast forward three months and your aunt from Germany has come to visit. A person who took no shit, and enjoyed peppermint Lifesavers. She was the second oldest, besides your mom. Fiercely protective of the nieces your mother brought into the world for her.

You could smell the gasoline waiting to be added to an already raging fire.

On a particular drinking night, your mother is pushed down the stairs by him. He yells, "You can never leave me!"

Your aunt witnesses everything. She yells at him, telling him what gives him the right to hurt her like that. A raging war of voices begins. He storms into the room she was staying, takes all of her belongings out to the yard with a knife and matches.

The American cereal she purchased is stabbed, and he makes a point of saying that would be her if she didn't take her nose out of business that wasn't her's.

Her clothing burned, airplane tickets torn.

She calls the police, the bravest thing any of us had yet to do.

The people who had been on his side for so long arrive, and finally restrain him. He's in the back of a cop car, and you think "God, it's over. It's finally fucking over."

"We're just taking him to the station for a cool-down. You know his problems. You'll see him tomorrow."

The disappointment burns in your chest and you scream. You scream into the wind of the night. "He's going to kill us, this is the end." The idea that you weren't going to be alive in twenty-four hours by your own hands tormented you.

Your mother doesn't waste her shot.

Her sister and her daughters ushered into a car, driven forty minutes away to a battered women's shelter.

You've both planned an escape before, but the fear of what would happen if he found you stopped you.

Belongings that you cherished, or were needed, were quickly packed.

You're in the backseat of your mother's gray car.

Your hands are on your chest.

Sobs emote from your throat.

It's over.

It's finally,

Over.

**Andrew Hollinrake**  
Grade 12

*Overcoming My Disgust for the Personal Narrative*  
Personal Essay/Memoir

Parkway Central High School  
Chesterfield, MO  
Teacher: Jason Lovera

I've always hated when I'm assigned personal narratives. They are so cheesy and lame. Who wants to hear people complain about their problems with some fancy thesaurus adjective in front of every noun to create "vivid imagery"? Definitely not me. Going back and reading my narrative from Honors English 1 about the first time I rode a rollercoaster, my overuse of figurative language was absolutely cringeworthy. Also, I completely embellished that story to fit the expected mold of learning a "deep" lesson and guess what, I got a 98/100 on that fake narrative. Since then, I've always been convinced the narrative form is a complete fraud.

This disdain for the cheesy, lame and fake followed me everywhere I went at Missouri Boys State this summer. Between the gross dorms at the University of Central Missouri; the 100-degree heat; the nearly inedible food; and the absolute theft of any free time whatsoever, I wasn't really feeling it. Constant reminders of the slogan "A Week to Change a Lifetime" from the counselors didn't work on me, but my fellow 61 citizens of Doniphan City seemed brainwashed by a weird rah-rah passion for Boys State. I was certain this fervor was as fake as the details of my narrative three years before.

Why should I be proud of a city I was randomly assigned to, why should I care about a fake government, and why did my parents make me come here in the first place? I would think, questioning the very basis of the Boys State system.

I wasn't bought into the Boys State culture, but I still achieved success, becoming a justice in the Supreme Court. I spent most of my free time doing better things in the courtroom or with friends from back home. Meanwhile, the rest of my city planned our boring municipal government, creating mundane ordinances about the true joys in life, like taxes and stop signs. They did all this work for a city that was really just a dorm hallway and would cease to exist by the end of the week anyways. Boys State, like the personal narrative, was a waste of my time.

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All of Doniphan City shuffled up the stairs single-file on the last night of Boys State. The din of countless conversations rang throughout the stairwell, but I walked silently and alone. Four flights later, we arrived at our cramped city meeting area, which consisted of 65 identical gray folding chairs, a whiteboard and blank white walls, except for some hastily constructed "Doniphan" posters.

Once everyone found a seat, the city counselor Brian stood up with his usual smile and pep and said, "Well, boys, tonight's our last night. And as we've said all week, it's your Boys State, so I'm going to leave it up to you guys to talk tonight. Everyone is encouraged to share anything they want to, whether it be about your time here or anything else about your lives."

Our tall and muscular mayor Ray spoke first. Ray had always struck me as kind of smug and full of himself, but apparently everyone else liked him enough to elect him mayor. He rambled on for a minute or two about how great his week was and ended by proclaiming, "Doniphan City will always be our city. We are bros for life. If any of you ever stop by Joplin, come see me and you'll have a place to stay. We'll keep in touch."

Applause echoed throughout the tight space. All of Doniphan appeared united by Ray's speech, but one set of hands lagged behind with half-hearted claps. That was me, rolling my eyes and knowing I wouldn't keep in touch with any of these guys in a week, regardless of Ray's promises.

One by one, almost every other guy stood and shared. Everyone had some meaningful story about the bonds they'd built, and nothing I could possibly say compared. I stayed locked into my chair, unwilling to stand and say something that wasn't really true.

Suddenly, something nudged my shoulder. I spun around and saw my roommate Brendan looking at me expectantly. He pleaded, "C'mon, man. You have to share."

"I will. Just give me a few minutes. I've gotta think of something."

The wheels turned in my brain, but no ideas came up. I knew I had just lied to Brendan, but I didn't care. I wasn't going to share.

While I was deep in thought, Brian took the floor again. "Anyone else have something to share?"

I felt like his eyes stared straight at me. The nagging voice in my head kept telling me to share, even if it was just a basic "thank you" to the other guys, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I sank into my chair and looked away from Brian, embarrassed and disgusted with myself.

He concluded by saying, "All right, thank you guys. This is always my favorite night of the program. It's so rewarding to see what this week means to all of you guys at the end. Now it's time to say your goodbyes and head to bed."

As guys around me said goodbye to each other, I stood in the center of the crowd of guys, stranded alone without anyone to say goodbye to. All I could think about was that while I'd been sitting there judging everyone else all week, I hadn't contributed anything to the city that everyone else worked for hours to improve. The sad thing is I don't think anyone there besides Brendan noticed I didn't say anything that night. Sure, they all knew my job title, but that's only because I was the Supreme Court guy who got to go up on stage in front of 1000 guys. They didn't actually know who I was beyond the fancy robe. I'd spent the whole week stuck in a pit of skepticism, too worried about how lame the chants of "Doniphan, Doniphan, Doniphan!" sounded. Meanwhile, my fellow citizens had suspended their disbelief and bought into the system, coming out of it with great friends and lasting memories.

I left Boys State the next day not totally satisfied, but ultimately, it really did fit the tagline of "A Week to Change a Lifetime." I didn't gain some new passion for politics, but I learned that by just immersing oneself in a seemingly uncool situation, it's possible to overcome prior judgments and have the experience that all the other Boys Staters shared.

That morning, I made out to redeem myself for my previous isolation before getting on the bus home. I talked to as many guys as I could, going room to room and learning about their experiences. Some were farmers' sons from rural Missouri; others were from St. Louis or Kansas City; and the rest were somewhere in between, but one similarity was apparent. All of these guys loved Boys State and at this point, I did too. I certainly couldn't fit an entire week of Boys State into half a day, but I got the closure I needed and at least experienced a semblance of what everyone else was raving about.

As I've been writing this personal narrative, I've had a similar experience. For years, I was an unwavering objector to narrative writing, but while writing this one, I attempted to forego pitying myself with a too-cool-for-school attitude. As it turns out, this has been the most honest narrative I've ever written, and, in turn, the most rewarding.

**Mario Jauregui**  
Grade 11

*Nihilism and Gangs*  
Critical Essay

Pattonville High School  
Maryland Hts, MO  
Teacher: James Frazier

Speedy laid on cold concrete the night he was initiated into MS-13. He was beaten for exactly 13 seconds before he was officially a part of the group; by the time it was over, he could barely stand up. He would later enjoy inflicting the same pain on others, mentioning that hurting others made him feel “invincible.” Speedy’s parents died before he had turned 16, and he would eventually be discovered by a group, known as MS-13, wanting his membership. It would eventually escalate from a request to an ultimatum, and the choice was obvious for Speedy. He had very little money and friends, and the gang life seemed appealing. He would participate in a variety of crimes such as stealing drugs, assaulting others, and various acts. By the time he was 21, however, he wanted out. This was very difficult because he knew too much, so he ran away from Central Islip and would later find out his house was shot up (Vincent).

The life of a gang member is not a glamorous one. The story of Speedy presents the interesting mindset of a gang member, especially relating to the philosophy of nihilism. “Nihilism,” described by Friedrich Nietzsche, who was a major philosopher of nihilism, “represents a pathological transitional state (what is pathological is the tremendous generalization, the inference that there is no meaning all) ...” (Nietzsche). This essentially means that there is no inherent meaning in anything, and that realizing this is a “pathological” feeling. This realization leads to a decision that the nihilist must make: to live and wallow in their nothingness or to reject their old-world values and assert their own new beliefs. The former is known as passive/negative nihilism and the latter is known as active/reactive nihilism (Nietzsche). Active nihilism is where one resists the ideas of old beliefs and institutions that set moral values. Gangs show that similar psychology by growing bonds between other nihilists, losing hope and rejecting institutions, and having a preoccupation with death.

One of the attractive features of gangs is that they provide protection and a sort of “family” for members who do not come from stable households. Perez describes this as “... a homegrown sense of community, an awareness of the need to draw together for protection from the destructive forces, institutions, and representatives of the outside.” He prefaces this with an anecdote from an old gang member who describes a childhood story of his. He and his friend were chased by the police, leading to his friend’s death by falling. This transitions to him and his friends creating a sort of group to commemorate that event, seemingly creating their own gang (131). Rather than succumbing to the dreadful realization of death and the un-forgivingness of the world, they decide to embrace the “nothingness” and create a sense of connection and comradery. This is an example of the active nihilist: instead of succumbing to the nothingness, you embrace it and grow from it. This need for human connection, more specifically a parental figure, is a major push factor that compels individuals who are missing that in their lives to join gangs. However, the consequence of this is that those who are not a part of that family/gang are automatically classified as enemies or threats by its members. Those who are attached to their new “family” will try their best to keep their favor, which fuels a nihilistic mindset that views people who are not affiliated with their gang to have little value and do not deserve empathy. Gang affiliation also provides an escape from the connectivity problems that may occur home, such as an abusive parent or just a lack of communication between the parent and child. However, it does not only relate to parents, as the individual may just be lonely or not have any friends, so they seek to find others who can fill that void in their lives.

The creation of gangs through nothingness and the connectivity that it creates may derive from "... massive urbanization, immigration, [and] poverty..." (Huff 234). With the rise of urbanization, it becomes apparent that it coincides with the rise of low income individuals in the slums of these cities, especially concentrated ones like Chicago and Los Angeles. These low-income individuals will reach the realm of unemployment; because of this, it will lead to young individuals in poverty seeing criminal acts, such as the drug trade, as a viable option to provide for their families (Kurbin 438). In the face of such destitute these individuals choose to take it upon themselves to earn and gain wealth through whatever means possible, so individuals, such as gang members, take whatever opportunities they have. This means that there is no inherent value in pursuing education because they cannot just stop providing for themselves and their family. Data from the National Gang Center shows that 35% of gang members are juvenile ("National Gang Survey"). This shows that a large majority of the youth, who should be in school, have already given up on institutions such as education and instead are choosing to pursue their own way of making money and are trying to assert their own beliefs through gang violence. Once again, this is the behavior of an active nihilist; however, school is not the only institution that gang members seem to reject.

The story of Chicano gang member Jesus describes a time in where he assaulted his priest and was taken to court where his grandmother testified against him. "It was like being in church again," he said, "she on the stand and the judge on the altar." Perez identifies that the comparison between the oppressive justice system and the Catholic church, showing that neither solved nor noticed the problems of the "disenfranchised Chicanos." This is exemplified by that his grandma and the judge are standing above him, showing a clear disconnect of power and perspective. They do not understand his troubles and there is no point in listening to either of them. This loss of hope in the institution such as the law showed Jesus the nothingness of the world, leading to him desecrating his grandmother's old church and killing the new priest (Perez 141). The trouble of his situation would lead to him discarding the justice that is perceived as normal and creating his own, so in his own eyes, he was in the right for enacting his revenge. Finally, there is the devaluation of religion and church, which can be seen in many gangster rappers such as Tyler, the Creator, in where he proclaims his atheism (Long 82). This caused by the loss of hope created by the financial instability mentioned earlier. This is because the oppressive nature of poverty affects the belief in a higher power. An individual like Tyler would ask this question: Why would God allow such suffering on his precious followers? This skepticism towards God is derived from problems such as financial instability and oppressiveness of ghettos, even if he may not directly be affected it (Long 84). The hardships life has thrown at them show that there is no meaning in the world, and now they have to answer the question of active or passive? Tyler and many other rappers like him have chosen to be active by pursuing rap and perpetuating their own ideals through music.

Diving in deeper into the mentioned rappers that perpetuate active nihilistic ideas, it is evident that rap does show aspects of active nihilism. This is seen with the preoccupation of death and objects such as a gun having an overbearing power over others, with rappers such as Kendrick Lamar lamenting on the fear of death in his song suitably named FEAR (Kurbin 440). He describes his preoccupation with the fear of being betrayed by his friends and dying before he could live his life: "I'll probably die tryna defuse two homies arguing', I'll probably die cause that's what you do when you're 17, All worries in a hurry, I wish I controlled things" (Lamar). The use of the word "control" shows that he wants to take control of his life in the face of his worries and nihilism. He was involved with a gang during his life in Compton and would later gain success and fame through rap, showing that he took control of his life in the face of his nihilism. The universe is cold and indifferent to individuals such as Kendrick and with this he saw the opportunity to focus on the aspects of life that affected him and peruse whatever he wanted to, without worry of consequences. This shows the overwhelming amount of freedom in this ideology.

Now we move on to the more explicit nihilistic views when relating to the preoccupation with death; however, instead of the fear of this death, we see a more jaded feeling toward it. One example can be cited in ex-gang member Alberto, who has been in a gang for an extensive amount of time and would later leave for a multitude of reasons. He explains his experience in an interview with Jennifer Guerra. He is quite interesting and the views he presents are easy to listen too, but what caught my attention was how

he described his friends and their view on their deaths. He explained that his friends would guess how their lives would end up before they would grow up: “dead, in a hospital, or in jail” (Guerra). This dreadful view of one’s future and the seemingly unceremonious option of death shows a clear sign of nihilistic thought. This is divergent from Kendrick and others like him, who see this nihilism as a positive outcome. This devaluation of death in gang culture is prevalent in the minds of young teenagers that listen to rappers that casually talk about the death of their fellow members or friends without much ceremony. This is intentional, as it represents that the lives of those in the ghetto may be gone the next day and that there is not much point worrying about it. There is also an explicit time in summer where gangs are active. This is usually a time where most deaths occur in major cities. It is especially relevant in rap where they talk about this time, as seen in *Summer Friends* by Chance the Rapper. He describes his time in Chicago and how during his summers in high school he realized the friends he would make during those summers would not last. This is because he saw that gangs were more active and the lives of friends were cut short if they encountered any of them, which is perfectly stated in the chorus, where he says, “Summer friends don’t stay.” He realizes that death occurs often, and this devaluation of death is clearly shown in the example mentioned. The weight of death is nothing to those who are jaded by it.

Some might ask, “Why is this important? Do I need to know that a gang member has a nihilistic mindset?” The reason for knowing is to possibility help rehabilitate those who have lived this type of life. It is similar to a jaded war veteran who feels nothing but emptiness because of all the death and destruction that they might have seen. If we can identify the roots of the issue and empathize with the gang members, we can find a solution to the problem altogether. The gentrification of cities and suburbs is still not enough when trying to solve the problem of gangs in America. Gangs will continue to exist; however, we can first try to prevent the perpetuation of this type of behavior by means of rehabilitation, so instead of having their future children learn their ways, we may be able to prevent it from passing on. This, overall, encompasses the idea of justice because to understand the mindset of these individuals, we must be able to empathize and understand the “justice” for their actions. If we can understand, we can prevent further spread of this behavior and we may be able to reduce casualties from gang violence, etc. This has shown to be quite effective, which is seen by Speedy’s life after leaving Central Islip. After receiving help, he was able to effectively forget his old life as a gang member and is now perusing to provide a good life for his children (Vincent). By showing empathy and being able to assist gang members, we can begin to restore their hope in society and allow them to have the confidence to begin working legal jobs.

Overall, the philosophical thought of nihilism and philosophy in general is a very useful tool in discerning psychological patterns and understanding why humans are the way they are. It opens the door towards empathy, and without it we would not be able to communicate and have the capacity to help our fellow humans. Individuals like Speedy move above their old views and continue onward in life to further grow and evolve. Huff argues “that community leaders and others who want to help should pay more attention to the ‘resistance identity’ expressed in hip-hop culture and rap music and respond by helping gangs join broader movements for social justice” (235). Instead of adding more fuel to fire, we should direct its warmth to something constructive. We shall see what society intends to do.

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## **Loretta Joseph**

Grade 8

*High On You*  
Dramatic Script

St Pius X School  
Moberly, MO  
Teacher: Christy Forte

Nancy - The main Character, best friends with Samantha. She has a younger brother named Joe.

Samantha - Nancy's BFF and she has humor. Has an older sister, Aurora & younger sister named Tinsley.

Lainey - An extravert who can make friends in less than 10 minutes. Has 3 siblings, Marissa, Ethan, & Nathan.

Kacie - Richard's girlfriend and Nancy & Samantha's best friend. She is an only child & isn't spoiled like most.

Grace - Always silent & is an introvert. Has no siblings & is really spoiled.

Richard - He is dating Kacie, & has a sense of humor. Has an older brother named Koy & sister, & Henley.

Jeff - He is funny in his own way. No one knows much about him.

Gus - The drug dealer who sells drugs to Nancy and is always HIGH.

Justin - Nancy's crush

Ryan - Nancy's father

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Narrator: During school at the Cairo Colts High School in Art class

Nancy: Today after school I have practice till 4:30 and then I have a lot of homework to do!!

Samantha: Yeah same...

Nancy: Have you ever thought about what life would be like if you were poor and didn't have anything except the clothes on your back??

Samantha: Well kinda but I didn't think to much about it...

Nancy: We should be thankful for everything that we have.

Samantha: Yeah, and we take most things for granted too.

Narrator: Bell rings to go to the next class, in between classes

Nancy: I wish everyone had the same things, or was able to have the same thing as someone else if they wanted.

Samantha: Yeah

Nancy: (sneezes)

Samantha: Bless you (laughs) Nancy try to say a jew like you are sneezing.

Nancy: A jew (sounds like a sneeze)

Narrator: Passes the boys in the hallway while going to P.E.

Richard: Bless you

Lainey: (laughs) Richard she didn't actually sneeze!!

Kacie: Dang Gina (it's a saying)

Richard: Geez you guys are so mean to me, I mean I already know I'm deaf.

Nancy: (laughs) Same thou

Samantha: (laughs)

Grace: You guys are weird.

Jeff: Agreed!!

Everyone: (Laughs)

Narrator: After school at the Cairo Colts High School

Group: Nancy, Sam, Richard, Kacie, Lainey, and Jeff

Nancy: So what are you guys doing over Thanksgiving Break?

Samantha: Well my dad, my siblings, and I are going to Ohio. To see some family members and maybe go to six flags.

Kacie: I seriously have no idea!

Jeff: Just going to visit family, it's going to be so boring because no one in my family likes me or is my age.

Richard: My family is coming over or something. What about you, what are you doing?

Nancy: Well I think some of my family and I are going to Mount Whitney, or something like that.

Samantha: That sounds like fun!!

Nancy: Ya I guess.

Samantha: Why aren't you excited?

Nancy: Well I don't really want to go.

Kacie: Why not?

Nancy: I don't know, my family really isn't that close and I'm going to be lonely and stuff I guess...

Jeff: Well my mom is here I gotta go.

Everyone: (except Jeff) Bye Jeff see you later.

Jeff: Bye guys

Richard: Well we better get going Kacie.

Kacie: Ok, see you guys later.

Richard: Bye

Nancy and Sam: Bye guys

Nancy: Well I guess I better get going see you later Sam.

Samantha: Ok bye, don't forget to Snapchat me.

Narrator: The next day at the Cairo Colts High School. During Music Nancy asked to go to the bathroom, but when she left the class she went to meet Gus (someone who sells & uses drugs). She wasn't telling anyone that she was taking drugs. Everyone thought that she was just fine and perfectly normal.

Nancy: Hey what do you have?

Gus: Hugs for drugs gurl!!! (says in weird voice)

Nancy: Back off dirtbag!!

Gus: Meeeeetttt me at the crochett store on thirty seventh street at 3, little haffeling.

Nancy: Fine, but if you don't have my 'sauce', then you will regret it!!

Gus: U caught me ya'll bouta WE BE BALLIN' catch these hands yeeeeeett yeeeeeett skeeeett skeeeett twinning is winning!!!

Nancy: WHAT??

Gus: Oh My Word

Nancy: Never mind (walks away) he's obviously flyin'.

Narrator: Nancy walks back to class mad cuz she didn't get her sauce, but tries not to show it. (BTW it's Friday) After school the group (Nancy, Sam, Richard, Kacie, Lainey, and Jeff)

Nancy: Thank God it's Thanksgiving break!!

Narrator: (everyone laughs) The group breaks up and leaves. Nancy and her family leave to go to Mount Whitney. About 2 hours into the trip.

Nancy: Are we almost there yet?

Ryan (her father): We only have about 3 hours and 46 minutes left.

Nancy: Ugh!! Fine

Narrator: Nancy listens to music and looks out the window for the rest of the way. They finally arrive at her father's sister's house. At about 6 o'clock, they watch a few movies, visit, eat dinner, and go to sleep. The next day the family gets dressed, visits, eats lunch at Hardees's, then heads to Mount Whitney.

Nancy: Finally we are here! Hey dad where is the bathroom?

Ryan: To the left up the ramp and in the building.

Nancy: Ok I will be right back go on ahead and I will catch up.

Ryan: Ok

Narrator: Nancy goes into the bathroom, checks her makeup and pops some pillies. She goes back to where the group had been.

Nancy: Where is everyone? Where did they go I told dad to wait for me.

Narrator: Nancy looks around, there is no one in sight. She gets out her phone to call her dad.

Nancy: Ugh, there is no cell service!!

Narrator: She is getting scared, mad, and sad. She takes her backpack off, and pops a few more pillies. She starts to head up the trail on her right to see if they went up that trail. She walks for what feels like forever. She is about to break down and cry. She comes to a rest stop, there is a beautiful view. There isn't anyone up there but she can hear someone talking.

Nancy: Hello?... Hello, anyone there?

Narrator: No one answers.

Nancy: (starts to get hysterically delirious from too many pills, laughs)

Narrator: Nancy looks over the side railing on the cliff.

Nancy: It's sooo beautiful... If they really loved me then why did they leave? No one loves me... (climbs over the side railing, jumps off the cliff) Hey guys I can fly, this is so much fun!!! (gets closer and closer to the ground) Hey Samantha we should do this more often! Hey guys look the ground is getting closer.

Narrator: She hits the ground hard...

~Justin~  
THE END

**Krishny Karunanandaa**  
Grade 12

*Knowledge Is Not Key*  
Personal Essay/Memoir

Parkway Central High School  
Chesterfield, MO  
Teacher: Jason Lovera

“So, what do you know about nanoparticles?” my research mentor asked, pulling out an iPad. My mind froze. I felt like a deer caught in the headlights. Of course I had researched nanoparticles before the meeting, but even then I had had trouble understanding the complex language used to describe them. With my lack of background knowledge I felt as if I were going in blind. In my fright, the only coherent sentence I could think of was, “Um, well I do know that they are very small particles on the scale of nanometers, but to be honest other than that, not much.”

That sentence pretty much described my answer to everything that first week of research. Before the start of the program, the closest I had come to working in a lab was extracting DNA from a strawberry in biology. I had applied and earned my spot in the program, yet no matter how hard I tried I always felt incompetent in comparison to my fellow lab members. I was surrounded by grad students and PhDs, all with several more years of experience than me.

Our weekly lab meetings were a prime example of my incompetence. These gatherings always entailed one or two lab members presenting their current research to the group. Of course while I found the research that was being done to be very intriguing, oftentimes I would not be able to understand the complex jargon they used to describe their experiments. Once again, my lack of experience with nanotechnology was showing through.

However, I found with each day that I was learning something new about a subject, that before this summer, had never crossed my mind. With each new research article that I read, I built on my definition of a nanoparticle. A nanoparticle was no longer a really small particle but a material in which fifty percent or more of the particles have at least one dimension on the scale of nanometers. Not only was my knowledge growing, but my experience in the lab was too. I had gone from not even knowing what a DLS machine looked like to being able to create my own protocols tailored specifically to the nanoparticles I was experimenting with that day.

My experience had grown exponentially since my arrival. However, I could not say the same for my confidence. I still avoided contributing to group discussions at lab meetings in fear of asking an ignorant question or making an uneducated remark. I still gave in to my instinctive urge to avoid all interactions with my fellow lab members. I still considered myself a peasant in the company of royalty, who would be judged for attempting to communicate on their level of intelligence. I still felt like an outsider. I had come to think of the lab and the halls of the Washington University Department of Biomedical Engineering as my second home. Yet, I still felt as if I did not belong there.

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It had been almost a month of research. The days at the lab had turned into nights as I worked to prepare my results for analysis. I had come to enjoy the constant struggle between failure and success as I worked to rerun unsuccessful trials, an experience key to research.

One morning, I was sitting in the common area near my mentor’s office when I heard footsteps coming down the hall accompanied by the low sounds of an unintelligible conversation. As they got closer, the low sounds began to transform into words.

“Oh there she is. Perfect. I am sure she wouldn’t mind helping you out in the lab today,” stated one of the voices. With a rush of dread I realized that the voice I was hearing was my mentor’s and the

“she” that he was referring to was me. My brain instantly began to formulate the various possibilities of what I was sure was going to occur in a matter of seconds.

“Was I being handed off to a different mentor because he decided that I wasn’t experienced enough? Was this some kind of test of my lab experience? Was this other voice my new lab partner?” I thought.

I had never really worked with anyone in the lab before and had found comfort in the independence that my solitude allowed me. I began to fear that no matter how much experience I had gained I would almost certainly make a fool of myself in front of this new person. Once again my lack of confidence was taking over.

The sound of my name brought me back to reality as they had reached the table I was working at.

“Kim, is that you?” my mentor inquired.

Slowly turning around, I responded, “Oh hi! How are you?”

The person beside him looked to be as if he were in the early years of his college career. His eyes were fixed on a distant point with quick, timid glances towards me. Surprisingly, he reminded me of myself, afraid to make eye contact with anyone.

“Great. I would like you to meet Zach. He is new to the lab and has developed a protocol for the synthesis of iron oxide nanoparticles. I would like you to show him around the lab and help him with whatever he needs,” replied my mentor, patting Zach on the back.

“Of course! Not a problem,” I responded, again forcing a smile onto my face. However, his request was a very big problem.

“What if I tell him to do the wrong thing? What if he asks me a question I don’t know the answer to?” I thought. Various speculations of this kind began to form in my mind, stemming from my self-doubt.

As my mentor walked away, it began to dawn on me that I was now taking on the same responsibility he held for me. I was now accountable for making sure that Zach had the knowledge he needed to complete his experiment. I panicked as the weight of my task settled on my shoulders.

“So, should we head down to the lab?” Zach cautiously asked, bringing me back to situation at hand. My face flushed as I realized he had been standing there waiting for me to act.

“Yeah. Let me just pack up my stuff real quick,” I replied. I hastily grabbed my computer and notebook and shoved them into my backpack. “All right let’s go,” I said, making my way towards the elevator.

“So how long have you been doing research?” I asked, trying to make conversation as the elevator slowly descended to the basement.

“Oh actually this is my first day,” Zach nervously replied. His response took me by surprise. I had expected that like my other fellow lab members, Zach had at least a couple years of experience.

“Oh that’s exciting!” I replied. I felt for him. He was going through exactly what I had during my first week.

“All right here we are,” I said as I put in the passcode to the lab door. “So first you always want to make sure that you have gloves on no matter what.”

As I walked him through the basic rules of the lab, I began to realize that not only did I doubt my abilities, but Zach did too.

“So if you want to mass something, fold the paper into four squares so that way it is easier to pour whatever you mass into the vial,” I said.

“Are you sure? That doesn’t seem right, maybe we should ask someone else,” he replied.

“You need to sonicate the vial for about ten minutes to make sure that the nanoparticles are not aggregated when we run them through the DLS,” I said.

“Are you sure? They seem pretty separated to me. Why can’t we run them through the DLS right now?” he replied.

“You need to make sure that when you write your DLS protocol that you specify the type of nanoparticle you are analyzing,” I said.

“Are you sure iron is the right type though? What if you got these nanoparticles mixed up with a different batch?” he replied.

The nervousness had been replaced by skepticism. Maybe it was because I was a high school student instructing a college student, or maybe he had picked up on my own self-doubt.

I had my own uncertainties, but his questioning of my abilities offended me. It was as if he was opposing my right to work in the lab. Despite my bruised pride, I brushed it off and continued working. However, Zach continually began to question my experience. It was as if he were my mom, constantly questioning my motive for every action. Despite the persistent interrogation, we were finally able to finish the synthesis of the iron oxide nanoparticles. As Zach was analyzing the results he exclaimed, “Wow you did know what you were doing. These nanoparticles turned out pretty good.”

His comment was slightly insulting, yet I took it as a praise. Little did Zach know, but that statement changed my perception of my place at the lab. I no longer felt like a peasant in the presence of royalty, but rather a student among fellow classmates. Up until that point I had felt inferior to my fellow researchers, always doubting my experience and knowledge.

“How could I possibly know what I was doing as a high school student in a college lab?” I would constantly question. However, my experience with Zach in the lab had shown beneficial in proving my abilities, not to others, but to myself. Although I didn’t have my colleagues’ years of experience, I had grown significantly since I first set foot in that lab and I had the knowledge and experience to prove it. I realized that it is important to know something, but even more important to have confidence in that knowledge because only then can you act on it. If I had acted with certainty, Zach would never have had the opportunity to doubt my abilities. My behavior not only in the lab, but as a person in society changed after that. Instead of hiding in the corner at lab meetings, I asked my mentor if I could present my research to the group. Instead of walking head down, I walked with confidence. Instead of avoiding them, I initiated discussions with my fellow researchers, and I have many intelligent conversations to show for it. Despite my lack of college experience, I welcomed these interactions and no longer felt inferior during them. I had realized that not only is knowledge key, but confidence is too.



**Benjamin Kazdan**

Grade 10

*Sadness*

Poetry

John Burroughs School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Jackie Gross

Yellow umbrella man watches the monkeys  
Cavorting, chattering, their mindless play  
Transfixes him. He stands day after day.  
The umbrella folded, closed always.

Once was that he would hurry by  
Living his life, he would fly  
Across the space, pursuing time.  
And when the sodden rain came pouring down,  
His bright, boisterous yellow sun held it at bay amidst,  
The dark, somber frowns of black and grey.

But now he stands, drooping, yellow-fading  
While the rain drip, drip, drips around his feet

**Benjamin Kazdan**

Grade 10

*Followers*

Poetry

John Burroughs School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Jackie Gross

Hi...

I know we barely see each other in person, and we rarely even speak to each other

But I wanted to know if I could follow you. And maybe even you could follow me

I would be a great follower, going wherever you go

I hope you will accept my request and not just look at my name in distaste

You're probably confused, because I've only spoken to you a couple of times...

Now I don't know what to say.

Anyway, I think a good place to start would be accepting my request

I hope you will take this into consideration when you see my notification

And take your time, don't rush. I'm not in a hurry

I know you are busy

That's why this is the fifth time I'm trying

## Grace Kennard

Grade 12

### *Settled Dust*

#### Short Story

John Burroughs School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Joy Gebhardt

The AM radio spit out bluegrass tunes and Michael simply couldn't take it anymore. He jammed his finger onto the Audio On/Off button, leaving his thoughts to float uninterrupted around the car's interior. The stretches of corn fields and occasional cow was growing old and a yawn snuck out of Michael's mouth, momentarily scrunching his eyes shut. He squeezed his eyelids just a moment longer, holding onto the security of the ephemeral darkness. Realizing however, he was still inching closer and closer to his childhood home.

Michael's fingers tapped a song unbeknownst to even him on the middle console of his BMW. His mind had now completely emptied itself into the car, leaving little room for Michael's new tune. The dense air reminded his eyes of their exhaustion and his body of its unwanted grief. His mother's words still ringing in his ears, he focused on the road in front of him and turned the radio back on. Pink and orange painted the sky on the horizon, adding some color to his monotonous journey, but still, Michael's foot reluctantly lay on the gas pedal. Steadily, he rambled with the car down the two-lane highway.

Michael parked outside his mother's house soaking in the warmth of the leather beneath him and letting the hot air envelope him. The wind gently rocked the large oak trees on the lawn, rustling the maroon leaves as they fell; the rain pitter-pattered across the top of his car, threatening to seep in. Michael opened his door and pulled his jacket closer as he hustled towards the house. Each raindrop felt heavier and heavier, forcing his shoulders down and his head to hang. He stood outside the grand black door, raised his hand to knock, and hesitated. He gnawed at his middle finger nail for a moment before letting out a deep breath and rapping his knuckles on the door. Holding his breath, Michael listened carefully for footsteps within. The door flung open and Michael's mother almost knocked him over with the force of her hug. His stomach dropped even further as he squeezed his mother, burying his gristly face in her red sweater.

Michael gingerly stepped over the door frame and lifted his head to stare at the family pictures hanging on the wall. He scratched his forehead as he gazed into his younger, concealing, blue eyes. His head told him to leave, run out the door and never come back, but his curious heart made him follow his mom into the kitchen.

"Michael, I am just so glad to see you," his mother said as she handed him a steaming cup of coffee, "I've missed you...we've all missed you." Her voice faded at the end, clearly her mind had set off on a different trail.

"Your sister was here last week. She, uh, picked up all the things he left for her and um, helped me clean up around here." Her eyes wandered to the piles of letters and pictures on the breakfast table, next to half-empty coffee mugs and used tissues.

Michael took his nail out of his mouth and rested the warm mug on his worn jeans. "Yea, well, I'm sorry I missed her...just got caught up with work. Jess's been out of town so it was just me and the kids and I couldn't leave 'em." Another yawn crept up on Michael, but this one he pushed back down into his throat.

"Look. I'm just glad you're here. I know--we all know--that you and your father had your differences, but I know he would have wanted you to have whatever's in that box. It's had your name on it all these years, it must be something special."

Michael traced the rim of his mug with his finger and let his mom try to warm the dormant house.

“Really, Michael...he loved you so much. You know, that’s why he was so hard on you, he just wanted--”

“Mom, it’s over,” Michael sprang from his chair and scarlet crept across his cheeks, “I don’t need you to fix anything. He’s gone. There’s nothing to fix.”

Michael’s mother outlined the grain of the hardwood floor with her wool sock and blotted her nose with the tissue she’d been clutching. Michael set the coffee mug on the granite and made his way to the attic. He tugged on the door to the third floor stairs, turning and pulling on the knob to open it. The streams of light from the window at the top illuminated the dust specks dancing around the air. The stairs creaked and groaned with each step until he stood at the top and let out a sigh of his own. Cardboard boxes rested on the rotted wood and worn furniture sunk into the walls. Michael dug out the box his mom was talking about and shook off the cobwebs with a wave of his hand. He coughed as he set it on the floor and knelt beside the tired cardboard, dented and wrinkled with age. He ran his fingers over the sharpie-etched “For Michael” on the top, his stomach flipping. The box seemed so light that Michael could not imagine its contents.

Michael stopped chewing his index finger, combed back the brunette waves from his eyes, and pierced the rank air with a rip of tape from the box. Gently, he peeled back the flaps and gazed down in between the cardboard walls.

Michael pulled the contents out of the box and set them on the floor. He rolled the baseball around in his hand, wiping the dust off. He knew exactly what it was from--his first Varsity home run; he never would have thought that his dad kept it. Michael let his brown hair hang in his eyes while he stroked his unshaven face. He squinted as he picked up the piece of paper and turned it over. Scoffing, his sunken heart inaudible, he read the only word on the page: “Michael-”.

## Naomi Kessler

Grade 10

### *Living Through The Color* Short Story

Parkway Central High School  
Chesterfield, MO  
Teacher: Jason Lovera

The cold air in which we were flying seemed to cover the windows with a tinted blackness. The Alps below us were both reaching up to pierce the sky, or caving down to the scorching core of the Earth. I knew that we had only another three remaining hours on the flight to Israel, but seriously, I thought, “Could this get any worse?”

Back home in St. Louis, I felt like a piece of me had disappeared during the school year, taking with it the energy, liveliness and spark that I used to have in my eyes. Drifting away from many of my friends, and feeling disconnected with how to possibly make any more, the start of the summer left me with time to try to figure out how to be myself again, which was more than I could ever ask for. I had joined the swim team in my neighborhood, had a job, and even had a bucket list with one of my only remaining friends, Grace, of all the things we would be able to do together before the summer’s end. Both of us trying to get our care free mojo back that had been taken. But instead, my summer, of course, was cut short.

I was headed on a one month trip to Israel with a Jewish organization that I had never even heard of. Of course I knew of *some people* from St. Louis that were going to be on my bus, but I wasn’t really friends with them. At home there was always the lingering question of: How should I act? Truly the confusion on how to be and act like myself at home left me sitting at home most days. So I asked myself, how should the next month be any different? I turned back into reality and could hear the loud, annoying chatter of the people behind me both talking and laughing as people on the plane were trying to sleep. The same people from hours earlier had been introduced to me as some of the kids going on the trip with me, but I already found them intimidating and aggravating.

“Great,” I thought, “they’re already getting to know each other.” I decided not to join because honestly... what was the point if people weren’t going to like me for who I was anyway?

Still having my eyes glued to the window in blankness, I looked back to my lap; being welcomed by yet another blank page of empty thoughts. The only thing that read at the top was, ‘*Dear Papa,...*’. My usually fast thinking and writing process seemed to be occupied with something else. Not *only* did the fear of no one liking me scare me, but also the idea of just *being* in Israel scared me. With all of these negative thoughts of Israel being *the place* for the Jewish to either *die* or *thrive*, I had decided to make goodbye notes to the close ones back home so that I would never have to regret not telling them something. Looking back on it now though, this mindset seems quite paranoid of me.

Half an hour went by and I was almost halfway done with my dad’s letter... but the cold dark air outside began pulling me under. I closed my eyes.

The next six hours seemed to me like a mixture of blurs and vivid memories. I remember getting off of the plane, going by bus somewhere, taking stops on the way, and finally arriving at a Refugee Hotel, just an hour off of the city of Tel Aviv.

I walked up a floor and placed my bags by the door to the conference room. Meandering into the room, I tried to find an open and welcoming seat, but I could already tell that cliques were forming. So I took the seat closest to me. There was a sizable amount of 35 kids all sitting in a circle of chairs waiting for one of the seven counselors to start talking.

“Hi everyone!” one finally said, “My name is Rabbi Mike and I’m in charge of the counseling department. Here we’ve got Jeremy, Mira, Eliana, Jason, Naor, and Ruti,” he said pointing at the rest of them. “Over this summer, whether you want to be here right now or not, you will get to know this group of lovely 35 individuals and counselors to a deep extent, you will create amazing memories you’ll never forget, and make lifelong friendships. However, along with this great experience, there come rules to ensure you have a good time and to keep you safe. First off,” he began listing everything as fast as he could, “no drinking, no smoking, no drugs, no vaping, no intercourse...” the list went on.

Once he finished speaking, I could hear a sleepy cricket chirping in the back corner of the room filling up the surrounding air.

“If any of these rules are broken,” Mike said, “sadly we are going to have to cut your summer short and send you home. But now that that’s settled, let’s assign roommates and rooms. And also, lights out at 11:00.” He simply placed the sheet of paper from his hand onto the table by the door, and walked out.

Now everyone was awake! They ran to the table and began shouting different room numbers like, “*Anyone in 908?*”, “*948 anyone?! ANYONE?!*”

As they began crowding out to find their rooms, I stood up and dragged my finger down the list. “*Ah here it is, Olivia Mason--- Room 917.*” I picked up the smooth edged handle to my suitcase and began rolling it towards the rooms.

As I entered the small archway that read “*????? ?? ???*” or “ROOMS THROUGH HERE” I was greeted by a *ginormous* landscape. The ground was practically in a rectangular shape with the rooms all surrounding on the upper level, multiple spiralled staircases going down to the ground floor which was filled with commotion and people, and the Kinneret just beyond the hotel, with the balconies overlooking it. I could look across the entire space and see everything. Kids from other summer programs speaking different languages, music in the air, people playing soccer, and groups just sitting on benches having lively conversations around the tall overstretching palm trees.

“It’s so beautiful!” I thought. Israeli nightlife had finally arrived. I could see it because the later it got, the more a live and lighthearted people looked. The scene as if directly out of a slow motion movie, the girls’ and boys’ sun kissed skin and radiant and gum-showing smiles, slowly creeping across their faces as their chests start moving up and down from that perfect moment of loving laughter. But standing there myself I could feel the non-existent smile, the non-existent laughter, the non-existent feeling of any want to be here, and only the lingering feeling of an empty chest longing for another breath of the thick, mildly air I breathed back home. Having to move on and start over from any progress I *could* have been making back in my hometown.

The feeling of my eyes drying and straining signaled to me how tired I really was, so I took my eyes off of the envious sight and went to room 917. When I got there, I knocked quietly on the door as to not wake anyone in the room that may already be sleeping, but with a sudden jolt, the door swung open and there stood a heavier set girl with a smile so big that the top of her gums were practically showing.

“HI! YOU MUST BE OUR FOURTH ROOMMATE! I’M MAXINE!” she shouted ardently.

“Yep,” I said, “that’s me. My name’s Olivia.”

“Well great, nice to meet you and come in! You can put your stuff down on this bed, it’s the last one open,” she said leading me in.

I placed my stuff down and looked around the room. It was a tiny space with four twin sized beds crammed up on almost every wall except for the one with the large window. Away from this room was a dividing wall that had both the bathroom, shower room, and sink.

“*Oh jeez,*” I panicked, “*how am I going to live crammed like this for the next month?*”

I took a look at the time which already read 10:58 PM.

“Hey I think I’m going to be heading to bed in a few,” I said yawning.

“Oh already? I was just about to head out to see Natalie and Chloe (our other roommates) to talk to some guys from some other youth organizations that are here at the hostel. You wanna come?”

In all of the theoretical ideas running through my head on how bad the month could go, I forgot to even notice that my other two roommates weren’t here.

“No, it’s fine,” I glared lazily, “I’ll keep the bathroom light on so that you guys can come in quietly and not fall over anything.”

“K, thanks goodnight,” she jested, and was out of the door the next second.

I was home sick, tired, and felt insecure of the fact that if anybody would get to know me, I’d just be rejected for a better friend or even worse, be pulled into another type of drama like I was in when school was in session. Thinking back to the memories of school gave me back the same gut wrenching feeling and pessimistic mind I had acquired at the time. With this thought, I decided to lay down so I wouldn’t have to think about how much effort friends took to please and talk to. I dozed off.

*BANG!*

I was awake with a start. Trying to find my phone in the darkness, I finally grabbed it and hit the home button. The bright screen blinding my eyes for a good 10 seconds, I continued to squint until my eyes adjusted and I could read the time.

*“2:30 AM?!? Why could they possibly be making noise this late at night?!”*

I shoved off the blankets and stood up, the blood rushing back into my whole body. I walked towards the dividing wall and began to say, “Hel--,” but was interrupted by another loud, ‘*BANG!*’ from the bathroom door. From what I had seen, there was exactly two people that had just gone in there, a guy and a thin girl. Who exactly? Well I could only presume that I had just seen Natalie for the first time ever by the whispers of, “*Natalie, bambino... yes,*” coming from the guy that seemed to know Italian.

I suddenly became aware of the other things happening. I could hear both Maxine and Chloe outside of the room laughing really loudly and trying to talk in whispered voices but only succeeding to speak in shouted whispers. I stood there baffled on how this could actually be happening, but then heard the door begin to open. I quickly ran to the window sill and closed the curtains to hide me from sight.

The door swung open and along with it came a huge waft of smoke filled air and the reeking stench of alcohol. Maxine’s voice was easy to pick out, but the rest just sounded like nine or so Italians all in their twenties. I hadn’t really planned out what I would do if she saw I wasn’t in my bed, but luckily I didn’t have to worry because they left almost two minutes later, carrying their big drunken laughs with them.

With the intoxicating, thick, smoky air I slid open the glass window and stuck my head out to try and rid my lungs of the second hand smoked. Dangling my feet over the edge, I looked at the darkness I was facing. It was full of shadows from the trees stretching across the large green landscape and the darkness of the sea that seemed to have an endless body.

Why were they so okay with breaking the rules? They’ve practically already broken almost every single one and yet we’ve only been here for less than a full day. Back home I was known as the goody two shoes that didn’t know anything about anything scandalous. I mean tonight was the first night I had gotten anywhere remotely *close* to the thrill or experience of rule breaking. But how could people they had *just met* like these girls so much to the point where they’re breaking all of the rules?

Serenely there was a voice coming from somewhere I couldn’t see, which slowly grew louder, interrupting my thoughts.

“Hello?” I asked out into the darkness.

“Uhhh hi?” replied the voice.

My eyes then scanning the ground trying to find where the voice had come from, but then hearing, “I’m over here.”

I looked to my right and saw a guy about my age poking his head out of the window in a childish, curious way.

“Hi, I’m Noah.”

“Hi Noah, my name is Olivia. From St. Louis,” I marveled back.

That was the vast introduction that sparked the rest of the night. Noah soon climbed down the side of the wall, stepping from window to window and then climbed back up until he reached mine.

He asked, “You wanna go for a walk?”. I recognized him from earlier in the room and realized we were going to be on the trip together. I stared at his perfectly cut blond hair, blue eyes, and his perfect smile that could probably win over almost any girl.

Right when I was going to say no because it meant we were going to breaking the rules and it sounded too dangerous, it hit me. I had been so focused on following the rules handed to me and living the book of life word for word, that I completely misunderstood how to live. I was never thrilling to hang out with because I was so uptight and weighing down any chance I would have at actually being able to have my own unique experience. Of *course* Maxine, Natalie, and Chloe all went out to have fun and do whatever they wanted, there was only one life to live and I was ready to go try and live it. Whether in St.Louis or Israel, I was going take a step *away* from my St. Louis life, and make one hell of a new story for me to be able to tell years from now.

“Absolutely,” I answered, the heated adrenaline moving up to my face.

He climbed back down the side of the hotel wall, and I followed feet first, reaching the ground as safely as ever.

Noah and I began walking towards the shore of the Kineret and instantaneously I could feel the difference. When we talked, the words came so easily and we sat there for another few hours, but what could have probably been forever. We talked about an entire range of subjects, but the conversation never ceased or died.

I sunk my hands deep into the warm sand and felt the spray of the sea’s water hit me. I had a new feeling within me, and even though it wasn’t the same as the one from the aspiring person I had been trying to be back home, I felt the feeling of being restored to a new version of me.

Being unaware of this before, suddenly there were colors that began to pop back from out of the darkness. The shaded grass went from a curtain of grey to a soft, toned green, the sea began to have a tint of blue, and all of the way into the grasping darkness of the Kinneret, was a city, a beautiful city filled with lights and lives, all waiting to be able to see me, as clearly as I could see them.



**Anna Lindquist**  
Grade 12

*Words of Wisdom*  
Journalism

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

James Edwards stands outside the door of a classroom, as he does every time he substitutes for a teacher. His palm is outstretched, and he shakes every student's hand, asking for a name. Students call him the 'Handshake Sub' and smile as they walk into the class.

The saying is penned in red on the whiteboard, his neat handwriting visible from every seat. When every student is at a desk, he asks them to repeat it back to him.

"I'm quick! I'm sharp! I'm bright! I'm smart! I'm rich and good looking and a major blessing!"

"I have this feeling that I want to reach kids with this," Edwards says. "I've had numerous chances to work full-time somewhere, but I'd rather do this."

He can remember back to one moment in 1949. One moment that specifically influences why he prints those words on the board of every classroom he substitutes for.

Edwards sits in a classroom at Greenbriar Elementary School in Northbrook, IL. Wooden chairs are in rows in front of a black chalkboard with writing scrawled along the surface, the classroom looking like one out of "A Christmas Story."

"You're stupid," someone says.

After one student says it, others follow suit. The kids around him repeat the phrase throughout his time in school, and it doesn't take long for him to start believing it.

"I was buying the lie somebody had told me way back when," Edward says.

A few years pass and "stupid" becomes his trademark. He plays off the old insult by being goofy and pretending not to care. In sixth grade, the school attempts to fail him, but with his father on the school board, they can't. They decide to give him time to redo his tests and quizzes for two weeks over the summer with no air conditioning. He spends most of it longing to be with his friends, at the pool or on vacation.

He's 15, and his report card comes out, Ds covering the sheet. The only classes he excels in are band and gym, but he does poorly in every other class at Glenbrook High School. It doesn't bother him.

"A single thing that my mom told me monthly, I never listened, but she said, 'Jimmy, you better start getting better grades or you'll end up digging ditches or in the army,'" Edwards says. "She said that over and over and over."

It isn't until his last semester of his senior year in Algebra II with Ms. Burgmann that he questions what people have been saying to him for years.

He bonds with his teacher, enough so that Edwards and the rest of the class challenge her and her bowling team to a tournament. Edwards and his team win by one pin. That class makes him realize he isn't stupid.

By the end of the year, he has a B. It's his first one in a core class.

“That second semester of my senior year when I found out I wasn't stupid, I looked to my mom and said ‘Mom, you know, if I don't get going here, I'm going to end up digging ditches or in the army and she said ‘Really? How about that?’,” Edwards says. “She told me that later. Eventually, it wears through your thick skull.”

Graduation passes, and Edwards is amazed that he has been accepted into Kendall College in Evanston, IL after graduating in the lowest quarter of his class. After years of believing he wasn't smart enough, he is determined to do well in his postsecondary education.

Later in college, a professor named Keith Moore makes his students repeat a phrase, one with the purpose of raising students' morales. The saying soon spreads across campus, eventually to Edwards. It resonates with him, and he decides to write it down.

I'm quick! I'm sharp! I'm bright! I'm smart! I'm rich and good looking and a major blessing!

After graduating from college, getting his master's and working as a choir teacher from 1965-1979, he works as a salesman until 2004. After 2004, he becomes the substitute teacher that students at FHN know him as.

“He makes sure that everyone is recognized, and he appreciates everyone for being who they are,” junior Riley Lawson says. “He is hands-down one of the best people here.”

Edwards hopes that, with this saying, he can positively influence the kids he sees every day. He wants them to think better of themselves so they can do better as a result, unlike how he was in his childhood.

“I just think it helps everybody,” Edwards says. “I love seeing all these people. I love the whole bunch of them. I am crazy about the kids. My goal is to have kids feel positive about themselves so they can have a positive life. I just want them to do well.”

**Tiffany Liu**  
Grade 12

*The Children, the Stars, and the Sky*  
Flash Fiction

Warrensburg High School  
Warrensburg, MO  
Teacher: Jennifer Fowler

We have managed to make the best of things in this small, sleepy town. The days here pass without event, stumbling and half-awake. Traffic signals change at empty intersections, and shopping carts litter an abandoned strip mall. But our laughter breaks the lullaby of the railroad crossing; our footsteps fill the vacant parking lots. And as the world turns, the drowsiness of the town gives way to nocturnal magic. The streetlamps whisper to us as we balance on the curb beneath their glow. They promise that though we may live these unenchanted lives, there is beauty in the fact that we exist at all.

Legend says that miles away from town, in the darkness of the country, stars come down to visit the earth. No one has ever found them, though many have tried. A group of foolish kids heads out every summer, driving wildly down the old gravel roads, confident that they will succeed where all past generations have failed.

Truthfully, we are no different.

Yet, swerving around corners with the windows rolled down and the radio beating in our sternums, we cannot bring ourselves to lament our mundanity. Far from the rush of daytime, we are content to just be here, together, happy, and alive.

I rest my head against the seatbelt and watch my friends lean out the sunroof. The wind tangles their hair and swallows their laughing screams.

They are looking for stars in a country sky. They are looking at an empty sky.

My friends are the stars, and the sky is a mirror.

Here in this Honda Civic, celestial beings are gathered.

Hours later, we are sitting in someone's kitchen, and Orion is microwaving leftover chicken nuggets. Andromeda scrolls through her phone, Lyra hums a quiet anthem, and Hercules pets the dog.

The bright spotlights are our last defense against the ocean of night that threatens to engulf our football stadium. The entire town has gathered here, and the arena brims with life. From the sidelines I spot children thundering up the bleachers, crushing popcorn in their stead. A lone mother's cowbell echoes across the field, a prelude to our performance.

We walk onto the field to the ticking of the halftime clock. When the music begins, we glide through the air with grace and flight. We are cygnets, dancing with glitter in our hands. Our bones are lighter than the autumn air, and our ponytails brush against our toes every time we kick. We leap and stretch and twirl in a flurry of feathers, pouring our silver hearts out on the 50-yard line. Yet the crowd is not watching; they are here for the bulls in the rodeo; they do not care for a show of baby swans. No matter, their lack of attention does not make us any less beautiful: through spandex and sequined costumes, our wings are already bursting free.

Even at midnight in this broken vinyl diner, we find things to worship: apple pie a la mode, the ding of a kitchen bell, the dead cricket in the entryway. But there is nothing more illustrious, more divine and awe-inspiring than a monument built from discarded ruins. Leftover tater tots and broken French fries are the muses of a 24-hour god.

From the crumbs and grease of a meal well devoured, I raise an unearthly creation. I build tots into walls,

balance fries like precarious ceilings. Crumpled ketchup packets outline a cragged landscape. I dodge the wrapper my friend flings across the booth, endeavoring to place the final touches on my work.

“This is Taterhenge,” I crow.

It is a prehistoric monument, a wonder of our small-town world.

Already, the people are flocking to gawk at its sheer size. “How did it get here? What does it mean?”

They fall to their knees and weep. “Only a god could do this, only a god.”

They have never seen anything this golden, this warm. They run their hands down the crispy ridges and whisper to each other that they can almost feel the history and hidden messages baked within. Taterhenge is a reminder of times gone past, when ancient legends were mere babes, and gods walked the earth.

Their gods are tired Midwestern teenagers in a dirty back-road diner. We are silly on boredom and youth.

