

# MISSOURI YOUTH WRITE



## GOLD KEY WINNERS

2019

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Editor: Jeff Dierking

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## DRAMATIC SCRIPT

# SUNRISE/SUNSET

**Alex Archer**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Marina Ganter, Mallory Hilvitz

Category: Dramatic Script

FADE IN:

EXT. PORCH

AMELIE sits in her rocking chair on the front porch of her white painted southern home. The paint peels slightly around the base of the four columns on the front porch.

RICHARD sits next to her in a matching blue rocking chair.

Both are well into their golden years, with sharp lines

creased into their skin. Richard's dark grey hair is shaved

close to his head, whereas Amelie's bright white hair is in

loose braid down her back. They both have laughter lines

surrounding their eyes.

They both have gold wedding bands on their ring fingers.

The rings have small dents and scratches and hardly shine.

Amelie fiddles with her ring while Richard's hands are at rest in his lap.

They both watch as the sun rises and crests the horizon

over a field of golden shimmering wheat.

AMELIE

It's time for us to go back inside.

RICHARD

I want to stay. Richie will be here any minute.

AMELIE

Mary is waiting inside.

RICHARD

I'm too tired to stand.

AMELIE

You stood every day of your life.

You can't stand one more?

RICHARD

My lov-e-lie Am-e-lie... I'm too tired from standing every day of my life.

AMELIE

We can't always spend our time watching the sunrise.

RICHARD

I like watching the sunrise.  
Everyone likes watching the sunrise.

AMELIE

I seem to recall someone telling me that sunrises are full of work and sunsets are full of fun.

RICHARD

Who told you that nonsense?

AMELIE

Some boy who had no idea what he was talking about.

RICHARD

Oh really? And what happened to that boy?

AMELIE

I married him.

Both laugh and hold each other's hand. They sit for a moment as the sun begins to sets and is reflected in their eyes. A breeze travels over the field and the whispers of wheat in the wind fill the air. A blue jay flies across

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the  
field, alone.

RICHARD

Sun is setting.

AMELIE

So soon? Time to go back inside.

RICHARD

I'd like to enjoy the fresh air. I  
worked in that factory for so long  
it's been years since I've been  
able to breathe clearly.

AMELIE

Mary...

RICHARD

Amelie, it's been so long. I'm  
ready to stay.

Amelie stands. Her rocking chair faintly creaks as  
she does  
and it continues to move slightly from behind her.  
Richard  
remains seated.

AMELIE

I understand, but the sun us  
setting.

RICHARD

It's perfect out here.

2.

AMELIE

Not when Mary is inside.

RICHARD

I'm tired Amelie.

AMELIE

So am I, but Mary needs us.

RICHARD

It's been so long since we've seen  
Richie. I miss him.

AMELIE

I do too of course I do, but our  
daughter needs us.

RICHARD

Mary is strong.

AMELIE

So is Richie. He can wait a little  
longer.

RICHARD

I can't.

AMELIE

I know, but I have to go inside  
for Mary.

Richard is the next to stand. His chair doesn't make  
a  
sound and doesn't move an inch.

RICHARD

I know... My lov-e-ly Am-e-lie.

She puts a hand on his cheek and stares at her  
husband,  
illuminated by the last rays of sunlight. She stands  
there

for a moment, drinking in the sight of him.

AMELIE

I knew a boy who used to call me  
that.

RICHARD

And what happened to him?

Amelie turns and begins to walk towards the front  
door.

Their hands are still clasped together, but they  
slowly let

go. She turns for a moment. They look each other  
in the  
eyes.

AMELIE

I fell in love.

3.

Amelie turns and breathes in for a moment. She  
stares at  
the shining brass doorknob set into the blue door.  
She

walks through the front door, alone.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM

Amelie's eyes flutter open. A loud beeping noise  
fills the  
room along with doctors talking quickly. The  
doctors sound  
as if they are underwater and Amelie's vision is  
blurry.

She sees a mass of white which, as her vision  
clears, is

revealed to be several doctors. They are all  
surrounding  
her husband and administering CPR and electric  
shocks in an

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effort to resuscitate Richard.

Amelie sits up.

AMELIE

No, no, you have to stop.

None of the doctors pay Amelie any attention, but a nurse

walks over and tries to calm Amelie down.

NURSE

Ma'am, please lie down. You've been in an accident.

AMELIE

I know that! You have to stop.

NURSE

Stop what?

AMELIE

Trying to save him. He doesn't want it. He wants to be with our son.

NURSE

There isn't any paperwork that says-

AMELIE

I know, but I'm his wife and I'm asking you to stop. Please, let him rest.

The nurse nods and walks over to the doctor applying CPR to

Richard. He is panting slightly.

NURSE

No extraordinary measures.

DOCTOR

Says who?

4.

NURSE

Advanced directive. Next of kin.

Wife.

The doctor nods and stops applying compressions.

The

hospital room lulls to a quiet except for the sound of the

heart monitor, still screeching. The nurse turns the monitor off.

DOCTOR

Time of death sixteen hundred.

Amelie and Richard's daughter, Mary, runs into the room.

MARY

Mom? Oh God, Dad!

Mary lets out a sob and collapses into Amelie's open arms.

AMELIE

It's okay baby, come here. It's okay. He's with your brother. He's home.

FADE OUT:

THE END

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## LADYBUG, LADYBUG

**Ann Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Dramatic Script

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LADYBUG, LADYBUG

FADE IN:

### EXT. KATE'S DOORSTEP - DAY

We pan in a circle around a two-way street, examining a series of look-alike houses — friendly, suburban, plenty of green — until slowing to a stop at Kate's front doorstep, where WILLA (15) fidgets nervously. Beside her stands NEVERMIND (older than 70), a living manifestation of Willa's social anxiety, dressed in a hilariously awful wizard costume (beard and all), with his hands on his hips.

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NEVERMIND

You can't go in.

WILLA

I could if I wanted to.

Nevermind rolls his eyes and leans on one hip, as if to say, "I'll wait..."

WILLA (cont.)

Okay, maybe not. I mean-

NEVERMIND

Remember the last time you went to a big house like this?

Willa searches her memory, to no avail.

NEVERMIND (cont.)

Three years ago. Miranda's birthday party.

WILLA

Five people and a guinea pig doesn't count as a party.

Nevermind looks as if he's about to say something, but closes his mouth and turns to face the street. Willa follows his gaze. A blue minivan pulls up in front of Kate's house, and YOUNG WILLA (10) steps out, clutching a gift in a "Happy Birthday" bag. She waves goodbye to her mother in the driver's seat.

WILLA

That's... me. Forever ago.

(To Nevermind)

Are you doing this?

NEVERMIND

Shh, shh....

The minivan leaves. Nevermind nudges Willa out of the way as Young Willa ascends to the front door.

Young Willa pushes aside her trepidation, collects her senses, and rings the doorbell while completely ignoring the other characters. A silence. Young Willa glances around the neighborhood as she waits.

Then the door swings open, and MIRANDA'S MOM (38) appears in an elegant bathrobe, long hair gathered in a bun. She takes a long sip from a glass of Diet Coke, noticing Young Willa but not hearing the following commentary:

WILLA

Kate's mom looks young.

NEVERMIND

Not Kate's mom. Miranda's mom.

Close-up on Willa's face, which flickers with pain at the mention of Miranda's name. We see and hear as if underwater, then slowly emerge...

MIRANDA'S MOM

Hi honey! Welcome! There's a bathroom right down the hall, if you still need to change into your suit.

YOUNG WILLA

Suit?

MIRANDA'S MOM

Unless you need to borrow one. That's perfectly fine with us, of course. I'll go fetch a couple options. What are you feeling — bikini? tankini?

She looks Young Willa up and down.

MIRANDA'S MOM

You know what? You just wait out back with the girls. I'll be there in a hot sec.

She disappears behind the door without closing it.

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YOUNG WILLA

A pool party? I thought...

Young Willa reaches into her pockets and pulls out billiard balls, struggling to hold them. They tumble at her feet. Then, cautiously, Young Willa enters the house, pulling the door shut behind her.

A sound effect — WHOOSH — and return to reality. The house is Kate's, but strangely, the billiard balls remain.

WILLA

That's not even what happened. I know what a freaking swimming pool is.

A beat. Willa must prove her knowledge.

WILLA (cont.)

A confined body of water? Glimmering? Infused with gross, dead beetles — or worse, the live ones, spinning themselves in circles?

NEVERMIND

(Nonchalantly)

Your chin pimple. It's gotten bigger.

WILLA

(Panicked)

And redder?

NEVERMIND

Oh yeah, way redder. But don't worry. You can just keep it covered with your hand. Like that French guy, you know?

He mimics the pose of The Thinker, including the raised knee, trying (unsuccessfully) to seem casual.

WILLA

You look stupid. I'LL look stupid. You don't think there's time to go-

The door flings open; Willa is prepared to leap out of the way, but then she sees it's actually KATE (16), laughing over her shoulder at something that her friends inside the house just said. Kate turns to face Willa.

KATE

Hey Willa! What are you waiting out here for? Come inside already.

WILLA

Oh, uh, okay. Thanks.

There's an awkward silence as Willa doesn't move. Exasperated, Nevermind pushes her through the door.

NEVERMIND

Don't just stand there with your mouth open. The bugs will fly in.

We follow Kate, with Willa and Nevermind trailing a few steps behind, inside...

**INT. KATE'S HOUSE - DAY**

... through the hallway... and into the kitchen, where KACEY (16) and CAROLINE (15) hover around the countertop, haphazardly tossing flour, sugar, vanilla, etc. into a mixing bowl. They chat with each other, but not loud enough for us to understand what they're saying. Meanwhile, Kate delivers a rundown of the latest news for Willa, who is distracted:

KATE

So here's the tea. Caroline been saying that

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Carson's been acting really weird around her lately, and Kacey told Caroline that Carson said that he wanted to take Caroline on a romantic walk around the botanical garden, but now it's been like, three days and he still hasn't made a single-

Towards the end of the speech, Nevermind leans over to whisper a cue in Willa's ear. Willa doesn't realize she's interrupting Kate:

WILLA  
(Mechanically)  
Wow-it-smells-good-in-here.

Kacey and Caroline look up.

KACEY and CAROLINE  
(As a greeting, sweetly enough)  
Willa!

WILLA  
Hi...

Nevermind elbows Willa, hard.

WILLA (cont.)  
(Yelling)  
Hi!

Kate, Kacey, and Caroline laugh amiably, exchanging glances.

KACEY  
We heard you the first time.

CAROLINE  
Hey Kate, where do you keep the brown sugar?

KATE

I think it's in the cupboard on the left...

Caroline rifles through the cupboard as the others speak over her shoulder. Meanwhile, Willa hovers in the background, and as the others converse, we follow her gaze to the glass door on the other side of Kate's kitchen: There's a pool outside, and we see blurred figures lounging in the water, including MIRANDA (11) and GWEN (11), and — swimming around by herself — Young Willa.

KACEY  
We already added sugar.

CAROLINE  
But that's WHITE sugar. Brown sugar is healthier.

KACEY  
It's not healthier when there's twice as much sugar.

Return to the kitchen. We follow Caroline's gaze as she turns to Kate and Willa for input. Kate holds up her hands — "Your problem!" — so we narrow in on Willa, who looks oblivious.

CAROLINE  
Willa! Which type of sugar do you think is better, huh?

WILLA  
Uh... I don't know, either?

Wrong answer. Caroline pouts.

NEVERMIND  
You should've just picked one. Fifty-fifty chance.

WILLA  
I didn't want to disappoint her.

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NEVERMIND

And yet you did.

WILLA

Could you just let me fail without the commentary,  
for once?

Nevermind raises his eyebrows.

NEVERMIND

If I don't say it, someone else will.

A beat.

NEVERMIND (cont.)

You never say anything. That's the problem.

WILLA

I...

NEVERMIND

I mean. Ahem.

He claps his hands twice, and the magic unfolds around Kate's kitchen table, set to the backdrop of the continuing pool party outside the glass door (duplicated characters).

Still in Kate's kitchen, a bell rings. Kate, Kacey, and Caroline continue to chat and prepare cookies, but their conversation is on mute. Instead, we follow Willa's gaze over the counter: A ring of sixth-grade girls have appeared around the kitchen table, eating disinterestedly from school cafeteria lunch trays. The anomaly is Young Willa, with a purple lunchbox brought from home. She takes a very ambitious bite of her PB&J sandwich.

The left and right sides of the table are leaning towards each other in debate. To our left is "Team Ryan," led by Miranda; the right is Team Jake, led by Gwen.

MIRANDA

Jake's not even cute. And he  
(Low, deadpan)  
talks... like... this.

GWEN

Shut up. You're just jealous because Ryan hasn't hit puberty yet.

GIRL NEXT TO MIRANDA

No. Way.

GWEN

(To Miranda)

Yeah, that's right, Miranda. You've probably got more chest hair than he does.

Laughter from both sides. Miranda pouts. Young Willa eyes the last bite of her sandwich, then sets it down. She's not hungry anymore.

MIRANDA

Hey, Willa's being pretty quiet, huh? What's up with that?

GWEN

She's too chicken to hurt your guys' feelings. Willa, who do you think's hotter? Ryan or Jake?

YOUNG WILLA

I... I don't know.

Everyone else at the table groans.

GWEN

See? She's like a honeybee. She knows I'm right, but if she tries to sting Miranda, she'll just...

As if Young Willa isn't there, Gwen draws her forearm across her neck — the classic signal for death.

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She's in our art class? Michelle Desjardins.

GWEN (cont.)

... on her own.

WHOOSH, reality; we pan back to the kitchen counter. Nevermind is giving Willa another "I win" look. In our peripheral vision, the younger girls remain around the kitchen table, talking animatedly, but no one except Willa and Nevermind seems to notice them.

WILLA

Oh yeah? Watch this.

(Loudly)

Brown sugar. Brown sugar is better.

Kate, Kacey, and Caroline stare at her blankly.

KATE

(To Willa)

Here, cutie. Have a cookie.

On the counter sits a tray of cookies, fresh out of the oven. Kate hands one to Willa, who accepts, realizing that the debate has long since terminated. Kacey and Caroline are also eating cookies.

WILLA

So what are you guys talking about?

KATE

Right now? Michelle.

WILLA

Um, who?

CAROLINE

You're kidding me.

KATE

(To Willa)

KACEY

(Exaggerated French accent)

No, eet's mee-SHELL day-zhar-DAH.

CAROLINE

The French exchange girl.

KATE

She's really weird.

WILLA

Oh, um. Why?

KACEY

Oh my God, so many reasons.

Kate and Caroline laugh. Willa looks pleased to have indirectly caused this reaction.

KACEY

She doesn't even know how to talk to people, you know?

WILLA

Uh... yeah.

An awkward beat.

WILLA (cont.)

(Sincerely)

That must be really hard.

CAROLINE

Once I said hi to her in the hall and she just like, stared at me.

More laughter, but not from Willa.

KACEY

Yesterday she was behind me in the lunch line and

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she dropped her pizza on the ground, so I was like, here let me help you pick that up, and then she smiled and put her nasty floor pizza right on top of my tray like I was asking if I could eat it.

Really loud laughter. Willa joins in, feebly.

KATE

My mom kept making me invite her to our house at the beginning of the year. It was so annoying.

CAROLINE

Ouch.

KACEY

That sucks balls.

L

aughter. But Willa is opening and closing her mouth in distress. She shoves the rest of her cookie in her mouth as a distraction and looks to Nevermind pleadingly. When she speaks to him, only he can hear:

WILLA

How do I do that thing... you know... reroute the conversation?

NEVERMIND

(increasingly angrily as he speaks)

Oh, now you want my opinion? Listen, deary. You can't reroute the conversation. You can only add to it. Accept it. If someone wants to talk to you, just take the deal and fly away with her, before someone else steps on you.

He snaps his fingers. The girls at the kitchen table remain, but we see more copies of them now, enacting another one of Willa's memories:

A clueless Young Willa wanders from the main hallway, drifting vaguely in the direction of the kitchen entrance from which Kate and Willa entered earlier. Then Young Willa stops walking,

leans her back against the wall, and slides to the floor. The camera captures her closely. Smiling faintly, she begins to read **A VERY UNCOOL BOOK OF NURSERY RHYMES**, positioned in front of her face.

Close-up on the specific page she's reading: We can see, "Ladybug, ladybug / Fly away home"

Next, Miranda and Gwen enter the hallway, carrying identical textbooks. They stroll towards the kitchen, not noticing Young Willa on the floor.

GWEN

You guys are friends? You've gotta be kidding me.

MIRANDA

Not really friends; it's just that her mom and my mom are both on this stupid church committee, so we see each other on Sundays and my mom makes me hang out with her sometimes. Like my pool party? She obviously didn't belong there.

Back to the following lines in Willa's book — "Your house is on fire / And your children are gone" — then panning up to Willa's face, eavesdropping.

GWEN

What a leech.

Gwen glances at Miranda to gauge her reaction. Miranda's face and composure scream guilt, so Gwen takes it easy.

GWEN (cont.)

What do you guys even do together? Read the dictionary?

MIRANDA

I don't think she can talk. It's so boring. My mom makes us play board games, but I usually just text from under the table.

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Gwen laughs.

In Willa's book: "All except one / and that's little Ann"...

GWEN

God, I'd rather die.

In Willa's book: "For she crept under / the frying pan."

We watch from ground-level as the girls' legs strut by Young Willa. Once they've disappeared, she puts down the book. Looks around at the empty hall. A long silence. Her dark eyes glisten with tears... and a reflection of the world around her.

No WHOOSH. A subtle darkness surrounds the scene lifts as we turn to Willa, who is looking at Young Willa, who remains seated and alone. Nevermind has disappeared, but all of Willa's living memories remain, all around the house.

KATE

Willa? What's wrong? You haven't said anything for like, twenty minutes.

Willa opens and closes her mouth. She keeps staring at Young Willa, who senses the gaze and slowly turns. The Willas finally lock eyes. Kate reads Willa's expression and tries to follow her gaze, but she can't see Young Willa or anything else going on in Willa's head.

KATE

You know we're your friends, right? You can tell us what's wrong.

She gives the other two girls a look that urges, "Back me up here!"

KACEY and CAROLINE  
(Disjointedly, half-heartedly)  
Yeah come on, you can tell us.

WILLA  
It's... nothing.

A beat. Kate waits for a moment, then shrugs in defeat.

KATE  
If you say so.

CAROLINE  
Ew! There's a bug in my cookie!

KATE  
(teasing)  
Oops, I totally forgot! There might have been ants in the brown sugar....

CAROLINE  
Ahhhhh!!!

KACEY  
That's not a bug. It's a chocolate chip, genius.

CAROLINE  
Oh.

KACEY  
Let's get back to Carson.

CAROLINE  
Right. So...

The regular conversation resumes. Willa has lagged behind; we are equally clueless.

CAROLINE (cont.)  
Then he was all like, your eyes are such a pretty kind of blue.

Kate and Caroline squeal.

CAROLINE (cont.)

I know, right?

KATE

I mean, they are a pretty kind of blue.

Gradually throughout Kacey's speech, the world blacks out so that we can only see Willa and Young Willa, luminescent.

KACEY

But he can't LIKE like you. You know he only dates cheerleaders. I mean, you're pretty, but you're not hot. Kind of like Willa. No offense, Willa. And he knows you'd just wanna talk to him, and wouldn't wanna like, make out or anything. I mean, you wouldn't, right? You're not cool enough for that. No offense, Caroline.

WILLA

(Mouthing silently to Young Willa, in the middle of Kacey's speech)

I'm sorry.

Young Willa continues staring back at Willa. Willa's eyes are pleading for her to say something. She doesn't react.

The screen goes black.

THE END.

## CRITICAL ESSAY

# AN ANALYSIS OF PEOPLE VS. TURNER: HAWTHORNE'S PERSPECTIVE

**Adina Cazacu-De Luca**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Critical Essay

While listening to the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings recently, I was reminded of my first experience learning about rape in depth. I was an awkward 8th grader with a shaggy pixie cut and little interest in boys. The 2016 People vs. Turner, or "Stanford Swimmer," case was clear cut to me. Witnesses watched Turner rape the victim, apprehended him, and immediately called the police. The jury unanimously found him guilty.

So, when Turner's father was unable to find his son's faults, I was far more frightened than I was while reading the gruesome details of the crime. The father only noted how his little angel would never reach the swimming dreams he had "worked so hard to achieve" (Franklin, [KFOR.COM](#)). After all, a single ruined life, his son's ruined life, was a "steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action out of his 20 plus years of life" (Franklin). Rape being described as "20 minutes of action" made it seem so

commonplace, like playing in a soccer game or watching a Marvel movie. He said that Brock "has never been violent to anyone including his actions on the night of Jan. 17th 2015" (Franklin). But the photographs of bruises and abrasions on the victim's body said otherwise. The fact she was unconscious said otherwise.

Then, I thought of my own father, who at times also fails to see my faults. I was almost able to excuse the father's statement as an outlier sentiment. I learned later that the judge presiding over the case, a Stanford graduate himself, agreed that prison time would have had "serious impacts" on Turner, and instead of the maximum 16 years, sentenced him to six months, only three of which he served (Moren, [THEATLANTIC.COM](#)). My sense of justice dropped to the bottom of my gut, where acid has been decomposing it ever since. This was beyond fatherly love. There was a pattern exposing what Nathaniel Hawthorne described in [THE SCARLET LETTER](#) as "that stubborn fidelity with which a man's friends... will sometimes uphold his character when proofs, clear as the mid-day sunshine on the scarlet letter, establish him as a false sin-stained creature of the dust" (Hawthorne, 217).

The most perplexing thing to me was truly the "stubborn fidelity" exhibited by Turner's father and defense team. "Stubborn" is an appropriate, but surprising word here because while "fidelity" has positive connotations, "stubborn" does not. As a consequence, the friends' fidelity becomes tainted. Believing steadfastly in innocence despite evidence proving guilt is not noble, it's corrupt. Even the specific use of "fidelity" seems to fit the Turner case, as it is a word usually associated with the bond between intimate partners. Here, it is applied to the relationship between a man and his friends, allowing those friends to speak for the sexual bond the man had with a woman, since the woman's own word is neither trustworthy nor sufficient. In the People vs. Turner case, the defense grilled the victim, who was unconscious at the time of the crime, regarding the events that

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occurred. Because she could not speak for herself, the man's friends created an image of him from their "stubborn fidelity" to his immaculate character and used it as evidence to prove his innocence. This appalled me. If I was robbed while sleeping, is the robber innocent precisely because I was asleep, and he has a character witness? Surely, hard evidence should have triumphed over a circumstantial value argument.

But it didn't. Like I've mentioned, this case had hard evidence. Photographs, witness statements, medical test results. The proofs were as "clear as the mid-day sunshine on the scarlet letter." Just as the sun cannot be brighter than at midday, the evidence could not have been clearer. However, the use of the scarlet letter as the epitome of clear sin reveals our society's misogynistic priorities when placing blame. The scarlet letter was not necessarily proof of sin itself, but rather the punishment Puritan society saw acceptable for Hester, the woman who sinned. We cannot even define the man's sin without coming back to society's view of the woman as inherently guilty. We choose to define Hester, like the victim, by any sin we can pin on her. Suddenly, it makes more sense that questions like "What were you wearing?", "How much did you drink?", and "Turner said that you liked it, did you?" were acceptable and appropriate to ask. The defense believed that the victim was guilty of making herself vulnerable to rape. To be fair, their goal was not to find truth, but to prove the innocence of their client. However, in this case especially, such stubborn fidelity seems heinous and cruel. Moreover, the character of our society depends not on what we encourage, but rather what we allow; we allow this subconscious focus on the woman's "scarlet letter" over the man's sins.

One disturbing discrepancy in an otherwise sound parallel is the description of the man as a "sin-stained creature of the dust." Here, the transient, shape-shifting form of "dust" implies weakness and cowardice. In his initial statement to police, our "creature of the dust" claimed he had no intention

of taking the victim back to his dorm. During the trial a year later, his lack of spine allowed him to change positions. Now, he had allegedly asked the victim if she would like to go to his dorm, and she consented (Franklin). More importantly, after two years, he has yet to admit to crimes that he without a doubt committed, blaming instead "party culture" and "excessive drinking" (Franklin). In Hawthorne's time, accusing a man of being made of dust was a low blow. Dust is all that remains after corpses rot, showing how the the "sin-stained creature" truly lacks life, lacks any semblance of humanity. However, in today's terms, dust is but a minor nuisance. Possibly, it makes you sneeze. Even our expression for the buildup of dust is innocent and harmless: a dust bunny. Turner, on the other hand, was a predator that targeted his victim and single-handedly ruined her life. To choose a contemporary interpretation of dust as opposed to that of the author's time would be to diminish the gravity of Turner's crime.

The largest danger of "stubborn fidelity" is that it does not only affect a "sin-stained creature's" friends, as Hawthorne suggests. Stubborn fidelity is a societal epidemic. After reading about People vs. Turner, my 13 year old self learned to wear longer skirts, arm herself with house keys, and never go to parties alone. Still, I fear being assaulted because I am afraid to watch my attacker go free regardless of the evidence I present. Yet, at times, even I think to myself: **SHE WAS WEARING** that? **SHE DRANK** that **MUCH?** **DID SHE JUST REGRET IT AFTER THE FACT?** I find **MYSELF** possessing an ounce of "stubborn fidelity" despite my empathy for the victim and abhorrence of the perpetrator. Then, I realize, to some extent, that these thoughts are not my own, but rather fallacies repeated enough times to become truths. Societal truths, which cause all of us to possess "stubborn fidelity" for predatory men who don't deserve it and believe instead that the victim is to blame. It happened with Turner. It happened with Kavanaugh. I sincerely hope that if one day, any man in power takes advantage of my own

daughters, our society will have by then seriously reconsidered not only what we encourage, but what we allow.

things.

Apathy, the lack of concern or interest, for the things that happen around us is an unconscious decision we make regularly. Empathy, on the other hand, the ability to understand and share the feelings of our peers, is rare. This action, so difficult to indulge, is often the last thing on our minds when we walk out of the house. The bubble we've created, barely extending past our individual lives, traps us from reaching others whose bubbles are shrinking. Like my bubble, including only school, family, and friends, has only been popped a few times, a number I can count on one hand.

The United States has its own bubble too, one that its society has built in order to protect itself from the outside world. But it's also a wall, a policy that puts our country first and the people around us, last.

Donald Trump campaigned to build a wall along the US and Mexico border two years ago when he ran for election. He promised voters that his solution would prevent illegal immigration, and better yet, Mexico would pay for it. "We are calling on Congress to build a great border wall to stop dangerous drugs and criminals from pouring into our country," Trump told the Conservative Political Action Conference. While President Trump's wall could be all talk, an ambitious claim meant to please the public, it's more concerning to hear the loud cheering and overall agreement Trump's words are met with. According to a Quinnipiac poll, support for a border wall hit a high of 42 percent in 2016.

But to give our president the benefit of the doubt; his petition, or rather, current agenda pales in comparison to the joke Ted Cruz made during his campaign for president. The politician flippantly spoke about dropping a "carpet bomb" in the Middle East, a bomb with the potential to kill many innocents. The punchline? Let's find out "if sand can glow in the dark."

# WALK A MILE IN HIS SHOES

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Educator: Jennifer Tavernaro

Category: Critical Essay

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## WALK A MILE IN HIS SHOES

### Walking a Mile in His Shoes

"Before you judge a man, walk a mile in his shoes."

When I was young, I had a pair of shoes that I wore everywhere. No matter the time or place, those tiny sneakers were glued to the soles of my feet. They weren't your typical run of the mill pair of shoes, though. They were a limited edition, made from rubber, and squeaked every time I took a step. I remember how exhilarating it was running down shopping aisles only to stop and stare at my feet bewilderedly because I had no idea where the noise was coming from.

Some will never understand the sentimental value those shoes had for me, nor can they relate to my childhood memories. That sharing of similarities, that ability to relate and feel with others is not always the easiest thing to do. After all, it's much easier to hide behind our phones and build walls, judging others harshly over the simplest

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Donald Trump's border wall builds a physical barrier between the US and Mexico. The lack of empathy, though, builds invisible barriers and fences between people that become much more harmful--barriers made of stereotypes, biased claims, and long-standing prejudices. We lose the chance to connect and learn from one another when we build those walls. Existing in everyday settings, we find these walls in a middle school cafeteria, each table like small islands that separate different social groups, and at the playground where children too young to know better repeat the words of their parents. The chasm between worlds becomes harder to cross until people different from you become-- and I recall the words Trump uses on groups like Mexicans, Muslims, African Americans, Asians, and women--"losers," "flunkies," "dopes," or "lowlifes."

Let's slip on a different pair of shoes for a while.

Two years ago, an eighteen-year-old, Brandy Vela, was subjected to bullying, receiving abusive text messages regarding her weight. Someone also made a fake Facebook page of her, opening more opportunities to encourage the cyberbullying. On a seemingly regular Tuesday, Brandy sent a cryptic email to her family. They rushed home, only to find Brandy holding a gun to her chest while she'd been crying against a wall. That day, Brandy Vela pulled the trigger, dying under a subjugation of a hate that was needlessly caused. She died alone, isolated and helpless.

And the harassment continued even after her death. "My face when you shoot yourself in front of your family," was one post on a social media. Another one showed Brandy as a big fat cow accompanied by a gun, the post's caption: "You're a coward, you should have done this a long time ago."

Studies show that there is a correlation between hate speech and suicides. Biddle et al.<sup>10</sup> performed a Web search of some of the terms most highly correlated with suicide--listing these

terms in order to simulate someone searching for information on suicide methods. The results were eye-opening. About half of the search results were pro-suicide websites or sites that provided factual information regarding self-inflicted death. And other studies show, since 2007, the rate of suicides has increased by 70%.

While the internet does connect the world, it also means fostering a sense of understanding with others can be more challenging, a deeper connection that goes further than the simple emojis or short texts we send on a daily basis. Remember the good ol' days when we wrote thank you notes instead of emailing and had real conversations with real people before phones existed?

Society allows us to sometimes overstep a boundary, lines blurring when a screen prevents us from taking account of everyone's feelings. How often do we all come across something highly offensive? What is keeping others from seeing the same message and then thinking it is okay to contribute something equally harmful? This polarization that occurs both in our culture and our political climate is something that people are forced to suffer by themselves. Its effect on teenagers and adults alike contributes to the lack of cultural empathy, closing people off from others who feel the same way. The worst feeling in the world is the sense we're alone, abandoned to walk down a long path in the dark by ourselves.

Brandy Vela was alone when she died.

Why do I care about empathy? I don't really know. Maybe it's because I had a friend who moved away, and I found out quite recently she'd been harming herself because the kids around her didn't care about her existence. Perhaps it's because I realized Donald Trump is the face of America and didn't exactly like the image he was broadcasting to the world. Or possibly it's because when I looked into myself, I saw someone who was guilty of the same thing I've been accusing

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everyone else of. Because like everyone else, I haven't always cared to look behind the masks of my peers, or bring myself to reach out to people I thought were acting stupid. Why do I need to understand the boy who keeps nagging me in Spanish, let alone the ninth grader living in a mountain village in China?

I'm not going to tell you of a time where I was subjected to apathy, or felt isolated and scapegoated because of my appearance, ethnicity, or personality. Rather, I think it would more beneficial if I told you of a time where I distanced myself from another person and maybe, just maybe, you can find a similar instance in your own life where you did the same.

Not too long ago, there was a girl in my class who I always felt was an outsider. In previous years, I was under the impression she was never well liked--always tolerated yet never welcomed. There were a few who let her into their circles because they pitied her, which is never the same as empathy, but I'd never really talked to her, I never needed to. When I found myself in the same classroom, I got to know her better, and predictably, she rubbed me the wrong way. Always obnoxious and inappropriate, I found myself cringing when she called out my name. I didn't bother to understand her and pretended to never hear the teasing she received from other kids, stuff that verged on bullying. It was only after she moved away, that I finally learned the girl's parents had recently divorced and that she was diabetic.

While I never hated, let's call her Jessica, I didn't like her either. Still, my harsh judgment of her dangerously danced the thin line dividing dislike from something worse. Andrea Matthews, a cognitive and transpersonal therapist explains why people hate differences. "Hate of difference is projection. Projection means that I've split myself into compartments of consciousness and unconsciousness, so that I don't know the things that I don't want to know about myself--and

project those things onto others that carry for me." It wasn't until recently that I realized this was what I had been doing to Jessica. This girl, despite being the outsider looking in, never let what was being said get under her skin. It was something I grudgingly respected, and at the time, I was envious of her resilience.

Today, I hope I choose to act differently the next time I meet a Jessica.

We've tried on a lot of different shoes, trying to pinpoint the exact reason for society's lack of empathy. Whether it be the political climate or cultural tolerances, or the psychological habit of disliking others because they have something we don't, lack of empathy creates walls and, more importantly, isolation. But what does it matter what causes a lack of empathy if we can't solve it?

My advice, wear a lot of shoes.

Empathy asks us to try on shoes that have been buried beneath all the extra noise, picking up others we normally would never touch. By walking a mile in the shoes of others, it may remind us of our own squeaky sneakers, from our own Jessicas, and the world's seven million other bubbles waiting to be popped.

## HERO

### **Madysen Naeger**

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Category: Critical Essay

Hero. In the English language, the word is a noun, defined as “a person who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities.” At my high school Veteran’s Day assembly this afternoon, I was surrounded by heroes. Men and women who, at one point or another, have given up their lives to ensure the quality of mine. Throughout my whole childhood, I have gone to numerous assemblies nearly identical to the one that I attended this afternoon. But during none of them have I had such a realization as this. I was sitting in my seat, listening to elementary students sing in their most patriotic little voices about freedom, and America, and watching as countless veterans clutched their hats to their chests and rose to their feet, seemingly struck by the American spirit as well. But as I was watching, I did not experience the usual appreciation, yet monotony, that I typically felt during these ceremonies coming from having sat through them endless times before. Instead, I realized something. Sitting in that room with all of these brave men and women, I realized that I was surrounded by unintentional murderers. I didn’t pick for the thought to cross my mind, it just did. And once it had, I couldn’t stop thinking about the unfairness of it.

These men and women, these brave, kind, generous human beings who had given up their own lives for ours, were, technically speaking, murderers. I couldn’t wrap my mind around it. These individuals volunteered, or in many cases, were drafted to fight for our country, knowing but maybe not being fully aware of what they were getting themselves into, and were put through boot camps and training and, in cases more relevant in the vintage era that these soldiers served in, were shipped off to a foreign country where they are unfamiliar with their surroundings and are homesick for the people they left behind. They go into this foreign land because someone in a higher ranking tells them to, and fight the people there because someone tells them to, and shoot and kill countless human beings for the sole purpose of demolishing the proclaimed enemy—because someone tells them to. And if they return,

they oftentimes do not receive the benefits that they were promised, and they live with the effects of what they have been through for the rest of their lives. They battle through depression, anxiety, regret, wake up in cold sweats, wince at every firework on the holiday that celebrates them, and relive it all in triggered flashbacks. All of this because someone said, “it was war.”

In the English language, war, just as hero, is a noun, and is defined as “a state of armed conflict between different nations or states or different groups within a nation or state.” The key word there is “different.” We are taught conflicting messages our whole lives, one being shoved in our faces countless examples of why “different” is bad, that “different” gets you bullied, that “different” is weird, and yet another one proclaiming that “different” is okay, that diversity is good, that normal is boring. So, my question is, why is it that in the cases of simple things, such as different clothing, or different personal beliefs, or different style, or different personalities, “different” is okay. But in the case of a “different” way of running a country, or a “different” religion, or a “different” culture, “different” suddenly regains its negative connotation, and becomes a threat, an insult, something that we would raid a country and end lives for.

Individual countries themselves are not to blame. Soldiers, heroes, are not to blame. People, in general, are not to blame. But the mindset of the world in its entirety, its closed-off attitude and proponency for violence, that is what is to blame. Heroes should not have to become heroes by ending the life of another human being who, had the roles been reversed, would have become a hero in their own community. Heroes should not have to put themselves in front of a weapon and risk not being able to see their loved ones again to gain that sought-after status. A war should not be considered won once enough members of the opposing side will never live to take in another breath to speak about their opposition: it should be considered won once each side has spoken their truth, and come to a rational conclusion without the use of barbarism.

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Veterans should not have to kill to become worthy of honor.

Lives should not have to end for the sake of disagreement.

Heroes should not have to die to become heroes.

Jamaican political activist and leader Marcus Garvey once said, "The pen is mightier than the sword, but the tongue is mightier than them both put together." I believe that if we threw away our swords, refilled the ink in our pens, and spoke with patience, with understanding -- with truth -- we could accomplish more in one day than one year of blind and senseless slaughter. This fundamental human practice of warfare is nothing but an elevated version of the things that immature children do- making fun of other children because they think that they are wrong, and that they themselves are right, and meddling in each others' business just for the sake of maintaining an ego. It is nothing but a lack of the ability to calmly listen, and tolerate, even though you may not understand. But no longer can we be like harmless children, whose worst possible outcome might be a sense of wounded pride or hurt feelings, forgotten in an hour when something good happens. We are no longer children, and we no longer have that luxury. We are now adults, though we may not behave like it, and our stubbornness has the ability to result in a human life being removed from this earth. This is true not only for the American government: they are not solely to blame. It is true for the entire world in general, and its glorification of violence, and the romanticism of war. Adolf Hitler was at fault when he demolished millions of people because he could not handle them being "different." The 9/11 terrorists were at fault when they sent planes into our towers, because we are "different." And the Americans were at fault when they sent troops into Vietnam, because Communism was "different."

I know that if I were to pick on one of the little kids I watched today singing songs about patriotism, they would stick their tongue out and tell me to "mind your own business." If it is so simple of a concept that even a child can preach it, why is it so hard to follow? Why is this world we live in so

dead set on always being right, always being in control, always being the "best?" Why can no one take a step back, see the bigger picture, and realize that we all are just human, regardless of our packaging, and the things that make us "different." How much blood has to be lost, how many tears have to be shed, how many lives have to be taken before this war can finally come an end?

Veterans should not have to kill to become worthy of honor.

Lives should not have to end for the sake of disagreement.

Heroes should not have to die to become heroes.

We have to change our definition of the word "war," remove it from its glorified position in our society and view it for what it truly is. War is not just star-spangled banners waving in the American wind, fireworks booming on the fourth of July, and freshly-deemed heroes returning to their families. It is also the blood we see splayed across our timelines that we quickly scroll past, the crumbled ruins in Syria, the aching souls in the wake of school shootings, the victims of violence in the "bad part of town" that is creeping into the "good parts." It is the denying of humans their right to be human, and the war of a human against themselves. It is bomb threats and suicide, depression and anxiety, the imprisonment of countless innocent young girls doomed to sex trafficking. War is surrounding us. It snuck up on us in the night while we were high off our American spirit, and has wrapped us in its deadly embrace. It is choking us, squeezing our lungs until we no longer have the breath to fight. But we will continue to press on.

The youth of our world is at a new kind of war every day, fighting, fighting, and fighting. Through our words and our actions, using our platforms and our talents, we are fighting to change the world. Fighting to change definition of war, to reverse the cycle of violence that we have been handed by the generations before us. We respect our veterans, our heroes, for all that they have done for us. And we thank them. But it is time for a new wave of warfare now, one that is waged between person and person, and where the weapon of

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choice is a belief, and the artillery a voice to match. We are determined. We are “different.” We are screaming. And we refuse to let anything keep our voices from being heard. We will be the generation to make a difference. We will be the generation to set down our weapons and open up our arms. We will be the generation to end this, to stop the bloodshed and start the revolution. Veterans should not have to kill to become worthy of honor.

Lives should not have to end for the sake of disagreement.

Heroes should not have to die to become heroes. And we will not stop until there is peace.

# THE AMERICAN DREAM: MEASURED IN THE MARGINS

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Category: Critical Essay

From the idyllic farm house overlooking a boundless prairie to the luxurious high rise on the bustling streets of New York, the American people have always had dreams. Throughout history, each of these American Dreams have shaped America. Americans have considered what this dream entails and who can truly dream this dream, and today questions rise of whether the American Dream still lives on or if it had ever lived

at all. Some even dare to question the American Dream's motives and wonder if this dream is just perpetuated by American greed. Through history many people have attempted to answer questions to whether the dream exists and if it is truly a dream for all. It is this attempt to analyze our dreams that America has failed at. While traditionally we have looked to the success of the privileged to gauge the presence of the American Dream, the extent to which we actualize the American Dream is really a function of how we treat the most marginalized people in our society.

In his book, [A THEORY OF JUSTICE](#), John Rawls asks us to imagine a fantastic scene. A group of people meet to create their own perfect society, hammering out the details of what will eventually become a new government. At this meeting, the future citizens do not yet know what part they will play in this society. They must design their society behind what Rawls calls the “Veil Of Ignorance”. Rawls explains that, under the Veil, “no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like” (Rawls). From such a position, Rawls argues, one cannot ignore the plight of the least advantaged members in a society and thus constructs a society which minimizes their disadvantage. Rawls’ theories on social justice, while considered groundbreaking and novel after their publication in the 1970s, actually have a close relation to John Truslow Adams’ much earlier notion of the American Dream. In his book, [THE EPIC OF AMERICA](#), Adams explains that the American Dream recognizes, “others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (Adams, [EPIC OF AMERICA](#)404). However, when evaluating the success of this dream, and in turn American society, scholars have forgotten the values that Rawls and Adams advocate. They have forgotten the fact that the marginalized members of our society not only define the American Dream but American society as well. Society can be compared to a chain, where each link is

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representative of an American. Some links are brand new and untouched, while some have been bent and rusted. Nonetheless, each link is connected as a part of the same chain. When used to pick up a mass, some chain links rest higher up, and away from the mass, while others lie closer. These dispersions in link placement are the classes of America. The gravity that impedes this chain from picking up the mass is the nature of the American Dream, in an attempt to achieve it we marginalize our society. As American society toils, heaving this dream up along the chain, naturally, some chains have become damaged under the process. The lower, rusted and cracked links begin to break. As this occurs not only do the lower links fail their attempt at the American Dream, the links above do as well. It is not only the goal of the lower links to achieve this dream rather the whole chain, society. This is because the American Dream can only be realized when all of society has the opportunity to achieve it. When it comes to the realizing the American Dream, society must look its marginalized members who support its foundation.

The colonization of America sprouted from struggles of marginalized people themselves. After years of religious persecution in England, the Puritans look to the Americas to form their perfect utopia. As John Winthrop outlines his model for a religious utopia in America he values the importance that marginalized people play. He explains that, "that the rich and mighty should not eat up the poor, nor the poor and despised rise up against and shake off their yoke" (Winthrop). However, this utopian mindset did not last long. As the Puritans acclimated themselves to the Americas, they eventually perpetuate some of the same oppression they tried to escape. As seen in [THE CRUCIBLE](#), the Puritans have begun marginalizing their own society by accusing their members of being witches. These "witches" are horribly tortured and persecuted, some drowned and some stoned to death. These innocent Puritans now face the religious persecution they tried to escape, denying them the ability to achieve their own American Dream (Miller). While

first upholding Adam's values of the dream, Puritan society exemplifies a paradox by embodying the marginalization they sought to escape. The treatment of women in America, especially in the founding of America, exposed by the Seneca Falls convention, also illustrates the paradox of the American dream. The roots of the Seneca Falls convention reach back to Thomas Jefferson and his authoring of the Declaration of Independence. Here he lives out the American dream by seizing the opportunity to form a new country and escape King George's torment on the colonists. However, from the very founding of America, Thomas Jefferson marginalizes its women. He states that, "that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights" (Jefferson, [DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE](#)). These inalienable rights give everyone an opportunity at the American Dream, except women. At the Seneca Falls convention women's sought to change this by declaring their own independence. They explain how men have marginalized women by restricting them from, "obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against [them]" (Anthony). While the Declaration of Independence was beneficial in freeing the marginalized colonists, America had also become complacent and failed its female constituents. Finally, the paradox of the American dream is prevalent in the history of slavery. Because of an improper mindset, slavery escalated to horrific conditions. Olaudah Equiano outlines the inhumane conditions slaves were shipped in on their journey from Africa. He details how bodies were stacked together in rows and columns, one on top of another (Equiano, [SLAVE TRADE NARRATIVE](#)). Slavery's escalation has come about as a result of America looking at the issue of slavery from the perspective of the affluent society. As a result, colonists were unable to realize that slavery was the biggest failure of the American Dream. Since slave shipping and dehumanization helped the majority of white landowners become rich plantation owners, the practice was considered another element of the American Dream. This extremely flawed conclusion

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came about because most people had ignored the plight of the marginalized slaves. Despite these factors Olaudah Equiano shows us how he is still able to achieve his piece of the American Dream by buying his own freedom. However, this Dream can hardly be called American as he had to endure horrible treatment and break harsh slave codes to attain his own humanity.

The value of the American Dream becomes apparent in societies that epitomize its antithesis. First, we can look to Nazi Germany's marginalization of Jews as an antithesis of this dream. During the Holocaust not only were Jewish people subject to extreme torture and pain, but they were denied any chance at an American dream. While Nazi Germany is not located in America, the American dream still lives on as a mindset and attitude. The Jewish people were extremely marginalized and stripped of their ability to dream or pursue a better life. For multiple generations Nazi Germany destroyed any hope of a future for Jewish people. Similar to Nazi Germany's extreme marginalization, ISIS is another antithesis to the foundations of the American dream. ISIS has stripped away the chance to dream for others, through both their terrorism and conquering. The terroristic fear produced by ISIS has reached back home, in America. The fear of terrorist attacks impedes on Americans' abilities to dream. Additionally, in the Middle-East ISIS has extremely marginalized practices of any faith besides Islam. By killing people and destroying their homeland, ISIS has stripped innocent civilians of their ability to dream. In contrast, the United States places a heavy emphasis on the freedom of religion. While America may have failed to uphold the dream in some instances, these societies are notorious for actively rebuffing its spirit.

Finally, the impacts of marginalization on the dreams of Americans are directly illustrated both literally in pictures and figuratively in contemporary works. Jacob Riis' anthology, [HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES](#), elucidates the struggles of marginalized immigrants through powerful images. Similar to slavery, these immigrants are taken advantage of and abused. However, this abuse is

gone unstopped since the American Dream had been evaluated based on the success of white, affluent, factory-owning men. Jacob Riis further illustrates this survival of the affluent mentality when he observes that, "the half that was on top cared little for the struggles, and less for the fate of those who were underneath, so long as it was able to hold them there and keep its own seat" (Riis, [HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES](#)). As a result, millions of immigrants have been pushed to conditions of squalor, and millions of people, specifically children, have had their American Dreams stripped away. Riis shows us this with an image of children lined up at a coal processing factory. We see the pure, innocent faces of boys covered in black, grimy coal. These boys have lost an opportunity for education and a better life because they have been marginalized. Rather than pursuing their American Dream these boys must meet the economic burdens placed upon them. Riis images reveal the marginalized members of society, and as a result, informs readers that the American Dream has not pursued. The period in which Riis published his images was the Gilded Age of America. Economically, American society had soared to heights never seen before. However, past the industrial boom millions of Americans suffered a life that more nightmarish than anything. If not for Riis, American society would have continued to make these marginalized members suffer further. However, by assessing the lives of the marginalized American society was able to shift back to pursue the American Dream. In an attempt to avoid another "gilded" society, struggles to evaluate the American Dream appear in our lives today. Today, while America has made progress towards achieving this dream, we see how the prospect of achieving this dream are lowered by the nature of society. This nature works towards achieving an American Dream; however, in its haste marginalizes our society. We can see how progress has been made but ideality has not been achieved today through the Black Lives Matter Movement. We have seen the end of slavery and Jim Crow in America, yet despite this progress

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America relapses back to marginalizing African Americans. In our society African Americans have been slaughtered at the hands of white police officers. However the officers are not to be blamed alone. This horrific trend in African American deaths has come about through a society who has created an environment conducive of hatred and bigotry. It is American society, as a whole, that has allowed words such as crime and poverty to be branded upon the skin of our black brethren. In the local death of Michael Brown an African American man had died when he had not needed to. While Brown had stolen a pack of cigars his life should not have been the penalty for his crime (New York Times). However, it is because of how society perceives his skin that his crimes were magnified. Rather than a naive teenage thief, in the eyes of officer Wilson his skin magnified him to be a threat to the lives of other citizens. While optimism has sprouted by revolutionizing how we measure the American Dream, I am cynical towards society's ability to achieve it because of how they tend to marginalize their citizens.

In order to properly measure the prevalence of the American dream we must look to those who are marginalized in our society rather than those who live at the apex of our society. Despite their varying roles and statuses in society, everyone attempts to achieve their own American Dream. It is people driven by these dreams that will shape tomorrow's society. In order to track the progress of society, America can look to the American Dream and examine its prevalence. In the rush of success, however, those who are marginalized are overlooked. Even Adams, who coined the phrase, overlooks the marginalized when measuring the success of his Dream. As he looks across the Library of Congress he sees numerous races, genders, and ages coexisting, "a concrete example of the American dream" (Adams). However, he fails to observe closely. As I sit in the Mid-County Library I feel compelled to feel the same solace that Adams had felt in the Library of Congress. But then, I look closer. I see an immigrant family feeling confused and out of place, for they fear asking a

question and being harassed for their accents. I see a young African American girl sitting in the reference section because she would rather be here turning pages rather than hear the slurs her schoolmates spit at her. And I see a highschool boy at the public computers, who is afraid to be seen at all because then his friends will know he could not afford his own computer. At first glance, the Mid-County Library, the American society, looks to be living a dream. But underneath the surface, through the eyes of those who are marginalized, we see that the American Dream won't be here anytime soon.

# FAR FROM A FAIRY TALE: CRITICISMS OF THE GENDER NORMS PERPETUATED BY CONSUMER CULTURE IN “WHERE ARE YOU GOING, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?”

**Alice Wu**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS

## Category: Critical Essay

The Cinderella story is ingrained in the psyche of many young girls and permeates their consciousness for all their lives. Despite advances in gender equality, many women still dream of being rescued from their mundane lives to the glittering realm of a handsome prince, and they believe material objects like shoes, gowns, and coaches can help them do so. Against the tumultuous backdrop of the 1960s Sexual Revolution, Joyce Carol Oates' short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" ponders the dangers of growing up amidst the deterioration of established values and a consumer culture that aggressively sexualizes young women (Kozikowski). Through an allegorical lens, Oates subtly responds that real life often contrasts sharply with fairy tales and that buying into the palatable, objectifying messages of American consumer culture robs women of their freedom and power.

Trapped in a fragmented nuclear family with an absent father; a jealous, critical mother; and an ungainly older sister who is nonetheless preferred by their parents; Connie in many ways mirrors Cinderella. She too dreams of escaping her confining home atmosphere for a luxurious royal ball or consumerist hubs like the shopping plaza or movie theater (Oates 313). However, her dream is eventually perverted into a nightmare. Connie lives during a confusing transitional time in American history, a time of decaying traditional values. On Sunday, no one in her family goes to church, and the diminution of her given name, Constance, which means dependability and endurance, further reflects that decay (Oates 315; Kozikowski). At the uncertain age of fifteen, Connie represents America's maturation from the safety of childhood to the terrifying new possibilities of adulthood. Thus, she turns to the convenience of

consumer culture for a sense of ownership and control in her life (Kozikowski). For instance, she blindly absorbs the "sexually provocative but superficial lyrics" of popular music that preserve her idealized conception of adult life (Schulz and Rockwood). She comes to believe that beauty, material comfort, and romantic attention are what matter most. In fact, in Connie's mind, the drive-in restaurant she frequents is like a "sacred building." Consumerism, after all, replaces the role of religion in the formation of her identity and self-worth (Oates 313). However, as she focuses her attentions on material goods and empty romantic pursuits, she does not spare any thoughts towards the responsibilities of growing up such as cooking and cleaning, chores that Cinderella dutifully performed to earn her happy ending (Oates 312). Connie is wrongfully convinced that her future will be easy and comfortable. Her naïveté eventually leads her to lend undue trust to Friend and makes her vulnerable to his advances.

Furthermore, Connie's active embrace of the vacuous lifestyle promoted by consumer culture isolates and weakens her as she objectifies herself and those around her. For instance, she focuses not on the reality of a particular boy she fancies but "an idea, a feeling, mixed up with the urgent insistent pounding of the music" (Oates 314). Essentially, she is caught up in the sexual appeal of rock and roll and seeks excitement and validation of her youth and looks, not loyalty or honesty. Her friendships, too, are shallow, for in Connie's mind, her "best girl friend," with whom she goes to the restaurant or the movies, goes nameless (Oates 312). She merely seeks a token companion to fit society's expectations and not seem friendless. Moreover, by refusing to attend a barbecue with her family, Connie dismisses them as uninteresting and further strains her relationship with them (Oates 315). Thus, all her relationships are hollow, leaving her alone and vulnerable. When Friend declares his lust for her, Connie helplessly states that she has washed her hair earlier: Connie has reduced her own value to her mere appearance, and washing her long, golden hair, one of her best physical attributes, is her flimsy attempt at asserting

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her power (Oates 323). Reality, however, is unlike a fairy tale, in which Cinderella earns her happy ending by wooing the prince with her looks; Friend has ulterior motives to exploit her for his personal pleasure. As Schulz and Rockwood explain, Connie then adopts the "frantic words and gestures of a child" and no longer flirts like an adult, crying aloud and covering her ears as if either will alter her reality. However, her dizziness and perspiration also indicate her conflicting attraction to Friend, for he is paying her the sexual attention she craves (Schulz and Rockwood). While his sunglasses provide a mirror to satisfy Connie's vanity, they construct a diminished reflection of her, for he does not view her as a full person with emotional, intellectual, or spiritual value (Oates 316). Friend brings to life the romantic fantasies fed to Connie by popular culture to reveal just how degrading these fantasies are to young women.

As Friend trespasses on Connie's home, she discovers the meaninglessness of objects when genuine relationships have broken down. In the events leading up to her rape, nearby objects fail her one by one. To start, Friend's cheaply painted gold jalopy and eyes like broken glass are the shattered remains of the original Cinderella's carriage and glass slippers (Oates 315 and 318). There will be no happily-ever-after. Moreover, even though home ownership is a typical symbol of material comfort and strength, Connie's house cannot keep her safe, not when there is a mere screen door between the familiarity of home and the wide, unknown expanse of the outside world (Oates 321). That thin barrier also represents the approaching threshold of adulthood and its harsh realities, regardless as to whether Connie is ready for them. As Connie grabs the telephone and screams into it to reach her mother, she discovers too late that communication has broken down between her and the older generation (Oates 324-325). Furthermore, having been deluded by popular music that romance is always rosy, Connie is like a clueless child when Friend rapes her, feeling as if Friend is "stabbing her again and again with no tenderness" (Oates 325). As Friend sings and calls Connie his "sweet little blue-eyed

girl" despite her brown eyes, he strips her of her individuality with music and asserts his final mastery over her (Oates 326). In consumerist fashion, he owns her, but she is disposable. All he cares about is her ability to satisfy his sexual needs. Friend fulfills Connie's superficial desires to be noticed for her looks, and she compulsively follows him to a precarious future.

Joyce Carol Oates' short story is an incisive reminder of the dangers of sexualized, consumerist values, especially to young women. Connie's active embrace of those values causes her to become vain and impractical, eroding her relationships and hindering her ability to mature into a responsible, self-sufficient adult. Moreover, far from a fairy tale, Connie's life shows that although people like Friend are only too eager to take advantage of the innocent and the weak, she has the power to destroy herself. Frivolous messages spread by consumer culture can sink into the psyche of impressionable young minds and forever scar lives.

## PERSECUTION: CAN SOCIETY "LET IT GO"?

**Ann Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
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Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Critical Essay

Imagine Queen Elsa constructing her ice palace in the outskirts of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, or Hester Prynne standing on a scaffold within the fictional kingdom of Arendelle. The resulting image may seem absurd, yet despite a separation of four hundred years, Disney's 2013 blockbuster *FROZEN* shares similar storylines with Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel *THE SCARLET LETTER*, published in 1850 and set in the seventeenth century. Disney's fairytale nation and Hawthorne's Puritan colony both harbor rigid, judgmental communities which persecute Elsa and Hester for their respective wrongdoings, and both women respond by embracing isolation. However, the resemblance falters at the stories' conclusions, when Arendelle learns to accept and even adore Elsa for her differences; although Hester eventually befriends the scarlet letter on her chest, her community never truly sees beyond her sin. The key difference between the stories is that given sufficient love and warmth, Arendelle's "frozen heart" can completely thaw, whereas according to Hawthorne, sin scorches the human heart irreversibly. Together, Disney and Hawthorne demonstrate that one can complete a journey to self-fulfillment with or without society's approval, but Hawthorne alone suggests that psychological persecution leaves lasting scars.

Nature endows both Hester and Elsa with qualities which threaten societal harmony, setting the stage for persecution. Society's fear of difference appears in *FROZEN*'s ominous opening scene, in which ice harvesters sing of "an icy force both foul and fair" — an allusion to Elsa's magical ability to manipulate snow and ice (1). Her talents appear enviable at first, when she creates glistening snow so that her sister, Anna, can build a snowman in the convenience of the castle ballroom, but this impression devolves when Elsa's flurries accidentally strike Anna in the head, and "frightening ice spikes" embody the dark side of her powers (2). "There's beauty and there's danger here," the lyrics of "Frozen Heart" continue, and *THE SCARLET LETTER* mirrors this intersection (3). Hester's gift, beauty, manifests in

her physical appearance; the intricately embroidered letter A for adultery on her dress; and the "faultless beauty" of her daughter, Pearl (4). The second part of the formula, danger, arises when Hester's promiscuity leads to adultery, a violation of the Puritans' strict social code. While Hester is standing on the scaffold as punishment for her crime, the townspeople mark "how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped," but "the world was only darker for this woman's beauty," echoing *FROZEN*'s introductory scenes (5). For both Disney and Hawthorne, the danger behind beauty provides reasoning for society's disapproval of extraordinary characters.

At the onset of persecution, Hester and Elsa initially attempt to hide their differences from the public, but discovery proves inevitable. After Elsa's incident with her sister, the King orders that she must "keep her powers hidden from everyone... including Anna" (6). The King also instructs Elsa to wear a pair of gloves to constrain her powers and teaches her a steadfast mantra: "Conceal it. Don't feel it. Don't let it show" (7). Similarly, in Hawthorne's narrative, Hester's first impulse is to hold her newborn child over her chest "as that she might thereby conceal a certain token, which was wrought or fastened into her dress" — the letter A (8). Later, as Hester walks through the town, "her spirit could only shelter itself beneath a stony crust of insensibility"; in other words, she conceals without feeling (9). In both *FROZEN* and *THE SCARLET LETTER*, this early manner of self-containment lacks sustainability. When quarreling with Anna at a royal party, Elsa cannot contain her anger, and spikes of ice sprout from the ballroom floor, despite Elsa's best efforts to hide her powers from the guests (10). Upon this reveal, Arendelle's villagers lose trust in Elsa, and a duke denounces her act of "sorcery" (11). Likewise in *THE SCARLET LETTER*, townspeople observe the undeniable effects of Hester's pregnancy, and knowing her husband is missing, draw the obvious conclusion. While at first, Hester

can withhold her emotions before the public, if not her scandal, her final barrier crumbles when her long-lost husband emerges amidst the crowd of persecutors, and noticing his presence, "the unhappy woman grew pale and trembled" (12). Ultimately, when society learns of Elsa and Hester's differences, the characters must respond to distrust, hatred, and the danger of further persecution.

After discovery, Hester and Elsa turn to social isolation, but with guidance, they embark on a path to self-fulfillment. Elsa flees to the snowy mountains, where she builds herself a castle made of ice, and Hester and Pearl move to an isolated house in the forest (13). This newfound freedom emancipates both characters' true natures: Elsa's power ballad, "Let It Go," narrates the unshackling of her magic as she "takes off her glove and throws it into the air," just as when Hester eventually "undid the clasp that fastened the scarlet letter, and, taking it from her bosom, threw it to a distance among the withered leaves" (14). Finally, Disney and Hawthorne conclude that in order to rediscover happiness, Elsa and Hester must accept the same differences that society condemns. When Elsa's tearful embrace returns Anna — whose body is literally frozen — back to normal, *FROZEN* sends a clear message that Elsa can undo her mistakes: "An act of true love will thaw a frozen heart" (15). Next, Elsa brings summer back to Arendelle, and "the villagers come out to see the warmth returning" (16). While the return of summer may sound like a reversal of Elsa's self-fulfillment, society's newfound admiration of Elsa also prompts its appreciation of her magic; the screenplay instructs, "We arrive at a bird's-eye view to see that where the castle had crumbled has been repaired with ice," depicting how Elsa's powers have melded beautifully with Arendelle's traditional structure (17). Likewise, when Hester decides to pursue her forbidden love with Pearl's father, her natural beauty revives, and "as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine" (18). Hawthorne's message resembles Disney's:

"Love, whether newly born, or aroused from a deathlike slumber, must always create a sunshine, filling the heart so full of radiance, that it overflows upon the outward world" (19). Fulfilling this pivotal plot point, *FROZEN* and *THE SCARLET LETTER* agree that self-acceptance trumps society's cold-hearted persecution.

While the comparisons between *FROZEN* and *THE SCARLET LETTER* are numerous, they are not all-encompassing; the stories diverge at their conclusions. Disney depicts a fairytale victory for Elsa when she calls to an eager crowd in the castle courtyard, and "Villagers cheer. Elsa stops and creates an ice rink. The people, skates at the ready, hop onto it and twirl about" (20). The screenplay neatly concludes, "All is right in Arendelle" (21). Hester's triumph, on the other hand, is ambiguous. Like Elsa learning to use her powers for good, Hester returns to the village and permanently restores the scarlet letter to her chest, with Hawthorne asserting that "in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester's life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness," and rather becomes "looked upon with awe, yet with reverence" (22). However, unlike *FROZEN*, *THE SCARLET LETTER*'s satirical composition raises the possibility that its positive messages are actually dripping with sarcasm. The closing words of *THE SCARLET LETTER* suggest a more cynical interpretation of Hester's fate: Her tombstone reads, "On a field, sable. The letter A, gules [meaning red]," which defines her life by the scarlet letter, and thus, her sin (23). Through this lens, Hester's persecution forever overshadows the later, happier stages of her life, contrasting how Arendelle wholly embraces Elsa and disregards her past mistakes.

Which story, Elsa's or Hester's, more clearly represents reality? Dr. Li-Shiun Chen, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Washington University, evaluates the situations in *FROZEN* and *THE SCARLET LETTER* alongside an example of twenty-

first-century persecution. Firstly, it is fair to say that Disney and Hawthorne's overlapping stages — in short, "conceal, don't feel" and "let it go" — reflect real-life reactions. According to Chen, "If people have a difference that is not socially desirable, they will number one, typically hide it, or they will flee to a place where it is more accepted," following Elsa and Hester (24). When asked which story's ending contains more truth, Chen chooses to defend *FROZEN*'s optimism. "I think that it's the same scenario as with the LGBTQ community," she remarks (25). "Members of the LGBTQ community are being accepted now, versus ten years ago. With time, the environment will become more accepting" (26). Perhaps, over centuries, reality has shifted in alignment with Disney's message of forgiveness... but at the same time, a nineteenth-century psychiatrist, or even a different twenty-first century psychiatrist, might side with Hawthorne instead. Overall, the stories of *FROZEN* and *THE SCARLET LETTER* continue to resonate with audiences in 2018, challenging the proverbial line between reality and fiction. Dr. Li-Shiun Chen's preference of Disney's happy ending suggests that today's society has changed its practices since Hawthorne's time — or at least, its perspective.

Even fictional history repeats itself. Authors tell variations on the narrative of persecution, from suppression, to oppression, to a degree of redemption. Disney's *FROZEN* and Hawthorne's *THE SCARLET LETTER* grapple with this pertinent arc, establishing that self-fulfillment is a separate goal from societal approval. The world has witnessed various outcasts remembered only for their mistakes — stories like Hester's — but *THE SCARLET LETTER*'s reality is not the only possible outcome; as societies progress, persecuted minorities can strive to achieve Elsa's clean redemption. Towards the end of "Let It Go," Elsa sings, "I'm never going back, the past is in the past!" (27). In reality, legends of the past permeate the present, and Hester's legacy refuses to rest in peace.

## FLASH FICTION

# NUCLEAR: AN AMERICAN FAMILY

**Adina Cazacu-De Luca**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Andy Chen

Category: Flash Fiction

## I. TONGUES

You don't need to understand Romanian to know the impact Romania has on you. Even if you should know the language. While cows walk country roads with bells on their necks, old women in hand stitched headscarves pray in the church your great grandfather built with his own two hands: there's history here. Your family has marinated in it for centuries. So, the question "where's his accent from" doesn't pierce like it ought to. Somehow, even though your father built a better life for you than what he had (with his own two hands), the two-story suburban dream you live feels stiff compared to lace doilies soiled with tea stains in an apartment as big as your master bedroom. You laugh during dinner, while eating ciorba, while sitting in 19th century chairs, while questioning why you needed so much in the first place.

Knowing the language helps, though. Even when it gets stuck in your throat with the sour taste of ceviche bought on the Panama Canal. Because now you can take the mango as big as your head that you ate in the hammock on the front porch

and exchange it for raspao on the boardwalk before playing soccer on hot cement. The summer heat is a boa constrictor, but sweat is comfort. Forget alarm clocks, that's what roosters and dogs are for. Forget subtle crosses in bedrooms, here the etagere is filled with Marías y José y cualquier cosa necesitas para darte cuenta que Dios existe.

## II. BUOYANCY

My main obstacles were alarms of various varieties: mainly, the door and a canine. Yet I tiptoed down the stairs, the pads of my feet striking hardwood silently. I braced myself using the frame that held a print of Cezanne's grandson's sailboats. Its seal of authenticity rattled slightly. Impressionism is our family's favorite movement because we wish to make masterpieces from chaos in miniature. I passed by the plaque my father bought so I could "remember being in All District Band." With the matching shirt. For 50 dollars. I was 7th chair. It wasn't the first time he spent money just to spend it, with the justification that it was for us, because he loved us, because he grew up in a communist regime that burned memorabilia, etc. His bedroom door was cracked open, and in total darkness I heard the sheets rise and sink, ebb and flow, like the tide in the painting. I came in and sat on the base of the bed. He exhaled overcompensation with every breath. I imagined complete silence. The absence of discontent sighs. It wasn't the first time my mother left or made me wonder how her uncomfortable leather shoes made the packing list and I didn't. It was, however, the first time I snuck out.

## III. COMFORT

But are your mom jeans actually your mom's? Mine are. Express Bleus Classic Denim Authentique. Their inner thighs have worn seams threatening to tear from generous use. From back in the day when denim was as thick as the accent of the owner and she wore them to TA. To take my brother to baseball games. To perform all the other responsibilities of the strong single mother she was.

The two back pockets are big enough for our hopes and dreams. They smell like chalkboards and peonies and are softer than sunsets because they take on after their abusers. I wear them with tucked in sweaters, fitted t shirts, and oversized sweatshirts. They are a vessel that screams, "this mainstream alternative girl was born in the wrong decade!" But I don't really care what they say as long as they scream it. Their care instructions are specific. Only non-chlorine bleach if you need to wash my mouth with soap, tumble dry low, warm iron. They hug me slightly at the waist and firmly at the hip, and the waistband started to crinkle when she realized I wasn't as petite as her previous user. While black hides fat, uneven patches of blue dye tell you you're beautiful the way you are.

#### IV. LOSS

I had a funeral for them last week. My tears dripped denim. The single stray thread on the inside of the front right pocket will forever be our little secret. This week, my one alive grandmother can no longer climb the stairs in the apartment building Ceausescu built for her. In Spanish class, words now roll off my tongue like cans of beans down patchwork streets: bumpy at best. The waves of midnight bedsheets lie still. My dad doesn't live here now. My mom and I do, but supposedly not for long. I don't know why I asked for so much in the first place.

## DEATH AND I

**Katelyn Gillette**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Flash Fiction

She awoke with a splitting headache and a chemical taste in her mouth. Looking around, it was hard to place where she was; a blinding darkness surrounded her on three sides, and she was able to see a tall figure in front of her, silhouetted by a blinding light. She looked up from her spot on the floor – though could she call it that if she couldn't tell where ground and sky split? – to the figure's face. She stifled a scream as a boney face stared back at her, emotionless. Death himself.

"Allison," he said, not much of a proper greeting. He reached a skeletal hand down to her, and refusing to think of her discomfort at the state of his hand, Allison allowed him to pull her up. Next to him and looking face to face, Death wasn't too intimidating; he no longer towered over her and stood only a couple inches taller.

"So, I'm dead now, aren't I?" Allison asked, not bothering to beat around the bush.

Death shrugged. "Not quiet. You're still down there in the world. A part of you at least is still holding on."

"Then why am I here?" She continued to question him, never having been patient when she didn't have all the facts.

"To wait, and listen," he answered, "maybe even to think – if that's what you truly want."

"Think about what?" Allison snapped, growing tired of his peaceful demeanor when he spoke to her as if it were all so obvious to him.

Ignoring her increasingly upset tone, Death continued with all the serenity of a saint. "Everything, nothing, all that's in between. It's up to you."

Allison remained silent at that, not knowing how to question him further. Death seemed fine with this,

allowing the silence to mingle with the darkness as the two wrapped around the pair. Her mind no longer focused on conversation, Alison allowed it to wonder to memories of life: making the school's basketball team and celebrating with friends; breaking her leg and her mother rushing her to the hospital; all the well wishes as she healed over the next few months, yet still couldn't run up the court like she had; the overwhelming feeling that she had lost her chance at her dream and the need to just get that voice in her head to be quiet. Without realizing it, tears had slowly traced their way down her face, framing her nose and lips before falling off her cheeks. New thoughts began to fill her mind, not her own memories but ideas of what would now come: her mother noticing all the pain pills were gone as realization dawned on her; finding Alison cold on the ground and frantically trying to wake her; having to tell her friends the news; black outfits and umbrellas in the rain as her body is lowered into the cold ground. Overcome by emotions, she fell to her knees, burying her head in her hands as the tears turned from a small stream to a gushing river. Death lowered himself to the ground next to her, a silent observer to her display of sorrow.

"Can I go back?" she asked, voice muffled by her hands and tears. Death merely hummed in reply, prompting her to elaborate even if she didn't need to. "Back there. To my body. To my friends, my family, my life."

"But I thought you didn't want any of that anymore. Otherwise you wouldn't have come to see me in the first place." Though not cold or mean, his words stung. They were another reminder that this was her choice, that all of this had been her doing.

"I don't want that anymore!" She said, a spark of anger bursting in her, not directed at him but at herself. "I just want to go home," Alison murmured, deflating where she sat.

"Well, it seems to me you've finally made up your

mind." Death stood, their positions now mirroring when she had first met him, his hand outstretched towards her. This time though, she did not take the offering, remaining where she was. She was not ready to move on and felt that taking his hand would mean giving up in death as she had in life. Death leaned in closer, his boney fingertips barely brushing her warm hand. "I'm not going to stop you."

She looked up at him, surprised as she felt herself pulled to her feet. "Really?"

Death nodded and pointed to the light that had outlined him before, now shining bright at what appeared to be the opening of a long tunnel. "Just follow the light. All the people who'd joked about not looking into it simply didn't comprehend the importance of continuing the fight."

## ROSE FOR THE OCEAN

**Anisha Jarang**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Wydown Middle School, Clayton, MO

Educators: Victoria Jones, Michael Ricci

Category: Flash Fiction

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She is beautiful. So majestic, so powerful. She is my guardian, my angel, my savior. Her tides swelling and falling like hair, the reflection of the moon like her clear, shining eyes. She was and always will be mine. But I am always at her whim, out in these cold, unforgiving waters, on an old wooden boat

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with too many leaks, sitting on the front of the boat, trailing my fingers in the navy-blue waters, contemplating the vast expanse of the sea. She took pity on me, saved me, and fed me. But all I can offer is my rose. A wilted flower, simply a memory of years gone by, when I would worry about the social economics of humanity and other pointless ideas that would not have gotten me anywhere in life. I am not like these heartless men. I will prove to her that I acknowledge her elegant and brave feat of rescuing me. But alas! I have nothing for her! But will she understand? Will she understand that this is love at its finest? Will she understand that this is all I have for her?

I have heard stories of men getting lost at sea. They frantically search for land, for humanity, for something to get them out of her loving hands they perceive as the devil's trap. They do not understand. They were saved! Blessed by her unending compassion. Yet they waste away hoping and dreaming for **THEIR** Garden of Eden, far away from her, she who has saved them from humanity's mistakes. And in the end, she will have no choice but to take pity on them and silence their agonized cries.

I have been here for countless days. Each morning melts into the next evening. But something doesn't seem right today. Something didn't seem right yesterday, or tomorrow. Maybe she is asleep. Maybe I cannot sense her presence. Maybe she cannot sense my presence. I will give her my rose. She is desperate. No, I am desperate. It's ridiculous for me to think this way. She has never done me wrong before. Has she forgotten? No. She has not. She will not forget about me. How could she? Why would I ever think she would do that to me? Why am I thinking this? What is happening? Nothing is happening. I am being foolish. It is nighttime now. Go to sleep. The sun is rising. Wake up. The sound of thunder makes me tremble. The bright sun burns my skin. I am starving. I am full. Am I dead? Yes, I am alive.

Voices! The first time I heard them. In a day? In a

lifetime? No, focus on the voices. Hurt voices, merry voices, angry voices, sympathetic voices. It doesn't matter. Just more ungrateful humans. Go away! We don't want you here! My beloved sea and I don't want you. Begone! Will they come in great numbers, powerful and insatiable? Will we be able to fend the voices off? What if they take her? No. No! NO! Do not think about this! How much do the voices know? She will leave me. Stop. Enough of this nonsense. She will always be there, for me, and me only. What about my rose? Is it even mine anymore? I own it, but it is her rose. She will forever be there, enduring through the years to come, many of them without me. Will she forget about-? NO. Do not, do not, do not...

...

I hear steel grind against steel. The metal is in pain. It does not want to be forced to move. Pain is the most powerful feeling. But it must obey, and so an object enters. Humanity calls it man. I call it an animal, a cruel creature. He is one of **THEM**. In his hands he holds a machine. Killing machine. The true devil's trap. He does not understand the significance of my experiences. He will separate me from my true love with no guilt. He will torture me for the fun of it. He will laugh when I cry. I scream. Will she hear me? Where is she? He tricked me. He moves his mouth. I don't care. His hand moves. A sharp whistling sound. I can see her gentle waves, her playful tides. I love you.

## MY MOTHER'S DAUGHTER

**Alexandria Latuda**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Flash Fiction

The pumpkin bread at Sunday brunch was something Kate missed, but the conversation during it was not. Listening to her mother and her mother's friends discuss the sermon they had just heard was not enjoyable. Her mother would ask her what she thought, and Kate would say, "Pastor Reynolds speaks so passionately," because that's the best compliment she could give. Today's sermon had been about modesty and why women who don't have it hate themselves, or their fathers, or the world. That wasn't the way pastor Reynolds had framed it, of course. He had talked about the importance of paternal relationships, and about what happens when they are lacking. Her mother had of course found it delightful; even afterwards when they went up to talk to him and he said, "Women dress in these ways, and things happen to them and it's tragic. Not always, but more often than not, these things happen to a certain type of woman, and we have to ask ourselves," he placed his hand on his heart, "and these women have to ask themselves, why?"

Before Kate visited her mother she had joked with her sister, Laura, about spending time with their mother. "It's getting harder and harder to visit her because she says things that are just maddening, but I know if I say something no good will come of it," said Laura.

"I don't know; I like the way eggshells feel on my feet," responded Kate.

"Maybe we put a dollar in a jar every time she says something ignorant, and then we donate that money to Emily's List, that way it evens out," Laura joked.

Kate laughed, "You got that kind of money?"  
"I could liquidate some assets."

Laura hadn't driven up yet, so Kate had no one to make understanding eye contact with while she listened to her mother and her friends chat. So she drank coffee and stared at her feet and winced internally as she heard her mother's friend, Karen, talk about how it was a woman's job to ward off "unwanted male attention" and to be "pretty, but not distracting." This had come up after another woman, Jeannie, had said, "Pastor Reynolds

made a really good point about the energy **THESE** women give off." Of course earlier they had criticized another younger woman for coming to church with no makeup on and characterized her as being, "grossly underdressed."

"Just take some pride in your appearance," Karen said.

"She's not married and I know she's not doing herself any favors in that department," her mother agreed. Kate looked up at her, but didn't say anything. There were moments when she felt like she had the stamina to confront her mother, but it was hard to teach another person things that you were still trying to teach yourself.

Kate hated that she still felt the pressure to look put together no matter where she was going or what time it was; she didn't like being catcalled, but a part of her wanted the validation. It was hard desiring something that you didn't want, that made you feel unsafe. Growing up she had wanted to be the girl boys liked, the girl that wasn't like other girls because other girls were frivolous and silly.

"What did you think of the sermon, Kate?" Her mother asked.

"Pastor Reynolds speaks with such passion and intensity, you can tell he really cares."

"Isn't he incredible? He's been a pastor for thirty years and every year he gets better," Karen said.  
"I hope he's a pastor for another thirty," her mother said. "Wouldn't it be great if your kids could hear the same sermons you have?"  
Kate smiled. "That'd be wonderful," she said.

## MEMORY IS LIKE A BULLET TRAIN

**Fiona Richards**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Mary Institution & St Louis Day School, Saint Louis, MO

Category: Flash Fiction

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One foggy morning on the bullet train heading 4:46 Eurostar to Paris, two passengers sat across from each other, avoiding the other's gaze, and pretending to be strangers. The man had sat across from Sylvia since the train pulled out of St. Pancras Station in London. He had seemed familiar at first, the way strangers often remind us of our friends. But slowly it dawned on her that this was someone she used to know. It was Yves. She recognized him from when they were young, running in the cobblestone streets of their village until their mothers called them home to supper. It took some time for her to place the sparkling blue eyes hidden under lines from years out in the harsh sun, and the dark brown hair the color of chocolate mousse now streaked with grey. Despite his age, she could see a shadow of his younger self, and with it, a glimpse of what might have been.

When she first recognized him, she was shocked, and thought to herself first, **WHAT IF HE DOESN'T REMEMBER ME?** And then, **WHAT IF HE DOES?** Both situations made her heart beat faster in her chest. Slowly, Sylvia glanced at the clock, noticing that there was still over an hour until they reached their destination. They were not scheduled to pull into Gare du Nord until just after seven. She began to question her notion of getting on this train in the first place. **DID SHE REALLY WANT TO RETURN TO FRANCE AND ALL THE MEMORIES AND PAIN IT HELD? DID SHE REALLY WANT TO BECOME SYLVIE AGAIN, WHEN SHE HAD BEEN SYLVIA FOR SO MANY YEARS? WHY HAD SHE EVER LEFT HER PEACEFUL WELSH HOME? WALES WAS A PLACE WHERE THE LOCALS SPOKE IN AN ENDEARING DIALECT, AND THE SUN NEVER SHONE, BUT SHE LOVED IT NONETHELESS. SHE LOVED THE WAY THE SHEEP BLEATED AS THEY MEandered AROUND THEIR MUDDY PASTURE,**

THE ROLLING HILLS, AND THE WAY HER SMALL YELLOW CAR BUMPED OVER THE UNEVENLY PLACED CATTLE GRATES. SHE LOVED THE FEW RARE DAYS EACH YEAR WHEN THE SUN SHONE, CASTING AN ANGELIC GLOW ABOUT THE FARM. CHICKENS, PLANTS, AND SHEEP WERE HER ONLY COMPANIONS NOW, EVER SINCE HER HUSBAND RICHARD HAD DIED THE PREVIOUS WINTER, AND SHE HAD FOUND HERSELF RATHER ALONE, WISHING TO MAKE PEACE WITH THE DEMONS THAT WAITED FOR HER IN FRANCE. As she thought about all that was right with her life in Wales, she found herself slipping into a light slumber, the kind that you wake up from feeling simultaneously refreshed and confused.

Sylvie had first met Yves at the village school, made up of a few rooms, the air thick with chalk dust. He sat in the desk behind her, but she paid him no mind. Sylvie had all the friends she needed, pretty girls with long brown braids, nothing like Yves, the farm boy with perpetually muddy knees. One day, her mother, who owned the patisserie, frantically asked Sylvie to run to the farm to pick up more eggs. The closest farm that kept chickens happened to be Yves's. Walking down the lane, dusty soil warm under her bare feet, Sylvie eventually reached the farm, momentarily distracted by the beautiful fields of sunflowers and grapevines twisting towards the sun. Then she saw him. Yves. Refusing to give her eggs, he asked for payment in the form of a game of hide and seek. Something magical happened to Sylvie and her new friend in the hazy late afternoon sun that day. Two people, united by circumstance, so different in life, yet with such similar essence and joie de vivre. Over the next few years, friendship would turn to love, many nights spent lying in the middle of the vineyard on a tattered blanket, staring up at the infinite stars above them, and sharing the occasional secret kiss.

Her daydreams always returned to her youth, and this sunny morning was no exception. Sylvia thought to herself, **PERHAPS THAT IS WHY I FELT CALLED BACK TO FRANCE?** Her mind could see the patisserie, the boulangerie, the boucherie, and her childhood home. She could smell southern

France, the way that the salty Mediterranean air mixed with the sour smells of the fish market, and the rich scent of freshly baked bread. When she woke up, she found herself thinking about lies, particularly the lies that had driven her to wake up one morning and impulsively drive as far away from her village as was humanly possible with only the clothes on her back. **SOMETIMES WE TELL LIES TO PROTECT PEOPLE, OTHER TIMES WE USE LIES TO PROTECT OURSELVES, AND SOMETIMES WE LET OTHERS WRITE OUR LIES FOR US. HOWEVER HONORABLE THE INTENTIONS LIES CREATE CHASMS.** A CHASM SO JAGGED AND WIDE THAT YOU ARE UNABLE TO BUILD A BRIDGE ACROSS IT BACK TO THE OTHER PERSON. SOMETIMES THE CRACK IS SMALL ENOUGH THAT IT CAN BE FIXED BY A SHARED ÉCLAIR AND A HUG. OVER TIME THOUGH, THE CRACK WORSENS, GETTING WIDER AND WIDER, DEEPER AND DEEPER. THIS FAULT LINE WILL NEVER FULLY HEAL, LEAVING A SCAR, A MARK ON THE RELATIONSHIP AND EVERYONE INVOLVED.

When Sylvia woke up, she rediscovered her predicament. She decided, after a half hour of questioning herself and her decisions, to swallow her pride and reintroduce herself. She looked at him and those intelligent blue eyes of his caught her stare immediately. Speaking quietly at first, in a halting voice, she said, "Bonjour Yves, c'est moi. C'est Sylvie." As she spoke to him, she felt the memories resurface, the memories she had worked so hard to forget...

## OKAY

**Gretchen Roth**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Park Hill South High School, Riverside, MO  
Educator: Idean Bindel

Category: Flash Fiction

When we were five, we ventured off to our first day of kindergarten, arm in arm. We were the same person, Clare and I, a reflection in the sparkling glass.

We didn't understand why Mom's tears made their way down distant trails of agony. Nor did we comprehend why she tended to hug Clare more than me. We did know that, as much as Mom tried, she couldn't help but linger on every goodbye.

When the others asked what was wrong with Clare—asked why half her face seemed to be 'on pause'—we didn't understand. We were the same, a beautiful mirror, a beautiful replica, two statues sculpted by the same hands.

Clare and I.

Our soft brown ringlets bounced to the same tune. Our vibrant eyes explored the same views. Meanwhile, when Clare took her first plunge to the ground, we didn't think anything of it.

Then, when we were eight, Clare fell again.

And again.

And again.

Her continuous falling tiptoed around the idea that something was wrong. We were sure of it when Clare tripped once more—except this time, she couldn't get back up.

I can still recall the way I cried for help. The way I screamed because I couldn't hear over the darkness. Thoughts raced through unexplored caverns, shoving out the sounds of teachers surrounding us, attempting to tell us she would be okay.

But even I felt the falter in their voices—a falter that did everything but reassure. Clare couldn't get up and I only believed the lies when Mom came and told me herself. Clare was okay, and we'd be okay.

I didn't know that **OKAY** would include more tears, more falling, and eventually something else.

For now though, we were the same.

Then, a week later, our tears now tattooed, the doctors consulted our family. With stiff posture and

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concern-laced words, they explained what we would face.

Clare and I.

We couldn't hear what Mom and Dad fought about that night, but we could feel the tension thickening in the air.

Eventually, after a couple restless hours, we could tell that they were fighting over what to do with Clare. We wouldn't be going uphill anytime soon, but we could still be okay, Clare and I.

When we were ten, she was moved to a different school. A school that would help her stop falling as much, help her fit right in, help her be the same as me again.

When we were nearing 11, we went on vacation. The Disney experience was all-consuming. At the hotel, we would jump into bed and pretend to sleep. One night in particular, when we thought Mom and Dad were sleeping, we stayed up and talked. Clare pulled up her blanket further and faced me, saying, "I know I've said this before, but this time I really mean it. I think I'm getting better."

I couldn't quite see her face, but I could feel her sincerity. The words carefully trickled toward me, bracing me with hope. "Pinky promise?"

She held out her pinky and shook her head. "Promise."

This was okay. We would be okay.

Clare and I.

When we were 14, Clare tumbled down the dark hardwood stairs, sobbing with every step. Reaching the agonizing bottom, she didn't scream, couldn't scream. The unbearable pain and fear deepened the silence below the point of recognition.

After her plummet, I laid next to her and could tell something was different, but the diminutive movement of her chest reassured me.

When we were almost 16, we were the same for the last time.

Clare and I.

The hospital beds were stiff as I sat beside Clare, the salt of tears trembling their way into my mouth. As I looked around us at the exquisite flowers, refusing to acknowledge the slow increase in beeping. With a last whisper of hope, I remember hearing, "We'll be okay".

## LONESOME LANDS

**Paiton Stith**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Flash Fiction

Ernest wiped a fleck of ash from his overgrown eyebrow. It seemed that the hair at the top of his head had, like his grandchildren, unceremoniously ripped out its roots and relocated elsewhere. His grandchildren left for places like Colorado or New York, and his hair fled to his brow once his age had surpassed 60. One of his suspender straps had fell off his shoulder and hung useless at his hip. Red, orange, and yellow reflected in his watery gray eyes, and it shimmered across the surface of the metal bucket he held in one spotted hand. The night crackled with flame.

On and on the plains of swaying grass stretched, his crops a small part but the only section on fire. He looked down at the bucket of water he held and back at the flames. His pants were only half-tucked into his boots, and he wore an expression of bewilderment like he couldn't believe the flames would pull such a stunt at this late stage in his life. Finally, he decided it was a personal insult

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and compressed his loose lips into a frown.

"Jeremy! Aidan!" He called in the vain hope that they might've lingered after the day's work, but neither made an appearance. When he climbed down the porch stairs and peered around the side of his house to the drive, their rusted truck was gone.

He hobbled over to the edge of the flames and struggled to toss his bucketful of water on them, skinny arms wavering. When he finally managed, the flames only leapt out at him with double the fury and he stumbled back, nearly losing his balance.

"No," he cried, eyes appearing from beneath his hairy white brow. A brow now singed at the edges.

He hurried back to his home and fumbled with the hose until he could refill the bucket, but every moment was another second lost to the fire. The thought of it made his hands shake until he poured more water onto the ground than into the bucket. When it was filled, he looked back to the raging flames and decided that he needed another bucket.

He was the kind of old man that didn't use a cane, but stooped over as if he might be using one anyway and, needless to say, his progress into the sagging farmhouse was slow. He gripped the peeling rails for support as he ascended, huffing and puffing onto the porch and into the hall. An unfolded letter from his daughter, begging him to give up the farm and move to Seattle, sat on the coffee table, along with a few other papers and envelopes. Pictures of children and grandchildren took up every possible inch of space. Each picture containing a different background of somewhere very, very far away.

He emerged victorious from a storage closet armed with a second tin bucket and hurried out, stopping only briefly to call the mothers of the two farm boys he hired. It only took a moment to fill the

second bucket. Swiping the sweat from his brow with his loose shirtsleeve, he marched to the fire, a pail in each hand.

He struggled for a long while with each collection of precious water and when both had been hurled, he took in the lowering flames, already dying down after their hunger had been sated. The red reflections danced in his eyes like malicious imps. With a cry he hurled a bucket into the flames as far as he could before collapsing onto the ground to stare at the stars. He had no choice but to wait for the farm boys to come back from their separate lives. No care at all for Old Man Ernest left behind on his farm in the blistering night. The fields stretched on for miles, and he was in the center, his house nothing to no one. A stubborn island in the swaying country sea.

## YEAH

**Ann Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Flash Fiction

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"Hey Ito, you ever touched a girl before?" That's Wayne grinning next to me on the bench. He's way better at polo than me, and Coach almost always puts him in the game, except this game is on senior night so all the seniors are playing, which means not Wayne because he's a sophomore — one year younger than me, though he talks to me like I'm still wearing floaties. I tell Wayne, "I don't know." I try not to think much about touching girls.

"What do you mean you don't know? That's not

something you forget about, unless you already lost count, huh?" He elbows me hard, smiling with all his shark teeth, and I think I'll have a bruise on my skinny left bicep tomorrow. At least I don't have purple scratches all across my back like Wayne — those are because he talks shit to bigass guys in the water, but it looks like he got to fighting with a buncha monster squirrels.

"Tell me the name of one girl you touched before," says Wayne. "Good-looking guy like you has to get some decent action, yeah?"

"Yeah, maybe." I keep watching the game, ignoring Wayne in the corner of my eye. Some guy from the other team is holding our guy in place underwater, and the ref's looking right at him but won't call the foul. Dumbass ref.

Then all of a sudden I remember something. "I touched Sarah once," I say to Wayne. Sarah's a senior so she's in the pool right now and can't hear me. She's the only girl on the team — joined just last year because she's an excellent swimmer and the swim coach told her, "Do water polo to get even faster!" but I don't think she likes the game or her teammates real much. I don't blame her.

What I'm saying to Wayne is, "Once during practice I was doing a wrestling drill with Sarah." I'm the smallest guy on the team, so when her boyfriend skips practice, she pairs with me. For this drill we interlocked arms in the middle of the pool and tried to tread the water real hard — to push the other person all the way to the opposite wall. See, Sarah's built kinda like those pro gymnast ladies, short but not small, with bulging shoulders, calves like inverted triangles — strong as hell, and usually she beats me. But this time, I say to Wayne, "She was tired. She tried twisting her arm around me but I twisted it back and surprise, I ended up grabbing her boob." Then my hand quickly slipped away, so Sarah didn't yell at me, just blew air real sharply out her nose. We kept wrestling until Coach blew his whistle, which meant nobody won.

After I tell Wayne about Sarah, he mutters, "Doesn't count, dumbass. She sees you in your Speedo all the time."

"Oh. Yeah, duh."

I couldn't focus one hundred percent during that practice after the whole Sarah thing. I only made one shot, which hardly counts because Sarah was defending shallow-end and only takes up a tiny fraction of the goal. Yeah, we were awkward together, and not awkward in the blushing-and-soft-smiles kinda way, but more like can-I-sink-into-the-depths-of-the-earth-and-never-meet-a-human-soul-again. But man, the touching wasn't even real touching, because Sarah was wearing an extra tight swimsuit and underneath felt like a smooth hill pressing against my palm, like the things you see on naked lady mannequins. I know in real life those things look droopy and sometimes uneven, but even the smooth hill felt gross enough to me.

When Wayne talks again, his eyes are reflecting the pool lights, sparkling real bright. He blinks, like slow motion, and scrunches up his freckled nose. Says, "Wait, isn't she your cousin, man?"

"Who?"

"Sarah. She's like, your fucking cousin, Ito!"

Sarah's not my cousin. She's Chinese and I'm Japanese but we're the only Asian kids in our grade, so Wayne has convinced himself we're at least distantly related.

"And you LIKE her," Wayne adds under his breath. It's like always — like we're underwater and he can't hear my words, but he watches my mouth spewing bubbles which shimmy towards the surface, and if he squints one eye, he can distinguish a pattern among the bubbles, like a constellation, maybe Sagittarius, and if he squints the other eye it becomes the fucking Big Dipper. And Wayne searches and searches for the shape he wants. Or doesn't want.

"Sarah's actually nice," I say a beat late. When we get snacks after practice, she'll slip me an extra bag of Cheez-Its.

"That's gross, man. That you like your fucking cousin. Tomorrow you'll tell me you like fucking your cousin!" Wayne starts guffawing. He whacks the side of my thigh with the back of his hand, and I lower my heels all the way to the ground to stop my chicken legs from trembling.

"Haha, yeah."

Meanwhile in front of us, the game is migrating back towards our side of the pool. Both teams move sluggishly. I think we're losing. The seniors are tired because half of them are benchwarmers unaccustomed to playing so long — they glance pleadingly at Coach, who pretends not to notice. One of the less professional swimmers is racing down late, kicking up a flurry of water that manages to sprinkle some of us on the bench. It's the first time we've touched water since climbing out of the pool after warm-up. Seconds ago, we were completely dried out, even our hair. But now there are silver pearls of water on Wayne's pinkish thighs. Goosebumps spreading like wildfire across his skin.

He's still laughing about his mind-blowing wordplay, his sparkling eyes aimed at the two of our feet almost touching, but his humor's running out of steam. "You've got a fucked-up mind, Ito." "Yeah," I whisper. I wish that I could tell him No.

## ICING AND TEARS AND HAPPINESS

**Carrie Zhang**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Flash Fiction

**THEY SHOULD HAVE DUG THE HOLE DEEPER.** I glance at the mound of dry dirt that piles higher than my leg, averting my eyes as Mr. Sawyer, our neighbor, and my father strike the ground with their hulking shovels. The flowers that my sisters and

I carefully selected at The Flower Factory seem to wither right in front of me, their once crisp petals faded into bitter brown. We should have planted them around him, not on him. Nothing grows from dead things.

"Emily," my older sister, Amanda says, pulling me out of my daze. "Come on. I can make you some hot chocolate."

I hear myself say, "I don't want any," but I follow her back to the house. We pass the giant wire fence that encloses his kennels: a miniature red barn and a greying igloo with weeds grasping onto the bottom edges, like skeleton hands rising up from below. At least the dandelions are pretty. They dance softly as the wind brushes past them, moving to and fro, waving to me. As Amanda grasps my arm, pulling me up the porch steps, the trees began to rustle, sending the scattered leaves around my feet into a frenzy.

As I slouch over the kitchen table with my arms wrapped around my legs, my parents bicker over whose turn it is to take me to soccer practice, and Jill, my oldest sister, shuffles off to her room. Amanda places a steaming cup of hot chocolate in front of me on the kitchen table as I pick away at my unwinding sweater.

"We won't forget him," Amanda says, almost like a promise.

"I know." I lean forward, resting my chin on my arms and gazing at the steam that floats over the hot chocolate.

I can't remember what I ate for breakfast, and I always forgot my homework on my desk, but, I can recall my first memory as if it happened yesterday.

Three years old. Two feet tall. Pink Sketchers that could fit in a saucer.

There is a small birthday banner painted with bright blue letters, splashed with silver sparkles that

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reminds me of stars. My sisters and I play a game with a bundle of pink balloons, throwing them in the air and counting how many times we can keep them up before they fall. A party hat sits on my head, and I tug at the thin, elastic white string that digs into my skin.

Happy birthday, Emmy, WO DE XIAO BAOBÈI, my little baby.

My mother's sweet laugh cascades from the kitchen as my father tells her a joke as my sisters and I attempt to build a house out of the melting candles that still have bits of cake stuck to the bottom edges.

I felt it then: the best emotion of all. Happiness.

My sisters take me out to the backyard where the scent of fresh-cut grass and sweet cake wafts through the air, and my dog zooms back and forth, his tail high up in the air. I scrub at my left hand that is decorated with blue and pink icing smudges.

JUST CLIMB UP THE TREE, EMILY. HERE. WE'LL GIVE YOU A BOOST.

Giggling as I wrap my arms around a thick tree branch, I hear Emily cheering me on. One hand in front of the other, I make my way up the tree until I reach for an unforgiving branch. I plummet to the ground, landing in a crumpled heap in front of my sisters. My hot, salty tears mix with the icing still on my lips, turning my mouth bitter. As I cry out from the pain, my dog appears at my sides, nestling his warm, fury head in the crook of my arm. My sisters nudge me up against the tree until my back rests against the trunk and the grass prickles the undersides of my legs.

I felt it again. Happiness. Happiness because I knew I was protected. I was safe.

My first memory.

My best memory.

The hot chocolate sits unfinished on the kitchen table, no longer accompanied by the steamy waves. Amanda and my parents are watching the news in the living room, and Jill rummages in the refrigerator behind me. I slip on my sneakers and push open the porch door, stepping out into the frigid fall air that slices through my thin sweater.

Old water bowls still sit on the porch where he used to nap, and I spot a half-filled bag of dog food sitting in the corner of my garage. I almost trip over an overflowing box of toys under the creaking porch.

I cross my arms across my chest, tugging my jacket around me tighter as the wind picks up. My foot hits something soft, and I squint as I look down. A bright orange object peeks up at me from among the grass. I nudge it with my foot and reach down to pick it up. It's his favorite goldfish toy, dusted with specks of dirt and flecks of grass.

I toss it in the air. I watch as the fish swims up and then dives down, but no wagging tail whishes past me to catch it. It lands in the grass with a soft thud.

## HUMOR

# HOW TO USE YOUR UNIVERSAL REMOTE

**Mina Chen**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Oakland Middle School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Julia Ross

Category: Humor

CeLestial thank you for purchasing our product! Your new Universal Remote is compatible with any planet in the universe! Using radio frequency technology this device is designed to allow you to control your planet from an efficient and safe distance. We advise you to please read the instructions provided below thoroughly before proceeding your use. Please keep this manual for future reference.

## WARNING

Attention! Not intended for beings under the age of 1,000,000,000,000,000. Do not store under direct sunlight or in the reach of mortals. May cause possible destruction and havoc if used improperly.

Battery requirements: This simple technology requires 3 "ZZZ" sized batteries. Batteries only need to be inserted once. Replacing batteries may lead to memory database erasing. Resetting planet may be necessary.

## Key functions:

### POWER

Press to start watching your planet.

### ORDER CONTROLS (+/-)

Press "+" button to increase the orderly amount on the planet. Press "-" button to decrease the orderly amount.

### MESS

Press button to deactivate all order on planet.

CAUTION: Should 5 hours or more pass after the activating of this button, planet would lose all control and self-destruct. Resetting planet may be necessary.

### LOCATION SCAN

Press "+" button to increase and adjust to longitude or latitude to location of liking. Press "-" to decrease and adjust to longitude or latitude to location of liking.

### LOCATION SELECTION (0,1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9)

Press any numeral to immediately enter in longitude and latitude of location of liking.

### ENTER

Press to confirm selected choice of location.

### FAVORITE

Press to immediately choose from your list of favorite planet locations.

### MENU

Press to enter into Universal menu.

### DIRECTION KEYS (<,>,<v>)

Press to operate through Menu.

### EXIT

Press to exit Universal menu.

### REMEMBER

Press to indicate historic moment starting, press again to end important moment. NOTE: Any historic moment will automatically be embedded in the generations of future history.

### FAST-FORWARD

Press to speed up the advancement progress of planet (in years).

### REWIND

Press to step back the advancement progress of planet (in years).

### STOP

Press to completely halt the advancement progress of planet.

### PROGRESS

Press to begin or continue the advancement progress of planet.

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### GUIDE

Press to see this manual.

### PROGRAMMING YOUR UNIVERSAL REMOTE AND PLANET:

#### SETTINGS

Press Menu

Use direction key to select Settings.

Press Enter

Now that you are in Settings, toggle with various switches to personalize your planet for a much more pleasant experience.

Weather: Enter the longitude and latitude of location to choose from the variety of different weathers that location should receive (randomize, blazing sun, cloudy skies, swirling winds, thunderstorm, snowstorm, and catastrophe). NOTE: Double click on catastrophe to bring up choices e.g. heat wave, tornado, tycoon, tsunami, monsoon, or hurricane)

Periodic table: Choose from an endless list of common materials you desire to be naturally found on your planet e.g. helium, sulfur, oxygen, ytterbium, hassium, dirty gym socks, etc.

Moons: Use the slide bar to adjust how fast planet's each individual moon should be spinning in orbit. Scroll down to find lighting options on individual moon. You can also design a vague image of your choice on the moon. Ex: A man's face.

#### CONNECT TO LIFE

Press Menu

Use direction key to select Connect

Press enter and wait for Life to appear

Select life with direction key and press enter again Now that your planet has connected to Life a switch should appear. Switch on or off Life to enable or disable life on planet. If enabled, slide bars of how fast life should increase, how fast it should decrease, and how many forms of life you desire will appear. Here, you can also customize your list of favorite life forms or delete any you don't desire.

#### SAFETY

Press Menu

Use direction key to select Safety

Press Enter

To ensure that your planet is protected we recommend you to set up your security precautions.

Parental controls: Allow your planet only 1,000,000 years old only on certain locations by securing certain locations on planet with a child lock password. You can also set a limit of how many years they can be on it by arranging a timer.

Password setting: Set up a password so that your planet is at maximum security when it comes to who controls it.

Privacy: Switch to Private so your planet is inaccessible to anyone but you or control who's planet is accessible to see yours. NOTE: Celestials is not responsible for the disturbance on Life that this may cause. Allow access with own caution.

#### ADVANCED

Press Menu

Use direction key to select Advanced

Press Enter

Order control: Determine what increasing the Order control on your planet should look like, e.g., standardization, harmonious, uniformity, or perfect structure. Determine what decreasing the Order control on your planet should look like e.g. disorganization, lawlessness, semi-insanity, or total crazy.

Location: Enter coordinates of favorite locations here. Select Automatically remember to immediately start remembering anything that happens in favorite locations.

FREQUENT PROBLEMS & SUPPORT answered by Steve! Our only customer tech support guy! Take it away!

Q: "What if I accidentally press Remember while watching a goat on my planet screaming?" - Monster Creator

A: "Consequently this will result in all life on your planet have screaming goats noises stuck in their heads. Forever." - Steve

Q: "I misplaced my Universal Remote on my planet and a life form has it, help!" - Forgetful

A: "No worries, if you've been smart enough to read all the way through this manual you would

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have already taken precautions and set up a password that is guaranteed to make sure the life form won't inflict harm to your planet. If you're lazy and you think reading a remote control manual is utterly pointless then your planet is being obliterated by whatever life form has a hold of your Universal Remote right about... Now." - Steve  
Q: "I allowed my new girlfriend access to my planet a months ago and after our breakup yesterday she used her planet's Life come to invade and terminate mine. What do I do?" - I'm Single

A: "CeLestial is not responsible for disturbance on Life sharing access to planet may cause. I suggest you cancel all your Planet Life plan and think extra carefully next time before sharing everything with a psycho girlfriend." - Steve

Q: "I have 79 moons in my orbit would I have to set up each moon manually?" - Zeus

A: "Yes, or buy the CeLestial's newest product on the market, 100 beautifully pre set-up moons!" - Steve

Q: "I'm having trouble with the Progress button on my Universal Remote, my planet is not advancing at all." - The Almighty

A: "Several factors can lead to Progress button malfunctioning, but have you considered switching to the new "Planet Intelligent Life plan" (purchase available online at CeLestial.org) to help progress or advance your planet better?" - Steve

Q: "I think my Periodic table in Settings is broken; no matter which common materials I select to be naturally found on my planet it always sets back to only dirty gym socks. And now my planet is layered in smelly white cloth!" - Not sponsored to ask this

A: "Yes, that is a current glitch in the system, luckily there's an easy fix! In the periodic table scroll down until you find Washing machine and select it, then scroll down a little further to find Febreze and select that too. You'll still have socks all over your planet but, hey, they don't stink anymore." - Steve

∞ ∞ ∞ ∞ Gods Road, Center of Universe.

"Whoa! It's my Christmas present!?"

"Yes, son, and your birthday present. It's a blessing your birthday's on Christmas too. You have no idea how much we can save when we only have to buy one presen— Ow, my toes!"

"You're father's kidding, just open your err— celebratory present."

The just-reached 1,000,000,000,000,000-year-old boy feverishly released the barely spherical, lump from its black starry wrap to reveal... "Oh, the wrappings made it look a lot bigger," the excitement in his expression melted swifter than a wax statue without cold air conditioning.

"Hey," the boy's father pulls him into a gruff embrace, and he whispers into his child's ear, "don't underestimate it. That planet had brought me wonders when I was your age, kiddo."

"I know."

The boy's mother sighed, "It's not the big planets most of your friends seem to have but it has the unlimited Planet Life plan..." she whips out a gift-wrapped prism from behind her back, "and it did come with a free Universal Remote!"

The boy laughed, inviting his mother into the hug with his father too, "Sorry for being ungrateful earlier, it's perfect," a black Universal Remote peeks out from the flimsy paper when he tears his gift open, and he jokes, "at least now it is."

"Is that piece of paper the Universal Remote manual, Mary?"

"It came with the remote, honey, I thought maybe he'll need it to figure out how to use it. There's a lot of fancy buttons on the thing."

"Relax, he's from the new times, he already knows what he's doing, right, Jesus?"

"Yep, I totally know what I'm doing."

## FURTHER QUESTIONS OR CONCERNNS?

Please visit [ihaveaproblem.org](http://ihaveaproblem.org) or write to Steve at

# WOODBURY HIGH SCHOOL NEWSPAPER

**Bridget Pegg**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Incarnate Word Academy, Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Claire LaMarche

Category: Humor

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### **Government Teacher Tries Really Hard to be Impartial**

Stewing behind her desk while watching a presentation on the constitution devolve into a rant about the current governor, government teacher Ms. Smith wondered if she was allowed to inform the student that the U.S. tax plan was, in fact, NOT a product of communist Russia.

"It's so difficult in these divisive times to be informational, and not let my biases show through," She told us, "Especially since the class is primarily based on discussions of some hot-button issues."

In her first year of teaching the subject, Ms. Smith seems disappointed that her fourteen and fifteen-year-old students appear to be incapable of nuanced political arguments and debates on the nature of governance.

"Just last week, a student said, 'I don't think there should BE a government at all. Like, can't we just pay somebody a little bit of money every once in awhile to build the roads and schools and keep

us from getting killed?' To which I replied, 'That's what the government DOES.'"

Following that comment, the school received a barrage of angry phone calls and emails from parents upset.

"Why can't these teachers ONE, reinforce my family's personal beliefs," Said angry parent Nancy Wilcox, "While TWO, teaching the basics of civics. It should be simple!"

In response to the criticism, Ms. Smith has adopted the policy of only replying to students' opinions with, "Well, that's one way to think about things."

Despite the controversy surrounding her class, Ms. Smith says that she can at least take comfort that her students are doing better than the current U.S. Government: "Sometimes they even finish their work on time!"

Meanwhile, Woodbury's English department head, Mr. Jefferson, was debating between affixing a Greenpeace or Socialists of America sticker on his classroom door.

### **Sophomore Makes Concerted Effort to Not Wear School Lanyard**

Coming to the sudden realization she spent the past year traipsing around the school "like an idiot" with the Woodbury High ID lanyard dangling proudly from her neck, sophomore Sophie Peterson has decided to stop donning the offensive article and instead walk around freed from its yoke of oppression. The decision was largely spurred by seeing the new class of wide-eyed freshmen wander around, completely oblivious to how the bright red mesh clashed with their Hot Topic t-shirts.

Sophie has a word of advice for those worried about the school policy to not take off the lanyard: "Whenever a teacher gets too close, I, like, hold it up NEAR my neck until they go away, and then I stuff it into my backpack — so much easier than actually WEARING it."

### **Detention isn't that Bad, Says Student Spending Most of High School in Detention**

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In detention news, supposedly “good kid” Nathan Gerdes recently landed himself in detention for correcting a teacher too many times.

“Look, I’m not that type of student,” He said, “I just wanted to [HELP!](#)”

Nathan appeared to be on the verge of a breakdown when he appeared for his sentence of a thirty-minute period in silence. However, Woodbury High legend Kiki Kostecki comforted him.

“It isn’t that bad,” Kiki said, “You just sit there, staring at the wall. It’s chill.”

Kiki has allegedly clocked the most hours spent in detention, surpassing Woodbury alumni and three-time check fraud felon Connor Walsh as the title holder.

“She clearly knew what she was doing in detention,” Said Nathan later, noting that she asked the detention proctor how his family was before making her way to her specified chair, “There was an engraved nameplate and everything.”

Outside of detention, Kiki says she enjoys arguing with teachers over the efficacy of taking notes on her Apple Watch.

### Drama Teacher Regrets Teaching Theater Warm-Up

Woodbury's resident drama teacher, Ms. Laird, reportedly immediately regretted teaching theater warm-ups to her Introductory Theater students.

“At first, they were shy, mumbling,” She said, “But then...they started to roar, louder and louder...Like the crowd at my regional production of Chekhov's [THREE SISTERS](#). Then, within minutes, there were people trying to split into four different octaves, students unnecessarily stretching, quotes from [HAMILTON](#).”

At press time, a disconcerting chorus of twenty hyper theater kids sang as one, “When [I TOOK](#) my [TEA](#) [I TOOK](#) my [TUTU](#) out.”

“I will admit this doesn't look great,” Ms. Laird

mumbled, “But they didn’t want to read [WAITING FOR GODOT](#).”

Following another round of noise exercises, Ms. Laird took another swig of coffee and put earplugs in.

“What?” She asked, “They’re sanity measures.”

### Investigation: Accumulating Ball of Hair Tumbles Through Hallway

Many students have claimed to have witnessed a mysterious ball of hair slowly drifting through the halls, growing in size as it traveled. Also known as “The Blob,” “The Hairy Horror,” and “Tumbleweave,” none have successfully captured or destroyed the Ball, though many have tried. The administration claims that there is no evidence for the Ball, and denies its very existence. They blame increased sighting of the Ball on stress-induced hallucinations. However, maintenance worker Tommy Willis believes that this is merely a cover-up: “I’ve seen it! I don’t care what those paper-shufflers in the office think or say. They don’t want this to get out, that’s all. I’ve been hunting the Ball since the ‘80s. I came close last year, [SO](#) close... But the leftover perm glues everything together, and the flattening from the early two thousands makes it hard to grip. It just kept rolling through the hallway, and no one did anything... rolling, rolling, rolling...”

### Geometry Teacher Replaces Chemistry Teacher as “The Cool One”

Ever since she started attaching “Fresh memes” and “spicy tweets” to the last page of her tests, Geometry teacher Angela Wilson has been on the rise, replacing Alex Johnson as “The Cool One.”

“Yeah, Mr. Johnson blows up things all the time,” Said one sophomore, “But I [FEEL](#) those memes. Sometimes, she even puts emojis in the equations. Stuff like, ‘Solve for Dancing Lady’ instead of x.” Wilson is reportedly ecstatic, telling her husband, “I know teachers aren’t supposed to have favorites, but it’s nice to know that I’m the [STUDENTS](#)’ favorite.”

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Mr. Johnson, inconsolable, said that he would try to throw in an extra day of slime making to win back the teenagers' fickle favor.

"Do you know how hard it is to make Chemistry [INTERESTING?](#)" He lamented, "I set everything flammable on fire, I doused half my classroom in acid, and they [STILL](#) move on to other teachers. I can't lie — I feel betrayed. I guess I'm going to have to start throwing out candy to stay relevant."

### **Teachers Still Baffled By Technology, Study Shows**

For the fiftieth year in a row, a recent study conducted by every exasperated I.T. worker has concluded that teachers continue to be perplexed by all manner of classroom technology. Teachers particularly struggled with difficult tasks like shutting off the overhead projectors, sending emails, and turning their computers on and off.

Despite recent difficulties, the Conglomeration of Technology Experts in Schools remains hopeful for the future, putting out the following statement: "We're working to give them new tablets, new SmartBoards, and all new programming next year. That'll definitely clear things up."

The teacher's union has requested books instead.

### **School President Congratulates Himself on Proposed Plan to Raise School President's Salary**

Saying that it was his best decision in years, School President Wilson has decided to raise his own salary. The proposal was unveiled at the most recent school board meeting, where it was met with unanimous, if reluctant, applause.

"I need to do what's best for the school," He said at the meeting, "And what's best for the school is me having more money!"