In the end, we are the children of this small town life, born to the heartland air and grown from the cracks in the wide asphalt streets. Looking up from the ground, our view of the sky is unobstructed. We watch as it changes from blue to gold to crimson and plum; we watch it through the clouds, the rain and the snow. We see it for everything it is. Even in the night, as the rest of the town sleeps, we watch the sky with wide awake eyes, staring up into the void.

For a while, the eternal blackness is overwhelming. We drown in its languid enormity. But there is a reason we live with our eyes to the sky. We are looking for something, and we do not want to miss it.

If only for a moment, the absoluteness of the dark is broken by streaks of light. Shooting stars jet through space, and faraway planets twinkle their hello. We grab each other by the hands and jump, breathless and excited.

“Did you see it? Did you see it?”

Tonight, like most nights, we do not feel like going to bed.

**Mikayla Lowe**  
Grade 12

*Gender Bias in Media Coverage*  
Critical Essay

West Platte R2 Jr Senior High School  
Weston, MO  
Teacher: Leslie Frazer

Women have been battling against men in nearly every career category for centuries. Men dominate the political, athletic, educational, and medical career spectrum, while women, unfortunately, fly under the radar. There are women who work their whole lives to become something greater than what is expected of them, and, when they do finally achieve their desired success, the media sweeps them under the rug. The media runs headlines they think will catch the attention of the public, which also tend to be gender biased. Media usually prints headlines which are male dominant and leave out female achievements of the time. Women deserve the same respect and media coverage as men. The fact that in 2017 there is still gender bias in headlines is an atrocity to the idea of America as a country that does not put any one person above another. The media should portray each gender the same way in regards to their accomplishments without any bias embedded into it.

In terms of politics, men command the board. In 2016, women held just 23% of government offices (Abrams), with less media associated with them than for men. Most of the time, media coverage for political women is overtly feminine and not especially positive. The media tends to treat women politicians as women and objects rather than as political protagonists, something they rarely do for male politicians (“Women Politicians in Media”). The media feminizes women by relating all their endeavours to their husbands and children rather than simply asking them their positions as they would with the men. Women candidates are more often than men described by the media in terms of their sex, children, and marital status, which can affect how voters view their ability to hold political office by stirring up stereotypical images of their responsibilities as mothers and wives (“Media Coverage of Women Political Candidates”). By picturing these women as motherly figures, they lose semblances of authority over political stances. The media plays with the general public’s perception of the candidates, causing differences in coverage, whether it be negative or positive.

Although most media is not a favorable representation of political women, some bring it on themselves. In order to assert their dominance over men, the women attack their male opponent's character rather than stances. Female candidates may be given more latitude than male candidates to make personal attacks as they enter the race with the stereotypical advantage of being considered kinder (“Women Political Candidates”). Of course, defying stereotypical norms also may backfire for women candidates as they may be labeled as too aggressive, rather than assertive, by the media (“Women Political Candidates”). This may cause them to lose their candidacy.

In the 2016 presidential election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, the media painted different pictures of each candidate. Attempts by the Clinton campaign to define her in terms of competence, experience, and policy positions were drowned out by coverage of alleged improprieties associated with the Clinton Foundation and emails (Faris, et al). Coverage of Trump associated with immigration, jobs, and trade was greater than that on his personal scandals (Faris, et al). While this coverage may not seem outrightly gender biased, the media smuggles the bias in. Clinton’s competence and experience were overlooked because she is a woman. The media focused instead on how incapable a president she would be because of her e-mail scandal. With Trump, media was focused on his policies because, as a male, he would know and be more fit to run a country than a woman. Trump’s scandals were swept under the rug on account of his fitting the collective idea of the country needing a male president. Nearly 70,000 sentences were written about Clinton’s emails (Bump). In contrast, fewer than

50,000 sentences were written about Trump's various scandals (Bump). About twice as much attention was paid to Clinton's emails in total than to Trump's scandals (Bump). The media picks and chooses what they write about to create the most political unease. Their job is to keep the election process exciting, and if ruining people's reputations does that, then so be it.

In addition to the gender bias in political media coverage, there is also much bias in athletic coverage. Forty percent of all sports participants are female, yet women's sports receive only 4% of all sport media coverage ("Media Coverage & Female Athletes"). While women's sports gets little coverage, these stories did make it to the air:

- a swarm of bees invading a Red Sox/Yankees game
- a giant corn dog that cost \$25 at an Arizona Diamondbacks game
- a ribbon-cutting for a restaurant opened by Tommy Lasorda
- where former Lakers player Kendall Marshall will find a good burrito in Milwaukee (Chipotle)
- a stray dog that became a spring training mascot for the Brewers (Women in Sports).

The news media decided that these inconsequential stories were more important to report upon than any of the women sports that could have taken their place. According to this, bees, a corn dog, a restaurant, a burrito, and a dog are all more important than the hundreds of women who participate in sports, the same sports that men play and receive recognition for.

On another note of gender bias in sports media, during the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Corey Cogdell-Unrein, a member of the United States Trap Shooting team, won a bronze medal in the sport. When the media covered this accomplishment, though, the headline published by the Chicago Tribune read "Wife of Bears' Lineman wins bronze medal today in Rio Olympics." The problem here is that the headline lacked a mention of her name. It reduced Cogdell-Unrein's amazing accomplishment to one of her husband. This headline credits the win to the Bears' lineman rather than the woman who actually battled for and won the medal. Another headline during the 2016 Olympics states "Phelps ties for silver in 100 fly" in large, bold print, while directly underneath, and in much smaller and less bold print, "Ledecky sets world record in women's 800 freestyle" is written. This newspaper, *The Bryan-College Station Eagle*, received major backlash for this headline, and, quite frankly, deserved it. Ledecky deserved to make more headlines in large, bold print rather than being sidelined to Phelps for simply being female.

Apart from the Olympic Games, female sports hardly receive any recognition at all. In the Olympics, there is no sport open specifically for men. The Olympic Games offer a more even playing ground for each gender because each sport has both a men's and a women's division. Outside of the games, though, the playing field becomes uneven and therefore the media reports more on the men because they have more opportunities for a story. People somehow came up with the notion that men's sports are more exciting and played better than women's, so people prefer to watch men play rather than women. The reality is that women and men have different strengths and therefore their sports have different draws. Men's sports are much more popular, so the media covers them instead. If women's sports were more popular, the media would report on them more. Most of the media coverage that has to do with female athletes are over the sports which may be perceived as more feminine, such as tennis or soccer. When World Cup Soccer is covered in the media, it's usually a women's team that is playing. The same is true for tennis; when it is in the news, usually a woman is in the headline. Sometimes, even though the headline contains the woman's name, the article is not actually about her.

When women win a title or are victorious in their sport, the media use it as an opportunity to inquire about their husbands or a male figure that has led them to their success. Many women athletes are managed by their husbands, but sometimes when these women win an award in their sport and the media assigns the win to the manager instead of the woman who actually won the award, saying that they are responsible for the achievement or that the husband/manager deserves the credit. In addition to this, as with the political news coverage, women athletes are portrayed and reported as overly feminine. Notable terms that cropped up as common word associations or combinations for women, but not men, in sport include "aged," "older," "pregnant" and "married" or "un-married" (Dvorak). The top word combinations for men in sport, by contrast, are more likely to be adjectives like "fastest," "strong," "big," "real" and

“great” (Dvorak). Women athletes are some of the toughest people there are and they should not be reduced to their familial relationships. Gender bias in the media undermines these women and many others. Getting rid of all of the gender bias in this country would take years upon years; years which some of these women do not have.

Most of the gender bias in media is probably not intentional, but that does not change the fact that it is there. Newspapers and the internet have undermined the female gender for centuries, and it is time for that to come to an end. The women in this world deserve the same amount of media coverage for the same amount of work. Women are justified to have as much media coverage as men and gender bias is not allowing them that. As the world advances, media coverage is staying the same. The media needs to change their tune and begin to recognize women as an equal of men, not their inferior. Women are just as smart, just as ambitious, just as athletic, just as political as men, which should warrant them the same amount of respect and media coverage as men without any of the bias.

**Gabriel Machado**

Grade 12

*On the Corner of Memory Lane and Hell Street*

Poetry

Central High School

Saint Joseph, MO

Teacher: Kyla Ward

The child comes home,  
His gloomy eyes rain  
A river of pain.  
He erases his sadness  
with the cuff of his jacket.

He changes his pace  
And sees the old man's face,  
A wrinkly old house with droopy eyes,  
That curses the sun with murmured sighs,  
under the breath of the wind.

The door handle shoots out  
like a rabid dog snout.  
Lusting for the smell of fear,  
So he lets his shadow steer,  
And stays a little behind.

The door opens with a growl,  
Hungry for the taste of the child.  
It swallows him up whole,  
As he closes the door.  
He's home now.

He looks to the left  
To the painting of a boy.  
It stares at him like  
A lifeless decoy.  
It wears swollen eyes and a gloomy face  
With baggy lips of joy erased.

He wonders why someone would've painted something so sad.  
And then frame it in misery. Why? Was he mad?  
Was he mad at the world and all that it touched,  
And took it out on a canvas with a paintbrush.  
The dye still drips, like fresh tears.  
He finally looks away, from the mirror.

He walks through the maze of empty bottles of beer,  
That jingle and clink every time he steps near.



Past the past out dad he's supposed to love,  
Now a marionette controlled by a drug.  
Past the lonely halls and dirty floor,  
Past the peeling walls and hungry door.  
Past the memory of hospital sheets.  
Past the beeping EKG,  
That still echoes in his ears  
Even after all these years.

And walks right into his mother's embrace.  
His only escape from this place.  
Her scent and smile and calming grace,  
Now a memory of love *erased*.

## **Cade McNicholas**

Grade 10

*In Session*

Flash Fiction

Platte County High School

Platte City, MO

Teacher: Angela Perkins

Words fly around these halls with a purpose, passing through ears and out the others... and others disappearing with the depths of thought and recollection. I sit and listen as I can hear these words being spread throughout and sadly I cannot help but laugh. I regain composure as I see the one in which these words are directed storm out of the classroom in anguish and embarrassment. Most don't relate or give these things a second glance, most don't ever assume the worst in situations like these. At home I enjoy time with my family, eat dinner with them, watch television with them. While across town another may quiver and hide as the pungent stench of whiskey rolls through the house as a car pulls into the driveway. I sit and talk with my friends through social media, and browse the internet on my computer without a care in my ever so perfect world. While another sees yet again, not one person cared to acknowledge their post....not a single person who cared at all.

Words fly around these halls like bullets, piercing the hearts of others. And that is what it comes to....to end the sorrow....to get revenge for what we have done. For there is not one person who cares, not one person who noticed, not one person who tried. So fuck them...these thoughts are ones that flow through his head, like a stream, as I see him walk into school on that November day, darkness in his eyes. Before I know it...it was his turn. He spreads his words through the cafeteria, piercing the hearts of those around him. He forces his words upon everyone, teachers, students, even those who we thought were his friends. His words bouncing off the walls. I retreat into the halls as I hear the piercing screams that follow the deafening sound of his words flying about in the school. I reach the outdoors, and run until the blast of his words are nothing but a faint whisper...and then I keep running.

Words flew around that school with a purpose, one that no one had intended them to have. These words are what started this all for him, what sent him spiraling over the edge. And words are what left him lying motionless on that cafeteria floor...along with others who fell victim to this reaping. Words no longer flew around this school...only a message delivered without words. And a surrounding sound of wails and screams which I had escaped, for I had learned the power of words.

## Amelia Meier

Grade 11

### *An Account from the Afternoon* Short Story

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: James Lewis

Upon my arrival at the Dixie's in the Northside I shot a smile at the clerk, and I could tell I'd just about pierced his heart. A look of recollection consumed his face, and he instantly withdrew. I yelled to him, "I ain't gonna steal nothing, sugar." He retorted with a snap, "I am not accusing you of a thing, ma'am." His face sat smug, as his wrinkles sunk further into young skin. He had greasy hair and million dollar smile. Fit'n trim that fella, despite that Dr. Pepper in his hand. I snapped because I knew, I just knew what he was insinuat'ing with those looks, and I said, "Everybody in this town thinks I'm about as useless as tits on boar, but I tell ya, I'm worth somethin'." He however was already lost staring into the fluorescent beams hanging from the ceiling. My little lavender silk robe, tied with a bow in front, hung limp, as I sunk with disappointment. A bit of my black lace chemise poked out the top, but it didn't matter much to me. I gazed down at the floor only to realize that there weren't any shoes on my feet, but that fella didn't mind, despite the sign posted on the door, so at least I got that goin' for me. Anyways, I darted for the clearance aisle, marked with bright yellow stickers that shouted "*Deal!*". I rummaged through that aisle in the back of the store, where none of those Northside folks ever went, until buried under a baby bib, an opened pack of nail files, and a tub of yellow stuff that read "Cheese Flavored Spread Topping", I found it. A little plastic vase, a meek little thing it was, but boy was she pretty. 39 cents the sticker, read and I shouted through that store, "I'll take it!"

I then grabbed a loaf of the finest bread they were selling, honey wheat. It sat there nice and pretty stacked upon the loaves. You see I always keep a fresh loaf in the bread box. That one with the dainty fading cherries and pinstripes against the ivory background with the crimson lid. There's just the tiniest bit of rust that crept up from the corner, that no amount of vinegar could remove. I tired and tired. Heck, I spent hours trying and tiring to get that rust off, but it never did budge. That stubborn ole guy. Anyways, I bring it home. Let it sit in that breadbox for a couple of days or so, and then I feed it to the coons. Those little guys, everybody's always ragging on them cause they look a little funny, act a little funny, eat a little garbage. But man, those guys might just be my very best friends. I am not fibbin' when I say oh I would just want to snuggle on up with 'em. Anyways, on to the checkout, I went, and that little bag of bones check-boy, still sippin' his Dr.P, just chuckled a bit at me. I snarled, and that was that. I finished my walk home around mid afternoon. It's a far walk, but I don't mind. It's all I got to do. The sun was just reachin' its zenith. "Mmm mhummm hummm umm ba da budahbuddabu, and a buda buta buah." Poured a glass of iced tea. Gotta start the afternoon sweet is what I tell myself. Then I went to fill the plastic vase with a couple of witchered Blacked Eyed Susans from my garden. Well I guess I just bought 'em from the Home and Gardening aisle at Fred's in the southside, close to where the gal got hit last week when she was walking home wasted from Stix. The bastard who hit her, tried to run and hide, but the dump in the neighboring county knew what was up when he wanted to watch 'em crush that car. Everybody was talkin' 'bout it. Anyways, I planted them out back yesterday.

They might have been the only thing alive back there, but you see, I wanted to have my life together for ten minutes so I went and cut them. I brought 'em inside, and laid them on the table in the kitchen. It seemed that about instantly, they shriveled up. Leaves wilting, slumped with shame. Oh who am I kiddin'? Nobody. Absolutely nobody. I screamed. Screamed with rage and passion and snatched that plastic vase and threw it at the linoleum floor. In my head it shattered into a million tiny splinters all over the ground, and that satisfaction was immaculate. In reality it bounced up and down again, appearing to

create a faint depression in my cheap wonky floors, then spun on the ground like a dime. So I screamed again. In a swift motion, grabbed a knife off the counter and the threw it at the cheap piece of rubbish. This vase, I tell you, for costing an impressive 39 cents would not break. It did not help that the knife landed straight in the drywall, and then slide down onto the ground. I dove for it, and grabbed the vase with my left hand and the knife with my right. That knife, fallin outta the drywall, leaf a thin little split in the fruited wallpaper. Split right through a pear it did. I curled up in the corner, careful not to stab myself. Heck, they woulda thought that I'd been murdered. Everybody woulda talked about that for weeks. Oh man. Lying in the fetal position, in that very moment, I stabbed straight through that vase. The knife went through nice and cleanly. I slowly laughed with relief, growing louder and louder. I felt alright again. My skin crawled with a new flood of excitement mashed with agitation, and I scrapped my way to the corner. You know, I don't spend all my time on this place shoppin'. God I hate consumerism, but you see I got to thinking, that maybe if I could just have a vase with some flower in 'em, then everybody would just quit talking. Talkin, talkin, talkin that's all they do.

Maybe tonight I'll slump myself over to the American Legion. They gotta couple tacky casino game machines and some drinks their servin'. All the ole timers hang around there, now, with the occasional dances and family reunions, birthday party too. I just go to watch the people. Try to learn how to act like what people here want me to be. Never could quite figure that out. I'm not like everybody else. But, now I hear'd the police sirens comin, so I just sat back in the corner, and thought bout what they were gonna say this time. Guess, I screamed a little too loud again. What a shame, I was gonna have a nice evening. I think I was finally catching on.

**(Yerin) April Moon**  
Grade 11

*To the Summit*  
Personal Essay/Memoir

Parkway Central High School  
Chesterfield, MO  
Teacher: Jason Lovera

I settled into my seat, feeling the familiar red velvet covering the chair embrace me. As I peered down from the second floor of the hall, tiny dots of musicians were scattered below me, practicing before their concert on the polished stage beneath me. The mixed sounds of the individual players clashed together as they reviewed passages that were personally difficult, creating a conglomeration of sounds that would sound chaotic to a passerby. However, the mayhem washed over me like the familiar clink of dishes I heard when I was home for dinner, or the whirring of the soft air-conditioner when it was hot outside. It sang to me, "*Welcome home*".

As a violinist myself, I spent frequent hours in the same hall with my youth symphony, playing alongside peers who shared the same classical interests as I did. One of my favorite pastimes was to listen to concerts in the same venue, performed by the orchestra many of our teachers and idols worked in. I prepared for classical concerts the same way other teenagers prepared for pop concerts-- obsessing over what to wear, having the urge to play along to pieces I knew, and cheering when the group played a section exceptionally well (silently, of course). I knew a typical teenager would scoff and scorn me for enjoying "boring and drab" classical music, but I didn't mind--their fondness of trap music didn't appeal to me much either.

Although I adored listening to my mentors and their colleagues perform, I had to admit that I would gladly trade taking a two hour nap rather than staying for the concert. The main piece that night was Strauss's Alpine Symphony, a piece completely unbeknownst to me. Unfortunately, I had a tendency to drowse off during concerts when I was tired, especially when listening to a piece I didn't know--similar to how it was easy to become sleepy when reading a textbook full of foreign information. My cellist friend, Nathaniel, nudged me and asked, "Are you excited for this concert? Alpine Symphony is one of my absolute favorites."

"I don't know...the title gives me this strange forest-like feeling. You know I'm much more into composers like Tchaikovsky or Brahms, anyway," I responded, wrinkling my nose. "Come on, trust me," he pleaded. "This piece will blow you away. You'll love it, I promise!"

"I guess, but in Tchaikovsky's works, you can hear the raw emotion and angst-- just like a relatable teenager. How is something that's titled after nature going to appeal to me? I haven't properly stepped into wilderness in years..."

"Just wait," he sighed, flipping through his program. Following his lead, I opened my program as well and began reading about the pieces about to be performed. I noticed that the symphony was divided into several parts, instead of a standard symphony with four movements. Each section had a short phrase, depicting a story through a day in nature, such as "Sunrise", "The Ascent", "On the Summit", and continuing on. *Hopefully I won't fall asleep. I can try to imagine how the music fits the written phrases in my head to keep me awake--like I'm creating my own movie, I suppose*, I thought.

After the lights dimmed on the audience, the first notes of the symphony began, slow and dim. *Nighttime*, I thought., reflecting back to the section titles I had read earlier. I strained to hear the music as the orchestra awoke from its slumber, with flutters of daybreak flashing occasionally. The piece continued to detail the rise of the sun and the trek of an individual up a mountain, encountering waterfalls and storms. The horns jovially announced their hunting song through the forest from backstage, as if it were coming from a distance far away. Colorful leaves, waves and swooping wind swept through my mind,

and I leaned forward, entranced by my imagination as if watching a film.

As the music climbed and swelled, I expectantly awaited the burst of sound to represent reaching the summit of the mountain, eagerly gripping the handles of my seat from anticipation. I held my breath, bracing myself, but the orchestra suddenly dropped to a hush. The thin sound of a lone oboe greeted me instead, as if one were silently taking in the beautiful view, breathless by the cold, sparse air, and how little they were against the earth. As if the beauty and grandness of their journey suddenly hit, the orchestra surged again into wild triumph, the reality of reaching the top of the mountain settling in. My vision turned hazy as I felt warm tears of joy and admiration fall down my cheeks, and the individual musicians blurred together into one large organism, swaying and singing as one. The harmonies and melodies surrounded me and carried me to the summit, praising me as if I was the one who trekked up the mountain. The entire world stretched around me, and I could see miles and miles away. A sense of pride welled up inside, as if my non-athletic self had literally climbed up to the top.

When the orchestra faded away back into nighttime, the audience sat in silence, as if forgetting that they were at a concert and the piece had ended. Suddenly, the floor vibrated beneath my feet, shaking with the roar and applause of the audience as they gave a standing ovation. Standing among everyone, I clapped as fiercely as I could, thanking them and Strauss silently for the beautiful story they had told. I stood, dazed as if I had just left a movie, confused between the line between imagination and reality. Nathaniel looked over at me and smirked, noticing the expression of awe and disbelief on my face.

Ever since that performance, I have wished to present a story to my audience with my music, hoping that they feel the emotions I play out. While listening to the symphony, the audience was guided by the titles and phrases to form a story. However, the images and settings that they imagined all differed--but shared similar emotions. Today, winning competitions, getting first chair, receiving acceptance into orchestras are goals that musicians have in order to make it into the music world. Strauss was certainly not worried about any of those things when writing this particular piece-- but rather, he wished to portray his emotions to his audience. Hundreds of years later, he is still wildly successful at doing so, inspiring young and old, musical and non-musical. Even if it is only one person, I hope to spark a new light in my audience without using words, but simply my music-- like how Strauss inspired me.

One day, I wish that I can touch someone else with my own playing, just as how music influences my emotions. I wish that they can create their own unique stories woven through the melodies of music. I wish that people would use their stories to inspire others around the world, creating harmonies both musical and non-musical.

One day, I'm going to take someone up to the high summit and show them the unbounded stretches of their imagination before them.

**Margy Mooney**  
Grade 8

*I Will Never Go to Another House Party*  
Poetry

Wydown Middle School  
Clayton, MO  
Teacher: Deb Baker

I Will Never Go to Another House Party

i.

i can smell hand sanitizer and sleep, pure and reminiscent of a hospital  
there's glitter smudged across your nose.  
it's too hot where we're pressed together,  
shadows dancing across the walls,  
music rattling our ribs, coursing through our ears.  
coffee is sharp behind your marble teeth, cold and smooth

ii.

i am dizzy and feel like i'm doused in gasoline  
and i'm yelling where are you and you're whispering.  
we're not whispering.  
waiting by the bathroom, i was mistaken for a friend,  
but her eyes were full of fire and mine were cold and barren,  
so i said no.  
i am not the girl you're looking for.

iii.

i found you again, a city on fire,  
as i wafted through the cracked bathroom mirror.  
we were different then, you and i  
our faces red from dancing  
but you found answers in me  
and in you i found only questions.  
so in my mind i build another wall  
and i wipe the glitter off your nose

**Amy Morgan**  
Grade 12

*Tomcat*  
Personal Essay/Memoir

Parkway Central High School  
Chesterfield, MO  
Teacher: Jason Lovera

I could feel people's gazes shift over me as I wandered aimlessly amidst the throng of people laughing and talking. I was painfully aware of the picture I must make: alone in the crowd with my head down and hands clasped together nervously as I pretended to be busy. The assortment of tables that surrounded me were filled with brightly colored jewelry, flashy paintings, and other hand-made trinkets. The vendors sitting behind each one made eye contact with me, expecting me to admire their products or strike up a conversation, but I just tossed them a cursory smile that barely reached my eyes before turning away and shoving my hands in my pockets. Searching for something to do, anything at all, I made a second pass around the tables and wished I was somewhere else.

"Super cool, right?" My friend Hayden emerged from the crowd and bounced on her heels in front of me, her auburn hair swishing behind her as her head bobbed excitedly. "Look at this necklace I got! And the woman was super nice!"

"Oh cool!" I exclaimed, breathing a sigh of relief at the familiar face and distraction from my own awkwardness.

Hayden grabbed me by the wrist and hauled me over toward the other girls from our group. Our church youth group was on a mission trip to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Each day, my team of fifteen high school students and four adults worked to repair a roof, and each night we attended an event in the local Lakota Native-American community. I was in my element on the hot roof when I could follow instructions and complete set tasks, but when it came to the social gatherings and initiating conversations with unfamiliar people, I was completely out of my comfort zone.

My wrist slipped from Hayden's grip as she bounded off to the side. I chuckled as I trailed behind her. Suddenly, I found myself face to face with a Lakota woman, who I had just narrowly missed bumping into.

"Oh, uh, excuse me-" I garbled softly, ducking my head and moving to the side as quickly as possible.

The woman seemed like maybe she was going to say something, but I was already walking away towards my friends.

Breathing easier now that I was encircled by people I knew, I gave a quick hug to each of the girls. I reached up and pulled my hair free from the ponytail, shaking it out and combing my fingers through it, even though every hair had already fallen in place.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Karl, the pastor of our church, walking towards us. Trailing slightly behind him was a Lakota man.

"Hey girls! This is Tomcat," Karl announced.

My gaze shifted toward the man. He was exceptionally tall, with slumped shoulders that made his ratty t-shirt hang loosely off of his bent frame. His unbrushed black hair was pulled back in a ponytail that went down to his mid-back. His face was leathery with deep set eyes and a forehead filled with wrinkles that made me wonder what he had seen in his life.

My feet shuffled hesitantly as I took a tiny step closer to introduce myself and craned my head up to look at him.

I offered my standard greeting. "Nice to meet you, Tomcat. I'm Amy," I said with an automated smile.



“Good to meet you,” he replied in a thickly-accented, gravelly voice. When he opened his mouth, my gaze was drawn to his unbrushed and crooked teeth. I couldn’t help my inward cringe.

He extended his hand, and I reached out and took it, but my firm squeeze went unmatched. His calloused hand was limp and oddly weighted in mine, and he quickly pulled away. I furrowed my brow, and my gaze flicked to my pastor to see if I had done anything wrong. No one else seemed to be reacting. The air buzzed with palpable silence, so I retreated behind my friends to allow them to introduce themselves.

Once each of the girls had said their names and exchanged pleasantries, Karl glanced at his watch. “Well, sir, looks like we have to be on our way. It has been great meeting you.”

He gave Tomcat a friendly pat on the shoulder before motioning for our group to follow.

I slung my string bag over my shoulder and started walking quickly across the grassy field toward our vans. I hauled the side door open and ducked my head down as I wove past unoccupied seats and dangling seat belts all the way to the back row of the 15 passenger van. My friends all piled in as well, jostling legs and elbows as we stuffed in together like sardines. I finally felt the tension in my muscles relax.

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After five days full of hammering, sweat, and stifling heat, we had finished putting the new roof on the Lakota woman’s house. I stood in front of a mirror in a dingy bathroom of a gas station, studying my grimy face covered with a day’s worth of caked sweat and dust. My ponytail was disheveled, and strands of my hair flew in every direction. I cupped my hands and watched them fill with water before lifting them to splash my face. Gray water streamed down my cheeks and dripped onto my sweat-soaked shirt. My arms were covered in little shards of fiberglass that stung like tiny needles as I dried my face with a paper towel. I knew I was as presentable as I was going to get.

My whole youth group was waiting in line to buy snacks and drinks, and I hopped in with several of my friends. The gas station was bustling with people, sitting at tables in the connecting restaurant or browsing through aisles of food. The commotion was so loud that I had to lean in to hear what my friends were saying. I glanced around and casually took in the sight of people going about their business. Suddenly, I spotted a familiar face across the room. It was Tomcat. He was waiting by himself to pick up his order of food.

As I watched him, I felt an undeniable pull. My heart started beating faster and I couldn’t ignore the voice inside me telling me to go over to talk to him. I rocked back and forth on my heels, biting my lip. I looked back at my friends for a minute and down at the food and dollar bills in my hands. I took a deep breath.

I shoved everything in my hands in the direction of Hayden and mumbled something about her paying for me.

I took a step away from the line I was in, wavered for half a second, and then nodded to myself and set off. I weaved my way through the crowd of people, walking briskly. It was as if my feet were leading me as my eyes remained fixed on the lone man across the room.

I finally reached Tomcat and placed myself next to him. He looked down at me, and I could see the flicker of recognition in his eyes.

“Tomcat? I’m Amy, we met at Lakota Hope,” I raised my voice above the din so he could hear me.

“Oh yeah, I’m surprised to run into you here,” he answered.

“It’s great to see you again!” I said.

I extended my hand. This time, when he took it, I left my hand loose and barely shook it, as I had recently learned was the Lakota way. A slight smile grazed his face as he let go.

“So what is it that you’ve been doing this week?” he asked.

“We’ve been working on a woman’s house. We just finished replacing her roof, actually! We leave to go back to Missouri on Saturday.”

Tomcat nodded. “Well, we’re glad to have you here.”

At that moment, they called his order and he stepped away from me and up to the counter.

I waited off to the side, watching as my youth group congregated on the other side of the room and sat down at tables together, laughing and talking. I stay fixed in my spot.

Tomcat returned to my side holding a to-go box in a plastic bag. “You said you were roofing? Were you using shingles?” he asked.

“Yeah, we were,” I answered, a little thrown off by his question.

“Well...” he hesitated for a minute, “you see, the roof of my trailer is leaking. It’s leaked for years. And honestly, I don’t know what to do about it. I don’t got the money to fix it and I just keep putting buckets under it. You think there’s any way...”

“Well, my group leaves tomorrow, but I can put you in contact with the organization we’re working with and see if they could help you,” I answered with a smile.

“Oh, thank you, that would mean a lot.” The wrinkles on his forehead seemed to smooth as he smiled down at me.

“Would you mind if we sat down for a minute?” I asked him.

Tomcat nodded, and sat down at a table not far away from where the rest of my friends were. I saw from behind him my pastor was giving me a thumbs up and asking if I was okay. I nodded assuredly as I sat down across from Tomcat.

“Can you... can you tell me about yourself? Your life?” I asked hesitantly.

Tomcat smiled, displaying his brown, crowded teeth, but this time I didn’t notice them. I was too busy observing the crinkles he had around his kind eyes and returning his smile with a warm one of my own.

He began explaining his story to me, and I listened intently as he spoke, careful to make sure he felt understood. By the time he finished, tears were pricking at the corners of my eyes.

“Tomcat, would you mind if I prayed with you?” I asked.

“I would love to. It would mean a lot,” he replied with a tilt of his lips.

I took his big hands in my own, feeling his rough skin against my smooth palms. I spoke in hushed tones, and the noise and bustle all around us seemed to fall away.

When I finished, I lifted my face to give Tomcat a bright smile. From behind him, I noticed that my youth group was starting to gather their stuff and get up from their chairs.

“I think we’re getting ready to leave, so I have to go now. But I’m so glad that I had a chance to talk with you!” I said as I started to stand.

Tomcat stood too and made his way around the side of the table. He extended his hand to me, and I took it, making sure to keep it slack in Lakota fashion. He nodded wordlessly to me, picked up his bag, and disappeared into the crowd of people.

I was left standing in the middle of the gas station as the commotion swirled around me. I was all alone, but I smiled to myself as I realized that I didn’t mind. I looked around at the Lakota families as they talked and shopped. For the first time, I didn’t see them as strangers from a culture so different from my own, but I saw them each as a unique story waiting to be told.

As I made my way toward the door, weaving between the all the shoppers, I found my way suddenly blocked by a Lakota woman with three kids who were pulling her in every direction. One of the children bumped into my legs.

“Sorry,” the mom apologized with a haggard smile.

A week earlier, I would have murmured a simple “no problem” and went quickly on my way, but I saw the frantic look in the woman’s eyes and knew she needed a little encouragement.

“It’s really not a problem. You have some beautiful children. I hope you have a blessed day,” I gave her a smile before continuing on once again.

It occurred to me in that moment that no matter how many roofs I repaired or mission trips I completed, none of it would ever matter if I didn’t connect with people. My whole life, I had preferred not to stray from my bubble of familiarity where it was warm and comfy, clutching my safety blanket of friends or activities close to my chest. I had never realized that taking the plunge and forgetting myself for long enough to personally care for someone outside my circle can be magical. I didn’t have to be polished or knowledgeable, but what truly mattered was an open heart and a willingness to listen. After all, I had

nothing to lose and everything to gain.

I had no idea if the interaction with Tomcat made any impact on him. Perhaps he forgot about me the moment he stepped outside of the gas station. Nevertheless, I was I proud to call him kola, the Lakota word for “friend.”

**Kirsten Osei-Bonsu**  
Grade 10

*For My Son*  
Poetry

Olathe North High School  
Olathe, KS  
Teacher: Molly Runde

Sometimes when I look at my brother/  
I am reminded why/  
I would *never, ever*/  
Have a son.

They are snotty-nosed and rowdy/  
With dirt constantly under their nails/  
Their grabby little hands sticky with pride/  
And their brown eyes shimmer like beetle shells/  
And swell like those of a morphine addict.

And when they're high/  
Veins pulsating with sugar/  
Bouncy like humanoid squirrels/  
They're rambunctious, noisy/  
*Boyish*

Sometimes when I work with children/  
I am reminded why/  
I would *never, ever*/  
Want a *boy*.

Because boys **love** baseball/  
And wrestling/  
And twitching/  
And I move slowly like stark droplets of water/  
Dripping and drying/  
To thin to go around/

And boys grow taller/  
Sometimes taller than trees/  
Spindly legs as spindly as their morals/  
Because it's so much easier to look down on others  
When their below you.

Sometimes when I think of my son/  
I am reminded why/  
I would *never, ever*/  
Turn him away.

I imagine he will be like his mother/  
His spirit warm and glowing/  
Thinking and fearing as i do/  
Touching and feeling as i do/

Because he would be my flower to garden/  
Grow into the weed the earth needed/

He would be like the gentleboys/  
Gentle boys whose hearts could hold the earth/  
Boys like blankets  
Whose smiles envelope you in warmth/  
Smart boys  
Who know the world as it is and could be/  
And saying to it, "let me mold you."  
like earth born demigods.

Sometimes when i let myself/  
I remind myself/  
That the world is not evil/  
And that my son would be the best of men/  
Or else he'd have to deal with his mother.

## Joseph Patton

Grade 8

### *Speedos and Mullets*

Humor

St Pius X School

Moberly, MO

Teacher: Christy Forte

A horror story

“Making people wish they were blind since 1914” - Sir Speedo

Mankind is an amazing species. It has created amazing advances in technology and science. We have been to the moon and back. We have done so much. Yet we still can't quite get fashion down right. The main things I'm talking about are the two big bads. These two disasters have forever put a big, fat black mark on humankind - forever. I'm talking about the Speedo and the mullet.

Let me begin by saying that this is a serious issue that needs to be addressed in our present community. Have you ever seen a man with a Speedo? If you haven't let me give you an image:

You're at a bar or restaurant by the beach. You're about 10 years old and sitting down for a nice dinner. You're on vacation and having a wonderful time. Then all of a sudden a man walks up and starts talking to your parents. Since you're a young squirt, you get to feast your eyes on a man's palest body part. You get to see some hairy upper thigh, then you get to see what appears to be silk underwear that has been put in the washer 25 times daily since the man was born. Most likely your older sibling, who gets to see the man's beer belly crammed into the string commonly known as a Speedo, by then will cover your eyes with their hand. Which leaves your parents to continue talking to the Speedoman- safely, at eye level.

If that doesn't scare you into sharing my opinion here is a definition put together by fellow Anti- Speedo Associations (look for one coming soon to your area):

The Speedo (n) - A disturbingly too-small article of clothing - better used as a slingshot - it can be wrapped tightly around a man's waist to cut off circulation - also known to give off a perverted vibe that the wearer confuses with being sexy.

Steps need to be taken - fully clothed, pant-legged steps - ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!!  
And now to the mullets... also known as, but not limited to:

- Ape Drape
- Beaver Paddle
- Bi - Level
- Camaro Cut
- Business in the Front
- Party in the back
- Canadian Passport
- Coupe Longueuil
- El-camino
- Hockey hair
- Kentucky waterfall

- Missouri compromise
- Mudflap
- Ranchero
- Achy-breaky-bad-mistakey
- Soccer rocker
- Squirrel pelt
- Tennessee top hat
- European Ear warmer
- Yep-Nope

The mullet is rarely spotted in the wild, more-urban areas of the world. Members of the species are consistently found in their natural habitat... the trailer park.

(For you historians out there, or just the confused urbanite...) The mullet was first invented by Grover Tillman who was a poor farmer from Greenway, Ohio. He pulled up to the Barber shop in his Camaro to get his haircut. He gave the barber a 5 dollar bill and sat down in the chair. However the price was 10 dollars. Still wanting to get his haircut he asked the barber to give him half of his money's worth... The result was a mullet.

On the off chance that you've never seen a mullet - most likely because you live in a city of more than 13,000, or north of the Mason-Dixon line, here's an image:

You're in a movie theater. The opening credits come on and you relax and get ready to enjoy the show. Then all of a sudden a rodent sits down in front of you... you cringe and get ready to shriek in terror, but, wait - it's not a rodent. It's a bad mistake from 70's and it's finally caught up to you.

You now remember the words a wise man once said, "*Leave the past in the past.*"

Looking at the head in front of you, you then realize there's a whole other world back there. Your mind opens up to the possibility of some hairs not having seen the light in 20+ years. Some of the hairs haven't realized that bell-bottoms and disco balls are dead.

You slowly ponder the question, "*Does this man need a haircut, or a weed wacker?*"

There are two types of people who have mullets. There's the type that is always parading online saying they were born in the wrong generation, and then there's Redneck Ron.

Nothing says, "I give up," more than a natural coonskin cap on your head.

Another problem with a mullet is that it's just plain weird. It's just kinda disgusting to have a haircut that also suffices for a mop.

So please, let's stop with the mullets.

Maybe it should come down to making it a law. I mean, "indecent exposure" is against the law and wearing a speedo is definitely *indecent* and *exposure*. And having a mullet almost always brings up images of "the bad man who touched me."

If you put those two together you get a warrant for your arrest. If someone is wearing a speedo they should be arrested for indecency in public. If you have a mullet, by law your barber should be forced to cut it off. And if you have both you should be thrown in a pit, never to see the light of day again. We need to stand up and speak out against these frightening things.

I'll give you some time to mullet over.

**Alexis Peterson**  
Grade 8

*Harmony*  
Poetry

Bode Middle School  
Saint Joseph, MO  
Teacher: Josie Clark

*Feminism is a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social **equality** of sexes. - Merriam Webster Dictionary*

We do not want to be better,  
We do not want to be less,  
We want to be equal.

If the world could look through different eyes,  
they might just see what they've kept in darkness.  
If oppression was packaged in plastic,  
wrapped in vibrant paper labels, and placed on every shelf.  
If sexism was shown in neon,  
flashing tantalizing lights over busy highways,  
and pushing its way into unknowing consumers,  
Then is it possible to say they'd think?

Our problems are only displayed number one on trending  
they only like and repost.  
Our distress is nothing other than a passing trend.  
Advocacy, to them, is nothing but a fancy term.

We fall through seas of never-ending darkness.  
-Your words are a noose choking out our pleas-  
Screams get caught in our throats,  
for you throttle us with no reason.

If only someone could see that this way isn't needed.  
If a winged seraph could come raise us from within this world's hellish grasp.  
If you or me could break the never ending chain,  
that binds us to this sufferance.  
Then maybe we could rise above this perdition.

There is a change that we could make.  
A utopia hidden behind a veil of smoke.  
A world beyond our grasp.

Lingering in our peripheral sight.  
Straight on, it is nothing more than a blurred vision  
A masterpiece hidden behind a rain streaked window.



If man would only see behind the given.  
If humanity wouldn't cease when face value seems enough.

We are close,  
So very near,

To a **harmony**  
strong enough to match  
this haunting **melody**.

**Annika Petrikin**

Grade 10

*For the boys*

Poetry

Blue Valley North High School

Overland Park, KS

Teacher: Diane Morris

They told me to write about something that makes me mad  
So I wrote a poem for you  
For every one of you  
You teenage boys  
You're welcome  
Because this is my love letter to you

This is for you, the boy who hit on me when I was in seventh grade and you were a junior in high school  
This is for the feeling in the pit of my stomach that I had never before encountered  
This is for how my heart skipped a beat when you were a step too close and I felt your breath on my neck  
This is for the fake number I gave you because I wasn't old enough to have a phone

This is for you  
My first boyfriend  
Another junior when I was in eighth grade this time  
This is for when you kissed me and I felt your stubble against my face for the first time  
This is for every time I cried because you made me think I wasn't thin enough for you  
Wasn't pretty enough for you  
Wasn't dumb enough for you  
This is for when I had to say no five times before you finally stopped trying

This is for you  
The boy in ninth grade  
Who I just wanted to be friends with  
For when you said you were a hugger and I said I wasn't  
For when you kept inching closer and closer to me  
For when I just wanted to watch a movie but couldn't  
For how my heart was beating out of my chest  
For when you decided that me saying "Stop" wasn't enough for you  
And for when I had to kick you off of me  
This is for how you never apologized and  
This is for how we are still friends  
This is for you

And this is for all of you  
All of you who have screamed at women as you drove by  
All of you who have ever said the words, "Not all men"  
For all of you who think the friendzone is a tragedy that justifies dehumanization  
For all of you who don't understand "I have a boyfriend" means go away  
For all of you who don't take no for an answer

For all of you who grope and grab  
And for all of you who decided attraction is equal to entitlement  
And that I want to bang you is a prerequisite to you are a human being

This is for the boys who molested my friend when she was walking home from school  
For the boys who think unconscious is an acceptable state of being during sex that isn't sex  
For every boy who thinks grabbing women by the pussy is locker room talk  
This is for our president and this is for every f\*\*\*ing boy who has ever made a rape joke  
This is for you  
This is my poem for you  
And you know what?  
I hope that you hate it

**Emily Reid**  
Grade 12

*Moana and Romanticism*  
Critical Essay

Lafayette High School  
Wildwood, MO  
Teacher: Nathan Willard

*Moana and Romanticism*

“Let her come to me,” Moana commands as she approaches the ominous dark shore of the Pacific. At the sound of her voice, the ocean trembles before parting to reveal a path leading directly to Te Ka, the raging lava monster that towers above her. The monster lets out as shriek, clawing at the ground with red-hot hands on her way down the sandy trail towards the heroine. The young girl calmly walks through the sand, hair fluttering in the wind behind her, flanked by swirling walls of blue-green water. Despite the chaos, the film goes silent as the two come closer and closer in slow motion. The monster halts as a cloud of black smoke billows past Moana. As the air clears, the heroine stares into the demon’s eyes. “This is not who you are,” she softly pleads, “you know who you are.” The lava flowing beneath Te Ka’s skin suddenly cools and she slowly bends down to Moana’s height, closing her eyes in an almost apologetic fashion. The heroine steps closer, lovingly pressing her forehead between the eyes of the enormous being. Moana returns the glowing green heart to its rightful place on the now-docile creature and her black exterior crumbles away, revealing a breathtaking goddess cloaked by lush greenery. Moana beams.

Disney’s *Moana* tells the story of the young chief-to-be of Motunui who sails across the ocean accompanied by the legendary demigod Maui in order to return the stolen heart of a goddess and save her island from a terrible curse.

Directors John Musker and Ron Clements are Disney legends. Collaborating as directors on a total of seven animated films, including fan-favorites such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Aladdin* (1992), the dynamic duo is no stranger to acclamation. Musker and Clements have accumulated three Academy Awards nominations, two Annie Awards wins, and many more (“Awards”). Every film the two men have directed tell incredibly Romantic stories, with dignified heroes, malevolent villains, breathtaking musical sequences, and a complete lack of any problem that cannot be solved within the space of a two-hour-long feature. Each film touched by Musker and Clements has been met with enthusiastic praise from children and adults alike, and it doesn’t seem like they will stray too far from their Romantic tendencies any time in the near future.

Many write off Romanticism as boring and predictable, and while plots are often very cliché, these stories still have appeal in current society. Romantic stories allow audiences to escape into a beautiful world far simpler than reality, where there are good guys and bad guys and always a happy ending. Romantic stories provide a space to forget the complications and adversities of life, if only for a limited amount of time. John Musker and Ron Clement’s *Moana* embodies the idealization of life that defines the Romanticism movement through its inclusion of the supernatural, heroic characterization of the title character, and celebration of nature.

Romantics often incorporated supernatural elements into their stories in order to invent a more perfect world, a tactic easily discerned in *Moana* as a myriad of mystical elements appear throughout the tale. For instance, as Gramma Tala swirls around with a group of manta rays in the ocean, she croons, “when I die, I’m going to come back as one of these.” Her prophecy soon rings true in a stunning scene in which her spirit appears to Moana as a sparkling, physical manifestation of a giant manta ray. Such a straightforward visit from the afterlife simply does not occur in the reality of life. However quixotical, the visit from her late Grandmother is the source of an extremely touching moment, portraying a life that is

simply better and more intriguing than reality, one where we can spend time with loved ones even after they've passed. However, Gramma Tala is not the only character who possesses supernatural qualities; "Maui's tattoos come to life, making his body an inky comic strip" (Scott). The demigod's ink constantly shifts as it scrambles to portray his new fantastical stories, and a tattoo version of himself offers a glimpse into his mind, acting out in charade-like gestures the thoughts he refuses to disclose verbally. Such an outlandish detail makes the guarded character far more easily understood by viewers than those we face in reality, furthering the enticement of the magical world of the film. Furthermore, Moana, although a mortal herself, "has a kind of superpower in that she and the ocean are connected" (Clements, "Ron Clements"). When the heroine claims that she is friends with the ocean, she means so quite literally, as the water itself becomes anthropomorphized and beckons her with a wave to sail the high seas (Lapin). With the aid of the ocean, Moana exits the realm of living that the average human is accustomed to, instead inhabiting an environment that provides more possibility and simplicity than reality. Writers of the Romanticism movement thrived on conceiving near utopias through the ennoblement of what they knew to be true, a concept that the creators of *Moana* relied heavily on as they introduced bounteous otherworldly elements into the film.

The titular character in *Moana* is characterized very heroically throughout the progression of the film, an occurrence very reminiscent of the obvious heroes present in nearly every Romantic work. For instance, Moana periodically declares that the ocean itself chose her to complete the task of saving her island. According to John Musker, one of the directors of the film, she follows a classic hero's journey—she alone is given the responsibility to decide the fate of her world. When Moana is hand-picked by the ocean and given the task of rescuing her island from destruction, she is singled out as the character the audience should be rooting for. The main character has the identity of the "chosen one," a trope very popular in Romantic literature; it simplifies the human, erasing all undesirable traits in favor of inventing a nearly perfect hero. Furthermore, whilst sailing through the ocean, Moana echoes the voices of her voyager ancestors as she declares, "come what may, I know the way!" The heroine's quest becomes even more noble as she fights to carry on the legacy of her people by learning the art of wayfinding, embodying the boldness of her culture that her family and friends have ignored (Johanson). Moana has an incredibly honorable cause for her journey, further identifying her as a dignified, Romanticized hero. Additionally, Moana's personality contributes to her heroism; even after an intense crash during her first attempt at sailing and strict criticism from her father, she sails out once again days later due to her commitment to her mission. Moana is unique on her island, as she seems to exhibit an indomitable spirit that is absent in her father and fellow islanders (Clements, "The Irascible"). Nothing can stop Moana from going after what she believes is right, which solidifies her as the embodiment of the perfect heroine. The nobility of the main character and her mission in *Moana* creates an immaculate heroine, mimicking the unrealistically valiant heroes of Romantic literature.

Celebrating the beauty of nature was an essential value to the Romantic movement and it is a very prevalent topic in *Moana*. For instance, during the first musical number of the film, a chorus of villagers sing in unison, "the island gives us what we need!" From the beginning, nature is celebrated; the entire population of Motunui rejoices in the natural resources provided to them. They insist that their environment is kind and giving, creating an idealization of nature. Furthermore, the reason Moana attempts to leave the island in the first place is her realization that nature is being depleted. The hero's concern for her surroundings is clearly communicated to the audience, and "there's a gentle, save-the-earth message underneath it all" (Whitty). Moana's primary goal being tied to the natural environment leaves a delicate impression on viewers, weaving the celebration of nature into the themes audiences take away from the film. Also, while Moana makes her way to the shore during a musical number about setting sail, "the screen is bathed in bright cerulean hues of the limitless ocean sparkling in the sun and the lush greenery of tropical-island paradises" (Anderson). The lyrics of the song that acknowledge the beauty of the ocean perfectly compliment the outstanding animation, and according to Andrew Lapin, a film critic for *NPR*, Moana's "love interest is the land and sea... and anyone who sees Moana will become smitten, too." It's nearly impossible to leave *Moana* without experiencing the impact of a deep love for nature since the film praises natural beauty in an unforgettably gorgeous and sensuous way.

Through its celebration of the natural beauty native to the islands of the Pacific Ocean through both visual imagery and plot, *Moana* connects itself to the popular Romantic tradition of celebrating the exquisiteness of nature.

Musker and Clement's *Moana* is yet another Disney masterpiece, a film that is certain to sneak its way into the hearts of countless children and their parents. Simply put, *Moana* is "a girl on a mission. And heaven help the man, monster, or demigod who tries to stop her" (Travers). Like other "Ron and John" movies, *Moana* has a storyline that seems familiar and somewhat predictable—a young girl sets her mind on a goal and does anything necessary to achieve it. So why do audiences flock to the theaters to see such films time and time again? The explanation lies within the target audience of Disney's animated films; *Moana* is an "empowerment fable that kids might actually feel emboldened by" (Parker). Disney can continue making films with similar messages and seemingly tired plots because they never fail to capture the fascination of children, who see themselves in the heroes. They feel their pain, their desires, their yearning for *more*; adults feel nostalgia for the simplicity of the past and the films that shaped their own childhood. Yes, Romantic plots are formulaic, but it's a formula that works; it encourages, motivates, and lets viewers believe that they can make their own lives just as splendid as the worlds they see on the screen. And that's beautiful.

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## Jada Reid

Grade 12

### *Shining Desolation*

Poetry

Collegiate School of Medicine and Bioscience

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Chandra Alford

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1

sleeping doesn't work as an antidepressant.  
i wake up and my pillow is still stained  
i go brush my teeth to see a sink filled with my blood  
I go to my closet to dress myself, but I can't find a clean blouse  
because my skeletons are out to play  
The dirt covers my clothes,  
My secrets jumping from my pockets  
I lay my body back down  
my body sinks into my sheets  
Desperation staining my cheeks  
my eyes closed  
six hours  
eyes open,  
and i greet the same day  
over and over

---

2

i asked my mom what her depression was like.  
i sat down quietly, waiting, but her brain seemed fumbled  
she tried to read me the words, but the sentences were jumbled  
she tried singing me a song but her voice was silent  
she began choking on her words because her depression's violent  
my mom tried to tell me what her depression was like  
but she couldn't  
her hands were tied, her throat was filled.  
someone asked me what my depression was like  
and i told them i didn't know.  
i tried writing another poem but I felt like I was writing in tongues,  
i tried explaining with hand gestures, but suddenly my hands went numb  
i began choking on my mother's same words,  
so I tried again  
i tried to tell them what my depression was like,  
but i was lost in it  
Someone asked us what our depression was like  
And even though we could seldom explain to each other,  
My mother intertwined her fingers  
with mine  
- The moment we began to understand each other



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3

darkness is filling me  
i become more empty

i can't feel my heart  
beat

lungs imploding  
vision blurry,  
i can barely see

these are the characteristics of  
my Anxiety

i can't think straight,  
but maybe this was my fate

i can barely breathe

my chest is dancing up and down,  
but there is no standing ovation

i am left alone in my room, with no one around,  
when the show stops and i am sitting there to watch the madness of the ending,

still breathing

---

4

she weaves  
in and out

Air

the cobwebs are intricate

every last word

every last gasp for

air

when the light shines on them,

they are hardly visible

transcendental

but you can only see them in the dark

- I didn't like spiders until I met myself

---

5

each day her soul awakens and stretches out of bed

her limbs are loose as she floats from the sheets

she looks at herself in the mirror to find

she forgot to put her body on

inch of skin by inch of skin she covers herself again

she is

human

- My skin was once binding, but now I realize *it's the only thing I feel comfortable in*

**Daniel Rinder**

Grade 12

*The College Interview*

Humor

John Burroughs School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Shannon Koropchak

**The College Interview**

INTERVIEWER: Welcome to the Very Selective University of Mutli-talented Students From Different Backgrounds campus admissions center. I will be interviewing you today to determine whether or not you will be admitted to the VSUMSFDB class of 2020, and will thus have a large impact on the course of your life. How are you today?

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: I'm thrilled to be here. I've been preparing for this moment my whole life.

INTERVIEWER: So, tell me what you're passionate about. When did you discover your passion? How did you discover your passion? How did you explore your passion during high school?

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: I don't have a passion.

INTERVIEWER: Sure you do.

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: I do?

INTERVIEWER: Of course. You have to have a passion.

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: Why?

INTERVIEWER: Why? I thought you received a high school education; didn't you ever read a book? All of the characters in the books have a passion. That is how things are done.

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: I suppose.

INTERVIEWER: What, do you think you're smarter than the people who wrote the books? Do you think the experts are going to come seek you out to get your opinion? No, you are just going to do things regular and find yourself a passion.

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: Alright.

INTERVIEWER: And it makes sense, really. If you don't have a clearly defined, articulable passion by the age of 3, how can you have accurately determined your career path by the age of six? Well, some of the experts say seven is acceptable...but even more importantly, how do you keep yourself going, day in and day out? How do you pull yourself out of bed every morning without a passion, a motivation, a purpose? How do you manage to drag yourself through the day?

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: Well, the caffeine certainly helps.

INTERVIEWER: Shots of Espresso?

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: Twelve per day.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any leadership experience?

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: I was the president of the Positivity Club, special assistant to the vice secretary of the Affinity Group for Partiers and Pot Smokers, and treasurer of the Fake Moon Landing Club.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me a little bit about what your responsibilities were, and how these experiences shaped you as a person?

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: Sure. I think I was around three weeks old when I first smiled. And at that moment, I knew that I would dedicate my life to spreading positivity throughout the globe. The Positivity Club was the first initiative that I undertook in high school. As the creator and 4 year president, I, along with other core members, drafted our founding document and manifesto expressing the aims of our organization. I also led weekly meetings for which our members woke up very early in the morning before school -

INTERVIEWER: Sorry, how early are we talking, exactly?