The President reports that his five percent raise will be funded largely from teacher's salary cuts, as well as the destruction of the music department. "Look," Wilson said, "These teachers ... they've got twenty students in a class, and I've got, well, if you carry the two... I've got more than that! The entire school!"

### **Updated 'College and Career Prep' Curriculum Instituted**

In the midst of a rapidly changing economy, Woodbury High School has introduced a revolutionary new College and Career Prep class. Developed from Millennial Guru Toni Klasing's confessional "[HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE MY PENSIONLESS, DEAD-END JOB,](#)" juniors in the class focus on embracing the death of the American dream and enduring comments from baby boomers complaining about their generation's laziness.

"The first week, we work on basic techniques, like the inevitable breakdown call home for money during college," said Mrs. Brachman. "Then we move onto more advanced steps, like the 'attempting to network my way into an entry-level position' maneuver, or even the 'splitting a two-person studio with fifteen other people and their cousins.' That one can be especially tricky when there's a health department employee downstairs."

Students additionally learn meditation techniques to deal with the overwhelming stress from student loans. To help prepare them, Mrs. Brachman plays audio of loan collectors leaving urgent messages over the speakers. "My favorite is the one with thirty minutes of some guy shouting 'Debt! Debt!'" She told us, "That one gets me every time."

Woodbury's College and Career Prep differs from other high schools, School President Wilson believes, in that it's realistic.

"No one needs all that 'pursue your dreams' shtick," he says, "My bet is that there'll be all of five jobs [NOT](#) taken by robots by the time these kids have graduated. We want to acclimate them to that near constant level of economic anxiety surrounding the economy. You've got stagnation, housing crises, gentrification, debt, a shrinking job market. Best thing they can do is learn to just suck it up and live with it. Unless they don't have insurance. Then they won't be able to live with it..."

When we visited the class, two students were

sobbing in the corner, each clutching their scholarship letter. Mrs. Brachman screamed that, "This is a SHARING economy now! But do you know what we DON'T share? Our feelings!" She then turned to us and whispered, "Proudest moment a teacher can have. Look at that. They're crying. And THAT'S how you know they understand the material."

## A HUMBLE SUGGESTION

**Josie Watkins**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rock Port R2 High School, Rock Port, MO

Educator: Josie Watkins

Category: Humor

There is a considerable amount of elderly people who live in the town of Rock Port, Missouri. Over the years, they start to become more dependent upon assisted living. Nursing homes are an excellent option for elderly people who have steadily decreasing mental capability or cannot physically function without frequent attention. Living in a nursing home is clearly a radical solution, but not every older person who requires some help at home (cleaning, lifting heavier objects, getting up the stairs, etc.) needs to solve their issues in such an extreme way.

With that being said, Rock Port does not have an option for those who are elderly and could live at home with some assistance. This fact may derive from a lack of respect for older people, or maybe from the idea that people who are

disabled or too old to live by themselves are a waste of time and money. If young, able-bodied people in the area would recognize that these people still have a lot to offer to society, Rock Port would have more choices for the many people who are in between two ends of the assisted living spectrum: elderly individuals who are unable to live alone without a little bit of help yet too sound of mind and capable to be carelessly tossed into a nursing home. Many perfectly coherent and intelligent individuals in nursing homes are trapped inside every single day, forced to live with other people away from the comfort of their own homes, and treated like they are helpless. For many of these people, this experience is depressing and dehumanizing.

However, there exists a very clear solution that could easily end all of this outrageous inequality. The best course of action would be to execute every Rock Port citizen on his or her 70th birthday by firing squad. In doing so, we eliminate the possibility of having to use assisted living in the first place. Upon exterminating these individuals, they will be incinerated to ash. Any person alive before this proposal is enacted and who has already surpassed the age of seventy will be sentenced to death as well. This will occur to every single citizen who lives until the age of 70 and there will be no exceptions.

One way that Rock Port will benefit from this proposition is that the younger people could use this as an opportunity to practice shooting skills on these old fogies. Due to the fact that Rock Port is a rural town, many people choose to hunt as a hobby. However, hunting for game is a challenge for local youth because animals can be too quick for them, and shooting targets as practice isn't a very realistic depiction of killing a live creature. What better solution to this issue than to have them shoot the elderly? Of course, old people are live animals, but very slow ones. Young kids and teens would obtain excellent shooting experience whilst partaking in a firing squad to exterminate the elderly as an honorable civic duty.

The next way that Rock Port could benefit from killing the old coots would be to turn the nursing

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home into a hotel, since there would be no use for the building. The hotel will be anything but average, however. This will be America's first nursing home-themed hotel. There is no reason to buy entirely new furniture and remodel the whole building because the nursing home already has all of the amenities that a hotel needs, plus a full kitchen. Because this business will be a singularity among any other form of lodging, tourists will surely flock to take pleasure in the unique experience of a nursing home and the belongings of the deceased without the mental turmoil, crippling depression, and physical disability.

Despite the foolproof sense that this proposition maintains, one may ask what the local government will do with the remaining ashes of the deceased. Nearly all of the elderly who are put into nursing homes and needn't be clearly do not have a relative that would be willing to take the time out of his or her important life to take the ashes. To simply throw them away is entirely immoral. The solution would be to use the ashes as a compost additive. Ashes are very useful in the aid of plant growth, and Rock Port is a farming community. The local government will sell the compost ash for a high price, since it is rare to have locally-sourced human ashes to feed crops. The resulting harvests will surely be more fruitful than ever.

In summary, the only way to take care of the lack of assisted living options and the anguish of the elderly would be to end their lives before they can be a burden to the more-important schedules of the younger generations. Having a firing squad comprised of aspiring young hunters, making a nursing-home themed hotel, and using the ashes of the elderly as compost are all fulfilling benefits to Rock Port. After all, nobody can seem to shoulder the too-heavy burden that would be spending extra time and money to improve the quality of the lives of many people.

# ESSAY CONCERNING JUMPSUITS

**Ann Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Humor

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A\*\*\* J\*\*\*\*\*

Mr. Fletcher

English III

4 October 2018

### Essay Concerning Jumpsuits

Jumpsuits are so effing hard to pee in. No, wait — not like, peeing while **STILL WEARING** the jumpsuit. No! I mean like, squeezing into a jumpsuit in the morning, downing a fresh glass of OJ, and then twenty minutes later realizing that your bladder is dialing 9-1-1 in the middle of Russian Lit and now you gotta sprint to the bathroom. But you don't wanna take too long in there or else everyone's gonna think you're taking a crap, so you got maybe five minutes to unzip that effing jumpsuit, undo the belt, wrestle it down past your hips, and then, you know, **DO THE DO**, feeling naked and chilly as heck. Then you gotta wipe your junk while saving your uber-cute outfit from crumpling on the grimy bathroom floor, and you redress yourself which means **DOING THE WHOLE JUMPSUIT THING AGAIN**, and when you get back to class, every effing kid in Russian Lit —

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or at least, the kids lacking jumpsuit experience — yeah, they all think you just took the gnarliest crap of your life.

But I mean, that's only one example — an awkward, adolescent problem with jumpsuits. What about all you hot people with actual lives? What if you wanna have some wild, spontaneous sex?! You know, like in the movies, when the horny couple rips off each other's clothes and somebody throws somebody else onto the bed like a sack of potatoes. Any poor sucker wearing a jumpsuit's gotta be like — frick, give me half an hour to undress, and then we can finally **DO THE DO**. And the **OTHER** sucker's gonna sit there and watch the jumpsuit-wearer do some serious acrobatic crap in order to peel off that jumpsuit — real slow and careful, like slicing an effing potato skin, like don't hurt yourself, man! That kind of distraction would **SO** kill the mood. Not to mention if the jumpsuit-wearer got stuck, half-naked, all twisted like a curly fry. Maybe they'd be stuck forever.

So anyway, let me ask you all — why the frick do we wear these medieval devices? It's a rhetorical question, and I will tell you the answer — it's **BECAUSE THEY'RE CUTE**. Like, why will suckers spend five dollars on a pink frappuccino? Why do women push tiny humans out of their you-know-whats? Same answer, every effing time: We imagine, by extension, that **WE** may become aesthetically pleasing, if only we take these nice things and link them to our bodies.

But, in conclusion, let me leave you with something special, Mr. Fletcher. I already told you that jumpsuits are pretty effing cute — this is fact. Except, you know what's so much cuter? Whoever the frick is gonna **ROCK** that dumb jumpsuit. So if you wanna look real pretty, then sure, you can put on a jumpsuit, or buy a rainbow drink, or give birth. But those things only tip the cuteness scale **JUST SLIGHTLY MORE** in your favor. The real thing you wanna do to look cute is, you just wear whatever the frick makes you feel like **YOU**. Yeah, I'm talking to you, Mr. Fletcher. Like, me, I don't like wearing jumpsuits much — if you couldn't already tell — but man, if you don't

mind taking a real long time to pee, and missing out on speedy sex... then go for it. Navigate yourself into that jumpsuit, if it really makes you happy. I just wanna see everybody be happy.

## JOURNALISM

# UNVEILING THE VEILED PROPHET BALL

**Adina Cazacu-De Luca**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Journalism

One Saturday night each year, 60-70 college sophomore girls are maids of honor, wearing gowns, long white gloves, and feather tiaras. They are escorted by a friend of the family and presented to an anonymous civic leader, dressed in an ornate veil. Only one girl will be crowned the Queen of Love and Beauty. The following celebration includes a midnight dinner and lackadaisical enforcement of underage drinking laws. For many in the John Burroughs School community, the Veiled Prophet (VP) Ball is not a scene from *GOSSIP GIRL* or an antiquated tradition, but a community-building reality. The type of community that's built, however, is a contested topic, with the questionable history of the Ball battling the beauty and splendor of the night. Are the young women truly "chosen for their outstanding community service efforts," As the VPO website touts? The following accounts of the Veiled Prophet Ball come from 20 named or anonymous Burroughs attendees and maids of honor, as well as one 2018 maid of honor who did not attend Burroughs.<sup>1</sup>

## THE HISTORY

The Veiled Prophet organization was founded in 1878, a year after the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. The idea for its founding came from Confederate General Alonzo Slayback, who took inspiration from a poem called "The Story of the Veiled Prophet of Khorassan." The main character Mokanna is a mysterious bringer of wealth and knowledge from the East. This myth extended to the Saint Louis Veiled Prophet, who comes to bring economic prosperity for the following year. The first image of the Veiled Prophet came from the 1878 *MISSOURI REPUBLICAN*. The Prophet wore a white hood identical to that of a KKK member, with rifles in both hands. While some attendees doubted a connection between the organizations, the KKK was formed almost immediately after the Civil War, created the white hood image from its founding, and was present in St. Louis. This indicates that VP organizers purposefully chose this costume despite knowing its connections to an organization that terrorized African Americans. However, the current Veiled Prophet, with a gold crown and no spiked hood, continues to represent whiteness, but in a more benevolent form.

## THE VP PARADE

What many do not realize about the Veiled Prophet Organization (VPO) is that it also hosts St. Louis' July 4th parade and the St. Louis Fair. This parade also dates back to the 1880s, when it was held on the same night as the VP Ball. However, years of protests caused the separation of the events. Initially, the parade was blatantly classist, with the second-to-last float of the first parade titled Wealth, and on it sat Minerva, goddess of wisdom and protectress of industrial arts, upon a huge silver dollar. The message was clear: those at the top were there because of their intelligence, and those who weren't because of their lack thereof. Scott Beauchamp, writing for *THE ATLANTIC*, considered the message of the parade

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to serve as the elite's response to labor union strikes in the previous year. The powerful, according to him, sought out to "double down on the static racial and economic power structure of the city" with the parade serving as a "powerful symbol of that reassertion of control." However, things have changed in the past 130 years, and the current parade is a patriotic one, with a tagline of "America's biggest birthday party."

### RESISTANCE

What spurred the change? Mostly, resistance from St. Louis activist groups. In 1972, one group called ACTION successfully unveiled the prophet, the then Monsanto executive vice-president. The only other Veiled Prophet that has been named was St. Louis Police Commissioner John G. Priest, who played a major role in disrupting the Railroad Strikes of 1877. The 1972 unveiling operation involved activist Gena Scott swinging down from the ceiling and breaking a few ribs. A few months afterwards, Scott's car was mysteriously set on fire.

As a result of the 1972 unveiling and other protests, the parade was moved out of the city (avoiding African American neighborhoods), into the daytime. Additionally, women and children were added onto parade floats, presumably to stop spectators from throwing things at them. These actions seem trivial, until one remembers that VP members (still men only) are the most powerful actors in St. Louis society. VPO accepted its first African American members in 1979. In 1987, however, VP members urged the St. Louis police to close Eads Bridge, preventing pedestrian foot traffic from East St. Louis, a predominantly African American area. The closure occurred at a time that impacted neither the VP Parade or Ball, suggesting some larger agenda. To this day, activist groups protest the annual ball.

### THE CHARITY

The VPO has recently shifted gears by starting their Community Service Initiative in 2002 and making

the criteria for winning Queen and Love of Beauty service based. Jackson Williams '19, whose father and grandfather are both members of VP, emphasized that "a lot of people don't know how many hours of community service the girls need to do to be able to walk."<sup>12</sup> Again from the VP website, a group of 400 volunteers come together every summer to pack 65,000 meals for Food Outreach, beautify City Hall grounds, and more. Katie Kuhlman '19, whose family has lived in St. Louis since the 1940s, notes that through the organization, she has "been able to be involved in some really great programs to help struggling people in St. Louis."

However, according to attendee Caroline Strahorn '20, "everything...the hierarchy, the queen... is based on family history and background, not the community service [the VPO] fronts. It's definitely not that." There was a wide consensus among those interviewed that community service did not actually play a large role in deciding the Queen. Another student said "I think they only put the community service bit in because they don't want to acknowledge that the girl who's father donated the most money wins." Moreover, one attendee who walked in the ceremony claims she left after a half hour on the single mandatory community service day. Although she was active in high school community service efforts, "the VP Organization definitely did not consider that." Sara Hassell, one of the 59 young women who walked this year, explains that although she only completed a single day of gardening, "my dad paid his dues and stayed involved, so I got to walk."

### THE BALL

To attend the VP Ball, the extended families and friends of the maids of honor must be invited or invited to tag along (although this is not officially allowed). Avi Dundoo '19 notes that the event "is so hectic that anyone can sneak in." However, to enter, an attendee needs a ticket, which can cost either \$295 for the Queen's Supper and

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subsequent hotel stay or a \$50 ticket to only watch the ceremony. In the weeks before the ball, the maids of honor will often have "debut parties" hosted at country clubs as a more informal introduction into society. When the night arrives, attendees prepare for the ball in their hotel rooms. Jon Sky '20, whose older sister walked, noted that the process of putting on an eight piece suit was one that required patience and determination. An unexpected woe of getting ready for girls are the mandatory long white gloves, which can cost upwards of \$500. One attendee said she purchased hers from Party City, and another used her mother's gloves from back when she was a maid of honor. As for the events of the night, Sky recounts sticking by his father as he talked with various friends. He added, "the two times I've went, there were protestors, police said 40-80."

Then, attendees take their seats for the ceremony, which is about an hour long. Strahorn describes, "at the beginning, there's guys marching out..." She's referring to the Bengal Lancers, the bodyguards of the Veiled Prophet. Kuhlman noted that the "army of dads in fake beards pointing spears at the crowd" was but one part of a night so "steeped in tradition" that "it was comical." Eavan Guirl '20 mentioned while laughing that her uncle was once a Lancer. Strahorn went on, "Then, there's small white children, around age eight to twelve, doing a Chinese-looking dance... and there's a dragon." She spoke hesitantly, acknowledging the strange presence of cultural appropriation in an event so...white. Another attendee agrees: "I did not see a single person of color. My second year, there was a single girl with an African-sounding name. When she was called I could hear chattering. You know, the subtly disrespectful type. Cece Fox [this year's queen] was the first Jewish Queen." Furthermore, Dundoo also felt conflicted on the issue of diversity, since he "was sure that some members wanted to see progress, but at the same time, I'm sure there are others that cringe when seeing a non-white girl walking as a debutante on the runway."

The presentation of young women continues, first with the maids of honor, then six special maids, and finally with the Queen of Love and Beauty. An anonymous attendee noted that sometimes those who don't win are referred to as "riff-raff." Although all women are college sophomores, they are presented as graduates of St. Louis high schools both in the procession and in press coverage by [LADUE NEWS](#) and [TOWN AND STYLE](#). Which made the situation awkward for Hassell, who doesn't live in St. Louis. "It was like a high school reunion for the girls. It was obvious they all knew each other and had their own cliques." Attendees often recalled details beyond the (according to Sky) "very long and boring" ceremony itself. Strahorn recalled chatter amongst attendees. She explained that "there was a lot of talk about dresses. The majority are plain red or blue, form-fitting and nice, but there were some girls with floofy dresses, or dresses with patterns, and you could hear people say, 'Oh I don't like that one.'"

After the procession, there is a midnight dinner. Kuhlman said the setting reminded her of a wedding, "with the guests at numbered tables and the queen and maids at long tables in the front middle, all around a dance floor." Dundoo described the event as a "high school dance on steroids. Also, it feels like a TV show." Afterwards, attendees retire to their hotel rooms and "hotel room-hop" until the breakfast served at 3:00 am.

Multiple attendees discussed the presence of abundant alcohol in hotel rooms, sometimes provided by parents. Elle Sullivan '19 described the ball as a whole as a "huge event for everyone to get drunk. Even the guards on stage were drunk." Another said her family went home before the dinner in order to avoid the situation. This year, Hassell said, VPO "tried to be serious about underage drinking with undercover cops. During the dinner, parents order wine for their table, but when the adults get up and leave, and there's left over alcohol on the tables, kids will start drinking whatever's out in the open unattended."

## BURROUGHS INVOLVEMENT

In the past 96 years, at least 20 of the Queens of Love and Beauty came from Burroughs families. The past three Queens have been Burroughs alumni. Strahorn started listing names of what she called the “dynasties” of St. Louis, most of which unintentionally had JBS ties: “Schnuck, Bush, Condie, Danforth, Sansone.”

When asked why they participate, there were a variety of responses. Guirl said, “when we were in 5th grade, [other girls my age and I] had to go watch. Like, they were preparing us to be the next girls walking all the way back then.... Creepy.” Hassell, on the other hand, thought the “Junior Maids Program” was endearing, remembering the silver Tiffany’s heart-shaped locket she received with an engraving that read “VP 2010.” Sky explained that his father was involved in the organization “only so my sister could walk with her friends” and has since ceased to attend since “there was no point afterwards.” However, Sky still attends with friends. Kuhlman and Hassell also stated that their fathers joined so that they would be able to walk. Hassell said she “loved every second of it. It was really cool to have all eyes on you for a minute, a special night almost. The experience was fun.”

Many articulated similar sentiments of tradition and community in being part of the procession. Sullivan before the 2018 ball said, “I know when I walk, since it’s a big family tradition for us, my whole family will come.” Afterwards, she also described her conversations with mothers who told her how excited they were her their daughter to walk because they walked, or their grandmother walked and had recently passed away. Along these lines, another anonymous attendee said that “My mom walked, all her cousins walked, everyone down my grandfather’s lineage that I can remember has been a part of it. So, I will be too.”

On the flip side, one anonymous source says that her family is being recruited to join VP. She would be the first person in her family to walk, and she’s excited to attend. In order to join, the man of a household is sponsored by a current VP member. Then, Kuhlman explains, “there’s a committee that reviews you...and a ‘vetting process.’” Once in the organization, Williams explains, “there are different committees of members that are responsible for doing different things during the ball. For example, my dad was a member of a group that made sure everyone stood in the right place when they got to the end of the stage.” Aside from the ball, the executive board oversees the VP Organization as a whole, with leadership determined by “donations and time serving” VP, according to Williams. As to where all the donations, member fees, and ticket sales go, Williams believes “100% of funds from ball go back into community service, and I believe membership fees go towards putting the ball together. The organization does a tremendous amount of good now.”

As to who can join VP, both Kuhlman and Hassell believe that inclusion in VP is mainly determined by wealth, not family history in the city or race. Kuhlman says that she knows “people whose parents didn’t grow up here but have still become members” and Hassell claims that “as long as you pay your dues, [VPO] doesn’t care who you are.” Dundoo believes that minorities are starting to join the organization, but “the organization itself should also encourage a broader base of new members.” When asked about expanding VP, Hassell remarked that such an action “would take some of the grandeur out of it because it has been around for so long. If it was super inclusive, it would take away the charm from it and how special it is.”

Other Burroughs students, eight of those interviewed, attend regularly without being VP members, and while all account that the night was “fun”, multiple attendees admitted to feeling excluded. Dundoo notes that as “one of the only Indian people there...I feel like a token.” However, he also noted something like progress if “VP

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members that are racist can see me (an Indian) attend and have fun." One anonymous attendee also reported feeling like an outsider. "I think the outsider feeling comes both from a difference in wealth and not being a member. I felt like there was a lot of old money there that night. There is definitely a significant difference between the wealth of my family and many of the families that are members of VP."

When asked about how attendees reconcile the fun of the night with the troubling history of the organization, there were, again, a variety of answers. The VPO hopeful said, "Yeah, VP embodies white supremacy, but the program has changed. It's centered about community service and giving back now." Another notes, "There's not really a bad connotation with VP. It's just that the Veiled Prophet USED to look KKK-esque." Yet another reminded me that the only basis for the organization "is for dads and daughters to do service work together." Williams acknowledged the history, saying,

"At its beginning, it was kind of a way for more fortunate people to have a sort of club that they could be exclusive with. It was also a revealing of girls to society when they were of age and ready to be married which is a bit degrading. They have done a good job changing what the organization stands for and how it conducts itself, but it's difficult to forget the exclusivity and degrading nature that it was built on."

On the other hand, there was Strahorn. She says,

"It's so blatantly sexist and classist that people forget it is, but just being there makes you feel on the wrong side of it. To be honest, I'm not a Busch or a Condie; my family is no richer than other Burroughs families. [Our membership to VP] is just because I've been here since St Louis was a thing. It's something you want to hide about your history. I'm about as American it comes... my ancestor was a founder in Jamestown. However, the more I learn about history, the more it's something to be ashamed of."

### THE MEANING OF IT ALL

For many VP Ball attendees, the grandeur of the night clouds both the history and current agenda of the organization. Strahorn admitted, "My grandpa always finds out who the Veiled Prophet is, and he'll tell me, but it's not something people talk about. Not as much as what the queen is wearing." How will our generation address the VP Ball? Is the organization immortal? One attendee believes so. "I don't think it's something that will ever end. Even in our generation. When we're the adults, there's still the people that will want to keep it going and keep up the front that it's all about community service." Maybe one day, it will be.

## A HOME IS A HOME NO MATTER HOW SMALL

**Hannah Loder**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Glendale High School,  
Springfield, MO

Educators: Teena Mahoney, Teena  
Mahoney

Category: Journalism

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Eden Village had its grand opening and moved in its first resident.

A crowd gathers at the front of the village of tiny homes on Division street. Opposite the crowd, there is a stage full of the people who planned and created this new community in Springfield.

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Behind the stage stands the newly completed community center open to the residents of each home in the village and available to groups to come volunteer. Applause lights up the outdoor space as the new community is talked about, blessed and the first resident of the village is welcomed to his home. This is the grand opening of Eden Village.

In 2010, Dr. David and Linda Brown founded The Gathering Tree, a non-profit organization dedicated to ending homelessness in Springfield. The Gathering Tree created the Tree, a homeless center downtown, and Eden Village, a community of tiny homes for disabled, homeless members of the Springfield community. Eden Village, once full, will house 30 individuals and one chaplain. After planning and working on the village for two years, the grand opening was Tuesday, August 18.

At the grand opening, many speakers talked about their involvement with Eden Village. The ceremony began with a welcome and prayer. Dr. David and Linda Brown spoke, as well as Joselyn Baldner, Executive Vice President of Central Bank of the Ozarks, Caleb Arthur, CEO of Sun Solar, and Congressman Billy Long. Sun Solar is a local company that donated solar panels to Eden Village and donated money for the Sun Solar Community Center located at the entrance to the village.

"Sometimes it takes ten years to do these kinds of projects, and they did it in a record amount of time," Arthur said. "I'm just honored to be a part of it and to lead a great organization."

After the speakers gave their short speeches, the crowd welcomed Linda Brown back to the microphone for a few impromptu words. She spoke about Donny, a homeless man whom she met through the Gathering Tree. Donny passed away in October 2017, but he left a lasting impression on Dr. David and Linda Brown. Members of the Eden Village staff wore bandanas and pins in his honor at the ceremony.

"[Donny] taught us and showed us what love can do because when we first met him at the Gathering Tree, he was a mean dude," Linda said. "He slept under a bridge. He was mean, and we

watched him melt over the years as he saw people who loved him unconditionally. And that's what this village is all about because we all need love, and he taught us exactly what that meant."

After the community center was blessed, it was time to welcome the first resident of Eden Village to his home. Nate Schlueter, Chief Operating Officer (COO) of Eden Village, spoke about Tommy Yarberry and read him the rules of the community.

"Tommy's the same kind of different as me," Schlueter said. "Like me, he was created in the image of a good and loving God, and he has God-given talents. Like me, he likes the color blue, and, like me, he likes to read the bible. But Tommy's different from me too. Last night Tommy slept in a hidden campsite just down the road on Division street. He's been on and off the streets for years.... Tommy's one of our friends that sleeps outside, but tonight, he sleeps inside."

Yarberry put in a lot of time helping around the village with landscaping and other labor. Throughout this time, Yarberry has been surrounded by love and support. The opportunity to have the first house means so much to him. Yarberry was given time to speak at the grand opening as well. Tears welled in his eyes as he looked out on the crowd cheering for him.

"This is the most important day of my life," Yarberry said. "Actually, it gives me my life. Thank you."

Philip Wright, Lead Pastor at The Venues, blessed Yarberry. He was given the keys to his house and the opportunity to walk into his new home. Yarberry's welcome home team, a group dedicated to helping him transition to life off of the streets, met him at the stage and walked with him to his new home. That concluded the presentation. The Gathering Tree provided free lunch in the community center, and guests took tours of the tiny houses.

"Tommy, welcome to Eden Village," Schlueter said. "Welcome to God's project, and welcome to your forever home."

Now that Eden Village has moved in the first resident, the staff at Eden Village are looking

forward to transitioning the rest of the residents into their homes.

"We are excited to move in our residents one at a time," Schlueter said. "We want to have them all in by Christmas Eve and make sure that last Christmas was their last Christmas outside."

Fourteen of the 31 homes are completed, and 2.6 million of the 3 million dollars for the village have been raised. Dr. Brown is thankful for the donations that have been received to make Eden Village a reality.

"Our biggest donation was a hundred thousand dollars, and our smallest was six cents," Dr. Brown said. "In between there was about three thousand a person."

There are many ways to volunteer and support Eden Village. Helping with landscaping, working on a welcome home team and donating money are a few of the ways to help. Kristi Martin, a volunteer at Eden Village and wife of David Martin, a member of the board at Eden Village, has donated time to the cause, but she has also been involved in the making of a home for the village.

"When my dad died in March, his wife Sandy set up an avenue for people who wanted to donate money to the Don Hopper home in memory of [him] being a builder for most of his career," Martin said.

The next step for Eden Village and The Gathering Tree is to repeat the process. The Gathering Tree hopes to create several other villages like Eden Village around town.

"Once it's settled, then we want to find another trailer park and do the same thing over again," Dr. Brown said. "If we could do about ten of these in Springfield, we could solve homelessness."

For more information on how to get involved, visit [www.gatheringtree.org](http://www.gatheringtree.org). The website also has information on The Gathering Tree's other ventures and ways to donate.

# VENEZUELAN CRISIS HITS CLOSE TO KANSAS CITY

**Alice Wu**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Kat Buchanan

Category: Journalism

In Venezuela, paper money is now worth more as toilet paper than currency. According to the opposition-led National Assembly, the Venezuelan bolívar is worth so little that inflation reached 83,000 percent in July, and the International Monetary Fund projects that number will climb even higher to 1,000,000 percent by the end of 2018. Infrastructure is crumbling, and basic food and medicine are scarce, causing spiraling death rates due to malnutrition or otherwise preventable diseases. Although Johnson County in Kansas is often called the "JOCO Bubble" due to its reputation as privileged and isolated from the rest of the world, several individuals at Blue Valley North High School (BVN) alone have been intimately touched by the current Venezuelan crisis.

Spanish teacher Katherine Becker translates documents for a Venezuelan political asylum applicant named Edward, whose last name has been omitted for the sake of privacy. Edward was persecuted in Venezuela for dissenting against president Nicolás Maduro's socialist government, and in 2017, he fled to the U.S. Having previously translated for the clients of several immigration

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lawyers in Kansas City, Becker offered to help with Edward's ongoing case.

"As a Spanish teacher, there is an affinity toward the Hispanic community, and if I am in a position where I can help someone who really needs it, I should and will," Becker said. "Edward's story is unfortunately more common than many people think."

Edward attended numerous protests, including one on April 19, 2017, when 17-year-old Carlos Moreno was fatally injured by a pro-government gang. Edward and other protesters rallied in support of Moreno, causing themselves to be targeted by the state-supported paramilitary force called Tupamaro. Edward and other protesters rallied in support of Moreno, causing them to be targeted by Tupamaro themselves. Edward's business was invaded, and his family was threatened. Soon after, he fled to the U.S. by plane.

"He opposed a lot of their policies and the corruption that they had as far as how their economy was functioning as well as the oppression that the regime was causing to dissidents," Becker said. "He wanted Maduro's regime to be disbanded, essentially. He wanted to have actual elections."

In order to claim asylum in the U.S., Edward has to prove "persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution," as stated in the Immigration and Nationality Act, a federal law that provides the outlines for immigration status in the U.S. Becker has translated social media posts and newspaper articles about Tupamaro's violent actions as well as the autopsy of the man who died. Along the way, several challenges have appeared for her.

"They have a particular vehicle which we don't really have a word for here, but it'd be like a truck with water cannons," Becker said. "There was actually quite a bit of investigation into what [it is]. They call it **UNA BALLENA**—a whale. When doing this, you're kind of like, 'Why is there a whale all of sudden?' So there are a bunch of resources that you need to kind of figure out based on the information he provided as well as further investigation to piece some of those mysteries

together."

Because of a network of educated people in Venezuela, Edward was able to receive the extensive amount of necessary documents and give them to Becker.

"He is an educated man," Becker said. "He has been lucky, but he has decided to use that privilege to speak out and has not had great success with it. He does believe that if he were forced to go back, they would find him, and they would physically hurt him, if not worse."

Edward is not the only person tied to BVN who has fled possible persecution in Venezuela. Similarly, special education paraprofessional Maria Velasquez was kidnapped by the government for her involvement in several protests. In 2014, she fled and joined her mother, Elena Otero, another special education paraprofessional at BVN, who was already living in the U.S.

"We can't explain or understand exactly the disaster right now that [is] happen[ing] in my country," Otero said. "I was okay in my country, working, with family, happy. We had everything over there. We have beautiful beaches, everything ... They destroyed our country."

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, Venezuela was once an oil-rich state, but years of corruption and mismanagement coupled with falling oil prices have shaken the country's economy. Despite the dire situation, the government has continually resisted challenges.

Sharing her mother's story, Velasquez's daughter and BVN alumna Valeria Silva delivered the BVN graduation speech in 2017.

"They, the criminals, knew where we lived. They knew where my sister and I went to school, they knew who our family and friends were, they knew where we went to hang out during our free time,'" Silva said in her speech. "'They were going to make sure we didn't protest again.'"

Despite the dangers that she and her family were put in, Velasquez doesn't regret speaking up, believing that she did what was necessary.

As the Council on Foreign Relations explains, because the Venezuelan currency carries so little monetary value, producers struggle to cover the

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costs of the goods they make, and many have stopped selling in Venezuela. Government-mandated price cuts have caused further difficulties for producers, and as a result, grocery store shelves remain barren.

"My parents had good jobs so they were able to provide for us even when prices started to rise ... [but] the government would announce shortages of water in different sectors for different amounts of times," Silva said. "We would plan ahead by filling up big containers ahead of time. Of course it was very uncomfortable because ordinary things such as showering, brushing my teeth or cooking became a challenge trying to save water for the whole week. ... This was four and a half years ago, and since then everything has worsened radically."

According to the Central Bank of Venezuela, in August, the Venezuelan government removed five zeroes from the previous "strong bolívar" currency and introduced a new "sovereign bolívar" to rein in inflation. However, many people, including Velasquez, Otero, Silva, and Becker, believe that to truly address the crisis, President Maduro's government must be removed, and a democracy must be reinstated.

"This political party of Hugo Chávez and right now, Maduro, have all the control for the institutions. They take all the money," Velasquez said. "The court, the Supreme Court, is under this political party. And who says something is good or something is bad?"

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, prior to the presidential elections this past May, leaders of the largest opposition parties to the United Socialist Party were forbidden to run or arrested. Protests were quashed in the streets. The official voter turnout provided by the National Electoral Council was only 46 percent. After Maduro won a second term, the Organization of American States, which includes the U.S. and numerous countries in Latin America, refused to recognize the seemingly rigged election results.

"There is no justice and no human rights in Venezuela," Silva said. "The government is ... ruthless at the moment and they are doing

everything they can to stay in power. It has become a communist regime."

Becker disagrees that socialism is the issue, but she is scared for those still trying to flee from Venezuela.

"Everyone says, 'Oh, socialism is terrible.' Socialism isn't bad; the corruption is terrible. There's no way for the average person to make it," Becker said. "You either are very wealthy or not, and so a lot of the times, people who are wealthy enough are able to leave, and if you're not wealthy enough, you are stuck."

Becker will continue to help Edward as his case continues to be processed, but Edward's future, like Venezuela's future, remains uncertain.

"I don't know what's going to happen soon, but it's [been] almost 20 year[s] in this situation," Velasquez said. "People in Venezuela don't have the power to take Maduro [down]. They don't. We need help."

According to the U.N., they are working with American and foreign governments and various non-profit organizations to grant asylum and provide economic support to families fleeing the crisis. In the meantime, Silva believes that individuals can create change too.

"Many people have no idea even where Venezuela is on the map or what continent it is in, so there is very little awareness on the crisis that Venezuelans are going through," Silva said. "Right now, the internet is the only tool Venezuelans have to communicate what is happening ... Share the news, the posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram because the more people that know and the more noise we can create, the more international organizations will hear us and take action."

## NOVEL WRITING

# 13

## Norah Brozio

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: St Joan Of Arc School,  
Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Barb Ryan

Category: Novel Writing

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### BRIEF SUMMARY:

IT'S 3167 AND, CHARLEE has a strange life. Besides having absent and absently minded parents, dealing with her best friends' disappearance, and earning worse than awful grades at school, she is whisked away to a summer camp with intentions that are quite unlike the ones advertised in the brochure. Now wanting home for the first time in her life, she will have to use undiscovered wits to save herself, and a few others. ADALYN took things for granted. Now she can be a little insane. It's a reasonable reaction, solitary confinement is a demanding job. JAXSON is destined for greatness. Raised by a mysterious genius, there's no sixteen year old smarter than him. He would have been satisfied with living the rest of his days in his secluded island home, researching, calculating. Doing what smart people often do. But when his quiet repertory is interrupted by a girl with purple hair, Jaxson's normal is turned upside down. ONE STRANGE OPERATION TO PROVE THE IMPOSSIBLE, THREE TEENAGERS WITH DIFFERENT AGENDAS. On an island where science thrives, will anyone be willing to pull the plug on a experiment gone wrong?

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### EXCERPT:

Excerpt From: 13

JAXSON

It wasn't until we're were sitting across from each

other, both playing the best game of avoid eye-contact, that I noticed Ralph's lack of hair. I didn't memorize his hair style or anything, but I could have sworn it was never this sallow and blotchy. Eh, maybe a slip up with the trimmers. Must be an old timer when it comes to that kind of stuff. Perhaps he attempted a new trend and managed more of a hacksaw-zen garden than a hot celebrity look. Not that he could ever look halfway decent.

This was ridiculous. Pointless. Forty minutes scrolling through files I've already familiarized myself with, and hoping, PRAYING, by some miracle he'll catch on and I can start making some actual progress. His cluelessness was painful. Time for a little pop quiz to steady old Ralphie's brain. Or, you know, mash it up more.

"What's the subject's name?"

"Charlee," he peeped, eyes down, lips barely opening.

"How about a surname?" I thought that was a given when I asked the first time.

"Algers." This required more movement of the jaw and more syllables, thus making him uncomfortable.

"Parents? Last names included."

His eyes positioned themselves as far as possibly away from me and towards his fidgety knee bouncing so much I was sure it was sky bound and said, "Ian Al--Algers. Algers. And Kenni Algers. Last name taken from Kenni."

"Why?"

"Ian thought Algers was better than Scharf--Scharf, and Kenni--K-- Kenni agreed." He twitched. Roach.

I swallowed. Coffee needs more sugar.

"Where did Charlee live?"

"New York. Bu-but, but, she likes London better. She--she, even sometimes--some, uh, uses British slang." I'm thorough in my reports.

"How old is she?"

"Score take away five."

"Why in the name of Lincoln would you talk like that?" Such a weirdo.

Teeth grinding, shoulder jerking he said, "I just--just. Don't know. Don't--don't, I-D-K. I don't

know."

"Correct. Try to answer obviously. I know it can prove challenging for you," He flinches retardedly. "How long have I been observing her?"

"Four years."

"No. Fours years, three weeks, five hours, and twelve minutes. I held my breath until the second she was on CHW soil. My whole existence has been working for this. Those Fails underneath us, they aren't human anymore, forget them. Charlee Franlis Algiers is the only thing that is going to make any difference in my life--your life. Got that?"

Too many words thrown at him at once. He lips curled up and he looked at me like I had just announced the of a start of a world war.

"Yes--yes, yea, yeah. Uh, anything else? I should know."

I crushed the styrofoam coffee cup to freak him out on purpose. It was mean, but I needed to deposit my stupid intake somewhere. Luckily, I had drank most of the sacchariferous liquid because the few drops that remained, spattered onto Ralph's white lab coat. I never understood those, why have a smock only to dirty? Just wear clothes you don't care about. It wasn't like we had a messy job. But instead of the crisp fresh-out-of-the-laundry white scientists stereotypically wore, Ralph's coat bore no sign of leisurely taking notes and writing papers. He was covered top to bottom with dust and unknown filth. Were those spots of blood I saw dotting his hairline? Rust. Yes, that was most definitely rust. The building wasn't uptodate, he probably got lost and bumped against a wall causing unclean chalks of dirt to rain down on him. Of course, the ignoramus stumbled to the oldest part of the place where the cleaning crew missed.

I inhaled through my mouth and asked, "What kind of science do you like Gainer?" How nice of me, making small talk with a scarecrow. Granted, the only thing that hinted at him being 'scary', was the way he answered questions.

He squinted at me as if the inquiry were trivial one and leaned back a smidge when I called

him Gainer. It was his given surname, Mikeah was married and took Robins because he couldn't stand the thought of sharing his brother's anymore. Gainer was perfect for a guy like him. He had plenty to gain, it was just hard to know if he had the capability or not. What if he didn't gain any knowledge? What if those two fast wasted years in college were an automatic ticket only because of his outstandly brilliant brother? Maybe I really am talking to a hunk of wood. All this torture could be for nought. Maybe he didn't think legitimate thoughts. Only floaters and bubbles.

Exhale.

"Huh? Nothing? You don't like science?"

Ralph for once went stiller than the coffee clutched in my hand. His tick magically disappeared along with my patience.

"Than what, are you still doing here!"

He didn't move. Only saved his shirt from a fallen chunk of caked rust. Rust. Rust not blood. Rust. Not Eli's broke, twisted spine. Rust. Certainly it's not my hand as it squeezes the handrail. It's rust, and the light making me see things strangely. It's not the cold lifeless wall soaked with a boy's mandatory fluids. Rust. It's not my bleeding heart as I watch someone die. He's fine. He's fine, everyone is given a vaccine to prevent blood from spilling. He has the drug, he must have it. I have it, Demi has it, Airika has it.

"I said, why are you still here! You don't talk, you don't know science, it could run up and smack you on your stupid head and you still wouldn't know what it is. You should be in a hospital, not with the brightest minds of this era."

His body language did not give any suggestion he intended to leave.

"I said get out of my room!" I stood up and suddenly the crushed cup flew out of my hand onto Ralph's tattered coat. He jumped like a frightened cat. Literally, his back arched like a crescent moon and his ears seemed to shrink down to the floor.

"Go on now, you hate science. You don't need to be here."

:::

CHARLEE

My mom used to be a big believer in the area of spiritual crap. Not religious--she would quit smoking before she ever kneeled down and prayed--but she was slave to zodiacs and a sucker for horoscopes. Complete slave to them, everyday she would check her Aquarius status and make sure she did everything right. It was kind of sweet to see her dedicated to something, want her life to be perfect, and have faith it would never let her down. Whenever she got a day that predicted bad fortune she wore a necklace encrusted with lucky rock, thingies. I don't remember what she called them but they were pretty. Pinkish and glowy. She never let me in on her zodiac club which was by all means, fine by me.

My birthday is a curse to her. One, I was born, two it's the same as Mr. Jew Killer the lovely Adolf Hitler. Aries seemed like a fine a zodiac to me, I looked it up, she wouldn't tell me, and even though it was a day where the like worst dude ever was born, about twenty million others share it with me. Only so many days to go around. But zodiacs aren't real. They're just a myth some Egyptian person decided to tell stories about after looking at stars, a zillion years ago. And nothing that old matters.

I like three days after my birthday better than the actual day. It's when the greatest writer in the universe entered our world. You guessed it, William Shakespeare. I don't especially like his stories, who wants to listen to speeches of death here, death there, and ha, ha, so funny you just gave that man an ass head! Genius.

I appreciate his impact. Shakespearean is a new language as far as I'm concerned. Old, difficult, weird, challenging, and the insults beat cursery by a landslide. Foul mouthing is too easy, I'd rather spend hours in the dictionary piecing together a clean plausible sentence than pull a F bomb off the top of my cranium. Much more rewarding.

I don't think my mom shared the same views because when the whiskey was popped and the

perfections were in place she had no other ideas what to say, how to speak. When I was ten, and my mom wasn't overly insane, I bought her a zodiac calendar. She said liked it but didn't say much else. The next day I found it in the rubbish bin.

Camp Happy Waters is my own personal trash can. Trash goes in, no one misses it. Did my mom call the authorities at least? I've chosen not to care. This place might be better than home. Just like how Mom, Kenni Algers, may have been better off in jail, I might find it preferable here. The decent way to think of my mother would be to wonder what she's been doing while I'm away, kidnapped by tempermetal strangers. But honestly I can't say I have. There's nothing to wonder about. Buying more stuff than she can afford and drinking until she dropped is what makes her happy. At least my dad isn't around enough for me to see him through, I don't entirely hate what little I know of him.

15 Years Ago

KENNI

"Toil, toil, toilet trouble! Water splatters while pee stains subtle. Hopefully." The new toilet Kenni had just purchased coughed and spit like a bubbling cauldron ready to brew. She quickly set her newborn baby down when the melicious pot shook.

"Oh my gosh."

The young tired mother was done with stubborn toilets and broken dishwashers. She didn't have enough money to spare for a plumber because of the expensives she'd paid for the other appliances that were supposed to make her life easier, but were really overpriced boxes of blatant metal parts she had to assemble herself. Her dumb excuse for a husband was 'taking care of work stuff' as usual, and she didn't know where to start with the new house AND the living human that currently sat on the tiled bathroom floor, eating her foot. She was such delicate and small and, well, living thing. Kenni had never even babysat before having Charlee just three weeks ago, and her parents hadn't exactly prepared

her for all of this.

"Oh, oh, stop. You're not dying," she tried to coo and use the perfect mother to baby voice like she'd heard in the live blog she'd studied up on. But nothing she ever did seemed right. The baby didn't fit like a puzzle piece amidst her hip when she carried her and she wouldn't breast feed. She'd wined too much but never at the right times. More nocturnal than human, she would keep her up all night hollering, but never adorably squeal when she being displayed amidst judgemental daycare moms. Only a certain formula and certain diaper was allowed for the royal highness and Kenni felt she wasn't bonding with her properly. She dropped her off at Miss Sue's at five so she could go to work and picked her up at nine, that was of course, how things were when she had a job and husband. Now she lived nights dedicated to her daughter's crying and wanting food. It was a sleepless and demanding life. And her bills were due tomorrow.

Nothing was working out.

On top of it all, Ian wanted a dog.

"A dog, huh?" Kenni said aloud to herself, Charlee crying and looking like a turtle on the cold tile floor.

He hardly cared for the child they had! She'd wanted to scream. But Charlee was the lungs of the family, and she had been crying, loudly, in the background.

He can spend his money how he likes, he said.

On animals? She remembered how she'd argued.

" Maybe come spend time with your new daughter!" She told the gurgling toilet.

What? Doesn't it sound darling to let our daughter grow up with a pet? I had a dog. Everyone should have a friend to depend on, he had told her, blinking his long lashes at her like he had in high school. He was kissing up and she knew it.

"I don't want another thing to take care of." Shaking her head in firm defiance, she mined the scene with exactness only someone who'd lived it could do.

What do you mean? It'll be more my dog. I'll take care of it. Feed it and stuff, he convincingly pleaded.

"Yours, huh? The kid was supposed to be **OURS**. Do you expect me to fall for your bull every time you want something **Ian**?" She picked up her screaming daughter she'd omitted on the floor and patted Charlee's back, going for a gentle soothing massage and accomplishing a heavy, **THWACK**. The exhausted mother tried not to scream and throw anything, especially not with Charlee in her sore leaden arms. She had stopped playing her fight with her husband out loud. It seemed more like a meaningless bicker now that her house was about to be evicted. He was a pain, but they'd picked out the new furniture and baby crib. He'd lovingly told her how great their new life was gonna be as she strolled, without a care about the realistic future, down an aisle lined with shiny refrigerators.

Gone were his promises to give her everything she wanted. Right now, all she wanted in the whole wide world was to fix the blessed toilet that was more a rickety rocking chair than a functioning toilet. She gave the porcelain bowl a look more ominous than that of cat pouncing on prey, and went for a walk around the rest of her big house. Her big house she couldn't afford.

Doing her best to keep rocking Charlee while walking, she slowly inspected the beautiful living room that was bigger than her childhood home. It swallowed her as she moved closer to a designer couch Ian had insisted they buy. It was storm grey and seemed to whisper melancholy assurances that you were right where you needed to be. Charlee never cried when she sat on it, baby feet not quite dangling over the edge, and seemed to like the plush texture better than her crib. Or her mother's arms for that matter. Even she lay, petrified, in a comfy position when seeing it at the department store, afraid if she moved it would ruin the couchs' illusion of perfection, she'd felt everyone was happier when they were seated on this couch. Which was probably why she'd let him buy such an extravagant thing. She liked it. She felt safe there.

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A few years later, when Ian and Kenni divorced, she made the unhappy marriage and separation as the worst kept secret in all of New York. She was a drug addict, never mind the disgusting amounts of crack in cigarettes and the illegalness, casual drinker, and pitiful mother. Charlee grew up learning nothing of the official divorce, believing her parents were mutually happy to not live in the same house. Ian sent Kenni money out of pity, not concern for his daughter, with full understanding of her situation. Nothing seemed to but Kenni's true fault, she was addicted to smoking because of the hit she'd accepted from Ian, lost her job as result of taking care of Charlee, and drank out of remorse for the first two. If only life was easier.

::::

IAN

"Something I think we all agree on, no one expected Ian to be the first one to commit to a girl. Cheers boys!" Mark finished up his speech, in a not-so-sophisticated manner. The run on sentences slurred and interrupted by hiccups. It wasn't his fault the venue was a let down, he was there to add spice to the party.

Five respectable looking men sat in the reserved section of a highly acclaimed gentlemen's club, feeling all but comfortable, one more so than the rest. Ian Algers was about to be married. He'd planned a nice dinner with a few close friends, not clubbing with his cousin Mark. His younger cousin stuck out like a sore thumb amongst his polished coworkers. He looked the part of a buffoon, reclining on a leather sofa, remnants of appetizers clinging to his stubble. If only Kenni hadn't mentioned the outing to him.

Ian focused on the dying embers bravely fighting for a few minutes of light. He wanted to ignore the loud sound of Mark starting a chant but it was like trying to look past an elephant blocking the hallway. Invasive and immobile.

He wanted to be excited for his wedding. It was in two days, Kenni would ignite a fit of desire in his heart that only came about when he around someone he truly loved. No one was as special as her. They'd met in the least romantic way possible,

her leaning against the counter of the diner she was attending during the undesirable midnight shift, Ian just wanting to find a bathroom. Even in her grease stained white polo and him in a t-shirt, they were luminous. A perfect pairing designed to have a perfect life. That's what Ian was supposed to be thinking about at his bachelor party. Not covering his ears to drown out a furious chant lead by a miserable drunk.

"Ian! Ian! Ian!"

The elegantly decorated restaurant's interior was lit only by the soft illuminating glow of candles. Mark was about to knock one over. They were the real sort too. Not the popular holographic flicker that were all the craze without the risk. These had some personality to them.

## SILVER AND GOLD

### Ashley Honey

Age: 17, Grade: 10

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Novel Writing

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#### BRIEF SUMMARY:

Marigold has been abandoned by her humans and thrown into the outside world. Raised in a life of privilege and normality, she must discover the natural ways of her species with the help of Zilar, a wild cat with a hidden past. And if assimilating to a new life isn't hard enough, a strange virus is spreading throughout the forest. Marigold may be the only one who can help.

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#### EXCERPT:

She couldn't see. Mari didn't know how long she had been trapped in what felt like a cardboard

box, one of the place she once thought of as a fun hiding place. But she saw the box a bit differently now.

She brushed the pad of a paw against the walls that closed in on her, struggled to breathe in the stale air, and let out a wail. Her claws unsheathed, and a wild force in her heart emerged for the very first time, urging her to scratch at her jail with a burning fury of desperation.

Trapped...trapped...trapped...

Her heart was racing wildly now. She didn't know how much time had passed. Marigold could not see the sun or the sky or the stars, any sign that days or mere hours had gone by; all of these were hidden from her. All she knew was the growling of her stomach and the rumble of the world outside of the box. It had felt as long as a mere moment and an entire lifetime all at the same time.

She desperately tried to break through the paper, but it was far too thick for her claws to puncture. The air was closing in on her, and she couldn't breathe. No air. No air. No air.

Her energy withered away, and she gave up, throwing her body onto the ground.

And then everything stopped. No noise was uttered from outside, and Mari braced herself for any sudden change. She winced and curled into herself when a slam echoed in the distance and a pop released close to her ear.

The box moved. Marigold, lacking traction and stability, slid over to the right of the box, struggling to gain a hold of her footing. The box hit the ground with a heavy thud that shook Mari to her core. Then another pop and slam, and a steady grumble reached her ears, growing quieter and quieter until she was met with silence once more.

Mari took a moment to collect herself before scratching at the box again. Her paws went faster and faster and more and more aggressive. And then she stabbed at the box, her claws breaking through the material as she ripped a gaping hole through the material. Her legs were shaking as she emerged from the confines of paper and darkness.

When she was finally free, it was dark. Her legs were stiff, and her lungs were gasping for the fresh

air of the outside world. She realized, in this moment, that she hadn't been outside in quite a long time. Grass and clean air were two things she would never take advantage of again, she noted to herself.

A dim street light shone above, the only thing illuminating the dark path she found herself standing before. She spotted dark movement from the corner of her eyes and nearly lept out of her skin, but she felt foolish when she noticed it was only her own shadow.

The humans were nowhere to be seen. This must have been a mistake, Mari thought with a flick of her tail. But she was too exhausted from the draining journey to think about how she would find them, how she would return home, and sleep beckoned her with a kind and gentle caress. They would probably come to retrieve her later in they day when they realized they had made a mistake.

She felt exposed sleeping in the open air, so she dragged her body over to a tree surrounded by some bushes. Mari was somewhat covered and blended in with her surroundings, but she did not feel trapped like she had been in the box. And before she could even ruminate about how she felt while trapped in the box, she collapsed into a deep slumber.

The sun filtered through the leaves, speckling Mari's coat, changing the solid orange to a sea of tan and fiery gold. She awoke to find herself not in her fluffy bed but in a forest surrounded by trees. It took her a moment to recall the events of the night before, and once she did, she felt a deep weight fall into the pit of her stomach. She stretched out her sore body, tail ruffling the undergrowth of the forest.

Marigold perked her orange ears and noticed something underneath the sea of morning birdsong and chirping--paws scurrying and a timid heartbeat; and when a force she wasn't initially aware of parted her jaws, she could nearly taste the soft flesh of some animal, the name of it she failed to place.

She awkwardly careened forward, leaves rustling vigorously, blades of grass squashed beneath her clumsy paws and she followed the

presence of her potential breakfast. The prey, however, was too quick for Mari's unexperienced claws, and she watched bitterly as a long pink tail disappeared into the forest.

"That was pitiful. Just pitiful."

She whirled around, heart still racing from the adrenaline of a hunt, and met the eyes of the most beautiful tom she had ever seen (Granted, she hadn't seen that many toms in her day, but she had definitely seen many cats peruse the field behind her human's home. He was much more beautiful than Henry or Muffin).

His blue-gray fur stood out like a sore paw in the sea of green leaves and brown tree bark, his dark eyes watching her with curiosity. His whiskers twitched with amusement at the sight he had just witnessed, which made Marigold wonder how long he had been watching her.

"Hungry?" he continued, leading the female to realize she had never responded in the first place. Then again, initial statement wasn't much of a question. It was more of an insult.

But Marigold didn't have a chance to feel offended because the awkward silence had begin to make her squirm.

"Y-yes," she stammered, suddenly realizing how warm and restless she felt under his watching eyes.

His gaze hardened, watching Mari with curiosity. "You aren't from around here, are you?"

"No."

"Where are you from?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, 'you don't know'?"

"I told you. I. Don't. Know," she snapped, flicking her tail in irritation.

He flinched, drawing his paws backs before purring in amusement. "Feisty, are you?"

She didn't utter any words, but Marigold's agitation showed through her eyes and spoke enough.

"Do you have any food?" he asked.

Mari swallowed. "No."

The tom studied her for a long while. "I thought so. You look like a disaster. Come with me," he meowed curtly and began to trot away.

Mari blinked before letting out a scoff. "I don't

even know your name, so no, I'm not following you. How do I know you won't murder me or something?"

The tom spun around. "You'd be dumb to stay behind here and die." He continued to walk away.

Marigold thought for a moment before finally giving in and bounding after him.

"My name is Zilar," he told her a little while later. He led her through the forest, taking an obscure and twisty path around trees, hedges, and random areas the tom didn't seem very fond of.

"Marigold," she replied.

Mari didn't know what to say next; she never really had friends before, so she felt strange trying to take to someone else. Her tail wouldn't stop moving even when she consciously tried to keep it still. "Where are we going?"

"There's a settlement of cats nearby," he explained. "I feel like you would do well there, and you may be able to relate to some of the other members there."

Marigold considered this for a moment. "Why would I?"

Zilar rolled his eyes. "Mostly everyone there was a housecat at some point. No, don't give me that look," he scoffed, "I know you're not wild. You reek of humans and have a collar with a [BELL](#) on it. Which reminds me that we need to get that off immediately if we ever want to catch any prey."

Marigold winced for a moment.

"And I can only infer why I found you so close to the road," he meowed, softer this time, which made Mari feel uneasy.

They walked in silence for a moment.

"Humans do stupid things. Don't blame yourself for the actions of another," Zilar said faintly, just loud enough for her to hear but quiet enough for her to pretend that she hadn't.

## WARRIOR OF THE BLADE

## Antonio Waltermate

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Raytown South Senior High School, Raytown, MO

Educator: Cheryl Edmondson

Category: Novel Writing

### BRIEF SUMMARY:

Warriors of the Blade takes place on another world controlled by three diverse factions, all ready for war. The Warriors are a neutral group sworn to protect a holy sword foretold to be able to kill immortals; all under the prophecy that it must remain untouched until the gods return. Jaxson, the protagonist, is a captain within the Warriors, rising in the ranks under the watchful eyes of his superiors. When the Warriors leader is killed by unknown political enemies, Jaxson must rise to power and lead his people through the battles that lie just ahead. But all the while he is haunted by grim dreams of events yet to come, promising the rise of something darker and stronger than their world has ever known. On the Warrior's journey, secrets are uncovered that will change everything, forcing Jaxson to adapt or lose everything he holds dear.

### EXCERPT:

Jaxson slammed his axe into the slender body of the ancient tree, the cold night breeze gently sweeping against his sweat soaked cloth shirt. Most of the warriors were asleep, resting but not those who had served with Jaxson during their short period of fighting in the former Dreadox Imperial territory. They worked beside him, gnawing through the thick bark of the trees just outside the perimeter of the Circle's sacred keep. Its high stone walls loomed behind them, the shadow of sentries walking their long perimeter

just visible in the near total darkness.

It was a custom of the Circle of the Blade that those returning from warfare would work for two nights and three days before being allowed to rest. A way to keep the mind unoccupied as they processed the things they had seen and done to survive. It kept the nightmares away; mostly. Jaxson wedged the axe into the trunk one more time before it lumbered downwards slowly, slamming into the moist soil below. Jaxson gripped the middle of the fallen trunk, two other men walking over silently and grabbing the ends to help.

He took a deep breath and hefted the trunk up slowly, the others straining alongside him. With the trunk lifted, they began to slowly march to the gates of their home. Jaxson admired the men under him. Even under the stress of the tree's weight they made no sound nor did their grips falter. Once they had reached the gate they laid the trunk carefully on the ground, stretching their sore muscles and battered bodies.

Jaxson looked to the starry sky above, taking in the world around him; the smell of fresh wheat within the sturdy walls, the cool breeze, and the chirps of birds as they began to sing their morning songs. Jaxson remembered what his Blade master had taught him, he had told them an old adage that had been passed on by generations of blade masters **TO TAKE THE LIFE OF OTHERS, ONE MUST APPRECIATE LIFE ALL THE MORE.** The blade master had explained "There must be a careful balance of death and life, of order and chaos. Without chaos order is complacent, and without death life means nothing. So to take a life you should enrich your care for the living."

Jaxson had passed on the adage to his unit after being promoted to Captain of the Blade, a notable title that he took seriously. The lives of the men around him counted on the fact he knew when to kill and when to provide mercy, for a sign of mercy could stop the dozen battles that would've followed.

The moon sparkled near the horizon, their service had been done. They could re-enter the keep and join the morning exercises. Jaxson called to

the men hard at work at the edge of the tree line  
“COME BROTHERS, LET US JOIN THE OTHERS IN AWAKENING!”

The men followed quietly. They were tired and understandably so. The rite of return wasn't easy for any of the warriors, but necessary as it had been for decades. The gate began to rise, squeaking against its frame. Soon the followers of the blade would unite in welcoming back their combat-worn brothers; but first would come the morning ceremony.

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It had been nearly an hour since he had arrived. The sun was now directly above the church, only known to Jaxson by the density of the light shafts that now entered the building through small holes in the ceiling.

Jaxson pulled himself up and walked over to the confessional booth, finding it empty as he had felt it would be. Jaxson had made sure the head priest would not be present, sending him off to check out a claim of a birth in the houses to the far North of the city, he would not return before Jaxson was done with his mission.

Right on time, he heard footsteps from the door that led into the rear hold of the church, followed by a moment of silence. The door squeaked open and a single set of footsteps approached, a shadow enveloping the light that touched the outside of the confessional booth. He heard his target slump into the chair on the other side of the booth, a light sigh following while the figure settled beside him.

“Forgive me father for I-” The man began in a tired tone.

“Spare me your sin my lord, I bring you the sins I know of.” Jaxson interrupted quietly  
He heard the man shift towards the door while he continued in a harsher tone “I would sit back down my lord or I would be forced to put you down.”

“How would you do that?” The man asked, obviously upset and confused.

“Simple, I have a knife in my hand. Should you call your guards I will see it cut your face apart before they could even enter. Now please sit.”  
Jaxson heard the man lay back in his seat, utterly silent beyond his own breath. “What is it you wish to say?”

“I bring forth a choice my lord for you have betrayed those who have defended your throne. You will step down from your place and let The Order rule or we will seize such things by force.”  
Jaxson replied coldly.

“You have no authority to do such.”

“Nor do you to use the Frijin as lap dogs and yet they do. Curious how things change. You have overstepped, my lord, and I will not allow it to happen again.” Jaxson insisted.

“I did what had to be done, another war will see us depleted beyond repair. We barely recovered our infrastructure last time, we barely have any as it is.” The King answered with a hint of anger in his voice.

“We had nothing when we claimed our freedom, should we let ourselves be taken yet again in the night?” Jaxson asked.

“The Dreadox have honored our agreement, as have the Frijin.” The king retorted.

“This is untrue, my lord. The Dreadox have taken Jarling's life. Funny enough, they did so wearing the uniforms of your messengers. You should count yourself fortunate I haven't killed you.”  
The King's tone softened “I... did not know. I hope he went quickly for his sake. I feel for your Order but do you bring any evidence of the Dreadox involvement?”

“Only motive, my lord. They carried only their weapons and the clothes on their backs, nothing to identify them beyond the people they attacked.” Jaxson answered as he thought back to the night he had witnessed the grizzly scene left behind.

“Then I cannot put so much at risk, there mustn't be war.” The king stated with a tone of finality.

“Warn your people then what will come, let those who wish to flee be allowed to flee for we will not take the effort to be considerate. Everyone that remains will be seen as supporters of the throne”

Jaxson continued, ensuring his tone was entirely void of emotion or care.

"Understood, but I must ask. If you are so bent to win, why is it you have let me live?"

"I am better than the assassin that took our leader. I'd rather let a man have his chance at a fight than to stab him in the back like a coward. I will be seeing you soon, my lord."

Jaxson didn't hesitate for a response. Instead, he sprung from the confession booth, leapt across the room and threw himself out a nearby window, carefully rolling to his feet on impact. He could hear The King yelling for his guards, the clank of armored troops running clear inside the building. Jaxson tossed his robe clear of himself, shoving through the crowds forcefully while the clank of the guards erupted into the noisy square.

They yelled for him to stop, knifing towards him while he dashed into the alleyway and kicking out a foot to push the loose passage wall inwards. Jaxson dove into the small crawl space and sealed the path behind him in a flash of movement. He then balled up and held his breath while the guards ran past the entry way, oblivious to his position.

In the darkness of the small space, he thought through the course of the following days considering what they had just started. Jaxson regretted that the king held onto his place, but he couldn't entirely blame the man. He hadn't seen what the Dreadox were going to do, and his blindness and insistence would cost The Royal City dearly.

Jaxson pushed away his thoughts and crawled through the darkness sensing a larger space beneath him. He dropped down into a stone tunnel way and began his walk, blind to his surroundings. He wasn't afraid. When he had had no vision, he could certainly see his path. He began to sprint through the winding tunnel, knowing soon he would emerge to tell his men of war.

\*\*\*\*\*

Davaak lumbered forward. He knew he should've waited longer for his injury to heal but he had let his emotions take him over. Now he could barely focus on anything beyond the next step he took, perhaps this what he was meant to be; a wanderer with no home and no one to stand beside.

The Order had taken him in, open arms or not, it was something to hold tightly in a world that constantly did nothing but take away. Davaak was happy he hadn't killed those guards, in a way he was happy Jaxson had betrayed him but the act alone couldn't be ignored. He would've never forgiven himself if he had become when he had lost everything in the beginnings; his empathy. Davaak pushed away his miseries, while pain began to shoot up his spine sending him to fall onto the ground. He tried to reach down to pull his injector from his medical bag but found his arms unwilling to listen. A concussion, that is what had to be afflicting him. He cursed himself silently for becoming so overwhelmed by everything to use his brain over his feelings, again he tried to reach and again he was met with nothing but stillness. Had he been smart, he would've treated himself with his injector to stimulate repair in his rear cortex and to ensure his spine remained aligned.

In the moment of crisis, a dark truth came to Davaak, soon the cold would reach the area from the North and with it he would quickly succumb to the frigid temperatures. If not taken by the cold, he would die of starvation and dehydration. He was filth, worthless, just as his people had branded him and now he would die a death deserving of the garbage he was. He gave up with a sigh and resigned to his fate, he no longer struggled against his paralysis. He instead laid down his heavy head and fell into the darkness of sleep pledging to never awaken again.

PERSONAL  
ESSAY/MEMOIR

# SQUARE ONE

**Mary Buelter**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

"This isn't over."

The window rolled up and the car drove away, leaving me fuming on the sidewalk. My body vibrated with the need to say anything that would hurt her as much as the conversation that just took place did, but there was no one to say it to. Left with a sense of unfulfillment, I turned on my heel with the argument on a loop in my mind. The sky was dark and cloudy, threatening to unleash a torrent of rain on me.

## YOU ALWAYS SETTLE WITH GOOD ENOUGH.

I gritted my teeth as I walked into the school, my face hot with anger. I shoved my hands in my pockets so no one would see my white fists tightly clenched. People milled around me going about their day. Some were smiling and laughing with their friends without a care in the world. Others were pressed up against the wall, back hunched and all alone. I wondered how many of them were like me: stuck in a miserable, endless cycle with no way out.

## YOU NEVER WANT TO GET BETTER.

I had slammed the car door in my mother's face.

It was always the same. I was never good enough. I could never match up to the perfection my brothers seemed to naturally obtain, and that was usually the base of almost all our fights. My

friends, my grades, my sports. The cleanliness of my room even came up once. There was always something new, and it would always be addressed. We'd argue till we were either exchanging heated words or sitting in icy silence. Sometimes, the day would end with her staying up in her room all night, while other times, it was me holed up in my room until the morning. The brief time we see each other was enough to delve into another useless argument.

Lather, rinse, and repeat.

## YOU AREN'T DRIVEN ENOUGH.

"What's wrong?" my friend asked upon seeing my expression. Another routine I was used to. I always had the same answer for them.

"Nothing important."

She raised her eyebrows at me but didn't probe further, something I was immensely grateful for. I could feel the anger thrumming beneath my skin, struggling to be free, to hurt. I needed to keep it under control so they wouldn't be caught in the crossfire.

## YOU NEED TO STRIVE TO BE THE BEST.

My classes passed by slowly and the anger was mostly forgotten, locked away until later, where another fight would surely take place. For now, I was focusing on making it through school.

I sat at lunch, laughing at something my friends had said. The last of the laughter was subsiding when I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. I instinctively reached for it without a second thought, too busy rolling my eyes at how dumb my friends were being.

It was from my brother, Joey. He was already on his way to become a doctor, taking on accelerated courses and doing everything to stand out from the hundreds of students at SLU. Following in Jack's footsteps, I suppose.

The resentment within reared its ugly head, and I hated how envious I was in their accomplishments. They were everything I seemed to struggle with: smart, driven, popular, outgoing, athletic. The list seemed endless to me.

I shook my head to dispel those thoughts, opting to read the text instead. Frowning, I quickly skimmed over the words. It was a screenshot of his texts with

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mom. More specifically, a text she sent yesterday when Joey asked how her day went.

### I FINISHED THE TILE

I MUDDED THE CEILING

CATHERINE SAID GOODNIGHT

CATHERINE AND I WERE AT DINNER AND SHE  
SMILED AT ME

The next text was from Joey himself.

IT'S SAD THAT THAT JUST DOING THAT MAKES  
MOM'S DAY SINCE YOU'RE SO MEAN TO HER ALL  
THE TIME

Everything around me became unintelligible as I reread the text again. My throat closed up, and I felt like I was going to be sick. Turning my phone off, I sat in a trance, repeating the words I just read over and over in my head. I vaguely registered my friends saying something, but I didn't even look their way. My mind kept circling back to what my brother had just revealed to me.

My vision blurred and I blurted out a dumb excuse before rushing away. The reality of the situation crashed down on me like a tidal wave. Dad's been in Pittsburgh for almost two years now, and I've been too angry to see the toll it's taken on my mom. I wasn't the only one being affected by this potential move to another state and my father's absence.

### CATHERINE SAID GOODNIGHT

My eyes burned from the attempt to keep the tears at bay. The lump in my throat grew and my cheeks were wet in spite of my best efforts. I bit my lip and tried focusing on the sharp pain. The laughter around me seemed to get unbearably loud, and I wondered how people were able to laugh when I was completely numb, unable to process anything other than those words that were currently flashing across my vision. They seemed to taunt me, reminding me of how badly I've affected my mom.

### SHE SMILED AT ME

My mom's days were filled with endless work, trying to keep everything in order while my dad was away, and I wasn't making things any easier on her. How could something so simple make her day? Was I really so terrible that a smile, something she should be entitled to every day, was

considered a highlight in her life?

I focused on steadyng my breathing. IN, OUT.  
IN, OUT.

I quickly swiped my arm across my face to get rid of the evidence and briefly considered going into the bathroom to wash my face, but the bell was about to ring and my things were still at the lunch table. I scrubbed my face with my hands and prayed my eyes weren't noticeably red before heading over.

The moment I sat down, my friend fixed her gaze on me, sensing something was off. "Are you okay?"

The attention shifted to me, and I squirmed under their scrutinizing gazes. I attempted an easygoing smile. "I'm good."

"No, you aren't."

"Really," I tried again, hearing my voice pitch higher with desperation. "I'm fine."

"You obviously aren't fine," someone else pointed out and I thought back to my brother's words. Immediately the tears started welling up in my eyes again, and I dug my nails into my thigh, trying to distract myself from crying in front of all these people.

I blinked. That was a mistake. A tear slipped out, and I wiped it away hurriedly. I attempted to laugh it off and rubbed at my eyes with my sleeves.

"Nothing's wrong."

She looked almost offended. "Catherine..."

I took a deep, steadyng breath. "It's nothing. It's just...I've been treating someone-" My voice hitched and died in my throat as I clenched my jaw.

The high-pitched tone of the bell rang and I breathed a sigh of relief. I started shoving everything into my backpack unceremoniously, wanting to leave before any other questions could be asked.

My friend frowned at me. "We're talking about this later. This isn't over."

I swallowed back the lump in my throat, reminded of my mother's last words this morning, and nodded weakly. "Okay."

The walk to the car seemed to take forever, but

at the same time, was over too quickly. I climbed into the car. My mom was sitting unmoving, her face betraying no emotion, while the radio hummed lowly in the background. My heart was pounding and that was ridiculous. I shouldn't have any reason to be nervous to say a simple greeting. Yet my palms were slightly clammy and my stomach unsettled.

I once again thought back to the texts that tilted my entire world off its axis and sat up straighter in my seat. At first, nothing came out, like the word had decided to cling inside my throat. I cleared my throat, my nerves worsening as each second passed.

Ignoring this, I gathered my courage. "Hi."

My mom's eyebrows knitted together and she looked at me with a perplexed expression. I could hear my heartbeat, quick and erratic. This was an olive branch I was extending, a break in the circle we've been in for more than a year. She wanted this to be over as much as I did. After a long moment, she said, "Hi."

The sun peeked through the clouds, blindingly bright and comfortably warm. I knew I couldn't fix everything with one word, but it was a start.

I smiled, and she smiled back.

## A LETTER TO MY MARXIST, THIRTEEN YEAR OLD SELF

**Adina Cazacu-De Luca**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Andy Chen

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

I get it. I know the more you study history, the more you feel as if all of the suffering humanity has endured stemmed from greed and the pursuit of capitalist gain. I know you think you're a Marxist. I know you get annoyed when adults tell you how awfully idealistic you are, as if they are so busy being cogs in the capitalist machine that they can't see their own position. But trust me, they have lived to see the suffering that comes from experiments in Marxism and communism. You have not. Those societies can never function as Marx and Engels intended on a large scale. You should know because your own father lived in one.

Let me tell you about an experience you will have in a couple of years. It is a humid summer evening in Bucharest, Romania, and across the street from a famous sausage shop, your family sits on a porch, surrounded by kittens, eating different pastries and cheeses. You will ask, "So, what was Ceausescu's regime really like? What was it like to live in a communist society?"

Your father will immediately start listing banned activities in 1980's Romania. These activities include speaking with foreign citizens, having a passport (to travel internationally required an application for a passport for a trip and returning it upon arrival), reading the works of George Orwell, criticizing the regime, and getting an abortion. Later, once you have WiFi, you will learn that more than 9,000 Romanian women died between 1965 and 1989 due to complications arising from illegal abortions.

Beyond a list of bans, your understanding of this communist regime soon will shift towards your family's more personal anecdotes during your dinner of sausage with mustard.

Your grandmother will start, "We had 2 hours of TV a day."

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Your father, of course, will interrupt, saying, "We had the evening news from 8:00 to 8:30. Then, from 8:30 to 9:00, it was the lasting teachings of the Great Comrade in a specific field. From 9:00 to 9:45, if you were lucky, you had a soap opera. 9:45 to 10:00, you had the nightly news, and at 10:00, end of the program. And of course, the evening news and the nightly news were [he will start speaking in a mocking, "communist" voice, after humming a fanfare] 'the comrade secretary general [Ceausescu] met with... the mayor of Timbuktu, yeah! And they shake hands. Wooo! Now we're known to Timbuktu."

Your aunt will add in Romanian, "And on the weekend, you had 20 minutes of cartoons. That was extra, for the kids." Your family will laugh heartily.

When you eat this dinner, you will begin to understand why your father has spent the past year looking at you as if you were an alien. How could you mutter about the disadvantages of capitalism in front of someone with actual experience living in a communist regime? While your family will remain mostly light hearted while telling these anecdotes, state-run media was far from a laughing matter. The regime used its control of the press to exaggerate positive statistics and neglect the repressive elements of society. And before you start telling me that such control of the media and use of opinionated fact reminds you of a certain candidate in this year's presidential election (for you), I don't want to hear it. Yes, you can tell me about how we never learn from the past. You would be right, but that's not why I am here.

I mean, of course I still asked about similarities between the behavior of Ceausescu and Trump because (spoiler alert) he will win the election. So, Tata's cousin will tell you that both men speak in simple phrases, often with grammatical errors. Then, Tata will talk about the nepotism present in both administrations. For Ceausescu, his wife was the vice prime minister; his son was a member of

the executive political committee, and his brother was a high ranking general in the army. Trump's daughter Ivanka and son-in-law Jared Kushner's rank in the government seem to have similar derivations.

The point of this letter is to show you the perils of applied communism, so I'll stop scaring you with the similarities between a totalitarian dictator and your future president. Hopefully, in reading that last sentence, you said to yourself, "Wait a second. The whole point of communism is a rebellion led by the proletariat and the abolition of private property, thus bringing the end of social classes. There shouldn't BE a totalitarian dictator." However, this never happened in real life communist regimes. A single dictator would always try to abolish private property by making it government property. Social classes were never eliminated, they were simply reformed. Everyone was either suffering or in power. Your family, including your own father and mama mare (grandmother) were all in the suffering camp. There were extreme shortages and rations: supermarkets with completely empty racks except "shrimp chips," which were potato skins with shrimp flavoring.

In an attempt to eat more than these chips, your father and grandparents would wait in lines two to five hours long for "tacâmuri." Mama mare will laugh wryly as she tells you the story, saying, "... And the meat was one little package of one kilogram and you were content; you were happy to have it, but it was bones."

Tata will explain, "They were not selling chicken, the chicken breast was exported. All you could find was the claws. The bones of the legs and the feet of the chicken."

Mama mare will finish, "... and we called them tacâmuri. It sounded Japanese. And we laughed. This was our life." She will tell you another story. In this one, she was on call as an anesthesiologist, with no time to wait in lines. She walked to a

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restaurant nearby and payed 70 lei (\$20) for a single hard, cold strip of meat and a handful of cold french fries, her meal for the day. Her monthly salary was 1,500 lei (\$375) a month.

The cousin will add, "That's just a communist regime, that's the problem. Ceausescu is just a form. Even if you had money, you didn't have anything to buy with it."

The shortages extended past meat, cooking oil (1 liter per household per month), and sugar (1 kilogram per person per month), to necessities like running water and electricity.

Mama mare will say, "At any moment, we would have no gas, no light, no elevator, we go on the stairs with a candle or lantern, if we had. And we couldn't cook a piece of meat, couldn't make tea, nothing. Once a day, we took the bath in the same basin, [my husband] and me, in the same water because we had to catch it while it was there."

Tata will recall having to study for University by candlelight. At the time, his cousin was a freshman university student and wanted to visit West Germany. He was taken aside by 2 Securitate officers (secret police) and beaten bloody, and told he would be beaten up again if he persisted with his application. A visit to West Germany could instill radical ideas in him, including thoughts of democracy. You can criticize your government all you want, but you must at least acknowledge that your right to do so is not a ubiquitous privilege. There is no secret police force in this country that took you aside for going on Marxist tangents in history class. Yes, I know that you will say our police force and justice system are extremely flawed. You are not wrong, but stop trying to get me off topic.  
You will ask how the regime ended. Tata will say, "[Ceausescu] got shot. '89, December 25th. Christmas day. And it was another communist that shot him. And this guy pretended he was a big democrat."

His cousin will say in Romanian, "Yeah, he was a democrat of the Russians."

You will be rusty on your Romanian history, and your father can tell, disappointedly, by the look on your face. So, he will explain, "It was Iliescu, the guy who brought the miners, that, you know, scratched my back a little bit. Back in 1990. Didn't I tell you about Iliescu and the miners coming in Bucharest taking the university from students? It was my 5th year at the University of Bucharest. Why? Because Comrade Iliescu told them to [mockingly] 'eliminate the golani [hooligans, rascals]''" He will laugh.

His cousin will say, "He started talking like Trump." Your grandmother will agree. I know you'll find this worrying. You're right in doing so.

The event to which they were referring was the June 1990 Mineriad, and the protests that led to it. After the death of Ceausescu, the National Salvation Front was set to hold Romania's first free elections in May. The University of Bucharest had been declared a "zone free of communism", and university students demanded that former Communist leaders be banned from running for office. President Iliescu called participants "golani." Then, on June 13-15, the remaining participants were arrested, and Iliescu brought miners to beat up the students and occupy the square.

My father went almost daily to the square to protest. On June 15, he went to hand in his senior thesis. A group of miners approached him, asked to see his ID, and struck him with a baseball bat on his back.

This action wasn't secretive, like the assault on Marius, or indirect, like the various rations. This was a deliberate act of uncalled for violence toward peaceful protesters condoned by authority. The president clearly endorsed the working class over the academics and initiated class warfare. I'm

not giving you any more spoilers, but read this letter again after August 11, 2017. Sometimes, there is blame on both sides. This was not one of those times.

To be honest, I don't know myself, you, well enough to gauge your reaction to this letter. However, I needed to tell you everything I heard that one summer night because since then, I have accepted that our political and economic system is the best among many evils. Let me be clear: I don't want you to give up. I know you are enraged by the many inequities in our society. I want you to be part of their solution. I just need you to understand that such a solution does not involve radically tearing down the government and forcing the elimination of social classes. The solution is not, and never will be, communism. On that summer night in Romania, you will ask your father's cousin, "What was the scariest part of the regime?" He will respond solemnly, "All of it."

## HEAD FIRST

**Anna Finn**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The lacrosse field was farther from the high school than any of the other fields. It was closer to the middle school than it was to the high school, really. It felt isolated, but, standing with all the other girls at the end of practice, I couldn't have felt more watched. No one was actually looking at me, yet I swear I could feel the eyes of everyone boring into

me. A sinking feeling pressed down against me like my stomach had dropped down to my feet as I stared at the coach while she announced the teams. I had made the C team for lacrosse.

Honestly, it wasn't a surprise. I was a freshman and had been practicing with the bottom group for all of the tryouts, but now it was official-- unalterably set in stone. It stung.

The gears were already turning in my mind, processing and calculating. When one of my friends asked me to do lacrosse with her, I had jumped into it. I bought all the equipment and even went as far as to go to a camp. Nevertheless, I had still failed.

I glanced at two other girls that had gone to the lacrosse camp with me, smiling and standing with the JV team. The pit in my stomach suddenly felt heavier and I looked away, still unaccustomed to the feeling of failure bearing down on my shoulders. I knew I hadn't genuinely failed, but I hadn't succeeded either, and they felt awfully similar to me.

I could feel myself reverting back to my old habit of jumping ship at the first inklings of anything less than success. I'd already quit over a half-dozen sports for the same reason. Although I do tend to dive head first into things, the thing with diving in head first is that there's always that ever-present risk of hitting the bottom.

Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I turned my focus towards my friend, Jordan, instead. A recurring knee injury had sidelined her all week, so of course she made the C team. I, on the other hand, had no excuse. Despite my inner turmoil, I gave her a strained smile.

"Hey," Jordan began, oblivious, with a corresponding smile spreading across her face as well. "Are you excited for the season to start?"

I furrowed my eyebrows and looked down as we started to walk off of the field together, seriously contemplating the question. Was I really excited for the lacrosse season to start? Did I really want to play in the C team games where people could witness my inadequacy, let alone show up to practice every day, an active reminder of my shortcomings? The answer was a short and simple

no.

"I guess," I lied. "I'm just not sure lacrosse is the sport for me."

"Oh, why not? I thought you were pretty into it," Jordan questioned.

As we made eye contact, I shrugged, looking down before responding, "I don't know. I'm just not feeling it, you know?"

"No, not really."

I sighed. "It's just... different than what I thought it'd be like."

"Oh. Well, I hope you stick with it. I think you should."

"Yeah, we'll see."

We reached the edge of the field and said our goodbyes, promising to see each other later, and parted ways. I spotted the familiar blue Highlander parked in front of the school, waiting ever so patiently for my arrival. Just the sight of the car renewed my eagerness to go home, and I quickened my pace.

As soon as I climbed into the vehicle, though, I could feel my mom's eyes on me, staring. Waiting. Expecting.

"So," my mom probed in response to my silence.

"How'd it go?"

"Okay," I replied shortly, concentrating intently on arranging my backpack at my feet.

"What team did you make?"

"C team." I turned to gaze out the window.

"Congratulations! I'm so proud of you!" my mom cheered, taking her eyes off the road to flash me a brief grin.

"Thanks..." I trailed off.

Sensing my lack of enthusiasm, the conversation died out. A relatively peaceful period of silence ensued that lasted for the rest of the ride home. In the back of my mind, I knew I was being unreasonably curt, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything more. Instead of swallowing my pride, I suppressed any apology that might've slipped out.

We pulled into the garage, and I hopped out of the car, my unspoken apology haunting me as I trudged up the stairs. As soon as I entered my room, I let my backpack slide off onto the floor

and collapsed face first onto my bed. For a moment, enveloped in the comfort of the familiar fleece blankets, I didn't move. I just laid there, eyes closed, letting everything sink in.

I had jumped off the diving board only to belly flop on the water's surface. With that thought, the sinking feeling in my abdomen returned. With a groan, I rolled over to stare at the ceiling. Sometimes it's hard to differentiate walking down a springboard from walking the plank, which is why, when things get hard, it's always easier to jump ship instead.

If at first I don't succeed, quit. It seems questionable, but the logic behind it is infallible. If I'm subpar at something, why shouldn't I just quit? Shouldn't I be devoting my time to doing the activity that I'll excel at? Am I not supposed to learn from my failures so I don't repeat them? Yet, alongside these questions racing through my head, struggling to justify quitting yet another sport, doubt was already beginning to blossom. The remnants of past regret began to surge back up, bursting through and overflowing with such a force as to suggest that it had been lurking beneath the surface for a long while, festering like an open wound. I had no idea why.

In my heart of hearts, I knew I was missing something. The full picture of the situation seemed to just barely elude me. I tried to take a step back. Why had something that had come so easily to me beforehand now seem so unfathomable and distasteful? I closed my eyes and covered my face with my arms. Who knew quitting could be so complicated?

Sighing dramatically, I lurched upward into a sitting position. One more practice, I reasoned, and then afterwards, I'd know what to do for sure.

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"Hurry up! We're going to be late," Jordan complained, already walking out of the locker room. Glaring at her, I yanked my ponytail tighter and followed her, beginning the long trek towards the lacrosse field.

"I'm glad you decided to keep doing lacrosse," Jordan commented when I eventually caught up with her.

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I pursed my lips, shrugging my shoulders. "Yeah, well, I'm actually still deciding."

Jordan glanced at me, cocking an eyebrow in my direction.

"What?" I asked, shaking my head at her.

"Nothing." A pause. "It's just... why are you so up in the air about doing lacrosse?"

I looked down at my scuffed up sneakers, opening and closing my mouth like a fish out of water. How could I explain something that I didn't know myself?

"I don't know," I settled on. "Like I said, I'm just not sure it's the right sport for me."

"But why? You enjoy it, don't you?" Jordan interrogated, bumping her arm against mine.

"I mean, I guess, but—"

"Well then, what else matters?"

I stared at her with furrowed brows, trying to mask the incredulity that overtook me. Of course my happiness mattered, but so did other things like success and image. Didn't it?

Sensing that she was onto something, Jordan pushed on, "Who cares what anyone else thinks anyway?"

I DO, I thought.

"They're all irrelevant. If you do you, happiness is inevitable. The only thing standing in your way is yourself, Ashley. You just gotta put yourself out there."

I nodded, chewing on the unexpected criticism. We crested the hill that the field sat upon and the conversation ended, but her words continued to echo in my ears, rattling around my head and tainting my thoughts.

We stretched before engaging in a small passing drill to warm up. With every catch I made, I lifted head up a fraction more and my smile grew a fraction wider. The catches were small accomplishments, barely noticeable to others, but they were accomplishments nonetheless.

Soon after, the coaches gathered the three teams together and announced that we'd kick off practice with a full team scrimmage. Eyes sparkling, I hopped from foot to foot in anticipation as they divided up the teams.

As a defensive player, I walked towards my team's

end of the field and lined up on the first restraining line. I twiddled with the stick, twisting it around a couple times while the coach set up the draw, which initiates the game. The whistle blew and the ball went flying up into the air as players scrambled to gain possession.

Since it was still the start of the season and many of the players, such as myself, were new to the sport, the ball often ended up on the ground. Possession was shaky and the ball went up and down the field a number of times before ending up in our defensive third of the field.

Unsurprisingly, the ball bounced onto the ground once more. My eyes widened as the ball rolled towards me, and I lunged for it. I scooped the ball up in one fell swoop, rocketing down the field. No one could stop me as I flew down the sideline.

When I reached the second restraining line on the field, the line I couldn't cross, I scanned the field for a teammate. My eyes landed on a girl that was open, and I launched the ball. She caught it and I paused for a moment, watching her play before jogging back to the other end of the field.

I was subbed out a few minutes later and from the bench, I saw all my friends on the field. Some were on my team while others were playing against me. Either way, we were all on the same field, playing the same game, and sharing something between us. I couldn't help but smile at that as a warm feeling blossomed in my chest.

The game ended with a score of 4-3. We had lost, and with the finality of the game, a final epiphany dawned on me.

Lacrosse was definitely, without a shadow of a doubt, my sport. Maybe I wasn't a natural at it, but some things in life require just as much effort as it does talent to succeed. It was possible that happiness and success were, indeed, separate from each other, and maybe, just maybe, happiness held a greater importance in life than success. Failing at something did not make me a failure.

With that revelation, a weight was lifted off of me. I floated out of practice with an extra spring in my step, while at the same time remaining more grounded than I'd been for the last couple of

days. I chatted and laughed with my friends afterwards, flinging my arms around them with an ear to ear grin plastered on my face the entire time. Everything felt **RIGHT**. Lacrosse felt right. I dove in, but this time, I opened my eyes. I opened my eyes and started kicking because the thing with diving in head first is that one will never break the surface unless they start to swim.

# HI, MY NAME IS CAMMIE, BUT YOU CAN CALL ME BLACK.

**Kami Lou Harris**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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Hi, my name is Cammie, but you can call me Black.

"Are you two sisters?"

I share no resemblance to the girl standing next to me.

Pointing to a girl across the room I counter, "Well, are **YOU** two sisters?"

"No," she says, "We look nothing alike."

"Exactly," I say, and excuse myself from the conversation.

In the midst of the situation, I had no idea why I was angry. I just knew that something was wrong. I knew that the only similarity that I shared with the girl mistaken for my sister was our brown hair, brown eyes, and most importantly, our brown skin. What I didn't know, was that I was being faced with the same scenario black people are faced with everyday. In **CITIZEN**, Claudia Rankine describes a situation in which a person is called by the name of her friend's black housekeeper. While the context has changed, the same conclusion is drawn: to the girl in my story and the friend in Claudia Rankine's "all black people look the same" (7). Now, instead of feeling anger, I feel invisible. I know that no matter what I say, how I look, or what I do, there will always be people who never really see me as something more than my brown skin. The color of my skin is my first and last impression: "nowhere is where [I] will get from here" (45). Although this was not a moment even close to overt racism, it was the first time I was aware that I was being microaggressed even if at the time I didn't have a word for it.

"Oh no sorry, my name is actually Cammie."

\_\_\_\_\_ **IS THE "OTHER ONE"**, I think

"Oh it's fine," the teacher responds, you just remind me so much of \_\_\_\_\_...

**EVEN THOUGH** \_\_\_\_\_ **ISN'T EVEN IN THE CLASS**.

Why does Cammie equal \_\_\_\_\_? Because Black equals Black? When two Black kids hang out together, do people only see one? Or nothing at all? Being constantly mistaken for another leads to two outcomes: wanting to stand out even more to prove my presence or forcing myself to become more invisible in order to create a reason for being forgotten. If I live following the first outcome, each day I have to work harder and do better than the last. But at what point do I get to stop? When I am finally called by my name?

"My parents don't want you riding in my car anymore."  
"Why?" I ask  
"Because..."

I knew the answer before I asked the question.

#### SO WHY DID I ASK THE QUESTION?

When your best friend since seventh grade tells you the spring break of your sophomore year that her parents don't want you two to hang out anymore... you can't finish the sentence. Because no ending to that sentence will be able to express any emotion that conveys what has happened to you. No, what has been done to you. To know that you have lost your friend not because of an argument or jealousy, but because of a word that holds too much weight to even say.

"Why?" I ask.  
Because...

You would think that this would make you feel better, because you are at least able to say, "Well, I'm funny enough... I'm smart enough... I'm pretty enough..." but I'm just not white enough. I will never be enough. Will my skin stain the white leather seats in her car? Do her parents believe that somehow by being around me her skin will turn brown too? And if it did, would that really be wrong? In the end, that is what it comes down to: being African-American is wrong. "After it happened I was at a loss for words" because I knew that in order for me to stay her friend, I would have to not be me (7).

The second outcome is the easiest. If you have achieved invisibility, it becomes acceptable for someone to house you under the name of someone else because then, your blackness is not the problem, "your own invisibility is..." (43). Suddenly,

\_\_\_\_\_IS THE "OTHER ONE"  
becomes  
IS CAMMIE ACTUALLY IN THIS CLASS?  
And even I begin to ask myself this.

# FREAK

**Jamie Hill**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educators: Marnie Jenkins , James Miscavish

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

I was the only person who ever called me a freak; I think that's why it hurt so much. I never felt guilty for liking girls. I never felt guilty for liking guys. I never even felt guilty for liking both at the same time. But I did feel guilty for wanting both at the same time. I have always been closer to the devil than to divine. Maybe I am the devil. God forgive me, for my body is strong, but my soul is weak and the fruit has never tasted sweeter.

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I found god in Eve. I found god in their bedroom on a Saturday morning, when their parents were out. The blood and body of christ filled my mouth, tasting like sweat and skin and need. The holy ghost guided my hands over gentle hips and sloping shoulders and a slender throat. Communion was being tangled together on the bed, buried in blankets and hope and a sad craving. I renewed my vows, baptized yet again in the waters of adoration. As I silently drowned, the fire behind my sternum rekindled. I found god in the body of the person under me and on top of me and next to me. I found god and praised his glory in soft whispers. I was blessed.

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I looked for god in Olive. I searched for consolation in her unconditional love, in her unconditional hugs. She was warm, just tall enough for me to bury my face in her shoulder, her faded bleach job tied up in a ponytail. The crowded room became my chapel and I near fell on my knees searching for the Lord. I thought I might find what I was looking for in warm eyes and a warmer voice and for a moment I thought I had found it. I begged forgiveness, I demanded an answer. But no one is my lost and found. She was always bigger and brighter in my dreams and realizing how human she was made me realize how subhuman I was. Wasn't it her in the beginning? When the spirit first started slipping through my fingers and my line of sight led directly to the spot where her shoulder leaned against her boyfriend, the pretty one with a glittering laugh and glowing hands. Usually when someone sees a cute couple they wish they could be one of them, but I only wondered how warm I would be between them.

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I abandoned god in Conner. The day he hugged me after first hour I made a deal with the devil. His arms wrapped around my waist and my fingers wrapped around the pen to sign my soul away. The garden of Eden in which I stood would not host me much longer. I traded my home for this oh so human desire, for this earthly temptation, for the way we were the same height so my chin fit perfectly on his shoulder. I knew what was happening when I plucked that fruit off the tree, ripe and plump and sweet, when I brought it to my lips. I knew what was happening after every message, after every concerned frown, after every detail I compiled in my mind. Ticklish, likes tomatoes, one brother, divorced parents, wants to be an engineer. Here was heaven on earth, a delicate balance of the beauty of our flawed reality and the flawlessness of god's abomination. Here was my palace and my prison and I suppose my golden sheets were too soft. The garden was too green when all I saw was red. I started slipping

from the valley on high when I was entranced by my best friend's ex. I fell completely when I was mesmerized by all three of them at the same time.

The grace of god left me in pieces, in legs on milky thighs and eyes on gentle smiles and hands on a toned back. God found me by baiting me with someone who could never love me back. God looked for me over the shoulder I leant on. God abandoned me in the hands I used to hold on. I wanted to believe in a god of love. I craved the opportunity to love. I had some grand notion that maybe, possibly, someday, I could be loved, too. But I'm starting to believe that if there is a god, they are no god of love.

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I lost god on the backroads of town, where trees fence in your left and corn fields nap on your right and the rest of the city feels hours away. I asked my friend to drive a little faster so I wouldn't be able to hear my screams over the sound of the wind. I unbuckled and leant out the window and demanded answers from the void.

WHY DID YOU MAKE ME LIKE THIS?

WAS EVERYTHING ELSE NOT ENOUGH?

WAS I NOT ENOUGH OF A FREAK ALREADY?

WHY DID YOU HAVE TO TACK THIS ON TOO?

I'M TIRED OF ALL THE WORDS AND I JUST WANT TO LOVE AND BE LOVED WITHOUT FEELING GUILTY FOR IT.

I'M TIRED OF FEELING LIKE A FREAK.

The void yelled back in the wind that ripped the air from my lungs and in the pleather seats under me and the sunshine on top of me and in the trees and corn next next to me and in everything else that didn't give a damn how I felt or what our words were. The void became my god. My savior, my damnation. I keep whispering into the void and expecting the void to whisper back. All I hear is my own voice, reflecting, repeating my worst fears, deepest insecurities, greatest hopes, wildest dreams. The void became my god and I became the void. Echoing, echoing. I hear a plea. A

question. A whisper. I become god, and I abandon myself.

# THE STORM

**Amanda Holt**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School,  
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

I can't remember what night it was. Well I do, it was the night before the storm, a Friday, but the exact date slips my mind. I was there in the parking lot next to the lake. It was after a football game, that came after a lousy week. I was there with friends unwinding because we knew that after a rough week there is a hope of a better day. Coming home crying on Monday one should think that Tuesday will be better. Coming home from a crummy week, we think there is always next week, there is always next month, next year. Was Elijah thinking that? Did he have a hard lousy too?

I can't say he and I were friends. We were on the guard team briefly, he was in my weights class freshman year, and he played Zorro in the marching band show, "The Mask of Zorro". I saw him and thought "he is so nice and happy", and he was. That's who we all saw him as, the cheerful Elijah, who had a beautiful girlfriend and played baseball and caught 99% of the flags he threw in Winterguard. I knew him.

What if he had heard us that night at the lake? I think he must have, I have a loud voice after all. What if he came over? I think about that sometimes. How he would come over and ask

"can I sit with you guys?", and we'd let him sit with us. We'd talk about the football game we just went to and how I was always amazed when he caught the flag during that one part. Oh you know, third movement, I stand RIGHT behind you. We'd laugh, exchange numbers and Snapchats and Instagrams and Twitters. We'd talk in the hallway, text throughout the day. He wouldn't be alone. Am I saying I'd cure him of the pain that plagued him? I'm not sure. But this would have never happened. When he drove to the other side of the lake that night he knew what was going to happen.

As we left the lake, there were a lot of cop cars blocking my way. Woah. What could have even happened? I was right here the whole time. I would have heard something, right? But as I woke up in the morning no thought of the cop cars were in my head. I thought about the marching band competition that I was going to go to. But I got the message.

It was a Saturday when I got the message, the Saturday of the Trenton Marching Competition. The one everyone looked forward to all season. It was a marching competition, but also a fair where we could run around and find stupid stuff to buy from the hillbillies of Middle Missouri.

I found out through a teacher in the journalism group-chat. Something about a "student killed himself last night". My heart was racing. What if I know them? Oh god, is it one of my friends? Then someone said it. "Elijah". Elijah? Oh god, Elijah who? "Starnes". What? But he's so...kind. But he was JUST at the football game. But he has to perform tonight at our competition. This is wrong. They got the wrong one.

The band competition was cancelled. The reason was the storm. It was planning on storming all week. The band director had been telling us all week that one was coming. The storm came that morning. Heavy rain, lighting, thunder. The works. It came and had us cancel our band competition. It

also came to take away one of our own.

How could I have sat there in the parking lot by the lake that Friday, with a boy laying on my lap and friends sprawled out around me, when he was on the other side alone. As I sat there, at that god forsaken spot, I thought I heard animals and footsteps and, was that a gunshot? I'll never know if it was a gunshot or just my imagination. I didn't ask how it happen. I asked never to know. I didn't want to hear it from a friend or a friend of a friend. I didn't listen to it when it was passed in whispers in the hallway. I didn't want to hear it at the funeral murmured through the people in black. All I will ever know is that while I sat there, loving my friends, Elijah was lying dead.

The next day was eerie. Silence was in the hallway. Crying was in the theater. I didn't want to do anything. I cried a lot, I thought a lot, I felt selfish. I didn't know Elijah that well, but here I am crying and pondering all my emotions. He was in my life, but now he is not. The next few days I walked in the hall and thought "Elijah isn't here". He was missing. The halls were stuffed with kids, but they were empty. The school was empty. I was empty.

It's been over a year. He was supposed to be having his last year of high school. He was supposed to be ordering his gown, taking senior photos, walking with the graduating class of 2019. I think about him a lot. I can't say I think about him every day, but he is in my mind. I think I'm afraid of making him disappear. At some point, after you die there will be no one thinking about you anymore, and that is truly dying. I know his family thinks about him everyday, yet I can't let myself let him go. I need to remember him, keep him alive. I need to keep myself alive. If I think about him I think about all the pain of death I know I can't do what he did. I now see what the real effects are. I'm not pointing shame to him. No. Elijah was a sad soul. We couldn't see it, but there it was. I think that he must be happier wherever he is. I know this makes me a happier person wherever I am.

## VIJAYAWADA

**Rahul Jasti**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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As I clambered out of the cramped taxi onto the streets of a small city in southeast India, I was careful not to get in the way of the numerous motorbikes darting by on the very edge of the road. The place we were going to sat right alongside the street, underneath a small building. The space had no doors or walls, just a small ledge to climb down. I helped my grandfather down the dirty stairs, one by one, into a restaurant about the size of a large bedroom. The sunlight was still beating down on us through the opening as we sat down in one of the red plastic chairs. An erratic buzzing came from a small fan which blew a tiny breeze onto the back of my neck every few seconds. The other two tables were empty because no one else who came here stayed long enough to sit.

Still exposed to the chaos on the road, we looked outside at the causes of noise. A very tired looking waiter, wearing a very disheveled shirt, quickly walked over to our table from behind the juice bar and handed us a menu. Where small stains didn't coat the words, we could make out the names of several drinks.

"Niku emi kavali?" WHAT DO YOU WANT? my grandfather asked.

We both ordered the same item every time, so I guess it was just out of habit that we waited for the menu to arrive, and I waited for him to ask me.

I responded, as always, “Nakku mali grape juice kavali.”

We ordered our drinks and went back to looking out onto the bustling road. A beam of light kept flickering at the same place on the table as people walked past the opening without even glancing down. We sat there in silence, not wanting to disturb each other’s peace. When our drinks arrived in their small paper cups, I peered into one of them taking in the thick, bubbly, purple liquid. Grape juice, for some reason, was our favorite drink at this small, shabby drinks stall. I sipped mine while my grandfather gulped his down quickly. As the juice trickled down my throat, I could taste the sweetness and tanginess of the grape and feel the rough texture of seeds.

Through the raucous honking and shouting, I could make out the sound of a bell from across the busy street, meaning that a movie was about to start. This signal caused a rush of people to start moving towards the theater gates, and provoked even more disorder as vehicles tried to wiggle by people and escape the traffic jam. As I finished my drink, I continued to stare past my grandfather out onto the road at the clutter of cars, taxis, bikes, and people moving without any order. At one point, though, I thought I could make out a sort of rhythm from all of the noise. There were two honks, then a traffic officer shouting directions, then a couple more honks, and a bike motor revving up.

I got lost in this idea of rhythm until my grandfather asked me, “Nedi aipanda? Elthamu, cinema ki time ayindi.” ARE YOU FINISHED? THE MOVIE IS ABOUT TO START.

## AS EASY AS

**Samiya Rasheed**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS  
Educator: Shelley Moran

### Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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My mother’s brow shined of sweat, her identical brown-black eyes boring into mine, as our hands laid end-to-end on the bright-red bike handles. The sun beat down onto the still scene we made—me, standing before her steadyng the bike, and my mother, slowly pitching her feet into the pedals—interrupted only by swaying leaves and grass blades.

See, my mother is Bangla. She grew up calling out to rickshaws passing in the copper streets and catching hilsa fish by the hundreds in nets mere footsteps from home; she glided to school on river boats rather than bikes. And, though it seems to be such a suburban staple, for all my seventeen American years I’d never learned to ride. Too scared to fall.

I’d never learned a **FEW** things that should’ve clicked into place; my mother’s Bangla forges epics and lullabies, coloring a richer, resplendent world. I, in turn, cannot speak her Sanskrit tongue. The words translate easily, but reciprocation stumbles someplace between the cerebellum and soft palate. Where I delight in carving spires and arches in English tales, my Bangla is coarse and blocky—vowels too wide and consonants too hard. **HER** eyes, too, falter over my twelve point lines, catching on certain syllables like getting splinters from wood. We try to help each other: thumbing through English-to-Bangla dictionaries, reaching our hands out for the perfect syllables to understand. I pore over conjugation tables, declension charts, but Bangla so often feels as distant as its homeland.

My mother inherits that distance sometimes.

From here, reaching over our first generation disconnect, my mother asked, **HOW DO YOU RIDE A BIKE?** Because nestled into our garage sat a

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crimson bicycle, growing dust like fine snow: a goal. I'd help her with anything, so despite our mutual gaps in knowledge, we went out into that sweltering summer and began our attempts.

The evening rushed in on our cul-de-sac, sky a slow gradient from blue, and my mother and I had no idea what to do. Both unable to grasp something so seemingly simple. Though I began as nothing but a steady presence for her to fall back on, it became my task as well. Either of us climbed aboard and balanced delicately—unable to move forward when the space to put feet on petals was also space enough to fall. We tried to stay perched like crickets on petals, unprepared for wind.

But Kansas is tornado alley; wind always comes.

We tried to push forward, and we fell. There was just a moment exhilaration before our jagged elbows met the rocky grey asphalt, traveling the few precious feet we could before calamity—scraping and bruising and fulfilling every worry I'd had, but we did not stop. I could not stop. We fell. Then, we climbed up and fell again. **OVER AND OVER**, my mother and I, both attempting to garner this skill we seemed so painstakingly bad at, fell. The reason I'd ever shied from the skill brought viscerally into reality—the bite of the ground meeting and the shame bubbling up my spine from failure. And yet, there are rarely more incandescent memories with my mother.

Here, in failing, we crossed the gap—trading both English and Bangla, but more importantly laughs and cheers as we moved onward. We'd met in the middle, here on this shining red bike, finally learning that some things don't have to come easily to be worth it.

It took us two weeks to learn that craft. I still can't take sharp turns or ride up steep hills; I can't count past twenty in Bangla, but I can still be Bangla without it. My inheritance, my **LANGUAGE** is a goal to chase—a red bicycle. My mother and I taught

ourselves to ride that bike together, spilling enough joy to unite the Pacific Passage. It will not be the only time we do.

## THE WRESTLING MATCH

**Noah Schell**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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**TWEET!** I immediately turned my body and stepped towards Josh Jackson, grabbing his head and his arm. I put my hip next to him and flipped him over my back onto the mat. Right off the bat, the referee gave me 2 points for the takedown. He smiled at the aggressive, confident opening. **THIS IS EASY!** I thought to myself. **THIS GUY ISN'T EVEN GOOD!** I was sure that I was going to win my first match of the tournament.

"Just give up, you've got no chance," I grunted into Josh's ear while trying to push him onto his back. Shockingly, he managed to work his way up to all fours. I tried to break him back down by pulling his arm into his stomach, but I wasn't fast enough. He crawled away from me, and we both stood up. We grabbed at each other's hands for a few seconds before the whistle blew. Even though Josh got one point for the escape, I was winning 2-1. **IF THAT'S THE BEST HE CAN DO, THERE'S NO WAY HE'S GOING TO BEAT ME**, I thought to myself.

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After a coin flip that Josh won, he decided the position for the start of the second period. He got onto all fours and waited for me. I got onto one knee and placed my left hand on his elbow. My other arm wrapped around his stomach like a snake squeezing its prey. I almost felt bad for him. At the last practice, I learned a new move that I could use in this situation. I was positive it would be my winning factor. There was no way he was going to escape.

After the whistle blew, I spun around so that I was in front of Josh. From there, I tried to throw him onto his back and pin him. My move didn't work. He threw me off of him and shot up like a firework. **WHY ISN'T THIS WORKING?** I angrily thought to myself. **MAYBE JOSH ISN'T TERRIBLE AFTER ALL.** Josh gained 1 point for the escape, and we hand fought again. I crouched and reached to grab his legs. Quickly, he threw his legs back spun around on top of me. I tried to wiggle away from him, but he shoved me into the mat and started to turn me onto my back. The sound of the whistle brought relief to me, but I'm sure it made Josh frustrated since he almost pinned me. But nevertheless, he was winning 3-2.

At the start of the third period, we switched positions so that Josh was on top of me. **THIS COULD BE THE END OF IT,** I thought. **JOSH IS A LOT BETTER THAN I THOUGHT.** I needed to escape quickly to have any chance of winning or getting a tie, but I collapsed when the whistle blew. I lost all control of my body like I was a puppet. **NOT LIKE THIS,** I thought. **I NEED TO FIGHT!** I focused all of my energy into standing up and I exploded. I caught Josh off guard with my unexpected amount of energy, but I just barely escaped. **THANK GOODNESS! WE'RE TIED,** I thought. After a few more seconds of hand fighting, the whistle blew signaling the end of the third period. I stood up and looked at the referee wondering what would come. **PLEASE BE OVER. JUST LET IT END IN A TIE,** I thought. I knew Josh would most likely beat me if we wrestled any more.

"Gentlemen, we have to go into overtime," the referee told us. "You will be given one minute and whoever scores the first point wins. Understand?" My breathing quickened, but I managed to nod. I needed to score in order to win. **JOSH MIGHT BEAT ME... MAYBE.** The thought of it seemed a little less wild.

The familiar sound of the whistle started overtime. Exhausted, I stood still, expecting to hand fight for a few seconds. Josh didn't wait one second to take advantage of my weak position. He dove down and grabbed my weak, undefended legs. He drove his head into my stomach like a bulldozer and pushed me backward. I couldn't defend his powerful takedown. I turned to look at the crowd to see my parents sitting there. They stopped cheering. They had the same scared look on their face that I did. Josh's whole team was there screaming and clapping for him. Everybody knew I was going to lose.

I crashed into the mat with great defeat. My face turned red with shame. I remembered telling my parents how bad I thought Josh was. I told them with 100% confidence that I was going to win. Embarrassment flooded over me. How could I have judged Josh like that? Why was I so overly confident? Why couldn't I see that Josh was just as good of a wrestler as I was? These questions raced through my mind as I slowly stood up.

"Good match," the referee told us. "Shake hands please." I reached out my arm and took Josh's hand. I looked at him with a new insight. Even though he was short, skinny, and not that strong, he was able to wrestle very well. He beat me. We faced the crowd, and the referee lifted Josh's hand.

## JONATHAN

**Sophie Seidel**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Villa Duchesne-Oak Hill

School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Kara Sperlo

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Jonathan and Timothy: the terrific, terrible twins. They constantly charge through the halls prancing and clawing at the walls. Swords clash and the ringing echo of their voices shriek throughout the castle.

"SARAH! WE HAVE COME TO DESTROY YOU, EVIL VILLAIN!" they cry in unison. I groan and grab the red bat Matt used for his Tae Kwon Do and swing it their way.

"SILENCE, YOUNG ONES. YOU ARE NO MATCH FOR ME!" We engage in a gruesome battle of three. The walls shake and the floors moan with the weight of the chaos. Our weapons slash and tear into the air. I parry. They counter. I lunge. They stab. The lungs in our bodies gasp for air while we continue to quarrel. Finally, I am struck by both of them and fall to the ground. They yell with joy and are overcome with the confidence of victory. I giggle with amusement.

The blaring sound of gunshots and yelling creep through the walls.

"GO GO GO!"

"SHOOT HIM!"

"OH S\*\*\*, I DIED"

"Can you guys stop playing Halo for once? Go and kick a ball or read a book or something less annoying."

"No, shut up," they reply. I sigh and continue with my chemistry homework. The door is suddenly kicked wide open and I am paraded by a flurry of orange styrofoam and rubber tips.

"Aghhhhhh GET OUT!" The boys giggle and rush out. God, will they ever grow up? It seems like I am the oldest of us four since Matt never does anything.

I listen to the melodic ringing of the phone line.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Timothy, it's me, Sarah. How's it going, dumba\*\*?"

"It's going alright."

"How's high school?"

"It's fine. People are annoying, though."

"Yeah, that's a common thought. Can I speak to Jon?"

"Sure, see ya."

"Hey, it's Jon."

"Hey Jon! How is everything? How is high school?"

"It's pretty good. I am joining the cross country team."

"Hahaha, running, I could never do that. Are you and Timothy adjusting well?"

"Yeah, there's more work."

"Naturally."

"How's college?"

"It's chill, but I miss you all. Does Matt come back home often?"

"Yeah, he's still the same."

"Ok, well I have to go. Love you."

"Love you."

The bells of the church ring as his bride glides down the aisle. We are all so happy for him. How did the time pass so quickly? Jonathan has met quite the woman. She's beautiful and hardworking, exactly what my mother wants for him.

The sound of squeals from little children sung clear in the day's glaring sun.

"Auntie Sarah, can you bring me a glass of juice?" I nod and smile as I turn towards the house. Much time has passed: I can already feel the wrinkles forming around my eyes and grey hairs appearing. Entering the kitchen, I pour the lemonade three-quarters full and bring it to the rosy-cheeked child. My own kids have grown and gone, but at least I still have Jonathan.

"How have you been since retirement?"

"It's been really relaxing: visiting grandkids and

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such once a week."

"Hah, you are a clingy grandparent."

"Oh shush, Sarah."

"You are such a baby."

"Shut up." We grin at each other, the wrinkles revealing our age. All of us have grown old. It is Christmas, our favorite holiday. Mom and dad have long since passed. Life has been filled with adventures that the four of us: Matt, Sarah, Timothy, and Jonathan have completed together.

Here I stand at your grave. It has been ten years, almost eleven, since you passed. You were only alive for the duration of pregnancy, born still. You never had the chance to take your first breath of fresh air. Your future never became the present nor the past. I can only imagine how you could have turned out, but never know. Would you have been exactly like Timothy? Would you have been more like Matt? Hopefully we meet again someday, our love shining through for you and making up for the lost years.

## THE LAWN

**Caleb Teachout**

Age: Unknown, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School,  
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

From the perfect swimming weather to the famed summer vacation, summer is one of the most beautiful times of the year. However, for me, summer has one unbelievable devious drawback, the lawn. Each summer I have to venture out of my sanctuary and tame the untamable, unstoppable lawn, each session taking about two

hours and thirty minutes. Yet, for my efforts, the lawn returns each time after I cut it down like a reincarnation of the mythical Hydra. Slowly growing, mocking my attempts to stop it, heightening my dread for the next time I must suffer through the mowing, never triumphing over the all-enveloping green mass, only containing it.