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: 4:30 a.m. at the latest.

INTERVIEWER: Ok, continue.

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: Yes, as I was saying, we woke up early in the morning and gathered in the Specially Designated Conference Room for the Promotion of Positivity, where we made plans to intimidate and verbally abuse anyone who refused to join the club. My leadership skills expanded greatly as a result of this experience, and I learned how to work with and manage a team to accomplish our shared goal of forcing everyone to always be positive. As I mentioned earlier, I was also special assistant to the vice secretary of the Affinity Group for Partiers and Pot Smokers. My responsibilities for this role included preparing the vice secretary's daily briefing each morning, scheduling appointments for the vice secretary during the day, and doing the vice secretary's homework while he was out getting high at parties. In undertaking these tasks, I vastly improved my time management skills. Finally, as treasurer of the Fake Moon Landing Club, I managed the finances of each of the 35 members. This was demanding work, mostly because none of the 35 members had any finances to be managed, but I still gained valuable experience with organization and planning.

INTERVIEWER: How impressive. And you were even able to pull off a 4.0 GPA along with that.

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: Oh, yes, if you need a referral I would be happy to give you the name of one of my tutors. They're not cheap, but they do a pretty good job; I only had to check their work a few times a year.

INTERVIEWER: You certainly seem dedicated to learning. So what do you like to do in your free time?

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: Free time is something that I rarely have, but when I do have free time I enjoy creating new clubs and designing elaborate processes by which I can appoint myself leader of said clubs. Currently, I am in the process of creating several new clubs, as well as expanding my current clubs to

include new leadership positions that I can hold.

INTERVIEWER: What are your academic interests?

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: My academic interests include everything, because all academic subjects are interesting to me. Math is a subject that has interested me since the moment I was born. In fact, when I said my first words, “wah wah”, what I was really trying to say was, “the square root of 97,344 is 312. Learning about numbers never fails to provoke feelings of awe, wonder, joy, and simple appreciation for the world in me. The moment of discovering the solution to a math problem is a moment of personal revelation, where I can truly experience God for myself...God - of course - meaning a perfect score on the SAT Math. And, although initially very difficult for me, Spanish has been a subject that I have also learned to love. Being able to switch back and forth between languages is the greatest feeling. It gives me the sense that I am living in two different cultures at once, and thus, that I can be two different people doing two different things at once, which is naturally my ultimate goal in life, because existing as multiple different people at the same time is helpful for maximizing productivity. Science has opened new worlds to me and given me great confidence, because I am now certain that all of the great questions of the universe can be answered using four step processes.

INTERVIEWER: How do you think you can use what you have learned both inside and outside of the classroom, as well as what we offer here at our university, to become a productive global citizen and leader who can devise and enact creative solutions to global issues in a world that is increasingly globalized, complex, and in danger of nuclear obliteration?

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: With the skills I have learned, along with the global education that this university offers, it is safe to assume that I will have solved world hunger by the end of my first semester or two in college.

INTERVIEWER: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to be here today. Before you go I would like to offer you our brochure. You probably already received a copy from the tour, the information session, the college rep. that came to your school, the copy we sent you in the mail, and the one that we beamed into your house by satellite. However, in this particular version, we have the most updated list of all 2,600 majors that we offer, ranging from Fidget Spinners in Art and Literature to the History of Sectarian Conflict in Greenland. Do you know what you’re interested in majoring in?

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: I would like to study the application of principles of common sense to everyday life.

INTERVIEWER: Sorry, we don’t offer that here. Well, this has been delightful.

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR: Thank you so much for taking the time to internally evaluate and criticize my every word.

INTERVIEWER: It was thoroughly amusing. Have a good day.

**Rachel Robinson**

Grade 9

*Two Brains, Heartbreak, The Road Home*  
Poetry

St Teresa's Academy  
Kansas City, MO  
Teacher: Dianne Hirner

Two Brains

sometimes I imagine  
that I have two brains  
one keeps order  
waters the plants  
does the dishes  
tells me to mind my business  
and let people be happy  
swallows my pride  
swallows my guilt  
swallows my food  
when I think it would be better  
to carry my body into the green forest  
and never quite return  
keeps me standing  
like a cracking monument  
with sticky-tape  
on the crown of her head

my second brain-  
is far too destructive  
to be allowed to live  
with someone  
as young as me

### Heartbreak

I've read a thousand novels about heartbreak  
and what it does to the soul  
they say it kills you  
twists its sharp and gleaming claws into your red rose heart  
and licks its lips at the wretched infection that comes bleeding out  
isn't it incredible  
the impact  
of anyone who can look you in the eyes and tell you, "you don't deserve me"  
but to the writers of human misery  
and lovers of star-crossed lovers  
I ask you this:  
do you know what it is to live inside the body that doesn't want you?  
to live and breathe and feel yourself break your own heart  
with false promises and unhealthy wishes on night airplanes and ripped out eyelashes  
there is no shock, no moment of silence on the verge of tears  
but a slow seep of something sticky and toxic and permanent  
you are fine  
then one day you wake up and your bedroom walls are painted grey and breathing is a chore  
I am quite sure  
that no one can ever hurt my heart the way I have

### The Road Home

my mother is calling me home  
but the road  
is as long  
as winding  
as dark  
as lonely  
as it is inevitable  
I hear friends and family shout to me  
“it waits, just walk it”  
no  
it looms  
it calls out to me  
“I am here for those who mind the stop signs”  
and I kick, and I scream, and I curse into the bitter wind the unfairness of it all  
and I run the red light  
fall back into this monochromatic silence  
where indifferent spirits live  
making my head heavy and my bedroom cold  
I drag my feet and stubbornly  
begin the walk again  
if only because  
there is nowhere else to go  
the road calls  
“I am here for those who mind the speed limit”  
but stupid me, impatient me  
I don’t listen  
I shout in defiance  
“you are not my keeper”  
and I fly through the twists and turns like a demon fleeing hell  
because that’s exactly what I am  
I land back in frigid, grey captivity  
with blisters on my feet  
I look around me  
I can’t stand these grey walls  
so once again  
I march to the road  
shadow trees breathe  
freeze tears as they fall  
I cry out against the wind  
“what do I have to do?”  
I feel the universe considering me  
tilting its head in contemplation  
“I am here for those who mind the wishes of their heart and not their head”  
the wind stops  
it is colder now  
too cold to speak or breathe or cry  
I turn around  
look back at where I came from  
there is no happiness here  
I hold my heart in my hands

the blood it beats is new  
I look ahead  
the road looms  
and I already see the stop signs  
but is a road, not a bedroom  
and my mother is calling me home



## Daniel Roman

Grade 12

### *Realization Through Pain* Personal Essay/Memoir

Parkway Central High School  
Chesterfield, MO  
Teacher: Jason Lovera

The ambient lull inside my dad's car was shattered by yelps of suffering. I laid writhing in the back seat, alone and full of terror, failing in an attempt to distract myself from the blinding pain in my stomach as we zoomed across Highway I-141. This, I realized, is how John Hurt must have felt in *Alien* as the extraterrestrial hybrid-baby erupted from his chest.

"How do you feel, son?" my dad yelled over from the front of the car.

A meager whimper came out of my lips, unable to form words as nausea began to sweep over my body, numbing my senses and formulating a dizzying headache. My dad had convinced me we would reach the hospital quickly, but the never-ending blur outside my window was convincing me otherwise. Trees melted into the sky and cars morphed together. This was a pain I had never experienced and my cries (or for a better word, mumbles) for help were useless on the long drive down to the Children's Hospital.

\* \* \*

An hour earlier, I had been awake for a little less than five minutes before I rolled over onto my side, feeling a bubbling uprising at the root of my stomach. Suddenly, I felt my body move last night's dinner up and out of me like an anatomical Splash Mountain. In about ten seconds, everything was out of my system and my alien baby began to kick.

"MOM!" I desperately yelled out of my room.

"*Que pasa hijo?*" she answered. I heard in her voice an assumption of the worst, just as Latino culture calls for.

"Just come—" I couldn't finish my plea as I leaned over and vomited again, right as my mom burst into the room.

"What's wrong?" she asked before looking over. "Oh my god, what happened? *Estas bien? Levantate hijo!*"

I explained the pain in my side but it was a useless effort as she crowded around me, unleashing a rapid-fire of questions with nanoseconds to answer in between. She fluffed my pillow, pulled me upright, tidied up the blankets around me, and hustled out of the room looking for something to clean up my mess with. As she was running out, my dad followed in. I assumed his medical degree would play some part in knowing how to fix me.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know," I grumbled. "My stomach hurts so bad." I rolled over in pain as he massaged my stomach, searching for bumps or abnormalities that could be the cause for the awful pain. As he concentrated on my abdomen, a look of worry stretched across his face right before my mother jogged back in.

"Ok, let's get in the car," he said calmly, dragging me up out of my bed and onto his shoulder. "We have to go to the hospital." My mother, a sharp foil to his relaxed demeanor, reacted as I would have never expected. She overreacted.

"Oh my god, oh my god," she tried to keep herself in check as we limped together to the car. I struggled down the stairs, taking every step with caution, praying I wouldn't throw up again. Upon reaching the car, I stumbled into the backseat, sprawling across the interior as the iciness of the leather seats prickled against my skin. I rolled onto my side, trying to concentrate on something out of the window and away from the pain as we rolled out of the garage and began the trip downtown.

\* \* \*

"Why is this happening?" I whimpered into the backseat of our make-shift ambulance, taking the final sharp turn into the ER parking lot. The chill of the waiting room beckoned ominously as the sliding doors opened, revealing a chamber doused in white. I slipped into the nearest chair, melting into it as my dad ran up to face

the mountain of paperwork necessary for my ailments. Suddenly, the room lost its color and my eyes sunk backward.

After what felt like moments later, they fluttered back open to a pattern of fluorescent lighting as I felt myself rolling down the hospital halls. The ricketing of the bed slowed until we turned into one of the various dimly lit rooms lining the corridors. A single bed lay in the room, surrounded by monitors and what looked like a much larger computer system connected to wires and miscellaneous devices.

“We’re gonna do an ultrasound, hun,” the nurse assured me as she pushed my cart towards the bed. “It won’t take too long and we’ll be 100% sure what’s wrong.”

“O-o-ok,” I answered shyly. She helped me up and over the bed, gently pulling the sheets aside and booting up the fossilized computer system at its side. The confusion of what was wrong with me began to settle in as she jellied up my stomach with an icy liquid that seemed to burn a hole through my side. That discomfort, however, was a preference to the probe that was used to capture the image of my stomach. I felt the wind knocked out of my lungs as I tried to hold back a scream, the probe rolling over my side and pushing down exactly where the pain had been all day. Drifting in and out of consciousness, I felt it push deeper into my stomach.

It seemed like years passed until the pressure let up and the nurse placed it back on the machine. I let out a breath of relief as exhaustion swept over my body in waves.

The nurse curiously panned over the monitor transmitting the echoing waves which would display an image for her to analyze. Her face scrunched up a little bit as I assumed the worst, unable to understand the situation as she was clicking away through the moving pictures that meant absolutely nothing to me.

“It’s appendicitis, sweetie,” she said. “We’re gonna set up a room for surgery shortly. It’ll be quick and you won’t have to stay here too long, hopefully.”

I had no idea what appendicitis was so consequently I didn’t know how to take the news. By her description, it seemed like no big deal, but the pain I’d experienced all day made me think otherwise. She helped me back onto the cot and we rolled into the hall.

*What is appendicitis? How long will this take to recover from? Does the surgery hurt? Could I die? What if something goes wrong?* A million questions rattled through my mind as I attempted to distract myself from pain with the fear and anxiety of the unknown.

As we wheeled into the waiting room, I was pleasantly surprised at the sight of my parents there for me. Within seconds, I unloaded every question I could.

“Dad, is it gonna hurt? Am I gonna survive? How long is it gonna take?” He chuckled and rested his hand on my shoulder, calming the mental storm that was brewing inside of me.

“Relax, son,” he assured me. “It’s a routine surgery. They know what they’re doing. Before you know it, you’ll be awake and ready to recover.”

My breathing relaxed as the anesthesiologist came into the room, explaining the situation the nurse had just laid out for me as he pricked a hole in my arm to push the IV needle through. My mind drifted off as his long spiel became irrelevant. The advice from my father accompanied by his calming demeanor purged the worry out of my system faster than any doctor or nurse had throughout the whole day. The pain was growing, but the mental anguish dissipated as we wheeled out of the room and into surgery.

The overwhelmingly luminous bulbs welcomed me into surgery, throwing a blinding white glow across the operating table connected to monitors, wires, and IV stands. I shuddered as we rolled into the bitter cold, fitting with the frigidness accompanying the rest of the building.

While the technician helped me onto the table, a group of surgeons walked in calmly yet with a certain bravado. They were commanders of the hospital and their power emanated dominantly. I felt reassured once more, yet a nagging thought wouldn’t leave part of my brain alone.

*What if something were to go wrong?* I thought for a moment. However, my fears dissipated once more as the head surgeon strode up next to me.

“How’s it goin’ bud?”

“Oh,” I replied. “Well, I’ve been better.”

“I’m sure!” he chuckled. His calm presence reminded me of my father and the thought of my parents right outside resurfaced, helping relax my body. “Well don’t worry this is a routine procedure and you’ll be done before ya know it.” He reached across the stand next to the table and pulled out a silicone mask with a tube at its base. “This’ll help you breathe while we fix you up. So put it on and I’m gonna have you start counting

down from ten, and before you're done counting, you'll be awake!"

"Ok, I can do that," I replied as I felt a sharp prick right underneath my wrist. I looked down and saw the needle go in, my cue to start the countdown.

"Ten, nine, eight-" My eyes got heavier with each passing number, begging me to fall asleep. "Seven, six, five-" as my eyelids fluttered, throwing the room into a blur. "Four, three-" The room went dark.

\* \* \*

I woke up to a comforting silence amidst a room splashed in shimmering scarlet hues. The linen drapes over the window to my left were pulled back, revealing the golden sun slowly setting over the lush green shrubbery and fading tree lines of Forest Park.

My parents once again sat at my side, my mom gently caressing my hand, my dad standing at the foot of the bed looking on peacefully.

"How do you feel?" my mom asked. "Everything went fine, I think we're leaving tomorrow afternoon."

"Oh that's great," I replied. Whether it was the combination of several intravenous drugs and relievers that made it so I couldn't feel any pain, I didn't know. I was surrounded by my family, and in that moment, I felt peaceful and surprisingly comfortable. The surgery hadn't killed me, I couldn't feel any pain, and in a strange way, I felt happy.

Although it was a minor surgery, the terror that came with the idea of a possibly fatal injury had racked my brain along with the physical suffering throughout the whole day. I was horrified from start to end, yet at the end of the day, staring out of the sun-caked windows, I reflected on the importance of my family.

I may not have been able to control everything that had happened during my appendicitis; however, I was never alone in that struggle. Though things became difficult, I was accompanied by the idea or physical presence of my parents, a luxury that seems a given to many of us. That love is relentless, and in taking it for granted, we lose the perception of having someone there for us. And that should never be the case.

## Isabel Saccone

Grade 8

### *Flamespell*

Science Fiction/Fantasy

John Burroughs School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Shannon Koropchak

A high-pitched scream rang in my ears, threatening to shatter my mind. “Morry!” I cried. “Morry, Father, Mother, where are you?” I turned to see a small boy, curled up painfully tight and deathly still. A sob escaped me, and I ran, ran like a coward from my dead brother, ran from the burned house where we had shared so many happy memories, the house that *I* had burned down, the dead brother that *I* had caused to die. Tears rolled down my cheeks freely in my fear and anger, my heartache flowing out of my body in the form of tears. That incident was 2 years ago, in 2081, but the memories stay with me, and I’ll never forget them.

I woke with beads of sweat clinging to my face. Painful images of my brother’s death still swam in my head, and I felt completely drained of energy, as if I had truly been running.

“Ups-a-daisy!” called a cracked voice like a broken record. “Don’t want to miss your morning chores, do you, dearie?” she cackled, and I gritted my teeth to still the tendrils of power blooming on my fingertips and keep them from igniting.

“Hurry up.” growled the voice like an angry tiger. “Nanny” pretended to be sweet and kind, but when, just minutes ago, she had been kindly and gentle, she would suddenly turn menacing and dangerous. I scurried upstairs, eyes glued to the floor. Years ago, I had learned that keeping myself focused on an unchanging pattern, a dependably same surface, like the floor, kept me from releasing my power at bad times.

By now, you’re probably wondering what this *power* is that I keep talking about. Well, all my troubles started on the day of my birth, and you bet I want to go back to being a half-conscious little being inside my mother’s stomach, unaware of life’s troubles, but, sadly, that will never happen. I was born in a hospital that also housed a few very prestigious scientists. These scientists were trying to create a substance that would give you the power of controlling water, fire, wind, and earth; basically, the elements. Precisely five seconds after I was born, a collectively ecstatic shout came from the neighboring room, the room of the scientists. My father realized what had happened, and decided to go look. Unfortunately, he took me with him.

“Oh, my darling, you’re going to see a miracle with your very own eyes, at only a minute old, too!” he cried, almost as excitedly as the scientists, and hummed a random tune happily. We reached the room and my father peered inside. One scientist, a rather large one wearing horn-rimmed spectacles, noticed us, and cried

“Come in, my friends, come in!”. My father beamed and ran to the table with me still in his arms. We stared at the table in wonderment. Four glass vials stood innocently on the table, each full colored substance. One was blue and green, and its surface seemed to be covered in tiny ripples, one red with flecks of gold and orange, another brown as dirt, and the last a pale, misty white. I remember feeling drawn to the red, fiery one, as if an invisible hand was prodding me in its direction. As I felt this

sensation, I realized that I really was walking steadily and surely towards the vials. My father later told me that he had made a grab for me, but his hand had simply glanced off. I reached the table and stared. The substance in the vial stirred, and I felt something inside of me stir as well. Suddenly, the contents of the vial writhed, and became a deep scarlet. The glass vial burst, and everyone but myself scrambled for cover; I heard my father yell my name, but it sounded faint and distant. A few shards hit me, but I felt nothing. The fiery element spun around in the air, halting once it had encircled me. Strangely, I remember having no fear; my emotions were closer to excitement as my body warmed and a river of power flowed through me. My father said that the fire actually entered my body, each fleck disappearing the moment that it made contact. No pain penetrated my thoughts, nor fear or even some slight unease. It all felt *right*, distinctly, unmistakably, emphatically, *right*.

From that day forward, I had the ability to make my fingertips ignite, as well as being immune to fire. Along with that, I had been sent to live with Nanny, who was given the job of controlling me and reporting my progress. My father and mother had been loath to leave me with her, but they had to follow the law, and the law told them not to get involved.

“I said, hurry up!” growled Nanny. I clenched my fists, trying to stay calm. I couldn’t afford to lose control now. The day of my release was a single week from now, the day when I would be allowed to return to my family. I resolved to be on my best behavior.

“Coming, Nanny!” I hollered as I ran. She was sitting on her forest green stool, the same one that she sat on for meals every day. The paint was peeling off in thin little strips, but Nanny still loved it to death. There was one time when I accidentally backed into it, knocking it over, and Nanny’s scream was deafening. She boxed my ears with an intent to kill and sent me stumbling into my room, rivulets of blood trickling down my face and hatred in my heart. Now, I was careful not to lay a finger on the stool, and I edged to my own, roughly hewn chair. A piece of burnt toast sat on my plate, and I munched on it glumly when Nanny glared at me.

When I finished my pitiful breakfast, I marched back downstairs after clearing and washing the dishes. Without warning, a scream sounded from upstairs. *Nanny*, I thought. Don’t get me wrong, I hated Nanny with all my guts, but I had to know what had happened. I dashed upstairs, and was greeted by Nanny’s body lying on rug. I ran to the window and looked outside to see if anyone else had heard the scream. A man stood outside with a stricken look on his face. I tugged open the window and was about to yell at him to stop and that everything was fine, but it was too late. He had whipped out an old LD4, or Linking Device, and frantically told it to summon the local squad of Disciplinary Authorities, also known as DAs. I moaned and turned back to the body. It didn’t move an inch. She was dead. A small smile crept onto my face. My persecutor, my enemy, she was dead. I got to work, still smiling, and pulled her down the stairs and behind the sofa, heaping blanket upon blanket on top. When I was satisfied, I hurried to a large, nearby closet and pulled myself in. They would be here soon, and they would come without warning, unlike the “police” in history class, what with their blaring sirens and flashing lights. Nowadays, DAs flew in quickly, efficiently, and without a sound or sign.

Shortly, the front door opened, and two tall, well-dressed men walked in silently. They strolled leisurely towards the sofa and my cabinet. Suddenly, I was gripped with an irrepressible desire to create fire. I tried to restrain myself, but failed. A few white-hot flames burst from my fingertips, enough to reduce the entire cabinet door to ashes. The gentlemen’s heads snapped towards me and I trembled in fear. They smiled, fluidly pulled out small, slight laser guns from their front pockets, pointed them at me, and fired; a perfect, synchronised, clear line of death sailed towards me and buried itself in my chest. The world turned black, and I fell, fell into the welcoming arms of Death.

**Victoria Sansone**  
Grade 12

*The Duality of Taro*  
Personal Essay/Memoir

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Anita Hagerman

Mulch and plywood-colored spirals protrude from a hairy skin. At first glance, the potato's awkward half-brother fails to attract many followers. However, it is the pleasantly purple interior that gives this Asian root its claim to fame. This deformed and strangely pigmented starch known as taro is what I grew up loving, not the processed powder version that is seen in bubble tea shops and Thai ice cream stores, causing many Americans to fall in love with it.

Growing up with the raw root chopped into beef soup and dumplings, I now must pause before selecting "Southern Asian Taro" as my Thai ice cream flavor of choice. Somehow that sweet version of taro feels fake, as it bears little resemblance to the starch featured in authentic Chinese dishes. Would I betray my grandmother's cooking by admitting I like the artificial version of taro better?

Perhaps in doing so I would surrender the little claim to "Asian-ness" I had. Though I am genetically half-Chinese, both American and Chinese people have a difficult time believing that to be true when looking at my auburn hair and hazel eyes. I remember Sundays at Chinese School, when at the beginning of each year my teacher would ask me if I was in the wrong classroom. Though there were a few other multiracial kids at the school, I was the only one in classes with "full" Chinese students. As a result, I felt I had to prove to my classmates and teachers that I was just as Chinese as everyone else. But no matter how hard I tried, I would still receive sideways glances from people.

In my own home, fitting in was never a problem. My grandparents spoke Mandarin to me all the time. We ate Chinese food at every meal. I looked forward to visiting my family in Fuzhou every other summer, especially for the traditional Fujian food, like *Yuni*, my favorite dish which pairs mashed up taro with beans and sesame seeds.

Though my friends also accept my heritage, some things catch them off guard. One night, my grandmother made *Yuni* for dessert, and my friend simply gawked at the dish. He felt too scared to try it, especially after I showed him the raw root it came from. I told him I grew up with taro, that I would braid the hairy outside of the root and carry it around like a Barbie. Taro felt every bit a part of me like veggie burgers did for him. He finally tried the dessert and admitted it was delectable.

As I grew older and began exploring my city's food scene, I stumbled upon taro flavoring at a local bubble tea shop. I immediately ordered a taro milk tea, elated that my own city understood the greatness of the root. Though I was utterly naive at the time regarding the popularity of processed taro, a part of me knew it was too good to be true. My first sip of the drink revealed the flavor was overpoweringly sweet and lacked the original taste of the starch. But as I drank more of the tea, my feelings began to change. To my disappointment, artificial taro became my new favorite flavor.

Today when I stand in line at a bubble tea counter, I sometimes think about the question that plagued my childhood: Am I going to meet others' perceived expectations? But that question is quickly countered with this knowledge: I will never be fully Chinese. And that's a good thing. Because my identity isn't defined by just my race or culture. It's defined by my experiences and the little things like root Barbie's and *Yuni*. So I can love both versions of taro: the misshapen relative of the potato, as well as the manufactured purple powder, without sacrificing who I am.

**Victoria Sansone**  
Grade 12

*Liquid Identity*  
Poetry

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Anita Hagerman

**Liquid Identity**  
*a collection of poetry*

**Horizon**

*in the voice of Chris McCandless*  
*inspired by Jon Krakauer's book Into the Wild*

If they told me how I'd look  
when they carried my body away  
weeks forgotten  
blue and white and yellow  
beneath frayed fabric—  
I wouldn't have flinched.  
If they said I died for nothing—  
childish dreams of meaning,  
purpose like cold nights and  
desert hymns, burned lifeline  
buried deep within,  
I wouldn't have cried.

You see,  
I was never looking for the pat  
on the back, the firm handshake,  
the how do you do or sincerely.  
That yellow-orange light of new experience  
woke me from your devilish nightmare of  
goodness. I began my days running  
from you.

I guess,  
the wind cleared my head a bit  
too much—Sunday morning in Annandale  
lost in “return to sender.” You see,  
I was trying to find me,  
Alexander without the McCandless stain  
blues and purples of ruptured veins—  
Shhh, you never admit  
only hide in broken promises.

If they told me I'd be ridiculed for  
building life around the horizon—  
replacing blood with new faces  
reading to find my breath  
chasing  
    chasing  
        chasing  
what you can't find in yourself,  
I would have smiled serenely.  
If they said I never found peace—  
find me Zhivago and look me  
in the eyes.

**Now**

*based on the feelings of Henrietta Lacks  
inspired by Rebecca Skloot's book The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

I am more than cytoplasm  
and membrane spreading like  
rumors in summer heat.  
I am more than  
any statue made in my likeness—  
More than “incredible.”  
More than “indefinite.”  
More than “important.”  
I am more than catheters stuck in  
holes of heart and charred skin  
bleeding into oblivion. More than  
fists swung for someone else's  
sins and dirt stinging  
coffee-bean eyes. You see,  
I wanted my body to do  
good, more than help money  
collect for those who think  
I am Helen Lane.  
I am more than a body  
used  
    used  
        used  
for your own prosperity.  
You see, you have removed  
the Henrietta from HeLa.  
I am nothing but  
what you say I am  
    now.

**Remembrance**

*in the voice of Marjane Satrapi  
inspired by Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel Persepolis*

I know myself like the goodbye



never formed on my lips—  
you were a speck of dust reflecting  
heaven. I know myself like  
the veil covering your  
unruly locks, aqua bracelet still  
clutching you in death's embrace.  
My scream echoes and echoes  
never  
    quite  
        reaching  
            you.

I know myself like dreams  
splintering into nothingness.  
Like steely metal colliding  
into earth, whisking away prayers  
and old books more valuable  
than breath. I know myself like  
my country knows strife,  
the conquered bowing to  
victors unfamiliar  
to soil so black  
it melts like lava.

I know myself like you think  
you know me. Like stories  
impossible to contemplate.  
Like pride emerald and polished  
Like sorrow red and withered.  
Know I won't forget.

**if.**  
*in my own voice*

*if i went into the wild, would anyone remember me?*  
sometimes when I stare beyond  
the greens and pinks and blues  
of boxes on sloping grass,  
I wonder if my happiness is  
defined by red ink and sidewalks.  
should I escape between the gaps  
of childhood and adulthood?  
be the Alexander minus the death part,  
breathe and know I've reached my horizon?  
perhaps the clock is still ticking—  
I haven't yet seen the  
yellow-orange lights of understanding.  
my smile is not serene, it is  
                                  satisfied.

*if my cells lived on, would you still feel my heartbeat?*

sometimes when I close my eyes  
my soul floats towards clouds  
of wonder. is my body truly  
a part of me—do I have ownership  
of my blood and tears and bacteria?  
if you cut me up and opened my skin,  
would you see my kindness swirling to  
the heavens or my worry sublimate  
like soot? would my love still reach  
those I care about it, or would it  
fall flat, leaving my kin to battle  
crimson nights and forever?

*if i left my country, would i still know myself?*

sometimes when I think of home  
my hands keep grasping for air.  
I am lost to cobalt torrents  
of doubt, caught between  
two lives, two cultures, two identities.  
perhaps I am a figment  
of “multicultural,”  
too within myself to know  
niceties from *li mao*.

*if you asked me who i am, would i answer?*

sometimes when I think of identity  
I know myself like laughter in long  
silences and *battements* to Traikovsky.  
I am fully formed, made of iron.  
but in a room of “good mornings”  
and tight smiles and curtseys  
I shift my identity to fit them.  
perhaps this fluid form of self—  
the liquid soul we each possess,  
is more accurate than drawn-out  
conclusions and poetry.

## Helen Schiller

Grade 8

### *Enemy Mine*

Personal Essay/Memoir

South City Catholic Academy

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Barb Ryan

Imagine being in a dimly lit, damp basement in the heart of Lindenwood Park, with concrete floors and stone walls. Imagine knowing that in that horrible basement lie a dangerous and foreign enemy. The day I encountered this foe was a cold November night. I was preparing to do my laundry when I saw *them*, the creatures that had terrorized the lowest level of the third house down on Pernod Avenue. My mortal enemy. Sprickets. Of course, I didn't know that these poor, useless creatures were sprickets at the time. All I knew was that they were big, looked like spiders, and jumped. I was terrified.

I've never liked my basement. It always smells like water and funk, no matter how many times we cleaned or had repairs done to the pipes. The fact that I've found many pests, including the occasional (dead) snake, in my basement, doesn't help. I've had a few encounters with the sprickets, but the most memorable and interesting one was my most recent meeting.

It was Sunday, and I was getting ready for school the next day. I slowly walked down my old, creaking stairs, balancing a laundry basket in one hand and my phone in the other. I reached the bottom of the stairs, and almost didn't see the spricket lying in wait, right by my destination, the washing machine. The spricket acted first, jumping up like it had been burned, and scurrying under the table where my friends and I play pretend poker. I screamed, dropping my laundry basket, and sprinted upstairs. My dad asked me what was wrong.

"There's a huge spider in the basement!" I shrieked.

Let it be known that at that point, I was convinced we had Brown Recluse spiders living in our basement. My dad just sighed, having dealt with this behavior before, and told me to get the spider spray. I was wary of spraying my nemesis with the poison, as I had heard horror stories of people having mutant spider infestations due to using the wrong kind of poison. Of course, I didn't want to sound more scared than I already was, so I didn't express these fears. I crept down the stairs with the spray, and decided right then and there, that I would end the sprickets' reign of terror. When I moved in for the kill though, the spricket did what it was best at: jumping. It leapt into the shadows of my basement, and just like that, I never saw the dictator of my laundry schedule again.

I finally did my laundry, feeling a sense of melancholy over the fact that I never actually got to witness my enemy's death. As I was pouring the detergent, I heard my mom yell to me,

"I think those were sprickets, not spiders."

I immediately looked up what a spricket was, and was horrified to find out that the creature I thought would kill me was some overgrown cricket. I knew next time I encountered something I didn't know about, I would have to do some research before I label it my "biggest fear." But whenever I descend into the basement, I make sure to wear shoes and know where the bug spray is. Just in case.

**Ella Schmidt**

Grade 12

*Blueprint*

Poetry

John Burroughs School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: John Pierson

Once in a while I love the thing  
that made the daybreak,  
when cars all stopped at beckoning light  
tremble like moons on water.  
Once in a while I notice  
a train signal out-sung  
by birds sweeping dust from the corners of the sky,  
the resurfacing of the moon  
and of the thing that invented it.  
I've never told my parents I believe in the thing  
that made the machinery of mountaintops  
scraping the sky,  
telling taller tales than twelfth-story rooftops.  
Man made the snaking fire escapes,  
but not before something else set in motion  
the ancient coil of ivy, not before  
the blueprint was there.  
I don't often notice the sun's slow descent,  
the love story I'm a sucker for,  
being someone who believes  
in the thing that made me  
once in a while.  
But when I do notice,  
I feel a long-lost safety  
beneath the time-lapse of clouds.  
Once in a while the radio bears hymns  
of long-ago places  
peppered with static,  
and the breath of a dog on the crosswalk  
keeps time with the panting of engines.  
Once in a while I believe in the thing  
that allowed for the birds  
who congregate all atop telephone wires,  
learning bit by bit the secret language  
of drawn-out goodbyes.

**Ella Schmidt**

Grade 12

*All There Is to Say About Mermaids*  
Poetry

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: John Pierson

The fact is your eyes make no impression  
but that they are blue, blue-eyed muse  
of everything.  
Blue roadside rain to windowless Atlanta fever,  
stained beatitude blue of rafters.  
Somewhere blue sleep  
by the washing machine.  
Spin-cycle siren song, talk of love  
like the dripping faucet.  
Blue of college sweatshirts, somewhere  
you are the blue curled lip of tide, boundless gills  
and expired horoscopes that people the fridge.  
Fabric for reddened accolades of loving you so,  
you are blue of elegies, of the freezer aisle at night.  
Blue ballad stuff: a rainstorm turns copper  
noble green of decay, and someday  
we will both shop for baby shoes.  
The fact is you are the moon  
before you are a symbol,  
wary of sidewalk movers and all else yellow light.  
Overworked as a mermaid or a rose,  
no longer living but emblemized.  
Blue-bodied muse of too much.  
The fact is you knew before all the stoner-boys with guitars  
that our grandfathers on veteran's day spoke old whiskey sonnets,  
that some girls can only be described like first cars,  
the way they can't brush their hair without inspiring  
the next hundred silk-similes  
and all the bluest love songs from across the room.  
That the moon tonight is doomed  
to outdo old radiance,  
and the poets will go on about it for decades.

## **Katharine Schooler**

Grade 12

*It's Hazy*  
Journalism

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

The freedom of press is one of our most basic rights, yet being a student journalist in America means that this right can be impeded upon. Instead of being free to write about any of your passions, if the school says you can't write about it, you can't.

Schools are allowed to filter what goes in the newspaper publication since the newspaper publishes under the school's forum. Not only is this a violation of the First Amendment, which states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." It also prohibits the student journalist to properly do their job and cover stories that may drastically change the school, this is because of the court case "Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier" in 1988.

In the United States there are a total of 12 states that are "anti-Hazelwood" states, which means students in those states are allowed to write about any story they deem necessary to write. Missouri is not one of those states. In Missouri, schools have the authority to tell student journalists what not to publish. However in 2016 Missouri attempted but failed, to pass the "New Voices" legislation, which is a bill that would protect the student journalists' right of free speech in a school publication even if the publication is a part of a class.

As a student journalist it is my job to make not only the school, but the community, aware of events affecting our everyday lives. I cannot effectively do my job if I am being told what I can and cannot write about. By filtering what I am allowed to write about this does not allow me to properly prepare for my future as a journalist.

Out of the 12 states that are "anti-Hazelwood" Kansas is one of them. In 2017 Kansas' Pittsburg high school's newspaper staff started doing in-depth research on their newly hired principal. Because Kansas schools do not filter what their newspaper publishes, these student journalists were able to find out that the woman who was going to be their new principal was in fact not properly qualified.

The fact that these student journalists were able to find this sort of information out when the adults who hired the principal were not capable of finding the same information proves that student journalists hold a lot of power in what they write. Writing news stories gives student journalists a voice in the community; it allows the community to see different point of views in a story.

Student journalists don't write to cause any sort of drama; we write in order to bring awareness to what is happening in the world around us. If schools didn't filter what student journalist were allowed to write about, the community as a whole would be able to know more in-depth stories that affect them individually instead of making us write about trendy topics that don't pertain to the entirety of the community.

As student journalists we need to be able to have our full rights guaranteed by the First Amendment, not a small part of it. Student journalists are the future and need to be fully allowed to cover all stories in the community, even the ones the school's don't like. Student Journalists have the power to be heard, if we want to help in the passing of the "New Voices" legislation email [newvoicesmo@gmail.com](mailto:newvoicesmo@gmail.com).

**Lane Schumann**  
Grade 7

*Sleigh Ride with Santa*  
Science Fiction/Fantasy

St Pius X School  
Moberly, MO  
Teacher: Christy Forte

Santa was a very jolly, old man, who loved Mrs. Claus, all of his little elves, and his nine reindeer. His elves had already prepared every single gift for all of the little kids who were on the nice list. Since they had all finished their work, Santa decided that the elves needed a break from working.

He said, "Since you have all been working very hard lately, I will allow all of you to have Christmas Eve off and celebrate that important day with me!"

The elves let out a joyful howl, "Yay!"

Santa paused the joyful cheering and said, "I would also like all of you to decorate my house for the party today."

The head elf, Herald, said, "Alright elves, you know what to do!"

All of the elves yelled, "Of course we do!"

So all of the elves went and got what they needed for the decorations and started to decorate Santa's house. The head elf split all of the others up into three different groups.

The first group was to get all of the decorations and put them up all around Santa's house. The second group was to tidy up every room in the house. The last group was to make all kinds of good foods and beverages including- fudge, Andes mint cookies, Andes mint brownies, sugar cookies, milk, egg nog, and hot cocoa. While all of the other elves were working, Herald went around checking how they were all doing and helped with some of the groups here and there. As they were all working, Santa was in his room reading a short book called, "*The Birth of Jesus.*"

The book was only 10 pages long, but it was a very good book. It was about Jesus, and the Magi coming to see Him. The shepherds were there along with Mary, Joseph, the angel of the Lord, the lambs, the cattle, the donkeys, and the camels. The Star of Bethlehem is also in the book, shining over everyone, the stable, and the manger.

Santa closed the book very gently and thought to himself, *what a wonderful book that was*, He then turned off his reading light, took off his reading glasses, and walked out of his bedroom to see how all of his little elves were doing. When he was walking down the hallway, he smelled a delicious smell that was wafting out of the kitchen. He stepped into the kitchen and he was very surprised to see Andes mint cookies, Andes mint brownies, fudge, and sugar cookies. The elves had made at least 10 platters that were filled with all of the mouthwatering treats. The goodies were piled on top of each other to where the cookies reached the height of the Eiffel Tower! He saw elves making batter, mixing the batter, pouring the batter into pans, and putting the pans into the oven.

Santa laughed, "Ho! Ho! Ho! All of these treats look very good and I think that all of you are doing a very fine job! There will definitely be plenty of treats for everyone!"

One of the elves said, "Thank you, Santa! We can't wait to see what your expression will be like when you try these awesome treats!"

Everyone laughed and Santa said, "I can't wait either! Ho, Ho, Ho!"

Santa left the kitchen and went into the living room and saw his elves vacuuming, dusting, arranging knickknacks, folding blankets and putting them on the furniture, and shining Santa's boots.

Santa said, "Wow, I didn't even recognize the place when I first saw it! Everything looks very clean and shiny!"

Since Herald was there helping the elves out, he replied, "Thank you Santa! It has been very fun doing



this, hasn't it elves?"

The elves yelled, "Yes! This is has been very exciting!"

As Santa was looking around the living room he noticed other elves decorating the walls with pictures of Christmas trees, trees covered in snow, and there were Christmas themed puzzles everywhere. But most important of all, there was a Nativity on a small table. The Nativity had baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the angel, the shepherds, the sheep, cows, and donkeys there. The Magi were not there yet because Jesus had not been born.

He congratulated the elves and said, "Well done, to everyone who is working! The treats look delightful, the house looks tidy, and the decorations are amazing!"

All of the elves heard him and said, "Thank you very much Santa!" We all have had a lot of fun!"

After they had all finished their work, they all had a great party. The treats were set up on a very long table and half of the treats on each plate were already gone! There were plates and napkins that had pictures of Christmas trees and other Christmas related pictures on them. Santa gave his reindeer some carrots and they ate them gladly. Everyone had a great time, and it was finally time for Santa to get his sleigh ready and get his reindeer hooked up to it. The elves loaded all of the toys in the back and Santa was finally ready to go.

As he was leaving he yelled, "Good night everyone," and he was on his way. Rudolph started to run and the other reindeer followed him. Finally, they took off into the cool winter night, with stars surrounding them. Rudolph's nose led the way and finally they came to their first house. Santa stopped the sleigh and he landed safely and gently on the ground. He went down the chimney very quickly and landed very quietly on the floor. He quickly walked over to the Christmas tree and put the presents around it. While he was eating his cookies, and drinking his milk, one of the little kids suddenly woke up!

The boy got up from his bed and went to go to the bathroom. As he was walking back, he looked out his window and saw something red. He was wondering, *I wonder what that red thing is*, So he opened his window very quietly and removed the screen. Then, he jumped out of his window and walked over to the red thing. Suddenly, he saw what looked like, deer. But what he didn't know was that those certain deer were magical, flying reindeer! The little boy walked up to the reindeer and realized that they were reindeer! He also noticed that the red thing was a giant sleigh! Finally, he knew what all of this was. It was Santa's sleigh and his reindeer! Right when he was about to go back inside his house, Santa came back up through the chimney, and started heading back to the sleigh! The little boy got nervous and couldn't think of what to do. So he decided to jump in the sleigh and hide behind the frontseat.

As soon as Santa got in his sleigh, the reindeer took off! The little boy realized that he had been taken away by Santa! Santa had almost gone to everyone's house and when he was about to arrive at the 20th to the last house, the little boy was getting cold and he was about to sneeze. He tried to keep it in, but all of a sudden,

"Achoo!" Santa had been playing this game a long time and had seen it all.

"Come on up from their. It's okay.", Santa spoke calmly.

He turned around very quickly and said, "How did you even get in here?!" The little boy froze and said nothing.

Finally, the little boy explained, "I saw something red outside my window and I wanted to see what it was. So I opened my window and walked out to see what it was and I realized that it was your sleigh and I saw the reindeer. Then I heard you coming, so I panicked and jumped into your sleigh."

Santa laughed joyfully, "Ho! Ho! Ho! That's okay. What's your name little boy?"

The little boy answered, "Johnny."

Santa questioned, "Where do you live, Johnny?"

Johnny replied, "Way back in Frosty the Snowman county."

Santa exclaimed, "Then you have been in here for a very long time, haven't you?!"

Johnny said, "Yes, sir."

Santa said, "After I finish up these last few houses, I'll go back the way I got here and drop you off at your house."

Johnny said, 'Okay.'

Johnny asked Santa, "How are these reindeer flying, Santa?"

Santa explained, "Well, it's actually kind of a long story. I met the reindeer when I was walking outside and they all looked very hungry and I took them to my house to feed them. I gave them carrots, beans, and water. They drank the water very quickly and happily ate their carrots enjoyably. They ate the beans joyfully and finally they were done eating. I decided to keep them and they were very happy. I named them- Donner, Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Blitzen, Comet, and Cupid. Rudolph comes in, in another story. Anyway, when I took them out for a walk, Dasher started running after a bunny and as he was running, he started flying! When I saw that happen I started thinking, *did I accidentally give the reindeer, the magical beans that make you fly?*

So I ran inside and looked at the package of the beans that were empty and read the label on the front and the caution label on the back- "Magical Beans" *Caution: Whatever you do, don't give these beans to reindeer! It will make them fly.*"

I said, "Oops! I thought these were just a "Jack and the Beanstalk," collectors item when I bought them from Amazon."

I ran back outside and I saw all of the reindeer flying around and it sparked an idea in my mind! I realized that I had a sleigh and I all needed to have was something big enough to carry my sleigh. I told the reindeer to come down and they did. I told them about my idea and started jumping excitedly and the next thing you know it they were flying again! I have had these reindeer ever since."

Johnny exclaimed, "Wow that's amazing! I've never heard a story like that one before!"

Santa and Johnny came to their second to last destination and Santa said very quietly, "Just stay in here, while I go inside and set the presents under the Christmas tree. You can go up and pet the reindeer while I'm inside their house."

Johnny said excitedly, but quietly, "Yes, sir."

So Santa climbed up on top of the roof and went down the chimney very quietly. While Santa was doing that, Johnny hopped off of the sleigh and walked up to the reindeer and said, "Hi."

The reindeer were a little startled, but then realized that Johnny was a little boy. Johnny reached out his hand to pet Donner, who was in the front, and he let Johnny pet him.

Soon after, Santa came back and immediately said enthusiastically, "What a lovely house that was! The Christmas tree was beautiful and the ornaments on it were very magnificent! The Nativity was the best part though. The Nativity made their house even more fantastic and lovely!"

Johnny said, "Wow, I wish I could've been in there, too."

Santa said, "Maybe next time you can come with me, if you are very quiet."

Johnny replied, "Yes, sir. I will be very quiet."

Santa and Johnny soon left and Santa inquired, "Did you like the reindeer?"

Johnny exclaimed, "Yeah! It was really cool to see a real live reindeer!"

Santa said, "Yes it is. I've had these reindeer since I was a little boy and they have brought even more joy to me now, than I had before."

Johnny answered, "I wish I had my own reindeer."

Santa said, "Yes. That would be very cool."

They finally arrived at their final destination and Santa got out and looked at the house. It had a mix of gray, white, and tan colored siding and there were beautiful Christmas lights shining on the house. The Christmas lights were of a green and red color, and all of the the dots that were on the house were all in motion. Santa then saw color changing icicles on the inside of the house and they all had the colors of blue, green, red, and purple.

Santa opened the door very carefully and he stepped inside. Santa was amazed at first sight, when he saw the inside of the house. (He did not go in through the chimney since there was no chimney). The Christmas tree was very pretty, and the lights were the color of yellow. There were amazing ornaments all over the Christmas tree. There were deer ornaments, food ornaments, baby's first Christmas ornaments, and all kinds of other ornaments.

He carefully got the presents out of the burlap bag and quietly put the presents underneath the Christmas tree. As he was walking out, he stopped for a minute and looked down at the Nativity that was

sitting on a table, with a small green tablecloth underneath it. Every character was there that was at the birth of Jesus and there was a candle on each side of the Nativity. There was also a pinecone on each side of the Nativity in front of the candles.

Santa soon left the house and hopped back up onto the sleigh.

Johnny exclaimed quietly, "That house looks really awesome, cool, amazing, marvelous, fantastic, and beautiful! I wish my house was like that!"

Santa replied joyfully, "Yes, that would be very nice, indeed. You probably don't know them, but that is the house of the wonderful Shoeman's."

Johnny questioned, "Who are the Shoemans?"

Santa explained, "The Shoemans are a very good-hearted Catholic family who are kind to everyone they meet. All of the children are very nice boys and are on the nice list every single year."

Johnny was amazed, "Wow! I've gotten on the nice list every single year, except for the one time I yelled at my parents."

Then Johnny asked, "How have they not gotten on the naughty list, yet?"

Santa answered, "Well I'll tell you about how all five of them are not naughty. Every time they made a mistake, they prayed to God to forgive them or they just said sorry to their parents and still receive the consequences. But the one time you got on the naughty list, you did not pray to God to forgive you or you didn't say sorry to your parents. That is how you get on the naughty list and they didn't."

Johnny apologized, "I'm sorry about that one time I yelled at my parents."

Santa replied, "That's ok. There are a lot of kids out there who do that."

Santa and Johnny talked about a lot of different things like how all of the elves were so short, how Santa ended up at the North Pole, and about the Magi coming to see Jesus when he was born.

Soon, they arrived at Johnny's house and Johnny hopped out of the sleigh and turned around to say something to Santa.

He said, "Thank you Santa. I have very much enjoyed being with you."

Santa said, "You are very welcome Johnny. I am going to miss you very much. I hope you a very merry Christmas and a happy New Year."

Johnny said the same thing back and Santa finally took off and yelled out, "God bless everyone and have a very merry Christmas!"

Then, in a flash Santa was gone. As Johnny opened his window, he thought to himself- I can't wait to tell mom and dad in the morning! And he went into his room.

**The End**

## Hailey Sears

Grade 12

### *My Dads Bottle*

Personal Essay/Memoir

Olathe North High School

Olathe, KS

Teacher: Lanie Gray

“I’ve never seen anyone drink themselves smart, successful or happy. Most end up broke, bitter and alone.” This quote from a rehab website really grabbed at me. My father doesn’t seem much like a father. They are supposed to be there, show their kids how to live, and teach them how to grow. My father only knows how to sulk in his bottle –the bottle that doesn’t ever seem to be empty. He doesn’t know how to take care of himself even though he has a diabetic condition. He continues to drown in his misery but never gets back up on his feet. He denies letting his bottle fall to the floor and bust.

On my fourteenth birthday my dad sat in rehab, fresh out of jail; the court made him go. My family sat in the car driving to visit him in Atchison. I looked out, watching rain drops race down my window. When we got there, my brother and I saw my dad. We played pool and walked around the rehab center to see what it was like. We sat with our hot chocolate, talking about how great it would be when he got out of rehab and moved into his own place. We do this every time we are with him, but I don’t think it’s ever going to be that great.

The bottle was gone.

When he got out of rehab he went “home,” a place he execrates to be. He lives with his brother who isn’t the nicest person in the world. My dad didn’t leave his room other than when he left the house. During this time he had to wear a tracker on his ankle, it tested his blood alcohol level, and he wore it for about a year. The bottle stayed gone for that year, and everything seemed like it was going to be okay. He then replaced one crutch for the other and he started smoking more. He was great to be around and things were looking up. He had lost his job from being in jail and then rehab. After he found a job to support himself, but he was washing dishes in a local restaurant. He loathed that job, but at least he was making money.

The bottle was gone.

He complains about how his life is melancholy and he isn’t content. Before I realized what he was doing, he would make me feel bad for things I didn’t even do. He would guilt trip me, and make me think that things were my fault. But then, I started to grow up really fast, I learned on my own the difference between right and wrong. He always blamed my mom for putting thoughts into my head about him. That was defiantly not the case. My mom always says, “There’s nothing you can do, he has to hit rock bottom before he can climb his way back up.” The thing is, though, he has already hit rock bottom. He just doesn’t know how to climb back to the top. I had seen with my own eyes how the bottle had made him an angry person and he absolutely despised the world. I stopped feeling guilty; I stopped feeling like things were my fault. It was all him. He is the one driving his life, he isn’t in control, and he needs to fix himself.

As soon as that tracker came off of his ankle, he was so happy. He still hated his job and he was lonely and that is what brought him back down into his hole. He was drunk again. My brother and I knew as soon as he started drinking again. He would call me, drunk, and angry. When he is around he tries to hide it but we all know...

The bottle is back.

Nothing changed, he went back to his old ways and there is nothing that I could do about it. As his daughter I want to help. I want to be able to mend him so he can be a better father. I had hoped that I would finally have a father, someone who would teach me things no one else can. My heart shattered into

a billion pieces and I no longer wanted to be around him when he chose the bottle over our family. My dad and I fight so much that my brother cannot stand it. I just don't know how I could sit there, and pretend like nothing is wrong. Usually the fights end badly for me. I cry because of how much it hurts, and then I go into a full blown panic attack. I remember the first time I got so upset like that. My dad, bottle in hand, said something about my mom. He said some really hurtful things to me and that sent me over the edge. I ran outside, sat on the porch with my head in my knees, and felt my blood begin to boil. I had no idea what was happening to me. I thought I was just being hormonal, and fighting with my dad like every normal teenage girl. Now I know that it was a panic attack and it wasn't normal to fight with him like that. I was scared of losing my dad, but how could I lose something I never had?

My father doesn't save money. He spends it on cigarettes and alcohol. He wonders why his life is so bad. He is diabetic, and doesn't seem to understand that the things he is doing to his body is killing him. I always tell him that he isn't going to die of old age but he will die from drinking and smoking. Then he, drunkenly, says, "You're just a child. I am an adult and I can do what I want. It's not illegal to drink. You don't understand what I go through." I then proceed to tell him that his drinking and his problems are making me grow up really fast. Almost always I feel like I'm older than him; wiser than him. I know what he is going through because I have to live with it too. He says it isn't illegal to drink but it is for him. If he gets caught drinking he goes back to jail. He keeps digging his hole farther down.

The bottle gets bigger: fuller.

My father is not smart, successful or happy. He is bitter, broke, and lonely but he hasn't been alone. Sometimes I wonder that if I just drop out of his life maybe he will realize that he needs to stop blaming the bottle for his problems and fix them himself. I've always wanted my dad to teach me something, and he did. He taught me that I don't need a father; he taught me that I can't control other people no matter how much I want to. My dad has a problem, it's not mine, but his. I have learned that I don't want to ruin my life.

Thank you Dad,

I will never need my own bottle.

# William Skaggs

Grade 10

## *Memorials: More Than Face Value* Critical Essay

Pattonville High School  
Maryland Hts, MO  
Teacher: James Frazier

An intricate part of the human psyche is our memory. The experiences we have throughout life and how we perceive them undeniably shape our views and the values we hold. It clearly follows that these same principles would apply to a society as a whole. Memorials are key examples of our deep connection with our past, particularly public memorials. When judged at face value, they seem only to have the purpose of honoring a person or event. However, they have much further-reaching impacts on the event itself and on the society that they are within than one might expect. Because public memorials are powerful icons that affect not only how societies reconstruct after traumatic events, but also how these events are viewed in the future, as well as representing the values of a collective society, they should endeavor to follow a society's moral orthodoxy.

One case that exemplifies the point of this argument is the statue of Robert E Lee that was taken down in Dallas in September of 2017. The statue portrayed the former general riding valiantly atop a horse with another Confederate soldier beside him (Hallman 1). Opponents of the removal argue that the statue is an important representation of Southern heritage and that rather than taking it as a celebration of the man it depicts, it should instead be seen as a warning for the future (Davidson 2). On the other hand, supporters argue that the statue venerates the Confederate general through its public display in Dallas. The topics discussed in this paper can be applied to this memorial to help understand their meaning.

The term memorial is often perceived as being very nebulous and vague, so before discussing their impact, it is important to define what they are in the context of this paper. As it is defined in The American Heritage High School Dictionary, a memorial is, "Something ... intended to celebrate or honor the memory of a person or an event." However, memorials serve many more purposes than just this. Often, in the wake of traumatic events, those affected by it will make attempts to repress memories of the event. For example, after the fall of Nazi Germany at the end of World War 2, many Germans rushed to destroy concentration camps in an attempt to wipe away painful reminders of the tragedy wrought there (Barsalou 12). Unfortunately, the issues and feelings surrounding the event aren't easily quelled, and it is inevitable that any recovering society must face its past eventually (Barsalou 4). Instead, memorials offer constructive ways to confront the past and put it in its place. They can also be used to celebrate figures in a society's past, as is the case with such famous memorials as the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument, though the celebration of a person's achievements can easily change into a promotion of their ideology. There are also differences in the effect memorials have on their viewers. Different size and styles of memorials have profoundly different effects on how people respond to them (Gurler 2). In general, large-scale public memorials which commemorate whole groups of people tend to be less personal, and the memory that they preserve is representative of the whole society's view on the topic. In contrast, smaller memorials are usually more personal and connect with audiences better, by using personal stories and imagery to impart a more direct, though usually biased, view of a conflict (Gurler 2). Integration into everyday life, such as local statues or buildings also helps people connect more with the message or themes presented by such memorials, as they are continually exposed to it (Gurler 3). An excellent example of such a memorial is the Bruce Lee statue in the Bosnian city of Mostar, as it is

situated in a frequently visited park within the city (“Bruce Lee”).

One of the most important roles of a memorial is to constructively deal with the memories of a recovering society. They have profound effects on the meaning of those memories and how the society is shaped for the future. They can lay to rest the tensions between groups and help heal divides between opposing groups, hopefully leading to more peaceful communities. For example, in the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars, a series of ethnically-based wars in Yugoslavia, the previously mentioned statue of Bruce Lee was erected in the city of Mostar, a still very divided area. The love of the movie-star was a universal connection for all the people of the city, and the statue was meant to bridge that gap between the ethnic groups of the area (“Bruce Lee”). Unfortunately, this powerful effect that memorials have on how a society reshapes can be used for nefarious means as well. In trying to commemorate victims or those seen as heroes after a conflict, those constructing it can also use the memorial to promote or denounce other ethnic, cultural, or ideological groups (Barsalou 4). An example of this is the Khiam Detention Center, which was used by the Israeli proxy militia, the South Lebanese Army, to house and torture prisoners. A memorial to the victims that died there would be appropriate, but the memorial constructed there focused also on the denouncement of Israel, which only prolongs the conflict witnessed there.

Besides helping societies recover from traumatic experiences, memorials also redefine many aspects of how the memory is recalled. The human mind could never be said to be perfect, and whether it be simple nostalgia or views on who was justified in the actions they took, the bias of the creator is almost always present in their creation. These biases are often transferred to how the viewer of a memorial feels about the subject in question. This could include recasting victims as subversives and aggressors as heroes or vice versa. Victim complexes often form from these, which can lead to repetition of violence and continuation of the cycle of violence (Bloomfield 64). For example, during the reconstruction after the American Civil War, many statues celebrating Confederate leaders and soldiers were constructed, encouraging the Lost Cause mindset many descendants of Confederates held, which glorified the Confederacy (Horton 2).

Given the facts and arguments presented, it is clear that the Robert E Lee statue being taken down was the correct choice. The support of memorials as being part of heritage, and blatantly ignoring the divisive conditions they create in a society, can only go so far. This paper’s argument isn’t intended to support the erasing of history, but rather to show that the display of public memorials that further divide a society in need of healing is foolish, and that these memorials should instead be placed in museums to be remembered, not promoted.

Because public memorials are powerful icons that affect not only how societies reconstruct after traumatic events, but also how these events are viewed in the future, as well as representing the values of a collective society, they should endeavor to follow a society’s moral orthodoxy. This is to help heal and unite societies while still allowing space for innovation and the challenging of ideals and identity. Memorials hold more power than people often realize, so it is imperative to consider the repercussions and reactions before their creation. Once constructed, they capture the views and feelings about the event and preserve them for as long as they remain standing, passing on the values immortalized in them to new individuals’ identities.

**Anna Spell**  
Grade 12

*Lessons in Letters*  
Poetry

David H Hickman High School  
Columbia, MO  
Teacher: Nancy White

**To the Tune of Sinatra**

Frank Sinatra's "Fly Me to the Moon"  
Belted from the old radio resting in the corner  
As my dad spun me around the kitchen in his arms.  
And captured in that momentary lapse of time,  
An unspoken agreement  
claimed the song as  
ours.

Every single evening along the stretch of  
Gravel labeled Tipton Terrace  
I would ask him  
"Can you bring me down the moon?"  
And every single time he promised to climb up a ladder  
And tuck it into my tiny purse  
At night.

He later taught me over steaming cups of coffee  
How to welcome the world and its people.  
A self-proclaimed  
"catholic with a lowercase c,"  
His open mind challenged conformity  
Welcoming the vastness of  
The stars.

And when I got too big to be swung around in his arms  
Too impatient to keep asking for the moon  
Too stubborn to agree with his opinions  
And too proud to admit I loved him  
He tied a balloon's ribbon  
Around my tiny wrist  
And let me float  
Up to the moon.



## Lessons in Letters

Can I have an affirmation?

An 'I understand'?

Do I get another chance to edit my words?

That's what I do after all...

I edit.

Tweak.

But how can I revise what I never understood?

How can I gather up all those broken words and soften their blows.

I mean...

It's my job to find problems -

The things that make people tick.

Tick.

      Tock.

And then to fix.

But sometimes my words aren't the right-sized band aid

And the hurt seeps through the edges.

Eyes strained.

Mind stuck.

Stories left unfinished.

Pick it out of the silence.

Let time be a bigger bandaid

Than my words will ever be.

Tick.

      Tock.

It's in the spaces

between

      the

      letters.

Come back to me when you find it.

## **It's the What-ifs**

I'm an unpredictable ball of iffy decisions and sloppy what-ifs,  
My zig-zag path in sharp contrast to the clear affirmations I scrawl out  
And commit to memory.  
My mind and heart struggle to keep their tired eyes open  
In their continued staring contest.  
Spindly hands grasping for answers in the convoluted air.  
Shaky fingertips smudge ink,  
Determining an invisible construct to separate the  
Tumultuous emotions from the  
Know-it-all answers I dream up about my future.  
I stand,  
Feet-apart,  
Fingers glued to frayed ropes,  
Crouched on a swinging bridge in terror.  
What lies beneath is indiscernible.  
Above is out of reach.  
Each opinion hurtled at me reverberates like a thunderclap,  
Shaking and swaying my careful demeanor,  
Bringing me to my knees.  
Dazed and bruised,  
I scramble up,  
Glancing back and forth,  
Too scared to bring myself to that first twitch of movement.  
The next step could tip me over the edge,  
Launch me into the clouds.  
So I just kneel,  
The wooden planks solid beneath me,  
And I close my eyes.

## **From a Girl to a Boy**

Dear Boy,  
Please don't read into this too closely.  
Don't squint at the bends in the 'B' in hopes of reading your name.  
This is for a future boy.  
A lesson in words based off of past experiences.  
To no one in particular.  
But Boy,  
Listen.  
Listen to the world around you.  
Listen to the cries that keep some up at night.  
Listen to the bravery,  
the honesty,  
the respect that still exists in the world.  
I don't know how we'll meet.  
End up.  
What you will bring into my life.  
But back to you, Boy, and all the past ones.  
Because recently I've dealt with too many mistakes to continue making them in the future.  
So I'm trying not to forget them.

I think the first is always a crush,  
A twisted love that never tarnishes because you never get to actually meet the person,  
Figure out if you could actually love them.  
That immortalizes a person, hides all of their flaws behind a pretty face.

The second boy was a surprise,  
One I was drawn to simply because at that time, he was the only boy my age in close proximity. A few questionable dates later, and my mind dropped back out of the clouds.  
It was childish,  
the 'good morning beautiful's were tinged with insincerity.  
It was just a game,  
A game with two lonely people searching for common ground.

The next was confusing.  
An instance of exploring a crush and not liking what I found underneath the pretty face.  
An off limits boy who had always been intriguing.  
This boy taught me the importance of honesty.  
Don't waste someone's time.  
Don't be half-hearted about a person,  
Especially if that person deserves more.  
There's so much to learn about yourself from these attachments, while brief.

The third boy was someone who I could talk to.  
Just an emotional attachment, no romantics.  
This boy listened, and I didn't want pity.  
I just wanted understanding -  
the soothing balm that you're not alone.

But future Boy,

this society and my experiences have made me cynical.  
The walls I put up are instinctual now.  
I don't want it to be like this.  
I want to be able to dance and laugh like I do around my family.  
Honest, flawed, better.  
And if it sounds cheesy, or if this sounds insincere in any way, then leave.  
Because if this rings true,  
then take it as that.  
My truth.

### **The Next Breath**

Words climbing across blank spaces  
Reaching for the end of pages  
In an endless race to the finish line.  
Like trying to swim up from the bottom of the ocean  
To take the next invigorating breath of air-  
Up  
  Up  
    Up.  
Like a balloon floating up to the sun,  
A spark of fire spiraling towards the stars.  
Never.  
Ending.  
Until,  
Finally-  
That breath of fresh air.  
That sun kissed balloon  
That starstruck spark.  
Until you take another breath-  
Duck your head back under,  
Whisper goodbye,  
Dissolve into  
darkness.  
It slowly becomes a cycle.  
Breath after breath,  
Balloon after balloon,  
Spark after spark,  
Until you drown.  
Until the balloon pops,  
Until the fire goes out,  
Until  
  You.  
    Are.  
      No.  
       More.

**Anna Spell**  
Grade 12

*Ink Stains*  
Personal Essay/Memoir

David H Hickman High School  
Columbia, MO  
Teacher: Nancy White

Ink stains. Pencil shavings. A callus on my right middle finger that feels more like leather than skin now, tougher even than the ones I got on my palms playing on the monkey bars in elementary school.

It all started in a second grade classroom at Russell Elementary. My teacher, Ms. Gehringer, created a monthly newsletter, *Ms.? ?G's? ?Busy? ?Bees*, that the whole class would write together to send home to parents about the current events of our classroom.

Inspired by our class newsletter, I went home one night and decided I wanted to found my own neighborhood newspaper. It would be a conversation starter, a way to get to know my neighbors and showcase the latest neighborhood gossip - not that there was much. I grabbed a stack of clean printer paper and a handful of pens and began stenciling out the paper into three sections; articles, art, and poetry. I wrote my heart out that night, eyes blurring from the effort to trace. Each. Letter. Perfectly. It was the first time I had full control. The first time I was able to push past my quiet exterior, putting my thoughts into words. Being able to double check and triple check the details made it so much easier for me to open myself up to others.

The next day I enlisted the help of my next door neighbors Maddie and Emily to be “guest reporters.” Even with their help, the process took hours, but eventually we were able to produce ten copies of our first edition. When we were done, we gathered up our papers and passed them out to our neighbors for a quarter each.

My paper lasted through six issues. Six issues doesn't seem like much, but it sparked a wild passion for writing, and more specifically, journalism.

My freshman year of high school, I held a school newspaper in my lap during class, seeing a fellow student's name at the top of the spread and cringing at the thought of all 1,671 pairs of eyes of the student population critiquing my writing. My fear of judgement got in the way of participating in what I loved, my fear so suffocating that it took me until sophomore year to work up the courage to enroll in Newspaper.

I took a breath and climbed back onto the monkey bars and began to toughen myself. The risk I took in putting myself and my writing in front of others, and in front of the school, still tugged at the back of my mind, but after my first day of journalism, the fears were forgotten.

I jumped headfirst into journalism, learning the ins and outs of the AP Stylebook, how to conduct interviews, and lay out newspaper spreads. I was able to share my love of writing with a dozen other dedicated staff members, and eventually on a national scale.

Newspaper gave me the opportunity to travel the country; I attended national journalism conventions in Los Angeles and Seattle, where I was able to compete in write-offs, earning a national rating of excellence in News Writing.

A journalist I met in Los Angeles explained that “when you sit down and give the person the courtesy of your humanity, you are making the story infinitely better.” This has resonated with me since, perfectly encapsulating why I love journalism. Journalism has allowed for so many new connections throughout my community, simply by listening to others tell their stories.

Three years later, I'm the Editor-in-Chief of my school's news magazine, the *Purple & Gold*. 1,671 pairs of eyes scrutinizing and reading my work, but I invite them to. I want my voice to carry

weight, to reach even one of those people and to make them think. Now my monkey bars are the pages I scribble out, the words I can play with on a page, and I want to keep climbing.

**Brittany Strasburger**  
Grade 11

*Moral Complications of Compulsory Vaccinations in the United States*  
Critical Essay

Pattonville High School  
Maryland Hts, MO  
Teacher: James Frazier

On October 14th, 2017, a Detroit mother was imprisoned for the refusal to vaccinate her child. Despite the consequences, the young mother stated in an interview with the Chicago Tribune that she “would do it all over again” if given the chance (Chicago Tribune). She spent almost a week in jail after refusal to vaccinate her child even after a court order. The parents were divorced and during the custody battle, it was brought up that the father wanted the child vaccinated but the mother did not. The court case was tried and the mother was found incapable of making the decision herself for the well-being of her child. After she was court-ordered and faced with a federal offense, she stayed devout in her beliefs. The focus was not on the fact that she was imprisoned, but rather why she continued to promote her beliefs after such harsh punishment.

The young mother is what is described as an “anti-vaxxist”, or someone who is against the use of vaccinations to prevent diseases. Parents across the world have fallen victim to falsified evidence that supports the anti-vaccination movement. With a gaining popularity due to the increase in stronger viruses, contaminating populations, the fight for compulsory vaccinations has grown in size and become increasingly relevant in today’s society. While it may seem absurd to some, choosing to not vaccinate for personal reasons is usually a result of false information. Supporters of these movements wholeheartedly believe “facts” that are debunked by scientific evidence. Despite scientific evidence against these falsified claims, anti-vaxxists continue to believe “unproven theories alleging connections between vaccines and illnesses including autism, diabetes, and multiple sclerosis” as stated by James Colgrove, a professor at the Center for the History and Ethics of Public Health at Columbia University. Although these “facts” are false, anti-vaxxists truly believe them. In an article published in 2001, Gregory A. Poland and colleagues describe how “information, accurate or inaccurate, is widely available, utilized, and promulgated across the world via internet”. Since information is more readily available, movements as such can reach more people in a shorter amount of time.

The concerns commonly expressed by anti-vaccine groups include the idea that “immunobiologics (vaccines) are foreign material injected into the body of an otherwise healthy person, increasing their risk of disease rather than protecting against them” (Poland). This strong-held belief causes problems when it infringes on the well-being of others who cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons. Such as the young mother described above, her personal belief is infringing on not only the well being of her child but everyone he comes in contact with. The personal belief of some has the possibility of decreasing quality of life for the majority of the population.

Recently, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has come forward about the dangers of not vaccinating yourself and your children, stating that:

“The chances of your child getting a case of measles or chicken pox or whooping cough might be quite low today. But vaccinations are not just for protecting ourselves, and are not just for today. They also protect the people around us (some of whom may be unable to get certain vaccines, or might have failed to respond to a vaccine, or might be susceptible for other reasons). And they also protect our children’s children and *their* children by keeping diseases that we have *almost* defeated from making a comeback” (Centers for Disease Control).

Therefore, by receiving vaccinations you are not only protecting yourself but also the people around you. This brings up an important question: do we have a moral obligation to protect people besides

ourselves? The argument, therefore, is whether or not philosophical or personal belief is justification to be exempt from vaccinations.

The main purpose of vaccinations is to prevent outbreaks by providing temporary immunity to certain viruses and diseases as well as protecting those who cannot be immunized for medical reasons. Currently, vaccinations are not mandated by the federal government, but rather controlled and regulated by state governments. Most states control and regulate vaccinations by having immunization records as a requirement for most students to attend public school. This does not, however, apply to private schooling or homeschooling, so children who fall under either category are technically not mandated to receive vaccinations. Roughly around 5.4 million children ages 6-18 attend private school, while 1.8 million children are homeschooled, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Since private schools and homeschooling are technically not under the control of the state, it is up to the parent or administration to stay up-to-date on vaccinations. Staying up-to-date on vaccinations can be difficult when there's no one enforcing you to do so, allowing more children to go unvaccinated.

As more children go unvaccinated, the risk of an outbreak increases. Although the logical argument would be to have government mandated vaccinations, it would be considered immoral since there is no way to determine which vaccines should and should not be mandatory, and forcing all of them would lessen the liberty of the people. The immoral actions of mandating compulsory vaccinations outweigh the consequences of not enforcing vaccinations. This taking into account that despite being effective, compulsory medical procedures are immoral. Stricter guidelines in vaccination exemptions are equally effective in preventing outbreaks, and without the option of exemption, parents will still continue to not vaccinate even with laws set in place to prevent such actions. In order to prevent this, the United States should not make vaccinations compulsory, but rather use stricter guidelines in vaccination exemptions to ensure a certain standard of health without imposing on personal beliefs.

Although the personal beliefs of anti-vaxxists are seen as wrong, according to the deontology and categorical imperative viewpoint, believing in false facts does not constitute a mental instability strong enough to have personal rights taken away. The categorical imperative (also known and seen in/as Kantian ethics) was introduced by Immanuel Kant in his publication *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, defined as "unconditional moral obligation that is binding in all circumstances and is not dependent on a person's inclination or purpose". This is used to show that we cannot justify infringing on the liberty of some, in order to possibly increase lives saved; especially when evidence suggests that compulsory vaccinations will not completely eliminate non-vaccinators.

Compulsory vaccinations have been used before in history but once an outbreak had already begun, not in order to prevent the outbreak. As reported by the Center of Disease Control, the devastating smallpox disease was able to be eradicated by 1953 in Europe due to compulsory vaccinations, but there were still people who challenged the law and remained unimmunized yet never contracted the disease. Without an outbreak currently happening, supporters of the anti-vaccination movement will not feel obligated to trade in their personal beliefs for (what they believe is) false security. Even if you create harsher punishments for those who choose not to vaccinate, they will continue to break the law by not vaccinating. In addition, you cannot lawfully punish someone strictly for personal beliefs that technically do not break any laws and do not have a direct causation to the decreased well-being of another.

The immorality of compulsory vaccinations creates a larger negative impact than continuing outbreaks that otherwise would have been prevented. According to Immanuel Kant's ethical theory of deontology, summarized by journalist Larry Alexander, the "action should be based on whether that action itself is right or wrong under a series of rules, rather than based on the consequences of the action". Therefore, the ends do not justify the means. While we should force vaccinations, we morally cannot. The duty still remains of ensuring a certain quota in the quality of life for everyone. Stricter guidelines and decreased availability of vaccination exemptions have been proven to prevent outbreaks, while still keeping a set standard of liberty for all Americans, including anti-vaxxists. However with the increase in stricter guidelines from what we have now, state governments can increase the level of punishments for those who choose to not follow the guidelines set. Currently the only penalty for refusal to vaccinate is exclusion from school until the requirements are met.



In a recent case study of the guidelines set by states in regards to vaccination exemptions performed by Jennifer S. Rota and colleagues in 2001, they found that the most effective methods in strict vaccination exemptions involve an extensive process to obtain the exemption. The process would typically include mandatory completion of classes that teach the dangers of not vaccinating, signatures or permission from state officials, and in the case of religious exemption, signed agreement from the head of church for such religion. All states that adhered to the most extensive process and the lowest percentage of exemption rates (less than 0.5 percent), had the lowest outbreak rates out of all 48 states that were surveyed with less than one percent infected. These statistics are proven for causation versus correlation with evidence of an “inverse relationship... observed between the complexity of requirements and the proportion of children claiming exemptions” (Rota). Even with such evidence, concerns arise if there were to be an immediate threat of a life threatening outbreak. However, each of the 48 states surveyed reported that if there were to be a life threatening outbreak, such as the measles outbreak in 1993-1998, none allowed philosophical exemption. Therefore proving that school vaccine mandates with personal belief exemptions can be “designed in a way that allows for personal freedom yet minimizes unfairness” (Rota).

Although wrong in her thinking, the young mother beliefs were valid in such a way that she truly believed them regardless of the absurdity. Her son is not old enough to make vaccination decisions on his own, so therefore it is the duty of the parent to make the right decision. In her mind, the right decision was to not vaccinate. It is the duty of the government and its people to inform and educate the “anti-vaxxists” of the harms in not vaccinating because only that and stricter guidelines can ensure an increased quality of life without infringing on personal beliefs. There is not an immediate threat of an outbreak, so therefore the risks outweigh the harms of not using universal compulsory vaccinations.

Compulsory vaccinations are immoral and useless when stricter guidelines are more effective. Without the option of exemption people will continue to not vaccinate, even if it involves going against the law. Therefore, the United States should not make vaccinations compulsory, but rather use stricter guidelines in vaccination exemptions to ensure a certain standard of health without imposing on personal beliefs. This option of outbreak prevention is not only feasible, but it allows for the highest quality of life for both sides of the anti-vaccination debate. Vaccinations are a mandatory part of life to ensure safety for the mass of the population. However we cannot force beliefs onto someone else when there is not a present danger nor a moral obligation proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

**Ethan Sutton**

Grade 10

*pro-vanity*

Poetry

David H Hickman High School

Columbia, MO

Teacher: Nancy White

An idol *worshipped* is a life time wasted

An idle mistake

I only know cause it's one *I've made*

Boo hoo

.... oh well

I make poetry for a generation of teens that abbreviate whatever they mean to three beats cause they don't value the art of speak and spell

As if you couldn't tell I'm no better

My name is *e* sometimes preceded by *mr* but only ever if that someone is following it up with you're making a scene

I construct the robust behind locked doors

I make up your mind since **you** lost yours

Upon this rock i shall stand

My empire will build

Upon this spot pen and pad in my hand

guts shall *spill*

*In school...* i was so pore kids called me epidermis

No sack lunch only ice cube soup in my thermos.

They say kid why do you gotta be such a show off?

I say i have tricks up my sleeve.

I just hope i never take my coat off.

## Alexander Thill

Grade 12

*A Great Crisis Is at Hand*  
Science Fiction/Fantasy

Blue Valley Northwest High School  
Overland Park, KS  
Teacher: Bill Smithyman

*Where the hell did Lucy go?* Colonel Potuit floated idly along the fuselage of her current residency: a two-man space plane of sorts – designed for moderately long missions. The word “moderately” seemed an ironic choice to describe a craft designed for the deepest trek into the black up to this point, the good Col. notes, passing by a now nearly half-empty food storage room. Besides food, the ship outsizes its crew’s necessities tenfold. This, as Potuit’s been told, is so that it may be reused in the near future for interplanetary rendezvous. To an astronaut whose comrade pilot tends to disappear, however, the interior is a bit extra roomy.

The portholes (only three, on Potuit’s right side) on the ship’s wall offered a view common to nobody in human history, until Cols. Josey Potuit and Anders Lusitania ventured into this particular part of the Milky Way. Just outside the window glared the dusty Ares Marble itself, the Elysium Planitia streaking slowly by. Even if the ride was a bit long, the views were stunningly gratifying. Josey’s childhood had been oversaturated with posters of the red planet, amateur – and then professional – telescopic photography of Mars and other planets, and a weird knack for mathematics.

However, all her training at the National Space Agency couldn’t prepare her for what Potuit had been facing for the last three years: an antisocial astronaut. How someone, who was the epitome of charismatic grace on all otherwise occasions, could then transform into a recluse the very moment the Orion II left the ground, she had no idea. But Lusitania, or *Lucy*, as Potuit in her annoyance had taken to calling the celestial introvert, did just that. His video logs became strictly-enforced private times, as eloquently stated on Col. Lucy’s door in sharpie letters: “OUT. PRIVACY. LOG.” on a piece of government issued gridline paper. *Oh, what intelligence that G.I. Bill Ph.D. afforded him, to write with such grace*, Potuit snidely remarked on her video logs, which Lusitania was ironically rather interested in observing.

But, then, here was his door. That gaudy warning sign was gone, so – presumably – Col. Lusitania was available to speak, a distinction previously unheard-of on Josey’s previous four missions. He and she were equals; appointments should be unnecessary, especially when living together for the longest-ever-yet space endeavor. These months, as in the last eight of the mission’s seventeen, Potuit had gotten used to a solitary existence, eventually nailing down and subsequently reinventing forty different game-modes of Spider Solitaire. Now, with the climax of the mission so readily at hand, the annoyance had become dire; landing procedures had to begin in 36 hours.

“Hey, Lucy,” Potuit slapped her open palm on the metal separator. “Hey. We need to get the mobile labs set up for tomorrow.”

The only audible response from the inside of the room was the automatic rustle of the on-board A/C, an eerie swish muffled by the closed door. She rapped on the port again.

“Alright, asshole. I’m gonna go get my portion set up without you. Hope you enjoy spending all tomorrow morning getting those colonies seeded, cause I’m not gonna help,” Potuit lied. She probably would end up putting the entire mobile lab together by herself, while Lusitania remained holed up for all space and time.

Back down the fuselage, only about halfway back this time. These mounted experiments had sat dormant for most of the journey; their utility only became relevant with Mars dirt. Most of the undone experiments were either looking for dead organisms, trying to grow new organisms, or growing new

organisms and then killing them. All the other boxes on the walls had been micro-gravity-dependent, and thus Potuit had finished all of them on the way here.

These new experiments were the fun ones. These actually required the astronauts to complete their mission; all the others could have been done back on the orbiting space station, had there been enough room. Potuit lovingly began unlatching the boxes labelled “EXP2” and gently unwrapping instruction booklets. The first instruction booklet was more like a pamphlet, actually, since the instructions were only two pages long. The others, though, took a good while to get set up. Potuit ended up laboring over the boxes for the whole four hours of her assigned morning work schedule. Exhausted, she moseyed down to the “kitchen”, resembling more of a high-tech pantry than a place for cooking genuine meals.

Food for such a long mission proved difficult to keep interesting, the two Information Age Argonauts found. Around month three, peanut butter and jelly tortillas started losing their kick. Then, around month five, so did *toasted* peanut butter and jelly tortillas. Today, the menu consisted of rehydrated-dehydrated egg and what little they had left of cumin-substitute spice sauce. That and a weird brooding feeling when Lucy didn’t even show for lunch, his second-favorite time of the day. Josey ate and waited for around a half hour, by her watch, then decided to bring lunch to him personally – partially to be a generous crewmate, but mostly so she had an excuse to open his door without permission. In minutes, a (comparably, for a space kitchen) fabulous meal was prepared and sailing along the hallway with Col. Potuit.

Lusitania’s door was... exactly as it had been five hours prior. *As expected, I guess*, thought Potuit, though it somehow seemed odd that he hadn’t exited his chambers for, like, all day. In vestigial regard for privacy, Josey knocked a tap-tap-*tuh-tap-tap* on the titanium door, decorated only with the word “bedroom” stenciled in Latin, Cyrillic, and Chinese characters. She knocked again, after a minute, all the while advertising the admittedly just-alright chicken with eloquence. Still, for several rounds of barking and knocking on the door, there was no response.

With faux deference, Potuit creaked the noiseless door open by inches, peaking her ponytailed head around with the Velcro plate as soon as the opening was wide enough. The first thing she noticed was Col. Lusitania’s disembodied boot, floating footless at eye-level (though, weightless, eye-level was more of a polar measurement than vertical). After that, an oxygen tank; *Wait, no*, thought Josey, *why does he have a Nitrogen tank out?* The tank, newly disconnected from the Air Resolution unit, floated lackadaisically “up”, Potuit lifting her eyes to follow it. After that came the balding scalp and, then, along with a (given the circumstances) relatively calm exclamation from Col. Josey Potuit, materialized the dead, staring eyes of Col. Anders Lusitania. The mask covering his mouth and nose was attached by the expandable plastic tube from the emergency oxygen reserves.

Almost immediately (following the curt shriek she had involuntarily loosed) Col. Potuit’s days in the Army came flooding back to her. Concurrently unstrapping her crewmate from his donned mask and checking his pulse, Potuit found Lucy’s sleeping bag was probably the best place to attempt CPR, and began pulling his lifeless body across the room. Strapped in with Lucy’s now-cold body, the living astronaut attempted breaths and chest compressions for what felt like an hour, before finally collapsing – or, rather, just balling up in an emotional, weightless desperation – into exhausted tears.

Colonel Lusitania was dead, had died probably hours prior. Really, had probably offed himself sometime late the night before, before breakfast. Taking a few minutes to compose her thoughts and, hopefully, vocal chords, Josey resolved to signal Houston the news, request advice for procedure. Turning to the late Lucy’s workstation, that goal was quickly diminished. The computer was fried; it looked almost exactly like, simultaneously, a really terribly expensive seafood dish and a scene from a shitty B-Horror science fiction movie from her adolescence. By any means, a message from this computer would not be happening anytime soon.

Panicked, the Colonel started to attempt reassembly on the only computer on the ship that could parlay with the Surface Communication Antenna. Reaching around the monitor’s mangled face, Potuit found a note next to the melted ethernet cable port.

The note was on Lusitania’s trademark resumé paper, scrawled in surprisingly calm, neat lettering.

It had a title, which – of all the things currently happening currently – struck Potuit as patently odd. She read:

*Our Martyrdom*

*Hello, Josey.*

*It appears now that you've found my body, and a (hopefully) totally nonfunctional comm. system. Broken now for at least twelve hours. It's really better this way.*

*There's really nothing for you to do now, Josey, so please – read all the way through this before you go trying to ruin anything for me.*

*First, we will crash into Mars. We – repeat – will crash into Mars. The ship is pointed such that our crash will be spectacular, our remains irrecoverable. There is no fuel left. The tanks have been made to leak, I allowed for this on our last EVA when I fixed the Ammonia leak: I started another one on the fuel tanks. The discharge of fuel has been factored into the redirection of this ship to its current path. There is no fuel left. Do not try to change course. You cannot.*

*Second, and far more importantly, our communications with Earth are cut off, blocked, ended – and have been for the last half day or so. You cannot contact Earth. You cannot ask for help, nor could they help you if you could ask. It's better if you don't even try to ask – they will not know how or why we crashed. We shall be lauded as tragic heroes, not condemned as idiots, or maniacs, or lunatics. Do not try to contact Earth – at this point, your best outcome of trying would be sustained electrocution.*

*I've left your air conditioning on, your power supply to your precious experiments and kitchen. For your comfort in your final hours. Speaking of which, if you find this any time after 1000h, you have fewer than 36.*

*It really has been swell to work with you, Ms. Potuit. You were quite tolerant of my plan, though you knew nothing of it.*

*We will be famous, Josey. The first man and first woman to die on Mars. We're assured to be in history books, to have monuments at home, to be written and sung about. My children will be famous, set for life. It truly is a shame you were unable to start a family before our grand finale. So it goes.*

*Think about it – had we survived this mission, our names would be lost in history, rubbed into irrelevance by the racing eons ———*

She crushed the note in her hand. The momentum of the fastballed note towards the wall started Potuit's exit from the room, and she propelled herself down to her own room to grab supplies. Fumbling in the drawer of replaceable electronics, she found a radio transmitter small enough to fit inside the palm of her EVA suit's glove, a roll of solid-core aluminum wire, and a USB to AV cable. Utilizing five semesters of a computer science minor at Yale, she constructed and assembled a radio dish that – given precision and some really *really* good fortune – could transmit signal from her laptop, reflect off the Surface Communication Antenna, and send some semblance of an SOS to Houston.

Turning on her laptop, the jury-rigged dish shorted out the USB port, and by extension fried the laptop's inner power lines. Potuit grabbed a plastic sextant from the box of emergency supplies. After another period of time wasted, Lucy's grim sentence was proven true. Their path was into Hell, a downward trajectory severely unadvisable for those wishing to arrive with all limbs and heads attached.

Potuit had never put on an EVA suit without assistance, but managed it in a relatively impressive time. Carrying one backup laptop, a USB cord, and a pen (for typing), she entered and exited the airlock, bound for the still-intact Comm. Antenna. On the outside, Col. Potuit noticed the three missing plates on the three gas reserves, all displaying inner emptiness. Ripping her eyes from them, she aimed her whole consciousness at the antenna. Within two minutes, Potuit had the laptop connected and logged on. In her intense concentration, Josey Potuit had not realized she was holding her breath, or that the suit had sprung a leak in the back of her left shoulder, unreachable by her even when oxygenated and pressurized. She had just barely gotten the command prompt open when she felt the sweat on her forehead and the saliva on her tongue start to boil. She blacked out.

## **DARING MARS PIONEERS DIE IN MYSTERIOUS ACCIDENT**

Houston (AP) – Yesterday, at approximately 5:00PM Eastern Time, the historic Sagan Ares Lander crashed on the surface of Mars, as confirmed by barely-recognizable debris, in photos transmitted from orbiting satellites. The two astronauts on board, Cols. Anders Lusitania and Josey Potuit, both American, are presumed dead.

The crash's cause, at this point, is uncertain to NASA and the DoD, though impact with high-speed debris (pursuant to the sudden loss of communication, fuel, and navigation) remains the most likely agent, according to Vice President Warren, chair of the National Space Council.

Although Col. Josey Potuit left behind no recognized family, Col. Lusitania is survived by his wife and three children.

In a statement made early this morning, Vice President Warren said, "Our adventures into space have always been marked with tragedy. It is the fate of ambitious peoples. Today, we remember those we lost, Col. Anders Lusitania and Col. Josey Potuit, in full knowledge of their devotion to their nation, to our great nation. Their sacrifice, though unwilling, will go down in history as one of courage ..."

## Isabelle Thorpe

Grade 11

### *The Leaves are Falling* Short Story

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Shannon Koropchak

The small, but subtle patting of the falling leaves against the glass held Dorothy in an unbreakable trance. One after the other after the other, they hit the window she so intensely focused on as the rays of the morning sun gleamed in her face. Her eyes didn't think to blink. Her head wouldn't move to meet the visuals of the world around her. Standing there everyday, Dorothy would stare as the trees moved time and time again.

While she was losing herself in the pitter patter, her children were playing outside in front of the window. The three young girls, Helen, Jane, and Elizabeth, ran around the spare barn that they used as their playhouse. The children moved in circles around that very barn and the trees surrounding it, picking up sticks from the wet ground as they went along. They sprinted to one another and began to engage in some kind of battle that would only end when the wooden stick made intense contact with a body.

On one of the many laps around the barn, Helen finally caught up to Jane. She took the stick she had gotten from the side of one of the trees, and hit her violently in the stomach. Jane automatically fell to her knees, and for a moment it almost looked as if she was crying. But when her face drew from her body, there was nothing but enjoyment and laughter shone across her face. She shot up from where she stood, and this same battle was fought between the three siblings over and over again, each wave of a stick followed by screams of childish enjoyment. But when those piercing screams broke through the thin walls of that kitchen, Dorothy was still stuck in her trance. The darkness in her eyes went on and on forever, sucking up the rays of daylight that broke through the glass. All was spent in the black holes that had sunk into her face. But they had been like this forever. When had she truly been alive?

The window was centered in the very back wall of Dorothy's kitchen. The tiny space, with pristine countertops and cabinets encompassed her at almost all hours of the day. While only being one tiny room in Dorothy and her husband's big farm house, she drifted to that space and stayed there statue-like. She found herself like this especially on days when the sounds of leaves pattering against the glass grew so painfully clear. Days like this one. For a moment, Dorothy wondered about what her children were doing outside, where they were playing. But these thoughts blew away from her like the wind. She knew that they were out there being kids, playing in the same exact barn she did during her childhood. They had each other to keep company and entertain, and they would always be ready to come home in time for their habitual 6:00 dinners. At 6:00 her husband would come home, and she would have set the dinner table just like every other night. Each person would sit in the exact same spot, and they'd have almost the exact same dinner that they have had for all the evenings past. Dorothy took part in this performance like clockwork, never thinking about what she was doing. Just knowing that she had to do it. The thought of her own parental duties was like a small buzz in the back of her brain. Only the pitter patter of leaves could keep her mind company, company that could not be fulfilled by anyone in her world.

The door of the tiny kitchen violently burst open at around 3:00 in the afternoon. The three little girls came rushing into the house, rowdy and yelling from whatever game they had just been preoccupied with. This was an unusual time for them to arrive back in from their playing, but Dorothy stood still, fixated at her window. The girls' constant yelling of their mother's name finally got the attention they desired. While Dorothy slowly turned her head to look at her girls, they began talking and asking for her gardening tools. Dorothy looked at her children, and her eyes seemed to take her to another space, one

where she was completely alone. But her children were indeed standing right there, and the three of them were covered head to toe in mud. The dripping mud that was caked onto their shoes left traces of little footprints on their polished, wood floors. The dirt on their bodies were accompanied with large gashes on their legs and arms, still bleeding. But the blood from these wounds did not compare to the splatters that were seen on their clothes. The girls' flimsy jackets were soaked in the aftermath of their playing, accompanied by freshly torn holes in their worn-down blue jeans. However, the deeper red on the girls' clothing could not even begin to draw Dorothy from the place she had wandered to, not in these mere minutes. In her effort to get anything out of her, Helen began to approach her mother, asking her more intently on where these tools were. The smell of fresh dirt crashed like a wave into Dorothy. The bright, pink jacket that was wrapped around Helen's small torso was the focus of her eyesight, and her mind began to wander for a split second about the weather outside. Was it cold today? She didn't know, she hadn't left the confinement of her kitchen. Where were the girls' coats at? What if they were freezing outside, and she hadn't given them anything to ease this? These thoughts were quickly swept away by the screaming of Helen's voice.

Helen was urgent now, getting increasingly irritated at the fact that her mother was not answering, or responding at all, to any of her questions. Her voice raised all the way until it snapped the boundary that her mother had put up between them. Dorothy could finally hear the words that were being thrown at her, and she slowly pointed to the cabinet next to the door where the small gardening tools lived. The girls grabbed them swiftly and then returned to their beloved playground that was the abandoned barn and open fields. Just as the door was able to shut behind them, Dorothy returned to the haven of her window.

As the clock struck 6:00 that evening, Dorothy's husband walked in the door before she even had time to register that it was time to play the part for the daily agony of dinner. She had already cooked the meal and set the table just as she did all the nights before, but the feeling in the room was off. The air felt heavy on her body, as if it was intentionally pulling her down into the floor. Dorothy's husband kissed her cheek as she began setting the glasses on the table, and then quickly asked where the children were. Dorothy's face grew hot, and she snapped out of the housewife character in that moment. Where were they at? It was 6:00, and they'd never been late before. Her husband stomped around the table, carrying footsteps that grew louder and louder. These footsteps alone seemed to shake the whole house. He grew angrier, asking her question after question. His overpowering stature threw Dorothy into a frenzy, and she began to pace around the kitchen. She leveled the forks and the spoons perfectly, while going around each space to frantically re-fold the napkins on the plates. All the while her husband found his way to the head of the table before her, looking into her eyes in disbelief, searching for some kind of answer as to how she could have forgotten their children completely over the span of one day. He bombarded her with questions as to when she had seen the girls last, what they were wearing, and what they said they were going to do. However, the only words that Dorothy could mutter through her pursed lips were "pink jacket" and "gardening tools". She whispered this repeatedly, while folding the napkins until they looked perfect. The culmination of her husband's stare and raised voice caused her hands to tremble so terribly until she could not do this small task anymore. She got up, and left the confinement of her house. Of the kitchen. Of the window.

Her face was met with the brisk, chill air of the early evening. She felt her feet sink into the earth beneath her as she darted around the field directly in front of their house, not knowing exactly where she was headed. Her husband raced after her, quick at her heels, all the while screaming his daughter's names. There was no response. Just the echo of his voice, and Dorothy's footsteps filled the silence of the air that seemed so heavy upon their faces. Dorothy made her way to the barn and stood at its closed doors. Her husband quickly moved her out of the way, and threw open the entrance. His eyes were met with the blood red walls of what once was an innocent playground for his children. He scanned the floor in utter horror at the countless animals that lay dead, half buried in the ground. The freshly slain animals all thrown together in a pile among the dug up earth below them. The sides of the barn around the half-made graves were drenched in the matter, the red skewing the lines of the wooden boards that barricaded the crime scene in place. Her husband's eyes were stuck on this image. But Dorothy's eyes were fixated on



one thing, Helen's jacket. The small, pink jacket that had once been tied around her daughter's waist was left lying on the ground of that barn, next to the tools that she had begged her mother for. The small spark that had fluttered in Dorothy's eyes for just a moment died, and they sunk back into her face like they were before, finding home in her darkness. She stood still. After minutes that seemed like days, she slowly began to take tiny steps out of that barn, amid her husband's screams. She tilted her head up at the big trees she could recall watching from her kitchen window. She succumbed to the trance that overtook her body once again, parting her lips just enough to whisper into her void, "The leaves are falling".

## Michael Tian

Grade 12

### *Cold, White, Walls* Personal Essay/Memoir

Parkway Central High School  
Chesterfield, MO  
Teacher: Jason Lovera

Cold, white, walls. Only bland words could have described my surroundings. Peering through a microscope, I carefully examined the squirming worms under the harsh light. Silently praying, I hoped to find cancerous worms. If I did, it was a sign that I inhibited the correct gene.

Here in the lab, people silently scurried to and fro, busy with their own experiments to determine which genes help prevent cancer from developing. With a sigh, I removed the petri dish from underneath the microscope. It was another negative. The process repeated: examine, remove, examine, remove. A fellow researcher walked past, a sign of life in this dead building.

“Good morning!” I exclaimed, as cheerfully as I could in the bland environment.

“Hello,” came the abrupt reply from the researcher, who, without missing a beat, continued on his path.

With a sigh, I slowly returned to the assembly line. Examine, remove, examine, remove. I knew that these experiments would eventually be important. Some genes in these *c. elegans* worms can be found in humans. Perhaps a fraction of those genes help prevent cancer from developing, both in these worms and in humans. However, despite knowing how our research could change the lives of thousands in the future, the lack of conversation and connection between workers was stifling. It was as if the researchers were simple machines carrying out a list of tasks, avoiding any unnecessary actions. I simply couldn't put my heart into my research, because there was no light hearted conversation among the workers. I was simply working on an isolated island, with only cold, white, walls keeping me company. Examine, remove, examine, remove. Time crawled slowly as I tediously did the same task over and over again, until the morning vanished. Done with work for the day and finding no success, I swung by the lab head's office.

“All right,” he said, “now what you are going to do tomorrow is...” and he droned on and on, listing more monotonous tasks that I had to do the next day.

When he finished speaking, I simply nodded my head and left the room. *Clack Clack Clack*, a symphony of keyboards greeted me as I prepared to leave these cold, white, walls. As I walked past, the musicians who were crafting scientific papers didn't even glance up. Dead silence, the only sound that could be heard was their instruments, the sound of plastic hitting plastic.

“I'm going to go insane in this place,” I thought to myself. “It's only been a week and I think that the worms have talked just as much as the people here. I still have the rest of summer break to go!” Thinking about a long list of tasks that I would have rather been doing, I drove to my next destination: the hospital, where I went to volunteer.

Cold, white, walls. They greeted me again when I entered the hospital, as if the bland walls were haunting me.

“Good morning!” the front desk cheerfully exclaimed when I walked in.

“Good morning to you too!” I replied, eyes widening at the sudden mood shift. It was as if I entered a different world, one with much more color.

As I walked to the Cardiology department, all around me were lively conversations involving not only patients but staff as well. Simple small talk made the hospital alive and comfortable, a place where one could be in for long periods of time. The staff in the hospital marked a sharp contrast when compared to the mechanical researchers back at the lab. Here, the hospital workers smiled and laughed with one another. Their conversations contained topics that were not about work, while back at the lab, the rare

conversation was dominated by the research at hand.

Glancing around, the cold, white, walls were not as bland as I originally thought. Instead of the empty, dull, practical walls of the lab, there were splashes of color in the hospital. A poster here, a painting there, the white walls of the hospital seemed teeming with life. The pediatric wing was plastered with colorful pictures, entertaining the children. While the white walls of the lab was distant and cold, the white walls of the hospital was welcoming and warm.

When I arrived at Cardiology, I immediately started assisting a technician. The moment that we entered the rooms of patients, their faces lit up. They were simply glad to have company after being isolated in a bed for so long, and we engaged in small talk. One of them noticed my lab I.D. badge that was hanging from my pocket.

“So you work in a lab?” she asked. “What do you do?” I smiled and gave her a lengthy explanation about how I was researching cancer genetics. Her face brightened.

“You are doing good things kid, really good things,” she happily said. “It is very important work that you are doing.” I nodded, not really believing in what she was saying.

“Important work? I’m just looking at worms all day!” I grumbled to myself. The technician and I continued making our rounds, trying our best to brighten the lives of patients, to try and get a laugh or a smile out of them.

However, some patients never laughed. These were the ones that knew that they were not going to make it. They were the ones that had been stuck in the hospital for weeks on end. These patients barely responded to any attempts at conversation, preoccupied with their own conditions. Occasionally, when out of the room, I would ask the technician what the problem was.

“Chronic, no cure. There is nothing to be done,” would always be the reply from the technician.

Those times were even worse than the times in the lab. Taking their mind off of their problems and trying to make them as comfortable as possible was all that I could do to help them. In my mind though, I felt like that I wasn’t helping the patients enough. We were only prolonging the inevitable, perhaps even extending their suffering. It made me think about the research that I was doing at the lab. Maybe what the patient said back there was right. Maybe what I was doing was important.

The next day, I returned to the cold, white, walls of the lab. However, now I took the time to examine the hallways. Plastered all over the walls were a variety of posters that detailed various discoveries. One depicted how a newly discovered chemical had changed treatment for a disease. Another illustrated how figuring out the structure of an ion channel in the heart altered our understanding on how heart works. All over these walls were discoveries that have saved human lives by being able to cure previously incurable ailments.

Within these cold, white, walls, I could see a sort of magic being done. Researchers were slowly teasing out the secrets of nature to try and save human lives. I realized why the researchers didn’t make small talk. They needed complete focus in order to make groundbreaking innovations. A silly mistake could lead to a researcher overlooking a vital, yet obscured, observation.

In the hospital, on the other hand, small talk was necessary for the staff members to accomplish their duty. It made the place more warm and welcoming, relaxing the patient and aiding in their recovery. The difference in atmosphere between the research lab and the hospital was based solely on their separate goals. The lab was focused completely on efficiency in their work, making interpersonal connections pointless as it does not contribute to the results of their research. However, the hospital, which also needs to be as efficient as possible, has to sacrifice some efficiency in favor of creating an environment that promotes healing.

After I was done carefully reading each and every poster, I walked back to my lab station. Along the way, the symphony of keyboards reached my ears. *Clack Clack Clack*. This time, the sound of plastic hitting plastic no longer signified people not talking to one another. Instead, it was the sound of scientific progress being made. It was the sound of us getting one step closer to saving more lives.

When I walked past a desk, a researcher looked up.

“Good morning,” he greeted, and immediately returned back to work.

“Ah, hello,” I mumbled in reply, caught off guard by the greeting.

I realized that it was probably the most small talk that I was going to get for the day, but it didn't bother me as much as it used to. Upon reaching my station, I went back to my microscope, and the process from yesterday repeated. However, this time I sat with my back straight, and my eyes carefully scanning the petri dish, checking over and over again to make sure I did not miss anything important. Examine, remove. Examine, remove. A researcher walked by me, but this time, I didn't greet him. After all, I wouldn't want to have my saliva contaminate the petri dish. I continued to examine the dishes. However, this time I paused and smiled. A positive. I hurriedly recorded it and prepared to share with the lab head. These cold, white, walls weren't as bad as I thought.

**Kimberley Tran**  
Grade 11

*Fear No Change*  
Personal Essay/Memoir

Clayton High School  
Clayton, MO  
Teacher: Ben Murphy

“Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”  
--Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance”

As naturally cautious beings, we stick to the known paths of life and blindly cling to familiar trails for a sense of security. Yet, true character development cannot manifest until we dare to breach our comfort zones. Our reserved nature comes from within. Our parents shelter us with love and warmth when we are children, fostering our innate desire for safety. Nonetheless, when we depart our parents’ household to pursue adulthood, we plunge into the chilling truths of life’s obstacles. Drown or float, we eventually learn to sustain ourselves, though not without a harsh learning curve. However, the shock of this adjustment triggers fear of change. Our tendency to cope with change seemingly only applies to us as humans. While animals obey instinct and flee, humans stick around and attempt to micromanage issues, no matter how unrealistic this feat may seem. This roundabout nature of coping reflects the fear we unwisely govern our actions with. Consequently, our ability to adapt to changes pales in comparison to nature’s, as our exaggerated phobias limit us from properly dealing with such changes.

*As I step out of my car, deserting a bustling city for a solitary haven of nature, the soles of my shoes crunch on the crispy stems of mottled leaves. Despite the blustery September evening, the flora and fauna resist the incoming winter. In order to locate color metamorphoses associated with fall, I play an impromptu “Where’s Waldo?” game. Upon closer inspection, hints of the impending weather change peek out from between bushes and among flower clusters. A squirrel races across the cobblestones, clutching onto its hoard of acorns as its shaggy tail wags in the breeze. The limbs of oaks arch overhead, the tawny tips of leaves clashing with the shamrock hues of the leaves’ blades. Hydrangeas, once proudly bursting with shades of violet and blue, now stoop downwards with bunched-up petals. A column of fuzzy shapes darts past; I glance up with a smile as I spot blackbirds soaring to the south in a perfect V-line formation. As the seasons cycle, these plants and animals constantly transition through shifting environments. As a result, they recognize their helplessness against inevitable surprises. Rather than fear the uncertainty which accompanies change, they cut losses when necessary. In contrast, in our “dog-eat-dog world,” we assume that only the weak get killed. We equate emotional instability to feebleness, unknowingly contradicting ourselves. When we fear vulnerability, we manipulate one type of emotion to steer clear of another type of emotion. Ultimately, we trap ourselves in limbo--too afraid to tackle change head-on and too scared when change catches us off-guard. Reflecting on my own pessimism regarding change, I realize that my dread stems from an inherent desire to control my future. Encountering a surprise and not preparing an adequate response seems too perilous. To elude scenarios where I feel helpless, I hold onto situations I can predict the outcomes of. For instance, I would rather stay mum in class instead of raising my hand, just so that I can avoid saying anything embarrassing. While avoiding change certainly decreases my anxiety of the unexpected, without risks, my life falls neatly into cookie-cutter like pieces. Consequently, my days tend to collapse into habitual patterns: dull and predictable. Where is the fun in that?*

*After traveling several rounds amongst the flowers and foliage, I seek relief in the shade of the garden’s trellis, overwhelmed by the contrasting sights and smells. An unwise decision on my part-- the air softly hums with the murmurs of bumblebees. Three striped bees flit from daisy to daisy, their plump*

*bodices trembling from the rapid fluttering of their wings. Barely visible underneath tufts of outer fuzz, their stingers jut out like knives. Another sharp object draws my attention: scores of prickly thorns encircling the stems of crimson roses.* These painful-looking edges epitomize self-defense against predators out to eliminate the weak. Nature revolves around instinct; animals know when to engage their fight-or-flight response. When a challenge arises, they resolutely meet it with action. On the contrary, when faced with a problem, we allow for emotion to cripple us. Rather than ensuring our survival, our insecurities impair our self-expression. Conjugating the beauty of bees and roses to images of inflamed bee stings and pricked thumbs from rose thorns reveals this interwoven paradox. As humans, the jagged edges of our outward appearances contradict the wondrous thoughts we conceal within. Uneasy of the unknown, we sometimes present ourselves as guarded and reserved. As an introvert, when exposed to new environments or people, I instinctually clam up and prefer to observe from afar. My shyness in unfamiliar social settings originates from a fear of rejection. By hiding behind our reticent natures, introverts like me feel safer. Yet, we jeopardize our authentic selves when we submit to our phobia of peer judgment. If change constitutes difference, our emotional hesitations against it will inhibit our personal progress.

*Restraining the urge to swat at a bee above my head, I hurriedly abandon the trellis and perch on a park bench. Parks and Recreation has not tended to the garden in several weeks; hydrangeas and lemongrass sprout haphazardly onto one another. The smooth tips of the lemongrass dangle rebelliously over the boundaries of its circular plot.* At first glance, this inherent violation of order infringes upon the tidiness of the garden. Much like how parasitic weeds leech off of dandelions, the anomaly of unruly-looking plants counters society's desire for structure. However, our bias towards tidiness should not justify our opposition to change. As such, I wish to inspire a call to action. First, we must look to nature as our muse. Like plants and animals, we too should refrain from permitting fear to consume us. When a dog chases a squirrel, the squirrel does not remain rooted and hope for the best. Rather, the squirrel will embrace its instinct and change its tactics to save itself. Our stagnation does not help us avoid confrontation; it lulls us into a hallucination of security. When change abruptly invades our lives and steals this familiarity, we enter a never-ending cycle of fear. Deeming change as an opportunity, not an obstacle can reduce our hesitations towards the unknown. In addition, we should emulate animals' fight-or-flight instinct in some instances. Stubbornly enduring problems which possess no practical solution in sight breeds resentment towards change. Given an unworkable scenario, we ought to recognize when to flee instead of forcing ourselves to cope. Although society perpetuates the stereotype that giving up is weakness, to me, acknowledging our emotional limits evinces strength. Furthermore, much like how plants possess mechanisms of self-defense, we should only act to protect ourselves when necessary. Arguably, we should not feel as if we have to defend against change.

Although my sojourn into the garden concludes with the setting of the sun, the wisdom the flora and fauna imparted to me will last through the seasons. Change perpetuates progress. Society would not have advanced without unconventional thinking or quirky beliefs. Similarly, welcoming change stimulates self-discovery. By appreciating differences, we also invigorate the world around us. As Emerson asserted, our responsibility is to act as pioneers for future generations. When everyone travels the same path, the trails grow weary and trodden. Comparably, banal ideas become overused and eventually collapse into outdatedness. Instead, we ought to welcome risks and construct our own tracks, so that future enlightened minds can build our bridges to even more radical heights. Ultimately, we should all emulate the courage to let go and accept spontaneity. For me, my challenge will be to overcome my diffidence and speak up in class without reservation. From now on, I will not let my fear of change define me.

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## Emery Uhlig

Grade 10

### *Enemy Alien*

Personal Essay/Memoir

Pembroke Hill School

Kansas City, MO

Teacher: Emma Romick

Four years ago, when I was in sixth grade, my teacher gave everyone in my class an assignment: Tell me about your past. He wasn't talking about us personally. We were only eleven years old at the time, so we didn't have much of a past to tell. What he meant was, tell me about your ancestors. Where did they come from, and how did they end up here, in America?

My dad is German on both sides, so I chose his family and began to do some research. At first I thought that after I gave my presentation I would forget about the assignment, that it would just get tossed in with all the other school work I'd done, a big heap in the back of my brain. But I was wrong. I didn't forget about it, and I don't think I ever will. This assignment has stayed with me all these years not because it was hard or even because it was unusual but because it taught me something about my past that I had never expected to find, and it has changed the way I see not only my family's place in this country but my own.