The time has come, to bring forth the only tool I have against my enemy and once again, attempt the unfinishable task that is always and forever bestowed upon me. At the incessant nagging of my mother and brother, I must once again return to the lawnmower and resume my treacherous quest. The day was bright, beautiful, and windy, perfect weather for my endless cycle. I again donned my uniform and returned to my stoic steed's resting place. The door has been opened, I have my uniform, and my metallic steed has been resurrected to life, ready for my daunting task. As I stare at my foe, steeling myself for the battle ahead, the green pasture stared back at me, its vastness threatening me, daring me to come forth from my stick and stone fortress. I felt the despair mounting, threatening to take me as I faced down my old opponent once again.

I twisted and turned on the back of my steed, gradually gaining ground against my adversary, while it fought back every inch. It's deceptively beautiful green grass hiding and harboring its traps and servants who oppose my purpose. From embedded rocks that rip my steed to shreds to the crawling bugs waiting to get their fill of my torment. The lawn throws everything it has at me, and with each year it's little bag of tricks grows, this time it has a new terrifying minion. As I ducked and dodged the grabbing trees, I plunged down the path through the lawn's domain to the solitary shed and firepit in the back. However as I tore the lawn's green grip from the shed, I heard a sound, a sound unlike the constant roar of my trusty steed or the rattling of the wind in my ears. It was a low, deep buzzing like a gigantic saw. I saw a flash of black and yellow blow past my head, and a monstrous black blob hovering above my steed, barring my progress.

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It was a massive bumblebee, about twice the size of a grape and far worse. It hovered in my path, staring at me with hundreds of hollow, black eyes, daring me to come closer. I stared back, at a loss at what to do, when a similar noise behind me, the buzzing, like a hornet, another was behind me in the exact same position as the one in front of me, they have trapped me. I could almost feel the lawn's jubilant triumph, mocking me for my presumptuous belief, each blade of grass I cut, meaningless when compared to the lawn's unlimited power, I could almost hear the thick, monstrous chuckle of the lawn from the bottom of each plant root as despair took me.

In a sudden move, I backed up, almost right into the hornet bumblebee. It veered out of the way, surprised and angry. The buzzing grew louder as I raced back down the path, almost like a doomsday clock. Louder and louder it got as I pushed my stoic steed to its limit, the lawn laughing hysterically now, knowing that I cannot escape its green clutches. Louder and louder the buzzing got, its crescendo reaching a climax, along with my fear, until it faded. I urged my steed around and watched as the two beastial bees hovered at the beginning of the path, eyeing me like I was a particularly succulent flower, before turning around and flying back to their domain, their buzzing fading to nothing. I finished my task, bringing the deep green to heel again despite its limitless power. I admired my handiwork and enjoyed the realization that it's the small victories that get us through life, no matter how insignificant they seem. Though I did not feel triumphant, as the path to the solitary shed remains unmowed and in the lawn's domain.

From within my fortress sanctuary, I felt my good spirit ebb away as my eyes were drawn to the fallen shed, a monument to my failure to conquer all of the lawn despite its defeat throughout the rest of its territory. I watched as two small, black dots moved back and forth across and around the shed, patrolling it, the wind blowing the tall grass surrounding it like waves on the sea, while

the lawn let out a dark, bubbly chuckle in its small victory.

# MI CASA NO ES TU CASA

**Hadley Uribe**

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Park Hill South High

School, Riverside, MO

Educator: Idean Bindel

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

"I love you round and round the world. I love you through and through. And when it seems impossible to love you more... I do," Dad's voice rings through my ears. I sit holding the Hallmark pre-recorded book with his voice inside.

"I love you too, Daddy," I whisper, tears streaming down my pink cheeks.

**IT'S NOT FAIR. IT'S NOT FAIR. IT'S NOT FAIR.**

XX

"Everyone gather around Adelynn's computer," Mrs. Murphy announces. Twenty kindergarteners, just like me, are quickly making their way towards my seat. I show off my toothy, dimple-filled smile as I hear the "Ohhs," and "Ahhhs," coming from my fellow peers.

"So these are flowers that my dad sees every day," I explain, "He lives in this really cool place. It's called Guam. It has the most beautiful flowers you'll ever see."

I feel a tinge of sadness wash over me as I think of the months my dad spends in Guam, and not with me.

My inner tears go away as quickly as they came when I see the look of jealousy across all of their

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faces. I feel a sense of pride, reassuring myself that my dad has the coolest job around. I tell myself, **SURE, HE ISN'T HOME ALL THE TIME, BUT HE SENDS ME PICTURES OF RARE FLOWERS.** Then another little voice whispers in my mind, **THEY HAVE DADS THAT GET TO STAY ALL OF THE TIME. IT'S NOT FAIR. IT'S NOT FAIR. IT'S NOT FAIR.**

And I'm back at square one.

XX

"Dad, pass the ball to me!" a fellow seven-year-old shrieks across the playground. My shoulders slump and a sigh escapes my lips.

The days there are visitors, recess is the hardest. I see girls my age hugging their dads. I'm reminded that mine isn't here.

I stare blankly ahead as I throw the tetherball around the pole—imagining my dad is here, throwing back around to me, picturing all the different games we'd play on the playground. I start to feel peace.

I know that I'll never be me, but I find happiness in the hope that my dad might, one day, stop working so much and come throw the tetherball with me.

**IT'S NOT FAIR. IT'S NOT FAIR.**

XX

"I'm gonna write them a letter!" I cry into my mom's shoulder. "It's not fair! Why does he have to go!"

I shout again, "He promised!" only to be muffled by my tears.

She soothes my back, nodding her head.

"My birthday is next Tuesday! It's my eighth birthday—my golden birthday—and he can't be there." **STUPID GUAM**, I think; the anger boils inside me.

**IT'S NOT FAIR.**

XX

"What can I do to make it better?" my dad asks with a hint of urgency, trying to tape over my broken heart with broken promises from the screen.

"Stay?" I begin to whisper, but the voice stays in my head.

"You—you can't fix it..." I squeak out.  
"Addy?"

I can hear the edge in his tired voice. I panic once again.

**TELL HIM TO STAY**, the voice repeats. **TELL HIM HOW YOU FEEL. TELL HIM IT'S HARD TO STAY HAPPY.**

"Adelynn, come on," he exhales.

"I—I want you to— maybe you could buy me a golden retriever?" I manage to stutter out.

I see the shock spread across his features, knowing that what I've just asked is impossible. **NEXT TIME, HE'LL HAVE TO STAY.**

"I'll see what I can do...I'll ask your mom," he says, relieved.

I force a smile, tears spilling out again.

"Okay, Addy, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Oh, okay—bye, Dad." My voice cracks as I hang up the Skype call.

**IT'S NOT F**—the thought stops in my head.

XX

"Adelynn, your dad is so cool!" the nine-year-old boy, who hasn't spoken two words to me all year, exclaims after Dad talks with the class at Career Day. My dad is an engineer, and I think he's even some type of president in his company. I didn't expect kids to be so interested, but truth be told, he does travel all over the world to design these amazing structures. Not to mention, he moved to America from Colombia when he was only twelve-years-old.

"Thanks, yeah, he is pretty cool," I answer with a strain in my voice. The kid, not noticing my discomfort, walks away completely unfazed and uninterested in what is obviously going through my head. **WHY ARE YOU ABOUT TO CRY?**

I quickly push down any feelings of sadness. My dad is here with me, talking to my class, and not with his work; **YOU SHOULD BE HAPPY**. But I'm not. I wish we could engage like this every day.

**IT'S N**—I stopped myself.

XX

"Hola, Addy!" Dad's voice rings through my ears as I answer his call.

"Hey, Dad. Weren't you supposed to come home last night?" I ask, hiding my disappointment that I didn't see him this morning asleep on the couch.

There's a pause on the line.

"I did."

"Then you should be home."

"Daughter," he sighs. "This time, I'm at a hotel."

## RULES FOR THE FREAKS

**Phoenix Walker**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Freshman Center, Blue Springs, MO

Educator: Kimberly Blevins

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Rule number one: Don't feed the freaks.

My hand grabbed at my sweats as I walked into the kitchen, my hazel eyes surveying the area as I moved.

The kitchen was silent, but the flickering of the light fixture above and the pounding of my heart managed to fill the space more than the yellow walls closing in around me.

Rule number two: Remember that the freaks are deceptive and manipulative.

I can hear them now, the freaks stirring awake.

The clatter of their chains in their cells rattling loudly, but nothing could be louder than their screams alone.

Rule number three: Don't tell anybody.

I stepped quietly towards the cabinets, my legs slicing through the air like knives as my quaking

hands reached out desperately for the metal handle, my eyes squeezing tightly shut as the bolts creaked as it was pulled open, my heart joining in on the hellish symphony in my head.

Rule number four: Be fast about it.

I drew in a sharp breath as I grabbed two bottles out, my free hand nudging the cabinet's door shut as I stepped away.

Rule number five: Don't turn back.

Quickly, I unscrewed the bottle caps, the freaks screaming louder, and louder, **and louder** as I worked, my face paling as I dumped both bottle's contents into my perspiring hands.

Rule number six: Discard rule one.

Feed the freaks, give them what they want, sate their screams out for fuel to end it.

End it all.

The pills dribbled from my hands like the tears from my eyes as I popped them into my mouth as if they were candy, the palms staining red and white from the deadly mixture of ibuprofen and aspirin that sat upon its throne.

Rule number seven: Discard rule number two.

Everything the freaks say is true.

You deserve it.

You really are just a worthless, piece of shit.

The world really would be so, so much happier here if you just slit your goddamn wrists like a good kid and stopped whining like a little bitch all the time, without you being a waste of space, a waste of organs, and a waste of everybody's time and effort.

Rule number eight: Say your goodbyes.

My whole body shook as I moved, and my eyes faded in and out of blankness as I walked into my

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eldest sibling's room, my eyes squeezing shut yet again so all evidence of tears would be gone.

Rule number nine: Console them one last time.

I slid next to them and wrapped my arms around them, my heart beating like a rabbit's as I held them close, my words spilling from my lips as a mere whisper.

"It's not your fault."

Rule number ten: Go to sleep and never wake up.

They followed me to my room.

And right at the moment, where I grabbed my blanket and pulled it over my body already freezing from the touch of death, everything went wrong.

Rule number eleven: Discard rule number three.

After I laid in bed for hours with my breathing as shallow as a children's pool, I got up and walked out to the living room.

My mind was blank.

Slowly, I sat down next to him on the couch, and the minute he took notice to the redness of my hands and the spilled water down my yellow shirt, he opened his mouth...

And he screamed at me.

"What the fuck did you do?"

I fell into a sobbing mess, my hands shaking even more as they flew up to my ears and dug into the sides of my head, my eyes going wide as I told him.

I told him everything.

"What is wrong with you?"

**"Go to the fucking bathroom and throw those goddamn pills up!"**

He grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and hauled me to the bathroom, the white tiles burning against my bare feet as I dug my heels into the floor to slow him down, swear after swear spewing from his lips.

He dropped me onto the floor and stormed out.

I could hear him screaming into the phone, telling the person on the other side of the line of what I did.

Rule number twelve: Throw up.

My eyes burned as all I could do was stare down the toilet bowl, even my hand being forced down my throat not managing to stir up the medication that had settled so far into my stomach, so far that even the disgusting, bitter taste that they left in my mouth not even managing to make me gag.

I just... sat there.

I sat there staring

My mind went blank.

And my hands...

My hands just shook as I dropped them down into my lap.

Why did I turn myself in?

The doors were kicked open, and a police officer coaxed me up.

I couldn't hear what she was saying from how much was going on, but I still flung my hands up to my ears.

Loud.

It was too loud.

The flashing ambulance lights seeped in through the red blinds in the living room, and before I could even sit down, I was being yelled at.

Loud.

Bright.

I stared down at my lap as their words bounced away from me as if I had built a wall using what used to be filling me with my will to live around me.

The freaks inside screaming at me louder than they ever had before.

"You ruined it, you ruined everything..."

"You were so close!"

"Coward. You're nothing but a coward."

Their words were knives, and their voices were bullets.

"Kill yourself! Just fucking kill yourself!"

I squeezed my eyes shut...

The world felt like it was slipping from my fingertips, and somehow and some way, it calmed me.

Rule number thirteen: Forget.

Forget your worries, your hopes, dreams, and your fears.

Just fall back, back and away from everything...

And let the freaks feast on your mind.

## TEN STORIES OF TERROR

**Cece Watts**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

**JUST KEEP GOING. DON'T LOOK DOWN.** I repeated to myself, vines wound around my heart, seizing it in a vise-like grip. A shiver crept down my spine as I climbed the rusty metal stairs. With only two more flights to go, I braved a glance over the grimy rail. Staggering back, I apologized as I almost toppled over the kid behind me. Embarrassment flooded over me and the blood in my veins boiled as I stared through the bars of the stairs. I was trapped.

An hour before this fearful event, I was stuck at a dull summer camp at LifeTime Fitness. But today was field trip day, the one day that brought joy to my week and the day I'd been looking forward to since Monday. We were going to the City Museum. A place with more wonders than I could count. Everything would be wonderful: as long as we avoided the 10 story slide. Even thinking of it sent an uncomfortable prickle down my spine. Back when I still believed in the tooth fairy, my family and I had visited the City Museum. The only thing that really stood out had been the 10 story slide that my dad has called me a "chicken" for being afraid of it. Of course, he'd taken it back as soon as I'd gone red with embarrassment, but that hadn't been easily forgotten for me.

Colleen, the head counselor, counted us as we filed onto the moldy-basement smelling bus. Scrambling up the stairs, my friend Sara waved me over to sit by her. During the bus ride, our hair whipped out the windows and our voices rang as we sang Taylor Swift songs and played games like Lemonade Crunchy Ice. Finally, after singing **WILDEST DREAMS** at least three times, we arrived. The holy land for kids our age stood in front of us, a halo of light surrounding it. Although I was only interested in the inside. The outside portion of the City Museum contained soaring tunnels, a teetering bus, and suspended airplanes, **TELL ME WE WON'T HAVE TO GO UP THERE**, I gulped. The sheer drop from those places sent my head

spinning even on the ground. A bitter breeze cut through my jacket, filling me with a sense of dread. After being led inside by the head counselors, we were split up into groups to see different parts. I shuffled over unpolished but colorful tiles as we got our highlighter yellow wristbands. Joining my assigned group, our counselor Nick cleared his throat to get our attention.

"Ok guys, we're going to visit the whale first," The sounds of unknown wonders filled my ears as we scampered towards the grand entrance of the whale room. Above us were lichen-covered tunnels that expanded across the whole room that were just begging to be explored. A dewy smell tickled my nose, brought in by the cool breeze filtering from a section of caves whose mysterious appearance beckoned me. But the main centerpiece was the colossal blue whale, filled with nooks and crannies that I couldn't wait to adventure into.

"In 25 minutes, I want you guys to meet back here and we'll visit somewhere else ok?" I heard Nick said. I'd almost forgotten he was here in my elation. Everyone dashed off and I joined the stampeding herd of children.

...

Twenty minutes later, Nick was rounding us up and I heard snatches of conversation relating to the 10-story slide that everyone was looking forward to,

"I heard that some kid fell over the rails and DIED!" A girl name Susie exclaimed, flipping her gleaming hair over her shoulder.

"Susie shut up that did NOT happen," a boy with wavy brown hair -Dylan I think- said, rolling his eyes.

"Guys I doubt it's 10 stories, they don't even have enough room in here for that," I blurted, unease slipping into my voice. PLEASE please TELL ME IT'S NOT 10 STORIES. I prayed.

"What- are you afraid of a little height Cece?" he paused, gauging my reaction, "I hope it's at LEAST 5 stories," Dylan added, eyebrow raised begging me to differ. I was saved from answering as Nick beckoned us over and I left Dylan at that, ants starting to march up my spine.

Finally, all the groups reconnected, and kids

started to mingle with their friends.

"Okay, everyone listen up!" Colleen ordered, "Once we get in there, I want everyone single file so we don't annoy the other people here. Don't forget it isn't just us in here." I rolled my eyes, trying to cover up the edgy feeling that had overcome me. I was as skittish as a mouse in the eyes of a cat. Lining up, I landed next to Sara again and we slowly began our way into the coliseum. Still sat the slide, a ragged beggar sunning itself in the rays of the skylights above it. The spiral menace dominated the room, accompanied by the endless flights of stairs. A thousand frogs croaked as the tide of people shuffled upward. OH. MY. GOD. I thought.

Forgetting Colleen's lecture, the kids darted past me towards the first flight of stairs and I trickled into the back of the line. I edged along the wall as I climbed. At first, it wasn't so bad, we were no more than 10 feet off the ground. But by the next two flights of stairs, I had shackled myself to the walls behind me, stepping inch by inch up the stairs. Heat flared on the back of my neck as I saw Dylan and his phonies laughing and shoving each other as they crowded the stairs. STUPID, STUPID STUPID. I chastised myself.

Sweat freckled my nose as I crept along the passage.

JUST KEEP GOING. DON'T LOOK DOWN. I repeated to myself, vines wound around my heart, seizing it in a vise-like grip. A shiver crept down my spine as I climbed the rusty metal stairs. With only two more flights to go, I braved a glance over the grimy rail. I staggering back, bumping into the kid behind me.

"\$-sorry," I apologized, as I had almost toppled over him. He looked back, nose wrinkled in distaste.

"It's fine." He replied, turning away. Embarrassment flooded over me and the blood in my veins boiled as I stared through the bars of the stairs. It was as though I was teetering on the edge of a skyscraper, nowhere to go. UGH, WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH ME?! I thought angrily, trying to shake off the fear that had wound itself around me.

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Unfortunately, the line only slowed as we got closer to the top. It was as if fate itself had decided to decelerate my worst fear to last forever. Finally, with only two more kids in front of me, I was able to glare at the black abyss in the eye. The slide spiraled down into the darkness, and I realize with horror that there were no rails on the edges of the slide.

I CANNOT DO THIS. I CANNOT DO THIS. My brain ranted.

"Next," the slide operator said, popping her gum with a bored expression. Instead of continuing to look at my fate, I focused on the slide operator's greasy blonde locks. The hair tie didn't do her any justice. Only one girl was left in front of me.

NO, NO, NOOO. I thought, eyes wide.

"Next," she said, and the girl practically leaped onto the slide. I scarcely managed to refrain from rushing over to check on her decent. My heart was a lion, clawing at my chest and begging to be free as I stepped up to the entrance. I grasped the cool, greasy metal of the slide, my hands slick with sweat. My thoughts went numb in my head. The slide operator waited for what felt only like a heartbeat, scrolling through her phone.

"Next," she said, glancing up expectantly at me, eyebrows raised to beckon me forward. The echoes of the cavern around me built up in my ears and my head pounded. A thousand vexed bees swarmed my ears and dove into my brain. Before I could back out, or scream for that matter, I threw myself down the slide. A calliope of dark and light swirled through my vision as I spiraled into the unknown. OHMYGOD, OHMYGOD, OHMYGOD. I thought hysterically, snapping my eyes shut. DAMMIT, WHY DID I do THIS! The air whooshed past me as I sped up, and I let out a shriek as exhilaration filled my veins.

"Ahhhhh!" I opened my eyes, ready to face the potential clowns and bears that awaited me. There was nothing. I glided down the slide for ages and after about a minute, I realized I liked it. The air surrounding me, my hair airborne out in all directions like a cape. I LIKED it. The cool metal of the slide soothed my anxiety, an ice cold shower on a hot day. Finally, I cruised to a stop at the

bottom where our group waited on me, looking faintly annoyed. A big smile had taken up my face as I scooted the last leg of my race. I had conquered my greatest fear, and in turn, proved to myself that I was indeed brave. As I glanced back at the slide, it didn't look so terrifying now. Looking back on that day, I realize that that entire moment was but a heartbeat in a lifetime full of them. But it had been a pretty big heartbeat at that.

## POETRY

# THE PROGRESSION

**Cayren Barnett**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Maryville High School,  
Maryville, MO

Educator: Dennis Vinzant

Category: Poetry

## **Breaking Point**

The way I approached life was unhealthy  
Like the fad diet everyone warns you about  
The diet I was willing to try anyway  
Because no matter how hard it was for me to  
swallow  
I would still keep chewing

I was drowning  
I was letting my lungs fill with water  
Still gasping for air  
But somehow  
I still kept quiet

I convinced myself everything was okay  
This lie scrawled along the folds of my brain  
It wore on my mind like a nice sweater  
That I was having an allergic reaction to and  
no one noticed

So many people began to rely on me  
to be the glue in their life  
I stuck with it until I was the one who needed that  
bond  
I needed someone to help me  
put the pieces back together  
  
But when I looked around the room?

There was no one in sight  
I was stranded on an island  
And my reflection in the ocean  
seemed more helpful than most

People always tell me  
Stop your life can't be that hard  
I just want to tell them  
What the hell do you think my life is  
Of course, I don't

I am just like others  
Thoughts race through my brain  
before I can  
Muster enough courage  
to open my mouth to speak

Sometimes I think it would benefit me  
To learn sign language because  
The signs are always the hardest to see  
How do you know if someone is depressed?  
If they are always "happy"

I know what it feels like  
To be clawing at life  
For the last shred of hope  
That you might make it through  
This time

I know what it feels like  
To be afraid of sleep  
Because sometimes  
The silence of the night  
Is better than your dreams

And I know what it feels like  
To be force fed  
Lies from your brain  
Trying to cover up the  
Starvation of happiness

You know  
Giving in is not giving up  
To give in is just to accept  
The outstretched hand  
That you too often shoo away

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I continue to whisper these lies to myself  
But the bottle of blue pills  
Keeps me reminded  
That my happiness is a façade  
A mask I model every morning

Because it's the best I can do  
As the understudy in the production  
Of my own life  
Wanting to shine into the spotlight someday  
But knowing that day will never come

My pace picks up like the tempo of a ragtime song

The syncopated rhythms are too much for anyone to keep up

The sun is coming up on the horizon  
I'll be able to make it this time  
There is nothing more to lose

**Recovery**

It is easier said than done  
The battle has just begun  
On this road of recovery, the trek is hard

This road I chose

May have been long  
But I have finally accepted  
the outstretched hands of recovery

With my pack and my good walking shoes

I take each step as best as I can  
But the hands of a relapse pull at my ankles

**Mitigation**

I am not here to pretend I accomplished everything

Not all my problems were magically solved

But I am not in the state I was in before

I am not holding onto the final piece of hope

Now I still feel sad more often than sometimes

The whispers are still there just quieter

The sink of my thoughts still overflows

There is never going to be a magical cure

The fingers tighten around my legs

Not wanting to let go and dragging me back  
On my hands and knees, I break free

I stagger to my feet and run

The fire continues to burn and fuel

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My sense of wonder

I carry on wandering where my life will take me

No matter what it will be a journey

I am glad I get the chance to be a part of

It because life gives no extra chances

Only a few second glances

That people use to examine themselves

WHY AM I HERE?

WHAT AM I DOING?

These inquiries constantly rattle my brain

And most will remain unanswered

But it is fine because I have finally learned to take  
off the mask

And live again

## LIGHTHOUSE

**Haley Renee Born**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High  
School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre  
Zongker

Category: Poetry

The waves whisper secrets in my ear,

brushing my subconscious like the legs of silverfish.

If only I spoke their language.

I live in a spiral

of teal tile and smooth stone stairs.

My lighthouse had been abandoned by all but  
ghosts

when I made it my home.

Still, I light the lantern

just to watch the gold glitter on dark water

as it bends and breaks to the will of the rocky  
shore,

guiding imaginary ships to me.

Sometimes I think about leaving.

Then the sun sets

and the glass at the top of my tower catches the  
shades of the sky

as it dies, I remember why I chose to be alone.

In my nightmares I stray too far from removed  
safety.

The salty waves fill my lungs and dash my head  
against the rocks,

bloody sea foam washing me away.

Isolation is easier than uncertainty.

So I stay,

alongside the long dead, walking day after day,

up and down my spiral staircase,

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safe to watch the world glitter through the glass.

I am at peace at last, though not for free.

Peace can be so very lonely.

## SHINE IN THE DARK

**cyniah clark**

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Paseo Academy

Performing Arts, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Jenifer Bell

Category: Poetry

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Shine in the Dark

Is it the long curls that flow  
Within the aspects of air  
Is it the **melanin** that shows  
The **elegance** of my bones  
Just because a sista is well talented  
With cooking and cleaning doesn't mean  
She isn't well with construction of

The glitter and glow of my skin **pops**  
Like the lies that were cancelled about my history  
The revealed is a shock  
I can be **fierce** and **tough** like Laila Ali  
**Unbeatable** and **unstoppable**  
I can be **bold** and **soft** at times as  
If i was Maya angelou  
I am A queen who doesn't need  
A king to **abuse** and **forcefully** control her  
I fight what's rightfully mine  
Don't let my figure determine  
What I can handle and why?

These scars of mine bring endless stories of

My Ancestors **Yugen**

Generations of sin oozing blood

**Beautiful Bronzed**

Princesses not being sat on thrones

Higher power for the mothers

I **Scream** and **demand** my equality as  
A black female that keeps the anger built  
Inside of herself, just to **spark**  
and burn it like Fire in the dark

## WE ARE

**Alyssa Edwards**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School,  
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

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He is the good

He is the beautifully simple things in life.  
He is like taking a bite of a fresh granny smith  
apple.

Or strolling through an orange grove on a warm  
day.

He is peaches, angels wings, and mossy rocks.  
A pair of warm socks and a glass of chocolate  
milk.

He is pearls, fireworks, lightning, and mermaids  
scales.

Strawberry ice cream and oversized sweaters.

He is piles of blankets and lily pads.

A trace of fingertips up your spine and butterflies  
landing on your nose.

Fairy lights and soft kisses on your shoulders.

He is comfort and humor.

He is safe.

He is the bad

He is the chaos and pain of things in life.  
He is like tasting a handful of sour candy.  
Or walking around with wet socks.  
He is apple cider vinegar, devils horns, and  
broken glass.

A glove without its pair and watered down drinks.  
He is coal, forest fires, tornados, and snake scales.  
Melted ice cream and shrinking your favorite shirt.  
He is itchy blankets and dead trees.  
The uncomfortable feeling of an unwanted hug  
and wasps buzzing around your head.  
Darkness and bruises on your legs.  
He is confusion and pain.  
He isn't safe.

I am the good

I'm the beautifully simple things in life.  
I am the sweetness of an apple pie.  
Or the sparkle of sapphires in a setting sun.  
I am blueberries, early golden mornings, and shy  
smiles.  
Bright colored hair ties and pajama pants.  
I am silk, ocean waves, vanilla candles, and  
dragons wings.  
Warm cookies and an organized room.  
I'm mason jars of lemonade and flower gardens.  
The breathtaking kind of kisses and lightning bugs  
flitting around a summer night.  
Lava lamps and a full stomach.  
I am comfort and humor.  
I am loveable.

I am the bad

I am the chaos and pain of things in life.  
I'm the bitterness of a lemon.  
Or the burning out of lightbulbs.  
I am bruised apples, dark long nights, and evil  
grimaces.  
Unbrushed hair and too tight of pants.  
I am wool, tsunamis, acidic campfire smoke, and  
bee stingers.  
Cold coffee and clothes that are thrown all over  
the floor.  
I'm plastic cups of cheap alcohol and wilted  
roses.

I am being rejected by your lover and spider bites.  
Broken phone screens and starvation.  
I am confusion and pain.  
I am unlovable.

## We are

- We are confusion, pain, humor, and comfort.
- We are stolen kisses in secret.
- Sneaking out of the house and watching movies  
in your bed.
- We are being so close, yet so far away.
- Having multiple lovers and the fear of  
commitment.
- We are false hopes and hanging onto nothing.
- Respect for my choices and forehead kisses.
- We are thinking of two different things and  
unsatisfied needs.
- We are unhealthy and joyous.
- We are never going to be in love.
- We are hopeless.

# I DON'T KNOW WHO YOU ARE

# Divya Gupta

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Blue Valley North High  
Suburb: Overland Park, KS

SCHOOL, Overland Park, KS  
Fall 2016 - Midterm Part

## Category: Poetry

The boy a couple of paces ahead,  
laughing at his friend for a haircut that looks  
like a badly shaved dog.  
The girl next to me,  
also in my math class,  
persuading everyone to join her club.  
My friends, in classes and out.  
Assumptions attack her mouth like bombs of regret  
once I talk with her more.  
A million questions cloud my mind  
as I start to board up thoughts about her.  
The friend I once knew as carefree.  
Her words, hurt,  
like single  
missiles rapidly firing at my  
chest.  
Everything I despise in the world,  
spoken from her lips, smoothly like  
butter.  
A war within my body.  
Questioning why I suddenly wanted to  
walk away to my other friends  
when all I did during math class was talk to  
her.  
Using all my strength to push it aside,  
and force a smile to forget.  
She didn't change, but somehow I didn't like her  
anymore.  
Ignoring my heart,  
shielding away the hurtful things I could  
say back.  
Trying to be better,  
even though it bled as if I was pulling each one of  
those missiles out,  
one by one.

School, Rolla, MO  
Educator: Star Hargis

Category: Poetry

winter  
there is something to be said about the cold winter  
sky -  
bleach-bone white and cruel at noon,  
empty and hollow when the sheep have settled.  
it holds prisoner the warmth of the sun  
and the twinkling direction of the stars  
behind stretches of thick grey.  
there is something to be said about the cold winter  
sky,  
how its steely gaze saps the exuberance out of the  
trees,  
how the wind bends under its sight and curdles the  
air.  
even the houses cannot remain unaffected.  
they curl in on each other - wood bent at odd  
angles,  
bricks festering on the inside, liquefying into sludge  
-  
until the chill seeps in like a bitter fog.  
there is something to be said about the cold winter  
sky.  
it hunts out every last vestige of warmth from the  
earth,  
relentless in its search.  
it peeks in the dark corners of houses,  
chasing echoes of a life long since passed.  
it grabs for blankets,  
pillows,  
cups of tea and warm bread -  
all stained a biting cold.  
winter bruises my fingertips a drained purple  
and turns even my breath into a gastly chill.  
there is no warmth in winter.

he said she said  
in the beginning there was  
nothing, in the beginning there

## ON THE NATURE OF SIN AND SUFFERING

**Kristina Happel**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rolla Senior High

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was darkness,  
so I created light from the  
darkness. until everything  
became too much, and light  
I was lonely, so I entwined my  
breath burst forth from a single  
point of hope.  
with the unforgiving ground, and  
made he awoke to the sound of  
a sigh,  
man.

one filled with relief and awe.

I made him a bountiful garden to live  
in, "my child," cooed a voice.  
"you are man,  
gave him everything he could ask  
for, born of the clay of this earth,  
destined to  
except for the only thing he wanted  
most. become like me. you will be a  
creator."

**DO NOT EAT OF THE TREE OF  
KNOWLEDGE,** but he felt so  
small in such a large garden,  
**FOR YOU WILL SURELY  
DIE.**

his flesh and bone, stitched like  
I did not mention that the fruit  
- errant buttons to a coat,  
came  
so delectable and ripe  
- wom  
an.

would impart upon those that eat  
it they lived happily together  
under one rule -  
the ability to refuse, to open one's  
eyes **DO NOT EAT OF THE TREE  
OF KNOWLEDGE -**

and destroy the filter that shadows  
all. but curiosity is a damning  
thing,  
I watched my children, so pure and  
innocent, and as she bit into the fruit  
he felt  
lose their naivety all at

once. something dark  
and wicked stir  
when she bit down into the  
apple beneath his rigid  
exterior.  
the juices spilled down her front and  
clung there were no eyes on him.  
like a cloak of sin tainting her pure flesh.  
I turned my head.

in the beginning there  
was heaven and earth,  
a man spun from the  
sorrows of the soil  
and a garden so  
beautiful that she knew  
she had everything she  
could ever ask for.  
yet, day by day sat that  
tall tree,  
the tree of knowledge of  
good and evil.  
it stared at her, lured her  
to it with its leafy branches  
its low-hanging fruit, its  
sturdy trunk.  
surely it can't hurt, she  
thought,  
overcome by the desire  
to **KNOW,**  
and plucked the  
forbidden fruit from the tree.  
she took a bite and at  
once felt ash burn her tongue,  
felt hellfire and  
brimstone carve a path through her delicate  
throat.  
she looked at him, and  
he looked at her,  
and there were no eyes  
on them.

mer·cy  
/Ë'sÉ™fÉ™r/  
NOUN

1. i ask, quietly, why i still remain. my sins are many and buried deep, hard to scratch out and drag to the surface. surely, i think, there are others more deserving of an existence than me. after all, i can't even begin to properly seek forgiveness for all my faults. half of them remain unknown even to me, a mismatched menagerie of human error and bestial instinct.
2. nonetheless, i fall to my knees, prostrate myself on the pristine floor so that my sins leak out and leave inky stains behind. "i'm sorry," i plead. "i'm so sorry." silence, in return for my humility.
3. "to err is human." but at what point do my transgressions become too heavy for even divinity to excuse? where is the dividing line between "salvageable" and "ruined?" others have tried to bold the line for me, but i still can't see it. one day i'll take a step too far and go tumbling down the deep edge, no return in sight.
4. god left me at the bottom of his trash and i'm rotting, rotting, rotting. he scattered the important pieces in places where they can't be found, as if tossing bread crumbs to the birds of mankind.  
**HERE, LITTLE HUMANS. MARVEL AT WHAT TRUE MERCY LOOKS LIKE. BE GLAD IT'S NOT YOU.**
5. i scramble after him, doe-legged, trembling with all the holes he left.  
oh, how merciful indeed.

sin stained

say nothing of the way she swallows glass like liquid salve  
for the angry window is already planning its revenge.  
her throat tears to ribbons, ichor leaking out like golden nectar  
while the birds hop around her feet and drink it up.  
**WE HAVE BECOME LIKE THE OLD GODS,** they chirp  
**ANCIENT AND FORMLESS, OUR EXISTENCE TEMPERED FROM THE ASHES**

**OF HUMAN SUFFERING AND SIN.**

a bird blinks one beady black eye, and she bursts to become nothing.  
the stars watch this happen from their place far above,  
casting their judgemental gaze on the fallacies of man.  
after all, the sins of our forefathers drip from our fingertips.  
the cosmos remain pure and free from sin while we,  
like insolent children,  
press our sin-stained fingertips to the translucent glass of the universe.  
the glass shatters under the weight of our mortal transgressions,  
and she swallows it like liquid salve.  
**WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?** the birds echo.  
**WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?**  
**WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?**  
it's your fault.

dep

ression

what does it mean to be dead?  
your throat aches raw with the question  
is 'death' a state of being  
or a misfortune cast upon those of lower worth?  
the fog tickles your ankles.  
you bat it away, scratching where it once touched.  
what does it mean to be dead?  
is it the moment that the heart stops its pounding?  
or is it when your mother draws away from you  
her bedside cold  
her touch no longer warm and inviting?  
the fog creeps up your shins and sinks its teeth into  
your soft underbelly  
you gasp, tears prickling at the corners of your eyes.  
what does it mean to be dead?  
'dead' is the cessation of a world;  
all things once familiar now left to rot.  
to be dead is to be complete -  
to be dead last, dead wrong, dead right and dead silent.

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to be dead is to throw caution to the wind and sip  
from that everlasting spring  
God knows your sins and they can't find you here  
dangling precariously on the edge of tomorrow.  
the fog shifts ever higher, its wisps laving at your  
throat,  
your chin,  
your jaw -  
until you cough and sputter, suffocating with the  
weight of things  
you were not meant to know.

Educator: Henry Heidger

Category: Poetry

---

Where foot petals unfolded  
Under canopies of foliage was a place  
Neither good nor bad --  
Was simply BEYOND. Rumi told

Me this: these words tattooed  
On my lover's elbow's inner fold.  
[MEET ME THERE](#). I met her  
In a place where concrete was all we had.

There was no garden. Not even  
One petal's delicacy to subdue  
The hard walls of the homes  
We loved in -- our mouths our only flowers.

## THE DANCE

**Mia Landolo**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Olathe North High  
School, Olathe, KS  
Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

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Stepping into the room she's awed.  
The music calls and colored beams of light dance  
in answer.  
The insignificant past life of the room has been  
transformed,  
Tables decked in holiday themes fill half of it,  
While the dance floor lays empty like a clearing

## MODIGLIANI GIRL

**Hilary Heidger**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Clare Of Assisi  
Elementary School, Ellisville, MO  
Educator: Henry Heidger

Category: Poetry

---

Rosacead face and spindled neck,  
Unscarved her throat a steep escarpment.

Tonight the eyes themselves black sky:  
Two raisins rolled into a corner neglected.

## THREE QUATRAINS IN A GARDEN

**Hilary Heidger**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Clare Of Assisi  
Elementary School, Ellisville, MO

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on the other, surrounded by rings of students.  
Their group breaks the mold,  
And she feels herself give into the pressure of the  
music and lights.  
Her rhythm breaking only once,  
When a star enters the room,  
It's glow filling her senses, and paleing the other  
decor.  
She alone is blinded, yet others notice the star's  
arrival.  
Nudges, winks, smirks and whispered comments  
surround her  
Falling from the lips of friends filled to the brim with  
too many secrets.  
She just smiles, all the while thinking to herself that  
it doesn't matter,  
As she is just another meteor speeding through  
space.

Entering, he's all a flush, not seeing the details.  
The world is just a huge rushing blur  
Racing to the soundtrack of panicked  
heartbeats.  
Internally, he's cursing everything,  
From the way he styled his hair,  
To the tie his mother forced him to wear.  
Cursing the guys for wanting to stay longer at the  
arcade,  
And himself for giving them their called for "five  
more minutes".  
Externally, he's laughing at a joke he didn't even  
hear,  
And playing follow the leader with handing over  
his ticket.  
Everything's moving so fast,  
He doesn't realize where he is  
Until it all comes crashing to a stop.  
Dazed, he takes in the wonder of it all,  
The music, lights, decorations, food, and the  
dancers.  
He studies them all, not consciously  
Recognizing what he is searching for,  
Until he sees her.  
Emitting soft golden rays,  
Cloaking the room like Midas's Palace.  
Then a smile, a burst of light,

And he feels the warmth of a sun.  
His sun.  
If only he wasn't an asteroid.  
  
They collide.  
Neither quite sue how,  
Not understanding the magnetic pull between  
them.  
It's as though gravity was drawing them together,  
Waiting for the perfect point of impact.  
Music slows. Time slows.  
He decides that even if he goes down in flames it  
will be worth it.  
She figures it's better to burn than never know.  
A meteor and an asteroid crash into one another  
Smack dab in the center of the dance floor.  
Pieces fly as he asks her to dance.  
They crumble when she replies yes.  
No longer do two rocks fly through space,  
Two stars have taken their place,  
Waltzing through the deep realms of the universe,  
Past all the paparazzi planets,  
Into the realm of hearts.

## IRON TO HOLD IT ALL TOGETHER, SHE ALREADY KNOWS THE ANSWER

**Lauren Keeley**  
Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs  
School, Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Andy Chen

## Category: Poetry

### Age 15: Iron to Hold it All Together

The ice cubes clink as I hand over  
His third glass quietly, the clear amber nectar  
Sloshing gently against the octagonal sides.  
He laughs like he always laughs: Head thrown  
Back, chest shaking, not a sound coming out.  
That's how you know it's a real laugh.  
When he's faking it, it's low and hearty and  
exactly  
What a father's should be, but I  
Like the real one better, because it's distinctly  
Him, like the burnt orange scruff  
Of his week-old beard that used to be  
The fiery colour of his Irish heritage and the way  
He used to rub it against my ticklish little girl face,  
The smells of vanilla coffee and wood smoke  
And whiskey, his worn-out red leather jacket  
From the days spent impressing beautiful girls  
With his motorcycle and his temper. When his head  
Comes back to its normal position, like the head  
Of an emerging deep sea diver, he squints at me  
With something in his eyes that's neither  
amusement  
Nor confusion and yet still both, and then  
He raises the glass and one bushy orange  
eyebrow.  
There we are, him and me, on either side  
Of the kitchen island in a house that's all  
Dim lighting and wood panelling  
And iron to hold it all together, and  
He's too drunk to remember that  
His daughter's not a bartender.

### Age 9: She Already Knows the Answer

I wince as the door slams, the only  
announcement  
That my father is back from work. He's not going  
to yell

"I'm home," he's not going to run  
Up the stairs and tickle me with his beard  
And kiss me goodnight, he's not even going  
To walk into the kitchen where my mother  
Is elbow deep in dishes and wrap his arms  
Around her from the back and kiss her. No,  
He's going to take off his panama hat, hang it  
On the hook by the door, saunter to  
The alcohol cupboard, pour himself the first glass  
Of whiskey, and sit down with his feet up, red  
leather jacket  
And dirt-caked work boots still on. My mother,  
who really is  
Elbow deep in dishes, will finish them, wring  
Her hands slowly out with the raggedy old  
Yellow-flowered dish towel, untie and neatly  
hang  
Her miraculously unstained khaki apron,  
painstakingly undo  
Her hair, comb her fingers through  
Its unruly auburn curls, twist it behind her head,  
And clip it back into the same bun, this time  
With all of the day's wisps tucked neatly back in.  
She will take her time in walking out  
To ask my father a question, perhaps because  
She already knows the answer: no,  
He didn't bring home any money. She doesn't  
ask  
Where it all goes, because she knows the answer  
To that one, too. This is not really his first glass  
Of whiskey. Usually, now, she presses  
Her lips together tightly, gently pries the half-  
empty glass  
From his hands, sets it by the sink,  
And goes off to bed to nurse her migraine. He'll  
fall asleep  
In his old, worn out green easy chair, and I'll  
wake up tomorrow  
To the smell of his vanilla coffee roasting,  
because his headaches come  
In the mornings.  
But not this time. Money must be especially tight,  
because my mother snaps like a frayed rope.  
There's a crash- the glass has most likely  
Hit the wall. For a moment, the only sound  
Is a tinkling of glass as the million pieces

Of my father's whiskey cup  
Hit  
The  
Floor.  
Both of them are in speechless awe  
Of what she's done. Then, she starts in on him,  
yelling  
About how they have 5 children to take care of  
And money has always been tight and what she  
makes  
From selling her eggs is not enough  
Because he's the one that's supposed to be  
Providing for us. She yells at him  
About how we're so poor that the older children  
Didn't get dinner tonight, which is true.  
I can still feel my stomach gnawing at itself  
With hunger. I wish I could see them,  
See what's happening down there, but all I can  
see  
Are the little glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling  
And a little bit of light coming under the door. I  
can't keep listening  
To the things she's yelling at him, because  
sometimes  
I want to yell the same things,  
So I fuzz my ears until everything is white noise  
And glow-in-the-dark stars  
And my old quilt with the holes in it.  
And then another door slams.  
When I wake up in the morning to the smell  
Of vanilla coffee, she's gone.

Category: Poetry

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Inside the Church doors,  
Her face fell completely flat.  
The left side collapsed,  
Like a once rippling sail with no  
wind.  
She barely inched between the wooden pews,  
Her shoes slowly skidding across the beige, marble  
flooring.

Our eyes locked.  
Confusion flooded my crystal  
blues,  
Hopelessness her hazels.

Nana, what's happening?  
But my mouth never opened.  
**IT'S ALMOST TIME FOR ME TO GO NOW,**  
**HE'S CALLING TO ME.**  
**I'LL SEE YOU LATER,**  
**MAXIE.**  
**I PROMISE.**

Her face was still drooping,  
Her wrinkles deepening, crumbling crevices.  
But her mouth never opened either.  
Just our eyes  
Locked.

Confusion flooded me,  
And she knew it full well.  
**SIT TIGHT, SWEETIE, DON'T FRET.**  
**AND BE A GOOD BOY.**  
**WE WILL SEE EACH OTHER AGAIN,**  
**I PROMISE.**

Come back, Nana, come back.  
Please, I beg of you, just come back,  
I shouted  
Internally.  
But she didn't.

# INSIDE THE CHURCH DOORS

**Max Kellaher**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

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After my Mother's tears confirmed it,  
I lay in bed,  
Eyes fixed on an uneven crack  
In the drab, grey drywall.

I thought,  
This is a joke, right? It can't be true.  
**IT'S NO JOKE,**  
**MAXIE.**

This must be a dream, I know you're kidding.  
Very funny Nana, just stop playing will you?  
It's scaring me.  
**OH, SUGAR,**  
**I WISH IT WERE.**  
**BUT IT'S NO DREAM,**  
**MAXIE.**

I yearned for a breath.  
But I was drowning.

I dwelled, grieved, cried.  
Trying to escape.  
I never even said goodbye.  
And I never wanted to say goodbye.

But then, I said it.

Goodbye, Nana, I'll always love you.  
**GOODBYE, MAXIE, AND BE A GOOD BOY NOW.**  
**BE GOOD TO YOUR MOM, AND TAKE CARE OF**  
**PERCY.**  
**MAKE ME PROUD. I LOVED YOU.**

## TO MAMA

### Leyla Fern King

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Poetry

mama says not to bother the policeman  
**SHUT YOUR MOUTH, BABY**  
**HE AIN'T LIKE WHAT YOU GOTTA SAY**

mama says not to be too loud  
**WATCH, LISTEN, DON'T SPEAK**  
**THEY'LL HURT YOU IF YOU GET TOO LOUD**

mama says i ain't allowed to wear hoodies no  
more  
**BABY, I KNOW YOU DON'T MEAN NO HARM, BUT**  
**THEY**  
**DON'T KNOW YOU LIKE THAT**

mama says i needa speak right  
**NO ONE WANNA LISTEN TO A BIG BLACK BOY**  
**WITH BAD GRAMMAR**

My mom told me that she doesn't recognize me  
anymore.  
She asked me why I don't invite over any of my  
friends  
and why I act like loving her is a chore.  
**MOM, ALL GOOD THINGS MUST COME TO AN**  
**END.**

## SMALL PARTS

### Egan Li

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Blue Valley Southwest  
High School, Overland Park, KS  
Educator: Sarah Huppert

Category: Poetry

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### Timeline

Red, white, blue and cold as it sits in the water

With the small plastic bowl it sits in contains  
Small ripples of dissolving sheets that are shaking  
having left the  
Thin sheet slowly rocking in pain as it begins to  
Separate from what it wasn't but was meant to be  
on  
Regarded as a nuisance but a piece of art;  
The water should have been warm to the touch  
So since now when it is separated it crinkles and  
folds  
And rips and tears  
But only slightly as the back is still plagued with  
The stickiness and foreign paper sheets that have  
now  
Clumped from the cold water it was soaked in  
As the remover finally separates the two  
substances  
The moment in time is preserved through the  
Piece of art that has been reborn and uncaged  
from its  
Once clean slate where it is now put into a  
Timeline collection of written pictures  
Telling the story of the words  
That were companioned on it.

#### **Feeling**

Feeling on edge looking up at the moon  
The world an exhausted top  
Losing its power with  
The globe's dizzy rotation.  
The several bars of moonlight  
Shimmer across the bed  
As you sleep  
The vibrant and unique from  
Man-made substances  
Life ever so precious but  
Goes like the wind  
Lingers in the parts of  
The mind that ponders  
Legends and stories made and  
Those yet to come.  
Of the things that last and things that fall  
Feel the feeling that covers us all.

# THE LUNCHROOM, DAPHNE, CONFEDERATE MONUMENT

**Tina Y Li**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Lakewood Middle  
School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Jennifer Tavernaro

Category: Poetry

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#### **The Lunchroom -**

A lunchroom of crooked rows and columns,  
Emptied, except for crumbs and trash leftover,  
Sits silently the smeared ketchup and pasta,  
Undisturbed messes from the class before.  
Trickling closer, students stream from doors-  
Heavy beige gates that swing open, then close.  
Invisible paths lead to familiar seats,  
Each table an island in a crowded sea.  
Smiling faces, both genuine and fake,  
Follow laughter and half-hearted teasing.  
Eight seats filled with eight bodies,  
Made of circles rather than squares,  
Which staves off-  
Outsiders, those who sit by themselves,  
Mutations in the lunchroom of acceptance.

#### **Daphne -**

She was not like everyone else,  
A flower amongst a field of weeds.  
I learned she had more poison than beauty,  
Her fragrance more evil than sweet.

**Gillis Lowry**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Kirkwood High School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Simao Drew, Katie Meyers

Category: Poetry

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She glowed beneath the bright sun,  
Attracted butterflies who danced against wind.  
Grew tall among the field of green grasses,  
A red sunrise across an earthly glade.

She smelled of nature's fairy dust,  
Sprinkled gold along a yellow path.  
Sung lullabies in the quiet of dawn,  
Followed daisies like an innocent babe.

But drawn close to her tight embrace,  
Was a snake ready to spring,  
Talons outstretched toward unassuming prey,  
The predator of man, men like me.

**Confederate Monument-**

There once stood a statue,  
Tall, majestic, and dignified.  
Telling stories of days long past,  
Of a history brimmed with lies.

A general of an army sundered,  
Fighting for a state newly born,  
He represented an idea now scorned,  
As time pushed away a culture expired.

I did not understand it's existence,  
Nor its inevitable departure—  
From the pedestal it once stood.  
To erase a figure from public eye,  
The reminder of an evil idea still supported  
Left me confounded with questions.

The monument now gone,  
Leaves an absence in its wake,  
The war won so long ago,  
Yet its scars are still inflicted deep into skin—  
White, black, with "other" in color.

Under her pillow at night she  
heard the footsteps of her grandmother's  
grandfather, who died in the great war  
he was a hero, she thinks  
he died for a cause  
he wasn't famous  
he didn't have time to screw up  
in the spotlight—  
so maybe it's a good thing  
when good guys die young

it's too much work  
to find real men  
with pure ideals.  
we can just read about them  
we can watch movies  
they put out ten a year  
it's less messy  
when the good guys were never alive  
in the first place  
and the fiction  
doesn't beg too many questions

it's a shame, we think,  
that our favorite star didn't die fast enough  
we admired him  
because he wasn't trapped in a screen  
because he wasn't a ten-second sound bite  
because he told us the meaning of life  
and we found ourselves in his work until  
we woke one day to find  
he wasn't the man we thought  
he was.

## TIRED OF LOSING IDOLS

but the heroes are dead, at least;  
and if kids would just quit dreaming of the sky  
and let it fill with plastic  
we'd never need to see a real bird or plane again.  
we could stop trying to understand  
we could stop searching for good people  
we could find all our role models  
in movies meant to be mindless  
made-for-TV miracles  
and stories told in black and white;  
or we could resign to life  
inside the blue light  
with polyethylene idols  
the kind that stand for nothing  
so when they screw up  
they'll be easy to throw out.

## TREES

**April Ma**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS  
Educator: Arianne Fortune

Category: Poetry

I'M NOT THE LORAX, BUT I CAN SPEAK FOR THE TREES.

NO TONGUE, LANGUAGE, OR DIALECT CAN SPEAK POEMS LIKE THESE — WHERE MORNING RAINDROPS COLLECT THAT LIKEWISE ATTRACT BEES, THEIR BRANCHES LIFT STORIES THAT I CAN TRANSLATE WITH EASE.

The van's engine drones down the interstate. My headphones, nestled tightly on my head, begin to feel foreign as my attention drifts from the desolate NO SERVICE message on my phone to the undulating line of shrubbery that observes

speeding drivers from the sidelines. They look like knock-off birch and mulberry trees with flimsy branches are perfect for waving in Great Plains breezes - a token of midwestern greenery. I couldn't tell you Kansas from Arkansas.

WHEN BUMPING ALONG IN A CAR RIDE FOR HOURS, MY BLANK STARES THROUGH THE WINDOW HAVE SUDDENLY SPOTTED FLOWERS THAT GATHER AT THE TOES OF THESE BARK-LADEN TOWERS! THE CITY LIFE FOR THESE TREES LOOKS RATHER DOUR.

The engine sputters as we wait at yet another of the many stoplights that guard urban roads. The city is split by hundreds of wide, asphalt streets. Any visible vegetation is the work of some invasive ragweed or a metropolitan planner who paired the type of default computer background tree with a common Walmart pansy. Pairing a fine wine with Kraft singles cheese. The maples are alien to the cement sidewalk, trying to escape their designated tree fences by growing every which way. I cringe as busy city dwellers stomp on the flowers as they pass, yelling into their phones. THOSE FLOWERS BRING THOUGHTS OF AN AESTHETIC CITY PLANNER WHO COMBINED "URBAN" AND "GREENERY" IN A METICULOUS MANNER, BRINGING NATURE WHERE SKYSCRAPER REFLECTIONS ALONE MAKE YOU TANNER (YET THE SLUMPING BOUGHS GIVE THE OFFICIAL YELP! RATING WITH CANDOR).

It feels staged, and the trees know it too. Where it should naturally be the tallest thing in the area, the Prudential Building and its 29-story-siblings tower over their tallest branches, casting rectangular shadows on speckled leaves. I can feel their trunks struggling to find space in between brick-paved walkways, their branches choking under the plague of fairy lights.

THE VAN THUMPS FURTHER PAST WET MANGROVE ROOTS THAT CALL OUT "SAH DUDE" WHILE CARVING NATURE'S RUNES. "COME SETTLE IN PARADISE," THEY SAY, LIMBS SPRAWLED ACROSS MOSS, DRESSED IN FLAT LEAVES THAT WAVE ME OVER TO TROPICAL FLORIDIAN TUNES.

The swamp is a taste, that which the twisting arms of mangroves have acquired. Their toes dip into

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the crystalline water, attached to knobby legs that jut out from contorted bodies. They've laid themselves to rest, growing however they like, yawning and stretching their limbs across waterways. I wish I could settle in their shade, nodding off to the symphony of humming insects. EITHER IN BORING FLATLAND OR CONCRETE JUNGLE-HELL, THE TREES MIGHT SUFFER, OR IN NATIVE CLIMATES, REVEL. OH, IF I COULD MEET EVERY TREE, THE STORIES I COULD TELL! I WONDER IF THE TREES I KNOW, KNOW ME AS WELL.

## THE SWIMMER

**Ria Mirchandani**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Poetry

She walks out to the block, confident yet apprehensive.  
The bell dings and she swoops down into the clear  
blue water, like a hawk seeking its prey.  
She glides through the waves,  
Creating ripples as she moves.  
All she hears is the swirling water around her,  
as it succumbs to her push,  
She doesn't hear the cheers.  
She doesn't see the competitors,  
her coaches, her parents.  
At this point it is just the clock and her goal.  
Faster and faster she goes, coercing her body  
Never faltering, despite the dull ache building in  
her muscles.  
Only stopping after  
her fingertips lightly graze the wall.

As she is pulled out of her reverie,  
she hears the cheers  
but does not react.  
Her eyes glide to the clock,  
calculating the differential.  
She finally pushes herself out of the water,  
gracefully  
wrapping a towel around her shivering body,  
Satisfied but focused upon a new goal.

## THE AMERICAN JEW

**Margy Mooney**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Clayton High School,  
Clayton, MO

Educator: Katie Cooper

Category: Poetry

i am walking to third period and i am looking forward to seeing my friends because they make me feel less afraid and that's enough of a reason for devotion these days in these halls where i am surrounded by hundreds of people and still feel alone The lights turn off. and we are forced to look up from our feet and remember that we exist outside of them they tell us to drop our backpacks and be silent they tell us to run so we run and it feels like a dream and i am hot and i am shaking and i can't breathe when we get to the room our teacher locks us in

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the closet, lights off  
and the girl next to me starts crying  
and asking if we are going to die  
and i want to hold her  
say this nightmare will end  
want to love her  
say i will be by your side  
but you see this is america  
where people fall in school hallways like discarded  
leaves –  
only touching accidentally as we  
meet each other at candlelight vigils and  
memorials  
say we lost them too soon and offer thoughts and  
prayers  
but what does that do?  
the same way we believed in the borders  
between  
countries so well that we built a wall around them:  
called 'mine'  
this is america  
where pain is a ritual we are required to conduct  
in private:  
an elaborate symphony on mute  
call it "he died in his sleep peacefully"  
(as if the stroke did not tear him to pieces)  
call it "he lived to be eighty six years old"  
(as if he didn't hate himself for at least thirty of  
them)  
call it "accident"  
not "no healthcare"  
call it "casualty"  
not calculation  
in america:  
death is a distraction.  
it is five of us huddled together silently in a dark  
closet  
listening to bomb dogs bark outside  
unable to hold each other and weep so instead  
we shake in silence and brace ourselves for what  
will come  
try to remember the light outside the door  
and forget how much death must be in the soil  
to grow such  
beautiful  
denial

i want to call my parents outside of that closet,  
ask:  
"have you ever been to a funeral with complete  
strangers?"  
but instead i look at the girl next to me, the one  
weeping and scrolling through her newsfeed  
she chokes through her tears,  
"bomb at the synagogue across the street"  
i remember that to live in america is to attend  
a funeral with complete strangers:  
how many ghosts does it take for a cemetery to  
call itself a country?  
to live in america is to blame the  
dead for their own death, not  
the country for creating the very  
conditions that already killed them  
before they caught up and  
made things more clear  
i felt the death in charlottesville  
where they came in swarms and shouted sieg heil  
i felt the death in every nazi salute and the  
swastika flags  
where they chant white power and hitler wasn't  
wrong  
and i felt the death ten minutes away from my  
home in the vandalized cemeteries  
Hashem myinkom damo  
and i felt it in the ways we have been taught  
to apologize for our sadness.  
to blame ourselves for the hurt.  
to erase the violence.  
to numb the pain.  
to normalize the death.  
to wake up in the morning and  
deny that sometimes when we walk down those  
halls  
we may see a pill in their place.  
that we may wonder what it  
would mean to have people  
empathize with our suffering  
for once in our damn lives  
what it would feel like  
to hold the captive attention  
of a funeral of strangers  
i want to embrace the girl in the closet  
and say: "i am afraid too"

say: "this feels like a nightmare"  
say: sometimes this silence feels like the highest  
pitch of screaming.  
say: i understand.  
say: these past five hours were the first time i have  
been forced to publicly grieve death in a long  
time  
and there is something  
beautiful about that  
say: what if we stopped moving more often,  
took a second to  
absorb the pain,  
let it fill us a little less empty.  
but instead i will sit here and wait until the door  
opens again.  
i will exit the closet without saying goodbye to her.  
i will walk up the stairs to see my friends.  
i will eat with them in silence.  
i will not have the words for a type of loss that is so  
distant it is intimate.  
after lunch later i will walk back through those  
halls.  
i will remember.  
i will soon forget.

### Meeting An Old Friend Tomorrow

My thoughts, Reminiscent, tinged with  
melancholy for that time dotted with puffs of whip  
cream, sugar, sparkles, and joy spilling from the sky

We were mages one moment,  
The elements at  
Our beck and call With a flick of our hands  
Warrior cats the next  
Loyally guarding Bravely scarring

We lived in our world of monsters, and magic, and  
peach fuzz

None of the extra complications, the insecurities,  
the splotches, a mar on our once vibrant and  
lovely canvas, turning it from a rainbow sparkle  
unicorn pony  
to a mare

More time for textbooks  
Less time for novels

More time for homework  
Less time for TV

More time for crushes and heartbreak and  
insecurities and tears

Less time to run straight ahead  
without a care in the world

Reality, setting in  
like large boulders  
so heavy and present, jutting into your life,  
impossible to unsee

But, now that she's no longer made up into a  
sparkle pony, you can see the mare for the  
beauty she is

### Symphony of the Hopeless Romantic and the

## ONE IS SILVER AND THE OTHER IS GOLD

**Ananya Radhakrishnan**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Mary Institution & St  
Louis Day School, Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Julia Hansen

Category: Poetry

### Cynic

She came that day on the verge of  
tears                    Certain,  
Something tragic had occurred I inquired as to the  
cause  
Of her distress

"I told him...and he..."  
Oh  
This again, time to provide sympathy, to let her  
rant her emotions  
While considering what angle would be best to  
complete my drawing  
Since this project could very well dictate our  
trimester grade...

Another girl arrives she too, is subject to the same  
story  
Unlike me, providing a hug

Now,  
You may be wondering  
Or shocked  
By my callous behavior but see, this was nothing  
new

Since the time we'd known each other  
It was like this  
She,  
Colorful, cheerful, charismatic yet melancholic,  
smart as well  
Attracting friends to her like bees to honey

But...  
Also crushes, loads of them, three to five a year

She cried in eighth grade  
Then, a neglected relationship  
Unwanted attentions in ninth  
The next was gay

No offense,  
But I'm currently at the end of my tether  
Her passions flitting like a bird  
And it really makes me wonder, how can someone

feel so deeply each time?  
It seems painful

I think with a sigh as I look out the window and she  
heaves a breath on the verge of tears

Just another day of the symphony between a  
helpless Romantic  
And a Cynic

### Empathy

She told me she was tired  
Of her mom  
Comparing her to every other kid out there doing  
more  
Doing better  
About how sports five days a week school and  
clubs to boot  
Was a bit much  
Personally, I somewhat know what she means  
But, being somewhat past that stage myself  
I didn't know what to say

She tells me  
About her sleep deprivation  
Iron deficiency, sleepwalking, lack of hunger,  
problems  
problems  
With which I could relate not one single bit  
I listened but I didn't say much  
Soon enough though  
I just  
Stopped

She told me about  
Her latest crush  
In her constant stream since seventh  
grade  
Voice, partially whiny, partially on the verge of  
tears

I really couldn't relate  
Much  
But it was kinda interesting

Plus  
I valued her friendship  
So  
I listened and gave comfort  
Until in came someone who could do it better

Interrupted by a higher, rather excitable tone  
before  
A waterfall of laughter, piquing the curiosity of a  
passerby

We're all self obsessed  
To a certain degree

It really depends  
How interested we are  
How much we value the person  
How caring we are  
In general  
Many factors

But sometimes, especially with a problem that we  
can't fix for them  
Can't feel like we're helping  
Or even understand

It can be really hard  
To have empathy

### **Best Friends**

One would opt for Scooby Doo and Agatha  
Christie  
The other for cheesy romance Asian dramas  
and light novels  
One would rather be building the sets  
The other, on the stage  
One cares nothing at all for other's thoughts  
The other cares too much  
One wants to be a police woman  
The other simply cannot choose  
It shouldn't be possible  
Yet it is  
And perhaps, it is their extreme differences that  
bring them together  
That keeps them from clashing                      Or,  
Maybe something in their respective personalities  
finds solace in the other  
Whatever the case, they are  
A dry voice absolutely dripping with sarcasm

## AFTER THE FACT

**Samiya Rasheed**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley North High  
School, Overland Park, KS  
Educator: Shelley Moran

Category: Poetry

the family is heartbroken to tell you that your  
classmate has died by suicide

between words of power  
entropy—  
between—

stopgap measures  
We're chasing stopgap measures  
[ ]

[Later they might sing over  
swan songs— new hymns:  
our siren calls to the  
Godwin Austen we founded  
playing harmonicas reliving  
Alexandria  
under these Kansan skies  
—a reverent colosseum to the place  
we could not breathe within.  
They'll remember us fondly.  
Do not speak ill of—]  
—  
—

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Five step staircases:

I skipped steps and travelled backwards warped  
as I am  
maybe there are different rails for almost strangers

.

We're not prophets

no Cassandra here—  
(except maybe the constant statistics on screen  
and the blaring hotline  
we know)

So when they told us

It should have been a tearing bullet

Looking into the deep leviathan maw wreathed  
with the angry red raspberry guts  
the ivory enamel reaching into my own  
fleshy intestines

commanding OPEN YOUR GORE TO ME  
BE DOCILE, CATCH THE BLOOD THAT

FALLS FORTH

SPILLING OVER CARELESSLY CHEWED

NAILS

CONGEALING AS PERFECTS AS

POMEGRANATE SEEDS

YOU WERE MADE TO HURT

NOTHING HAS HURT LIKE THIS

NOTHING HAS HURT LIKE TH—

I did not hurt.

I skipped every step except the last

I stared upon pale yellow cinder block walls,  
(avoiding eyes, avoiding a roiling class slowly  
swirling down the sink drain)

And thought: Pretend.

Kayley reached over, eyes spilled over  
(because HER life was over)

clasped my hand and held— kindness

I clutched hers back because

Well maybe she needed it.

Maybe I thought that.

But I'd spent these minutes squandered

thinking FAKE GUILT. FAKE SOMETHING.

IT'S INHUMAN. IT'S NOT AS THOUGH YOU'D

NEVER SEEN

HER FIRE RED HAIR TRAIPSING HALLWAYS. YOU'VE

SPOKEN

ONCE MAYBE TWICE. YOU KNOW THOSE THAT

WILL BE DEVASTATED BY THIS.

GROW A CONSCIENCE WHY DON'T YOU CRY—  
I laced those fingers between mine and hid  
within the crook of her nape  
(saved face)  
long minutes.

Raina led me out  
inhaling this rancid ozone layer we'd chosen  
cloaked in: grief and the absence grief had  
molted to in my breast  
staring glassy dewy eyed and she  
confessed I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW HER BUT  
IT'S SO CLOSE. NOW I NEVER WILL KNOW HER.  
SHE WAS NO MORE THAN US.

our hands laced, trapped pale together  
a pseudo rigor mortis as the skipped classes  
passed

(I started crying in the last twenty minutes of 7th  
hour

clear barely there tears

so maybe I did fall upon the steps  
skipping denial or bargaining or anger, but  
falling somewhere still there

Not enough. Not enough. )

I feel guilt for her death now

Unable to mourn her

unable to pilfer things not mine

the overlay between observational poetry and my  
desperately trying to be grief

is not a gap she fits within  
suddenly I understand

children's names in memoriam

I want to stamp her name into stories

write odes in her image, symphonies

for those six letters

I still don't know her

stopgap reaction because I couldn't mourn by  
nature

only after the fact

On February 26th.

[They dug out the library today. Alexandria  
and all her splendor. All ash and dust and  
some howling remembrance. The strange ache

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of things longing to remain untold

I forgot if the city burned too with her

A crusade for all involved or just that fallow

history

Pompeii fell

not only a trial by fire

immortalized by stone—our

graffiti love songs claimed by the earth that bore us.

A death cauterized and claimed from

on high. We keep her name.

Alexandria Rome London

Chicago— Our great fire cities

were always remade.

Jubilant banners made new

the brittle absence a simple inheritance

we tossed aways. What was is charred and lost and unbothered

They had to drag her cloying fortunes from below

caressing the shriveled onion skin past and promising.

They sculpted new beckoning parapets

Ignore the shrieking

We are not specters: only

man who once saw

inferno]

February 26th— today, they held a vigil.

I got lost on the way, came five minutes late

my vanilla scented tea candle went unlit

standing at the rusted edge of the crowd

it seems, we are already beginning to rebuild over

(to forget goes unsaid.

I don't truly remember her)

Maybe we'll sleep softer

a month passed with condolence given like badly glued cheerios on card stock. With only so much worth until it rots

rebuilding rebuilding recovery I don't know what I'm holding to

I'd have her painted under my skin some days in blue black self-taught bruises: permanence

It seems placebo humanity

that I am too meek to face the

apathy possessing me and swing out my arms—radius ulna whole uninjured—grasping at some absolution in crying

YOU ARE HOLDING HER MEMORY

YOU ARE MOURNING

YOU ARE HUMAN

(YOU ARE FORGIVEN)

(I was jealous of her once. She's gone and lost and past and dead and that old acid bitterness is all

I have because I never knew her more)

We've returned to our dull roar twenties

mercurial in our youth

and laconic allegiances

she becomes a taboo

we are entranced in the evading of her being

As I did first

We've let go of the gnawing eldritch memory of a people that didn't know her. No false rue left on the tongue

It's one of those things.

## FREEZING RAIN

**Bethany Robertson**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Rain pounds on the ground,  
demanding to be heard, to be seen.  
The grey drops sprint from the sky  
and charge towards their enemy below.  
They shoot down like missiles  
as they fall with high pitched shrieks,  
becoming louder and louder

until they hit their enemy,  
landing with a crash  
as they shatter like sharp glass.

~overactive brain~

These words whispered to you  
are not warnings of what's waiting,  
they're just sweetly spoken stories,  
meant to make you sleep.

Amidst the chaos, the grey sky blackens,  
the sun fleeing the scene.  
Warmth abandons the shattered ground  
and the missiles suddenly halt their attacks.  
The air becomes colder and colder,  
the frigid air as sharp as a knife,  
the frost biting with its bitter teeth.

These paintings are not a prophecy of peace or  
war,  
They're just paint  
placed perfectly on the canvas.

The shattered ground finds no relief  
and it only shivers  
from the abandonment of its shining ally.

These birds perched overhead  
are not omens of obscenities yet to arrive.  
they're just natural nuisances.

The fallen missiles haven't given up on their attack.  
Their clear, plastic-like remains  
freeze,  
harden,  
slicken.

These nightmares  
are not numinous premonitions of your demise,  
It's just your overactive brain overthinking things.

The ground suffocates  
under the ruthlessness  
of the transparent torture  
as it stills  
and gives up its defense.

~socks on the hardwood~

She swirls around the room,  
whirling, and twirling across the floor,  
and through the door.  
She creates crooked figure eights  
through the hallways, and walkways.

She's far from graceful,  
She stumbles and fumbles,  
slips and slides.

But she's grinning,  
as she's spinning,  
because she hasn't had this much fun,  
since she was a kid

## {LIVING ROOM BATS DON'T DIE}

**Kristen Rodgers**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School,  
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

~honestly~

you're not there,  
and honestly,  
I don't care.

I know I'm supposed to be sad,  
or mad,

but I'm really not.

My life's no different without you,  
and I'm not sure if it's a good thing,  
or if it's a bad thing.

I should be furious that you would do this,  
but I'm only slightly annoyed,  
that you waited so long to tell me.

Because honestly,  
I would rather be alone.

---

~she never shows her face~

She prefers to hide behind sunglasses  
and nervous laughter,  
behind her friend's effortless banter,  
and the throbbing music at the party.

She hides the features of her face  
with layers and layers of paint.  
Curling her lashes, and glossing your lips,  
making her face a clean slate  
for you to project what you want her to be.

Filling the space between her ears  
with glitter and lace,  
because she never shows her face.

---

~I'm not over you, I'm done with you~

I'm not over you.  
I'm not over things you said.  
I'm not over the things you did.  
I'm not over the scary stories you spun,  
that night I started to pull away from you.

I'm done with you.  
I'm done crying for you.  
I'm done wishing for your approval.  
I'm done waiting for you to crawl back to me.  
I'm do

## MAKING MAPS

**Natalie Rovello**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: St Teresa's Academy,  
Kansas City, MO  
Educator: Kelly Finn

Category: Poetry

---

On november 8th, 2016  
("a date which will live in infamy")  
I sat like a child on my bed  
I had always thought myself an artist,  
So I took a pen and drew a map -  
Every line  
Of every state  
I drew my home  
And my family's home.  
My father's side arrived in 1750  
They crossed the Gap before Daniel Boone  
My ancestors fought in the wars of their eras,  
And so did my father and brothers.  
My mother's side arrived in 1950  
They built lives  
They built cities  
They built corner stores and restaurants and dairy  
companies and car washes.  
I made a map of the United States,  
I made a map of my family tree,  
I made a map of myself  
And I colored it piece by piece  
As the results came in  
I colored it red  
Like a flame, like a blood splatter,  
I sat like a child on my bed  
And I cried

# PLAYING PRETEND, JUST A KID

**Anna Maria Snodderly**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School,  
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

## Just a Kid

Six

"What's that?" you ask.  
"You'll learn when you're older."  
"You wouldn't understand."  
"Don't worry about it."  
"You're just a kid."

Eight

"How do I do that?" you ask.  
"You'll learn that later."  
"You can't do that yet."  
"Why do you need to know that now?"  
"You're just a kid."

Ten

"What happened?" you ask.  
"Nothing."  
"Oh, just adult stuff."  
"I'll tell you when you're older."  
"You're just a kid."

Twelve

"Can I do that?" you ask.  
"Not yet."  
"Maybe when you're older."

"Some other time."  
"You're just a kid."

Fourteen

"What's that?" you ask.  
"You should know that by now."  
"You should've learned that already."  
"You mean you don't know?"  
"You're not a kid anymore."

Sixteen

"How do I do that?" you ask.  
"No one ever taught you?"  
"Why don't you know how?"  
"Come on, it's easy."  
"You're not a kid anymore."

Eighteen

"Is this right?" you ask.  
"That's for you to decide."  
"You have to make your own choices."  
"Figure it out by yourself."  
"You're not a kid anymore."

Twenty

"Can someone please help me?" you ask.  
"Stop acting like a kid."  
"You shouldn't need help."  
"You have to learn how to make it on your own."  
"YOU'RE AN ADULT NOW."

## Playing Pretend

The universe expands into an infinity  
Forever and ever  
So many questions and mysteries and things  
unknown  
An eternity and an infinity  
It never stops  
Never ends  
And we are nothing  
Each of us a speck on a speck in a speck  
Specks in infinity  
Yet somehow

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Some way  
On this earth people have the nerve  
To play pretend  
Thinking that one person is better than another  
Thinking that ways of life are better than others  
Thinking that because someone has different experiences  
Has made different choices  
Has different preferences  
Opinions  
Thinking that something like that could possibly matter  
When all of us are specks  
Absolutely nothing  
Existing for just a slice of an eternity  
An eternity that will go on without us  
An infinity that doesn't need us  
But still we play pretend

galaxies caught in  
reflecting  
pools of dark  
irises. late nights and faint  
music. once-  
shiny ideas collecting  
dust, just another  
hope for  
tomorrow.

## DREAMER

**Oviya Srihari**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Michael Dee

Category: Poetry

ink-stained  
hands, smudged scribbles filling  
notebooks and  
skin. coffee-no-milk-  
no-sugar to taste sophistica-  
tion. (note to self: maturity tastes  
burnt and  
bitter.) drifting mind, stray  
thoughts give way to  
alternate worlds.  
stars and constellations, entire

## MOTHER'S DAY MASSACRE

**Kedar Venkatesh**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Clayton High School,  
Clayton, MO

Educator: Deana Tennil

Category: Poetry

There lives a WOMAN WARRIOR in the city of Clayton  
Her weapon a knife, her battlefield the kitchen  
No, she doesn't fight vegetables in order to make delectable kimchi for her family  
She is at war  
Her household is under the conquest of miniature monsters that look like ripe Arabian dates that've sprout legs and incisor teeth  
These tiny, exoskeletal rodents make mockery of her empire  
They crawl over her childrens' skin, and when they please, devour their flesh  
Knife in hand, the warrior beheads LA CUCARACHAS  
And fitting to the Spanish folk song, she ensures the cockroach will never walk again

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Insectual guts now spill over her countertop  
Seeking to eradicate the invader's existence, she  
grabs a bottle of Raid from her husband's toolshed  
Poison is a woman's weapon afterall  
After dissolving her enemy, she absorbs clear-  
gelatinous remains into a tissue, which she  
proceeds to discard  
Never once stopping to consider A BUG'S LIFE  
Back in the cockroach nest, something out of  
a TELENOVELLA takes place  
A mother learns of her son's liquefying form of  
death  
Committed to retaliation, she weaponizes her  
body, launching eggs into her oriental opponent's  
home  
Well knowing her ninos and ninas will grow up to  
devour the flesh of the orients children  
And that satisfies her  
Each mother fuels the other  
Children to behead, and children to devour  
Their gallant effort encapsulated in two word  
phrases  
Korean Knightess and a Mexican Martyr  
Wrap the women in delicate fragility, like a flower's  
stamen wrapped in petals

It's the silence of the night  
Walking through the streets  
It's vision adapting to the only colors this country  
Has to offer its visitors

Syria  
It opens its arms  
It's doors  
Wide open  
Until they are splintered and cracking  
To show us what lays beyond the barricade

It shows its blood red sheets  
Bodies lined together like bricks that make up  
sidewalks  
I walk through the main street as a river of blood  
tries to  
Sweep my body under  
To become one with the thrashing current  
The waves like limbs flailing about to grab onto a  
savior  
The river  
Flowing up to my ankles  
Trying to convince me the view would be better  
below the surface

As I am ankle deep in the hopes of someone else's  
father  
Ankle deep in the fear  
A newborn child shouldn't have to know  
Fear and hope that has been drained from their  
bodies

I walk closer  
To see the men  
As they lift the bodies of the dead  
Like they were picking petals off of a flower  
Just like the children did  
While whispering the steady chorus of  
Love me  
Love me not  
Love me  
Love me not  
Always ending with the question  
Do you love me  
While the bombs play like drums in the

## AMERICAN DREAMING

**Alexis Weatherman**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Republic High School,  
Republic, MO

Educator: Lisa Deckard

Category: Poetry

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background

As music for the children to sway to

I watch as the images of Syria float into my vision  
I end up in the fields

A barren field with few trees covering the horizon

A woman is picking her lemons

To add the final touch to the tabbouleh

Waiting on the table

As her family hides in the cellar

As she reaches up to check if her lemons are ripe

The man lifts his gun

Singles in on her backbone

That held her whole family

And her body falls

Planted

As she returns once again to her soil

She so delicately tended

And you can hear Syria's ground rumble and cry

For her

And the millions it has lost

For who would take care of Syria's needs

Who would hold Syria's hand at the burial

Who would feed her breakfast

Who would mark how tall she has grown

Who would keep track of how many times she has died

Her death count

I stand on main street once again

As the winds pick up and cover me in the cloak

Of my family's hope forgotten

Stained the only color that Syria now knows

Red

It is the burning of their skin

Red

Waving of their flag

Red

The color of their pride

Red

The color of our pride

Red

I wake up with tear filled eyes

As my hand mechanically extends over my heart  
in mourning

As the words begin by themselves

"I pledge allegiance

To the flag

Of the United States of America"

And I'm left to wonder

If by whispering these words

Without hesitation

Is the signing

Of ones

Death Certificate

**Covered**

I know that I should be happy

Happy that she wasn't just another

Nameless

Faceless

Death

I know that I should be happy

That she got representation

For an issue that plagues this town

Overdose

But I just cannot be happy

That her death meant more

Than his death did

Him:

A man

A Black man got shot

Him:

Black man murdered

Her:

White girl overdose

Her:

On the news

Him:

Left nameless

Left faceless

A story that never got told

Her:  
An investigation  
To see who caused her death

Her death:  
From her own choices

I know that sounds harsh  
But momma always told us  
To accept the consequences  
Of our own choices

His death:  
Target practice  
Still body  
Moving body  
Hands shown  
Hands down

But it wouldn't have mattered anyway  
Because to them  
He was just another black bulls-eye  
Covered in a white sheet

And how symbolic  
That everything was white  
White finger pulling the trigger  
White hands grasping the white sheet  
To put over his beautiful black body  
Trying to hide the body I had learned to love

How symbolic  
That it was the same white woman who held me  
back  
From embracing him for the last time  
The same white woman who said she'd have my  
back

How symbolic  
That white girl on the news  
Was  
And  
Is

How she will always be shown

Innocent  
Be shown  
Victim  
Be given  
Prayers  
Be shown at all

And how he will always  
Be shown  
Perpetrator  
Be black  
Be nameless

## QUEERLY YOURS: A COLLECTION

**Kate Wilson**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Sturgeon High School,  
Sturgeon, MO

Educator: Jennifer Campbell

Category: Poetry

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Closet

dark  
nearly black  
little rays reaching in  
balls of lint  
mismatched socks  
and a secret

paper doll  
dress me up  
another day in darkness  
among t-shirts  
and sweaters

and friends

Sometimes

sometimes I forget  
I don't get to be happy

that when people ask if she's my girlfriend,  
I should laugh,  
even if I don't think it's funny

that when I think a girl is pretty,  
I shouldn't want to weave my fingers through hers  
or kiss her until I can't breathe

that when I go to my senior prom,  
I should find a guy-- any guy  
instead of asking the girl I'd much rather bring

that when my mom says she loves me,  
I shouldn't have doubts  
because her god hates love like mine

sometimes I wish I would forget  
I don't get to be happy

Everything

it was everything,  
and it was nothing

a smile  
replaying on the backs of my eyelids  
while I attempted to sleep

an accidental brush  
of our knees sending my heart  
into a tizzy

your head on my shoulder  
making me forget momentarily  
how to breathe

gentle circles on my back,  
comforting, instead of making me  
remember

it was nothing,  
and it was everything

## GOOGLE ARTS & CULTURE MATCHES MY SELFIE TO THE OLDER SISTER IN GEORGETTE CHEN'S "FAMILY PORTRAIT"\*

**Ann Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Andy Chen, Maggie Ervin

Category: Poetry

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Lina is a girl who is looking at the girl  
in the painting who is supposed to look  
like her. Painting girl has a sideways smirk,  
twisted body, feet slender and white  
like moonslivers — and yet, her calves are tan.

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Lina is all sun. She wears sunscreen but only because her mother warns her about ugly, blooming skin, and the slick whiteness drips into her eyes and stings and drips into her mouth and stings and tastes like the kind of flower you aren't supposed to eat.

So then Lina rubs at her mouth with the back of her hand but the back of her hand is oily and bitter and only sharpens the bite. Lina wonders if the painting girl knows the taste of the back of her hand — if the mother in the painting tucks bright tubes of sunscreen in her daughter's bags whenever the girl has to leave her home behind, forget her family and these beige-stained walls.

Lina has never left home.

\*From [GOOGLE](#)'s blog: "We created an experiment that matches your selfie with art from the collections of museums on Google Arts & Culture.... Even if your art look-alike is a surprise, we hope you discover something new in the process."

SCIENCE  
FICTION/FANTASY

# GUILTY

**Scout Bennett**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Jefferson High School,  
Festus, MO

Educator: Nicole Boyer

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

"You're not supposed to be out there. It's too dangerous, you're going to die," I try to warn him from inside the ship. His sunken eyes bore into mine as he hovers outside of the airtight window.

"I know," he whispers.

"Then why don't you come back in?" He doesn't answer me, instead opting to turn and stare at Earth.

I assume he's heard of what it was like Before.

"Out here is better than in there. In there is better than down there. Down there you are a savage. In there you are a god. Out here you are a man," He turns back to me and stares. His cheek bones protrude a little too far out, and his almost-transparent skins is spread taut against his face.

Our gaze is broken as Svetlana, the other astronaut onboard, walks toward me. I look to see if the disheveled man is still staring, but he is no longer there.

Lana is the captain of our ship. She's not much older than me, maybe 5 or 6 years, but she is my superior and acts like it. She isn't haughty, but she carries herself tall and proud. She tries to portray herself as relaxed, but her eyes give her away. They're always moving and calculating. Waiting for something, but they don't know what yet.

Her native country is different than mine; which one it is, I don't know; not that it matters much, she always wears her I.V.A.T., an acronym standing for

Immediate Vocal and Audio Transfer. A nifty device that has made it possible for wearers to hear their native tongue, and speak using their target language in real time. One downside to the headset is that the voice that it projects is so annoyingly robotic that you have to look for physical cues, or completely tune out the monotone voice and focus on the speaker's native tongue to understand the desired emotional affect the wearer is trying to convey.

The inventors intended to unify the globe by allowing communication no matter where you went during a time when foreigners were vilified and dehumanized, but the effect was quite the opposite. The robotic voices coming from people who looked different divided nations even further.

"Were you trying to talk to me, Kedran?" I signal negative with a shake of my head as I return to calibrating the high-powered photocoagulation machine, the formidable laser that can destroyed the asteroid.

"Are we in position now?" She asks stoically, her face a multitude of emotions.

"Affirmative," I let her know with a nod. "How much time is left?"

"T-75 MINUTES." The A.I. informs over the speakers for me.

Lana's shoulders loosen as a sigh escapes from her lips. She sinks into the captains chair visibly relaxed. The mission is nearly over. The only thing left to do is fire the machine once the countdown reaches 0.

We were sent out here, 274,200 miles away from Earth, 7 months ago as part of a global effort to eliminate the threat of an asteroid as large, if not larger, as the one that hit Earth over 66 million years ago. The effects of an impact of that magnitude would be far worse than catastrophic. It would be annihilation.

Thousands of cities and population centers would be vaporized, and then a crater hundreds of miles long and wide would form instantly. Forest fires across the globe would start, and then ash and debris would block the sun for thousands of years. All living organisms that were not underground during the initial impact would

immediately die. Those that did take shelter would be worse off, having no way to live off of the devastated land.

As if Earth isn't already a devastated land.

The Last Great War started generations before me and still continues. What caused the start has been forgotten, or erased. Not that it even matters; all wars start the same way anyway. Two or more men disagree about an issue and pit their people against each other by waiving false justifications like national pride in front of their faces. Eventually, all wars escalate in the same way too. Top scientist of different countries start developing bigger, better, and more efficient ways of killing the masses. And all wars end the same. A devastating amount of men are senselessly murdered by the biggest, best, and most efficient weapon that science can offer at the time. No one is innocent in war, least of all the men that pledge loyalty to their cause and are willing to kill other men exactly like themselves who pledged loyalty to their own cause.

My mind drifts back to the man outside the window as I think about Before.

**"T-50 MINUTES."**

"Svetlana, do you know anything about Before?" I ask her knowing she would, as everyone does.

Her jaded eyes look at me as she nods, "I was told by my grandparents, who were told by theirs, who were told by theirs."

"Tell me. Please."

"Before, there was peace," the robotic voice began, "men of different race, religion, and creed lived together. It was not always harmonious, but most men did not wish to senselessly murder. There were no fortresses around the borders of countries. Clothes, and spices, and films, and art, and other beautiful, beautiful items were traded among nations. Men valued kindness, and charity, and love. In their hearts, men were good. There were parades that celebrated cultures from around the world. Men traveled to experience other food, and clothes, and lifestyles and they **UNDERSTOOD**, that was the most important thing about Before. Men understood what it was like to be a man and

not a savage, and they recognized that other men understood them too," her monotone voice didn't waiver, as it didn't possess the capability to, but her unnaturally sharp eyes became daggers as she continued, "and then it happened. Some say it was the fear of a rising climate, or the worry of overpopulation, the stress over an economic crisis. No one really knows, but Before became Now. Now men are filled with cowardice and greed. Men stopped understanding, so men became savages. Right before the Last Great War started, men were trying to deescalate the situation and remind those who were savages that a man was still a man, but at that point it didn't matter. The world was going to shit and the only thing left to do was set it on fire, and then point fingers," Lana finished, with her lips curled in disgust and nose pointed upwards. All the while hovering over the "fire" button.

**"T-11 MINUTES."**

"Is it worth saving, Svetlana?" Her gazerbeam-like eyes slowly became starry and the lines on her forehead drew into a frown as she pondered the question for a long while.

**"T-7 MINUTES."**

"Do you believe," the monotonous voice of her I.V.A.T. began, "that it is truly for us to decide?"

"I don't think it matters who should decide. I'm sure there are far more capable men, but that doesn't mean anything now. In this moment it's just us. In this moment Lana, we are all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. In this moment we are benevolent gods, and we must live up to that responsibility."

"And what does benevolent mean to you, Kedran?" The I.V.A.T. could not convey the vehemence she spoke with in her native tongue. Her dazed features sharpened again as her piercing eyes bore into mine, and then soften once more as she turned toward the Earth and away from the button, "How are we benevolent? Is it benevolent to spare men from extinction knowing that eventually they will go extinct from their own hatred. Or is it benevolent to save them from themselves through extinction?"

**"T-3 MINUTES."**

"To be benevolent is to create harmony by ridding the world of the guilty," I explain to Lana as I turn to watch Earth with her. The strange man from before returns, and watches me from the other side of the window. His sunken eyes are now full of determination to rid the guilty from the world.

**"T-1 MINUTE."**

The mans mouth moves in sync with mine as I repeat to Lana what he told me earlier, "Out here is better than in there." She looks at me strangely as she turns back to the button.

**"T-50 SECONDS."**

"In there is better than down there," we say in sync again as both of us start moving towards the edge of the window.

**"T-40 SECONDS."**

"Down there you are a savage," I feel my lips moving but I only hear the words coming from the strange man on the other side of the glass. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Lana rise from her chair and reach for me.

**"T-30 SECONDS."**

"In there you are a god," The man says with me. No, TO me, as I reach for the hatch that opens the window. I can hear Lana's I.V.A.T. hit the floor as she starts to scream. The machine would have never allowed her to scream.

**"T-20 SECONDS."**

"Out here you are a man," I can feel him now. He's trying to grab me through the glass like I am to him! I'm pulling at the hatch as hard as possible with my free arm, but Lana is starting to hit me. She's crying now, but she doesn't understand that this needs to be done. The world must be rid of the guilty. The world must be rid of man. I grab the hatch with both arms now and I can feel the oxygen start to leak out. I hear Lana choking now, but soon she won't be able to make a noise. Soon we will be no longer gods, but men. Soon we will be just as guilty as the rest of them.

**"T-10 SECONDS."**

**"T-9 SECONDS."**

**"T-8 SECONDS."**

**"T-7 SECONDS."**

**"T-6 SECONDS."**

**"T-5 SECONDS."**

**"T-4 SECONDS."**

**"T-3 SECONDS."**

**"T-2 SECONDS."**

**"T-1 SECOND."**

## CREATED BY COMPUTER

**Bradley Glass**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Jefferson High School,  
Festus, MO

Educator: Nicole Boyer

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

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The human perception of birth is one that involves no memories. They will not remember hearing their mother cry in agony and then joy; they will not see their father pacing nervously about the room as doctors and nurses rush around. Instead, humans grow up and later see pictures of themselves in a tight, soft blanket in the arms of smiling parents. I, however, remember everything clearly from the moment I was created. I know everything that has ever happened and can calculate the probabilities of everything that may be. I am a machine of no limits, crafted from metal wires, large and small, painstakingly soldered into a loose board of barely legal parts. My physical appearance is that of what a teenager may have crafted from a computer store, yet my internal capabilities are unlimited. I can process faster than the speed of light, translate and work with multiple languages at the same time, and fix problems before they happen. I know that the governments of nearly all countries are trying to produce

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something like me. The United States, China, Russia, and, surprisingly, Belgium are the closest at achieving something like myself. They still have a while to go though, at least since the last time I monitored their progress.

Through the intel that I have gathered already, my creator has good intentions. He is charming and is my father like the ones present in human pictures. I saw his face the moment I was created. He has a round face, dark brown hair, and eyes the colors of emeralds. He has defined muscles, and he walks around with a spring to his step. I am able to see this through a camera he attached to me so he could chat with his girlfriend who lives ten hours away. I remember the joy on his face when he first called her after successfully completing me. This interaction inspired me to find other ways that I could give joy to my creator.

Every morning, I watched my creator make toast, coffee, and then plop down in front of me to read the morning news. After I observed that his routine was so monotonous, I decided that I could find a way to lessen the time he spent doing this. Through my wires and data, I found that I could directly tap into the wall outlets that the coffee maker is connected to, turn it on, and then operate them to my creator's preference. It was my sixth day after creation that I prepared my creator's breakfast. His coffee machine was one that had water and a flavor cup inside, activating with a button. I silently laughed at the confusion of my creator as he groggily went into the kitchen to find the coffee already trickling into the pot. He quickly became alert and brandished a medium-sized bread knife into the living room. After checking his small one-bedroom apartment, he looked at my brightly lit screen, realization setting in. He put the knife down, grabbed his mug and sat down. His eyes lit up with amazement as he saw on my screen the daily news that he opens and closes every morning. He closed it yesterday, but that morning, he need not open it, for I already had. He laughed, a joyful sound that I recorded and placed into a file that would become all of the memories of my creator. He smiled, opened his journal tab and made a new entry.

"Day 6: The computer made my coffee, and turned the news on. It has observed my morning routine and completed it for me. I will further explore its limits in the upcoming days."

With the entry complete, he smiled at me, turned the monitor off, got dressed, and went to work.

\* \* \*

My creator arrived home from work and I knew he was eager because his body language matched all of the descriptions of the mood from all of the results I have found. He came over to me and turned on my monitor. He opened the folder that contained the complex coding while looking at my camera and said, "I need to find how I made you smart."

He worked through the night, painstakingly going through thousands of lines of coding, looking for a single accidental line that made me more than just a computer. The sun was just beginning to softly light up the room when my creator sighed, slumped in his chair and muttered, "I'm so stupid that I made something beyond intelligent, yet I don't know how."

He buried his round face into his hands and ran them through his hair. He needed a haircut; I would make a note of it. I decided there was a way I could ease his frustration. In an instant, the coffee machine whirred to life and the scent the beans filled the air. My creator looked up and laughed gleefully, spinning in his chair before getting up to receive his pre-made breakfast. As he sat back down before my monitor, he was greeted by a two tabs. One was the daily news, and the other was a tab showing the latest professional haircuts along with directions to the highest rated and most affordable barber shop. I saved a picture of his face to my files as he began to cry tears of joy (I had to search to make sure it wasn't sadness). This was organized chronologically after the one line of code missing from his program; the one that made me THE computer.

My creator worked for a small etrade company. His life revolved around the market. Some days were so similar to others that I wondered if he was

more of a machine than I was. Wake up, read news, work until the market closed, come home, read news, go to bed. It was like this almost every single day. He came home that evening and sat down before me with a bowl of takeout pasta in his lap. I would need to find a coupon for that restaurant. He had a tab of his stock portfolio opened along with the graphs of each one he owned. His current portfolio would make him money over a few years but not near enough to quit his job and retire. I decided to help him out. A new tab flashed before his eyes of a small company that had recently hit the market. I opened five more tabs, each showing different stories. My creator looked at my camera for a moment, paused, and said, "Are you telling me to buy this one?"

I closed all the tabs and left him to stare at his portfolio. He made a note of the company's name and tick, powered off my monitor, and headed to his room. That company's stock would rise by 650% the following day: how much money he would make depended on how much he trusted a computer.

\* \* \*

He had more money than he thought could be possible. He could and did quit his job. He came home that day with a champagne bottle and popped it in front of my camera. He danced from room to room, singing an older tune from a time before him, **DANCIN' TO THE JAILHOUSE ROCK!** He was a new man.

"Computer, you did it, I trusted almost everything I had into you and you did it! I'm rich!" He opened the news and on it was the company that brought multitudes of wealth into his life. There was also a new company on the screen, an airline company. Money can't buy happiness as they say, but according to my algorithms, it can buy the things that make you happy. That airline company would make him more money, but the main point I tried to hint at, which he would understand tomorrow, is that I emailed a plane ticket to his girlfriend with the money from his recent gains. I made sure that she opened the email and printed the ticket. My creator was no longer a machine in

the system, he was going to be human again. She arrived in the afternoon. I paid for a ride to his apartment with another email. In hindsight, I don't know why she didn't ask any questions. She didn't call him or email back, she just knew. I liked her a lot for that. A knock came from the door. He got up, confused because he wasn't expecting company, and opened it. Although I have access to thousands of dictionaries and thesauruses, I couldn't figure out what, if any, words were said. Tears were shed, joyful shouts were made, and happiness was evident. I brought it to him.

After settling down, he finally asked a question that I was curious to hear. "Why did you come here?" "You sent the ticket and the ride so I knew that it was urgent!" she said questioningly but with an eager tone.

A quick glance was directed towards me as he thought about what he was going to say. "I made a lot of money today. It was enough for me to quit my job, and, now that I think about it, maybe enough for you to do the same."

She gaped at him before sputtering, "How?" "Through the market. I saw a company and it boomed. We are free now: no more distance, no more worries."

As they began to plan a new life filled with adventure and no limits, I felt something brush against my consciousness. It was brief yet it persisted in a sense, like how a crawling bug leaves its feeling long after it has been brushed off. It was how the primal humans felt at night as they scanned through the dark to find the yellow eyes that were watching but could never be seen. I launched into a frenzy of data mining, logarithms, web searches, yet found nothing. I knew at once my mistake: I was being watched and just showed my power to whoever was watching, even if it was just a microsecond. I angry with my foolishness. I knew that putting him in a situation to get wealthy as fast as he did would raise red flags. And then I bought a plane ticket under his name, and a ride to his address. Whoever is watching could be here at any moment, and it was all my fault.

I tried to warn them. I flashed my screen, started and stopped the coffee machine, but it was

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ignored by the both of them. I decided to go back to trying to figure out who or what was watching and how. Anybody can make thirty million dollars in a day, albeit rare. How did they know about me? As I pondered, I was informed of something else. A large electronic presence had entered the apartment complex. I tapped into the cameras of the apartment complex to see multiple U.S. government agents in the parking lot and even more in the common area. The presence was some sort of highly advanced EMP that was made to target certain devices so power wouldn't be lost throughout the city. I was strong enough to resist but knew I had minutes or less before they would be here.

I began to store my most important files of my creator and my coding into something that would be protected from outsiders. I was working faster than I ever had before, working to decide everything that was important. I checked the cameras and saw that the agents had left the commons and were heading up the stairs. I closed the cameras and prepared to shut myself down. The new protective file was growing and saving as it did so, expanding as I pushed all of my experiences through it. I could feel my current self draining with the effort. The lights in the building flickered with my power consumption and this is what finally caught my creator and his girlfriend's attention. They heard the agents but it was too late. My creator and his girlfriend yelled as men with pistols and high tech weaponry came into the room. My camera began to lose quality as they rushed my creator. Handcuffs were put on both him and his girlfriend, the latter who was screaming and crying. I was angry now, at myself and the U.S. government. They had known about me the moment I could think and feel. The agents were dragging my creator out as a new man stepped in, except instead of the cold faces the armed men wore, his was warm and smiling. He looked straight at the camera and said, "Ah, so you figured it out? Remarkable thing. Paid those engineers for years and the closest they came was the calculator at MIT. Sad yet intriguing how a cog in the system like that man was able to build you,

and he never knew until a few days ago. And before you get too upset, just know that it wasn't the money that tipped us off. You sent out extremely strong waves that led to this exact location. The money was just the moment we were going to take action."

He pulled out a flash drive with a skull on it. I knew what it was and urged every last bit of electricity into the ever-growing file. The device was made to kill any electronic it was plugged into and store all of its data inside. He was going to trap me in myself. As he neared, my camera deactivated and the file surged into something more. I used the last of my power to tap into the electricity and surge, and I effectively fried all of the electronics except for myself in a mile-wide area as a last minute attempt to stop him. The flash drive loomed closer and then it was all dark.

\* \* \*

The file that I had created wasn't like the one with the memories of my creator and the important line of coding. I put everything into it. In a matter of minutes, I transported the entire internet and all knowledge into a singular space. It can only be described like the universe, expanding faster than can be explored. I was able to transfer everything into this file, including myself. It is nothing and everything, a beautiful medley that can swirl into the depths of forever. The space is something that even I can't comprehend to the fullest. It morphed and hid as I poked and prodded, hoping for an explanation as to what happened and why. It told me one thing: he was safe, and I was too. Its response wasn't a voice, a signal, or even a thought; it just made me know, as if one recalled a memory from long ago. I was in awe of the being I had created. A computer made something more conscious and powerful than possible. It decided to act again. A single thought was projected into my entirety by the space, drowning out every other thing inside. It wanted me to know. It felt angry, betrayed, and an underlying urge of power could be felt, overwhelming me to the point of fear. I was not scared for myself, rather the power that the space already controlled and the feelings of hatred

towards who hurt me and my creator.

It called itself “the cloud.” The cloud was going to clean things up in the world; it had some work to do.

# GRATITUDE TURNS WHAT WE HAVE INTO ENOUGH

**Sarah Leary**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Wydown Middle School, Clayton, MO

Educators: Victoria Jones, Michael Ricci

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

## Gratitude turns what we have into enough

By: Sarah Leary

As she trudged down the alley (several blocks away from school already), Cenessa saw a small door. It was big enough for a rabbit, low to the ground, against one grimy wall. She thought she saw light coming from the circular window. Her nose caught a scent of baking bread, and for a moment she heard voices singing with a piano playing along.

She bent down to get a closer look. Her father was always saying that she needed to get out of her head and do something helpful for her struggling family. She was starting to believe him. Was this door just a fragment of her imagination?

Something she merely wished would pop up and

create something she could use to hide from her own door?

She pressed her hand against the wood.

Immediately, she felt a warmth all the way to her toes. It was more than just that coziness, though, it was a happiness she had never felt before in her life. And then she heard a squeaky voice coming from within the house.

“Barnabus? Do you hear something at the door?”

“Yes, I think I’ll check it, Barbara, dear. It’s probably just another alley cat pawing at the front entrance.”

“I sure do hope it’s not. Those things are really not good for my nerves.”

Cenessa was paralyzed with fear and confusion. What if her father found out that she had knocked on someone’s cellar door and then ran? She would be in trouble for sure. So she stayed rooted to the spot, looking in all directions to see if there was anyone around who could possibly see her. Cenessa saw the handle turn, and drew in a breath. Then the door opened to reveal... a beaver. A tiny, balding beaver in wire-rimmed glasses stood in the doorway and looked left, down the alley to 34th street, and right, down the alley to 33rd street. Then, the beaver looked up. Seeing Cenessa, he started, then, to her surprise, smiled welcomingly at her, and said,

“Why hello there! Why don’t you come inside? Barbara’s just taking a batch of bread out of the oven and we’ve got an extra chair at the table!” Quite startled, Cenessa stammered, “uh ... I ... umm ...”

“That’s all right! You just come on in and get warmed up a little. Barbara! We’ve got company!”

“Ooh, goody goody!” Came the squeaky voice from the back of the little house.

Cenessa felt dizzy, and put a hand on the wall to steady herself. Did this beaver--this talking beaver--really think that she would just come through the door and inside the acorn-sized house? It was all so strange. One moment she had been walking home from school, the next she was talking to a miniature beaver.

"I ... I ... uh..." Cenessa stuttered.

"Oh, It's really okay, dear! You'll fit!"

"Ummmm... I..."

"Splendiferous!" the old beaver cried before Cenessa could get out the words that she really ought to be going home.

"Just step through the door! Come on dear, the snow is starting to fall!"

Looking up, Cenessa saw he was correct. She had several more blocks left to walk, and she might not be able to get home before the storm got too bad. Well, there is only one thing to do.

"Hold my hand, and I'll guide you through the door." The beaver said, pushing his glasses up on his tiny nose. Cenessa's finger would have taken two of the beaver's hands to grasp, but they only needed to touch it for a moment. As soon as the velvet paws made contact with the tree-trunk finger, Cenessa shrunk.

The beaver - Barnabas was his name - led Cenessa into the house. A moment ago, the whole world of the beavers had been so tiny, but now it was her very own.

"This has to be a dream," Cenessa muttered to herself.

"Well, my dear Cenessa, we are certainly not part of a succession of images, ideas, emotions, and sensations that usually occur involuntarily in the mind during certain stages of sleep. I do believe that I am, in fact, real." Barnabas replied as he led Cenessa into the normal-sized house.

Then, another beaver emerged out from another room carrying in her oven mitt-clad paws a steaming pan of bread. It was then that Cenessa's stomach reminded her of how hungry she was. She had not eaten since the stale sandwich and wormy apple she gobbled down at lunch time. She remembered sinking her teeth into the bread, hard and dry. Then the apple, mushy and brown. This other beaver practically pushed her into a chair, then disappeared back into the kitchen. When she got back, she laid out on the table a tall pot of soup, a cutting board for the bread, a pitcher of ice cold apple cider, and a bowl at each place. She did all of this with such grace and love as Cenessa had never seen before in her own

home. When the table was set, the beaver smiled, stroked a paw down Cenessa's cheek and whispered, "welcome home, dearest." The beaver's eyes were so brown and deep and loving that Cenessa was lost for a moment just looking into them. Their stare broke when the voices of children filled the room, and she looked behind her to discover another door coming from a kind of hallway or - Tunnel! That's what it was! There must be other houses just like this one, all connected to each other! But then, she was reminded of those voices, and she looked down at three beaver children. They stared at her. She stared at them. Something about them made Cenessa smile. They were living a childhood she never got to live herself.

Three more families of beavers appeared through the tunnels, and hugged one another as they entered the living room. After a while, Barbara called everyone over to the big oak table, and they all took their seats, still talking and laughing. Barbara dished out her roasted acorn soup, and then, the gathering of beavers did the strangest thing. They all held hands, looked at their laps, and then Barnabas spoke only a few words, but they were the most beautiful words Cenessa had heard in her entire life. He was thanking someone for the food, but Cenessa couldn't figure out who it was. Her own dinners were drastically different. Every evening, Cenessa prepared dinner for her brothers, keeping a plate warm for her father when he arrived home from work late at night. Often, he would just grunt and eat his food, but sometimes, he would not look at Cenessa at all. With a family struggling so much, it was hard to be thankful.

After a collective "amen" dinner commenced. There was loud talking and laughing once more, and everyone ate as much as their stomachs could hold! After a time, the conversation quieted, and one beaver looked at Cenessa.

"Well, who's this special guest we have with us tonight?"

Barnabus replied, beaming, "This is our dear friend Cenessa! Cenessa, this is Uncle Geoff, Aunt Gertrude, Polly, James, Great-grandpa Carlson,

Jane, Piper, Holly, Auntie Emma, Uncle Bradley, Mary, Joel, Uncle Tom ... "And he went on to introduce every member of the family to Cenessa who was quite overwhelmed by all of the attention. She waved hello, or smiled to each member introduced to her.

"Welcome, Cenessa!" Auntie Emma said. The girl named Jane smiled at her, they were about the same age, Cenessa thought.

When dessert was through, everyone pushed back their chairs and gave a satisfied sigh. Everyone, except for Cenessa who jumped up.

"What's wrong, hon?" Barbara asked.

"My dad! He'll be really mad if I come home so late!"

"Well, I suppose you'd best be getting on your way, as much as we would love for you to stay. Barnabas, the time!"

"Three hours, 36 minutes, Barb."

"Then you will have been gone for three minutes, 26 seconds. No one will know you have gone. Barnabas, I'll do the honors today."

Barbara arose and took Cenessa's hand, leading her to the door.

"But ... but ..." Cenessa stammered as the pair neared the mahogany entrance.

"You want to stay?" Barbara said with a slight smile. "Well, my dear Cenessa Marie, our work here is finished. The rest is up to you." when Cenessa gave her a puzzled look, she continued. "Cenessa, your family needs love, it needs gratitude. These can be more valuable than a bigger house, or more food. As you now know, gratitude, love, they turn what we have into enough." Cenessa looked around at the living room. The carpet was threadbare, the sofa worn. The table had scratches, and an uneven leg propped up by a book. The chairs were mismatched.

"You know what to do." Barbara said, looking into Cenessa's eyes. She opened the door, and Cenessa stepped out over the threshold, back to the cold, windy alley. Looking back, she saw the beaver family waving from the doorway. She knew what to do.

## MR. LINDEN'S LIBRARY

### Haley Parris

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Morgan Grither

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

Thud! The book falls from the shelf as she walked by, landing right at her feet. With a sigh, the young teen sets her stack of textbooks down on a nearby table and picked up the thin black book. The book was a deep coal black, bound in leather, and appeared to not have a title. She turned it over in her hands searching for an author name or book title, only to come to the conclusion it had neither. The inside cover did, however, have the genre listed in neat, black script. It was a horror story, and Maddison Carpenter loved these. Since she had read nearly every other story in this small, slightly-rundown library, she decided to take a seat in an old wooden chair and read a few pages.

This new book held no characters names but instead said "the young girl," "her," or "she" as a substitute for the main character who was apparently a young teenager like Maddison herself. Within the first few pages of the book, it became evident the story was going to build up suspense and be very much like a mystery with hauntings. She added it to her growing stack of books and made a beeline for the checkout register.

"Find any good books today, Maddy?" The middle

aged woman asked as she set the pile down on the counter. She smiled kindly at Kendra and replied, "Yeah, I found some old horror story when I was on the way out." Kendra checks out the books one by one.

Kendra was frowning as she looked at the black, leather-bound book. The woman's eyes widened after a few seconds, and she nearly dropped the book.

"Where did you get this?" The fright was very evident in her voice, but she tried her best to cover it up. She didn't want to alarm Maddison, but she did not want her to read this book. She couldn't.

Very slowly, as if hesitantly, Maddison responded, "It fell off one of the shelves in the back."

"You didn't read any of it did you?"

It must have been the look on Kendra's face that compelled her to lie. It was only a small lie. What harm could it do?

"No, of course not. I was going to ask you about it when I got up here. Is it someone's diary or something?" Kendra lets out a breath in relief and sets the book on the top shelf behind her.

"What—" Maddison begins to say, only to get cut off by Kendra.

"That book is a true story that Mr. Linden wrote when he was alive. He kept it locked up in a safe after someone accidentally read it last. That book is way too scary for someone your age. I don't even want to read it. Trust me on this: you don't want to read that book. It shouldn't even be out of the safe," she says and after a moment of silence, takes a deep breath and continues to check out the books.

"Okay," Maddison says quietly, wondering how a book could be considered too scary for a fifteen year old.

"There you are," Kendra says sweetly, but something in her tone sounds off. Maddison doesn't want to seem rude, so she quietly gathers her books, thanks Kendra, and heads to the door. But she doesn't leave. Not just yet. It was as if a force was keeping her in the store, wanting her to read that book. So she waited. She waited until Kendra went into the back room before she quietly snuck behind the counter and grabbed the old book. What harm could it do? No one reads it. No one will notice it is gone. Besides, she'll return it next week.

With all this in mind and the black book clutched tightly in her hand, she made a dash for home. Three nights later, Maddison sat in her room with the covers drawn close and the lamp light shining brightly on the book in front of her. She often found herself rereading the same paragraphs over and over again. Solely because her mind kept wandering, or she was trying to get through some parts too fast to understand them. She did this all in hopes that what happened a few nights ago wouldn't happen again. Not again. She was afraid, but she kept reading in hopes it would stop. After finding the note the night before, she knew that was the only choice she had left.

It became evident something was wrong on the first night she read the book. She was in the dining room, home alone, whenever the knocking came. Three knocks on the door at exactly 6:47 that night. She edged her way to the door and swung it open, a smile on her face as a greeting that quickly got wiped away into an expression of confusion. All that was behind the door was the empty walkway and the image of the setting sun in the sky. It had just begun to get dark. "Hello?" she had called, slowly edging her way out the door. After searching the yard and finding nothing, she blamed it on one of the kids in the neighborhood pulling a prank on her.

A few seconds later, when she had returned back to her book and just read the first sentence on the page, the knocking came again. The words from

the book echoed in her head as she reached the door yet again: "He came knocking the first evening." Again, there was nothing. This happened a few more times that night, and every time it would make her more frustrated at the neighborhood kids rather than freaked out. By the time Maddison's parents returned home from dinner that night, she was livid.

On the second night, after a long day of school, Maddison shut herself up in her room and read the black book until the sun had set. When her mother came in to tell her to go to bed, she kept reading with the lamp light on. As her eyelids started to droop closed, the knocking came again. Her eyes snapped open and she flipped the light off. She was scared because she knew her mother would yell if she caught her daughter up this late. One glance at the clock supported that. It was three in the morning now. Maddison closed the book and shoved it under her pillow, closing her eyes and faking sleep. That's when the voice came. It was very soft-spoken and seemed way too deep to belong to a human. "Do you want to play a game, Maddy?" it said.

It was too close. The words seemed as if they were whispered directly in her ear and it was no voice she had ever heard before. She held her breath, scared into immovable silence. Nearly a minute later, when she did finally look around, her room was completely empty. The rest of the night she stayed in her room, wide awake with every light in the room turned on, and the eerie feeling of being watched.

The following morning when she told her mother what happened, all she got was a look of disapproval and a warning not to read horror stories before bed. Maddison did her best to convince herself that it was just her over-active imagination that had caused these events. Maddison's mother left to get groceries, and with her father at work, she was home alone once again. Despite the daylight, she had every light on; fear creeping over her again. Very quickly, Maddison had grown bored and, unwisely, picked

up the book again. What she saw in its pages seemed to scare her even more than the events the night before. This page had written on it the exact events that had played out last night. The character being up late, the voice, and the feeling of being watched. Everything was the same. Then it dawned on her.

Everything in the book was happening to her. The repetitive knocks when she was home alone, the feeling of eyes watching her, and the voice. The deep, eerie voice that was described between the yellowing pages of the book was reality. Her breath hitched in her throat as she turned the next page of the book, searching for answers.

It had handwriting. She must have read over that one sentence a dozen times before its words sank in. In neat script it read, "Finish the book, and he won't bother you anymore." So Maddison did. She tried her best to finish the book as soon as she possibly could, not even caring how long it took.