What I learned while researching my family's past was that a hundred years ago my great-great grandfather, Paul Julius Uhlig, was forced to register as an enemy alien. If you look it up in the dictionary, an enemy alien is defined as a citizen of a foreign country that a domestic country is at odds with. So, technically, that's true. My great-great grandfather was German, and in 1917 his country of birth was at war with his country of choice—the United States. But he didn't feel like an alien in his adopted country, and he certainly wasn't an enemy.

Paul J. Uhlig holds an important place in my family history. My grandfather was named after him, and so was his first son, my uncle, and his first son, my cousin. The first Paul Uhlig was smart, scrappy and brave. He was also the first person in his family to immigrate to the United States. He was just seventeen years old, traveled by himself in third class with only one suitcase, and didn't speak a word of English. He knew that he would probably never see his home or his parents again, and he was right.

When Paul finally reached the United States, he took a train directly to St. Joseph, Missouri. His cousin Robert had a job there on a farm which was owned by a widow, Mrs. Adams, and her four children. They hired Paul as well, and, even better, introduced him to Opal, one of Mrs. Adams' daughters. They got along well immediately, and Opal, along with her sister Ada, started to teach him to speak English. Opal would laugh every time he tried to say the word "three," which always came out sounding like "tree." Paul ended up marrying Opal, and his cousin Robert married Ada. Paul loved the farm, his family and his work, and he quickly and happily settled into his new life in the United States.

Sixteen years passed. Paul and Opal ran the farm, helped their neighbors, and had children of their own, and every day Paul felt more and more like an American and less and less like a German, even though he still couldn't say the word "three." Then, on July 28th, 1914, thousands of miles from their quiet farm in Missouri, life for Paul and his family changed in a heartbeat. A Serbian nationalist named Gavrilo Princip assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, setting off a domino effect, with country after country declaring war until thirty-two different countries were involved and the First

World War had begun.

The United States originally decided not to get involved in WWI. Our president, Woodrow Wilson, thought that it would be better to focus on the strength of America's economy, rather than taking part in a world-wide war. He also believed, as did many Americans at that time, that the war was Europe's problem, not ours. Wilson had even campaigned on a promise not to enter the war. A lot of people had supported him because of that promise, including Paul Uhlig.

Paul, his wife and children worried more about WWI than most of their friends and neighbors in Missouri because they knew what it meant for their family. Almost as soon as the war began, German immigrants across the United States and England were labeled enemy aliens. After Germany sank the British ocean liner *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915, enemy aliens in England, mostly Germans, who were of military age were sent to an internment camp on the Isle of Man. No matter what their age, they were not allowed to send letters to family or friends back in Germany, travel more than five miles from the station where they had registered without explicit permission, own a camera, car, motorcycle, or even a carrier pigeon.

Two years later, the United States Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1917, which was the first act to pretty drastically limit immigration into the country. A few months after that, America entered the war. Germany's numerous submarine attacks on American ships and the Zimmerman telegram (in which Germany promised support for Mexico if Mexico declared war on America), had proved too much even for Wilson.

Attention in the United States quickly turned to German immigrants. They had to register as enemy aliens, have their registration card with them at all times, and report any change in address or employment. Around 6,300 enemy aliens, again mostly Germans, were arrested and thousands were interrogated. More than 2,000 German-Americans were imprisoned in either one of two camps during World War I: Fort Douglas in Utah or Fort Oglethorpe in Georgia.

Although he had lived in the United States for almost twenty years and was married to an American citizen, Paul Uhlig didn't yet have his final naturalization papers, so he too had to make the humiliating trip to the local post office, where he was registered, photographed and fingerprinted like a criminal. Even more painful was the fact that, as his wife, Opal had to do the same thing. For a woman who had always been fiercely proud that her ancestors had fought in both the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, the humiliation was almost too much to bear. Her son would later write that "the deepening lines on her face told the story of her suffering."

When the war finally ended, Paul, Opal, and their entire family were deeply relieved. They thought that something like this would never happen again, but it did. Just 24 years later, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United States entered a second World War. Once again, the principal enemy was Germany, and Germans were required to register as enemy aliens. Immigrants frequently heard the phrase, "Once a German, always a German" on the lips of the people they had once thought of as their friends, neighbors and fellow countrymen.

This time, though, it wasn't just German Americans who were affected. Italian and Japanese Americans were targeted too. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese were hated almost more than the Germans, and many Japanese Americans were forced into internment camps.

Of course, life is very different during war, especially a world war. People were afraid. Not only were they sending their children to die in a war that was taking place in a far-off country, but they felt like they had the enemy living right next to them. But fear can never justify prejudice, cruelty and injustice. I can't imagine how hard it must have been for those who were imprisoned just because of where they had been



born or the fact that they spoke English with an accent. My dad has always told me that when I meet people who have an accent I should treat them with respect because an accent means that they speak one more language than I do.

Maybe that's why learning that my great-great grandfather had to register as an enemy alien has stayed with me all these years, or maybe it's because of all the news about immigration and immigrants. I see it when I'm eating breakfast in the morning and there are newspapers scattered all over the table. I hear it when I'm riding to school and the radio is playing the morning news. Even at night, when my parents turn on the TV while we make dinner, there it is again.

Usually what I hear are long discussions about who should be able to get into the country and who shouldn't. Who's an American, and who's not. Who's one of us, familiar and friendly, and who's foreign, a little suspect, possibly dangerous—even if they're already an American citizen. What I rarely hear is what immigrants have done for our country. There's very little about the fact that we started as, and have always been, a nation of immigrants. It's at those times that I think about my great-great grandfather, Paul Julius Uhlig. He took a huge risk coming here. He worked hard. He married an all-American girl. He loved this country. He struggled to learn the language, even though he hated the word "three." He felt like an American, and he believed that he was one—until his fellow countrymen suddenly told him that he wasn't.

So what I want to know is, when is an American truly an American? Do you have to be here for generations? Do you have to speak English without an accent? Do you have to have a lot of money or political connections? Or do you just have to follow the law, be a good person, contribute to society and love this country? That's the path my great-great grandfather took, and millions more just like him.

Unless you're a Native American, if you live in this country your ancestors were immigrants, and that's nothing to be ashamed of. On the contrary, being a nation of immigrants is what makes the United States so strong. Our ancestors weren't the people who stayed home, afraid to take a chance. Our ancestors crossed oceans and deserts to get here. They were brave, resourceful and determined, and when they finally arrived they taught those around them that there is nothing to fear in the unfamiliar. You can define an alien as a foreigner, but there is a second definition: strange, or not belonging. In that sense, there has never been anything alien about an American immigrant, and they're not our enemies. They're our countrymen.

## Kaitlyn Wallace

Grade 12

### *Where's Waldo?: A Drama in Human History*

#### Short Story

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Anita Hagerman

In the beginning, God created the heavens, the earth, and Winthrop Waldo.

Waldo was created to do all the things that God couldn't. God, you see, had failed to bundle up properly the previous winter, and had subsequently acquired a nasty sinus infection that simply refused to go away. Naturally, ever since then, he'd been partial to a particularly irritating and perpetual state of lethargy.

So, it was Waldo who lassoed the sun from a neighboring universe to give God the light he asked for—these things don't just happen on their own, you know. And Waldo was the one who raised the sky from the water on the second day; he would never quite get over the fact that Atlas (created much later and deemed by Waldo to be intensely useless) got the credit for that.

Furthermore, “let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26) has been widely mistranslated from its original seraphic: it should read “in your image, in your likeness.” God was so ill by day six of creation that he reluctantly delegated the responsibility of resemblance to Waldo, who made man in the image of himself.

In spite of this flattering kinship, Waldo was never fond of mankind. In Waldo's opinion, there was nothing exceptional about man—other than, of course, their intensely favorable likeness to himself.

But, for God's sake, he tolerated them. He did his work dutifully, weaving impatiently among the lives of man, intersecting their fates, quietly going about his work fulfilling a vision that had never been revealed to him in its entirety.

That is, until one particular March 25th.

Waldo, on this day in 7 BC, was arranging a conception (a task which he found exceptionally distasteful). Over breakfast, God had proudly told Waldo that the child to be born was to bring the name of God to the forefront of the minds of men. He had said nothing, Waldo noted with displeasure, about the name of Winthrop Waldo—but never mind.

Irritatingly, but naturally, the bothersome task of finding the woman who would bear this child was assigned to Waldo. She was probably lovely, he thought nastily, and wide-eyed and rosy-cheeked. For the little patience Waldo had with man, he had even less with woman. Waldo believed it was because they had been created as an afterthought, a careless addition to an already imperfect creature. We who know better might note that woman did not possess what was in Waldo's opinion the only redeeming quality of man: a resemblance to himself.

He felt her coming before he saw her (people who have lived through eons occasionally develop a sixth sense to these sort of things). The presence, haughty and rather refined, was unexpected. There she was, her dark hair intentionally slicked back, nose slightly hooked like his was. Her gray eyes skated listlessly over Waldo's, not realizing their duplicate, which were, like hers, set deeply into a handsome face.

It wasn't love at first sight, exactly; after all, it was nearly the same face that had stared back at him in the mirror for thousands of years. Besides, Waldo could never have any love in his heart for Mary, alluring as she was; in fact, he could have no love in his heart for anything. You see, God had made one mistake when creating Winthrop Waldo: he had neglected to give him the capacity to love.

We must be understanding, of course. It was God's very first creation; it's a wonder Waldo turned out as impressive as he did. God did very well for himself, really. Waldo did serve him faithfully for

thousands of years.

But however much sympathy we have in our hearts for God, it is matched in volume by Waldo's bitter jealousy. He was intensely unforgiving of God's first mistake, and this sudden reminder of his inability to feel had done nothing but re-inflame his passions. Besides, by this time in his immortal life, Winthrop Waldo had grown deeply unsatisfied with being the universe's secretary. God had grown famous throughout the warring regions of the world, and Waldo had continued to fade into the background. He had engineered the rise and fall of empires, ensured the survival of the human race through the floods and ice ages— indeed, it was he who controlled the minutiae of evolution, creating man itself! And for what? Waldo had no disciples, no temples or altars. After so many millennia of anonymity, Winthrop Waldo was tired of blending into the crowd.

Something snapped inside him at that very moment. Waldo couldn't love, but that didn't mean he couldn't do anything.

Mary kept seeing the other fellow, and married him eventually. But Joseph was always left to wonder where his son had acquired his pale complexion, his piercing green-gray eyes. Why was it that there was always a chill that came with his glance?

Unfortunately, these antics would come to backfire on poor Waldo. Coincidentally, God happened to be vacationing by the Dead Sea when he felt his delicate plans unravel, and he knew at once that Waldo was to blame. And God rose from his heavenly beach cabana, forcefully set down his margarita, and left the beach in such a hurry his shark tooth necklace was left behind— a fact he would later bemoan to anyone that would listen. But for the moment, God was jolted out of his systematic lethargy and into action. Waldo would come to regret having ever underestimated his fury.

God didn't kill Waldo. That would be too easy. Instead, he stripped Winthrop Waldo of his powers, his sleek European mien, even his name, and he gave Waldo his wish— to be known throughout the human world. But instead of notoriety for the great deeds Waldo had performed in God's name, Waldo became known for that which he most hated. He became famous for blending into the crowd, for being so tediously *human* that not even God could tell him apart. His existence now is a mere amusement for the humans he considered so far beneath him.

Waldo exists in a place beyond the imprisonment of the literary page. Remember, mankind was made in Waldo's image. Whether we like it or not, there exists a piece of Waldo in each of us— he feeds our most wicked and apathetic energies, our most destructive tendencies.

But he also gives us a sense of duty. It is he who compels us to call long-suffering great-aunts, to attend weddings of distant cousins, even to ask "how are you?" when we know how tragically long-winded the answer will be. Without Waldo, where would we be? Our human niceties would go unfulfilled. The tiny, mindless tasks that keep our lives in order would stay perpetually incomplete, leaving us in nonspecific disarray.

Where is Waldo, you ask?

He is the stitches in the fabric of the universe, the preservation of order. Waldo is everywhere. Waldo is nowhere. Waldo *is*.

## Kylie Williams

Grade 11

*The Hurt.*

Poetry

Teacher: Kathryn Hart-Williams

I've been dancing on hot stones,  
but the heat does not compare to your anger.  
For if I stop dancing,  
you burn our love underneath me.  
It is me to blame  
if our flame,  
goes out.

*~ Why I keep burning myself*

You picked a flower that hadn't quite bloomed.  
Moments after you laid your hands on my precious petals,  
I wilted.  
Now every time, someone comes along to plant a seed,  
I feel your fingertips,  
and again, I am scared to blossom.  
For you entered my home where there was no welcome mat,  
and then proceeded to leave trails of your dirty shoes on my floor.  
You saw my womanly figure as a shelter for your manhood.  
A room for a one-night stand.  
A rental.  
The rain fell, the thunder rumbled, and even rainbows shined,  
yet somehow you remained engraved on my body.  
I couldn't wash away the ink of sorrow  
or the feel of your unwanted lips on my now bruised breasts.  
My hair matted with anger,  
And my mind scattered like a cabinet.  
The one next to the microwave,  
the one I stuff all my belongings into when I have no other space.  
Why did you hurt me like that?  
Why did you take pick the fruit that wasn't ready?  
I hope it tasted sour,  
sickened your stomach and maybe even infected you.  
I hope you feel the burden of a thousand poisoned fruits,  
because you left so much weight behind,  
that even when a new lover is on top of me,  
they become – you.

*~ Not welcomed here*

In these halls of hungry ghosts.  
Pictures of lost ones on the walls.  
My mother begged for me to feed,  
She got on her knees and asked me to eat.  
I was no longer her child,  
I was a crying skeleton,  
just some skin and bones.  
Her eyes were filled with sorrow and desperation,  
and yet, I still did not have the strength to lift the spoon.  
Each day, I left the table, a little more dead.  
Momma had prepared to say her goodbyes soon.  
I wrapped my hand around my arm,  
my fingers overlapped with themselves.  
My father didn't want to believe,  
that his perfect daughter was going to be 6 feet deep.  
He pleaded that it wasn't true,  
until his little girl's lips were stained a cold blue.  
The tape measure almost went around twice,  
my thighs no longer loved each other,  
they never touched anymore,  
and my hipbones craved attention,  
they protruded from both sides.  
My feet had no weight to hold,  
but they still screamed of exhaustion,  
they had no energy to run the miles that I forced them too.  
It's the worst sickness one can have because it has you do the job for her.

*~ Anorexia.*

My father always said yes to me,  
for I did what was asked of me without hesitation.  
But now I have a question that cannot be answered  
with a simple yes or **no**.  
Parents...  
of compliant kids,  
What good is only teaching your children to say yes,  
when they have an unwanted boy with his uninvited parts  
doing unpleasant things to their body.  
You see, what if they want to say **no**,  
but their 6-year-old, obedient self is screaming that **no** is disrespectful.

*~NO means NO*

If I were to move a mountain so you didn't have to climb,  
you still wouldn't be thankful.  
But if you brought me a piece of paper,  
I would turn it into art and tell everyone what a beautiful painter you are.

*~ungrateful*

**Jason Wood**  
Grade 7

*War*  
Short Story

Washington Middle School  
Washington, MO  
Teacher: Kaylin Bade

James Grump was at his latest speech telling the American people how he was going to make America great again when his security team told him that he was needed in the White House immediately. He told the security team that he would wrap up his speech, but James focuses a lot on himself so his way of wrapping it up took an hour. After he finally finished his speech, he made his way back to the White House. The whole way back he was imagining going to war with North Korea and Kim Chan. He was very ready for war but he was being patient, waiting for somebody to make a move.

When he got back he met with Matt Mattis. Matt told him that they needed to talk in private. After they avoided everybody Matt said, "Kim Chan has set off a missile that was supposed to hit America, but the missile fired right back down on them. This is our time to strike."

"Let's do it," whispered the very eager president.

But what they didn't know was that North Korea was taking actions of their own. After the missile test failed Kim Chan was infuriated. His eyes bulged and steam came out of his ears as he met with the government. He told them to get ready for war and to gather all of their military. Chan was worried because if his enemies came to him, he couldn't use his missiles, so he decided he may as well use them now to weaken his country's enemies. He had one more launching station that worked. He had a missile delivered there right away. Chan told the operators, "Let it land on the White House, destroy it! I have to go get ready for war, but good luck." He left mainly because he was scared that another missile would not work, but also because he had work to do.

When Chan got back to his office he ordered all of his military teams to different areas, making sure that nobody got to him. He was ready for war.

Back at the White House James was getting everything ready for war. Everything was going smooth except that he didn't have a lot of people to help, only his country. He told Matt Mattis that he was going to need backup for the war.

"I will make some calls," said the defense secretary as he hustled to his office.

The president was getting very excited. "I smell success already. I can also smell my lunch," he thought to himself. The savory flavor of his roast beef sub sandwich with lettuce and tomatoes made him feel even better but tired. After he finished his sandwich he decided to take a nap because, why not. He didn't have anything else to do, everybody else could do it for him. He got in his roly chair and started to drift away.

Right as he was about to go to sleep, Matt came in and said, "I got the Russians on our side. Vitaly also told me that they hacked North Korea's missile test station."

"Oh, come on," thought the exhausted and disgrace of a president. "Let me talk to Vitaly," moaned the tired president.

Once James reached the phone he dialed Vitaly's number. The second in command answered so James asked to speak to Vitaly. It took a while for Russia's leader to reach the phone so James almost dozed off again. Vitaly finally reached the phone though. Vitaly Puttin told James that he had already gathered everybody except America for the war. They were ready for war. Vitaly told him, "Let's go, now."

"Okay," assured the now awake president.

James had every part of his military head off to North Korea. James would head in after they defeated North Korea to offer peace. They headed off and James got ready to board his plane.

Russia and everybody else were already heading to North Korea. They met in a valley, far away from anybody else. They were discussing plans but none of them were good enough. Fai Jinping then chimed in and said, "If we surround them they would never be able to defeat us."

Vitaly then ordered, "Everybody split up, every nation, take a different spot. Work together. Let each other know if you need help. Good luck," and they took off.

Every nation took a different area to bomb North Korea. After they bombed the outskirts of the city, North Korea's showed up. The American military took down a big chunk and the others took down the rest. A couple more waves of the North Korean military showed up, but they got eliminated almost immediately. Hayden Trudo then yelled into his headset, "We have spotted Kim Chan riding out of the city in a van. Be aware he may have launched his missiles."

Out of the blue, a giant missile burst out of the sky and headed away towards America. James Grump then arrived. He joined the group and said, "We hacked their email, one email said the missile is going to hit the White House. We need to destroy it."

"How," asked the surprised Russian leader, "We locked down their test station."

"Apparently they had another backup," sighed Fai the Chinese president.

"Don't worry, we have missiles as well. Watch this," said Vitaly.

Just then a missile burst out of a plane and crashed into North Korea's missile. The explosion was huge sending debris far and wide, and leaving a burning smell. "Prefect," said James, "Now go get Chan."

They tracked down the van and blew up the road in front of it and behind it, and surrounded it.

"Watch out, they might have guns," said Juan Miyato, the Mexican president.

They got out of their planes and walked up to the van. They shot the tires for good measure, James not knowing what he was doing shot the one tire with a gun that set off a smoke bomb. Once they could actually see, they opened the doors and captured Chan and the others inside the van. Nobody fought back, they were defeated.

"We have decided to offer you a peace treaty," said James, "If you accept you will continue legal work as the leader of North Korea, and if you don't accept you will be locked up for the rest of your life."

"I accept," said the conquered Chan.

"Sign here," said James.

"From now on, we will all play by the rules and be fair, understand?" asked Vitaly.

"We understand," everybody said.

From then on all leaders from every continent, every country, every city, played by the rules and were fair. Everybody helped each other with anything. Even Kim Chan helped other leaders with making a space shuttle that would send people to Mars and back. Not surprisingly, he designed it like a missile. Everybody was now working together on one team, no problems between any leaders.

**Julia Wykes**

Grade 10

*She Did Not Belong in a Parking Lot*  
Poetry

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Eleanor DesPrez

I watch her as she sits in my passenger seat,  
singing songs from before she was born.  
Popping her gum as I roll down dusty roads,  
I am driving for no reason—  
but seeing her breathing beside me.

Here, in my dirty car— a vision of ecstasy.  
I watch her scream another verse,  
as her fingers dance out my open window.  
To the beat of the radio, she taps her foot—  
right in time with mine.

*I notice how her summer skirt rides up along her legs.  
I so easily silence her singing in my backseat,  
parked in an empty lot like all my friends.  
My windows rolled up, keys on the floor.  
Her fingers shaking as they move across my bare back.*

*My chest is puffed, but now she's gone,  
singing her songs in other boys' cars.  
She rolls down their windows and they watch her laugh,  
then trade it all later,  
for pats on the back.*



**Ellie Yang**

Grade 10

*ABC*

Personal Essay/Memoir

Parkway Central High School

Chesterfield, MO

Teacher: Jason Lovera

A sea of rushed voices buzzed around me as my aunt took my hand. She pushed through the crowd until we finally separated ourselves from the chaos of the platform. I mindlessly followed her as my eyelids started to droop, and I could feel my feet getting heavier with every step. Here I was, in the city that was going to be my home for the next two weeks: Wuhan. The journey to this congested, humid city of almost 11 million people consisted of a thirteen-hour plane ride, followed by the five-hour train ride that sucked up what little energy remained in me.

Around me, I started to recognize a familiar language, but I couldn't quite distinguish what was being said. The words seemed to be the same as Mandarin, which has been spoken in my house since I was born, yet the accents on different syllables led me to believe that I was entering a new world. I overheard a conversation about people visiting their family. Or were they planning a party?

I was all alone, with only my aunt to guide me, and I didn't even know her that well. My only recollection of her was from when I was in Kindergarten, years ago. What was this dialect that I couldn't understand? How could I possibly be able to survive this trip?

? ? ?

"??,????!" my aunt called me to wake up. "?????????"

I rolled over and stretched my limbs. Thankfully, this time I could understand what she was saying because she communicated to me in Mandarin. My legs stumbled as I dragged myself to the shower since I had been too exhausted to take one the night before. The bathroom I entered was a long, skinny room with a tiled floor that had a toilet at one end and a shower in the front. Essentially, it was a long shower with a toilet in it.

*Even the showers are different here*, I thought to myself, but I wasn't complaining. After all, at my grandmother's house, there was just a hole in the ground for a bathroom, or a "squat toilet" as one might call it.

Speaking of which, today was the day that my aunt and I were going to visit my grandmother, as well as my aunt, uncle, and cousin who lived with her. Their tiny apartment was the same one that my mother had grown up in and the one I had lived in for quite a while on my first trip back to China in Kindergarten.

I realized that for the first time, I could actually say that I was going to my grandma's house. Back in America, people would always talk about going to their grandparents' house for the holidays, but that was never a possibility for me. In order to see most of my extended family, I have always had to travel halfway across the globe to a different country.

Despite being born in America, I wasn't the average American citizen given my Chinese heritage; on the other hand, my minimal knowledge of the dialect surrounding me here in Wuhan was one of the many reasons that I was not a typical Chinese person either. Nothing around me struck me as anything near familiar, with the bustling streets and shouting voices, yet even at home with my friends, I could feel the differences between us. Where was I supposed to belong?

? ? ?

After we climbed the five sets of stairs to my grandmother's apartment, my aunt and I were welcomed into the small space that I could almost remember from my trip years earlier. In the living room, memories of lying sick on the couch with a pillow resurfaced. On that trip, my mom had been here to do

all the communicating, but now I was alone to figure it all out. I could hear my aunt talking to her brother in the other room as my grandma approached me.

“???????” Naturally, my grandmother questioned me in her native dialect.

All I could make out was a jumble of sounds that didn't seem like they should belong together. The fluctuating rises and falls in the tone of my grandmother's voice repeated in my head, as if they were taunting me. *? is not supposed to sound like that*, I told myself, *so she's obviously not asking about dinner*. Even with seven years of Chinese school under my belt, my teachers had never really prepared me for the real world. I panicked at this real test of my knowledge, even though if I listened close enough, I would've known the answer. What if I answered it completely wrong? If the same question was repeated to me without the accents of the dialect, I would've laughed at how simple it was.

Seeing my bewildered face as she had entered the room, my aunt took pity on me and repeated, “??,???????”

*So my grandma was talking about dinner!* My aunt's help gave me more confidence in my listening abilities, and I could see the similarities between the two dialects more clearly. I shouldn't have doubted myself in the first place. *Maybe they aren't as different as I thought*, I reflected. After all, they were the same words, just pronounced differently.

Following this epiphany, I started to listen more carefully to the cultural language of the city. When my aunt talked to her friends on the phone, I listened to her side of the conversation and tried to decipher what the conversation was about. During my numerous visits back to my grandmother's house, I began to understand more and more of the conversations that my relatives were having. Listening became more natural, and I finally started to become more familiar with the dialect that had once intimidated me. Instead of worrying about what my grandmother was trying to communicate to me all the time, I was able to concentrate on who I was and grow as an individual.

? ? ?

Every day, my aunt took me on a new adventure; I climbed mountains, hiked trails, walked along the Yellow River, and even ran to the top of the Yellow Crane tower. On one particular day, my aunt planned to take me to a mountain with my cousin once removed, my second cousin, and her fiancé. A paved trail or the gondola were the two choices to get to the top.

I had never ridden a gondola before, so I begged my aunt to take me on it, to which she replied, “?????!”

My spirits were deflated, but I did not give up. After much encouragement, I finally convinced my aunt to ride with me. The other three members of our group would hike up and meet us there.

“??,?!?”

I was so thankful that my aunt put her fears aside in order to give me an experience that I would never forget. By revealing her personal struggles, she had allowed me to see her as a person, instead of just my aunt. During the trip, she always played the role of my guide, and I had failed to stop and appreciate her as an individual until this moment.

As we ascended, the beauty of the trees surrounded us. Everywhere I looked, I could see greenery and sky. It felt like we were flying to the top of the world.

During these trips to mountain peaks and rivers, I felt like an entirely new person; I could be whoever I wanted. I was not restricted by the expectations of American society, or any society for that matter, because I was in an entirely new atmosphere. The clothes that my aunt's friends gave me, the cheap accessories that my aunt bought me...my physical appearance was just the beginning of a complete makeover. Once I allowed myself to break free from what was expected from me, I could finally become who I really was, nationality and race aside.

As the trip progressed, I even picked up a few words in the dialect that struck me as funny when my aunt said them: “?” and “??”

“????,” was the first thing that my aunt had remarked when she saw me. At the time, I had felt self-conscious since I knew that the “Asian beauty standards” included pale skin, while Americans tended to obsess over tanning. Now, however, I recognized the fact that wherever I was in the world, I would always be tan; it was a part of who I was. As long as I was okay with it, it didn't matter what other people

thought or what the “standards” were.

Now that I knew how to pronounce it in the Wuhan dialect, my aunt joked that I could tell my mom when I got home, but something told me that it wouldn’t be the same when I shared it with her rather than my aunt.

I felt a strong connection between the two of us, whereas before, there was just a faint memory of meeting her. The almost-daily walks we took together to get bubble tea would be greatly missed, but I knew I could be reminded of them whenever I sipped a cup of bubble tea back at home. This one tiny drink, at least, was a constant in both of my worlds, American and Chinese. It had been accepted into both cultures, with equal enthusiasm.

When I was able to become more accepting towards my own identity, I began to feel more comfortable with my situation, as overwhelming and unfamiliar as it was. The path to get to this point of comfort was not an easy one, starting with the moment my feet stepped off that train, but I was proud of all my progress. Nothing would have been a better learning experience than throwing myself into a completely unfamiliar environment to figure everything out by myself. Not only did my language skills improve, but I was able to figure out who I truly was, albeit with a few struggles. I learned to deal with my own discomfort and use it as a motive to become more adaptive. My ethnicity was as simple as ABC ? American-Born Chinese, but that didn’t define who I was.

As I prepared for my return to America, I vowed to take what I learned with me. If my friends ever asked me if I visited family over break, or if I didn’t eat what was considered American food, I would just accept it as one of the many parts that make up who I am. Wherever I was, I would always feel a sense of discomfort, but I was finally okay with that fact. I belong not to a certain place, but to the people within it.

*1 Wake up, Xixi! We’re going to grandma’s house.*

*2 What do you want to eat for dinner?*

*3 Xixi, what do you want to eat?*

*4 I’m afraid of heights...*

*5 Thank you so much, Aunt!*

*6 Pale and Tan (White/Black)*

*7 You’re so tan!*

**Lauren Yoksh**

Grade 12

*Morning Prayer*

Poetry

Olathe North High School

Olathe, KS

Teacher: Molly Runde

a daydream of something better.  
tranquility a silk ribbon secure  
around our shoulder blades  
tied loosely into a drooping bow  
at our sun kissed chests. we sit there  
on the bank of a river we have never  
known before, toes dipping into cool  
rapids whose white noise replaces  
the sound of heartbeats and  
a nearby fisherman. sunshine  
a yellow gaze like stardust-- mystical,  
a moment in time from a memory  
we both have forgotten to remember.  
behind us children play  
with the earth that has been  
so kind to the soles of our feet, the aching  
in our backs. you bless the life you never  
lived. to fill the space I begin  
to speak of mediocrity, the way that we  
so desperately pined to breathe  
the sweet air of a field just like  
any other. how we wished for  
the same sun to rise above us  
though there are thousands  
glinting in the solid blueness of the sky  
we yearned to touch. your legs turn  
into water as I speak, and I pretend not  
to notice until all that is left beside me  
is your shadow. kids continue to romp around  
in the forgiving grass that you waited  
your entire existence to never see.

## Lauren Yoksh

Grade 12

### *Summer Abundant*

#### Short Story

Olathe North High School

Olathe, KS

Teacher: Molly Runde

It was during the summer that Joseph came to visit that I snuck out of the house for the first time. I was seven years old, and the white moon rested on the soft horizon and I could hear crystal waves lapping the shoreline outside the rec room window. I was reading *The Witches* by Roald Dahl, sprawled out across the aged woven rug that covered the damages on the hardwood floor, when I heard the familiar high-pitched creak of the storm door that led to the back porch. By the time I sat up, whoever opened the door was long gone, and I figured it must have been Stephen and Joseph who left out the back and were headed to the beach. I set *The Witches* on the kitchen island and made my way to the beach as well. I didn't realize that I was technically sneaking out. All I noticed was the blank sky, save for the twinkling stars that I could make out when I stood still and squinted my eyes and tilted my head back. It must have been near 10 o'clock, which is a strange time to go to the beach, and the sand felt cold against the pads of my bare feet.

The day before, Joseph mentioned to me that he had never gone crab hunting on the beach before. Stephen must have been in the room when he said this, and I concluded that this is what the two of them had gone out to do. How thoughtful of Stephen to take Joseph crab hunting! I knew the boys would have a lot of fun chasing crabs around the shore with flashlights and a net, and afterward they would build a fire and chat and enjoy each other's company, and I wanted to join in on the banter. The beach was vacant that night, just the shore and the shells and the salty water kissing my toes. In the distance my eye caught a faint glimpse of red, and as I walked closer I noticed Joseph, in a bright red sweatshirt, standing with Stephen, the ocean water swallowing both of them up to their knees. Stephen noticed me first, and gestured me towards the two of them. I jogged toward the boys, pulling on the bottom of my pant legs, folding the hems up to my knees. I waded in the chilled water with the boys, the salt irritating the rug burns on my calves, and I listened to the boys talk about college and girls and professors and Joseph talked about his life in New York City, and I talked about crabs. I taught Joseph all about crab hunting, and he thanked me, and said we would have to go out one night before he left.

We were on our way back to the house a while later; the moon had risen off of the horizon and now hung among the stars in the black sky. Joseph was the first to feel it, the prick of a cold water droplet on the back of his hand. His pace slowed down, and he looked up toward the clouded sky. Another droplet landed on the middle of his forehead, and soon Stephen and I took notice, and looked up toward the sky as well. Within seconds, the three of us were being pelted with water all over our bodies. Joseph and Stephen smiled as they exchanged looks with each other. *Rain*, Stephen whispered. *It's been years since we've gotten rain*. The three of us stayed on the beach a while longer, arms extended outward, feet sinking into the damp sand, clothes heavy with dripping water, tongues stuck out to catch the mystical raindrops. As we stood underneath the boundless black sky, Joseph talked about lightning, and Stephen taught us about the history of droughts, and I smiled and thought about feelings that never end, summers that you remember forever.

**William York**  
Grade 11

*Uncertainty*  
Personal Essay/Memoir

Platte County High School  
Platte City, MO  
Teacher: Marnie Jenkins

The first time is a distant memory. The fact that he was gone and might not come back didn't really click in my mind. This doesn't mean I didn't miss him, but rather I just didn't know the reality of the situation. My father deployed for the first time to Korea when I was 5 years old. I vaguely remember my family tearing up, including my father. This was the first of two times that he teared up in my lifetime.

We said our goodbyes outside the gate and waved goodbye as he boarded the plane. My mother bought us icecream on the way home, trying to dull the pain of knowing that we might not see my father alive again, and if we do, it won't be for six months when he comes back for his two weeks of R&R.

All was fine when he returned one year later. We met him at the airport with a big sign that read, "Welcome Home Dad", and the people in the airport clapped as they saw us embrace, our eyes full of tears. Dad was home, and he wasn't going to leave us every again.

Wrong.

The second time is a memory seared into my mind that will never leave me. It continues to shape me today, molding me into the man I am becoming. I was 8 years old the second time my father deployed, this time to the Middle East.

I truly knew what it meant this time: I wouldn't get to see my dad for at least six months and maybe not at all. The day was marked by another solemn drive to the airport and more tears as we said our goodbyes. This was the second time I have seen my father tear up, and it continues to be the last till this day. This time was different for me because I understood the uncertainty of the situation: whether or not my father would return home walking, in a wheelchair, or in a wooden box.

With these thoughts whirling inside my young mind, I rode home in silence. I didn't eat my ice cream this time, but rather swallowed my own tears.

Over the course of the next several months I was able to Skype call my father. Seeing his face but not being able to feel his touch almost made it worse, knowing he was alright, alright on the other side of the world. Reality set in one day when I was speaking to my father through the computer when the screen shook, followed by a loud noise. My father said he had to go, hurriedly ending the call and opening the door to his quarters at the same time. I watched in horror as the screen went black, and my mind burst with ideas as to what could be happening to my father. Uncertainty.

I later learned that he came under heavy insurgent fire and had to evacuate the facility because the insurgent's rockets were becoming too accurate, too quickly.

My father returned home for his R&R the same as he left. The family melded back together within minutes, enjoying each other's company and never wanting it to end. But of course he did as he had to return. As I watched him board the plane, I thought of the Skype call and what could happen while he was over there. Uncertainty.

The following months were some of the toughest of my life. I became a nuisance to my family and others around me as I tried to find my place in the world without my father to guide me. I didn't have the reliable source of knowledge that I usually did to lend some insight on what I did. I ran away from home, punched my bedroom walls, slept on the stairs in protest to my mother, and even attempted to buy a one way ticket to Iraq. Uncertainty.

I turned down the dark path of blaming my father for being gone, telling myself he had the choice to stay or go and he went. I resisted speaking to him through the computer, not wanting to see the supposed

face and source of my pain. Uncertainty.

My father returned and sat me down in the basement. We spoke for a few hours, him telling me that he was glad to see me and that he knows how hard it must have been to behave and be a good boy without him around to be my best friend. I cried, knowing that he forgave my stupid behavior and I learned that day that I would never allow a cloud of uncertainty to rise in front of me and my family, knowing we all do what we must for others in the hope that the gaps that might be created can be crossed as easily as if they weren't there.

Uncertainty is not a characteristic of the weak, but rather of the confused and merely a scar of those shaped by it and who've learned to conquer it.

**Ann Zhang**  
Grade 10

*Agenda*  
Short Story

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Maggie Ervin

*Around Here*

It's supposed to be jog two laps then walk one, but Mrs. Jackson never looks up from her phone. We are the same four as always. Two in front and two in back. The new girl, from Texas or Alabama or something, asks us to point out her flaws, just for fun. Her eyes are blue, her nose is small, and she's skinny even though she eats whatever. We tell her she's perfect.

She says we should go around in a circle. Who's next?

It's Kavya and she's pretty with big eyes but a little chubby beneath the chin, we all agree. And she has braces, but that one doesn't count because she's getting them off at her next appointment.

Aarushi's hair is gross because her mom makes her moisturize with coconut oil.

Sarah's lips have eczema.

Then everyone is looking at my face like a math problem where you can't find X. Kavya says, It's your eyes. This one I was expecting so I think Okay, because they're squinty.

And your skin. It's like this. Alabama girl runs a hand along the wall with paint the color of vomit chunks. I glance at my hand that is not so yellow and then back at the wall. But Kavya is nodding so I am nodding too, except then Mrs. Jackson yells Run, run and we stumble forward like dominos and try not to trip over our matchstick legs.

\*\*\*

*The French Eat Baguettes*

Her real last name is Paul-Aleksandrov. On the first day of the school she said just call her Madame Paul, maybe because it sounds more French. She's not French though, she's Bulgarian, and her accent is thick like margarine so she's not fooling anyone.

Still, I'm always here before the bell rings. I teach myself words we haven't learned like *pourquoi*, *formidable*, *sans*, *toujours*. Today we talk culture, which I don't know much about. Madame says: Class, something very important is that in France they like to eat baguettes.

Before I can stop myself, I'm crying Wait but it's not like *all* French people eat baguettes. Some of them might be allergic! Or maybe they just don't like bread.

Even my friends roll their eyes. Someone is yelling Shut up Ling Ling. Madame says No this is fact and when I try open my mouth again, she almost breaks my nose with the textbook. Here, see! *Les Français aiment manger les baguettes*.

I tell her I understand now but when it's time to write vocab, I use my pencil to carve FUCK U into the desk. Madame watches, arms crossed.

\*\*\*

*No More*

I have no one to talk to in the lunch line. Behind me there's Lamija From Bosnia and Mackenzie Who Gave Up Cheese For Lent, and in front me there's the Mob. Mackenzie is complaining about how she has nothing to eat, and God, what was she even thinking? She turns to me and says You're lucky you don't go to church.

But I do. Every Sunday pretty much. I don't do Lent like the Catholics, but I always bring my Bible and sing How Great Is Our God, and before I go to bed at night I say Thank you Jesus for this good day, and also I would like my very own iPhone please.



So I tell Mackenzie: Actually, I'm Christian too. I didn't know the Mob was listening, or else I wouldn't have said. Now I have their attention. They are laughing, laughing at me I'm sure. One of them shouts You ain't Christian you liar.

I yell Am so! and look to Mackenzie for help, but she is laughing with them. I close my eyes and my ears and repeat it in my head until it means nothing. I am so, I am so, I am so.

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### *Chicken*

Our table goes Jess Danielle Kavya Lucy Jane Sarah Deepa Eli Aarushi me. We are only supposed to sit eight to a table, but it's a stupid rule, so nobody follows it except when someone tries to join us.

Most days we trade food. Deepa is the best because her mom makes nutella sandwiches and yogurt with M&Ms. Aarushi doesn't like to trade because she's vegetarian. The gods say so, and they also told Kavya who always buys cheese pizza. Me, I used to order pepperoni until they stopped putting sauce on it. Now I choose the salad. I pick out the good parts like the croutons.

Today we all buy Izze drinks even though it costs extra. Lucy says Cheers and we clink the grownup way. We play Never Have I Ever and sip our fizzy Izzes. Then Kavya asks me: Hey can I try some of your chicken?

I tell her Sure. If it were tomorrow or yesterday I would have said different, but presently our heads are someplace else. Kavya plucks a piece of chicken from my plastic salad container. She pops it in her mouth, just like that. Huh, pretty good, she says.

The next day she takes another and then two and then more. I wonder if new taste buds are being born on her tongue. Maybe it's like drugs. I want to ask her why'd she do it? What do the gods think? Is she happier?

Instead I push my salad into her hands. Hey Kavya, wanna trade?

\*\*\*

### *Ms. Morrison Kills*

Rumor has it that Ms. Morrison murdered her husband. She's mentioned that she's divorced, and she says all her words in a voice like white noise the way that serial killers do. Also, she eats ramen during class and doesn't share. The smell of noodles and chicken broth can convince us of anything.

Ms. Morrison keeps choosing stories like "Death By Scrabble" and "The Lottery" and "Lamb to the Slaughter." I skim the big words but the meaning is not lost on me. Now we are reading "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe. A crazy man has just chopped up a corpse. I glance over my shoulder as Ms. Morrison places her ramen in the microwave.

It's a load of crap, I know. But I can't help but imagine my teacher's hands around a throat. Maybe she never leaves her seat because she's afraid we'll snap handcuffs on her wrists. Maybe she's met a million faces, and that's why she can't remember my name. I try to punctuate this class like Edgar Allen Poe. The! microwave! beeps! and! soon! I! shall! burst!

\*\*\*

### *Eli*

She's gone to school with the others since forever, but they don't actually like her because she's always passing gas. We still talk to her though. At her bat mitzvah we ate too much at a fancy restaurant, and even the vegetables tasted good.

Eli braids her hair every day, usually one fishtail down each side like licorice sticks. She'll do other people's hair too. On Fridays we are Dutch girls, all the same.

Today Eli doesn't show up until fourth period algebra. She doesn't look at us and then sits down like everything is normal. The first thing we notice is her hair, chopped off the same as Emma Watson's. The others exchange looks. Jess whispers Woah.

There's a long pause. Finally Jane says Eli I like your hair. That's what you say when you don't like someone's hair but also when you do. Eli says Thanks. Pulls out her binder. Her fingers kiss the bare curve of her neck.

\*\*\*

*The Way Back*

We call it the midget bus because it looks like someone chopped the back part off. It parks all the way at the end, around the corner of the sidewalk and behind the teacher parking lot. Even with half a bus, the four of us have plenty of room. Mostly we play word games on our phones. We google celebrities and debate if they are hot. We share stories about stupid people and ask how did they even get into this school?

Every day we go home to backyard patios and garage door openers. We are the fewest people but the longest ride. Jane leaves first, at a different house on different days. Then Kavya, Aarushi, me.

When it is just me and the driver left, I scoot close to the window. I watch the trees race by like stallions. Sometimes I count minutes and mailboxes and miles.

Eventually, the bus drops me off right in front of my driveway. It is policy, I think. The house is empty until I open the door, and that is the way I like it. Just television and wedges of Babybel cheese all to myself. Yes, tomorrow the bus will find me again. But in this moment I do not have to bow to conversation. I decide: Let the French eat their goddamn baguettes. The earth will keep spinning.

**Ann Zhang**  
Grade 10

*Mayra Morales*  
Short Story

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Andy Chen

The bonfire was burning at its peak, so I leaned closer, jabbing a skeletal stick deeper into the flames. The beast hawked up a shower of sparks, which clung to my jacket, orange and winking. My marshmallow blackened.

“You might not want to get so close?” said Mayra, her wide eyes glowing from the other side of the fire. She said it the way you’d ask someone for their jacket in the middle of North Dakota December — which, in fact, we were currently experiencing.

“It’s not that hot,” I said. To prove it, I held one hand further in front of me, waving away the ashes and smoke. Of course, it stung like hell.

Mayra bit her lip. I knew she was trying to be a good host, to keep me from melting my face off, even though I’d been a stone-cold bitch all night, fretting over some failed geometry test. But Mayra was sweet like that, like a mother.

Proof: She had invited the entire lunch table to toast marshmallows in her backyard that night, even though she was new to the school and therefore didn’t have any worthwhile connections. She could get away with this move because she was pretty. Gorgeous, really. So even if you didn’t know her, you liked her by default.

Anyways, that evening I was the straggler; the other members of the group had already gone home. I blamed my dad, who had somehow missed my text — *Pick up at 10* — and at ten-thirty responded, *Will be there in half an hour.*

By this point, I’d endured about fifteen minutes of the half hour. Mayra had stopped trying to make small talk, so we just sat there in what we pretended was a comfortable silence.

“Shit,” I said. My marshmallow was withering. The end of the stick, exposed, curled like vine. I pulled it out of the bonfire and waited for the smoke to die down.

“Want another one?” asked Mayra.

“Sure,” I said.

She lifted herself off the log bench, grabbed the entire bag of *Jumbo Puffs!* from the cardboard box where she’d already packed things away, and held it out to me. I plucked a deformed marshmallow, one that looked like it was jackknifing at the waist.

I told Mayra with as much feeling as I could muster, “Thanks.”

She smiled with her lips and glanced around at the four log benches like she couldn’t remember where she was sitting before. Then she plopped down right next to me. Her left leg, bouncing up and down, almost knocked out my marshmallow-roasting arm.

We both jumped when my phone buzzed. It was my mom this time: *Can you stay the night at your friend’s house?*

I was about to respond “no” when her number appeared on my screen, and I picked up, gnawing my marshmallow, which was only mildly burnt.

“Grace,” my mom said in greeting. She was driving; I could hear the crackle of her Bluetooth system in the foreground.

“Yeah?” I said. I could feel Mayra’s gaze on me, so I put the phone on speaker.

My mom’s voice is level. “Your father blasted his tire on a curb.”

“He’s okay?”

“Yeah. You know how he is. But now I’ve got to go out and take him home, and your friend’s address, it’s all the way in the other direction, and it’s already so late...”

“You can stay, no problem,” Mayra blurted.

“That’s a massive help,” said my mom with her supersonic hearing. Then, directed to me: “Tell your friend thank you. A thousand times.” A pause. “Good night, sweetheart.”

“Bye.” I hung up.

Mayra rose from her seat again, all in a hurry, calling over her shoulder, “Hold on just a sec, Grace.” In the darkness, I couldn’t tell if she was grinning or grimacing.

While Mayra was gone, I grabbed another marshmallow from the bag, skewering it with delight. I held it over the flame and waited for maybe another hundred and twenty secs until she returned, grasping two steaming mugs, both topped off with whipped cream. “I’m sorry,” she said in explanation, handing me a mug. She sat down next to me again.

I burned my tongue on my first sip of the drink — hot chocolate. But it was worth it; I almost moaned, my pinkish fingers gripping the mug even tighter, leeching its heat.

I said to Mayra, “Why the hell are you sorry? This is delicious.”

“About your dad,” she said.

“Oh. He’s not a very good driver.”

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

Then, very awkwardly, she leaned sideways, towards me, and pecked me on the cheek. It was almost grandmotherly. The tickle of a moth’s beating wings. I took a long, scalding swig of my hot chocolate.

We retreated to our drinks in silence, and on occasion I could sense her glancing at me from over her shoulder. I fastened my gaze to my marshmallow like it would leap into the flames if I looked away. Then I started breathing too loud because I’d suddenly become aware my breath, like when you notice the tip of your nose and you can’t stop seeing it, even though it’s been right in the middle of your vision all along.

But anyway, I liked that she was watching me. So the next time, I looked back at her. I wasn’t trying to call “gotcha!”, like I’d caught her picking her nose or something, but as soon as I turned, she started blinking and swiping her hand across her face like a thorn was lodged inside her eye.

Maybe there really was something in her eye: The snow had just then begun to come down, all soft and ghostlike. The bonfire let out a low growl in response. A couple of tiny pearls took perch on top of Mayra’s mess of hair, and they lit up like glitter, shimmering as the fire stretched its arms. I looked at Mayra and she looked back at me and I didn’t look away.

That’s when I did it — a flurry of motions — I couldn’t tell you how — and the next thing you know, my hot chocolate is a brackish puddle on the ground, and the mug’s shards ring and spin in their places, and there’s a flaming stick in my hand, the kind shaped perfectly for roasting marshmallows, and —

Mayra is screeching and wailing; that very same restless orange crowns her heart-shaped head. Sparks fly, literally. Her eyes meet mine and soften as both of us realize what I’ve done.

“Shit,” I say. I snatch the hot chocolate from her trembling hands and pour it over her head, soaking her fur-lined coat in the process. The liquid trickles down her face and drips off the tip of her nose, and she lifts her face to me — lips half-open, eyebrows losing balance — and I have to turn away.

At least her hair looks fine, I think — damp, but otherwise untouched by the flames.

A beat too late, Mr. and Mrs. Morales rush out the back door, cradling bottles and bottles and bottles of water that they then use to douse their daughter, even though the sparks are already gone, even though she’s shivering now against December’s raw breath. Then her parents pour some water onto the bonfire itself, like retribution. The flames hiss, but don’t back down.

Mr. and Mrs. Morales are saying something that I don’t understand, and I don’t know if it’s a different language or my brain just isn’t working. But they don’t sound mad at me, so I nod along.

Slowly, everything returns to focus: Mr. Morales kicks a stray log. Mrs. Morales chastises her daughter: “You know better than to get so close.”

An hour or so later, my mom shows up in her grumbling sedan, and I climb into the front seat because my dad is sprawled lengthwise across the back, snoring in wheezes.

“Don’t wake him up,” whispers my mom. “He’s had a long day.”

So we inch out of the driveway. I call goodbye to Mayra's parents, who are waving from the front porch, just the two of them, hips touching. I twist myself around against my seatbelt to watch the Morales' house shrink into the distance.

As my mom rolls a stop sign, a single light flickers on upstairs. A silhouette presses her hands against the window, only for a moment, then peels soundlessly away.

**Ann Zhang**

Grade 10

*On Elmo*

Personal Essay/Memoir

John Burroughs School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: Andy Chen

On Elmo (a love letter to my grandparents)

My grandma's favorite story about me begins like this: After I learned to speak but before I'd found anything worth saying, I told my family that I loved Elmo more than anyone. I dragged my fuzzy, tomato-red doll around the house until he was identifiable only by his gaping black mouth—stuck halfway between a smile and a scream.

My attachment hindered my early studies, specifically, in potty-training. My parents set up a toddler-sized toilet in the center of the kitchen, but I refused to descend upon the throne without Elmo, as if only his fluorescent presence could somehow rouse my bladder to action.

One day, my dad (perhaps out of jealousy) resolved to test out my compassion towards Elmo. "Why don't you give Elmo something to eat?" he asked me.

*"Bu gei, bu gei!"*—I won't give, I won't give!

My dad tried again: "Why don't you give Elmo a drink of water?"

*"Bu gei, bu gei!"*

My dad frowned. Obviously, he needed to lower his expectations. "Why don't you let Elmo use the potty?"

But I was fed up with all these demands. Without another word, I raised the doll above my head and plopped him into the toilet.

My grandma has always been a woman of few words, yet she tells and retells this story because we've all heard it so many times, in both English and Chinese, that the entire family understands her. Every time she reaches the punchline, we laugh.

\*\*\*

When I was in seventh grade, my mom proposed that I apply for a coeducational, liberal arts, college-preparatory day school near her workplace (or as I thought of it, a fancy-ass private school). I probably said something noncommittal, like "Whatever."

My dad balked. Soon he had sketched a mathematical forecast of the school's tuition in relation to each parent's income. We didn't come close to qualifying for tuition aid, but with a significant slice of the pie chart set aside for sports teams and piano lessons, switching schools would surely limit our spending.

After a campus tour featuring free cookies, the scale tipped to my mom's side. The next year, in late August, she drove me to my first day as a new eighth grader at the Fancy-Ass Private School.

Since middle school teachers didn't give letter grades, I took my first year easy and focused on greater responsibilities, like rewriting my existential outlook. I listened to life-is-hard indie music, memorized philosophical quotes, and gave up eating meat with the exception of seafood (nowadays, my answer to "Why don't you eat meat" is "All the reasons," accompanied with a shrug).

My family had trouble wrapping their heads around these drastic reforms. What had happened to their llama-loving optimist?

The main objection was towards my kind-of-vegetarianism (the technically correct word being "pescetarian," which I avoid because A, I have trouble spelling it, and B, it sounds pretentious as hell). According to my mom, I was blindly imitating my classmates.

My grandparents nodded along.

Now is probably a good time to mention my grandparents' relentless love for cooking. Whenever I open the garage door, my grandpa pokes his head out to exclaim, "Annie has returned! It's time to eat!"

I'm so lucky to come home every day to his signature dishes: shrimp dumplings, sticky balls with red bean paste, *ji dan geng*—which is lost in translation as "Chinese steamed egg"... (Last summer, when I was learning to cook, my grandpa showed me the way his parents taught him to swipe his finger around the inside of the eggshell, to extract every single bit. Then he said, with no small amount of pride, "But *you* don't have to do that.")

Anyway, these days, my grandparents, fretting over my suppressed intake of protein, tried to stir beef broth into soups, or sneak shavings of meat into vegetable dishes. I did my best to assess my food before each bite, like a bomb-sniffing dog.

Finally, by freshman year, I began to believe that my family had accepted my dietary choices. My dad, for example, made sure to snag the untouched veggie sandwiches at his business conferences.

Then one evening at dinner, my grandma brought up a news article she'd read about a Chinese woman celebrating her 100-somethingth birthday. "And every day," my grandma mentioned as casually as she could, "that old woman eats *hong shao rou*" (in English, red-braised pork).

I froze, holding a spoonful of egg. I'd let my guard down, I realized, slowly lifting the spoon to my nose, confirming my dread—the dish was made with meat broth.

I must have made some otherworldly noise as I leapt from my seat and shoveled the remainders of my dinner into the dog's bowl.

"See, I told you she would know," clucked my grandpa to his wife, who was laughing heartily, her mouth full of egg.

I stormed upstairs and spent the rest of the evening blasting "Summertime Sadness" right next to the air vent so everyone in the house would hear.

Around this time, I was still reeling from the hit that my free time had taken: I tried to juggle a rigorous course load, three instruments that I hardly practiced, and competitive sports throughout the year. I no longer had time to keep up with *Dance Moms*; I cried over missed points on tests; my social life decayed into a skeleton of the previous year's friendships.

The egg incident became an excuse for me to zero in on schoolwork. Each evening I filled a bowl with several careful scoops from each platter, brought it upstairs along with my forty-pound backpack, and ate alone in my room while watching Khan Academy tutorials.

Then I let go. There was no grand event that forced me to recognize my stupidity; my stubbornness simply faded away, like mosquito bites do. I wanted to be able to look my grandpa in the eye; I wanted to be my grandma's favorite again. To prove I wasn't so much of a brat.

As a compromise, I brought my laptop downstairs in the evenings. I would inhale my dinner, my grandparents observing from across the table, as Sal Khan walked us through cellular respiration. Sometimes my grandparents would pick up a word or two, and echo after Sal: "The reality is..."