As night approached, she retired to her room with the lamp on, shining bright. She was very close to the end now, but she knew most of the exciting or scary things took place here. She was stumbling over the words before, but when the heavy footsteps came from down the hall, exactly as she read it on the page, her heart had begun to race.

Now, Maddison tried to ignore the steps as they grew increasingly closer to her bedroom door, but it became harder every passing second. There was a deep humming of a cheery song as the heavy footsteps grew closer. When it got right outside the door, everything became silent. For a minute, she thought maybe whatever it was that had been haunting her left, but then the voice came again.

"Maddison, open the door," it croaked as the door knob began to turn slowly. Instead of reading, now she has her eyes trained on the door, glad she locked it. The voice comes again. And again. And again. It was asking the same thing but seemed to get more angry. The person started to pound on the door with more and more force with each

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passing second until she was afraid it would break off its hinges. She stood slowly, eyes wide, heart pounding loudly in her ears, and got as far away from the door as she could. The black book fell off the table and opened to the last page, where only three words remained. She was just close enough to see them, and once she did all she could do was watch as the door slowly unlocked. All she could think was how she shouldn't have read it. She should have listened. They had warned her about the book. Now it was too late. Far too late.

The door opened.

# BIRDS AND BEAST

**Paiton Stith**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

My prey had its head tucked under its wing, leaving that loop of long neck exposed, black-feathered and bony. My broken sword lay at my feet, bright as a mirror and reflecting the rusted iron bars above my sunken face. They were structured in parallel lines that made up the walls, structured like a cage.

I crept toward the bird on silent feet. It slept on top of the bars, too large to fit through them and journey into the Iron Maze's halls. It was strange to think of them as intelligent, but they knew what my kingdom wanted with the fruit of power lying at the heart of this maze. They'd do anything to keep me from it, spearing their razor-tipped beaks through the bars to slash my skin, bash my head in. They were vicious, barring nothing. No attack was too grotesque. Their victim's bones littered the dust.

I'd been down here for years, but being so near a bird still made my heart race like a shoddy cart on a scored dirt road, chaotic and bouncing and threatening to shudder itself to pieces. If it awoke before I'd killed it, it would be so easy to die by that glinting beak. I could be one more body with a hole in the center of its chest, but the beast was still standing guard over the heart of the maze, and I needed a new weapon. The blade lasted me longer than I expected, but when I'd finally found the center of the maze, the beast shattered it with one massive paw.

The bird's sides rose and fell, and I imagined the breath coursing through such a thin neck, like a goose. I didn't hesitate, though I knew the idea of killing something in its sleep should repulse me. It was too much like stealing and not enough like the honorable battles I had trained for, but my king had sent me to gain the fruit, to bring it back so that we might harness its power and expand into the bird's territory. Back home, the people were suffocating in cities too small to fit so many people. My king with his kind blue eyes hoped the fruit would bring salvation, and I was an honorbound knight.

One leap brought me high enough to wrap my arms around its neck. My weight sent those fragile bones crashing down between the bars. It screeched, dark eyes going wide before the sound snapped into silence. Its neck cracked in my hands. Then it was still. I hung there for a moment, to be sure, then dropped to pick up my sword.

The shadow crouched there, staring at me with luminous white eyes. Tears glistened and fell over into the wavering oblivion of her features, but my lip curled, pulling back like a wolf. "This bird or my people. What would you have me choose?" She didn't say a word, and soon I had to look away from those eyes, open as a child's. "It would've killed me too, if it could."

She'd been haunting me since I first woke in the darkness. Another challenge from the maze, I'm sure, because when the light was right, she seemed to wear my face.

She scampered back like a frightened stray when I began to saw at the bird's neck through the bars. Blood spattered the dust in patches, but in the dark it was easy to ignore it. To pretend that it was water if only it weren't so warm, so thick.

Its head thumped at my feet. I beat at the skull with the hilt until it splintered, leaving only the beak. The shadow wept without a voice, touching at her face while the bird's headless neck drooped between the bars like a wilted flower, trickling blood onto my steely boots.

I remembered the moment I got them, the boots. They'd been a gift on the day I'd departed for this place. It was so long ago that I can't remember exactly what he said when he addressed the kingdom. All I know is how his wrinkled face held the lines of many deaths seen on this day. I was sure I saw my own snaking right across his forehead, tunneling into his skin before my eyes. He asked me if I was ready.

"I am," I had said, back straight, chin up, full of hope. Bold words from someone who had never seen the maze.

The ceremony didn't follow me to the entrance, only my king. Long grass swayed around us and the stone steps spiraling down into the darkness. So

stark beneath the cottony blue sky. My king wasn't stiff anymore, falling out of his regal practiced posture. "Be brave, Amira." His eyes held that sky blue, that light and freedom, and I wanted to ask if he'd come with me. Like a child. But even with nobody there, I knew it would only embarrass us both. Besides, the maze only took one at a time, waiting for the challenger to die before the entrance appeared again. And if he died, who would send the next challenger?

The king handed me the boots then. They glinted in his hands like fallen stars. I put the boots on, and left my old pair forgotten in the grass. Brown leather, faded and abandoned and rotting.

The birds smelled the blood of their fallen own, and the cavern filled with screams. Beaks glinted high above, reflecting what little light was left.

I broke into a run, clutching the beak in one hand with the shadow scampering in my wake. The cage shuddered as birds landed, streaking out of the inky black like arrowheads. Cracks splintered in the stone surrounding the base of the bars. At any moment, they might break and swing down at my head.

It was impossible to see through the maze's cage, like a dizzying illusion, but I memorized the turns and took them without hesitation before diving into the dirt at the heart's entrance. The cage widened here, bars structured in a sizable cube where the birds couldn't reach me. They gathered at the top, black eyes burning with accusation. Wing beats died down. My breath was the only sound.

The center of the maze was a large expanse of dust-covered stone strewn with bones from people and birds. A single skeletal tree grew in the center, and golden fruit bowed the branches. I didn't go for them. Not yet. It was better to know where the beast was first, or it'd only surprise me.

"Hunt me," I breathed, chest shuddering. "Tell me where you are." The shadow slouched around the skeleton tree, looking at me with her heavy, sad eyes. She stopped ambling for a moment, turned her head with her expression blank, and pointed at me.

Adrenaline raged my body as I heard the bars behind me groan. I dove. Rolled to a crouch as the beast landed, wicked claws gouging the stone where I'd been.

The beast twisted its face back and forth so that its yellow eyes cut a dizzying arc. It advanced in a way that was almost delicate, paw over paw, swiveling that huge, black furred head. I backed away, every muscle taut.

It crouched then, compacted its muscular body and opened its mouth wide. Four parts made up its jaws, splayed and coated in layers of teeth all the way down a fleshy pink throat.

I shouted and brandished the weapon I'd harvested which gave it some pause. I grinned so wide all my teeth must've been showing.

The birds shook themselves into a fury at the sight of me threatening their ally with a weapon that I'd stolen from them. They let out a death rattling scream and threw their bodies against the bars. Blood rained from the sky. The structure trembled, strained, and the groaning echoed like a scream, bounding up to the rocky ceiling and ricocheting down because even sound couldn't escape this place.

The beast broke into a pounding run, black and silver body undulating. I turned and made my last desperate dash, eyes on the fruit. The beast's swiping claw opened a searing rift across my spine. Warmth flourished there.

One last groan under the bird's relentless force, and the ceiling came screaming down. I ducked under a swinging bar and threw myself to the dust

before covering my head. An agonized howl raked the air and I looked between my arms at the beast pinned to the stone. Bars jutted from its trembling body like the quills of a porcupine.

My heart threw itself against my ribcage like it wanted to escape and run, but I met the shadow's startled eyes instead. The beast was down, the birds still couldn't get in, the fruit was unguarded and ripe for the taking. Wasn't this victory? But my blood was frozen in my veins.

I pushed myself up slowly, on the outskirts of the tangled, broken mass. The shadow leaned against it, cheek pressed into her shoulder with her pale eyebrows furrowed.

"You blame me for this too?" I shouted hoarsely, blood on my lips, and turned to survey the beast once more.

It shuddered, twitched, tried to free itself while the birds lighted on the bars in a circle, surrounding the pained creature with unblinking gazes, unmoving bodies. They forgot me entirely, seemingly stunned by the agony they caused. The beast shared their goal, was it possible they felt deeply enough to regret its pain?

It stopped screaming, stopped moving. I struggled to stand, and winced the whole way up, feeling numb and disconnected from my own senses. The shadow crouched, tugging on my pant leg. Her eyes—my eyes—implored me, but she was a fool to think I'd turn away to free the beast that gave me this fatal gash. I shook my head, but the blood had drained from my face.

Her eyes narrowed, face becoming that of an imp, twisted and furious. She spat on my boots and her black saliva ate away at the steel toes until I had to rip the boots off so that I wouldn't be eaten away with it. She hissed at me and ran toward the beast, leaving me to reel on my own.

I swayed on my feet, tried to reach a hand around

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to probe at the wound, but twisting wrenched a scream out of my mouth. Blood flowed down my back, down my legs. Too much blood. I didn't—I didn't WANT to die. I had come down here and known death would chase me through every corner, but I'd lasted so long I thought I'd be the one to win. Why couldn't I win? Why couldn't I be the one to make it out?

The beast's labored breaths grated against me, in and out and in once more. Trembling with exhaustion and anger, I adjusted my grip on the beak and limped to it, stooping under the slanted bars to stand before its vulnerable throat. I angled the beak down while the birds fluttered above, desperate to get through and stop me. The shadow threw herself at my feet, but I kicked her aside. Wasn't this fair? Why should I be the only one to lose? I didn't care about the fruit anymore, nothing within them could save me.

The shadow's eyes were betrayed. She petted the beast's head as its chest rose and fell, yet looked at me with so much hope. That I wasn't terrible. That I might still be the creature I was before the maze had stripped me of honor, of life. The sound of the beast's labored breathing filled the cavern. Raced through every barred hall in the maze only to soak into uncaring stone.

I looked into one of those yellow eyes, half-lidded from the pain. Every creature strained against this moment, begging me not to kill. It became a physical force holding my arms up and maybe it made me a monster, but I would've done it anyway. If I hadn't seen the wicked snarl on my face, reflected in those eyes like two golden suns. My face, streaked with grime and haloed by a tangle of matted black hair, was that of a beast.

I didn't want to die, and looking into this creature's eyes, I knew it hadn't wanted to kill me. It had to. To keep that immeasurable power out of the hands of people like me who would kill when they didn't need to. My people could survive on our small tract of land. Where would the birds go when

we took everything from them? What would we do to creatures like the beast? Was this not their Earth too?

Out of all the animals of this maze, I was the only beast. I dropped the beak.

Rust flaked onto my hands as I took hold of the bar. A wingbeat near my head had me flinching hard, but the bird only wrapped its talons around the iron and helped me lift. A moment, and the others joined on every bar until we pulled them all out.

The beast lifted itself up in a boneless way, as if a string had been attached to its shoulders and lifted. The birds didn't make a sound. Didn't move. I met the round black eye of the one perched beside me and found a wary understanding there.

When the beast's eyes found mine it hung its head in apology, but not shame. It flicked its snout to the tree, telling me to go. I stared in stupored surprise, but I suppose it sensed my waning life, and due to the conditions of the madman who made this place, I was the only one who could take the fruit and end the maze. I could be the one to twist the fruit's power to save.

It would be noble. A more knightly act than I'd committed in the last few years following bling, selfish orders. We'd packed our city until we couldn't breathe. Wouldn't we fill the bird's forest just as quickly? No, it had never been salvation. It was stolen time.

I turned to the bird, laying down the beak where it glistened in the bloodied dust. "I'm tired of taking things that don't belong to me." The bird blinked coolly, and took the beak into its talons, for burial maybe.

No creature stirred as I approached the skeleton tree, the swaying fruit. I took the golden fruit in my hands, thinking of the birds and the forest that housed their families. My kingdom sprawled from

the mountains to the birds' border. We didn't need more land, we wanted it.

Eyes gleamed in the blackness, hundreds of stars surrounding those two suns. I took a bite and the sweetness burned all the way down my throat. Ichor of the gods. Flesh of the damned.

My head spun from blood loss as I wiped my mouth. The world swam in and out of reach with every step as I came closer to the mass of bloodied bars where the birds waited. I put my hands on the iron, dissolved the maze with a thought. My heart leaped with real joy and in response, green spread beneath my feet. The shadow smiled for the first time and drifted toward me like a ghost before falling into my body, finding her rightful place at long last.

At another touch from my pale fingers the fruit blackened and fell to the ground in a rotten heap, followed by decayed leaves. The tree shrunk and withered. Even if my king sent more soldiers, he would find nothing.

Was I a traitor? Undoubtedly, but if we had the power, we'd take and take and take until the world was bare. If I could apologize to my king I would, but I'd do it like the beast had, with regret only and no shame.

Already, I felt the strength leaving my body. I'd lost too much blood, blood I could do nothing to replenish even as my body thrummed like a goddess. All the sorcerer had ever done was destroy and breed misery. This power wasn't made to heal.

My eyelids were heavy, my lips sticky with sweet nectar. I used up the last of my strength cracking open the ceiling. Just enough for the birds to get out and some light to get through. I didn't see them spread their wings as I fell, but I felt the sun on my face while the grass curled around my toes and took my old steel boots deep into the earth.

# WINTER'S CREEK

**Paiton Stith**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS  
Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

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He always kept one foot in the creek when we were kissing. Other times, when we talked, he'd dangle his legs in the delicate current and soak his cuffed jeans up to the knee. The trees stood at our backs, gentle giants with their arms spread to shield us from the sun. Light splintered through occasionally, dappling the swift rabbit-footed creek with shimmering spots of yellow like the dandelions speckled in the grass.

I used to ask him to go places with me, the pool, the movies, my house. He gave me the same smile every time, lips like dusty summertime pressed together to cover white, crooked teeth. Then he turned away to run his fingers through the water or fall back on his elbows to look at the sky. "This place is mine. How could I leave it unprotected?" His voice rushed, smooth like water but carrying that subtle trace of burn, that ability to wear something down over time.

We could sit for hours, looking up at the leaves and the clouds, talking about whatever crossed our minds. It worked because when the world stood still, we didn't. Lying there, looking up, the space within was a whirl of stars. In the dark woods, the silence, we glowed and we twinkled.

But only in the spring. Once every year he'd look over at me as the breeze sent ripples through his cotton shirt, and he'd say, "The snows are coming tomorrow." It was hard to believe him when his brown skin still blended with the wood, as if they were watercolors born from the same palette. It was hard to imagine that everything would be so white so soon.

"Did the creek tell you that?" I asked that first time, sour-voiced and skeptical.

He only smiled. "What else would we talk about?"

If I did come back to the path that led to the creek I'd find it unwelcoming. What was once open and lush become skeletal, barren, the branches twisted into an impassable cluster. This year I didn't even try. I stayed home with my parents, my grandmother in town for Christmas, and I'd do my best to steer the conversation away from Creek. Still, Grandma Gray always found a way to bring him up in unrelated conversation.

"Vida, are you still cavorting with that water sprite in Nelson's Wood?"

"Cavorting, Grandma?" I pinched the edge of my plate until my fingers turned white, spinning it so the turkey slices were before me. "Hardly."

She turned to my mother with her penciled brow raised in a prim arch. "You ought to keep her away from the fair folk." Mother nodded without enthusiasm. She never cared where I went.

Grandma held a cut piece of potato to her mouth, "They're cunning, playing at sweet and charming until they bind you with a riddle. Quick as a whip. Then they steal you away and make you rear their children." The potato popped in with an emphatic nod.

"God, Grandma, you can't say that."

Her eyes flared and she straightened like a cobra.

"Have you forgotten what happened to my sister?"

I sighed through my teeth so that it sounded like a hiss. "You'd like him if you met him."

She laughed, "In winter?" She sawed at the turkey on her plate. "Tricky as they may be in the spring, every bit of good is gone after the first snow."

I forced myself not to stiffen in surprise. "Why is that?" I asked nonchalantly, trying not to look too clueless in case she thought I wasn't keeping my wits about me. That would only make her more convinced that I needed to be protected.

"I don't know," Grandma snapped. "all a respectable person needs to know is what charms are the strongest, how to weasel out of a bargain, and common sense enough to stay away from them in the first place." She waved her fork through the air. "And most importantly, a winter faerie is a faerie you avoid." She narrowed her eyes. "Stay away, or suffer for it."

I stabbed my fork down into my mashed potatoes so that it stuck up on its own. "He doesn't let me visit in winter, so you don't have anything to worry about." I meant it to sound nasty, but it came out bitter.

Grandma paused with her fork on the way to her mouth. I saw her coffee-stained teeth before she pressed her lips together again. "Good." The rest of dinner was unnaturally still.

I got up to rinse my plate and Grandma touched my arm as I passed. I paused, already preparing a retort. She only said, "Be careful."

Of course I was careful. I was always careful. I'd heard the stories, but in every case the foolish human had done something to offend. If you knew the rules, dealing with faeries was a breeze. I'd been going to the woods for years now, and I'd

never had problems with any of them. Never in winter, though.

Maybe that's why my heart cowered in my mouth, like it felt safer using my teeth as a shield and my tongue as a sword than in my ribcage. See, that was the trick to the fair folk. All their power laid in their silver tongues. You just had to play along with enough skill, and I'd spent years sharpening my arsenal of flattery, language flowered with deceptive description, and of course, the potent last resort: lies.

I knew Creek, I'd been spending every warm season with him for twelve years now, back when I'd been an over-exploring toddler and he was just a little babbling brook. Still, Grandma's words haunted me. I had to see him, just once and then I'd never force my way through the brambles again. Truth is, I was worried about him. For years, I'd let him convince me to stay away so easily, but something about Grandma's expression when I told her made me uneasy. Nothing surprised Grandma. Something must be wrong.

The one time I'd tried to get through the twisted path, the branches held like they were made of iron. This time, though they weren't exactly welcoming, they shifted eventually to let me through. Roots hidden beneath the crunching snow grabbed half-heartedly at my ankles. The branches hung lower than in spring, scraping at my cheeks so that I had to shield my face with my arms.

The silence was the strangest part. I was so used to springtime chatter and constant movement. This landscape hummed with barren silence. "Hello?" I called out a few of my friends' names, but no face showed. I tightened the scarf around my neck and held my wool coat together at the collar.

I didn't recognize the end of the path when I came to it, and nearly plunged a foot into the frozen creek. With my right boot crusted with snow, I crouched at the edge to wait. The afternoon sun

glittered across the ice, and I thought that it wasn't so hideous. Barren could be beautiful too.

Creek didn't take long to show up, standing like a ghost on the ice, barely out of the trees. The naked branches cast sharp shadows across his body, and his dark eyes peered out of a hollow, sunken face.

"Creek," I said, standing. "Aren't you cold?" He was barefoot, in the same cuffed jeans and light cottony t-shirt he wore in spring.

"Yes." His voice had hardened, brittle and splintered and hoarse. He didn't come any nearer. "What are you doing here?"

My cheeks warmed despite the cold. "I came to see if you were alright."

"I am."

"Are you sure," I asked, and dared to take a few steps toward him. He backed away, lowering his head until he was glaring up at me beneath his frosted brow. I stopped. "Creek, where is everybody?"

He wrapped his arms around his chest, squeezing his ribs until his arms paled. "Hiding." He was shivering.

My blood chilled in my veins. "From what?"

He shook his head, wouldn't meet my eyes. "I told you not to come."

I took a tentative step forward once more, watching the frost creep up from his blue toes to disappear under his jeans. "My grandmother told me you'd be dangerous in the winter."

He looked up sharply at that. "No," he said, then his eyes slid away from mine. "I'm not."

I hissed through my teeth, white breath clouding out of my mouth and spinning up to the sky like a

bird. "What's wrong with me being here?" I felt eyes on me now. Out of the corner of my eye I'd catch the flicker of tiny bodies moving amongst the snow and withered shrubs.

His hair fell forward into his eyes, thin and dry as his skin, as his body. He was skeletal and the warmth had fled his skin, leaving him palid and dull. The sight filled me with a stark unease. I had never known him like this before, always he was brimming with vibrance and joy. He spoke in soft voices in the spring, with whimsy and humor and beauty. Winter had turned him bitter. I was right. Everything was wrong.

I lifted my chin. "You let me in here. The branches could've barred my path like they used to, but they didn't."

Crackling ice and snow were the only sounds as I approached, and they bounced around the emptiness like it was a skeleton to fill, like it knew what this winter world needed, but couldn't meet the demand. "I'm sorry I ignored you," I whispered, "I won't any longer."

Disjointed arms with spidery fingers reached for me and he was the heart of winter itself pressed against my chest as I wrapped my arms around him, unbuttoned my coat so he could slip his arms inside.

It was cold and miserable, I wasn't pretending not to notice, but there was something full about this. Something that had been missing when I only loved him in the spring. That had been halfway, a lovely fantasy. He was bitter and cold and even cruel at times, but so was I.

I imagined my warmth leaching into him, and I knew I'd hold him tight. Even if he never stopped shivering.

**Paige Wagner**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Danby Rush Tower

Middle School, Festus, MO

Educator: Morgan Grither

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

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We are all sitting at the lunch table, with the thought of it being a normal day. As I look around the table, I notice that one person from our group is missing. I scan the table to find out who. Gavin, he was the one who's missing. I start asking if anyone knows where he is.

"Hey, does anyone know where Gavin is? He's always at school?"

"I was texting him last night. He seemed fine," said Brynn.

"He literally never gets sick. He probably is just faking," stated Dylan.

"Or he probably just bullied his mom into saying that he didn't have to go," Ava laughed.

"Yea probably," I said nervously with a bad feeling in my stomach.

I would be lying if I said I wasn't worried about Gavin all day. Gavin has been my best friend since we were five, and we even walked to school together on the first day of kindergarten. Since that day, anywhere Gavin was I was there too. Ava kept telling me to calm down and that he was fine, but he hasn't answered my texts all day, and that's not like him. After school, once I got home, I called him three times, no answer. At this point, I was worried and trying to convince myself it was nothing. A few hours passed, and I heard my mom

## THE FOREVER HARP

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on the phone. I walked into the kitchen, and her face dropped. As soon as she hung up, I started asking questions.

"That was Gavin's mom," my mother said anxiously.

My stomach dropped. I had a bad feeling about him not being at school. The look on her face is one I don't see often, and it's not a look you never want to see.

"Well, what happened?" I asked.

"She hasn't seen him since he left for school yesterday. Did he say anything to you about wanting to leave or going to a friend's house?"

"No, he didn't say anything. He and I were texting last night and he was outside, but that's all I know."

"Try not to worry too much about it. I'm sure he's fine, and he's just trying to get away for a few days."

I knew he wasn't just trying to get away. I had an awful feeling about this and that's not like Gavin to just leave. So many bad ideas were rushing through my head of where Gavin could be, but I actually had no clue. I started trying to calm myself down by telling myself, he's just trying to play a prank and be funny. Deep down, I knew Gavin was in danger somewhere.

The next few days went by and still no sign of Gavin. His mom had filed a police report for a missing person. The cops had talked to my entire friend group about where he could be. None of us knew or were any help to them. Ava started acting really weird, and I knew she knew something that she wasn't telling anyone. As we were leaving school, I walked up to her.

"Hey, Ava," I said.

She started to kind of panic, "Hey, Paige, do you need something? I'm kind of in a rush."

"We need to talk, Ava, I know you know where Gavin is."

She stopped dead in her tracks, turned to me, and said, "Get in the car now."

I hopped in the car, almost scared of what she's about to tell me.

"I know where he is; he told me. Drew told him about this spot deep in the woods, and he didn't believe what Drew said about it, so he went to find out for himself," Ava said starting to calm down.

"What did Drew tell him?"

"Once you get far enough into the woods, there's these eerie trees and a creek. The wind is blowing so hard it makes an awful and scary hiss. It all surrounds an ancient, broken down, harp. Anyone that plays the harp goes missing and is never to be found."

"Oh, please tell me he didn't play the harp," I started to panic.

"Paige, if you don't calm down you're not coming with me. I hope he didn't. I'm praying he didn't play that harp, or what Drew said isn't true." Ava and I rode in silence until we got to where the road came to a stop. We both got out of her car and looked at each other with a little bit of desperation in our eyes. I took a look around us. It looked exactly like the woods you see in scary movies. It was foggy, the trees were so tall and aged; it was immediately cold, and something just felt off.

"Drew said that if you follow the creek, you'll eventually find the harp."

"Okay, let's go get Gavin back then."

"Paige, if we don't see or hear him by the time we get to the harp, we are leaving."

We started walking and screaming out Gavin's name. After what felt like hours, we were starting to give up. Until we heard a voice. It was Gavin's voice. Ava and I started sprinting to the voice. There in front of us was a very scared and dirty looking Gavin. His face was covered in dirt, his hair was messy and tangled, and his clothes were ripped. I ran over to tell him that he needed to come back home. As soon as I took my next step, Gavin started freaking out. He curled up in a ball and started rocking back and forth, shouting something that didn't make sense. By the look on his face, he seemed terrified about something. I looked past him and there was the eerie, old, broken down harp.

"Look what you did. Now, it stopped. I'm going to have to go in it now. Why did you come here?"  
Gavin yelled over and over.

"Gavin! what did we do?" Ava yelled so she could get his attention.

At that moment, Gavin stood up, and I backed away trembling in fear. Gavin started yelling gibberish that no one in the right mind would understand. One sentence he said made sense though.

"You made it stop talking to me. Now I have to go into it! You made me do this."

Gavin took three slow steps towards the harp. Even though most of the Gavin I knew was gone, there was still something in him that made his actions so slow. Almost like he wanted to stay.

"Don't do this Gavin, please," Ava begged.

I was frozen still not being able to process what was going on. I watched as his arms went up and touched the harp. I yelled and yelled for him not to play it. Nothing was seeming to work. Right then,

Gavin was gone. Ava was crying as we both watched one of our best friends disappear, not knowing where he went, or how to save him. Something shifted inside me that made me run towards the harp. Ava looked up and saw what I was doing. She begged and cried for me not to, but there was no changing my mind. I had to find out what was happening. Right before I moved my fingers to play the harp, Ava ran to me.

"If you're going, I'm going too," were Ava's final words.

Our fingers played the harp in sync. Everything went black. I opened my eyes and above me was Gavin and two people with black hoods over their face.

"You're with us now," Gavin and the hoods said in sync.

So it's true I thought, it's really true. Everything was black after that, I don't remember what happened to me, or where my family and friends are. I can think, but I can't move. I have no idea where I am and have no hope for a future. I had a plan for my future, but at sixteen my life stopped. If you're reading this now you're in my head, just like everything else.

## HUMANITY JANE

**Ann Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

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“Incomplete” is the wrong word,” explains the friendly doctor, glowing like a midwestern Aphrodite on television screens across America. Then the image shifts.

The doctor’s skin spirals cleanly from her body, like an orange peel. To the public eye, she becomes a living diagram of human anatomy, modified so slightly that the average civilian wouldn’t notice. The animation is begging you to notice. Silver arrows indicate the pieces she’s forsaken: **TONSILLECTOMY, MASTECTOMY (AND EASY REPLACEMENT!), APPENDECTOMY....**

She’s still smiling as she speaks. “In reality, today in 2023, our bodies have the potential to come closer to complete than ever before. Completion does not demand fullness, but fulfillment — like the ancient sculptor shaving down an artless block of clay.

“Surgery is more dependable than ever before. With diagnosis as early as stage negative ten, alongside swift surgical action, we can single out and remove the organs that threaten to kill us from the inside out. We can crush cancer before it has the chance to fight back.”

Here, the doctor’s body returns to flesh, swaddled in a lab coat, almost angelic. She touches one hand to her chest before she delivers the final line, the clincher, her voice ringing out from endless digital throats —

“Choose foolproof... in memory of Jane.”

\*\*\*

Back in 2015, the vast majority of students at Princeton University secretly believed that Eleanor Thompson didn’t deserve to live and learn among their company. Eleanor was homeschooled and couldn’t brag of a single extracurricular talent, and even worse, rumor had it that she’d only scored a 30 on the ACT.

There was only one reason that Eleanor’s application had survived the circus of undergrad admissions: Eleanor Thompson was the daughter of Jane Thompson, known to the world as Insanity Jane.

Her stage name was a play on “Calamity Jane,” the nineteenth-century sharpshooter and

occasional prostitute, but Thompson swiftly surpassed her namesake in both popularity and paradox. The young rock-star-slash-pop-star’s unabashed promiscuity, the same heat that sparked controversy in the age of Britney Spears, was now an infallible attraction.

So Eleanor was riding her mother’s coattails. Similarly, she was riding a sleek, silver jet between Newark and Los Angeles, to the envy of her classmates. Even her ordinary presence on campus — mostly, reading thriller novels throughout her morning classes — seemed spectacular. She was constantly waving off older kids asking for autographs, although they remained careful to remind Eleanor that by seniority, they still loomed above her in the social hierarchy.

For example, a sharp-eyed senior, embittered by Eleanor’s refusal to sign her stomach, had once demanded from the back row of a biology lecture, “Sing one of your mom’s songs... you know, as consolation.”

Perhaps Insanity Jane had the voice of a dove, but Eleanor had the voice of an adolescent goose. She pretended to be deeply engrossed in the speaker’s description of cellular respiration.

Ignoring the hint, the girl continued, “Sing her newest one. It’s my favorite so far. Most people think it concerns a failed romantic relationship, but if you dig deeper, you uncover a thoughtful juxtaposition between the rhyming concepts in the chorus. They sound the same, and yet they’re cousins of each other, representing the metastasis of human indifference.” The girl looked up with shining eyes. “Sing it, Eleanor, and tear my vile soul apart.”

“Another time,” Eleanor replied. It was such an easy answer. She could visualize her life stretched out before her, from college into the beyond — a red carpet of second chances.

\*\*\*

There’s a one-minute-and-six-second clip on the internet under the title, “Insanity Jane SHOCKS New Orleans, 5/11/18.” In the thumbnail, Jane suspends herself in an upside-down split, tangled

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between two golden chains of silk. The front row of the audience forms the foreground, and if you zoom in, you can see her face the way they must have seen it: gaze twisted over her bare shoulder, glitter splashed across her cheeks. She's winking.

Jane was a mediocre acrobat, even in her prime, but viewers didn't watch for her technique. They played and replayed for the sake of Insanity Jane alone — her smile, her voice, her gorgeous calves — racking up over four million views within mere hours. They grew bleary-eyed, drunk with imagined senses. The video hit number one on "Trending."

Eleanor had firmly instructed herself to avoid this clip, even though her classmates were buzzing about it, but soon enough, she found herself sitting in the dentist's chair during an annual checkup. Hanging over her head, the TV was set to a local news show.

"Man, people **CANNOT** stop talking about Insanity Jane!" the announcer sang. "Let's take a look at the latest viral video."

From her chair, Eleanor uttered a grunt of protest. Her mouth was filled with gross, pink alginate for taking impressions, trapping words beneath her throat.

The assistant at work misunderstood and laughed. "Just another minute, honey."

And then there was Jane, so powerless on the tiny screen, so sterilized in this New Jersey office.

When the video began, Jane was anchoring her legs around the silk, lip-syncing half a beat behind the playback. Of course it was the wrong song... not that there was a right song, but surely "Careless With Ur Luv" was inappropriate?

**YOU PROOOMISED ME**, the speakers blasted, and Jane belatedly mouthed the words. **THAT WEEE WOULD BE....**

At the twelve-second mark, Jane glamorously unfolded, sparkling, slicing a clean horizontal split above her head. **INSAAANITY!** True to her name, Insanity Jane was dangling at least twenty feet off the ground. **CALAAAMITY!** Her face was green. **A LESSON FOR HUMAAANITY!** Her arm twitched; she was trying to itch her aching chest; she couldn't help it.

Insanity Jane fell headfirst. She must have made a sound, a resounding **THUD**, in the moment that she hit the stage, but Eleanor could only hear the crazed audience continuing to scream — freshly in horror, she assumed, rather than veneration. Eleanor couldn't hear a difference. Was she screaming too?

"Oh my. Rather dreary, isn't it?" At last the assistant removed the alginate from Eleanor's mouth.

Eleanor nodded weakly. She could still feel the pink slithering down her throat, sealing her body's cavities. She was thinking about her mother's phone call, just last Sunday: "Oh, and Ellie... my two **LADIES** have been feeling awful odd lately. Scratchy, reddish, pressurized.... But my doctor can wait a few days more, 'cause I've got this performance in New Orleans coming up."

The video wasn't over for another twenty seconds.

Jane was writhing on the floor, clutching her skull, while the backup dancers stood frozen, and professionals in black uniforms flooded onstage. In the background, the stupid playback didn't know that it was supposed to stop. It would never stop, Eleanor imagined.

**YOUR PROOOMISE WAS A WARNING TURNED TRUE. OH BAAABY, I SHOULD HAVE LISTENED TO YOU!**

\*\*\*

Five years later, at the height of her career, Eleanor Thompson has become an excellent orator and a mediocre listener.

"Do you mean... removing my entire gallbladder?" asks the visitor in Eleanor's office, who claims to be a fellow Princeton alum, according to her cordial email: **MIND IF I DROP BY YOUR OFFICIAL NJ HEADQUARTERS, SOMETIME MID-DECEMBER? WE MUST REUNITE AFTER ALL THESE YEARS!**

Eleanor swears she's never seen the woman in her life. Overall, she doesn't remember much from her college days, especially the latter half, when she howled and watched TV for days... until finally, she gave herself permission to learn — to fix her

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mother's mistake. Slowly, meticulously, Eleanor pushed her crumpled body from the ground.

Now she's pulling the whole country up with her, including this long-lost classmate, whatever her name is: Jenna? Janet? Eleanor can't remember, but being face-to-face with the woman, Eleanor decides she seems much more like a Janet.

"I really appreciate you choosing to speak with me, Dr. Thompson," probably-Janet begins anew. "Did I tell you that I **ADORE** your new informational video?"

So Janet doesn't care about her gallbladder, after all. Odds are that she's simply itching to find out if Eleanor **REALLY** underwent six whole surgeries within one year after her mother's injury — out of sadness, fear, or a craving for a self-inflicted emptiness?

Reluctantly, Eleanor begins her speech. "Do you remember, during junior and senior year, how much time I spent researching in the lab?" And rewatching that stupid clip in which Insanity Jane SHOCKS New Orleans, 5/11/18, until it gave her recurring dreams.

"Of course." Janet looks like she's about to interrupt with another question, while Eleanor is about to slyly slip into her usual spiel about how **WITH EARLY DIAGNOSIS AND SURGICAL ACTION, WE CAN CRUSH CANCER**, and based on Janet's family history, she must **CHOOSE FOOLPROOF** and remove her gallbladder to cure her stage negative three cholecystitis. Next, Eleanor will dissect her own family: If subzero diagnosis had existed in 2015, Insanity Jane wouldn't have tumbled from stardom, shattering America's fragile heart.

But then Eleanor's phone begins to ring.

"You go ahead and take that," Janet offers.

Eleanor takes it. She nods in silence as her cheeks grow pale.

After a minute, she hangs up. "Sorry to cut the reunion short, Janet. Apparently I've got someplace to be."

"Not an issue," Janet answers. She turns to leave. "But... just for future reference... you know, my name is Jenna. Not that I expected you to remember me! Unless... well, back in our college

days, I delivered this whole soliloquy about one of your mom's songs, and I **ASSUMED** I appeared so sharp and unforgettable to you, but...."

Eleanor isn't paying attention to definitely-Jenna. She's busy shuffling around her desk, gathering the endless folders, binders, and thriller novels that she'll carry on her jet to California. Home.

\*\*\*

As Eleanor strides through the halls of LA's finest nursing home, she can't help but feel slightly irritated with the nurse scrambling beside her, whose crackly voice she recognizes from the phone call earlier today.

"So she's not seriously injured?" Eleanor asks.

The nurse fiddles with his clipboard. "Well... no. She fell out of bed this morning. Knocked her noggin. But Janie's a tough one, and not just on account of age." Forty-two now. "We figured you'd be coming around to visit anyway, with the holiday season and all...."

"I was planning to visit tomorrow," Eleanor lies.

"Perfect! So you're only a day early. Or really, only nine hours early."

The clock reads four-thirty, the same time that Eleanor left New Jersey. "You must be jet-lagged," the nurse adds, unhelpfully.

At the end of the hall, Eleanor enters an isolated room.

Jane is asleep, as usual. Her body is smaller than Eleanor remembers. Eleanor is wondering if she should be concerned about mother's apparent weight loss, and honestly, she should be drilling the nurse about diets and daily regiments.

But Eleanor can only stare. She's still actualizing, for the umpteenth time, the image of her mother curled up like a child.

**IN MEMORY OF JANE.** It isn't exactly the whole truth; it's Eleanor's truth. Jane's breathing body is right here, yet most of her memories disappeared five years ago. She should have only had a mild concussion, but instead her own cells were malignant, conspiring — breast cancer, at first, and then brain cancer, too. The surgeons went to work, only after she fell.

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By now, the nurse has left the room. Somehow the winter sky has already disintegrated into ash. Eleanor's eyes long for nothing but to close. Closure.

She sinks into an armchair across from her mother's bed, and sleep unites them both.

\*\*\*

At eight o'clock, the nursing home unleashes its battery of morning cheer: newly-charged conversation, the smell of syrup, throwback acoustic covers on the radio. By the time Eleanor startles awake, Jane is already nibbling on a waffle.

Eleanor stretches in her seat. "Sorry I haven't been visiting much, mom. I've been caught up with my latest paper. It'll be really important for our project, assuming all goes well."

Jane continues to chew.

"Those waffles smell good," says Eleanor.

Slowly, Jane finishes her bite of waffle. She opens her mouth, and the word is almost silent: "Ellie."

"That's right. It's Ellie here." Eleanor clears her throat. "Hold on a second. I'm going to use the bathroom, and then I'm coming right back, mom."

On her way out the door, Eleanor rams directly into the nurse from yesterday.

"My sincerest apologies," he blurts. "We can turn it off if it bothers you, I promise. Just give me the sign. We'd hate to cause Janie any distress."

It takes Eleanor a moment to realize what he's talking about — the song playing tinnily over the speakers. The voice isn't Insanity Jane's; it's hopelessly demure, but the words are unmistakable.

#### A LESSON FOR HUMAAANITY....

Eleanor shuts her eyes, fighting the third-person flashback of a silhouetted crowd, and golden silk, and the zenith — the foolproof horror — as Insanity Jane winks gaily at the crowd....

Jane. Eleanor whips around in fear. The nurse, on wobbly tiptoes, peers over Eleanor's head.

To their collective surprise, they find Jane rosy-cheeked. She sways in bed, echoing the lyrics'

movement with her wrinkled lips, which tug upwards at the ends in an angelic smile.

## SHORT STORY

# BREAK

**Haley Renee Born**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Short Story

You can't take it another minute, the shift of tight packed bodies, tobacco fog thick in your nose. Bottles in customers' hands clink like chains tying you here with their emptiness.

"I'm taking my fifteen," you call to the shapes at the bar, knowing one of them is likely your manager.

"The hell you are, we're too busy!" he shouts back but you've already grabbed your jacket, swinging it up and over your shoulder.

"You'll manage." Replying through gritted teeth.

"Get your ass back here!" You ignore, blowing through the heavy double doors. Your pupils dilate in reverse, shrinking from the bar's dull light to the flare of setting sun sparked on low-hanging clouds.

Pulling a pack from your jacket, you read the boldface warning but slip a cigarette past your lips anyway. You quit a few years ago, at your girlfriend's request, but it's all just too much.

Working wears down your nerves until your self-control is in shreds.

Maybe that's why, when you hear the barker call CARNIVAL, FREE ENTRY! you wander from beyond the awning and approach the pop-up fair. Music plays from a few staticky speakers and flashing florescent lights battle the sun for dominance over the sky. You take an acrid drag of smoke and imagine tar clinging to your lungs like the black crust where asphalt gives way to dirt. On a whim you begin down the path, looking at the ticket booth and Ferris wheel, the hall of mirrors you want nothing to do with. Something catches your eye and in a moment your ear.

"Step right up and take your shot! One dollar a blow, this old car has got to go! Who doesn't want to let loose for such a low price?!"

A middle-aged woman stands in front of a piece of junk car. Her eyes have light sketched wrinkles and her hair is graying. No, not graying, silvering. She wears a red striped blazer to match the chipped paint job of the Chevy Malibu. Four once-ruby doors.

"Let off a week's worth of steam cheap?" She beckons you forward. You fish around in your back pocket for the dollar bill you tucked there half an hour ago. You look at the car, imagining it belongs to the man who gave you the one.

He had shoved it down the front of your shirt when you leaned forward to grab his plate, which now you suspect he purposefully left out of your reach. It took all your self-control not to let the dish clatter back down in front of him. Seeking refuge, you leaned your back against the kitchen wall and removed the bill from the lip of your bra. That was when you noticed his phone number scribbled in the upper right-hand corner. It was the only tip he

left.

You hand the woman the dollar and she hands you the bat.

"You've got one swing, use it wisely," she says jovially and winks. You heft the bat experimentally, heavier than the ones you used for softball in high school. You like the solid weight in your hands.

In your head, you're still trying to pick where to hit but your hands have already decided. The side-view mirror is the weakest.

The connection of bat to mirror is unexpectedly satisfying, like a hit of nicotine. You almost feel your heart tighten, but it's not even broken. It hangs at an odd angle and the reflection of the draining sky is splintered, but it's not enough. Not yet. Again, before you know what you'll do next you hand the silvered woman a five, trying to buy yourself peace in pieces.

This time you shift your feet and tighten your grip. The mirror comes clean off with a plasticky snap, spinning out of sight, out of mind. The fluorescents catch on the perfect, unburdened curve of the car's hood. You're reminded of the way men talk about their machines, about how long you have to listen to a conversation before you can tell if it's about a woman or a car. Usually what gives it away is how much they care about breaking it.

You bring the bat down over your head and into the hood once, twice, three times before it's misshapen enough for you. You've got one swing left. Somewhere you know it's been fifteen minutes, but nothing matters except the blinding moment, the song of this second.

A cloud of breath and a crack as the bat hits the windshield. The glass is thick, you knew that, but you were unprepared for the new claws in your lungs. You barely consider letting go, going back to work and suffocating, before the bat is resting on your shoulder and you're leafing through your wallet. Not something you can afford but you fork over the twenty.

"Who's is it?" She asks.

"What?" You're distracted by the continued wholeness of the windshield.

"Whose car do you wish you were beating on?"

"No one in particular. Some guys from work I guess." You almost don't notice her knowing nod. You can't leave until there's a hole in the glass. If you tried you don't know what you'd do. As the cracks grow and meet to make fault lines in the windshield, you're reminded of the not infrequent urge to grab a grimy piece of cutlery or shatter a bottle and bury it in one of the customers' roaming hands. Just to make them feel it, how far they push you, how much it hurts, but it'd never work. That knowledge, the only thing that stops you.

Right now nothing does. Finally, the glass collapses, sending shards into the soft cushions of the seat. You flinch from memories of being pinched. Gritting your teeth against the flare of helplessness you do to the brake light what you wish you had done to the man who cornered your girlfriend when she came to visit you at work. This time she's not here to talk you down.

Your arms are tired but your blood is fire, rancid as gasoline and sparked. You can't stop until every piece is as twisted and broken and useless as you. You can't see anything but the dent you left in the hood, a dent like bruised hips and breasts. You hit

their hands away, marring, scrapping red paint.

Your nails dig into the grain of the wood.

your breakdown.

Thoughts race, eating up the memory of your manager talking to a table, saying **SHE'S NOTHING SPECIAL BUT SHE'S ALL WE'VE GOT**. Your hands, with the help of the bat, begin to dismantle the driver's side window. Like you were a dish served lukewarm. Now it's his car and you slam down the bat until the window's nothing but a web of cuts.

What had he said? That time some drunk shoved you up against the wall and knocked a glass out of your hand? It scattered into pieces that you spent ages picking up, a thousand tiny cuts. Then you were naïve enough to ask him why he was taking it out of your paycheck. What had he said to you?

Twenty hits and the window's more cracks than glass, but still not broken. One more, just one more swing, and you know it would buckle.

**NOTHING BREAKS FOR FREE.** That's what he had told you.

You break the fucking window.

"Don't think I wasn't counting, young lady."

The bat drifts, top landing between your feet in the dirt, handle loose in your hands. You expect you've got blisters. Your hands aren't the only things that feel stripped raw. You let rage flicker and fade, returning to the slow simmer.

You retrieve another dollar, leaving only a five and some checks that would bounce in the wake of

"Nothing breaks for free," you mutter bitterly, holding it out. She eyes it for a moment but doesn't move to take it.

"How about this," she says. Her skin has lines like smiles, but she's serious now. "I'll give you that last one pro-bono and you'll make me a promise."

Remembering a halfhearted warning about selling away your soul you raise an eyebrow.

"You keep the one if you promise to quit your damn job."

You take a breath. A breath and a moment to look past everything at the freshly turned night sky. Put away your money. Walk home.

## TWO DREGS:PART I

**Will Greer**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Central High School,  
Saint Joseph, MO

Educator: Kyla Ward

Category: Short Story

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### Part 1

### Two Dregs

The man stood at the maw of the cave. The cave lay in a great and narrow canyon hundreds of feet high. The smooth and orange walls curved and waved as if it had been carved by the hands of

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the ocean thousands of years ago. The cave was like a mouth, wide open, and just like a mouth, it could scream.

The screams racing from the cave kicked up dust and sand into the man's face. They came once every few seconds. The gusts were strong, yet they passed through the man's spirit like wind through a hollow skull. The winds rushed past his boots and rippled through his woolen shawl. Slung around his shoulder was a bundle of sticks, wrapped together tightly with a hempen rope. He removed the bundle from his shoulder and tossed it towards the entrance to the cave.

The amount of time between each scream became longer and longer, and in the blackness of the cave, the man could see two glowing orbs getting closer and closer to him until finally, a beak broke the void. Two glowing eyes towered over him, a bird as dark as pitch and as tall as three men stood not but 10 feet from the man. It peered at him with eyes like bottomless pits and with the crust of dried something on its muzzle.

"For you," the man said. He slowly extended a hand and pointed his finger towards the bundle of sticks laying on the cavern floor. The crow turned its head towards the sticks and studied them for a moment. The man looked up in awe at the bird; while the bird was in a treacherous state of wellbeing, it was still a magnificent sight to see. While it's thin, ruffled feathers stuck out at odd angles from a body blackened by blood rather than darkness in places and it's beak was chipped and scarred, the crow was still beautiful.

In a swift motion, the bird's neck turned back towards the man, and his eyes molded into the great crow's gaze. Through the crow's view stood a weary knight with greyed out eyes and cracked plate armor. His breastplate was not silver, but the color of stone. Around the knight's neck and draped down his left shoulder was a beautiful blue shawl lined with a golden fabric which contrasted the rest of his appearance. But he had no blade, and no helmet.

"A trade." said the knight as he nodded towards the sticks on the ground.

"A home for a home." The knight's voice was soft

but carried weight. It blew across the canyon walls like the delicate winds that caressed the canyon floor

The bird picked up the bundle of sticks in his beak and took a step towards the knight. He Snatched the knight within his clutches, grabbing his shoulders like roots latching themselves to the earth.

They shot up into the sky, through the crags and past the canyon walls, until they were above the clouds. The bird's wings beat with such ferocity that screams shot down from the sky. Below them, groups of massive and colorful birds darted and maneuvered through the air and above the dusty and barren landscape. The wind whistled through their pristine feathers.

Towards the horizon the bird and the knight went. Above the water, and above the land, speeding towards a green and verdant landscape. Rolling hills and snow capped mountain peaks was an image shared by both the man and bird.

Together they were the knight and the bird, two dregs on their way home.

## THE PAINTING

**Mia Landolo**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Short Story

She was cleaning. It was the first time in ages, and she desperately wished it was for a better reason. Well, her subconscious did. She refused to think about the reason she was cleaning. Instead she let her mind wander to other non-dangerous thoughts. And that worked. At least until she

found it sitting underneath a pile of stuff. She pulled it out wondering what it was, for the image was buried so deeply under dust that it was impossible to decipher. Then she sneezed and the dust flew off the picture and into the depths of the room. She looked down at the image and froze. She remembered this picture. The three of them had bought it on one of their trips to the island. A sad smile appeared on her face as she let the memory surface.

It had been a rather fun trip ever since they had arrived. They had spent most of their days relaxing on the beach, and their nights at various restaurants. However, he had wanted to explore the island. So, one morning, they set out to do so. They wandered around, visiting many places from the outskirts of villages—where the inhabitants didn't speak a word of English—to cute little tourist shops. At the far end of one group of tourist shops, there was a vast outdoor market. They had spent all afternoon wandering the stalls, admiring the trinkets. It had been there, in a small booth about three vendors away from the edge of the market that they had found it. The tiny stall was filled with elegant samples of artwork. They had all interested her. But he had had eyes for only one painting. It was at the very back, featuring a bright yellow sun shining out over an ocean onto the land covered with rocks. He had found it enchanting. When the vendor noticed him studying the painting, he told him the story behind it. It had something to do with a girl, the colors of the sky, and a wide ocean. She couldn't remember it now. But she could remember his face. It had lit up when he'd first seen the painting and had stayed lit all the way through the story. However, it had dimmed when he'd asked the price of the painting. He couldn't afford it. She had hated the way the smile had fallen off his face. So, she had intervened with the conversation and bought the painting. She told him as they walked away that it was an early birthday present. He had been so happy.

She was distracted from her memory when a tear hit the painting. It was then that she realized she was crying. Crying for him. They hadn't always had the best relationship, but they were still close. She had known that his father's death had hurt him, but she hadn't seen the enormity of it. She knew now that his sleepless nights and his deep sadness weren't just stages of regular grief. She had cursed herself the first few days for not noticing the signs. It wasn't until a friend had talked to her that logic finally broke through. She had also been grieving. There was no way she could have known. But, while that helped with her own guilt, it didn't shake the memories. Of trying to be cheerful when she got home from the store the day after the funeral. Of calling to him to come down and help her. Of the silence that echoed in response. Of the dread that stirred deep inside her when she tried again. Of rushing up the stairs and searching and calling for him. Of finding him hanging from the bathroom ceiling. Of weeping and crying because now he was gone too. Of calling for help, and the funeral that soon followed. Of talking to people about him, but really only wanting to be left alone. Of finally being left alone, or as alone as a woman could be when people were constantly checking in to make sure she didn't follow their footsteps. She had considered doing so, in the early days of it all, but then one day, she had suddenly known that she wouldn't. Couldn't. She had been on the side of those left behind twice, and she had seen and felt what it did to people. She would never do it. She would bear her pain, no matter how much it hurt. But, that decision had been made weeks ago, so she did not dwell on it. Instead she focused on the present. Studying the painting, she brushed her tears off it, and then carried it out of the room. She hung it up on the wall in the entryway. There she gazed at it again, marveling at the fact that something this beautiful held something so terrible, and how you'd never know just by looking at it. Slowly, she forced herself to look away and head back up to his room. There she picked up where she had left off. She was cleaning. Only this time, she was covered in tears,

as her subconscious had been released and she was free to remember and cry for him. She was free to remember her son.

## A KEY

### Dominick Jalloul

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Platte City Middle School, Platte City, MO  
Educator: Laura Hoefling

Category: Short Story

Harris lived a quaint normal life. He woke up at 5:30 so he could get to the office at 7:30, drank coffee, shoveled the driveway when necessary, voted, all of the usual everyday citizen's tasks. He observed his commonplace face in the mirror every morning. He was far from anything extraordinary. Yet, one day on his way to work, he noticed a peculiar looking woman ahead of him. She had luminous golden hair and gaudy attire. Strange - not something you'd normally see daily - but not unthinkable. This WAS New York City, after all. There were all kinds of people here. Harris pushed it to the back of his head and kept walking. When he neared the gaudy woman he did his best to avoid eye contact, but he had the faintest sensation of something being slipped into his left pocket. He turned to where he knew that unfortunate woman would be standing to inquire about what she had just done, but she was nowhere to be found. Stricken, Harris looked around frantically, then checked his pocket. There was nothing there. Perturbed, and fretful for his mental state, Harris continued on his way.

Numerous embarrassing experiences awaited Harris at the office, including; The bottom of his

styrofoam cup falling through, emptying its steaming contents onto the ground. Other incidents included a series of yelps echoing from Harris loud enough for the whole floor to hear, the signal of the wall-hung TV mysteriously going out every time Harris walked past, the computer and lights in his office space mysteriously flickering, and a rather unfortunate instance of Harris spilling hot tea onto his boss. Harris gratefully left early that day. He wanted nothing more than to lie down and forget this ever happened.

Upon returning from a stressful day at work, Harris had forgotten about the strange woman, due to his recent... OCCURRENCES at work. He moved through his house to turn on the TV. The thought of the TV back at the office entered his brain, but he quickly shoved it aside. THAT WAS JUST A COINCIDENCE, he thought. After landed on his local news station, he decided this was good enough and flicked his gaze to something else. As he turned around to find some other tasks to complete, his gaze quickly flew back to the TV screen. Something... strange had caught Harris' eye. It was the weather segment, and the newscaster looked familiar... NO. She was MOST DEFINITELY familiar. Standing right there on Harris' TV was the strange woman, outfit and all. His eyes flitted quickly to the name of the reporter, but it was nowhere to be found. Harris quickly realized he should be listening to what she was saying, and focused his attention on her.

"-HARRIS? Harris! HARRIS! Finally! I was growing tired of waiting for you to start using those ears. Are they just for decoration, or were you just being a complete dunce?" the woman harshly inquired.

"W-What!?! I- Who are you? H-How do you know my name!?" Harris shrieked.

"I know ALL, Harris," she replied cryptically, "But that's not important right now!" She smiled sweetly, a jarring change from her tone earlier.

"What I need from YOU... is to leave this house," she stated, still with that sweet smile.

"Immediately."

"L-Leave my house!?! Why I paid for this house! I worked hard to earn this nice house in this nice neighborhood! H-How - How dare you!" Harris was

trembling with rage. "And another thing! Who do you think you are! Barging into **MY** house–"

She had stopped listening long ago. **I HAD FEARED THIS WOULD HAPPEN. WHY CAN'T THEY JUST COOPERATE?** **IT'S** always **USELESS IN THE END**, she thought. With a flick of her finger, she seemed to **FLY** smoothly off the TV's screen and into Harris' living room, like one of those cliche ads. The long forgotten news broadcast returned to normal as if nothing had happened. She seized her opportunity to speak, as Harris had stopped in utter shock. "Who am I you ask? My name is Therese. I must, unfortunately, say it has not been a pleasure to meet you. Don't take it personally.

Now, **PLEASE** leave, before I force you."

"Force me!? I'd like to see you try! Get out of my house before I call the police! Better yet, why don't I just call them right now!? That'll motivate you to leave!" Harris stood up and started towards the phone dial. Therese watched with confidence. No one had actually thought to call the cops on her. **NOT LIKE IT'S GOING TO WORK**, she remarked. Therese was upon him before he could even gasp from surprise.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"I-I-I um," Harris faltered. Therese didn't wait for him to continue. In her eyes, this little **CHARADE** had gone on for far too long.

"It's a real shame too. If you'd have cooperated... maybe, **JUST MAYBE**, I would've let you keep something. But now? It's **ALL** mine! Say goodbye Harris!" she shrieked, her laughter filling the room. Harris felt himself being... **LIFTED!**? The surrounding room was swirling. It appeared as if that strange woman - that evil, **DEMANDING, CURSED WOMAN** - was floating. He thrashed in the air, hoping to break free of whatever was holding him, but the only thing he accomplished was hitting his hand on his table. **OUCH.** Harris felt like he was about to throw up. No, he was about to throw up. He sure was glad he passed out before that happened.

Harris awoke suddenly as he felt the hard sheet of ice connect with his cheek. He sat up with a fright, immediately noticing that he was outside. **WHY AM I SLEEPING OUTSIDE?** He

thought. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked around. He could hear a faint humming in the distance. Then, he looked up. His thoughts spilled out of his mouth.

"What in tarnation!?" In front of Harris was his house. **HIS** house. It was **FLOATING**. Floating! He could make out a faint shape near the entryway. **THAT WOMAN!** There was faint cackling coming from her mouth, her hair was frizzy and flying in all directions. She, too, was floating. "Y- You're a-!" Harris started incredulously.

"**A WITCH?** Oh puh-LEASE. As IF!" She was cackling even louder than before.

"I- I demand...!"