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Today my grandma enters my room without knocking, while I have my back to the door, scrutinizing two books because I can't decide which to read first. I assume my grandma is here to ask about the laundry—she brings clothing to me when she can't distinguish its owner—but then she says "Hello Annie," in English, and I can hear the smile in her voice. (Recently, my grandma has been practicing English with the Indian grandmother next door. My grandma rarely speaks to me in Chinese anymore, which sometimes feels patronizing—I can *understand* the language perfectly well—but mostly I feel guilt: I used to speak Chinese, and now I don't; or at least, I'm too ashamed of my accent to say anything.)

I turn around at her voice. My grandma is hugging something to her chest, something candy-apple red. "It cost five cents," she says to me, disjointedly. She can't stop laughing.

Most Sundays, my grandparents and their friends from church reap the harvest at Goodwill, a ritual that my mom orders kept secret. The dining room table transforms into an exhibit of fake flowers and neon ceramics, everything bearing a bright orange sticker with some single-digit number—though eventually, it all enters hibernation in the basement. Until then, my grandma will boast each price like the name of an accomplished son.

My grandma offers me today's finding: It is Elmo. Or rather, Elmo's torso. His plastic hands are folded; I make his arms slide up and down, as if he's pressing a button.

My grandma says, "I see at store, I think, Annie will like this."

I love it.

So I say what I want her to hear from me (I imagine her face brightening, like a full moon, like daybreak): "Thank you."

"Ha! You are welcome."

After she leaves the room, I write down her words. I ponder former Elmos, and Elmos to come. I think, maybe my grandparents would like me a little more if I ate meat, and maybe I would like them a little more if they didn't expect me to go to Harvard. But I don't write this at first.

I want to write something meaningful—to tell my grandparents I'll never be too busy for them, and I'm not the least bit embarrassed when they're cackling like hyenas in a dimly-lit restaurant, and once at Target I cried when it struck me that we were all getting older, and my grandparents were already so old, so I hid in the tampon aisle so no one would find me, so no one could see how much I felt—but I don't know where to begin.



**Ann Zhang**  
Grade 10

*The Passive Voice*  
Dramatic Script

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Andy Chen

THE PASSIVE VOICE

Cast of Characters

PETE: 14, an eighth-grader. Can't make eye contact with adults.

MISS ZIMMERMAN: 26 — young enough to understand the era's new technology, but grew up without it. One of the school's best English teachers.

Act 1  
Scene 1

English classroom at an exclusive private high school. Day.

*Neatly written across the chalkboard:* January 14, 2028

*and in even larger print:* Please return your essays to your desk and Smartwriters to the cart when you are finished. Have a great weekend!

*MISS ZIMMERMAN is collecting papers from the empty rows of desks. Only one student remains in the classroom — PETE. He rests his arms and head on his desk, covering his paper, and kicks his legs beneath him.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN

Do you know why you're here right now?

PETE

No idea, Miss Zimmerman.

MISS ZIMMERMAN

Here's an idea.

*She approaches his desk and slides his paper closer to him — it's handwritten; all the other students' were typed. PETE doesn't react.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN

Care to explain?

PETE

It's... It's an A minus.

*MISS ZIMMERMAN raises her eyebrows expectantly.*

PETE

I don't see the problem with an A minus.

*MISS ZIMMERMAN picks up the paper from a desk next to Pete's. Holds it up.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN

Pete, do you know how well your friend Cecily Fernandez did on this paper?

*PETE reads directly off Cecily's paper.*

PETE

One hundred percent. With a smiley face.

MISS ZIMMERMAN

The median grade in this class was a perfect score. The median grade in every class was and will be a perfect score. We're leaving other schools in the dust — well, most students are.

PETE

I dunno what you want me to say. I'm sorry? I'm sorry for being stupid?

MISS ZIMMERMAN

No, you simply need to adjust to changing times.

*MISS ZIMMERMAN sits down in the chair next to Pete. She sighs.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN

Pete, have you been stealing former students' work? From an older sibling, maybe?

*PETE holds his poker face.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN

You know that's not benefiting you in the least, right? They couldn't write the way that we can now. I'm sure your older brother would kill to go back in time and rewrite his high school essays using even a first generation Smartwriter, and you have the finest model right at your fingertips! Even I would-

PETE

I'm an only child.

*A long pause as MISS ZIMMERMAN waits for Pete to elaborate.*

PETE

And I don't have one. A Smartwriter, I mean.

*MISS ZIMMERMAN laughs. It sounds like a cough.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN

The school board cut my paycheck in half this year to buy cartloads and cartloads of Smartwriters. Every teacher and student in this school owns a Smartwriter, and I am certain that you have not been overlooked.

PETE

I mean, I got one at the beginning of the year, yeah...

MISS ZIMMERMAN  
And what, it ran away?

*PETE looks away.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN  
Should I call your parents now about the two hundred dollar fine?

PETE  
No! No, it's right here in my backpack. I swear.

*PETE digs through his backpack. First he has to take out books — he's carrying a wide variety, from The Handmaid's Tale to The Catcher in the Rye — which he stacks frantically on his desk. Then at last, he pulls out what looks like an ordinary laptop and holds it in front of his face like a shield.*

PETE  
See?

*MISS ZIMMERMAN gently lowers the Smartwriter to Pete's desk.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN  
You know what grade you could have earned if you'd simply bothered to make use of this Smartwriter?

*She waits for PETE to answer. He doesn't.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN  
A perfect score.

PETE  
Anyone can get a perfect score.

MISS ZIMMERMAN  
Exactly! All you need that kind of confidence!

PETE  
But that's it. I have to have confidence in Smartwriters.

MISS ZIMMERMAN  
Is that an issue for you? These programs were designed by the finest English professors in the country! Don't try to tell me you consider yourself such an expert already. Even Cecily Fernandez is not an expert.

*PETE scoffs.*

PETE  
Cecily Fernandez couldn't use a semicolon to save her life.

MISS ZIMMERMAN  
But you-

*She glances at Pete's paper.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN

have no right to look down upon her. Besides, I fully trust that Cecily understands the use of semicolons. I ran through basic rules of grammar for this entire class on the first day of school.

PETE

And nobody learned them! Don't you remember? You were like, "Make sure to take notes in your Smartwriters!" And we were all like, "Sure, yeah," but really everyone was checking their texts or playing games or whatever. And Cecily Fernandez was watching a video of a Chihuahua running into a screen door over and over and over...

*MISS ZIMMERMAN gestures to Cecily's paper.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN

But Cecily Fernandez-

PETE

can press a couple buttons on a Smartwriter. So can any other human being. Or a monkey! Or even that dumb Chihuahua.

MISS ZIMMERMAN

If so, then with the help of a Smartwriter, Cecily's Chihuahua would have earned a better grade than you. You will always have a Smartwriter with you, Pete, all the way from high school to adulthood. The only thing holding you back is your own lack of effort.

*She grabs Pete's paper to begin pointing out errors.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN

Look, here's a simple comma splice... sentence fragment... comma splice... comma-

*PETE holds up The Catcher in the Rye.*

PETE

There's all kinds of broken rules in this one.

MISS ZIMMERMAN

I-

*She stops herself, smiles faintly.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN

You would like that one, wouldn't you.

PETE

I did.

*He sets down the book.*

PETE

Sentence fragments and all. And who's gonna write something like this from my generation? When you

pick up a book, don't you want to hear different voices every time? And grading all these papers! Miss Zimmerman, don't you want to read something more than "firstly," "also," "additionally," "in conclusion"?

MISS ZIMMERMAN

You're writing a literary analysis, not a bildungsroman. Your Smartwriter is only a tool to guide you.

PETE

But would the A be worth if I don't do it myself?

*MISS ZIMMERMAN sighs.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN

Pete... I'm not asking you to philosophize. Do you really think you're the only one putting forward these questions? I know teenagers are always trying to break the system and wear tight pants or whatever, but for now, all you can do is follow. Collect perfect scores.

*MISS ZIMMERMAN lifts herself from her seat to collect the remaining papers. She speaks while walking.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN

Pete, you're a great writer. I have to say that to every student, but this time I really mean it. You have new ideas. You have things to say. But what are your parents and classmates and colleges going to think when they see your A minus in a school of A pluses? You'll have do better — on paper, at the very least.

*She circles back around to Pete's desk and opens his Smartwriter, moving his paper around next to it.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN

Here. Begin typing from the first sentence.

*PETE begins to type and occasionally click the mouse pad. Throughout Miss Zimmerman's remaining lines, the lights gradually dim, blacking out at the end.*

MISS ZIMMERMAN

It'll point out all your mistakes, and all you have to do is press the little green checkmarks. See, there you go. Watch now how it fixes you.

# Sydney Cimarolli

Grade 12

## *Mementos* Writing Portfolio

Webster Groves High School  
Webster Groves, MO  
Teacher: Katie Guymon

### Unraveling

My dad charged down the path ahead of me, not bothering to accommodate my more leisurely strides. I bristled with annoyance and attempted to catch up to him, but every time I got within a few feet of him, he sped up and left me behind again. I crunched my teeth together and tried to keep my mouth shut, but after a few minutes passed with silence stretching out between us like taffy, I couldn't help myself.

"Stop that!" I called, indignantly running up to meet him when he stopped moving. "Are you gonna spill whatever you dragged me out here to say, or are you gonna keep acting like a... like a whiny little pissed off toddler?"

My dad turned to face me, his suburban look overtly out of place amongst the reaching trees and dappled light. His futile efforts to manifest an outfit appropriate for hiking would have usually been endearing, but because of the strained, bitter look on his face and the unexplainable, petulant way he acted, he only annoyed me. He opened his mouth for a moment, then closed it.

"Listen," I started. "I have a lot of homework to do, so if you're not gonna talk to me, I'm going home. Okay?"

"Anna... I, um, I have to tell you something," he said, lacking all of the eloquence by which I defined him.

"I know. So tell me."

"I'm just... You're... You might not see me the same way after. So forgive me if I take a moment."

Sweat lingered on my dad's forehead, his eyes trained on his feet as he fidgeted with his hands. I couldn't get over how pathetic he looked: my father, a lawyer and a scholar, reduced to such an unsettled state. A sudden self-awareness caused me to uncross my arms and soften my gaze. In the pause that followed, a kind of unfolding seemed to take place within my dad. His back straightened, his hands dropped to his side, and the sweat seemed to evaporate right off of his skin. He became himself again.

"Look, the whole shtick about how I had to tell you something... It was just a ploy to get us some quality family time together," my dad said. "With school, and soccer, and your friends... I barely see you anymore. It makes me sad, that's all. I hope you can forgive me."

I narrowed my eyes. I couldn't get the way he'd just looked out of my head. He wouldn't be that upset over something so simple.

"You thought that would... change the way I see you? Something like *that*?" I pressed, searching for his explanation's Achilles heel.

"Yeah... I know it sounds ridiculous, but I can't help but worry. It's just something parents do. You'll understand someday."

"Wait, if you wanted quality family time, why didn't you ask if Mom wanted to come with us?"

"I..." he began, his eyes darting back and forth as though he would find the right words dangling from the trees like ornaments. "I thought *we* should have some time together. You know, some father-daughter bonding. That's important, don't you agree?"

"Sure, Dad, but... I don't know. You're acting weird."

"I'm sorry," he said, seeming to mean it. "It's been a long week."

"How so?"

"The usual. Work, mostly."

"Oh, yeah, I get that," I replied, even though I didn't. My dad always talked about how much he loved his job. He once told me specifically how privileged he felt to be able to take slow but meaningful strides towards creating a more just society every day.

We moved onwards, bird calls sounding above our heads and brittle leaves breaking under our feet. Looking over at my dad, I noticed tears dusting the bottoms of his eyes. I hadn't seen him cry since my grandma died. The red face, puffy eyes, runny nose... they didn't suit him. His features matched best with more dignified feelings, like contentment or certainty.

"Dad, is everything okay?" I asked, now sure that he hadn't told me everything.

He stared straight ahead, his eyes fixed on the path in front of him. He stopped walking.

"Do you remember back when you first got your driver's license, and you were driving my car to Sarah's house, and you called me in a whole mess of tears, apologizing and apologizing before you even told me what you did wrong?" His voice broke a little, and I pretended not to notice.

"When I thought I'd popped a tire? I was so worried you'd be mad at me..."

"And I took off from work to drive down there with a spare, meeting you in this little neighborhood where you could have just walked the rest of the way to Sarah's, really, and when I got there, it turned out that all your tires were fine. There was nothing wrong with the car at all."

"Well I heard this nasty noise, and I just thought—"

"You were so convinced. You wouldn't even believe me when I told you that the car was fine. If it wasn't the tire, you kept saying, it had to be something else."

"God, I didn't know anything about cars."

"No, you didn't. But you just *knew* something was broken. You believed it so strongly that you didn't even check once you'd pulled over to make sure you were right."

I laughed. "Yeah, I really should have cleared that up before I called you. I was so embarrassed. And I felt terrible for making you take off work."

"Not terrible enough to ask your mother for help, though," he mused, sounding inappropriately wistful.

"I'm sorry about that. It's just, I was scared that you would be mad at me, but I was *sure* that she would be. Even though I hadn't done anything wrong." I paused, looking at my dad, half of him lit by the sparse sunlight and the other half of him darkened by shadows. "You didn't question it. You didn't even suggest that I call her. You just showed up."

"I did," he answered, still not looking at me. Tension laced the air; he was still keeping something from me.

"Seriously though, what's bothering you?" I pressed. "You can tell me, you know. I'm not gonna judge you, or whatever you're worried about me doing."

"That's not true. I wish that were true."

"Dad," I urged. "What aren't you telling me?"

"I... Fuck... I cheated on your mom, Anna," he choked out, crumpling the second words left his mouth as if he had been emptied by the confession.

The forest blurred into a mess of brown and green around me.

"I don't..."

"I know how this makes me sound. Believe me, I do. But please, just try to—"

"Why would you tell me this?" I tried to yell, but the words came out in hoarse whispers. "I don't want to know, why would you think that I'd want to know that, I..."

My dad lurched towards me and grabbed me by the shoulders. Revulsion pushed vomit up my throat, and I choked it down.

"Look, Anna, please just listen to me, please... I needed you to hear this from me so you wouldn't think that I was one of *those* guys, one of those guys that, though I'm sorry to say it, that you'll probably date one day. I just... I need you to understand. I'm not like that, Anna, I'm not..."

“You can’t say that—you can’t! What makes you any different than...?” I trailed off, thinking of Mark. We’d dated for eight months before I found out that he’d been sleeping with some girl he met at church camp the entire time. Embarrassment stopped me from telling either of my parents why we actually broke up; I didn’t want anyone to know that I’d let that happen to myself. But just as I’d wanted to show Mark the extent of the hurt he’d caused me, I longed to push all of the pain I’d felt then onto my dad, so he’d know, really know what he’d done, and feel crippling guilt over his actions. Of course, though, just as with Mark, my fury made my tongue weigh too heavy in my mouth, and I stayed silent.

“I didn’t seek it out. You have to understand that. Most men, they seek this stuff out. That’s cruel. I’ll always condemn it. But you don’t understand how hard it is to say no to—”

“Who?” I asked, more like a demand than a question.

“What?”

“Who was it? Who was worth this?”

“I don’t want to tell you, and I don’t think I have to.”

“I think you owe me—”

“I don’t owe you anything. I didn’t even have to tell you in the first place. But I did, and now I’m trying to explain myself. You’re just not listening.”

“There’s nothing, nothing...” I trailed off, suddenly aware of feeling ridiculous and feeble, screaming at my dad and waving my arms in a hopeless attempt to get him to listen. I paused to calm down, then continued: “There’s nothing you could say that would make this okay.”

My dad shook his head. A change had come over him; he no longer looked pitiful. Instead, he looked angry, which only made everything worse.

“I’m going to tell her,” he asserted. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“Please, Dad... Don’t act like you’re being moral. Just...”

“But, I am. I’m not claiming to be a saint, but I’m not the worst I could be. I’m being honest with you. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“I don’t want to talk to you anymore. Go home.”

“But Anna, I can’t bear you thinking that I—”

“Please, just go. I need to be by myself, okay? Please.”

And after a long, unbearable moment, he did go, leaving me alone with the rapid unraveling of a once stable family that I’d always taken comfort in belonging to.



## Faith

the voices of the children's choir hollow out the church walls  
stained glass Jesus with slitted eyes that never stop staring  
sermons rolling off of the pastor's silver tongue  
love in the form of beration  
words in a language that used to be mine  
young eyes wide and sparkling, not yet discordant  
the twitch in my hands far too indicative of my betrayal  
different hues of faith, matching auras that create rainbow light  
while the air above me stays stagnant, barely ripples  
as i grasp at colors with my insatiable hands  
barely able to watch as they slip through my fingers yet again  
electric energy crinkles in the air like tin foil  
forming excitement like dewdrops  
that i wish i could suck up like the sponges that line the pews  
in front of and behind me  
watching the scene play out, rapturous in their seats  
clearly privy to something that I am not  
the woman next to me is dabbing her eyes with  
a mascara stained handkerchief, used, I imagine, solely for this purpose  
taken over by the sheer Greatness of it all  
a gutting reminder that even in a whirlwind of people i am alone  
and even in the most spiritual of places

I will never be holy

## Daughters of Resignation

we are not the first daughters of resignation  
of sad eyes framed by straggling hairs fallen out of a hasty ponytail  
of deft but tired hands working mundane magic at the warming kitchen stove

illusionary equality has not undone the despondency pulled out of women  
that begins to show in high school girls, suffocated to a stop  
when leering boys are praised for As and we, striving for safety,  
get a gaze that says *I knew it* when we get anything less than perfect

we are not the first daughters of resignation  
and we will not be the last but still we will try  
as did our mothers and their mothers before them  
so that one day there will be no daughters of trapped mothers  
that look forward and think *i love you but i must not become you*

## Mandatory Identity Crisis

it seems poetic--the glitzy, freshness of the year's start  
laid out against the harsh, jaggedness of the year's end  
my first time driving a car, clumsy turns and jolting stops  
juxtaposed with my first time crying in one, shaky hands and  
windshield wipers that couldn't clear my vision; I thought  
going for a drive would make me feel better, but gaining control  
over a machine was no cure for losing control over my life  
everything slipping, slipping, slipping, and me: tripping over  
the fragments of myself that had been left behind in the wreckage.

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

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

## **Blindly Cynical**

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

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

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

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

## Wisdom Teeth

they let me keep the carcasses:  
glaring up through glinting plastic  
just four more parts of me that wouldn't fit any more

time slips away towards a brick wall future  
this like all the other milestones: kisses then misses, braceface and suitcase  
seemed too far into a stretched out future to ever occur

next year I will be 821 miles away from my mother but currently  
she helps pull red clouds from my mouth, exposing the open wounds  
and then draping them with white

## Green Memories

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

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

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

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

Ruth had met enough silver-tongued men in her life to be wary, but she didn't see a problem with letting herself have a little fun. The man was not handsome enough to charm her, but entertaining enough to fill the night with meaningless talk. He was a fool, but of course, he had thought he was fooling Ruth. She remembered giggling as she detailed the overblown tilt of his conversation to her friends over coffee and bagels the next morning.

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

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

The book had been given to Ruth by her best friend at the time, Martha, who was playing Ophelia in a local production. She'd begged Ruth to read the play before she saw it, claimed she'd understand it far better that way. Ruth remembered feeling guilty—the extravagant book must have cost Martha a ton, and she had no money to spare. Martha, though, was prone to excessive spending whenever she landed a job. She'd felt like such a star as Ophelia, so glamorous. Martha truly believed she'd make it big on Broadway, then, and Ruth had believed it right along with her. Ruth assumed that dream had gone up in smoke, as she'd been an avid New York theatergoer for a decade or two and never heard a word about Martha.

Ruth had lost track of Martha far too quickly, as close as they were. She wished she could get in touch with her, wished even more that she'd never lost touch with her, but she didn't know where to start. She didn't even know if Martha was alive or dead. *To be or not to be*—Ruth's inner dialogue was beginning to mirror Hamlet's these days. She set the book carefully on top of the dress. Ruth needed to remember Martha, even if it hurt. She owed her old friend that much.

To Ruth's disappointment and relief, the rest of the box appeared to be filled with meaningless junk that she'd simply been too much of a hoarder to throw away. In the corner of the box, peering out from a faded green t-shirt, was an item Ruth thought she'd never have to see again. Her wedding ring. Fingers trembling, trying to remain as steady as possible, Ruth reached for the ring. Once she held it in her hand, she immediately dropped it, as though it was a burning coal. It seemed to fall in slow motion, producing a muffled, anticlimactic thump as it collided with the carpet. Ruth decided not to pick it up again, merely stared at it in shock. It had been years since she'd even thought about it, since she'd even thought about him.

She was immediately bombarded by memories, suffocated by the clarity of them. Images of Ruth's rose colored days appeared in her consciousness with so much detail, it was as if she could leap into them and return to that time. Of course, she wanted to. But of course, she remained painfully rooted in the present, despite being overpowered by the past. After a few moments, Ruth was able to slow the memories, dissipate their intensity. She then dug back through the box for what she knew was resting at the bottom of it—the photograph.

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

But Ruth could not punish herself for so long. Instead, once her eyes were clear she drove to the supermarket, bought the most beautiful flowers she could afford (rich reds and pale pinks that bled together like an Impressionist painting) and took the long way to the cemetery. It took Ruth an extended period of aimless wandering before she found his tombstone, black marble glinting in the snowy sunlight. The bitter air painted her cheeks with red as she kneeled in front of him, the man she'd lost too soon and mourned too late.

## Yearning

yearning billows up from the pits of society  
seeps through cobblestone cracks  
up low leaning roofs  
through doors swinging wide  
tracked inside like mud on the bottom of a shoe  
the idea sticks itself onto open minds  
sometimes sprouts into action  
other times rests, festers into poison

not just the loud find their place in the streets  
some yell their dormant voices raw  
though they know their efforts may be futile  
the air seems ripe with progress  
making a future seem tangible  
reality will strike us later  
but for now, we bask in this  
this illusion of safety

this place is rotten with dissatisfaction  
one day, the revolution will come



**Alice Kogo**

Grade 12

*Blk Grl*

Writing Portfolio

Olathe North High School

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### **Antithesis of Coconut Oil**

my hair bleeds purple when i sleep  
dark, violet, translucent in the way that sausage fat boiling on the pan is before it touches a towel  
in the way that a ghost's imprint is before fingerprints are left on the kitchen counter  
in the way that black bodies are before they find themselves in front of the barrel of a gun  
before they become that ghost  
before the pus leaking from the wound touches a tshirt a hood the towel they are wrapped up in before  
reaching the stretcher and they are dead meat, sold by link, five bullets per pound, fifteen bullets per  
pound, twenty-three bullets per pound. to save money on hospital bills the medics pronounce them dead  
to prevent the wasting of money on someone who would've died / been left anyways they are pronounced  
dead

maybe if i were in the absence of color my hair wouldn't bleed, it would drip, straight down, following the  
lines, rivulets of clear water down my locks.  
clear as my conscious as i tell myself that i am not a racist that my were parents were / are  
clear as my reflection in  
the water i see myself and i can smile will not have to change myself to fit the image of a black pariah in  
america

i use coconut oil in my kinky hair because it makes me feel at home.  
when it freezes into the hard shell of itself that can only be soothed with the warm pulse of a human hand  
i see myself  
there is no harm that comes from coconut oil, but its opponent *dark & lovely* deep conditioner is its  
antithesis, it makes me bleed  
store brand, average, bought when my pockets were too empty to search for the solace of the barest, the  
best, coconut itself

they repackage what i know, they call it original, make me smile with a cardboard cutout black face on  
the label  
remove the sense from my head as i reach to the shelf  
forgetting the black-owned businesses that exist, that they need me, that i need them  
i empty my pockets out for you and you *make me bleed* because the money i spent on your white product  
takes away from what i could've put in communities that would help quell the bullets  
that would bandage the wound / that would keep us alive / but i chose the alternative  
and as it makes me bleed i

remember how purple used to be my favorite color  
until it wasn't

how royalty is dressed in fine robes of that hue, the shade tantalizing  
but there are no more queens in my country  
my color has already been assigned to me, black, the absence of light, and because purple is just a  
refraction of the sun in a prism holding a multitude of colors within itself, it is no wonder that i do not  
partake in its equiption

## Revamped Beliefs

if I am to believe in anything,  
i believe in the stars.  
i believe in the glint the moon gives though a car door window.  
i believe in the scattered freckles of lanterns in the sky,  
eternally held in place until you  
blink and they shift ever so slightly  
in pursuit of the moon.  
i believe in my mother.  
i believe in the womb i was born from.  
the umbilical cord.  
SNAP the string snapping which once tied us together into one being until i'd begin bawling,  
bawling,  
bawlin,  
ballin,  
no, not ballin on the basketball court but bawling for the love found in a mother's womb which until  
seven in the afternoon had been extracted from my pre-life but before post-death state.  
for the familiar.  
for a mother's touch, an embrace, anything close to what i had known for the entire past nine months i'd  
spent as a leech clutching her for support.  
for life.  
for my existence, and now  
for a comfort amidst the fact that a black body in a white world cannot exist peacefully but will burn, but  
will be angry and what's left is believing, believing.  
believing in my father.  
believing in the bottom of beer bottles which slowly, oh so slowly turned into wine.  
believe in the late nights spent at a cousin's house because, a "oh no, we have to wait for them to finish."  
believe in the way he used to be and the way he changed and the way it's hard.  
believe in how long it took to  
forget, to  
remember, to  
forget,  
remember, forgive and clutch and hold on to that forgiveness and believe in the power of humanity and  
remember it and look for brighter days.  
younger days when you would be on his shoulders and he'd call you dear and baba and chepkogei and  
anything other than the names everyone else used to mutter to you as passing greeting  
because what is on my birth certificate is only legal and not as binding as the memories clinging to my  
heart each day.  
to believing in uncles who called me uncle in an accent, to a man who'd travel around the world with two  
kids in kenya and one in the us and still have enough time to bring his favorite niece back a present, a  
purse, a baby doll.  
i believe in the gift of laughter that erupts from my uncles mouth as he sticks his tongue out (something  
my little sister is keen to mention these days) and i believe in my inability to hate him  
no matter what demons were brought into my father's life because everything has a meaning, and  
every moment has a reason, and  
one individual, one brother alone cannot ruin another's life.

and yet we keep on turning and turning page after page in this novel, life, and i can't stop believing in the power of a religion to cast away it's undesirables.  
emboldened in fear, milked by the patriarchy, black, womyn, gay, what is left to save if my pieces haven't been won over?  
how centuries ago, weapon of destruction, now the same with a beautiful face  
i believe in the ability to make myself uncomfortable by denouncing the book that nurtured me with falsehoods.  
i believe in my brother who i looked at up and down, and labeled "better than me", and remove the words, destroying my perception, in case he believes that he lives in my shadow.  
i believe in him.  
i believe in my sister who a decade younger than me, who is yet to grow and unlikely to face every last one of my struggles, but who will grow with my nose and my body and my skin, the dark pigmentation which casts us as african and i believe in her ability to succeed  
i believe in the stars because they were once my only friends, and now that there is more than one light in my life, believing is the platform upon which i voice the echos of my dreams.

## Monument

you are a monument to me that i will chisel and watch form alter my perception of you in eyes of mine  
they are blank like a piece of paper before the gloss / your face / before the spray tan  
o monument / you will rise in my communities / erupt in my living room / it is called so because its  
purpose is to serve me and my family how dare you enter

o monument you are revolutionary / created from dirt there you will return like the minerals in our  
ecosystem / in truth my reality will not be just that / minerals are a joke / they will be temporary / for this  
ecosystem is countered by the cries of a government that hates it  
you, monument  
back space / escape / erode in front of my eyes

## Oreo Kid

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 cumulation 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.

## Black Pearl

i have not lived here long enough to know where the creaks in the floorboards lay  
or the places the arches in my feet should never touch,  
i stubbed my toe once-  
not within the walls of my home though, so i guess i am safe from harm,

i don't sneak out  
often.

i am a perfect child. straight as only the best i can offer.

i get distracted,

enthralled in mysteries in the midst of discovering why the projectile motion of a rocket is split into two  
components, all

storybooks, poetry.

simple simplicity is not my forte- give me something i can play with, grow, mold until into the shape of  
my body, influence until you hear my voice when it speaks, when it opens itself out to you and says here i  
am.

i write about floorboards because they are the only thing that keeps me grounded in this home.

my door is locked and parents ask, why? but i have no audacity to tell them that when a human looms  
suddenly, subtly in the depths of a miniature hallway, it is only a precautionary method and an irrational  
one at that.

plus, i just hate that my want for privacy is

deflected. rejected. overly anticipated and exploited.

wood on the floor does its best to replicate my skin like no other pearl has tried- failed to do

## Defense Mechanism

words bubbling on my tongue are not metaphors,  
it is a message, a warning of future plights to come.  
I should thank this body for that, thank  
you. piece of flesh, you  
distracted woman. you  
girl, mere girl, who cares more about making a living than making happiness,  
you  
who's future has begun, yet to become a winding twisting turn of events which can  
be made a biography out of, you  
should be grateful to this body  
shouldn't you. shouldn't  
you weep at the thought of compliance, at  
coercion and the past tense vocabulary verb coerced, the way it encapsulated  
your very being in that moment. your introduction gave way to the need to hide  
darkness in a pure  
white room. thank  
you for this defense mechanism, this  
shielding of the eyes for the past decade, providing the need to hide  
blackness as a default  
understanding, part  
of how the world works. part of the way the world spins on its axis;  
it is simply a fact, a term,  
like I said "the verb  
coerced". remember that. remember  
in the back of a classroom sitting, only black girl in the room.  
remember those advanced math classes that you didn't want to take (that your parents didn't want you to  
take), but you knew you had to take because  
remember the way that the winding twisting turn of the way the world works  
makes you  
care more about making a living than making happiness. remember  
that software development pays \$112,000 per year. maybe  
that's enough to get out poverty. maybe that's just enough to make you *happy* (but that's  
not the priority). just 8% versus the wall of 92% of males in the  
field, maybe you'll be the one out of the many that will grow. while  
happiness is not a default.  
writing is a default venting mechanism. this passion:  
out.  
this passion for  
(in)justice  
seeking for attention  
to be seen in the eyes of the media even though it will never be  
\*seen  
remember  
defense mechanism  
remember  
new ways of life

r em ember

remember

making happiness

you.

weep.

coercion.

should.

be.

grateful.

very (buried).

moment.

white.

room.

thank.

living

## "Mark Twain once said..."

"Mark Twain once said," I hurriedly spoke, finger tap away from boring a hole in my side, and hyper-aware of the lilt of nerdish academia in voice. "I've had a lot of worries in my life..."

I stood, the center of attention in the center of a classroom which eight hours from now, would be emptied and barren of life, anxiety, and distress. My blazer sleeves tugged impatiently at my wrists, stiff cloth against the warmth of a human body. He stared at me, eyes plain, cautious to mask judgment, yet curious due to the mention of Twain; this was probably his first as well. I lifted my eyebrows, setting up the story in advance. Paused meaningfully. "Most of which never happened."

His eyes slightly widened--I had secured his attention. "As we delve into the world of college applications, must acknowledge the presence of a universal truth: fear. A constant. However, in order to truly acknowledge the means by which this issue is battled we must address two critical points." A slow nod, the slight tilt of his head forward was enough encouragement for me. "1) An explanation of Impromptu Speaking and 2) A series of speeches which have paved the way to my own understanding of personality." Pause. He was hooked.

Throughout the entirety of my debate career, I have given speeches, some baseless, others probing, and a select few which proved invaluable. There have only been three instances in my time as a debater that I have been able to convey what I truly felt were groundbreaking ideas, and they all occurred in impromptu speaking rounds. Hopefully, by illustrating the significance of these speeches, I can sway your opinion to a vote for me on the ballot.

The National Speech and Debate Impromptu Competition room was chilly, and five minutes after my speech, there was a tornado warning which lasted a total of 35 minutes. Ironically enough, I almost had picked to speak on the weather of all subjects. However, I choose to speak on money. Particularly the illusion which it brings in catapulting the illusion of the American Dream.

District competitions mean a lot to me--they are the very foundation of my career as a debater. But in certain moments, the very presence of judges who can't understand your viewpoint can be quite irritating, as certain words are lost in translation between the white and black power dynamic. It is a blessing that Mean Girls phrase I selected was "that's only okay when I say it", because in the majority of cases, feeling towards the word I would discuss are universally drastic. I discussed my complicated relationship with the n-word, and how as a black woman of color with roots directly in Kenya, I feel as if I can't say they word, and brought up my experience with Huckleberry Finn and the way the word is used in class. It was magnificent.

The oddity which followed this tournament round was embarrassing and semi-offensive. But I learned to deal with it and laugh, because that is what black folk do. Not only was there a relationship between my experience of out round and the speech I gave, but the very fact of my blackness cut through the room like a glove. I was given a quote on Will Smith as the Prince of Bel Air and his experience living with relatives in California, and placed a spin on the saying, juxtaposing the relationship between black people in America with black immigrants in America, and the different successes and failures they both face.

After the round, the older white male judge walked up to me, shook my hand and spoke: "There is no color in America. From one black person to another, well done." I will leave my shock right there.

In a brief reflection, a universal fact to be acknowledged is fear: whether it be governed by performance anxiety, isolation, poverty, all individuals face it. But just as the words of Mark Twain which I repeat every impromptu round state, "most of [them] never happen". It is rational to believe in our success, as they constitute our only true driver.

## Afrofuturism: a concept

The guiding question in my life has always been governed by the fine line between exclusion and acceptance in predominantly white spaces: Do I belong?

As a black woman, I will face criticism for certain aspects of my identity which cannot be changed. This experience is one with which I must become comfortable in order to exist in conjunction to a world that sees blackness as an attack upon normalcy. Though I could choose to simply sit back and lounge in this realization with a Solange album or two, I find it more constructive to choose an alternative, and question that question--particularly within the realm of science fiction.

In my senior project, I pose the same inquiry which Mark Dery, in his 1994 text, *Black to the Future*, dared to present: Why is the presence of black characters in science fiction so often plagued by the doubt of anything more than representation in the form of two-dimensional characters and plotlines? Can black characters in science fiction literature have relatable plotlines? Do they belong? And how does a black narrative influenced by Afrofuturist thought present itself in the predominantly white genre of science fiction?

Drawn from the movement of the 1990's--because everything wonderful came out of the 90s era--Afrofuturism incorporates numerous complex ideas. A distinct piece is tied to the reclamation of black bodies in the future, while another elaborates upon what realities black folks can interpret for themselves in a space bounded by no concept other than human imagination. It refuses the idea of packaging and placing identities in a box, while simultaneously refusing to ignore trials of the past, expanding far into mixed media such as hip-hop, literature, science, and film. A common thread in the theory contends that as the trend now follows, it is critical to reflect on the past prior to approaching a nuanced analyzation of the future. Science fiction is a lens by which we can analyze politics of the present.

Identity politics have recently become central to my understanding of the world, given that I am black, a woman, and non-heterosexual. These identities tend to conflict with one another because the era we live in suggests that the norm is the opposite-- white, male, and straight. As I am pushed into different corners of predetermined success by my parents, it is no coincidence that in order to follow the American Dream, I must place myself within the necessary boxes in order to succeed. Following each attempt, it is common for a loss of identity to occur in the process. In the frame of Afrofuturism, it is clear the rejection of blackness is not one to be sought after, rather, the embrace of change.

I am gifted enough to get the opportunity to explore this concept further as a part of my senior project, and I intend to analyze the text of Mark Dery and other black writers who have centralized the black thought and future as a part of their work. Hopefully, the production of a novel of my own will become the endpoint I achieve. Within the insulated walls of Afrofuturism, I can find out where it is I belong, and discover that which can easily morph into the present if one waits long enough.

**Kailey Mgrdichian**

Grade 12

*Crystal Zoo*  
Writing Portfolio

Liberty North High School  
Liberty, MO  
Teacher: Kelly Lock-McMillen

**Connected. Disconnected. Connected.**

I work hard,  
I receive no praise.  
But drop the ball,  
Or stutter for even a moment,

I am  
Cursed  
Yelled  
Sighed  
at

I flicker in and out of consciousness as they force my weary self to work again.

IT. IS. TIRING.  
But I have no choice.  
To work  
Fetch this, load that,  
connect  
A million  
A billion  
m o r e  
At once

I never get a break  
I never get a breath

Because I have to load cat videos for her  
And a dating site for him

Surprise, still no new messages  
I'll check again

A disturbing Google search from the  
Probable-serial-killer-guy in 4B

No home,  
No heart,  
Spread across  
Cities  
Countries  
The world at large  
But I can't see any of it.



## The Zoo in the Cellar

It's Take-Your-Child-To-Work Day, and I'm sick. Dad says I've been sick for a while. At least since Mom let me fall. My dad is the most amazingest in the whole wide world. He's a zookeeper. He keeps his own zoo in the cellar, but he doesn't let me down there without him. At least there are still animals up here on the top floor; Parakeet Pete (caws all day), Frog Fred (can't stop jumping around), and Snake Sam (sticks his tongue out). Still, it's nothing compared to what's downstairs. I beg Dad to let me play with the animals downstairs. He says there's "no use indulging me", but when I cry about wanting to see my mom, he eventually gives in and lets me out for "Take-Your-Child-To-Work Day".

Today is that day! Dad fetches me from my room and leads me downstairs. I've been to a "real" zoo once before, but it didn't have hallways. I think that's why Dad's zoo is so special. He showed up after my first trip to an outside zoo. I don't see many humans since we moved here, but Dad says he hopes that'll change. Mom stays downstairs in her own room since The Fall. Dad says she's sick too, and it spread to me.

I get bouncy, just like Frog Fred, when we enter the hallway. I already hear all the animals. Up first is Gary the gorilla, with big muscly arms and grey hair. I wave but he grunts and pounds against the wall, so I move on. The next one is Flo, a flamingo with long, skinny legs. She mostly just sits in a puddle she made herself.

Don't tell Gary or Flo, but the next animals are actually my favorites. They're unlike any you see in a regular zoo. Lilly has spots like a leopard, but she hoots like an owl.

"Who? Who's there?" She calls, and I tiptoe to see through the window to her room.

"It's me, Simon," I wave. Her eyes remain wide.

"Who? WHO?" She hoots. I sigh and move on. The next one is Ginger, a tall giraffe, but she has black stripes and shakes like a rattlesnake. I dash ahead, letting go of Dad's lab coat. He yells after me, but I don't hear. Her room is empty when I get there.

"Dad, what happened to Ginger?" I ask.

"She, uh, she got tangled up in some rope," He recaptures my hand and pulls me away. "She's with an expert knot detangler right now."

"She'll be back?" I worry.

"Remember not to run off," he lectures. "That's how you got here in the first place."

My response disappears as the next room nears. Mom's room. I'm not allowed to go in because I might "disrupt her work". I look in to see notes written all over the walls in red ink. I wish she taught me to read before we moved to this new place. Mom lies in her bed. She must've gotten new sheets; they're bright red.

Dad shouts for other zookeepers to come, and they flood into Mom's room. They're all yelling and it's too loud, too loud, TOO LOUD.

"Be quiet!" I yell, but my voice only gets lost in the hurricane of shouting. "She's taking a nap!"

Mom used to love her naps and got mad at me if I disturbed her. Maybe it's an adult thing to trade stuffed animals for bad-smelling bottles whenever you sleep, because she was always surrounded in them. I run back down the hall, sitting out of sight, underneath the staircase. I'm jealous of the zookeepers. I haven't been in my mom's room since we got to this new place. I smile slightly knowing the beating they're going to get for waking her.

A splashing sound echoes against the concrete stairwell, and I crawl along the wall towards the sound. A door opens to a hallway I've never seen before. The first room holds a zookeeper working on a zebra. He's in one of those beige sweaters for the wiggly animals. He clamps the machine around the zebra's leg and flips the switch. The zebra jerks around, rattling like Ginger. The zookeeper turns off the machine to reveal a black stripe. I gasp—so that's how zebras are made.

I continue along the curved hallway, seeing penguins inside big eggs, bats hanging from the ceiling,

and the source of the splashing. A big lion yowls from the bathtub as more buckets of water dump from above. The water must be cold. The hall ends in another stairwell. Mom's ink tracks here from all those zookeepers pulling her out of the room. I follow the drops of ink into the end of the first hallway. Dad rushes over when he sees me. It's quieter now.

"I told you not to wander off!" His yell echoes louder in the silence. My eyes fill with tears.

"It was too loud," I sniffle. "Loud like the first zoo."

"When you fell in?" He says quietly. The noise rushes back all at once, along with a headache. Dad says Mom let me fall, and now we're both here to get better.

I nod silently. "Take me back upstairs."

Dad takes my hand. He follows me into my cell, and I point out the window.

"What's that sign say? I always wonder." I look back to him, but his face is straight, like an orangutan.

"Simon, this nonsense needs to end," He shakes his head. "Your mother died today. You've been here for over ten years. From now on, you will address me as Doctor Filton. This is not a zoo. We take care of patients, not animals."

He adds a sigh over his shoulder before he closes the door: "The sign says Sunshine Oaks Asylum."

I guess I'm an animal too.

## Crystalline Red

the first color you catch in a crystal  
Red  
the color of contradiction

romance of rose petals flung over a bed  
surprising a blush of flustered cheeks  
a grand red bow on a brand new car

But

the anger of a face deep in a fight  
the fluttering flag that infuriates the bull  
to poise for the kill  
the sun burns skin red in a selfish bite  
creeping in on the corners of vision  
of a stolen thought, a lost mission

shift the crystal slightly  
and you might  
miss it

## Intelligence Chips for Felon Children

After the Great Criminal War sighed to an “official” end on this filthy planet galaxies away from Earth, I tinkered.

*But who was I to decide their fate?*

Our colony-turned-city would not go down the drain. Not like Lost Vegas, a failed colony that literally was lost. My intelligence chips were a success, albeit after desperate and persistent pleas to the mayor.

“What if,” I shouted through his wall of bodyguards on their way to his car. He added a new man after I broke through last week. He flattered me. I nearly fell down the steps when his parade halted. “You could tell someone’s probability to become a criminal?”

He sighed. I held my breath. “You’re never going to go away, are you?” The guard barrier parted with a wave of his hand. He fixed a glare and his suit. “Show me.”

I scrambled excitedly to plug in the suction pads to a bodyguard’s brain, calibrating my handheld display. Two intelligence chips ran my algorithm and reported two pieces of data. On the left side of my screen, the man’s total crime count. This included past, present, and future. Their past crimes were added to their ancestors’ average count with an age ratio to determine future crimes, based on family history patterns.

*Oh, wasn’t I a smarty-pants?*

The second number was a severity rating from one to five. The first number took each crime individually and converted it into a number, one being as minor as jaywalking, and five being murder. The average severity was displayed on my right side screen.

Mr. Bodyguard’s numbers finalized and I pulled public records to verify. The mayor only stared in surprise despite every whiteboard I filled with explanatory equations. He approved my work and funded the manufacture of multiple chips to test each and every citizen.

The new law went as follows: the Criminal Limit of a citizen may not exceed twenty (20) total crimes, or a three-point-five (3.5) rating. Those exceeding will be jailed indefinitely.

*It started out simple, huh?*

Soon enough, everyone in the city was tested. Until the prisons overflowed with criminals. The old limit, through a tough decision, became the new automatic execution sentence.

*But it didn’t stop there, did it?*

The new Limit was 10 total crimes, or a 3 rating. The prisons freed up quickly. Executions took less than a month. After everyone in the city was tested, it only left the babies of the free public, a few popping out every week. Babies were tested straight out of the womb.

*How was I even supposed to test for that?*

More and more children violated the limits, until we ran out of daycare space in prisons. The 10-3 Limit became the new execution sentence. The jailing sentence was abolished. We couldn’t afford to lose any more citizens.

I sat in my high rise laboratory apartment late at night, walls covered in scribbled equations. Something was wrong. I needed to find the pattern.

We tested the babies too soon. Their soul was too new, too fresh, and hidden behind the goop covering them. The goop of their mother, *vernix caseosa*, skewed the algorithm. It added the mother’s numbers to the baby’s numbers, pushing almost every baby over the Limit.

*How was I supposed to know?*

My head fell into my hands, grief dragging me to the floor in my high rise apartment. I sent a kill code to every intelligence chip, destroying them as deeply as I was inside. Plowing through the death records, I reverse engineered the numbers for every child under one. Ninety percent of them were innocent. One hundred percent dead. I calculated our population decline. We’ll be gone in less than two hundred years. The next generation won’t be enough to sustain the colony, much less a city. I left a note to the mayor.

There's one more kill code I have to send. This one requires a manual overhaul, and only terminates one intelligence chip. I stand on top of my high rise apartment. Only a few lights remain in the surrounding buildings. The wind is more alive than the colony tonight. We're lost. I open my arms and fall to the city hall steps below.

*Who's the criminal now?*

## **The Necessity of Slang: The Rebellious Yet Aesthetic Language in the Modern Era**

If I started this essay with “wuz poppin’, today ur gonna learn a thing,” I would immediately be discredited. Yet the “wack” intro I supplied still makes some form of sense. Through context clues and conditioned communication, there’s semblance of understanding. I asked how it’s going and introduced the paper. However, there’s a time and a place for slang, and the ability to understand when and where and how is a natural instinct among humans. Through code-switching, community-building, and constant evolving language, slang in the modern era has made communication more effective than ever.

Slang, first developed to shorten language, has become a powerful aesthetic tool in communication during the modern era. The usage of slang goes beyond words or phrases. It’s an adaptive language all on its own. Most often it is seen as a bastardized language, which isn’t entirely wrong. One purpose of slang is rebellion against the standard, whether it be formal overtones or English itself. But to examine what slang is, we must first explore why slang comes about. Slang, at its heart, improves communication. Language is a constantly evolving beast, so slang aides in connotation and tone. With millions of words, most with different meanings, humans rely on several factors to enhance communication: body language, tone, and facial expressions. All of these are forgone on the internet, where there is nothing but text on the screen. Thus, in the digital era, slang has developed tenfold to balance communication.

Different types of slang include abbreviations, shortened language, and synonyms. Each type has a different purpose, whether to fill a lexical gap or enhance communication. Abbreviations obviously abbreviate a phrase, such as “lol” standing for laughing out loud. However, as online communication developed, “lol” has been refurbished to soften tone. “That’s stupid.” comes across harsher than “thats stupid lol”. Capitalization also speaks of formality, and takes the backseat in the midst of a friendly group chat.

Shortened language has the obvious purpose of efficiency. Slang enhances communication by actually improving clarity through tone. “How are you?” has become “What’s up, dude?” to the even more casual, “suh, dude?” Using any of these sets the tone of the conversation. It’s obvious to the native English speaker which belongs in a professional context and which to use with slang.

Slang is so ingrained in our culture, since we are constantly surrounded by it. It’s an immersive type of language. Synonyms are easiest to pick up on, since they are often given context. Most synonymous slang are terms for “good”, but with different contexts. Take music, for example. A song can be fire, or a bop, or a jam. All are inherently good, but mean different sounds. “Fire” is usually in reference to a mixtape or album, and most likely not pop. A bop is nostalgic, often preppy or a pop song. A jam is a song that usually “goes hard”, or has an intense beat or base drop. Synonymous slang comes naturally to those who speak it, and can be picked up pretty quickly.

Slang in the digital era has also taken on a new goal: filling lexical gaps. As technology develops, we need words to explain that technology. For example, smartphones now show “read receipts”, whether or not the recipient has seen, opened, or read your message. If someone reads your message but doesn’t reply, you have been “left on read”, or ignored. This phrase has found its way into online conversations that don’t even pertain to read receipts. An example of this would be a post reminding users to drink plenty of water and do their homework. A commenter might drop in “read at 4:33 PM” to show they ignored the post as an ironic retort.

Most of slang is for the aesthetic or humorous value. Over several interviews, each teenage interviewee agreed slang has a “certain ring” or comedic value to it. The beauty of slang is while it usually secludes itself to specific groups, it is incredibly communal. Anyone in the group can contribute to slang.

Slang not only is formative of a generation, but reflective of it. In the 1910s, women walking down 23rd street in New York might be surprised by a sudden strong wind due to sharp architecture, which

would cause their skirts to fly up. Men would gather in groups to watch women's skirts fly up, so police were dispatched to the scene to move people along. Scattering groups of men would leave quickly, becoming the "23 Skidoo" ("How Slang Affects the English Language"). Soon the term developed to mean "to leave quickly". However, as women's skirt lengths rose and slang modernized, the term got left behind. The term reflects the time; the aesthetic sound fits in with the time period and grew from the more patriarchal values back then. The Atlantic examines moreso how slang reflects the era:

It makes sense, for instance, that the Times defined acid ("a slang term for the drug LSD") in 1970, grunt ("a slang word for an infantryman") during the Vietnam War, diss ("a slang term for a perceived act of disrespect") in 1994, and macking ("a slang term for making out") in 1999. (Garber)

In the modern era, technology is a major driver of slang. Take the aforementioned "left on read," which wouldn't exist without the advancement of read receipts. We also have terms like "venmo", a verb meaning to send someone money through the venmo app. Slang will often become a part of English, just classified as nonstandard (Adams). For example, "to hang out" was once slang, but is now a common term used for a casual meeting usually between friends. For a word to be entered into the dictionary, "...the general population must use it and keep using it. A word must be in use for at least five years to be considered" (Kolowich). Slang often evolves and devolves quickly, so if a word sticks, it may become an "official" word.

The beauty of language is how it evolves. Thank slang for trickling in our language to modernize, rather, casualize, our language into something more recognizable than Old English. Language isn't stagnant, and it shouldn't be. It evolves in every conversation. People make language their own as they speak it. We are the influencers of language, and language influences us. Each social group we belong to form a code of vernacular. Our friends use in-group slang, especially among younger generations. Families have their own code, and same with a workplace.

Code switching is essential to anyone in more than one social group, which is every single person in existence. How a teenager talks among friends is in far contrast to how they would speak in a job interview, or to family. This is because not separating code defeats the purpose of communication. If I were to tell my mom I was "left on read" by a cute boy, I would spend the majority of time explaining to her what "left on read" meant, rather than talking about how cute he is. Each code we use makes language as effective as possible for the given audience.

What's most intriguing is how easily we code switch. Slang is an immersive culture, so once we are outside of those bounds, we switch into the next code. For example, my grandparents live in southern Missouri. They pronounce "wash" as "warsh". When talking to them over the phone, my voice slips into a slight twang to match theirs. I use no slang at all, but once I hang up, I'm right back to whatever code I was in previously.

A specific distinction to make is the difference between slang and jargon. Jargon is specific to a group; those in the group can be across all individual boundaries (race, sex, age) and still understand the jargon. For example, in debate, "breaking" means advancing to a semifinals round. An opponent who tries to skirt the rules or play dirty is described as "slimy". We "flow" or record the round. Each debate also has their individual jargon. Policy debaters run "K"s, but must provide solvency, inherency, and possibly even counter plans. In Lincoln Douglas debate, debaters must support their value with a criterion. In Public Forum, grand cross can get pretty intense. Jargon always fills a lexical gap for participants. The connotation is also different; jargon is to make effective, efficient communication, whereas slang adds a humorous or casual aspect to tone.

Out of the ten teenagers I interviewed, all said slang must be humorous to be successful. Brady Graves expanded that while the slang may not be inherently comedic, such as saying "oof" over a mistake, it's humorous in the situation.

Slang's essential purpose is communication. Online, communication suffers without body language, tone, and facial expressions. To balance these shortcomings, slang has developed even faster over the

internet. Words are constantly evolving and adapting, as well as spreading quicker than a chemical reaction to reach people across the country. Technology is the spark to the flame of language. Thus it's only natural for older generations to feel discomfort around slang.

Older generations throughout history have detested slang and technology. They favor the traditional route, also known as how their generation was raised. Ironically, the generation before them feels the same way. The generation after them as well, and so on. Given, some slang can be vulgar: "heada\*\*" is used to describe someone acting stupid, i.e. with their "head up their a\*\*" (Graves). Older generations are obviously more mature and might find vulgar slang distasteful. This also becomes apparent when social groups stick together, so the cross-contamination between younger generations and older generations other than family don't occur more often than not. The most likely scenario is the workplace, in which would be expected a code of standard, formal English, which slang has no part of.

Slang represents the English language at that moment in time. So, when older generations hear about the reckless behavior of "YOLO", meaning You Only Live Once, there was probable cause for concern. To an older, more mature generation, using "YOLO" to excuse partaking in risky behavior is looked down upon.

There's also another purpose of slang: rejecting the status quo. Making up new words rejects the current standard and starts the new swing of modern language. As a result, however, manipulates the current vernacular set by the generational predecessors. This rebellious behavior is thus detested by the older generation as they view it as immature and irresponsible. Maybe to some it is, but it must be also noted language can't develop if no new steps are taken.

New generations must be allowed to make the language their own. Every generation leaves a mark, from the 60s "groovy" (which is making an ironic come back), to the "far-out" 70s. The 80s made "cruisin'" to "rock and roll" popular while the 90s got a bit more in-your-face with "wazzap!" (what's up?). The new era brings in new technology and a bigger community than ever before, overtly leading to the development of slang being kicked into hyper drive. Each generation leaves their mark on fashion, technology, and current events, so language is no exception. Words are the base of communication, supported by body language, facial expressions, and tone, so it makes sense for language to shift and adapt to each and every conversation through the years.

Slang may make language crude at times, but it's efficient to a fault; whether the purpose be to humor, to casualize, or to rebel, it will always enhance communication. In any code, slang has its set place, setting the tone of the conversation based on diction along with our other communicating factors. Each word or phrase marks a reflection of the world around it. Slang changes through the decades, shifting the common vernacular around it. Though it has always been an integral part of language, slang is more essential, as well as more accessible, now than ever. As technology develops and the digital world flourishes, slang is a necessity to balance the shortcomings of communication online. Slang is here to stay, though it will do anything but stay the same. Without slang, our language would lose an essential avenue of communication. Over time, slang evolves right alongside language, because it's a language all on its own. *That's what's poppin'.*

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## Reapers' Reign NOVEL EXCERPT

### *Reapers' Reign Summary*

Miri Skynote, master of the flute and lute, is falling for brute Dia Embers ever since Dia saved her from a brawl that nearly knocked Miri into the next life. Prince Seloua Ivy of the Ivy Kingdom likewise finds his heart tangled up in Pix, Guardian of the Faerie Forest, the only one who doesn't see right through him.

However, the ragtag team is oblivious to their tangled pasts threaded together due to the plague of bandits, called the Reapers. Their secrets are a tiny slip away, one leading to another in an avalanche of betrayal and deception. No one is innocent. When the group is on the brink of corruption, a Reaper-concocted, worlds-ending plot is found. Now Miri, Dia, Seloua, and Pix must pull it together long enough to end the Reaper Reign, or be destroyed by their pasts.

### Chapter One

Miri had tucked herself in the corner behind her map, but the brawl found her anyway. A stumbling man the size of a baby griffin crashed into her table, knocking her further back into the wall. A drink slammed down on the counter and a coarse voice roared.

"That's ENOUGH!" The girl at the bar yelled, pulling her choppy blonde hair back into a ponytail. The drunken brawlers paid no mind until she joined the fight herself, sober and deadly. She threw them out, slamming the door in their faces and dusting herself off in the doorway. Miri sat huddled under the shelter of her map, only peeking out when the drunken grunts faded. She found beyond the map was a hand, connected to her savior.

"Thanks, Dia," the barmaid said, cleaning a glass out of boredom. She never even looked up. Miri reached out for Dia's hand, shaky on her legs.

"You okay?" She said, helping Miri to her feet. Miri's voice was as shaky as her legs.

"Yes, I think so." Her hand didn't leave Dia's, and the gesture turned into a handshake.

"Dia Embers," The warrior introduced herself.

"Miri Spellwind. Thank you for, um, saving me," She nodded back. Miri grabbed her map to place back on the table, but the remains were strewn about the floor. Dia hoisted a nearby table up to replace it, and Miri settled back in. She focused back into the map, drawing her fingers over it to reveal land, when Dia seated herself across from Miri.

"Where are you headed?" Dia asked innocent enough. Miri cleared her throat and looked back down to the wrinkled page.

"To the Ivae Capikal," She said sternly, in a voice she only used with her brother when he had misbehaved. Miri was on a mission, and it couldn't be interrupted by some mercenary, no matter how attractive said sellsword was.

"Why?" Dia asked, and her whole face seemed involved in the question.

"I'm going to join the guard."

"Lemme guess, you wanna help take down that bandit clan?"

"Yes."

"Fair enough. I'm in."

"What?" Miri coughed. "That wasn't an invitation."

"I know," Dia chewed on a fingernail, then paused to talk again. "Have you traveled along this road before?"

"Well, no."

"I can show you the way. There's this bridge you have to avoid, nasty little troll underneath. Doesn't even have the good kind of riddles."

"Why do you want to come with me?"

"I've been wanting to join the guard for three seasons. Need a little push, someone to keep me accountable. You could do the trick."

Miri weighed the options. It really wouldn't hurt to have a guide, especially a brute like Dia. Miri was no sort of heavyweight. Her slender frame was built for dancing, not fighting. "Alright, I'll let you come with me."

Dia smiled and stood up, stretching out. "Yes! Come on, we have to leave now if we want to make it to Fifarstad by nightfall!"

Miri rolled up the map and was all but pulled out the door and down the tavern steps. The drunken men were gone, and now only a journey lay ahead.

The cobbled path stayed through to the kingdom, Dia said. One of the perks of living so close to the capikal. Miri almost missed kicking up dirt in her hodunk town further west, but flashes of blood mixed with dirty paths strayed her mind back to the task at hand.

Dia chattered on in her rough voice. She nearly sounded like a tour guide. To your left are trees, to your right are trees, further in front of you, oh look, trees. That's a rock that the gods struck with blue fire, that's where old farmer Joland lives. Walk around the long way, his mind is straying and he thinks people are moving scarecrows. He makes good butter bread, though.

"So how does that map work?" Dia asked, involving her traveling companion in a finally two-way conversation. Miri nearly flinched at the sudden attention.

"Oh," She says, unrolling it as they treaded on. "I have a illuminating ring." She demonstrates, waving her finger over the parchment to enlarge town names and roads. Dia nods, impressed.

"Where'd you get it from? Are your parents mages or something?" she asks. Miri stiffens at the mention, and Dia leans a little further. She never was taught when to stop. "Where are your parents, anyway? Do they know you're going to join the guard? I'd want to be there if my kid guarded up."

"No," Miri forced through gritted teeth. "They weren't mages. Just bought it for me and my brother when I was younger."

Dia tilted her head at this information. She wasn't quite saying it, and Dia couldn't clearly get the message unless it was spelled out for her. "Weren't? Past tense? And where's your brother, too? I'm an only child, sort of."

Miri whirled to a stop, facing Dia. "Dead! They're dead okay! All of them. Everyone I love is dead because of those bandits!"

Dia leaned back, out of the flying spit zone. She winced at her own pushiness. Miri sighed and regained herself. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled. Please, just...no more questions."

They walked in silence until the town became a sight on the horizon. Dia needed to initiate conversation before Miri ditched her in the city.

"I'm sorry to have pushed. I really don't know when to stop. I grew up with a bunch of different people in a semi-orphanage. Bandits took my parents too."

*That's all Miri needs to know*, Dia thought, *so stop running your mouth for once*. Miri spoke, between a whisper and a crack. She called on the god of death. "I'm sorry about Erun's fate." Dia nodded. So they shared a god and family deaths.

"I'm sorry about Erun's fate for your family as well," Dia reciprocated. She nudged Miri out of her trudging feet. The town neared in sight and the tavern combined inn was a welcome sight for sore feet.

"We'll arrive in the capikal around noon tomorrow if we start an hour after sunrise," Dia plans, pushing open the door to the tavern. It's bustling, and Dia strolls over to the innkeeper.

"Dia!" The old woman greets, hugging her as if she were kin. "It's been a few months, what trouble have you been getting into?"

Dia blushes, a rare sight, and clears it away with a cough. "I've been doing just fine, Mama Reed. Are there any beds available?"

"I think just one left, a two bed. You and your girlie over there will have to share." Miri, off to the side, was called back to attention.

“Huh?” Miri asked, but Dia and Reed were lost in conversation.

“That’ll be fine, if she’s okay with it.”

“Wait, why do we have to share?” Miri asked, lost as to her whereabouts after watching a nearby table thirty bets deep in a round of Creatures & Beasts.

“Well, I don’t want to sleep on the floor and you don’t want to sleep on the floor,” Dia pushed back hair out of her face. “What other options do you think there are?”

“It’ll be double for two beds,” The innkeeper sighed, sweeping the room with her gaze. “Everyone and their kin are heading to the capikal this week, either for the Royal Ball whatnot or the Seasons Festival.”

Dia turned out her coinpurse, only finding a few coppers enough to buy dinner. Miri turned hers out, enough for one room. The girls decided to split it, pushing their coins across the bar. She gathered them up into her own purse and gave them their key.

Soon enough the girls were seated near the front of the hubbub and roaring chatter with dinner steaming in front of them. Mama Reed knew how to take care of her people. This tavern was friendly, warmly lit, and no brawls brewing in sight.

“So from here, it’s just the East road right into the capikal,” Miri munched, hunching over her map.

“What are we going to do tomorrow?” Dia asked, slurping into her soup. Miri pulled a piece a bread apart in her hands, contemplating. “For money, I mean.”

Their coinpurses ached. Miri should’ve picked a better time to travel. Although, that’s less her fault and more her foster parents fault for kicking her off the farm. ‘Make something’ of yourself, they said. ‘Your talent shouldn’t be wasted weeding Ova fruit’. They meant well, at least. Miri sighed. It was time to work, then. She shoved the bread into her mouth, finishing off her dinner. “I’ll be right back.”

Miri returned from the room wearing a much shinier attire, formed around her arms and flowing out at her waist. A not too shabby wrap, easily made with long Taffic leaves. She approached the tavern bard, asking him for a song. The bard agreed, switching to an upbeat flute tune usually only heard farther north. Miri raised her right hand above her head like she was pulling string from her chin. The overture faded and the melody kicked in, as well as Miri’s feet. She turned and spinned and glided to the music, dancing for the tavern folk. Eventually all eyes were on her, and Miri nearly tripped.

Just focus and breathe, she told herself. This is your largest audience yet and you need the money, keep going. Pretend you’re still with Mentor Ayela, trying to make a living back in Rosewood. Miri closed her eyes, natural movements flowing together like streams into a river. The flute grew faster and faster and so did Miri, until the melody reached its highest pitch and fell to a close. Miri knelt to the floor, ending her dance.

Cheers erupted from the tavern, clapping and copper pieces thrown from across the room. Miri even found a silver piece. She smiled and gathered the money, returning to her table and a grinning Dia.

“You didn’t tell me you were a dancer!” Dia exclaimed.

“We’ve only known each other for eight hours,” Miri admitted, and Dia swatted the air in a laugh.

“Yeah, but you should have led with that. Hello, I’m Miri and I’m a fantastic royal-ball-level dancer, hi.”

“It’s not royal ball level, Dia,” Miri blushed anyway. The crowd, upon realizing Miri was a one-act only, started rumbling about for an encore.

“Your admirers seem to think so,” Dia smirks, chin in her hand. “Now, you don’t want to keep your public waiting.”

Miri bought themselves a round of sweet Ova ale to down before she returned to the so-called spotlight. She danced, again, and the crowd cheered, again. This time a few more people rose to dance, mostly those with roses on their cheeks. Miri stepped over to her table for a much-needed break in between melodies. Dia, with glasses surrounding her, could not hold her ale.

(Miri returned to the so-called spotlight dragging Dia with her this time. Her “no no no no”s and “I don’t dance”s were ignored.)

After the music mellowed out, the two found themselves in a round of Creatures & Beasts, where

Miri was crowned Ruler of Creatures and Dia lost to become Squire to the Ruler.

The blur of the night ended with the two collapsing into bed, falling asleep within five minutes, luckily avoiding any awkward makeshift pillow talk.

## Chapter Two

A bright, sore morning revealed itself beyond the window. Dia snored beside her, and Miri changed out of her dancing clothes from last night. She grabbed Dia's clothes, as well, to wash in the laundry springs next to the inn. Out of Dia's pack came a long, frayed bandage. No blood, but Miri shrugged and took it as well. Before leaving the room, she saw where the bandage took its place: Dia had one on her left arm, near the top of her bicep before her shoulder. It'd be nice to have a clean bandage, so Miri continued on.

Miri hummed as she went, waving to a few other tavern mates who were early birds. She scrubbed at the clothes, and found a slight ink imprint on the bandage. Black, so it wasn't blood. Still, the image was too light and hazy to tell. Miri smacked herself internally to quit being so nosy. She laid the clothes out on the enchanted weathering rock to dry and grabbed a perking drink from the bar. Maam Reed was up early, but not happy about it.

"How do you know Dia?" Miri asked in the nearly empty bar. Her thumbs drew small circles around the mug.

"Funny, I was about to ask you the same," She said with a kind smile. "She tavern-hopped a lot a few years back. Absolute drunk, I tell you. Owed every bar somethin'. We innkeepers banded together, got her sober, and got paid back. She was always a nice young lady. Never a mean drunk, just a drunk drunk. She paid off her debt a while ago, now she just bar-hops to debrawl them in exchange for a bed and food."

"That's wonderful of you all," Miri sighs, trying to picture Dia as a drunk. The bandage must've been an enchanted patch of some kind, then. Case closed. "If I'm going to be brute honest, I've only known her for less than a day."

The innkeeper chuckled, preparing a tray of breakfast bread stuffed with cheese into the oven. Miri collected the clothes, shuffling back upstairs.

Dia was still asleep when Miri returned with clean, dry clothes. Lazy girl. Miri shook her by the shoulders, harder whenever Dia merely groaned and turned over. Miri sighed. She grew an idea and smirked, using the ways of an older sister. She grabbed a glass of cold stream water and poured it on Dia's head. That certainly woke her up, and Dia pushed a laughing Miri off the bed. The two got dressed and headed out to breakfast. A goodbye to Mama Reed and they were off, two girls ready to take on the big capikal.

The winding road curved north, around the glowing forest. Miri shifted her attention to the casual conversation with Dia.

"So Mama Reed told me where she knows you," Miri pulled her hair off her neck and onto her shoulder, cascading down in a dark wave. Dia gulped and looked off the road, to a nearby farm.

"Oh, she did?" Dia said, and Miri's features twisted in confusion.

"Don't be embarrassed about your past," Miri went to slap Dia on the back but chickened out for an arm pat instead. "You've changed now."

Dia looked surprised at that, facing Miri on the cobbled road. "Really?"

"Of course," Miri smiled, facing back towards the road. "You're not a drunk anymore, you're a debtless citizen working hard."

Dia hunched at that, but Miri was speeding ahead. "Look, it's the Sandent Ova fruit farm!"

Dia jogged behind her, pushing thoughts away with each step. "Yeah, and? We've been passing Ova fields for a while."

"I worked on an Ova fruit farm for a few years after... after I left my hometown. The Sandents are supposed to have the best, juiciest Ovas. They're also our competitors."

With that, Miri checked both ways of the road before snapping a few off the nearest bush. Dia

paused, shocked at this delinquent side of Miri. “What happened to Miss Goddess-Like?”

Miri turned, Ova juice dripping from her chin. “I’m not uptight. I just like the rules when they keep things in place.”

“Not you in place, though?”

“Nope,” Miri smiled, wiping juice off her face. She tossed Dia a fruit, and she bit into the soft skin as well. Perfectly ripe, sweet and warm. Juice politely dripped down her chin. The two shared a lunch on the road as the capikal grew in sight.

In one of those towers was Prince Seloua Ivy, overseer of the bandit eradication effort. He scribbled out yet another apology letter to Pix, his childhood friend and immortal faerie being. He crumpled it after the first sentence, yet again. Underneath his drafts lay the latest strategies for eliminating the Reaper bandit clan. He pushes the letters aside. The Prince must focus on avenging his sister, not on silly puppy love. It’s time for their reign to end.

## Timeless Love NOVEL EXCERPT

### *Timeless Love* Summary

Elle and Marie *might* have a small reincarnation problem. They never die. At least, their souls don't. From strangers to enemies to lovers, in galaxies across the universe, they come back from death.

Marie remembers the most intricate lives. She remembers lives as racing mermaids fighting off a Siren invasion, intergalactic fugitives battling space pirates, and angels exposing a corrupt "wing enhancing" company.

Elle remembers the more domestic lives. She recalls a prank war on a commercial set, a spontaneous book club in an indie coffeeshop/bookstore hybrid, and one secretive life she opts out from telling Marie every time they recount their memories; the most amazing one night stand she's ever had in all her lives.

Elle may keep one secret, but Marie keeps plenty. Elle suspects Marie isn't telling her everything. When she talks of past lives, the ending doesn't seem all there. Marie only remembers the lives ending in horrific death, and she's not sure she can take it anymore. She shuts Elle out and lies about the endings of her memories to spare Elle the pain. Elle doesn't understand Marie's distraught pacing in the middle of the night. They break it off, but it only makes matters worse. A zombie apocalypse strikes both their memories and shows no mercy.

Their love is hanging by a thread. The reincarnation never ends. Will Elle get through to Marie? Will Marie learn to accept this fate and give Elle the truth? Most of all, will their love be able to endure time itself?

### Chapter One

I grip my train ticket as the car lurches side to side, throwing me from one wall of the hall to the other. Bend your knees, the hostess said, it'll be easier, she said. It only sort of worked, if you timed it just right as you were walking. But I, Marie Raiment Lyon, am the least balanced person in the universe. I'm pitched to the windows as it lurches again and I glance at my ticket. Room 304, sleeper car. I take a deep breath. I got an A in Physics, I can handle this. The train car senses my attempt to move and jolts me out of my stance. Unfortunately, it pitches me the opposite way. Into a sleeper room. And onto someone's lap.

My stomach hits knees and the breath is knocked out of me. I groan, falling to the floor. "I'm sorry so oh frick sorry sorry," I slur as my eyes raise to my poor victim I just fell on top of.

My next thought that interrupts *ohnooohnoo* is: *oh no she's hot*. Her bright brown eyes are wide and wavy blonde hair frames her face just right. She knows her way around makeup and she is *slaying* it.

"Ohmygosh," She stutters, equally as lost as me. "Are you...okay?" I rise to my feet and stumble and out of the room. Real smooth, Marie. I hide my face in my hands and take deep breaths. Focus. You're looking for room 304. I look at the number on the room I just divebombed to orient myself.

304.

Shit. What's the survival rate for jumping off a moving train? If I go back in, what do I say? *Hello again, I'm Marie, the idiot who fell in your lap?* I consider asking a steward to switch rooms. However, that would warrant me walking back across three train cars.

I push through the curtains again, extending my hand, and say: "Hello I'm Marie I'm very apologize also this is my room hello."

She stares at me again, then takes my hand and shakes it loosely. She's probably checking my grip to see if I'm having a stroke.

"I-I'm Elle. Nice to meet you?" I nod and sit down across from her. We avoid all eye contact for a solid ten awkward minutes. I steal quick glances at her. She's reading a book, but I can tell she's not paying attention to it. She's looking out the window, and she's still gorgeous. She's got a great sense of style compared to my current sweatpants and hoodie. I'm lazy when I travel, what can I say?

"So, where are you headed?" She asks, tearing her gaze away from the passing fields to me. My

heartbeat picks up. I hate being put on the spot and nothing is more on the spot than a pretty girl asking me a question that I should obviously know the answer to and should probably be telling her right now.

"I-um-Chicago. Chicago." I answer while not quite meeting her gaze. She nods and puts a bookmark in her place.

"I'm headed there too."

"Oh really? That's cool." I offer weakly. Okay Marie, maybe say something to continue the conversation? Jesus H. why can't you just act normal. "Why are you headed there?"

"I'm attending the University. What about you?"

"I swear I'm not a creep, promise, but me too."

"You sure?" she gives a slight laugh. I try to smile along.

"Yeah, I'm still sorry about earlier. I guess I don't have my train legs yet." She laughs at this, and my smile becomes more genuine.

"I've been on here since breakfast, and oh my gosh let me tell you, the servers here are so natural. Like, they don't stumble at all. Meanwhile, I'm over here grabbing at the edge of tables, my legs spread a little wide as to not land in people's food."

Her laugh is comforting enough to melt in. I finally start to relax.

"That's gotta be crazy. Do you think they serve hot chocolate like that one scene of the Polar Express? Wait, no first: would you rather fall into someone's food or someone's lap?"

She takes a moment to stifle a smile.

"First, if they do have hot chocolate in August, that'd be amazing alone. Recreating that scene, though? Spectacular. Second, it depends. I mean, what kind of food am I falling into? Or, whose lap am I falling into? These are important questions."

"Hmm, I see where you're coming from. Okay, you'd either be falling in a bowl of soup or onto an old man's lap."

"Can I say-"

"No, you can't say neither! That's the very core of the game Would You Rather! What a disgrace!" I scoff with false offence. We burst into a fit into the giggles and the earlier awkwardness slides away. She coughs to get rid of the laughter to be able to speak.

"Okay, okay, my turn. Would you rather have food spilled on you by a server or get knocked unconscious when trying to pull down the top bunk in this room?"

"Oh boy. Did that happen to you this morning?"

"Both, yes."

I try to sustain my snicker until after I answer the question. "I'll have to go with the spill. You can always clean that up, but you'll have a bad bruise with the top bunk."

"This is also true. By the way, I like your hair."

I reach for my hair to play with it until I remember it's up in a purple bun. I smile and thank her.

"I've always wanted to dye my hair, but I'm completely lost. What color? More than one? Over all my hair? I'm having an existential crisis," She clutches a fist to her heart overdramatically and it makes me laugh again. "Speaking of falling in food and such, do you want to take a trip to the snack car?"

I nod and we stand up slowly to get our bearings. The train seems to be slowing down, so we hurry down the hall while we can still walk straight. I follow her through the junction of cars, terrified. Though it's covered, it's gratingly loud with the wheels straining against the tracks rhythmically. I step over the joint and join Elle on the other side. The door closes behind us and we let out a collective breath.

"That's terrifying," I state, saying what we're all thinking. She nods, giving me a small smile.

"Agreed. We're closer than ever now that we've faced death," She remarks and makes her way down the second sleeper car. I make sure to brace myself against a wall as to not fall into someone else's lap. I try not to focus on her words too hard. *We're closer than ever*. Okay Marie, you can stop with the puppy dog love. It's just a tiny little crush. Get over yourself.

We face two more train joiner things before we finally make it to the snack car. The snack bar lady looks very bored, and I grab a bag of chips and a soda. Elle grabs a candy bar and a bottle of water. We

bring our items to the counter and the lady stares up at us with a half-glare, seeming pissed off that we dare come into her snack bar and buy food. She rings me up first.

“\$10.95,” She monotones, and I choke on air.

“For a small bag of chips and a can of soda?” I question her, and immediately regret it. She full on glares at me, and I quickly pull out my wallet. I throw a ten and a one on the table and she gives me a nickel. I grab my things and back out of the way so Elle can get her food. She smiles at the lady and the lady looks back, confused. Elle is so fearless.

“Good morning! How much for this?” She greets cheerfully, and I take a step back. How the hell can she be so nice to, well, some angry train lady who doesn’t seem like she got enough coffee this morning?

“\$8.46,” She monotones, but with less anger. I stare as Elle pays and gets her things, and then faces me, ready to leave. I back out of the car, making my way back to our room. My metaphorical mouth is agape all the way back. Once we’re there, I turn to her.

“What was that?” I ask, my face obviously showing my confusion.

“What?”

“You were so nice to...to that...to that *demon*,” She takes a moment to consider me then laughs.

“She was probably just having a bad day,” She shrugs.

“You’re amazing. I was absolutely terrified,” I admit, and she smiles. It must be my imagination that she’s blushing.

“I think you’re the true hero of today. If I fell into someone’s lap at the beginning of the day,” She said as I blushed in embarrassment. “I think I would’ve asked a steward to switch me rooms. Or I would’ve just went home.”

I laughed at this, and cleared my throat. “I actually considered it, the switching rooms thing. But I figured I’d save someone the hassle and just dig myself into a deeper grave by being even more awkward.”

“No it’s okay, I completely understand,” She smiles and shakes her head. “One time I tripped and fell right into my crush’s arms.”

“Aw, how romantic!” I said in a singsong voice, and she snorts at me.

“It was like, maybe 7th grade,” She puts her head in her hands and I feel compelled to share another embarrassing moment.

“In 7th grade I wore purple eyeliner.”

“Oh my god you didn’t!” She laughs, and now it’s my turn to hide my face. “I wore blue eye shadow!”

“I tried bright pink blush a couple times. I thought it was for classy occasions,” I snorted through my hand. Elle laughed with me and wiped away a tear.

“Why didn’t anyone stop us?” She whined and I nodded, hiding my face in my hands.

“Off the subject of makeup, I got my suitcase stuck in my car this morning. I had to wrestle it out,” I hide my face further, unsure of why I’m sharing more but uncaring because I know she’s not judging me.

“This morning the train jerked as I was drinking coffee and I choked and burned my tongue, throat, and stomach. So there I was, silently screaming and holding back tears and trying not to cough as this elderly couple across from me was speaking of their granddaughter they were visiting.”

“I once pretended to squirt my water bottle all over my friend but the cap was open so it actually did squirt in her face.”

“Why are we doing this,” Elle cries from laughing so hard. “We just met and I am bearing my awkward soul to you.”

“Hell of an ice breaker, huh?” I offer, not quite wanting to stop the conversation. Sharing each other’s mistakes made her seem less intimidating, less perfect.

“Yeah you could call it that. Next we’re going to play truth or dare, you just wait.”

“Okay, if you insist. Truth or dare?” I offer, and my brain smacks itself. What am I going to ask for either side? I loved these games, but I suck at them.

“Truth, I’m not sure what kind of dare-type you are yet.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I fake offense. Elle smiles and shrugs.



“There are different types of dare-ers. There’s gross type, like lick your foot or eat something off the ground. Then you got your embarrassment type, which just dare you to go make a fool out of yourself. Then there’s the inappropriate type that make you do something, well, inappropriate. I don’t think you’re that type, but who can say?”

I consider her analysis and try to hold back a smile. “I usually can’t even come up with dares.”

“Fair enough. Truth away, then.”

“What’s your major?” I ask, starting it out clean

“I’m thinking of art. Y’know, that whole starving artist vibe. Mostly because I like art and I’m always hungry. Truth or dare?” She asks, and I take the safe way out.

“Truth.”

“No fun,” She pouts, and she fires off a question before I have a chance to point out her hypocrisy.

“Hmm... Well, what’s your major?”

“Education. I want to be a teacher, I’m just not sure what in.”

“I can see that.”

“What, me being a teacher?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t quite look the part,” I snicker, thinking of my bright hair and hidden tattoos.

“So? You’ll be great. What level of kids? Like kindergarten or high school?” Elle seems genuinely interested.

“I’m not sure. I’ll probably skip around if I can, and see what I like best.”

“That’s cool. At least you have a plan for your future,” She gives a small laugh. “I have no clue what I’m supposed to do with an art degree.”

I shrug, and we sit in a brief silence before I remember our game.

“Truth or dare?”

“Dare,” She answers, a mischievous glint in her eye.

“What’s the craziest thing you’ve ever done?”

“Ride the Demon Coaster,” she answers immediately.

“Wow, so someone’s not a fan of—”

“No you don’t understand,” She stares at me eyes wide and serious. “It was horrible. The ride got stuck for 3 hours.”

I close my eyes and shake my head. “I can’t imagine the pain you had to go through...”

She squints but smiles at my sarcasm. “That wasn’t even a dare!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

We go on for the next three hours, only stopping for dinner where I made her laugh so hard that soda came out of her nose. She got revenge by commenting at least it wasn’t burning coffee, which made me choke on my water.

Once we got to our stop, I got packed up quicker and half-waited on Elle. I wondered if I’d see her again. Chicago had a big campus, and to be honest, I would like a friend going into school. It’d make it less scary.

“Hey, do you mind if we trade phone numbers?” I ask, anxiety gripping my heart. Where was I going with this? Asking a cute girl her phone number? She’s probably straight anyway, and why can’t you just be friends with her first? Yeah. Friends first.

“Sure!” She smiles, and it makes me smile as well. Her smile is the best kind of contagious. I blink as I process that she accepted my offer, and pull out my phone. We exchange numbers, and I nod and head out just as graceful as I entered. “Good luck with getting there, hopefully we’ll see each other soon!”

“Yeah, you too!” I answer back.

## Chapter Two

I struggle to push my bags through the small dorm room door and drop everything with a sigh. It’s a closet of a room, with bunk beds on one side and two desks on the other, barely squeezing in two closets.

The window lets in clean light and I get to work.

I'm all settled in, clothes in the closet and my posters up on the desk nearest to the window. I wait to unpack my sheets, as I chose the desk so it's only fair my roommate gets choice of bed. I flop down on the bottom bunk, wondering what my roommate will be like. Hopefully a good one. My stomach growls and I sit up, grabbing my wallet and seeing how much I have for lunch.

The door is all but kicked open as a girl struggles through the door with more bags than me. I freeze as she drops all her bags as I did earlier.

"No friggin way."

"Marie?" Elle looks up at me, pushing hair out of her face.

"Hey roomie."

"Quit creeping on me!" She huffs, teasing me with the slightest smile.

"Hey, this is my room first! You're the one creeping on me!"

"I—" Elle starts, but then admits defeat. "Okay, you have a point."

"I guess you really follow through, huh?"

"Huh?"

"Hopefully we'll see each other soon?" Sooner than I expected. You're like a fortune teller, dude."

"Dude?" She rolls her eyes and smiles at me.

"Yeah, dude. So hey roomie, want to go get some food?" I offer.

"As long as it's not train food."

"Amen to that."

## **Ella Schmidt**

Grade 12

### *Days Gone: Collected Poems* Writing Portfolio

John Burroughs School

Saint Louis, MO

Teacher: John Pierson

### **Blueprint**

Once in a while I love the thing  
that made the daybreak,  
when cars all stopped at beckoning light  
tremble like moons on water.  
Once in a while I notice  
a train signal out-sung  
by birds sweeping dust from the corners of the sky,  
the resurfacing of the moon  
and of the thing that invented it.  
I've never told my parents I believe in the thing  
that made the machinery of mountaintops  
scraping the sky,  
telling taller tales than twelfth-story rooftops.  
Man made the snaking fire escapes,  
but not before something else set in motion  
the ancient coil of ivy, not before  
the blueprint was there.  
I don't often notice the sun's slow descent,  
the love story I'm a sucker for,  
being someone who believes  
in the thing that made me  
once in a while.  
But when I do notice,  
I feel a long-lost safety  
beneath the time-lapse of clouds.  
Once in a while the radio bears hymns  
of long-ago places  
peppered with static,  
and the breath of a dog on the crosswalk  
keeps time with the panting of engines.  
Once in a while I believe in the thing  
that allowed for the birds  
who congregate all atop telephone wires,

learning bit by bit the secret language  
of drawn-out goodbyes.

### **Another Man Goes off to Smash Guitars**

My mother cultivates the habit  
of letting the neighborhood wives  
cry to her on the phone.  
Dulled curtain-chink of memory our kitchen,  
whatever is carved into the breakfast table:  
men who did or didn't live  
in this spot.

She scrubs our dinner plates in yellow gloves,  
teaching all the while that heart-throbbery was once  
the sound of smashing guitars. That heartache  
was the cold shoulder you gave yourself  
for losing him.

Every man who leaves leaves  
a screen door smack in his wake.  
Some slam off into the hereafter  
with full chests. Some go with a lion's  
cry, some with the twig-snap  
of a foreclosed-on heart.  
She doesn't watch them go.  
She scans four eyes well-versed  
in backtalk, my sister and me,  
wising us up for a time when we  
are what is left of her.

She teaches we will all be referred to, at times,  
as unparticular women, as weeds  
no one owns.  
I learn I am not a creature of music boxes,  
though they say I resemble my mother  
who wears her beauty around the house  
and can be so exposed in it.

She teaches the importance of opening  
the blinds, and other quick fixes  
for depression.

Another man goes off to smash guitars,  
to dance the dance of the dissenters, declare  
himself more maverick than man  
and go to bed with a bellyful of dumb luck.  
He tucks a hard-won happiness into his coat sleeve.  
If I had the secret to a good life,  
I like to think I'd be generous with it.

Steam riots up from the basin  
as the screen door clicks shut, and my mother  
warns of a nomad's cleaved heart,  
washing dishes all the while.

## Nowadays

What we have is anyway love,  
world of crossed sticks.  
Once the wet clay banks of our eyes  
in a shared rearview mirror:  
how lovely a girl's own sweetness  
told back to her.  
Once with electric-fuzz halos  
around our church curls.  
Later, we shed our light

on makeup wipes, peel off  
our torn-up jeans.  
Put our blackened feet in running water  
and perch our bodies on the edge of the tub,  
relics of our younger ghosts:  
girls at the end of a dock.

Once with lemon juice in our hair, now  
we kick up dust into the face of the sun.

Once, you were so many  
things at once: your shinguards, allergies,  
tiny gold hoops.  
Now you are the messiest thing  
in the room to love.

Once with eyes artless and working,  
nights like eyes like zodiac  
looking into time in both directions, some instinct  
you won't say why.  
Now in the lot of a Phillips 66,  
your most quarrelsome eyes when riled  
hold in them a small town's most famous fires.

Once suffocated by the love they offered, now longing  
for the old ones of our youth.  
Now with danger in our girls' belligerence, danger  
in our bad-teeth beautiful, overwrought and doomed  
and beautiful, unhome-unlovable  
and still very beautiful.

Once we slept like sinking stones.  
Now with trouble and a taste for trouble,  
we place our stock in newer days, hunt down  
a party to lift our spirits from the dead.  
We sleep with maps to trusting minds

in our lakewater jeans. Now periphery's 20/20  
and we've got no use for it, chasing the fossil tails  
of grandfather constellations.

We wonder are all women's best sleeps  
behind them, the ones  
on their cousin's girlfriend's sister's cots,  
the ones that didn't poke at them.  
Now, once again, we are yesterday-born,  
crying out to the sunless night  
you've outdone yourself in darkness.

Once we wished to go out grandly,  
with sunburnt lips and skyward toes.  
Now we hope to die like paper boats,  
by a gentle push downriver.

## Leela

December was the obvious month for making love  
but for the death of Mr. Luther's son.

Once his raised-right ample eyes said  
I will shake your father's hand firmly.

Today the open-mouthed pores of the sky gush grime,  
remind us of unblinking time and bruise us roman numeral.

Psalms for the mothers of fat pink babies, glad but for our struck  
men, their skinned elbows keeping them away at Christmas.

Fallen is the cadet in locket, a pastor's boy. We lift lying eyes  
to our elders, the late pitcher's mound. Month of hindsight, still air,

Leela: her vodka soda and retainer on the windowsill,  
rendering the funeral lilies pedestrian.

This morning she curled her toes inside her rain boots  
and the bus never came. The evening was vesper and rust and

I wished to be a man of coal and work, underground at sundown  
and by her altar-side on a Sunday alabaster.

December of afterthought: at dinner we bowed our heads  
and sputtered mangled grace. Pretended we always had.

Somebody's nephew tugged at the tablecloth, laughter dribbled  
from an uncle's beard. Leela kicked me under the table.

We learned the passage of dinner rolls like it was the instinct  
for elegiac distance, the instinct of a god himself.

Leela's socks were blue and collected the dust. Her hair  
like when we were bathed in sinks and smelled hypoallergenic.

December of time zones, of detergent: comfort was to touch without  
closeness, with chins hanging low. By day, casual-tied blooms

beckoned Sunday-schoolers in a crowing heap. Our ankles  
touched, Leela's and mine, and we pulled away, sickened.

That morning Mr. Luther's voice split and the children were sorry,  
squirming in our requiem clothes.





## Noise of Migration

In childhood, roosters  
fanned out their wings like Christ on a necklace  
and their mighty trumpet-calls wakened Gabe,  
his hair like a hay bale in the first fingertips of sun.

The daily grind marked up his hands plentiful,  
calluses hardening to their state of permanency,  
knowing what to pluck from the ground and when  
like it was the instinct for motion or sex.

The air was pandemic with sweet pea and milkweed  
and the sound of circumstance blighting Gabe's harvest,  
pipe dream in the language of song-stifled bird—  
sometimes during movies Gabe says for Christ's sake listen.

Of the city, he loves  
that the people extinguish their porch lights at nine  
to engineer perfect silence as if it were a token of the natural world.

Of morning glories, he loves  
that they are not morning glories awaiting their parents' approval,  
that they grow not for the sake of a life mapped out  
before them, but only by the impulse  
to expand.

Of the passenger who broke into dialogue  
on Gabe's first-ever plane, he thinks  
a man who grew up without mud-chores and chickens  
must always pursue small vapid conversation  
because he never fell asleep with just the hum of cicadas  
and woke to the grand racket of ducks  
leaving trails in the water.

Of the city, he hates  
that he and the man file into the same mobs  
for coffee and baggage claim,  
scanning the place not for lovers at the foot of the escalator  
but for drifters with their names on signs  
and keys to the taxis that take them apart.

## **That Arrow**

Before you, it was  
the possibility of you—  
I lived my life away  
thinking of the day  
you'd find me.

I've scavenged the way to your heart  
by now, just thinking it over.  
That arrow only points ahead  
so I dream up a past  
and dizzy myself in the fluke of it all.

It was on a night I couldn't sleep.  
By then, I didn't have a spotless heart.  
I didn't have quite the good looks  
I'd hoped for—  
you didn't expect  
what wasn't there in front of you.

When I see paired-up people  
alone together and in love  
in crowded places,  
I know that of the two  
one loved better  
and one loved first.  
And that if they are in love,  
neither remembers.

We were young and it didn't take much.  
I offered up a love like  
those heavy coats you stow away in;  
you promised never to let me  
scare myself to death.

Then all lips were your lips,  
all music was music you had  
an opinion about,  
all eyes held in them  
your reflection, trembling  
like a mounted flag.

There is no day yet  
when my heart doesn't find you.  
On sleepless nights,  
I thank the lamp posts  
with their craned necks

for lighting my way.

When time has worlded us  
and we don't look the same,  
the possibility of us will lie awake  
like the dashboard on those nights  
the blessings are too many  
to tell each other about.

For now, we live where eyes  
are not windows but forests  
darting by,  
and our full-hearted moments  
happen to us in the cool rush of night.  
Where the best we can do is sit back  
without a whole lot to hold onto,  
speaking a little, or perhaps  
not at all.

## All There Is to Say About Mermaids

The fact is your eyes make no impression  
but that they are blue, blue-eyed muse  
of everything.  
Blue roadside rain to windowless Atlanta fever,  
stained beatitude blue of rafters.  
Somewhere blue sleep  
by the washing machine.  
Spin-cycle siren song, talk of love  
like the dripping faucet.  
Blue of college sweatshirts, somewhere  
you are the blue curled lip of tide, boundless gills  
and expired horoscopes that people the fridge.  
Fabric for reddened accolades of loving you so,  
you are blue of elegies, of the freezer aisle at night.  
Blue ballad stuff: a rainstorm turns copper  
noble green of decay, and someday  
we will both shop for baby shoes.  
The fact is you are the moon  
before you are a symbol,  
wary of sidewalk movers and all else yellow light.  
Overworked as a mermaid or a rose,  
no longer living but emblemized.  
Blue-bodied muse of too much.  
The fact is you knew before all the stoner-boys with guitars  
that our grandfathers on veteran's day spoke old whiskey sonnets,  
that some girls can only be described like first cars,  
the way they can't brush their hair without inspiring  
the next hundred silk-similes  
and all the bluest love songs from across the room.  
That the moon tonight is doomed  
to outdo old radiance,  
and the poets will go on about it for decades.

## Pictures of Girls

The last one of us together and in public: we are smiling. Ours is a furtive fastening of calloused hands that haven't strayed far from the playground; we are experts at resenting grown-ups and wishing we were older. We are high-strung along the pulsing october moons; we are giddy and unsure, intoxicatedly she: this is when we are most mistaken for each other.

We both have two smiles: one is closed-lipped, unsloppy caution-carved, mine chapped and wary of the camera, wary of boys playing Legos making cameras; yours is practiced, puckered and inviting. The other is aglow, and our eyes boast something other than skepticism—even mine, too trusting for a feminist, are fervent and bursting with breath.

We always choose the same smile, and here, it is the elastic latter, full-bodied and blunt. Our hands are bound, yours stifling, mine happy to be stifled, captured at their best. At my best, I am breathtaking, if not out-of-breath. At your best, you are hard-shelled level-headed lethal, triggerman of heart-throbbery and heartache. At your best, you are so beautiful it hurts

to measure the space we don't take up, your skin a pearly pocketknife. We learn girl and self and love as mutual exclusion. We learn compromise. When the time comes to decorate the mantel, I choose your dog-eared darkroom photographs—the best pictures of me were the ones you took at the end, when you pointed the camera on yourself. At the moment the shutter snaps closed, we are grateful

to be girls: lowercase letters in beautiful, complicated fonts and sometimes different languages. We are heavily filtered, Afterlight-ed and VSCO-ed; we surgically subvert, but our voices are uncut. We pierce the camera's white-noise murmur, I say: there is nothing better than our compatible complaints, I say: perhaps loving a girl is a reciprocated warmth, the only thing we historically have to offer each other being hospitality. Our soap-sodden mouths

and woolen spines take the long way to my mom's car, where we discover unfeminine greed in stolen glances. The scalloped hiss of shutter buttons captures our newborn captivity, even in the secrecy of the backseat. My mom points out the moon—it used to follow us home, a million best friends ago. But the glow of our phones out-shines the cosmos;

our heads are dutifully down. We are girls, we find ourselves now  
in pictures.

## Ana Schulte

Grade 12

### *The Art of Whispering Goodbye* Writing Portfolio

Olathe North High School

Olathe, KS

Teacher: Deirdre Zongker

## Supernova Sings Goodnight

*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 earbuds, 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.”

## Release

One slippery step.

Tiptoe across tile and clean carpet,  
walls so bright they blind

under fluorescent lights,  
and there's sweat tucked into mildew surfaces.  
And there's the music spilling out the drive thru window

across the street,  
which sings so loudly  
she can hear it on the seventh floor,  
and she can hear the cashier's heavy breathing

as he asks for her sister's order  
*one more time,*  
and one more time  
it plays in her head,  
because it's all brighter and louder in Wichita, Kansas.

A small stride into the death trap.  
Hands grasp for teardrop steel  
and slip against it, now,  
the water's getting hotter,  
it's spilling down her spine  
and her stomach, which she holds desperately

to keep from spilling over her arms,  
now, a trepid jerk forward,  
oh she aches to be cooler!  
One more time, but,  
the clock doesn't move forward  
and she finds no release from the  
linoleum confides

of the hotel room shower.

Naturally, she will fight back.  
Fist collides with the wet wall,  
pounding until knuckles bleed,  
and up to her eyes,  
she rubs raw  
because *which parts of her are worth seeing anymore?*

Flesh torn from her, abused  
washes away down a clogged drain

and she falls to watch it slide  
along the grout and through the filter  
on bruised knees and cracked hands,

willing it to feel better.  
Willing her body to be clean.  
Willing happiness to rain down through the spout.  
Showers are supposed to be safe.

But this one,  
it's hurting. And she is burning,  
and it keeps hurting

and it keeps burning  
and it keeps hurting

and it keeps bur

## Dream

“Sleep.”

The man in the booth flashes the signal—  
it’s time.

Gnarled hands grasp the knob and slide  
the saturation to zero  
dim the lights  
set the reel

find the keys to an piano and begin to pound Chaplin song.  
Screen flickers awake.  
READY?

### FIRST FRAME:

Something is wrong.

Dimly lit room with checkered walls  
Familiar faces possess disconnected smiles  
Glass door in the left corner, and then,  
Something I cannot see  
so I pretend I cannot feel it watching me  
eyes traveling up and down the curve  
of my shoulders and the back of my legs.

No matter how fast I turn my head  
pivot round  
flash eyes,  
something I cannot see.

I reach out to feel  
but what I touch is not attainable —  
static.

Something is wrong.

### SECOND FRAME:

Silent,

We sit side by side on gray rocks  
brushed by gray waves  
shadows play on gray sky  
and I wish I could cry but I can’t!

I can’t move

I can’t speak

I can’t ask why I feel no pulse

but I hear pounding in my ears

and I want to watch his eyes but he’s fading, something I cannot see  
pulling me into the gray sea, and I too am gray.

Body resolves to seafoam, please,  
please!

I didn’t want to leave yet.

### THIRD FRAME:

Running  
My fingers yank my hair for the pain  
of the tug at my scalp  
but that can't save me now,  
climbing  
up a ladder to the top of a steel monster  
with chipped paint  
and abandoned train cars,  
kicking,  
I am trapped atop the beast.  
I don't want to go down I do not want to fall,  
clawing,  
please let me out, please let me go,  
something is wrong!  
Falling,  
stomach plummets,  
I'm going to die, I know I'm going to die!  
Spilling.

FOURTH FRAME:

Driving through the dark  
on roads hanging from the stars  
above the ground  
with strangers who are laughing  
but I can only hear the sound  
of a man who's taunting  
"You don't know who you are, do you?"  
We're moving too fast for me to look —  
"You don't know where you're going."  
To whom do I owe this favor of fear?  
Something I cannot see.  
Something I feel,  
something is wrong  
How do I get out of this car?  
And suddenly the static finds its voice —  
"Wake up."  
What?

STOP.

Aching fingers slide off the keys  
and put an end to Charlie's song.  
A door has opened in the theater  
light is pouring onto the seats  
into the booth  
illuminating wrinkles on old hands  
working to add color back into tired eyes.  
Reverse the work of the subconscious.  
Something is wrong, something I cannot see—  
just a dream.

## The End

The end of the beginning.  
The past eighteen years I have held on  
desperately to happiness,  
clinged to warmth and memories  
of summer and fall changing to spring:  
my home.

Now, they say,  
*It is time to bid goodbye  
to it all.*

But how can I say *goodbye*

to all these beautiful people  
and beautiful places?

My mouth will not open  
to that word  
which burns on my tongue,  
but I know it must.

I've felt that familiar pain before  
and I notice now  
it gets easier every time.

Easier to walk the road alone, cold wind  
blowing against my face,  
reminding me of the bitter sting  
of hatred  
and ignorance  
and anger.

Late nights when tears wet my face,  
for what?

For the next time the wind blows  
cold sorrow in, and I can say

*I made this place a home.*

To the people in the picture frames

I placed bets on,  
who made me proud and let me down.

*And* I'd like to raise a glass  
to the advanced chem class

I almost failed, and then a victory lap  
for boys with good hair,  
thank you for getting me through these last few years!

Finally I clap clap clap  
for the ones in the back  
raising their hands in the hall to wave to me  
even when they don't know me,  
they've been waving since forever I think,  
but can I remember eighteen years?

And now.  
*Today is a good day to be alive,*  
I say, even though I only half believe it.  
But this home taught me something:  
I'm going places,  
shedding old skin on the concrete leading out of town.  
I cannot be stopped, I'm a soaring supernova.  
I know a house is empty without a soul  
to turn its foundation upside down.  
Once I was afraid, but now, I say  
*Goodbye home! Till we meet again, soon!*  
And on into the unknown.

## The Beginning

And on into the unknown—  
Thirteen. *What's it like?* They'll ask today,  
and I'll answer with the routine  
*I don't feel any older*, but I do feel this age  
is the start of an intangible beginning.  
So I stare at myself in the mirror  
and run the brush through my hair  
and hook my fingers in the loops of my jeans  
and do up the buttons on my collared shirt  
one thousand times  
before I am ready  
to grab the ropes and hoist myself up onto the ship.

I point to the waves ahead,  
chopping themselves in halves,  
*Onward!*  
(Later I'll wonder if I ignored the signs:  
friends drowning, heads floating on the surface  
of the water.)  
I speed forward fearlessly into Thirteen,  
but the wind whispers there will be pain,  
patience and waiting,  
wondering and soaring,  
searching for truth  
that I will never entirely be sure of.

I cross the threshold of life  
as I know it, and wave goodbye  
to the familiarity I had left behind.  
Ready to conquer the horizon  
because I am thirteen! And a champion.  
There are no battles to lose yet.  
Fates I would be forced to succumb to  
hid themselves in crashing tide.  
*You're changing*, it says. I refuse to fall  
to these words. I do not have to change  
to find the x that marks maturity,  
and it was true on that day.  
The beginning.



## And There Was Light

Neither of them could remember a time before the sky was a shadow. It had been months since grass bloomed beneath their bare feet instead of soot and darkness had not permeated the world. It was if they had spent their entire lives frozen on opposite sides of white flames wondering who would be the first to go. The boy at dawn, or the girl at dusk? Who would perish first? Life was, seemingly, a test of time. A waiting game that neither wanted to play. But eventually the two children would have to admit to themselves that this could all come to an end, unless they wanted to do something about it. It was all up to them.

One evening, the shadows above wavered, and a stream of light escaped through the impenetrable blanket of clouds. The girl squinted as she looked up. She saw that the boy's head had also sprung up in surprise, and the two caught each other's eyes. She thought that he was trying to smile at her, but it appeared more as a grimace. She cocked her head. He shrugged and rubbed his neck, which ached from being fixated at the ground for so long. She cleared her throat.

"Hello," She offered. Her voice echoed throughout the vast nothingness that surrounded them.

"Hi." The boy replied. "How are you?"

She stared at him.

"Maybe we shouldn't skip around the gloom and doom." The words, which, she had almost spat, came out from her mouth before she could stop them.

"Oh. Fine then, this is all quiet shitty, isn't it? I don't suppose you have any rope, or a gun, so we can just kill ourselves?"

"Listen, I'm sorry. That's not exactly what I—."

"We don't have to talk about it."

"I guess." Her voice grew weaker.

Talking ceased. After a while, the girl got up from the box she was sitting on and crawled onto the ground, lying down and fighting her way to sleep. The boy did the same, covering himself in plastic bags. The next morning, she tried again. She was determined to stare at him until he became so uncomfortable, he would be forced to talk to her. At first, he tried to avert her gaze and focus on the can of food he was eating. He knew what she was trying to do. He cleared his throat. She blinked. Finally, he opened his mouth.

"When I was little, I used to be really afraid of the dark."

She raised an eyebrow.

"I guess it's because I thought that maybe if it was too dark for too long, I wouldn't be able to see anything anymore. I told a boy at my school about it and he said that I was stupid... that the longer you stay in the dark, the lighter things actually become. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I've been waiting for that to happen here, but..."

She wrung her hands together.

"I understand."

"And you know what sucks?" He went on. "I'll never be a famous baseball player. I'll probably never have another chocolate chip cookie, or any cookie for that matter. And I'm never going to see my family again. Which I should've gotten over awhile ago. But now I'm never going to see anyone again, except for you."

The girl's stomach dropped. Did he think she wanted to be stuck with him? Alone? She would've died with everyone else if it had been *her* choice. She knew it was a silly thing to become defensive—after all, there was nothing either of them could do about it now.

"Yeah, it really sucks. Anyway, I know what you mean. Everytime I wake up, there's a second where I think my mom will be standing over me telling me it's time for school. I used to hate waking up on school days, how stupid is that? I was safe..." Her voice trailed off.

He laughed.

“You thought you were safe. We all did, but we never were. You shouldn’t get too worked up about that.”

“I know. Still, it *is* a bit upsetting being reminded that all of my dreams are crushed. And everyone’s dead. And my Mom isn’t here.”

“Did you get to call her?” He asked suddenly. “Before...you know.”

“I tried, but she didn’t answer. She was probably trying to get my little sister to safety.”

The boy perked up. He slowly stood and made his way around the fire to come sit by the girl.

“You had a sister?”

“Yeah. She liked applesauce and cats, and I miss her like crazy. What about you?” She asked.

“What was your family like?”

She turned to face the boy, who was looking down at her inquisitively.

“Huge. Two older sisters, an older brother, and one younger sister and one younger brother. My oldest sister was married to this guy Manuel, he sold door knobs. He was pretty cool. He was supposed to take me to a baseball game the day that, well. You know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Not a big deal, we’d been to plenty.”

The girl nodded, as if ‘we’d been to plenty’ made up for the fact that Manuel had probably been burned alive with door knobs melted to his hands. But maybe the boy didn’t want to think about that image. When they talked, the girl noticed that the boy avoided speaking directly about the attack. That was probably what she found most irritating about him. She had so many questions that haunted her everyday and plagued her sleep and she figured, if she didn’t talk about them, would soon drive her crazy.

*How did you feel sitting there in the dark after it all happened, blinded by the explosion? Did you think it would be that bright? We’d read about it before in books and heard it in all of those videos, but did you really think it would be that bright? Like a second sun? How did you feel when you didn’t know who else was out there? When it could have just been you, alone? How can you sit there across the fire everyday without wanting to die, without wondering why it’s just you and me? How can you breathe, how can you move, cough, blink—*

“Are you okay? Hey, are you alright?” The girl blinked and felt her shoulders being shaken. The boy was standing over her.

“M fine,” She mumbled. He looked hesitant.

“I don’t know how I feel about any of that.”

Her eyes widened.

“I said that all...*outloud*?”

He nodded softly.

“Oh no, I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t offend you. I know you don’t like talking about that day.”

“No, it’s fine.” He sat back down beside her. “Maybe I should.”

She was taken back.

“Really, you don’t have to.”

They both stared into the desolate landscape before them. Pillows and pens were scattered around their little “campsite,” along with empty waterbottles, a hairbrush, a tube of toothpaste, a torn cardboard box full of fruit.

“I felt guilty.”

“Guilty? Why?”

“I worked so hard all of my life to get a scholarship to our school. My Dad was hard on me, but he wanted things to be good for me. He wanted me to have options. Opportunities. I was the first one in our family to go to college.”

“Oh, wow. That’s great.”

“Ha, ‘great,’ *right*.” He mocked. “It *was* great, such a nice building. Our dorms, of course, had the most glamorous amenities. Federally certified safety shelters! My family would have never seen anything

like it. My younger siblings, they would've been at school too. Maybe at recess. They had nowhere...nowhere to run, they didn't know what to do—" His voice broke and he hid his face in his sleeve. The girl extended her arms towards him and awkwardly embraced him, holding him as he trembled. The fire illuminated his wet cheeks, danced on into the afternoon. After some time had passed and the fire had dimmed, the boy escaped from the girl's arm.

"We need to make a decision." He spoke weakly.

"Well, you know our options." Her cheeks flushed.

"Repopulate or let all of mankind die off. Pretty straightforward, yeah."

She rolled her eyes.

"That sounds horrific. It doesn't have to be like that exactly."

"You're lying to yourself."

"Well fine, let's just say it then. Do you want to have kids and watch them have sex together and watch their kids have sex together? I don't know how it worked the first time, but I don't think it was like that. And even if that all works out, and one thousand years from now things are back up and running, we're all still going to hate each other! And we'll destroy ourselves again! Is that the reality check you needed?"

"Calm down. There's no reason for you to get angry. I was just saying..."

The boy ran his hands through his unkempt hair and inhaled heavily. What *was* he saying?

"Do you even want to have kids with me?"

Did she? The answer was most definitely, most selfishly, *no*. There was no denying the boy was good looking, albeit until recently she'd thought of him as airheaded and conceited. Not her type whatsoever. And anyway, she had never really looked forward to having kids, human race depending on it or not.

"We're not even friends."

"Yeah, we're not." He said with a half smile.

"We're just two people in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"The only ones who made it out alive." He leaned back and wiggled his eyebrows. "Maybe that means something."

"But it probably doesn't."

"So what's next, then?"

The fire crackled and filled the emptiness in the air that had been left by a question finally vocalized after months of being buried beneath fear and apprehension.

"I don't want to answer that." She replied.

"We need to make up our minds."

"We have all the time in the world to make up our minds."

"Until one of us is mauled by a dog or eats the wrong berries. One of us is gonna die off eventually, natural selection is coming to snatch us up..."

His voice became garbled in the girl's ears; her thoughts were beginning to race. A seed of an idea had been planted and was growing dangerously fast. The implications of the idea were preposterous, and she knew it. But she had just about made up her mind. There *was* a way that no decision had to be made after all. There *was* a way to never know. A way to make the right and wrong decision both at once.

"I'll leave." She said. The boy blinked.

"E-excuse me?"

"I'll leave. And you won't follow me."

He scoffed.

"You can't be serious. What, purposefully go off on your own? All this time alone out in the wilderness has made you delusion. I get it! My older brother was in the military, I know about PTSD. Whatever, I won't let you do it."

"Think about it! If we both go our own ways, we'll never be alone."

“And how do you propose that?”

“You’ll never know if I’m dead, and I’ll never know if you’re dead. We’ll always be alive to each other. Maybe we’ll find other people. Maybe there’s water out there, or trees. We’ll keep walking, and if we die, the other person will never know. There will always be some sort of hope. But if we stay at this campsite, there won’t be any hope at all. Just the truth. The truth doesn’t belong here.”

“How poetic. You’re insane. It’s out of the question.”

“I’m leaving tonight.”

Silence. In the beginning there had been nothing but silence, and it seemed that in the end, that’s all there would be too. That’s all there had been. A decision was made. The girl packed away her things carefully, avoiding any sort of look toward the boy. He did the same. They were suddenly all too aware of how human the other was, with families and feelings and irrational tendencies. Stuck in the same pitiful situation because one man had decided to play God, obliterating mankind by pushing a big red button, or making a phone call, or something along those lines.

The sun was setting now. Throughout the day, more smoke had cleared from the sky and vibrant hues soaked through clouds and stained the sky pink and purple and yellow and blue. As the girl folded up her last belonging into a bag, she noticed that the boy was staring at the sky. She knew she was crazy for making this choice, he knew she was crazy, and she felt sort of sorry for dragging him along into a life where neither of them would ever feel security or the warmth of another human again. She walked to him. On her way to bid him a final farewell, she picked up a piece of fruit from the cardboard box on the ground to offer him a sort of consolation.

“Here,” She said as she drew closer, extending her arm. He took the fruit from her hand and stared at it. She leaned against him and followed his gaze to the stars that had begun to appear above.

“Thanks.” The boy said coldly.

“You’re welcome. Anyway, I should be off.” She turned to leave.

“Promise me something.” He spun her around so she looked into her eyes.

“Sure, what is it?”

“One day, if you feel desperate or alone, try to find this place. I know you think we can’t stay here anymore and that we need to leave, and maybe we do. It’s certainly not an ideal place to be. But it’s everything we know. So when it’s the end, when you know it’s the end, come back. I will too. And maybe we’ll meet again.”

“Maybe.” She agreed, though she was doubtful. She reached out to pat him on the shoulder, but he quickly retreated from her touch. She shrugged. “Goodbye.”

And with that, she turned her back to him and began her trek into what was left of the world. He watched her push forth until her silhouette disappeared in the horizon with the sun. *She could die tonight.* He thought. *She could die tomorrow.* Or perhaps she really would find something worth living for. Perhaps he would too. He looked at the fruit he was holding and dropped it to the ground, preparing to walk the other way.

Baseball was gone, and so were doorknobs. But at one point, long ago, none of those things had been there at all. Stars hid for eternity before a hand flipped the light switch. Were all ends beginnings? He couldn’t say. But if he held out long enough, he believed, he would live to see the sun rise once again.

## What the Streetlights Saw

She sat in the darkness, hugged by a damp metal fence that held her upright in her place. Her breath was shallow and inconsistent; she found she could not stop shaking. She could not see her hands but she could smell them, and when she squeezed her eyes together tightly her mind flashed the deep currant red of blood. The color caused the corner of her lips to split and curl into a smile. She brought her sea salt fingers to her nose and deeply inhaled into murderous ecstasy, but not before she was lurched forward as she threw up violently over her shoes. She folded further into herself, recalling the events of the last hour.

She'd followed her for years. The skinny girl with stringy brown hair and familiar green eyes. (Perhaps it was remembering the sight of her that had made her so sick, but more likely it was the excitement of the memory of seeing her pressed against the wall of the roller skating rink, pale face illuminated by shimmering disco lights.) Her heart sped as she recounted the colorful details. Pink and orange polka dots on the carpet. The white laces of her skates. Blue polo shirt tucked into khaki pants. And red, spilling over her knife and unto her hands. She giggled excitedly, jumped in exaltation. The girl slunk to the floor, grasping at her throat. The girl gurgled up what she supposed was meant to be the question why. Her face flushed seeing the girl in a state of such disarray. Look at her! Watch as she tries so desperately to breath. Watch life leave her...

She wanted to feel it one more time. She leaned down and pressed her nose to hers.

"Goodbye!" She whispered gleefully. She traced the line she'd created minutes earlier, sinking the paintbrush as deeply into her canvas as possible. The girl spat up more blood unto her fingers.

She opened her eyes, staring into the night. She knew she had to leave now, before they came looking around corners for anyone who might have seen what happened at the rink. She didn't have time for questions. So she packed up her memories, vowing to indulge later, and picked herself up and walked down the street. A woman walking her dog smiled at her as she turned the corner. Lights glimmered in puddles along the sidewalk. She caught her green eyes in the reflection of the water.

## Law of Reflection

Fingertips leave greasy smudges on the car window,  
censoring headlights and Honda dealerships  
blinking red and gold  
like stars scattered across  
desolate space,  
a blank page scribbled in  
with glass crayons that tore through the paper.

And people  
call this politics,  
as if greed can be explained by a law tattooed in stone.  
Law impossible to erase, so  
tucked away by those who claim it  
and hide it in those banks and churches,  
flickering  
like lights in the distance.  
But greed doesn't belong to them.  
We each hold a stone in one hand  
while the other presses against glass.

Lookup! To the night sky.  
Watch planes dance with clouds.  
Look to the white line, its tail tagging behind  
in the dusk, illuminated by pink sun —  
Wouldn't it be nice to leave *no* trace?  
Drink half the wine  
and leave a full glass in its place,  
with the taste of adventure on your tongue,  
and bitter taste of pain erased  
in the minds of those  
you bruised along the way?  
Is ignorance conscious? The choice to forget active?  
The potion you seek does not exist,  
and you won't forget the things you did.  
You won't forget the glass crayons you played with.  
Reckless.

Open your umbrella, for the storm is rolling in.  
Crack of camera lightning flashes  
against your back, startlingly candid.  
Now they've seen your  
shoulders slumped with hair unkempt  
and hypocrisy duly noted,  
for, as hard as you may try,  
you cannot clean  
the lens capturing

your reflection  
once the image has been taken.  
And though you've been telling  
the mirror something quite different,  
actions have consequences regardless of intentions.

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## **A Novel Technique for Monitoring Blood Pulse Shape with Packaged Whispering-Gallery-Mode Optical Micro-Toroids**

### Abstract

Cardiovascular disease is the number one killer in the world. Measuring pulse shape and blood pressure continuously and safely could save lives by providing crucial early warnings of cardiovascular disease, but no existing sensor has these capabilities. To meet this imperative biomedical need, I have created a portable sensor made of whispering-gallery-mode (WGM) micro-toroids, which holds promise for unparalleled detection capabilities and widespread adoption due to its ultra-high sensitivity, small size, and low cost. Here, I detail the methods that I used to fabricate and characterize the WGM micro-toroids. I show that the micro-toroids can robustly measure pulse shape continuously in real time in a simulated lab setting. I also compare the responses of different simulated pulse shapes, which indicate important information about pressure. In addition, the micro-toroids were found to maintain a highly stable quality ( $Q$ ) factor over time and provide reproducible measurements.

### 1. Introduction

Cardiovascular disease remains to be the leading cause of death [1]. A major challenge our world faces is early prediction of heart failure or other cardiovascular problems, which could prevent many premature deaths. Although existing products such as the Fitbit and Apple Watch can measure heart rate, no portable device can currently measure pulse shape and blood pressure continuously, which are related to cardiovascular conditions. To measure these parameters as early warnings, I have developed a small, portable sensor that could have a vital impact on medical diagnosis and public health. Even though it is only about the size of a quarter, it can accurately measure pulse shape, which I have demonstrated experimentally in a simulated lab setting. Deriving blood pressure from pulse shape will also be explored using the extracted pulse wave velocity [2].

Currently, the potential of pulse shape seems to be overlooked by many, but it is worth being studied because it is intimately related to how the heart beats and how the vascular system transports blood [3].

It is also important to measure blood pressure continuously. At present, doctors can measure blood pressure, but not continuously nor conveniently. Cuffing is required, which can be unreliable because different blood pressure readings have been reported to result from different cuff sizes used on the same person [4]. For example, blood pressure generated may not completely transmit to the brachial artery if a



cuff is too small, resulting in systolic pressure overestimation [5]. Cuffing can also cause discomfort and more serious problems. For example, frequent cuffing can starve tissue of oxygen, and non-continuous monitoring can miss important warning signs. My sensor would eliminate the need for cuffing, and it would allow for continuous monitoring of blood pressure so that if a person's blood pressure became abnormal at any time, he or she could immediately be cared for. Treatment is more effective when the disease is detected at an early stage [6].

Even though micro-cavities have mostly been applied in physics and engineering, they also promise new detection capabilities in biomedicine [7]. Here, I want to use these cavities to measure pulse shape and blood pressure with high accuracy. I hypothesize that I can use micro-cavities to detect irregular pulse shapes of a person and derive the blood pressure as well, and early detection of any abnormality could save lives.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### Whispering-Gallery-Mode Optical Micro-Cavities

The key component of my sensor is a special type of optical cavity, the whispering-gallery-mode (WGM) optical micro-cavity. WGM micro-cavities are shaped like acoustic whispering galleries, such as the one in the famous St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Due to their shape, acoustic whispering galleries capture sound in circular orbits as it is totally internally reflected from the boundaries. WGM micro-cavities are the optical analog: rather than confine sound, they confine light [7].

WGM micro-cavities come in different forms, and the form I am using is the micro-toroid. The main advantages and unique qualities of WGM toroids are their small mode volume and ultra-high quality factors [8]. These toroids are micro-sized—as small as a single strand of human hair—which makes them less expensive to fabricate and easy to integrate into wearable devices. Because these circular cavities support total internal reflection with low intrinsic loss, light can reflect off the cavity surface up to ten thousand times, greatly increasing light-matter interaction [9]. This increase in interaction between the light and the cavity leads to an exceptionally high quality factor. Quality factor, or just  $Q$  factor, is a measurement of the lifetime of a light photon in a cavity, which is inversely related to the optical loss in the cavity [10]. The highest  $Q$  factor of WGM cavities is up to three orders of magnitude higher than  $Q$  factors of other types of cavities, enabling detection sensitivity that no other type of cavity has reached [9].

### Underlying Principle

The resonance condition states that an integer times the resonance wavelength is equal to the circumference of the WGM cavity:

$$m\lambda = 2\pi R,$$

where  $m$  is a positive integer,  $\lambda$  is the resonance wavelength, and  $R$  represents the radius of the cavity. At the resonance wavelength, light can couple the most into the cavity. When I apply pressure to the micro-cavity, its radius changes, therefore shifting the resonance wavelength, which is the underlying principle of my proposed sensor.

### Micro-Toroid Fabrication

To fabricate the micro-toroid, I first started with a layer of 2  $\mu\text{m}$  silica on top of a silicon wafer. Next, I

etched disks of silica on the silicon wafer with hydrofluoric acid. Then, I used XeF<sub>2</sub> to make silica micro-disks 1/3 of the whole disk's size. After etching, I used CO<sub>2</sub> laser reflow for approximately three seconds, aligning the micro-disk center and laser beam center, to form a toroid micro-cavity with an atomic-scale surface finish [10].

### Micro-Toroid Characterization

To start creating my sensor, I performed characterization to find the  $Q$  factors of micro-toroids. I selected the ones with high  $Q$ s.

I will now describe the experimental system for micro-toroid characterization. The function generator created different types of waveforms to drive the laser. The tunable laser allowed continuous tuning over a significant wavelength range. The polarization controller controlled the polarization direction, allowing me to maximize the efficiency at which light couples into the cavity. The photodetector detected the intensity of the transmitted laser light. The oscilloscope, triggered by the function generator, continuously graphed voltage so that electrical signal could be observed over time. The computer acquired data from the oscilloscope for storage and analysis.

Once I set up the system, I used tweezers to put the chip of micro-toroids under the objective lens of the microscope. I slowly and carefully adjusted the knobs in the  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  directions to move the chip up to the optical fiber, which was tapered through heating and stretching in order to let the light leak out and couple into the micro-toroid [11].

### Packaging

After finding the micro-toroid with the highest  $Q$  factor, I used an X-ACTO knife to cut a piece of glass in the shape of a small rectangle. Then, I put optical adhesive on top of the glass and placed the package base underneath an ultra-violet lamp for 30 minutes in order to cure the adhesive, making sure to add a protective screen before turning on the light. Finally, I cut the part of the chip containing the toroid with the highest  $Q$  factor, and then I attached the chip to the polymer with double-sided tape.

### Data Acquisition Setup

For data collection of the resonance wavelength shift, I modeled the system after a cardiovascular system. First, I connected a tapered optical fiber to my package. I used a flexible 5 mm tube to simulate a human blood vessel. Blood vessels vary enormously in size, from a diameter of about 25 mm in the aorta (main artery of the body) to only 8  $\mu\text{m}$  in the capillaries (smallest vessels that deliver oxygen). After I used a syringe to fill this tube with water, I sealed it at the end, set it on the optical table, and taped it to my sensor. The tunable laser sent out a beam of light, and the polarization controller controlled the polarization to maximize the efficiency of the light coupling into the micro-toroids. I pumped the syringe, mimicking the heart, which sent a pulse through the tube, simulating a blood vessel. The signal then reached the sensor. Some light left the toroid, and the photodetector converted this optical signal into electrical signal. The oscilloscope displayed the signal, and I used the computer to analyze the data.

## 3. Results

### Lorentzian Shape

The Lorentzian spectral line shape is unique to whispering-gallery-mode micro-cavities. At the resonance wavelength, light is maximally coupled into the cavity, resulting in the deepest drop in transmitted light

intensity. The linewidth of the Lorentzian shape is directly related to the quality factor of the cavities. The quality factor of the packaged WGM micro-resonator is about 106.

### **Stability**

My sensor maintained a high  $Q$  factor of approximately 106 for long periods of time, demonstrating its stability. The stability is due to the careful fabrication and packaging, which minimize loss of light and heating.

### **Tapping Test**

Before testing my sensor, I started out by monitoring the baseline wavelength shift with no pulses, which demonstrated high stability and low background noise levels. Then, I checked that my system was working properly by tapping the tube twice. It worked successfully because two distinct spikes were shown with much higher wavelength shifts than the minimal background. The second tap was closer to the sensor than the first tap, and therefore the second pulse took a shorter amount of time to reach the sensor than the first pulse did, which is demonstrated by both the arrival times and the wavelength shift magnitudes.

### **Pumping Test**

Once I made sure that my system was working, I pumped the syringe to measure the pulse shape. I pumped the syringe around the eight second mark, causing a spike to rise far above the background. After collecting data from pumping the syringe once, I pumped the syringe eight times, causing eight spikes in the data. The collected data indicates that this packaged micro-sensor can detect pulses continuously with high sensitivity. The data also conveys that the spikes caused by pumping rose much higher than the background.

### **Comparison of Testing Methods**

Finally, I graphed both multiple pump pushes and tap pushes in order to see the similarities between the two methods of testing. Notice that tapping with the finger causes the pulse width and pulse period to be less regular, simulating various disease conditions.

In summary, a packaged WGM micro-sensor can distinguish different simulated pulses based on their arrival times with sufficient temporal resolution. The data illustrates the promise of WGM micro-toroids' detection capabilities due to their ultra-sensitivity.

## **4. Discussion**

### **Cost Analysis**

I can fabricate more than 50 packages per chip, and each chip costs 20 dollars. The etching cost is less than one dollar per package. I use one meter of optical fiber per package, and the fiber is four dollars per meter. The polymer is 20 dollars per gram, and I need one gram per package. Overall, the cost for one package is currently less than 30 dollars, which can be further reduced in mass production. This cost is extremely low for the benefits to healthcare and engineering.

### **Comparison of Fitbit to My Sensor**

Fitbits can only measure heart rate. On the other hand, my quarter-sized sensor can measure pulse shape in addition to heart rate, therefore improving existing technologies.

## Future Directions

As soon as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approves my project, I will test my sensor on human volunteers. The IRB approval process often takes a long time, but I expect approval soon because my experiment is non-invasive and completely safe. Once I obtain approval, I can test my sensor on a variety of subjects to detect irregularities in pulse shape. I will also derive blood pressure from the pulse shape through pulse wave velocity [2]. I even believe that the fine features of a pulse profile contain additional important information about the heart function, which will be worth exploring.

The laser and the electronics can be miniaturized in the future as well. Although I have so far focused on miniaturization of the core component, i.e., the micro-toroids, the peripheral components can be miniaturized as well. Highly compact lasers have become commercially available. Electronics continues to improve its packing density as demonstrated by smart phones. In fact, as both optics and electronics can be integrated, it is perceivable that one day the entire system can be integrated with a smart phone or Apple Watch for personal care and telemedicine applications [12].

## 5. Conclusions

Fabricated at a low cost, my portable WGM sensor can maintain an ultra-high  $Q$  factor over long periods of time. It can also successfully measure pulse shape continuously in a simulated lab setting. The pulse magnitude was much greater than the background and was highly repeatable, demonstrating robustness of the sensor. Also, the sensor responds to pulses in real time. The pulse rate can be easily calculated by counting the number of pulses within a given time period. Therefore, my sensor holds promise to save many lives by allowing people to continuously and conveniently measure their pulse shapes and even blood pressures, which would alert them to seek immediate help if they observe irregularities.

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## The Beat of Different Drums: An Analysis of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

"He who walks out of step hears another drum," wrote Ken Kesey, a prominent countercultural figure who linked the Beat Generation of the 1950s and the hippie culture of the 1960s. This line from Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* represents his desire to challenge traditional views and acceptance of societal norms. He first found inspiration for this novel when working at the Menlo Park Veterans' Hospital. Under the influence of drugs, Kesey frequently talked with the patients at the hospital and realized that the patients were not insane--they simply did not fit into the conventional institutions and categories created by society, so society subsequently treated them like outsiders. In 1962, Kesey decided to write a book in order to address the problem that leaders tend to cage people and make them conform. He acts as an inspiration for people who feel caged by encouraging them to embrace their individuality. In his novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey effectively employs eye imagery, representing power and vulnerability, to express the idea that although authority figures often pressure people to conform through strict rules and monitoring, the oppressed people can sometimes follow a rebellious individual and achieve a certain degree of freedom.

In the beginning of the novel, Kesey introduces the readers to Nurse Ratched, the head of the hospital ward and main antagonist of the story. He portrays her as a powerful force who uses her piercing eyes to control the patients through fear and make them feel like targets. When Kesey introduces Chief, the Native American narrator of the novel who suffers from hallucinations, he describes Chief as a large man who avoids eye contact with the nurse because she "can't tell so much about you if you got your eyes closed"(7). In this line, Kesey uses Chief's closed eyes to show that he feels the need to protect himself from other people's intrusion. His submissiveness illustrates that a dominating force in society can often make people feel powerless and small. Later in the novel, Nurse Ratched holds a group meeting at the ward, and her "eyes [sweep] back and forth over [the patients] as steady as a turning beacon...Her eyes [click] to the next man; each one [jumps] like a shooting-gallery target" (31). Kesey includes the image of Nurse Ratched's seemingly mechanical "eyes sweeping back and forth" to depict the inhumane, machine-like nature of the nurse's eyes. By staring down each patient, she asserts her authority and causes the patients to feel nervous and insecure. She also encourages the patients to confess their wrongdoings so that she can use their weaknesses to gain power and take away the men's sense of masculinity. During the confessions, the nurse scares the men into "[shouting] to outdo one another, going further and further, [with] no way of stopping, [and] telling things that wouldn't ever let them look one another in the eye again"(31). Kesey helps the reader understand that through the nurse's shooting-gallery style of interrogation, she targets each man and snatches away his ability to look people in the eye, and therefore his ability to stand up for himself. Throughout the beginning of the novel, Kesey suggests that tyrannical figures in society inflict fear to make people compliant.

As the novel continues, Kesey introduces Mack, the rebellious protagonist of the book, and he uses Mack's bold eyes to represent his growing influence on the patients and defiance of Nurse Ratched. When Mack walks out of the bathroom and steps in front of Nurse Ratched, she scolds him for running around the ward in a towel. In response, he "looks down at the part of the towel she's eye to eye with, and it's wet and skin tight. 'Towels against ward policy too? Well, I guess there's nothin' to do exec—'"(55). Through this dialogue, Kesey conveys Mack's increasing power in the ward by implying that Nurse Ratched is figuratively "eye to eye" with Mack's genitals. Because Kesey describes Mack's eyes as at a higher level than the nurse's, he hints that at this point in the book, Mack has more power than Nurse

Ratched, therefore expressing that disobedient individuals can challenge and overpower authority figures. As a result of Mack's defiance, Nurse Ratched "closes her eyes and concentrates. She can't have [the patients and workers] see her face like this, white and warped with fury. She uses all the power of control that's in her"(57). People often close their eyes when they need a break and want to regain control of situations, and Kesey includes the image of Nurse Ratched closing her eyes to indicate that she no longer has complete control over the ward, and to suggest that too much rebellion in society can tire leaders and cause their power to wane. Later in the novel, Mack convinces the patients to protest by crowding in front of the blank television screen, and they keep sneaking glances at Nurse Ratched to see her reaction. Nurse Ratched is finally "on the other side of the glass and getting a taste of how it feels to be watched when [she wishes] more than anything else to be able to pull a green shade between [her] face and all the eyes that [she] can't get away from"(85). This monumental moment serves as the first time that Mack has influenced the patients enough to successfully exhaust Nurse Ratched. The nurse cannot handle all the confidence that the men have gained in the middle of the novel, symbolized by their direct eye contact. Kesey uses the men's development to demonstrate that people can group together to resist oppressive leaders.

In the end of the novel, after Mack's going-away party, Nurse Ratched asks the men if they have seen Billy Bibbit. The men know that he is with Candy, and they begin laughing, making Nurse Ratched "[dart her] eyes out with every word, stabbing at the men's faces...but the men [are] immune to her poison. Their eyes [meet] hers; their grins [mock] the old confident smile she had lost"(172). Through the image of the nurse's "darting", "stabbing" eyes, Kesey illustrates that she wants to regain control and make the men feel guilty and anxious, but their "eyes meet hers", once again representing their development of confidence. Mack has helped even the most frightened patients become "immune" to the nurse's "poison". In response to the men's laughter, Nurse Ratched "[shuts] her eyes and [strains] to calm her trembling, concentrating. She [knows] this [is] it, her back to the wall. When her eyes [open] again, they [are] very small and still"(173). The nurse's act of shutting her eyes and straining symbolizes her complete loss of power over the patients, and the description of her eyes as "small and still" when she opens them again implies that the patients no longer see her as a large, threatening hunter with "darting" eyes. Through this imagery, Kesey conveys that authority figures like the nurse can lose power to masses who decide to band together and rebel. In the final few pages of the novel, Chief suffocates Mack to prevent Nurse Ratched from using him as a poor example, but Chief notices that the "swelling [goes] down enough in [Mack's] eyes that they [are still] open"(177). Kesey includes the image of Mack's open eyes to explain that Nurse Ratched did not defeat him and that his influence still lives on in the patients. The patients' newfound freedom in the end of the novel demonstrates that oppressed people can unite and follow a resistant individual to take away the strength of an absolute ruler.

Through abundant eye imagery in his novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey conveys the idea that motivated individuals can sometimes help a mistreated group of people revolt against authority figures and acquire some level of individuality and freedom. He acknowledges that people might not completely obtain free will, but they can work together to loosen the binds to societal norms. As a leader in the counterculture himself, Kesey understood and advocated the importance of originality and differing views. How boring would the world be if the same monotonous drum beat in every person's mind?

## From Iniquities to Intuition: An Analysis of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

According to Kelly Clarkson, "What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger". Clarkson's lyrics, such as "You didn't think that I'd come back, I'd come back swinging", express more than simply a girl avenging her heartless ex-boyfriend. As conveyed in this renowned ballad, individuals who overcome barriers in life must face a period of frustration but emerge experienced and cultivated. Similarly, throughout Harper Lee's esteemed novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the author characterizes the children to suggest the idea that exposure to the iniquities of humanity drives adolescents to sacrifice their innate innocence but to also mature as insightful adults.

In the beginning of the novel, the author introduces the children as naïve of proper etiquette. When Dill first arrives in Maycomb, he inquires about Boo Radley with, "Wonder what he looks like...Let's try to make him come out...I'd like to see what he looks like"(16). Dill's line of dialogue portrays him as a curious boy who lacks knowledge of his ambience. Shortly after, Jem invites Walter to dinner at the Finch's house. As Walter drowns his vegetables and meat with syrup, Scout narrates, "He would probably have poured it into his milk glass had I not asked what the sam hill he was doing...It was then that Calpurnia requested my presence in the kitchen"(32). This scene, although humorous, conveys that Scout does not yet understand to tolerate practices different from her own. The following summer, the children determine to give a note to Boo Radley. In exact words, "Jem was merely going to put the note on the end of a fishing pole and stick it through the shutters. If anyone came along, Dill would ring the bell"(62). By including this frivolous scheme, the author highlights that the children do not perceive the misbehavior of invading privacy.

In the middle of the novel, the children encounter injustices and react immaturely. When Mr. Avery scolds Jem and Scout for causing the snow, Jem assembles a snowman caricature of him in the Finch's yard, remarking, "Mr. Avery's sort of shaped like a snowman, ain't he?"(89). Jem's actions demonstrate that he responds to prejudiced criticism with ridicule of his criticizer. A while later, Francis, Scout's cousin, severely insults Atticus. After Francis persists to taunt her, Scout punches him, later recalling, "This time, I split my knuckle to the bone on his front teeth. My left impaired, I sailed in with my right, but not for long"(112). Scout's impulse to attack Francis elucidates her failure to sedately deal with maltreatment. Similarly, when Mrs. Dubose asserts that Atticus laws for n\*\*\*\*\*s and trash, Jem "did not begin to calm down until he had cut the tops off every camellia bush Mrs. Dubose owned, until the ground was littered with green buds and leaves. He bent my baton against his knee, snapped it in two and threw it down"(137). The author inserts Jem's breakdown to emphasize the children's fruitless habits of fighting fire with fire.

In the end of the novel, the children develop their senses of reason as well as profound perspectives. After Dill flees from Meridian, Jem immediately informs Atticus, shamefully explaining to Dill, "You oughta let your mother know where you are...You oughta let her know you're here...'. . .Then he rose and broke the remaining code of our childhood... 'Atticus,' his voice was distant, 'can you come here a minute, sir?'"(187-188). When Jem discloses Dill's escape to Atticus, regardless of Dill and Scout's resentment, he displays his new willingness to act responsibly. A week later, the children run to Atticus when a vicious mob approaches him. As Atticus instructs Jem to return home, "Jem shook his head. As Atticus's fists went to his hips, so did Jem's, and as they faced each other I could see little resemblance between them...but they were somehow alike. Mutual defiance made them alike"(203). Because Jem fears for Atticus's safety, his disobedience signifies a monumental leap from child to adult. Near the novel's conclusion, when Sheriff Tate refuses to reveal to the public that Boo Radley had murdered Bob Ewell,



Scout justifies, “Well, it’d be sort of like shootin’ a mockingbird, wouldn’t it?”(370). The author employs this memorable phrase to express Scout’s mature comprehension of Atticus’s past lessons.

In conclusion, Harper Lee’s coming-of-age novel reflects on the concept that while children abandon their purity when unsheltered from sinfulness, they also develop key intuition of the humankind. Returning to Clarkson’s ballad, rather than retaliating, the girl avails herself of past experience and breaks through the barrier, changed for the better. What will be the “mob scene” in your life?

## “Human Beans”<sup>2</sup>: An Analysis of James McBride’s *The Color of Water*

Before the 19th century, new “science” asserted that each race represented a different species of human on the “Chain of Being” hierarchy, placing Africans between man and lower primates. In our modern 21st century, racism still prevails, as highlighted in the Michael Brown shooting and in other recent traumatic episodes. James McBride, who published *The Color of Water* in 1996, acknowledges racial conflict, but also recognizes ethnic assimilation as a blessing in disguise. Throughout the memoir *The Color of Water*, James McBride and his mother, Ruth McBride Jordan, depict the idea that although interaction between cultures can induce tensions and altercations, the joining of different backgrounds can also cause empathy and can help people realize their niches and values.

Numerous scenes in McBride’s *The Color of Water* exhibit the friction, potentially perilous, caused by cultural misconceptions. Near the beginning of the novel, Ruth flashes back to her childhood and characterizes her Jewish father, “Tateh kept a loaded pistol underneath the counter next to the cashier...He trusted no one. He thought black folks were always trying to steal from him...He was robbing these folks blind, charging them a hundred percent markup on his cheap goods, and he was worried about them stealing from him!”(44). The narrator employs this irony to stress that her father’s delusion of African Americans stimulates senseless suspicion and distrust. Later in her adolescence as a Jewish girl, Ruth fantasizes about running off and marrying her African American boyfriend, Peter. However, she recalls his somber response,

““No way. I don’t know where that’s been done before, white and black marrying in Virginia. They will surely hang me”, and she laments, “What a fool I was to believe we could get away with it! I’d sit on the balcony chastising myself a million times for what I’d done and waiting for the Klan to come kill him”(86). This apprehensive excerpt incites fear in the reader and reveals the prevalent intolerance of marriage between blacks and whites.

On the other hand, both narrators also express how multiracial integration can create new appreciation and insight into the common humanity among races. When Ruth attends a Protestant school, she befriends Frances and describes her, “She’d do little things to let you know she was on your side. It didn’t bother her one bit that I was Jewish”(63). Frances’s instance of characterization indicates that she gazes past Ruth’s ethnicity and embraces their differences. Further into the novel, Ruth’s mixed son, James, recollects a conversation within a group of black college students:

“one of them said, ‘Forget these whiteys. They’re all rich. They got no problems,’ and I said, ‘Yeah, man, I hear you,’ while inside my pocket was the folded letter holding the heartbroken words of an old white lady who had always gone out of her way to help me...It hurt me a little bit to stand there and lie”(145). James’ realization of his lie leads the reader to understand that positive cultural interaction can cause people to gradually shift in a more open-minded and accepting direction. As James’ childhood draws to a conclusion, he visits Ruth’s hometown, Suffolk. He reminisces his Jewish grandmother’s hardships and asserts,

“Given my black face and upbringing it was easy for me to flee into the anonymity of blackness, yet I felt frustrated to live in a world that considers the color of your face an immediate political statement whether you like it or not. It took years before I began to accept the fact that the nebulous ‘white man’s world’ wasn’t as free as it looked; that class, luck, religion all factored in as well; that many white individuals’ problems surpassed my own, often by a lot...Yet the color boundary in my mind was and still is the greatest hurdle. In order to clear it, my solution was to stay away from it and fly solo”(205). Despite

James' initial frustration, he learns to attain the seemingly impossible, identifying with the "opposite" race.

In addition, this memoir conveys that ethnic unity can help people increase awareness of their communities as well as of themselves. One day after church, young James ponders about the color of God's spirit, and his mother replies, "It doesn't have a color...God is the color of water. Water doesn't have a color"(39). His mother's notable line of dialogue, in addition to serving as the memoir's title, teaches James that God, widely worshipped, does not discriminate based on skin color. Later in his life, James ruminates over his contemplation as a child,

"I thought it would be easier if we were just one color, black or white. I didn't want to be white. My siblings had already instilled the notion of black pride in me. I would have preferred that Mommy were black. Now, as a grown man, I feel privileged to have come from two worlds. My view of the world is not merely that of a black man but that of a black man with something of a Jewish soul"(79). With the narrator's newfound outlook on his mixed background, the reader realizes that multicultural experiences let people appreciate their heritage. Continuing on his search to understand his heritage, James meets Aubrey Rubenstein, a Jewish elder, and shapes his thoughts, "I found it odd and amazing when white people treated me that way, as if there were no barriers between us. It said a lot about this religion—Judaism—that some of its followers...seemed to believe that its covenants went beyond the color of one's skin"(175). This revelation startles James and leads him to realize that some people, in this case the Jewish, value others based on character, not race. Before he departs Suffolk, James reflects on his journey through his mother's hometown as well as his own life journey. He illustrates,

"My own humanity was awakened, rising up to greet me with a handshake as I watched the first glimmers of sunlight peek over the horizon... the greatest gift that anyone can give anyone else is life...Next to that, all the rules and religions in the world are secondary; mere words and beliefs that people choose to believe and kill and hate by. My life won't be lived that way"(179). James' beautiful imagery signifies a turning point in his life, because he now understands that nothing but people themselves create barriers, and that these pernicious barriers can be broken down by a willingness to change and to stray from the pack.

James McBride's *The Color of Water* suggests that racial globalization can sometimes disrupt harmony, but more importantly that it can promote understanding and enjoyment of other cultures, as well as finding one's identity along the way. James and Ruth have experienced animosity and intolerance unimaginable by most people, but they continue to hold on to their humor and to their hope for humanity. As Ruth declares, "'There's pinto beans...There's lima beans...We're all *human* beans!'"(71). Our world's history, both ancient and current, contains unfathomable racism, but we "human beans" can unite to fully abolish the "Chain of Being" hierarchy and to build powerful friendship in its place.

## Perry Smith - The Royal Heinous: An Analysis of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*

A phantom that eats raw squirrels with bloodstained hands. Jagged scar, popping eyes, and rotten teeth. About six-and-a-half feet tall. A true monster, that Boo Radley is. Or at least people see him as one. He isn't a monster, though. People just don't try to get to know him, to truly *understand* him, and they define him by what they see on the surface—a misfit, an outsider. Someone they could never relate to. Although Boo does not murder an entire family, the way the townspeople of Maycomb County, Alabama see him somewhat parallels the way the townspeople of Holcomb, Kansas see Perry Smith. While some people might find sympathy for these “monsters”, most could never regard them as “normal”, or even human. Throughout the novel *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote characterizes Perry Smith to suggest the idea that although even the most monstrous murderers can have kind, human qualities, many people may never completely see past their criminal nature and truly understand their motives and actions.

In the beginning of the novel, Capote uses dialogue to convey that some people may see murderers as damaged and heinous by nature. Before the murder, Dick describes Perry as a rarity, "a natural killer"...conscienceless, and capable of dealing, with or without motive, the coldest-blooded deathblows"(35). By choosing the words “natural” and “coldest-blooded”, Capote not only implies that Dick (ironically also a murderer) views Perry as a person with inherently murderous and cold-hearted qualities, but he also poses the question of whether criminals' qualities stem from their upbringing or their biology. Later in the novel, Perry recalls the final letter from his “one and only” friend, Willie-Jay, which had said:

“You are a man of extreme passion, a hungry man not quite sure where his appetite lies, a deeply frustrated man striving to project his individuality against a backdrop of rigid conformity. You exist in a half-world suspended between two superstructures, one self-expression and the other self-destruction. You are strong, but there is a flaw in your strength, and unless you learn to control it the flaw "will prove stronger than your strength and defeat you. The flaw? Explosive emotional reaction out of all proportion to the occasion”(28).

By including the phrases “man of extreme passion” and “hungry man”, Capote characterizes Perry as a frustrated and uncontrollable man who possesses an almost unnatural amount of anger. Even Willie Jay, the person who likely knows Perry best, foreshadows that his flaw, “explosive emotion reaction out of all proportion”, will destroy him, reinforcing the idea that people often see criminals as inevitably flawed. After Dick and Perry murder the Clutters, Dewey investigates the case and finds it “difficult to understand ‘how two individuals could reach the same degree of rage, the kind of psychopathic rage it took to commit such a crime’”(51). Because Dewey does not understand Dick and Perry's “psychopathic rage”, he demonstrates his confusion and disgust toward them, further sketching criminals as monsters whom people could never relate to. When Perry later reflects on his actions, he helplessly tells Dick, ““Know what I think?...I think there must be something wrong with us. To do what we did’”(67). Capote includes Perry's reflection to reveal that even Perry himself believes he has “something wrong” with him—possibly a defect that he cannot change. If he sees himself as cursed and rotten by nature, then how could other people see him any differently?

In the middle of the novel, Capote contrasts this dialogue by painting a portrait of Perry that highlights the gentler sides of abominable criminals. For example, when interviewing Perry about the murder, Dewey realizes that “the mattress box had been placed on the floor for the comfort of Mr. Clutter, and taking heed of similar hints, other fragmentary indications of ironic, erratic compassion...[he] had conjectured

that at least one of the killers was not altogether uncharitable”(155). The combination of the phrases “comfort”, “ironic, erratic compassion”, and “not altogether uncharitable” illustrates a kind, warm-hearted image of Perry, seemingly contradictory from the novel’s previous descriptions of him. Capote likely emphasizes this irony to suggest that Perry has multiple layers—*any* criminal has multiple layers. As Perry continues to recount his story, he describes a conversation with Dick: “he says to me, as we’re heading along the hall toward Nancy’s room, ‘I’m gonna bust that little girl.’ And I said, ‘Uh-huh. But you’ll have to kill me first.’...Now, that’s something I despise. Anybody that can’t control themselves sexually...I told him straight, ‘Leave her alone. Else you’ve got a buzz saw to fight’”(156). Through this excerpt, Capote provides a paradox: even though Perry takes part in the murder of four people, he refuses to let Dick hurt Nancy. This display of Perry’s complexity reinforces the viewpoint that criminals, even if murderous, can still emotionally connect with and care for other humans.

At the end of the novel, Capote conveys the idea that although people can empathize with criminals to a certain degree, they might not have the ability to fully tolerate or understand them due to conflicting values. After Dewey learns that the Clutters had suffered and experienced prolonged terror, he

“could not forget their sufferings. Nonetheless, he found it possible to look at the man beside him without anger - with, rather, a measure of sympathy - for Perry Smith’s life had been no bed of roses but pitiful, an ugly and lonely progress toward one mirage and then another. Dewey’s sympathy, however, was not deep enough to accommodate either forgiveness or mercy. He hoped to see Perry and his partner hanged - hanged back to back”(158).

Although Dewey understands that Perry had a tragic childhood and has sympathy for him, he does not believe that his circumstances justify his crime, and he hopes to see both Dick and Perry hanged “back to back”. Capote includes this passage to assert that despite the sympathy people may feel for criminals, they still deserve to face the consequences for their crimes. During the trial, a young reporter from Oklahoma defends Perry, arguing that “he’s had such a rotten life - ”, but another newsman, Richard Parr of the Kansas City Star, interrupts him and contends that “many a man can match sob stories with that little bastard [Perry]. Me included. Maybe I drink too much, but I sure as hell never killed four people in cold blood”(194). This dialogue, which in addition to serving as the novel’s title, expresses the view that the “sob stories” some criminals may have, no matter how heartbreaking, could never rationalize their cruel and inhuman behavior. As a result, people may never see them as anything but criminals.

In the novel *In Cold Blood*, Capote effectively characterizes Perry Smith to convey the idea that despite the gentle, human traits of some criminals, most people cannot completely overlook their monstrous label and understand them. As for Perry, people may never define him by anything other than his heinous crime—he may as well be known as *The Royal Heinous* for eternity. No empathy for Perry, nor for criminals in general. We tend to see criminals as abnormal—as “messed up”—even though many demonstrate human qualities. But how human are they, and to what extent should we treat them as humans?

## Still Waiting : An Analysis of Elizabeth Bishop's *In the Waiting Room*

*Cogito ergo sum. I think, therefore I am...* let's think for a second. The 16th century French philosopher René Descartes coined this enigmatic phrase to explain that humans can doubt the existence of anything, but the very fact that we are doubting is "something that cannot be doubted". Even back then, people wondered about their identities as they tried to solve the mysteries of the world. Questions like *who am I, where did I come from, and why am I here* boggled the minds of the greatest philosophers. Now, in the 21st century, people remain stumped by these unfinished puzzles that they began to wonder about even in childhood. In Elizabeth Bishop's renowned poem "In the Waiting Room", the poet captures an event from her youth to suggest the idea that when children encounter new and unfamiliar situations, they may question their identity and their connections with other people in the world, leading to intense and eye-opening experiences.

In the beginning of the poem, Bishop uses her six-year-old self to convey children's curiosity and uneasiness when exposed to the foreignness of the world. The speaker sets the scene as she accompanies her Aunt Consuelo to her dentist appointment: "It was winter. It got dark / early. The waiting room / was full of grown-up people, / arctics and overcoats, / lamps and magazines"(6-10). At first glance, the speaker seems to write with a nonchalant tone, but her choice of words, "winter" and "dark", forebodes coldness and obscurity, and the waiting room could represent the experience of waiting for an event to take place. In addition, the detail that she feels different from the adults in the waiting room hints at her youth. While the speaker waits for her aunt, she studies the photographs and reads the captions in the *National Geographic* magazine, describing, "Babies with pointed heads / wound round and round with string; / black, naked women with necks / wound round and round with wire / like the necks of light bulbs. / Their breasts were horrifying"(26-32). The speaker repeats the phrase "wound round and round" to highlight her fascination with the unknown. She compares the necks of the black women to the necks of light bulbs to try to relate these unfamiliar people to more familiar objects, but the strong, sharp images of "pointed heads" and "black, naked women" express awe and horror. These new, uncomfortable situations spark the young speaker's vivid and wild imagination.

As the poem progresses, Bishop reflects that although children who ask mature questions may feel overwhelmed and confused at first, they eventually begin to connect and empathize with others. When the speaker looks at the cover of the magazine, she realizes, "Suddenly, from inside, / came an *oh!* of pain / -- Aunt Consuelo's voice-- / not very loud or long"(38-40). Out of the blue, the speaker hears her aunt's voice coming out of herself—she feels an inexplicable connection with her aunt. The speaker continues to elaborate, "What took me / completely by surprise / was that it was *me:* / my voice, in my mouth. / Without thinking at all / I was my foolish aunt, / I--we--were falling, falling, / our eyes glued to the cover / of the *National Geographic*, / February, 1918"(53-59). This epiphany shocks the speaker—she *becomes* her aunt, and in an intense and unexpected experience, she connects the pain of her aunt to the pain of the people in the magazine. As the speaker's revelation continues, she describes, "But I felt: you are an *I*, / you are an *Elizabeth*, / you are one of *them*. / *Why* should you be one, too?(67-69). When she calls herself *an Elizabeth*, she acknowledges other Elizabeths. This key line helps the reader to understand that Elizabeth questions her identity and her connection to other people—for the first time, she feels like a *part* of humanity. In the waiting room, she nervously glances "at shadowy gray knees, / trousers and skirts and boots / and different pairs of hands / lying under the lamps. / I knew that nothing stranger / had ever happened"(75-81). Bishop uses this descriptive detail to show that the speaker attempts to understand humanity better by peeking at the people sitting around her, but when she cannot find answers, she ultimately feel overwhelmed and frustrated again. As the young speaker keeps searching for

explanations, she feels human for the first time as she starts to connect emotionally with the people around her.

In the end of the poem, Bishop suggests that even though people cannot answer many of their deep questions about identity, through asking, they develop a newfound sense of their own humanity. As the speaker tries to solve these mysteries, she asks, “Why should I be my aunt, / or me, or anyone? / What similarities-- / boots, hands, the family voice / I felt in my throat, or even / the *National Geographic* / and those awful hanging breasts-- / held us all together / or made us all just one?”(83-92) This series of open-ended, mature questions helps reader realize that although the speaker does not have all the answers, she understands that humanness makes “us all just one”. Humans share the similarity that they do not know exactly *what* makes them similar. The speaker follows up by asking, “How had I come to be here, / like them, and overhear / a cry of pain”(95-97). This line of dialogue may express that the speaker now empathizes with not only her aunt, but also the people in the magazine, who she does not even personally know. Finally, the speaker leaves her dream-like state and returns to reality, describing once again, “I was back in it...Outside, / in Worcester, Massachusetts, / were night and slush and cold, / and it was still the fifth / of February, 1918” (105-110). The reader can assume that “it” refers to the waiting room—even after this deep and intense experience, the speaker still “waits” for the answers, leading to a paradox: the speaker now has a much deeper understanding of herself, but she actually does not understand *anything* about herself. Because her questions remain unanswered, they may seem pointless at first, but these questions have heightened the speaker’s feeling of belonging in the human race.

In her poem “In the Waiting Room”, Elizabeth Bishop characterizes her six-year-old self to convey that new and foreign situations can give children scary yet powerful experiences as they ask mature questions about themselves and their relations with others in the world. However, do we know if these experiences really happened? Although we might read “In the Waiting Room” as Bishop’s autobiography, outside sources state that most of the *National Geographic* pictures and captions described by the poem, such as the “Long Pig” and the “black, naked women”, do not actually exist in the February 1918 edition of the magazine. This revelation makes the reader wonder about the actuality of the poem’s events—did Bishop base them off of personal experience (she did use the name Elizabeth), or did she just imagine them? Nevertheless, the fact that even today we can relate to these events matters more than their actuality. Shocking and eye-opening images still prevail in the pages of modern magazines and media, and we continue to try to better understand our connections with other people, while hoping that time will reveal more answers. Still waiting...

## The Perfect Student

*Note for people who do/did not attend this school district: We take seven classes, and an O stands for outstanding citizenship.*

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Seven A+'s. Seven O's. Throughout middle school and part of high school, my report card stayed like this—a picture-perfect piece of paper filled with promise and potential. My whole life, my awesome mom and dad had drilled into my brain, “*Don't worry too much about grades and tests. Just try your best and learn as much as you can. I mean, that's all you can do, right?*” WRONG. In my head, I thought: *What the heck are you guys babbling about? Grades are everything. It's easy for you to say—you don't have to deal with the stuff that I do. Do you know how hard it is for Asians to get into a top college now? So many of them have perfect GPAs, perfect SAT scores, perfect everything. Excelling at the piano and violin? Taking Calculus as a sophomore? Juggling school and about ten extracurriculars? No big deal for an Asian. I have to do all these things just to be considered average. You guys just don't understand.* But out loud, I always just smiled and replied, “Right.”

While my parents drilled these words into my brain (they hadn't really stuck yet), unknowingly, I was drilling myself into black hole that would suck me in for most of middle school. While middle school was probably a breeze for most, for me it was more like a lethal, insuppressible hurricane, eating me up one day at a time... just kidding, it wasn't actually that bad. But it *was* hard. I was slowly transforming into a perfectionist, and *everything* can be hard for a perfectionist. *Ugh this word is totally crooked—what happened to my handwriting?! I need to rewrite this whole essay.* If even itty-bitty blemishes bothered me, then bigger blunders were a nightmare. One time in seventh grade, I cried about getting a 95 percent on my last Advanced Geometry test (I had gotten over 100 on all the other ones). So... yeah. I didn't really take the whole “*Don't worry too much about grades and tests*” thing to heart. I thought I was fine, though. I thought I was happy. But then came sophomore year, and for the first time, I started to see that I wasn't. I was taking AP Calc BC, AP Physics Mechanics, AP Euro, Advanced Chem, and Advanced Lit, among other classes—I couldn't fit in Latin so I was taking it independent study. I had tennis after school every day, and a few times our matches didn't end until around seven. Oh yeah, I also needed to practice violin. But HOW WAS I, A FREAKIN' SOPHOMORE, SUPPOSED TO STUDY FOR MY CALCULUS TEST, FINISH MY MASTERINGPHYSICS ASSIGNMENT, TAKE NOTES FOR EURO AND CHEM, TRANSLATE SOME LATIN SENTENCES ABOUT THIS BOY NAMED QUINTUS ON A FARM, PRACTICE MY SCALES AND ETUDES, AND GET ENOUGH SLEEP?! I am *not* the kind of person that can sleep after midnight and wake up feeling jolly the next day (actually, is anyone really that kind of person? I don't think so—maybe they just pretend to be). You might be thinking, *Oh, the solution's simple! Just don't take on as much.* Yeah... try telling that to an overachieving perfectionist. Contrary to what some people may think, perfectionism is *not* helpful. It slows you down *a lot*—sometimes you can't get anything done because you're stretching yourself into a strained strand of string to meet this unreachable standard. It's dangerous. It's toxic. Early last year I started to get terrible anxiety, and I broke down many a time. It was time to listen to my parents. This year I've cut down on some extracurriculars not as important to me, and although I'm still taking rigorous classes, they are classes that I enjoy and can handle for the most part. I've also learned not to compare myself as much to my peers—if you ask me what I get on a test, I'll probably say that I got some positive number (I learned this from my older brother). I'm not a huge fan of unnecessary competition, but I won't judge you if you are. There isn't a *right* way to behave. There isn't a *right* way to learn. There isn't a *right* way to live. Mom, Dad—



thanks for teaching me this. Thanks for helping me rediscover *why* I go to school in the first place—it's to learn, to better myself, and to better society. I'm doing my best, I'm enjoying these final two years of high school (even with standardized tests and all), and I'm slowly accepting that **I AM NOT PERFECT**. I'm not perfect. Who cares?

## The Wrong Kind of Minority

*Note to reader: Aimee Tang and Ed. U. Cation are fictional people, and South Harmon Institute of Technology is a fictional school first featured in the 2006 film Accepted.*

14 March 2018  
Aimee Tang  
12 Tofu Drive  
Orlando, FL 32803  
Orange County

Dear Ms. Aimee Tang,

I regret to inform you that after much consideration, we are unable to offer you admission to the elite South Harmon Institute of Technology. I hope you understand that we cannot offer a place to every worthy applicant—despite your high GPA, excellent SAT score, and avid participation in extracurricular activities, we simply do not have enough room in our school.

Thank you for your interest in South Harmon Institute of Technology. We wish you the best of luck for your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

Ed U. Cation  
Dean of Admissions

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16 March 2018  
Ed U. Cation  
South Harmon Institute of Technology  
Harmony, FL 34773  
Osceola County

Dear Mr. Cation,

Thank you for your letter. I would first like to state that I am not trying to change your mind about denying my admission to South Harmon Institute of Technology—I know that you cannot accept every qualified student. I simply would like to address an issue with the current college admissions system of affirmative action in hopes of improving the system for future students. While I admire President John F. Kennedy’s well-intended goal of affirmative action “to correct past injustices by implementing policies that favor those previously discriminated against” (1), have these past injustices *really* been corrected?

A few days ago, two of my high school peers, Karen Kim and Aspyn Baker, were accepted into South Harmon Institute of Technology, while I was rejected. Karen scored a perfect 1600 on the SAT, took nine AP classes with a perfect GPA of 4.0 (unweighted), volunteered for more than 150 hours, and excelled at physics and gymnastics, while Aspyn scored a 1380, took six APs with a GPA of 3.7, volunteered for 130

hours, and played the oboe in our school band. They both met your university's admission requirements. But so did I. I scored a 1550 on the SAT, took seven APs with a 3.9 GPA, volunteered for 150 hours, and participated in both my school theatre program and Speech and Debate. But I wasn't accepted. I wasn't accepted because even though I met the university's requirements and exceeded the average GPA (3.6) and SAT score (1390), compared to the GPA and scores of other Asian-Americans (such as Karen's), mine were just average, or even below average. Due to affirmative action, colleges have a limited number of spots for Asians, and as a result, many qualified people are rejected. Does this situation sound like "correcting past injustices" to you?

Some people, such as Khin Mai Aung, the director of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund's equity program, may argue that universities considering all of an applicant's characteristics (including race) can "create the most effective learning environment for giving each student the tools to succeed in our global and multicultural economy" (2). While I agree that colleges should consider all of an applicant's characteristics, I believe that race should impact their decisions less than it does now. Considering race may ensure diversity, but is it possible to have diversity without snatching opportunities away from deserving people, or does diversity only come with the compromise of true equal opportunity?

Although colleges should value diversity, they also need to realize that while affirmative action has helped certain minority groups with college admissions, it has severely harmed other minorities—Asians in particular—by discriminating against them. Did you know that according to the New York Times, "to receive equal consideration by elite colleges, Asian Americans must outperform Whites by 140 points, Hispanics by 280 points, Blacks by 450 points [on the] SAT (Total 1600)" (3)? Why should I have to score that much better than my non-Asian friends just to receive "equal" consideration? Why am I expected to know more than they do? We get to go to the *same* public school. We get the *same* education. We get the *same* opportunities. Why am I punished for my race—something I was born with, something I cannot control?

I do not know.

I do not understand.

I do not understand why the National Center for Education Statistics shows that even though "Asians of college age doubled in the last 25 years, their enrollment rates at Ivy-League schools have stayed the same" (4). In response to this statement, some people may say, 'Oh, you don't have to go to an Ivy League or big-name school. Just go to the school that best fits you!' Some may think that Asian Americans get unreasonably rattled by the idea of discrimination in the college admissions process (5). But when the system doesn't discriminate against you, it's easy to stay calm. While I agree that elite schools do not fit all, people (including Asians) should have the opportunity to attend any school they qualify for, even if the school is an elite school (unless they commit a crime such as cheating or theft). In my case, South Harmon Institute of Technology happened to be my top-choice university—not because of its prestige, but because I thought it would fit me best.

I also understand that some people have fears about higher college acceptance rates of Asian students. For example, some may fear that without restraint, Asian students could take over the entire school population. But could a single race really have that much power? Every race has hardworking, academically-competent people—no race seems likely to homogenize the school population. But because this fear still prevails in our country, colleges and universities discriminate against many qualified people. While some people may enjoy the benefits of the current affirmative action policy, most Asians have to battle the consequences of *negative* action. According to The Google Dictionary, the purpose of affirmative action is to favor "those who tend to suffer from discrimination, especially in relation to

employment or education”. However, this “affirmative” action has caused Asians to “suffer from discrimination”. Right now, we’re told that we should “accept discrimination for the ‘common good’” (6). But do you see the irony of this phrase? Since when did “common” not include Asians? Since when did “good” not pertain to us? Does our well-being not matter? We should matter, but instead we’re pushed aside. We’re not a minority that benefits from affirmative action—we’re the wrong kind of minority.

But why? Why does checking that one tiny box next to “Asian (including Indian subcontinent and Philippines)”, or writing our last names as “Wang” or “Lee” make colleges automatically pigeonhole us (even if subconsciously)? I am proud of my Asian ancestry, but I am not proud of the way my nation treats me because of it.

On the surface, the current affirmative action system may seem to fight discrimination, but the system itself ironically discriminates against some races by taking away equal opportunity in college admissions. Plus, the number of people of mixed race has grown by 32 percent between 2000 and 2010 (7), and we can only expect that this number will continue to grow—how will colleges be able to label an applicant of Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, *and* Asian descent? To prevent similar issues and to reduce the discrimination caused by affirmative action, colleges could fix the current holistic review process by changing the balance of weights—they could weigh the applicants’ economic and educational backgrounds more than their races.

If two students of different races come from the same economic backgrounds and have the same secondary school opportunities, then logically, shouldn’t they also have equal opportunities in higher education? Would you want anything less than true equal opportunity for your own child? Thank you very much for your time and kind consideration.

Sincerely,

Aimee Tang  
Concerned Student