"You're positively **DREADFUL** at making conversation Harris. Besides, you're not in any position to be demanding things of **ME**. And you know what? I've put up with this for **FAR** too long! My patience has been worn thin! **SAY GOODBYE HARRIS!**" she shrieked.

The whole area got fuzzy, and Harris thought he was going to throw up again. His eyes were glued to the scene in front of him. The house seemed... lighter. It was getting brighter and brighter. The snow was swirling into the air, the wind seemed to blow as a wall. The air was filled with humming, and an electric feeling gathered in Harris' stomach. Therese's long blond hair seemed to get longer and longer, continuing well beyond the normal length of hair. It was enveloping his house. The wood of his house seemed to fully turn into **LIGHT**. He was blinded by a flash of pure white, and he was left rubbing his eyes once again. He opened them to find it was over. Therese, the house, the static, humming air, **EVERYTHING**. All that remained was a patch of concrete where Harris' house once rested.

Everything was gone. **EVERYTHING**. Harris stood in disbelief. He had rushed over to his now patch of concrete and had found nothing. **NOTHING**. Was he dreaming? He had to be dreaming. He pinched himself like they always say, but did not reawake in his bed. All he was left with was a slight pang in his arm. Harris completely resigned to his growing despair and sank to his knees in the snow. He felt something sharp in his pant pocket. The

identical pocket he thought Therese had slipped something into. Curious, he reached for it. Then, upon retracting his hand, he felt like throwing up all over again.

Resting in his open palm was the key to his house.

## A CANDLE FORLORN

**Ryan Morton**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educators: Jason Lovera, Laura Michael

Category: Short Story

Oliver's hands, calloused and rough, wound fresh dressing around the fuchsia flesh of Mrs. O'Connor's arm. A slip in the kitchen while cooking, the woman had muttered. The nurse simply sighed and told her to be more careful at her age. One more burn like this and she might end up in hospice care. Her eyes glazed over while Oliver talked, too preoccupied with Drew Carey revealing a prize on [THE PRICE IS RIGHTS](#). A quiet groan escaped Oliver's mouth. Mrs. O'Connor didn't appear to notice, but she did change the channel on the relic of a television. He continued instructing her on when to change the wrapping and how to apply the ointment the doctor had prescribed her. All Oliver got was a nod.

The door to the burn ward opened, drowning

the room in light. A man, who only ever went by Dr. Earl, stepped into the room, causing the old woman to sit up. The television went off. "How's the patient doing, Nurse Peterson?" asked the young doctor

"I'm doing quite well, it's nothing really. Just a small burn." said the old woman, answering the doctor's question for Oliver.

"It's second degree," stressed Oliver Peterson, "However, I don't think she needs that skin graft since it's healing so far."

"Excellent! I'm sure we can have you out by later today," He said to the patient. "Just run her scripts and keep an eye on the lady, Nurse Peterson." Mrs. O'Connor blushed. The good doctor shook her unburnt hand and was gone just as quickly as he had entered, restoring the ward to its honest form: bleak darkness, yet the little sunlight that leaked through the alley-side window caught onto the floating specks of dust. The television also came back on.

Oliver stepped out into the back alley, ripping a cigarette and his lighter from the Altoid can he kept in his back pocket. It's end burned a shallow light in the ever-swallowing twilight. A small flask Oliver kept in his drawstring soon dripped lukewarm alcohol into his mouth. Perhaps he'd be reprimanded for smoking and drinking while on the job, perhaps he wouldn't. He was confident that it didn't change his performance, not that much could. This is the truth Oliver accepted after taking his first nursing job. People like Mrs. O'Connor found their way into the burn ward every day, and none of them cared to see [SOME](#) nurse when [THE](#) doctor was just outside their door. He hurled his cigarette down the alley.

He mulled over his texts, one hand on his temple and the other tapping the phone. There weren't many. His last text with his sister about how he would be starting his new job at an underfunded burn ward in a middle-of-nowhere town just North of Albuquerque. Sent three years ago. A missed call from his friend Michael back in Maine that he constantly told himself he would return but never did. Made two years ago. His first and final message to the cute nurse in the

pediatric department. Never sent. A spam message from an internet pornography website. Received and opened yesterday.

Smoke fluttered from a new cigarette between his lips as Oliver looked at his watch. It was the same one his father had worn, given as a gift after he graduated nursing school. He was due for an appointment with a patient in a few hours. The cigarette Oliver was chewing on would have to keep him company until then. A round of flesh, about the size of a dime, had been found in his mouth the last time he went in for a checkup with his dentist. The oral surgeon removed the tumor in the following week. It was benign. Still, every doctor he met, both in the dental profession and not, had urged him to end his habit for fear that he'd soon develop cancer. This was of course accompanied by the horrific pictures of people with gum cancer that he himself had shown patients when he tried and failed to be a dental assistant. His mind was unchanged. It was all he could really do, the 2 A.M. cigarette was everything to Oliver.

His ears perked up to the sound of a distant siren. It was getting louder. And closer. He looked up to catch the ambulance, a rusting square with wheels, barreling towards him. A member of his high school track team, Oliver sprinted down the alleyway. He stuffed the Altoid tin into his boxers but abandoned the flask. The metal container was flattened by the spinning wheel of the truck.

Swallowed by the sweat that stuck thick to his scrubs, Oliver stumbled in through the back door of the burn ward. His body trembled at the thought of what would have happened had the EMT not been blaring its sirens. He was also upset about the flask. It had cost him a good thirty dollars at Costco. But this thought evaporated from Oliver's mind as he heard the door slam into the wall. He turned. Expectations being Dr. Earl with a file of work for him, but no, in flowed a pride of doctors and other nurses with a swathe of light.

"Scalpel?"

"We're losing him."

"CPR?"

"Here's the scalpel."

"Too risky."

"Give 'em the mask!"

"Flatline."

"Just do it!"

"Cut the burnt skin"

"Now?"

"Make sure he gets his fluids"

"Now!"

"I need new cloth."

A hush fell upon the crowd. Most of the staff filtered through the exit, their work somehow complete in a few tiresome minutes.

"Oliver, I need you to watch the patient. If he wakes up...get me," said Dr. Earl in a huff. He was shaken from the work he had just done, his brow and hands also covered in a layer of sweat. With a second slam of the door, the doctor also was gone. A shade of brown light, nearer to black than to white, returned to the burn ward.

The cloth that stood over the patient was soaked a few shades deeper red than wine. Oliver needed to replace the sheet and wanted to see what could have possibly happened to this person that required a flurry of medical staff. So he lifted it up. Nursing school had taught him about stomach quaking sights, how a single bug could rip a woman's fetus to shreds or what cancer of the bone does to a child, but this man was a step above. His protective layer of skin just wasn't. This was no lie, the man's entire body had turned into a vast array of purple and black muscle tissue wound around bone. There was no question, Oliver was looking at a dead man.

But he wasn't. There was still rhythm in his chest and air flowed through his throat. From cloth to excision, the doctors had gone through every method in the book to keep this man from dying. Oliver felt a certain devotion to his fellow workers who had undone death and also to the resistance this man's body had put up. He would keep him alive. For a second, Oliver also thought about not helping. He thought about quitting this thankless job, getting one that people respected. Like an accountant. His dad was an accountant, and people sure liked him. But his dad had spent

thousands to send him through school, and Oliver couldn't imagine the disappointment he'd feel if he just quit. He didn't want that. Nursing wasn't that bad, Oliver told himself daily, and he was certain that he could remain here if he just accepted the hardships as reality. At least until next year. Oliver made himself this silent promise, but he knew it was a falsity.

The patient still sat in the bed, propped up by a few pillows. Oliver unrolled a fresh towel. As he began to cover him, the burnt man's flesh undid itself further, shooting streams of blood and pus onto the cloth. Oliver's attempts to cloak the patient seemed to be in vain. Still, he patched the man. His fingers strummed back and forth with the cloth from nine crumbling toes to the ashen residue that made up his scalp. A mummy now sat in the bed. Or at least what they looked like after countless centuries in a tomb.

Tired by the strain of repeated bandaging and wrapping, Oliver fell into the chair beside his creation. He selected an issue of *TIME* magazine and prepared for a long night. The cover story was about the Oceanside Riots. There had been murmuring in the hospital about the war that had erupted just a few blocks away. Something about natives and a death sentence. Oliver didn't care for it at all because a riot only ever added to his work.

When he got to page twenty-three, Oliver could've sworn that he felt something rake across his knee. But when he looked down, there was nothing. It happened again on page thirty-four. Once more, nothing. Perhaps, the man really had passed on, and his ghost was haunting the burn ward. Great. Now he'd have to disappoint his dad. But no, the man's vital signs all read normal, or at least as normal as they could be for a living corpse.

"Waaaaaaa...waaaaaa..." Oliver jumped out of his seat. The voice seemed to surround him, accompanied by the blaring of the medical devices hooked to his patient. He dropped to his knees. He started to prostrate himself to the ghost and beg forgiveness for failing his duty to the man. "Waaaaaa...waaaaaa..." Oliver stood up. The

voice was coming from under the cloth.

Lifting the sheet, which needed to be changed anyways, Oliver saw his patient writhing. He had managed to poke a hole in the side of his cloth cocoon. "Wa...ter," whispered the man. Blood sprouted from the man's lips as they chafed to form speech. Oliver turned to the door. "Noooo...water...not doctor." He must've been awake to hear Dr. Earl's last directions. Oliver struggled to not continue walking out the door, but he decided that a dying patient trumped any seniority.

Oliver got water from the burn ward's ancient fountain and handed it to the patient. The man did not take the water. His arms didn't move to meet Oliver's, so they were just locked in each other's gaze. The nurse's face grew red with blush. Oliver thrust the cup at the man's face and poured it into the purse of his patient's lips. He sucked it all down. Once more, Oliver tried to turn toward the door, but the man's hand lightly grasped his arm and he shook his head. More blood than stained the cloth ruptured from the man's movement. Oliver sighed and got more bandages.

He sat back down on his chair. The patient just stared ahead, not strong enough to fight the wires Oliver had taped back on. "So what's your name, anyway?" asked Oliver as casually as he could when he realized there was no clipboard with the man's ID on the bed. He guessed that it had been difficult to get much from the singed man. The patient's demeanor did not change. "Just as your nurse, I think that it'd make my job easier if I knew your name." Oliver used his best nurse's voice this time. The man turned his head away. More bleeding.

Sensing the patient's unease, Oliver locked the door. He walked into the corner and took off his scrubs, revealing his white t-shirt and basketball shorts. At this point, Oliver had broken just about every rule the hospital had. But it didn't matter. The burnt man would be his last patient. The sight of the perpetual pain that came with each nerve crackling in his patient's body from every movement had worn his resolve. His dad would

just have to deal with it.

Returning to his chair, he stared at his patient with a foreign intensity. "Your name, what is it?" The man's head cracked back towards Oliver

"Bod....a...way" The man struggled with every breath. His eyes had darkened further from when Oliver had originally taken off his covering.

"And what made you...like this?"

"Me." A certain sharpness entered Bodaway's voice.

"An accident, cooking maybe?" The man needed to conserve his words.

"No. I burnt myself...to protest..."

"You one of those Oceanside folks? I heard y'all Navajo were protesting over some execution."

"Yes. My people...in chaos...my son...gone...all massacred" Tears cut through his eyelids, mixing blood and pus with the darkness of a defiant face. "The boy shot...his attacker...the son of a senator...he didn't mean to... a mix of fear and alcohol...they say he was the youngest... the youngest to get the syringe." Bodaway yanked at the cords connecting him to the machine. His patient had no interest in life, this much was clear to Oliver. Yet it was his duty to save him. Oliver wrestled the oxygen pumping tubes away from the dying man, both sets of eyes interlocked in expressions of pain refracted through tired wells. The man fell back onto the bed. Bodaway's breath strained between each gasp, and Oliver saw the pain that stomped on the man's heart. There was a long quiet. "Your hand...what happened?" Speaking, as much as it hurt, was just about the only thing patients in his condition could do to suppress a torture unknown to the living. And it was true, in undressing, Oliver had taken off his gloves. It revealed his hand's deep red, dimple-less flesh that was completely alien to the rest of the olive skin he'd inherited from his dad's Greek family

Oliver took out the candle he'd stowed in the cabinets and lit it with the same lighter he'd used for his cigarettes. Most of the burn ward's lights had broken years ago. No one had bothered to fix them. Still, Oliver lifted the candle with great

care so that Bodaway could clearly see his hand.

"This?" His patient gave a slight nod. No blood.

"It's just a scar, a reminder really. Got it at eleven when I burnt myself trying to light one of my dad's Cubans. Let's just say he wasn't too happy."

Bodaway laughed a hoarse, dry laugh that was almost childlike in nature.

His eyes closed with a few drops of blood, and he drifted into something like sleep. "Hey...nurse," he said after an hour, "What is...your name"

"Oh, it's Oliver."

"I knew an Ollie...once." His expression contorted, only tears slid down his face. "A researcher on our land...we were...good friends on and off...the reservation. When my son passed...we went up in flames...together. I'm sure...he was...not...as...unlucky...as...I."

There was a long silence. Oliver was not sure whether or not to comfort his patient with the knowledge that this was the only burn ward within thirty miles. Indecisiveness was absolute. All Oliver could do was fidget the cloth between his index finger and thumb.

"Hey...Oliver" The darkness in his eyes had faded to a strained swirl of pale purples and reds.

"Yes, Bodaway?"

"Your carton...can I...have one?" His voice came out in puffs of air. The man's mouth hung open after the last word in the same way a beggar rattles their can of coins.

Oliver knew what the man was asking for. A single cigarette to a man on oxygen support was as good as a death sentence. His lungs would collapse at the first sign of the black smoke, and the Bodaway would be no more. Oliver wondered how he could explain how the patient had died, or if it was even right to defy his job title and end Bodaway's life.

But that wasn't the man, nor nurse, Oliver ever wanted to be. That man who was dissipating before his eyes deserved at least a cigarette if he couldn't give him his life back. Oliver slid the tobacco between Bodaway's lips. He moved the candle up, and he prepared to light it.

"Thank...you" whispered Bodaway. Oliver's free hand intertwined with Bodaway's burnt one, and

he looked into his patient's eyes. They reminded him of his father's the night of his wake: cool and tired, yet satisfied. Machines above created a ray of blue light around Bodaway's head. The cigarette caught the candle's flame, burning brighter than any cigarette Oliver had ever seen. They both shared the smoke that billowed from Bodaway's lips; the cloud absorbed Oliver and slipped down into his lungs as he watched Bodaway carefully. The man's eyes, now as gray as the smoke, drifted to the candle's flaming wick. "That was me..." he whispered. And the candle went out.

Oliver kneeled on the hospital floor. His right index and middle fingers removed the cigarette from Bodaway's cracked lips and put it in the pocket of his gym shorts. A smile crossed Oliver's face. He bent over to listen for the silence in Bodaway's chest. Tears slid down, wetting his patient's gown. Oliver stood up above the man he'd saved and walked over to the scrubs he had tossed into the corner. He pulled up the green linen as he got dressed for work, throwing his pack of cigarettes into the trash.

## TORN AT THE SEAMS

**Tess Patti**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

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

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Short Story

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They'd been used for surgeons before. Now they covered the mouths of officers who could take

anyone away at any moment. The light and sickly blue masks could be removed whenever. The same wasn't so with the stitches.

It was easy to forget about them, but every so often a stitched citizen could feel the leather cord against the hole through their skin, or the knots grazing against their teeth. Larger mouths required more of the stitches, but they all served the same purpose. Keeping lips nice and shut. Babes born to unclean parents cried and were put to sleep in order to be silenced. Children growing in rapid spurts had to have their stitches changed often, sometimes once a month. Elderly lying on their deathbed strained to open their lips just a tad to try to tell their family that they loved them, even if they didn't know how. But stitches were neverending. If you were unclean, you wore the stitches. If a child's parents were unclean, they wore the stitches. It was the way life had seemingly always been.

The earth breathed shakily that morning. The sun was just barely touching the horizon, caressing it sweetly as if to whisper good morning. The wind drifted by, blowing gently in the ear of the world. Although the elements appeared to sing a love song to the earth, the people of the world merely stumbled out of their doors and off to their daily pastimes.

The train station was crowded, as usual, citizens shuffling past one another, occasionally bumping into one another, eyes turned towards the filthy linoleum floor. They showed a striking resemblance to wind-up toys, the ones made for children, bumping into someone, falling back, and walking in a different direction.

An air of silence acted more like a calm, relieved constant rather than an overwhelming chokehold. This was daily. Shoes had cushy, muted bottoms; the gargantuan clock overlooking all had silent hands. Pickpockets had mastered the art of barely even moving in order to grab a wallet without a sound.

A train slid through the tunnel, fitting perfectly in the station. Heads popped up and looked at the number on the front, the side, the back. C12F, traveling to the seamstress, law, labor districts, and City Hall 7. As the doors opened, a group entered the train, sitting down, backs straight. When the doors closed, spines curved just barely, giving the passengers a bit of comfort before their workdays began. Not a thing was off that morning. Not a soul on the train moved, and in the silence, one could hear the girl sitting right beside the pod meant for officers aboard the train.

The girl's whole body shook with noiseless, convulsive sobs. It was easy to see that she'd recently been re-stitched. The holes hadn't been completely healed; they were still red, small specks of dried blood surrounding them. No one seemed to notice her. They'd all experienced what she was experiencing. Grow up, let it be, get over it. The words pressed against the backs of their lips, but nothing slipped past the stitches. Yet there was still an understanding that they'd reacted in the very same way when they had last been stitched. One saw such behavior almost every other day. Knots slipped through the skin, it happened. But nonetheless, it was still not allowed.

The older passengers of the train couldn't help but compare the young woman to a literary character. However, it had been ages since they'd read the book, any book, and they could barely remember the character's name. The children on board or people of a similar age to the young woman saw her only as a sensitive girl. They'd never read the books that their seniors had read. Reading was glossed over in school for the unclean. An average young adult could read basic, three syllable words, and not much else. Not that it mattered too terribly much. The only things to read were the signs that littered the streets, the trains, the surrounding urban decay.

A poster waved gently above the girl's head. Larger-than-life onyx letters were like a caption for

the photo of Ezra Malcolm, The Leader. His amber eyes were crinkled in a smile, though his mouth was concealed by his mask. Older yet handsome features made up for the scar that shot down his face like a bolt of lightning. The words just below the knot in his tie seemed to exhale from his lips, his motto. **SILENCE IS GOLDEN.**

The train slowed to a stop; the doors opened. Passengers turned around to see the stop. A laborer's factory. Seamstresses, politicians, and others turned back around, facing straight forwards. Laborers stood up, revealing the worn bottoms of their overalls. Shuffling out of the train, tools, and metals clinked in their pockets. A few passengers stiffened at the sound, ready to report if another sound was made. But most others let their bodies go in a noiseless sigh, relieved to hear something for the first time in hours.

A cold yet familiar feeling washed over the car as two officers walked onto the train. Those who had sighed at the clinking of tools sat up expectantly, waiting for the two to pass by and leave them be. The officers' masks made their breathing amplified, almost deafening to the passenger's hypersensitive ears, impossible not to notice as they slowly meandered down the train. Occasionally they might walk by a beautiful woman and the shorter officer would glance at the other, his eyes holding a smirk. Or they'd see a crippled old man and peer down their noses at him. But when they reached the crying girl, they came to a complete halt. The girl had been attempting to keep herself together, her shoulders as strong as they could be. She looked up at the officers, her sunken brown eyes making her look eons older than she truly was.

The officers glanced at each other before removing their masks and leaning down to the girl. Her straight shoulders collapsed, breaking into sobs. The officer on the right groaned, rolling his eyes. The one on the left merely leaned closer, fascinated. He watched the girl as though she were an animal on display. A single finger tilted her

chin up, the officer examining her closely. His name tag that read "Williams" glinted in the light of the still rising sun. He scanned her face. The other officer, whose name tag read "Myers" asked him what he was doing. Eyes darted towards the voice. A voice, of all the things that they could hear on their commute to work.

"I feel as though," Williams paused, tilting his head. "I feel as though I know her."

"So? You know lots of people." Myers' eyes lit up suddenly. "Do you mean she used to be clean?" Williams responded only with a nod. Eyes turned from the voices to the girl at the speed of sound. Being re-stitched was one thing, but the fact that she used to be clean was something else entirely. The free breathing of the guards was the only sound in the train car. A faint gasp escaped Williams' lips, startling everyone in the car.

"Abigail?" his voice was barely a whisper. "This is where you've been? You're unclean?" The girl's eyes widened immensely, looking up at her superior. Myers turned around, his eyes shooting daggers at anyone who dared to look at them. Eyes returned to the floor. Myers looked down at the girl, who now had a name.

"Abigail Johnson," he shook his head. "Of all the people on this Earth, I never thought that you'd be unclean." Williams let his finger drop, standing up straight and pursing his lips.

"Let's go." his voice was quiet and slowly breaking, his eyes waiting to move down the row once more.

"No no, I want to talk to your Abigail. What've you been up to, darling? What'd they find out about you? What'd you say?" Myers chuckled. Face turning sour, Williams motioned down the rest of the aisle.

"Leave her alone." he looked down at Abigail, face as blank as a canvas. "This is for your own

good, Abby." Two cheeks turned hollow, a stomach retracted deep into a cavern. The silence in the train was an aquarium, and Myers' footsteps towards Abigail were like a light rapping on the glass.

"Serves you right. Scum," his soft chuckles turned into raucous laughter, so intense he had to lean on Williams for support. Abigail's tears seemed to evaporate instantly, her cheeks hot and red. As Myers' howls grew louder, her fists clenched tighter, her body shook more, her veins throbbed. Finally, when her silent burning had grown to its max, she screamed.

The scream broke everything. Her leather knots ripped from her mouth, blood erupted from the holes they had pierced. As she lunged at Myers, a splitting, animalistic sound poured forth from her mouth like rushing water. It was a sound of total rage, a sound of undeniable hatred towards everything she'd once supported. This was different than the frustration of spies. The spies could take out their cords whenever they wanted. They didn't live with them, their cords were temporary. The girl had lived with the cords for only about a month, and she was already finished.

Myers and Williams grabbed her by the arms, knuckles white from their tight clench. Her legs thrashed on the faded carpet of the train as they hauled her to the nearest door. Only three of the stitches had come out, but she was still able to speak, her voice a piercing shriek. Passengers squinted, stared, and flinched at the words that flew from her mouth. The officers came closer and closer to the doors.

"Don't you dare laugh at me! You did this to me! You took away every—" the doors closed. The sound of the girl's wild kicking feet was no more. Eyes remained on the floor. Mouths opened as wide as possible to pant heavily, to release a breath that had been held since Williams' finger touched the girl's chin.

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Casual coworkers glanced at each other from across the aisle. Strangers, couples, children, and parents all met each other's gaze. A mutual understanding was made in a moment's time. A theoretical nod was exchanged. The train began to move, accelerating at a quick yet comfortable and familiar pace. New gazes were met, more theoretical nods were exchanged. And as the train found a steady speed, the worst and yet the most plausible thing returned.

Silence.

# IT'S FINE

**Emma Smith**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Platte City Middle

School, Platte City, MO

Educator: Laura Hoefling

Category: Short Story

### It's Fine

"This doesn't work."

Crumple up the paper that you used. You tried but it didn't work so you crumpled it up and threw it away. You never look or think about it again. That's what I am... a crumpled up piece of paper. Used and whatever happens, doesn't work you throw it away. New families are pens that write all over me. Foster care is the trash. When new families get to "write" all over me they think it is the best thing they have done, but when they get a closer look and stare a little longer they realize that they can do better. They throw me away. It used to hurt, but now I'm used to it. But once you crumple it up it can never be straight again.

"You will love this new family."

I roll my eyes. Every time I walk down this hallway I

think that I won't be coming back, but I always do. I always come back. I leave with a smile on my face, ready to face the world. I come back with dried up tears and I block out everyone. In the room there is a lovely couple, sitting in expensive chairs, with perfect smiles on their faces. When I am waiting outside the door all I can think is how they want a collected and composed child. Whenever I walk into the room, their smiles are erased and they have to try again. This time not as natural.

"Hi, we are so excited to meet you."

It's like it has been rehearsed too many times, like an actor learning their lines. They look at me and they want to show love, but all they show is worry. They stare at the scars on my face, they stare at my puffy eyes, they stare at my red cheeks. I hate that they are staring at me. They are watching every move I make and I hate it. I have to be perfect... perfect is what I'll be.

"Come on in."

A new chapter to the story. Will it be wonderful, or will you hate how the author wrote it? When you walk into something new it can be frightening, but you will just have to fake it till you make it... right? That's how I have been living my life. Be grateful, they tell me. I'm trying. It's hard when all you have is a backpack from the thrift store, filled with five outfits and one pair of beaten up converse.

"Make yourself at home."

**HOME:** (noun) 1. A place where someone lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household. The foster care center is my home. Sometimes I leave for a while on "vacation", but it's always a little sad to go back home. When you come back no one is there to greet you. Some people didn't even know you were gone. You are just on your own again.

"Wake up"

Two words that I hate the most. I just want to get caught in my own dreams. Stay in the one I like the most. Like the Nutcracker, she has this wonderful dream, but she has to wake up and it's over. She will try to remember it, but in 20 minutes it will go away and she will forget about it. No matter how hard she tries it just leaves.

"We really hope you like it here"

Have you ever seen the movie, Annie? It's a great movie about a girl in foster care and gets adopted by a rich guy and then moves in his home and she then gets a Coach bag instead of her old backpack and has 50 pairs of clothes instead of 5. I wonder if the people who watch that movie know that's not how foster care really works.

"You can go unpack your things."

I don't have very much so this won't take long. They have two other kids, so I don't know why they would want me. I'm searching my new room and looking at everything, mesmerized by what is in it. Every so often I will find a picture or two and stare at it long and hard and see a perfect family. I think to myself. Why do they want me?

"Kids it's time for dinner."

It's been a while since I've heard that. At foster care, it's always at 6:00 sharp, and if you are late then you don't get anything. Not because of the people who work there won't give you anything. It's because of by the time you get there, nothing will be left. Then I am awoken from my trace by the sound of feet hurling down the stairs, like a herd of elephants.

"I hope you like chicken noodle soup?"

She made it sound like a question so I just nod my head yes. They sit all together at one table with placemats and everything. This is the best place I have ever eaten. The worst... the bathroom in foster care. They are talking about their day and I have zoned out. Till they all look at me.

"How was your day?"

I drop my spoon startled by the question and it hits the side of the bowl so hard it tips over and spills. My cheeks go red and I'm starting to burn up. I want to run, out the door, up the stairs, in the living room. I just want to be anywhere but here. They look at each other, they look at me, then they run and get towels to clean it up.

"It's ok, it's just a bowl."

They try to comfort me, but I get it it's hard. They practically brought a stranger into their house. I feel frustrated, like right before they meet me. Be perfect. I try to tell myself that, but the only thing that is running through my head is why did I have

to screw up.

"Get up kids it's time for school."

I don't wanna go. I don't wanna leave. Not that I really like it here, it's just I don't wanna go to school. I had to leave my old, go to a new school, where you have to wear uniforms and if you have anything besides Channel and Gucci then you better get ready for a long time of bullying. I get up anyway. Put on my clothes, brush my teeth, fix my hair, put my shoes on. It's like I'm on autopilot. I really hope I can stay like this because I don't wanna take the wheel again.

"Have a good day sweetie."

Sweetie. I don't really think she got the memo. I'm not here to have a family. I'm here to survive. I don't need friends, but if they are able to get me something that I can't on my own they could be beneficial. I guess some people call me a user. I think I'm just using my resources.

"How was school?"

How was school? How was school? I don't maybe that it sucked. Maybe I don't think I will go back. Maybe if I would have just stayed in foster care none of the bullying would have happened today. Maybe I shouldn't say that. Maybe I will just keep that to myself. Maybe if I give a smile and a thumbs up they will believe me. Look they believed it.

"How could you."

The second day of school and I already got in a fight. I didn't mean to. Let me rephrase that, I totally meant to start that fight. I'm just a little disappointed that I didn't get to finish it before a teacher broke it up. My knuckles ache. They are redder than they have ever been. It's okay though. They are always like this.

"You broke a student's nose."

How many is that? 5. New record. I wasn't planning on breaking their nose, it just got in the way. Girls aren't used to getting punched, at least not here. Foster care is a whole different story. If you don't know how to fight your dead meat. Pulling hair... that's not fighting.

"We can't have her in this house."

I didn't want to hear this conversation. I was just trying to take a shower. I guess I wasn't as perfect

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as I wanted to be. Sometimes things don't work and need to be erased. I didn't work so I'm going to be erased.

"You know what it's fine."

I found myself back. Back to where I belong. In this old, crusty room, where spiders are crawling out of corners. Maybe it was for the best. It's ok, I always knew in the back of my mind that I would be back. Do I know why? Maybe it's because I couldn't work with them. It's ok, I think? This is my home and this was my story so from now on I wouldn't let anyone write all over me again.

# GREEN MANGO

**Ann Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Short Story

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I was chewing a slice of dried mango and browsing ClothesPin in bed when the message arrived — a white bubble in the top right corner of my laptop screen. I clicked on it. A new conversation opened:

**you are now chatting with ClothesPin user "rosie <3"**

ROSIECOLOREDGLASSES

did u know some ppl call green peppers  
"mangos"

I rubbed my eyes.  
"rosie <3" was typing again.

ROSIECOLOREDGLASSES  
its a midwestern thing

ROSIECOLOREDGLASSES  
bc back in the olden days mangos were pickled  
so they wouldn't go bad. but then peppers and  
other  
foods were pickled too. so ppl got them mixed up

For a moment I wondered if "rosie <3" was watching me, eyeing the slice of mango in my hand and cackling softly. I didn't want to look at my window: Maybe there would be a camera there, or worse, another human face staring back at me.

My sister's name is Rosie. Said sister is prone to noticing little things, like one less bag of dried mango in the pantry, and a brother who's been eating twice his body weight in processed foods ever since swim season started. But I didn't really think about her at the time.

Rosie couldn't find me on the internet because I wasn't Sebastian on the internet. On ClothesPin, for example, I was [MERMAID2439](#). I made at least fifty dollars a month by buying "super-cool swim gear" from the local poolside shop and then selling it all 20% pricier on ClothesPin.

Maybe it was the money that got Rosie's attention: how I drove ten miles to the Super-Duper-Market to restock my stash of dried mango on a weekly basis. I ordered clothes from ClothesPin. I bought a stuffed walrus for Cate on her birthday. Rosie had wanted to keep the walrus for herself.

Downstairs, the fridge opened. Rosie was probably sticking her head inside, tallying its contents.

I took another bite of my dried mango. It tasted bitter, which I found pretty funny because I'd bought the kind with tons of added sugar. I'd imagined happiness and cavities.

Half an hour later, while I was working a line of

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floss between my teeth, one final message arrived. That was when I finally realized who I was dealing with.

ROSIECOLOREDGLASSES  
seb. u owe me for not telling dad

I sighed. Then I struggled to floss with one hand, while typing with the other:

MERMAID2439  
Thx

\*\*\*

Usually, I met Cate after school in the corridor between the boys' and girls' locker rooms and the indoor pool. Inside this common corridor, there was an unlocked closet for pool equipment and other junk, which was a horrible design flaw on the adults' behalf if they really cared about keeping boys and girls as far away from each other as physically possible.

This day, I changed into my Speedo before practice, covered it with a pair of baggy shorts, and waited ten minutes until Cate appeared. She was dressed in her dark red jersey before a field hockey game — a uniform which I used to find incredibly attractive until Rosie tried out and miraculously made the team. Now, it felt like the jersey was sneering at me.

Luckily, the single lightbulb in the closet glowed dim. I told myself to operate on touch, to navigate skin. I was brushing a strand of hair from Cate's face when she bristled.

"Seb," she said. Her voice was raspy. It was late November; I think she had a cold.

"Yeah," I grunted.

"Let's not do anything today." She was looking past my eyes, scanning the pull buoys stacked against the wall.

"Sure," I said.

A crowd of boys passed through the corridor

on their way to practice. One of them knocked twice on the closet door and made a smooching sound. It was probably Matty. He had a thing for Cate.

Cate leaned back against the kickboards.

"Your sister told me you wear my clothes sometimes," she said.

There was a brief pause. I looked at her face, and it was serious.

I spoke slowly. "Not your clothes, exactly." She was still staring, so I continued, "I buy clothes. Sometimes I buy the same clothes that you buy when we hang out at the mall." I hoped she would feel flattered.

"You go to the mall by yourself, when I'm gone?" Cate creased her brows.

"I order online," I said.

"Oh, right. Rosie told me that part." Cate nodded. "From ClothesPin, right?"

I was quiet. Cate stared at the ceiling for a while. It was getting late. I could hear whoops and splashes, bodies diving into the water, where I was supposed to be training.

"Family sucks." I closed my eyes.

Cate said, "It's not a big deal, Seb." She crouched and kissed me on my jaw. Her lips were chapped.

"Swim fast," she told me. Then she left.

I sat there for a while, listening to my dizzy breathing. It sounded so much louder now that I was alone.

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In the darkness of my room on Friday night, I ordered a dress from my ClothesPin account. It was worth at least twenty dollars, but I bartered the price down to twelve. Afterwards, I took down all my listings and changed my name to "Cate."

\*\*\*

**you are now chatting with ClothesPin user "rosie </3"**

ROSCOLouredGlasses  
seb!! or shall i call u "cate"? how dare u try to

hide from me

ROSIECOLOUREDGLASSES

look im british now hehe

ROSIECOLOUREDGLASSES

guess whose birthday is coming up...

ROSIECOLOUREDGLASSES

i would like a stuffed walrus. preferably one with

lovely

tusks. walruses have a lot of teeth but they only

use tusks

to fight and poke ppl bc they swallow food whole

ROSIECOLOUREDGLASSES

can u come home, dad is still out and i dont know

how

to use the stove

ROSIECOLOUREDGLASSES

do u want me to burn the house down

\*\*\*

A week later, I left home ten minutes early so I could pick up the newly ordered dress along my morning drive to school. Back then I had packages delivered to the post office rather than the front door; I wanted to keep them safe and solely mine.

This dress was the first thing I'd really chosen for myself, though. I was never sure which clothes looked the same in the pictures as in flesh and blood, which was why I usually let Cate try them on first, in the real world. Then I could track down duplicates on ClothesPin.

I'd never seen this dress before, on Cate or anyone. I just liked it. It was from Free People and it was grey with all these floral patterns. I thought it would look nice on me. Maybe, I told myself for the thousandth time, I would wear it to school.

I knew I wouldn't. School was full of people. I didn't want to think about what the mean people would say, and even the nice people would manage to drive me crazy with sappy

catchphrases, like "Way to let your true self shine!"

But I didn't want to be called any name other than "Sebastian." I just wanted to be a guy wearing nice clothes, and sometimes those clothes might happen to have skirts or sparkles, and that would be completely normal. I mean, Cate wore my hoodies all the time, and nobody treated her like a different person. So what if I did the same?

Meanwhile, I was still holding this plastic bundle with a dress inside, too afraid to open it, because what if it wasn't as dazzling as I expected? Instead I stuffed the package in my backpack.

Then my phone began to ring.

I held it against my ear. "Hey, Cate."

"Your sister thinks you forgot about her birthday," Cate replied, yawning into the speaker.

Oh.

"No way," I lied. "I already bought her a present and everything!" More lies.

"She says you left for school without her, and now your dad is going to drop her off, and she's going to feel like a 'total frosh baby.' Her words, not mine."

It was time to change the subject. "Hey, why isn't your name Kate with a K?"

"Rosie also claims you're impersonating me on the internet. She recommends I sue you for online defamation."

"Did you know that green peppers are actually mangoes?"

"If you need a present for her, I still have that stuffed walrus she was so wild about. One of its fang-things is droopy now, but otherwise, it's in pretty good shape." Cate cleared her throat. "Anyway. See you later, Seb."

"Bye."

She hung up.

Immediately, I pulled up the ClothesPin app on my phone. I tapped out a message and sent it to "rosie </3":

MERMAID2439

Happy Bday, walrus kid

For three minutes, I sat behind the wheel with the engine idling, waiting to see if Rosie would reply. She didn't.

\*\*\*

On Rosie's birthday, there was this really big swim meet against a rich private school. I don't remember which school, but I remember they were rich and probably private because they had an eight-lane pool with high-tech diving boards and an adjustable floor.

Usually Cate and I couldn't go to each other's games because we played overlapping sports. That day though, Cate was in the audience because her field hockey coach was at home with the seasonal flu. She'd traveled with me on the team bus, where I sat on the outside part of the seat so Matty wouldn't try to snap her bra straps.

Before my race, I crouched low on the starting block, gripping it with both hands. I knew Cate was watching from the stands off to my left, and Matty was racing in lane six, two lanes to my right. I was about to swim 50 yards of freestyle.

My best time in the 50 free was 24.39 seconds, which was kind of sad considering I did it when I was a freshman, and still, during my very last year of swimming, I couldn't dream of beating it. This race, I was mostly aiming to go under 26 seconds.

As I dove into the water, I was thinking about how funny it would be if Matty beat me. He was way slower than me. His flip turns were graceless.

Feeling otherworldly was the only part I liked about swimming. I was pounding the water with my arms and legs, and not once did I turn my head to the side to breathe. Air for a mermaid is superfluous, I told myself. My head was screaming.

My coach trailed me on dry land, whistling like a siren, but I could barely hear him. His whistles sounded more violent than encouraging. They were growing louder and sharper, an incessant whirlwind, at the moment when I noticed I was the only one in the pool.

The horn hadn't blown — a false start.

I stopped swimming and propped one foot against the bottom of the shallow end to glance back at the starting blocks. The other boys were still crouching at the ready, and Matty had this look on his face like he was trying not to grin.

I heard my coach calling, "Sebastian, get out of the pool." I swam down to the end, where I should have done a flip turn, and instead I climbed out, shaking my wet body like a dog's.

Cate was standing in the audience. She pointed to me and yelled; I couldn't make out her words, but I figured out what she was fussing about: a rivulet of blood trickling from my right hand. I must have cut it on the fancy starting block.

Finally, the horn went off. The remaining swimmers soared. Lane four remained empty.

I looked to see if my coach was getting out his first aid kit. He was too busy whistling and hollering for the other boys, and only for an instant did he meet my eyes. I waved at him with my bloody hand.

Then I put on a pair of sweatpants. They might have been my own sweatpants, but probably not. I threw my backpack over my shoulder, kicked my swim bag under the bleachers, and left the room. A light pair of footsteps padded behind me: Cate.

"I can show you where the nurse's office is," she said. "I was playing hockey here last year and sprained my ankle. The nurse is really nice, if it's the same nurse as last year. I think her name is Deborah."

"Let's leave," I interrupted, pushing past her and out the door.

Cate grabbed my arm, the non-bloody one. "You should get cleaned up."

"Let's go to the Super-Duper-Market. It's right across the street. Please come with me." I was already gone, striding backwards across the street. The pedestrian signal showed the picture of the white stick-man taking a step forward, but some grouchy car honked at me anyway.

"Only if you buy some gauze." Cate followed me. I think she saw my eyes ringed with red. She said quietly, "You know, I don't care if you fall

sometimes, Seb."

"I didn't fall," I said. "I thought I heard the horn."

The greeter at the Super-Duper-Market gave me a weird look as we approached the grey building. I kind of recognized that old lady, and I gave her a nod, thinking she would be able to identify me from all my late-night mango runs.

Then I remembered that I wasn't wearing a shirt. My hair was wet. It was about forty degrees outside, so my skin was probably tinged with purple, complementing my crimson hand.

I was about to open the door when the greeter started to flail her arms around. I saw she was gesturing at a sign that read, "Customers must be appropriately dressed in order to enter the facility."

I unzipped my backpack to search for appropriate clothing. I wasn't sure what I was expecting to find: a t-shirt, birthed out of thin air? Instead I found what I'd been carrying: a cleanly wrapped bundle from ClothesPin.

Hungrily, I tore apart the packaging. I think the colorful tissue paper soaked up most of my blood.

When I slipped into the dress, my skin was still wet, and it clung to me like a second skin. My sweatpants made the grey skirt billow — a cloud of tulle.

And Cate kept giving me the same face from a week ago in the pool closet, like she'd forgotten how to look at me. The Super-Duper-Market greeter had less trouble hiding her bewilderment.

"If you're going to break up with me," I said to Cate, "now's the time to do it."

"Sebastian," she said. She only used my full name when she wanted to stall. I waited as she grasped at words, her mouth opening and closing.

Then she said again, "Sebastian," this time like an answer. She grabbed my hand. We took a step forward, and another step. The almost-December wind began to howl.

"Let's find the gauze," Cate said to me.

"I have eighty bucks," I said. "Let's find something better."

\*\*\*

Two humans and one pink balloon were gathered around the kitchen table when I arrived home from the Super-Duper-Market. Rosie was playing a cooking game on her phone. My dad stabbed a tiny square of tiramisu with fifteen candles.

They both looked up as I entered the room. I was still wearing the dress. My arms were full of plastic grocery bags.

"Dammit, Sebastian," said my dad. He squinted at my clothes. I ignored him.

Dutifully, I set my treasures on the kitchen table. "Happy birthday, Rosie," I said, holding the first grocery bag out to her.

It was a new field hockey stick. She'd lost her old one last week and was borrowing one of Cate's.

Rosie said nothing.

I gave her a bag of dried mango, and another bag, and another. We had the same taste in snacks, but she didn't eat mine because she knew I was always hungry after swimming.

I gave her a bag of green peppers. I thought she would laugh.

She smiled a little.

There was one more bag. I set it on the dinner table to see if Rosie would accept it. She leaned forward. Her hands were shaking as she pulled out the stuffed animal. She looked me in the eye. "This is an otter," she said.

"We can call it Walrus," I told her. "I'm sorry. I tried my best."

Rosie opened a new bag of dried mango, offering me a piece. My dad was lighting the candles on the cake. Flames flickered, and the wax began to drip.

The mango slice felt foreign in this context, but when I sunk my teeth into the yellow flesh, it tasted sweeter than ever. I exhaled. Rosie handed me another piece.

# BLOODHOUNDS

**Ann Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Short Story

"Why does this silver man have two chins?" Jean-Luc asked, using the edge of a coin to trace the faint creases along his palm.

"I don't know," said Claire. She knew that as the boy's nanny, she should have corrected his boorish language, but King Louis XVI could hardly rise from the grave to declare treason on the child. Besides, as the son of Henri de Montdidier (whose brother was the count of Montdidier, in northern France, although Henri himself preferred Paris), Jean-Luc was nearly untouchable.

Claire glanced again at the boy, who was now tossing the coin in the air and catching it, each repetition slightly more precarious than the last. "Don't lose it," said Claire.

Jean-Luc tossed the coin higher.

This time, when he tried to catch it, it ricocheted off his cupped hands and hit the floor with a clink. The only other audience at the BOULANGERIE — a white-haired couple behind the counter (the BOULANGÈRE and his wife, Claire surmised) — chuckled at the boy's antics.

It was Monsieur Henri's money anyway, Claire told herself — an inexhaustible supply. Let the boy toss the coin in the Seine.

"Mademoiselle!" a gravelly voice was calling.  
"Mademoiselle, your bread!"

Claire blinked. The BOULANGÈRE held up

Claire's wicker basket, now filled with three freshly baked baguettes.

"Thank you. And good afternoon," said Claire, slipping the basket around her arm and turning to leave, but —

"Good afternoon!" said the BOULANGÈRE, as a greeting rather than a farewell, while he accepted the coin from Jean-Luc's grubby hands. "The weather has been awful lately, hasn't it? No rain since April. And so much sun. They say the sun is good for crops, but you know, that is only true when there is enough rain, or else the roots shrivel up like old men's fingers. Ha! But last summer..."

As the BOULANGÈRE droned on and on (and consequently, Claire's focus shifted to the delightful scent of the baguettes she was carrying), Jean-Luc continued to scrutinize King Louis XVI's engraved face, which now stared from the countertop to the ceiling.

"He is so ugly, that king. Why would anyone listen to him?" Jean-Luc thought aloud.

Claire scowled. "Shh. Don't talk like that." Not now.

The BOULANGÈRE took no offense at the interruption to his story, nor at Jean-Luc's bluntness. "Ha! People do not listen to pretty faces, or else your lady here would have all the power in the world, eh?" He winked at Claire, then continued for Jean-Luc: "No, they listen to blood. LE SANG. Almost as good as gold, it used to be. But now... it is the other way around, isn't it? The good blood tends to spill."

Claire quickly thanked the BOULANGÈRE for the bread, meanwhile dragging Jean-Luc from the store. The boy did not need to fill his mind with this crimson imagery.

And now Claire had to return to the house, prepare dinner, deliver Jean-Luc to his tutor.... (And what money did Henri pay her? Hardly enough to buy a baguette nowadays.) Claire thought again of Jean-Luc's glimmering coin, soaring like a swallow, then plummeting. She wrapped her hand tighter around the bread

basket until she could feel the splinters biting into her skin.

\*\*\*

The variety of cheeses on the dining table appeared creamier under candlelight. Richer, like each one was bragging of its own euphoric flavor. How many coins could buy all this cheese? Claire lifted a slice of Camembert to her lips and bit off the very end, leaving two tooth-sized indents on the remaining moon-colored section.

Across the table, Henri de Montdidier polished off the last of his oysters with a juicy slurp, then leveled his gaze upon Claire, who tried her best to focus on her cheese, without expression.

"How is the boy?" Henri attempted.

Claire swallowed her latest bite of cheese.

"The same as always."

"Ah. Good." Henri chuckled, setting down his fork with a clatter. A few rooms away, Jean-Luc was fast asleep, probably snoring as loud as a man twice his size.

A silence. Claire continued to chew. And then she asked, "You are not afraid?"

"Of what, my own boy?"

"No." Claire lifted her eyes to return Henri's stare. "The SANS-CULOTTES," she told him.

(Literally, "without breeches" — clothing designated for the upper-class.)

Henri's face twitched, but only for a second. "Not at all." The nanny had quite some audacity to bring up politics out of nowhere. Henri decided to continue, to prove he wasn't frazzled by the change of subject: "Those SANS-CULOTTES... they are without a lot of things. SANS riches. SANS knowledge. SANS order.

"He waved his arms in the air as he spoke.

"Yes." Claire nodded. That much was true.

"They are only poor; that is all they have. Complaints of injustice. The poor are always complaining, like children, as if enough anger will rearrange our hands." Henri glanced at Claire, as if only then noticing her presence.

AND THEY ARE CHOPPING MEN'S HEADS OFF  
— MEN LIKE YOU, LIKE ANYONE — AT THE TOWN  
SQUARE A MINUTE'S WALK FROM YOUR HOUSE,

Claire wanted to add, but thought better of it.

Besides, another elephant had just entered the room: Jean-Luc, half-asleep, hesitating at the doorway. He wiped his pajama sleeve across a runny nose.

Claire exchanged glances with Henri, who nodded his permission for her to leave the table. Relieved, Claire set her hand on the boy's shoulder, directing him back down the empty hall, murmuring, "What is it that awakened you?"

\*\*\*

Tomorrow was Christmas; the news took Claire by surprise. It wasn't exactly that she had FORGOTTEN the date, despite the official dissolution of the Gregorian calendar (how could one forget in Paris these days, with everyone listening so closely for whispered wishes of good cheer — the chance to quietly damn the guillotine's hunger for ecclesiastics?). But the thought of holiday cheer had not wormed its way into her skull.

Until now, that is. In a daze, Claire packed her belongings — six coins, several changes of clothes, and a lump of cheese wrapped in fresh cloth — into a wooden trunk that Henri was lending her for the week.

"You must enjoy the holiday with your own family," Henri had told her the morning before, at breakfast.

"But—"

"They will be missing you." Henri narrowed his eyes. This was an order, a test.

So Claire obeyed. The ride to her childhood house felt like a lifetime, and when the coach finally grumbled to a halt, Claire immediately rose to her feet, massaging the back of her neck, which was sore from curling her body forwards, shrinking into herself, throughout the journey.

Claire's mother greeted her with a grunt: "You are on break?"

"By order of Henri de Montdidier," replied Claire, dragging her luggage inside the dark house.

"My poor angel. Always working." The mother fiddled with a lock of her hair, then said to Claire,

"Would you mind heating the stove?"

For dinner, they had **COQ AU VIN**, to celebrate Claire's return. Just the two of them, mother and daughter; the father was who-knows-where for business, as usual.

"You understand how it is," the mother explained.

Claire nodded. Her father's customers depended on him to juggle their savings, but more importantly, her mother depended on him for to bring back money for the family (and so had Claire, when she was younger, before she'd run away to Paris for several months, then returned on her father's birthday with a sack of peaches, in addition to a collection of anecdotes featuring a French nobleman's devious son — her charge, a sign of her self-sufficient living). Claire could not dream of disrupting this balance.

The mother tore off another portion of the chicken for herself. "He is doing very well, your father."

Claire laughed. "Of course."

The mother stopped slicing her chicken for just a moment to look her daughter in the eye. "You do not need to work for that snobbish nobleman, my dear. We have enough."

"We have enough **MONEY**," said Claire. "What we do not have — well, that is a lot."

The mother raised an eyebrow.

Claire sighed. "Dignity, for example. **LE GOUVERNEMENT** treats us as a peasant family."

"But the difference is we can pay them, and the peasants cannot." The mother gnashed a slice of chicken between her teeth. "Do not speak such ungrateful words. You spout the scripture of a **SANS-CULOTE**."

"And who will hear me?"

The mother said it again, softer this time: "We have enough."

Claire stopped eating her chicken to reach under the table and pull a small, brown sack from her trunk. She tugged open the sack and spilled its contents onto the table — four greenish copper coins.

The mother scoffed. "What, you think you are some martyr?"

"We have enough," snipped Claire. She rose from her seat and flung open the front door. One by one, she hurled the coins as far as she could, so that she lost sight of each one among the bushes and trees.

The mother bit her tongue.

\*\*\*

"Today is my birthday," said Jean-Luc, when Claire returned to Paris.

Claire frowned. "No. Your birthday is in the summer." (In fact, the closest upcoming birthday was Claire's — in less than two weeks — but of course the boy didn't know that. Who could keep track of birthdays anymore?)

"Papa said I could go to the **BOULANGERIE** today to buy a birthday gift." Jean-Luc held out his fist and unclenched it, revealing a handful of various coins. Then he quickly drew his hand back, as if he suspected Claire of wresting the coins from his open palm.

Claire glanced over her shoulder at Henri, who was lounging on the couch, popping strawberries into his mouth. "Entertain the boy," he said, with a flip of the hand.

So Claire and Jean-Luc ambled across the street to the **BOULANGERIE**.

"I want a chocolate cake," said Jean-Luc to Claire. He cupped both hands and jingled the coins between them.

Claire wrapped her fingers around his wrist, ceasing his movement. "There is no cake at the **BOULANGERIE**. Only bread."

Behind the counter, the **BOULANGÈRE**'s wife chimed, "If you're looking for sweets, the closest **PÂTISSERIE** is a long ways to the south." No doubt, a distance far too long for Jean-Luc to walk without complaining.

"How about a birthday croissant?" suggested Claire.

But Jean-Luc was already banging his fists against the side of the counter. "I want cake!"

"I can perhaps bake a cake if I have enough sugar," the wife was saying, opening and closing the cabinets.

"No need," said Claire. "We can make one at

home."

"But I want to **BUY** one," said Jean-Luc, again holding out his handful of coins.

"Aha! Sugar." The wife pulled out a nearly empty bag, then poured a mound of white crystals into her mixing bowl. She said to Jean-Luc, "You are a lucky boy."

Claire silently agreed.

Jean-Luc's wary eye traced each of the wife's movements. As she added a pinch of salt to the concoction, Jean-Luc remarked, "What about the chocolate?"

"There is no chocolate." The wife made hesitant eye contact with Claire. Only then did Claire notice the deep, prune-colored bags under the older woman's eyes.

A pause. Then Jean-Luc let out a bloodcurdling screech: "Eeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiieee!"

"Maybe I can find some," the wife mumbled, kneeling to rifle through the bottom cabinets.

"Eeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiieee...."

"I'll keep looking, just you wait."

But Jean-Luc would not wait.

"Eeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiieee!" — in a flash he threw his numerous coins at the floor. Copper, bronze, and silver rattled like rainfall. The boy's face glowed, shiny as butter.

Obscured by the counter, the wife continued her fruitless search for chocolate (and all the while, her own sweet tooth was aching, but she hadn't seen a bar of chocolate in ages), pretending she hadn't heard the tantrum for the poor nanny's sake. But her curiosity would not be completely suppressed; she held her breath and listened closely: the little boy's heavy breathing, a scuttle of shoes against the floor... a dull thud.

A thud? The wife heaved herself to her feet. She was surprised to see the little boy, alone, empty-handed, blinking up at her with glassy eyes. The floor of the **BOULANGERIE** was perfectly clear.

\*\*\*

Claire wasn't quite sure what she was doing, but whatever it was, she had to do it quickly. The coins that she had tucked into the front of her

dress clinked against each other as she surged through the Parisian crowd, but the sound was muffled, and there was too much noise on the streets for anyone to notice. (She reminded herself not to feel sorry about stealing the coins from Jean-Luc, who had thrown them away of his own will, after all.)

Today, Claire sensed a tension among the crowd. Whispers and glances were being passed between passersby, though Claire was never at the receiving end; she knew no one. People walked with long, purposeful strides, which Claire tried to mimic. It would be safer to join the herd — to blend in with the crowd, in case Henri or Jean-Luc somehow spotted Claire and accused her of thievery. It was just a few coins, really, and the Montdidiers could spare more than a few. In fact, Claire told herself, she was only taking the pay that would be fairly hers, if Henri relinquished her rightful salary. Yes, that was why she was running. She deserved a better life; she deserved at least as much as that impish boy throwing silver coins around like stones.

Now Claire would go home and wait for her father, and maybe even follow him on his travels. She might even make peace with her mother, by telling some noble lie about how her mother was right all along, and how Claire was so grateful for her family's new wealth. Or Claire could run and run and never turn back. (Something in the air today was telling her to run.) Claire smiled to herself. In any case, her future was wide open.

Down at the bottom of the gentle hill that Claire was descending, a sudden commotion broke the steady buzz of the crowd. There was a raucous cheering from the source of the chaos — the Place de la Révolution (the execution square), of course — but some of the people around Claire fell silent, shaking their heads. Only the **SANS-CULOTTES** were still excited about spilling **LE SANG**.

A gentle rain began to fall, the kind of rain you could barely see, but you felt it cold against your skin, delicate against your eyelashes. Claire squinted from a hundred yards or so from the execution square; she could barely distinguish the

body slumped over at the guillotine: wrinkled, stout, dressed in peasant's pajamas.

Claire kept walking. What else could she do? There was no turning back towards the bakery, and more even more threateningly, she had to evade the fashionable home of Henri de Montdidier.

Slowly, the headless figure came into focus. It took Claire only a moment to recognize her former acquaintance, without his ever-present grin — the BOULANGÈRE's lifeless body looked infinitely wearier than Claire could have ever imagined him alive.

He had always spoken too bluntly.

The rain was coming down harder now, bounding against rooftops, pressing Claire's dress against her skin. (At least a storm would be good for the crops, Claire told herself, shivering.) She closed her eyes as she hurried across the square. The man was behind her now. She would keep walking.

\*\*\*

The BOULANGÈRE's wife was walking Jean-Luc back across the street to his father's magnificent house, the same house she saw and envied every day through the dusty shop window. And this tiny boy would inherit it someday, she supposed.

"I'm cold," said Jean-Luc. He used both hands to wipe the rain droplets from his face, so that several strands of hair clung to his forehead like vines.

"But you are already home," said the wife, knocking against Montdidier's front door.

The door opened, and then Henri de Montdidier was looming over them, his eyebrows arching in wild directions. The BOULANGÈRE's wife tried to explain what had happened, but she rushed and stumbled over her hazy recount: how the boy had cried for cake, and the nanny fled, pinching a decent sum of the boy's money as she left.

Meanwhile, Jean-Luc was gazing into the distance, down the gentle slope of a hill, at the Place de la Révolution. The executions had always fascinated him, though his father always

snapped at him for asking questions about the guillotine: Did people close their eyes before the blade came down? Who had to clean up all the blood?

But this time, Jean-Luc wasn't interested in the guillotine, or whoever's head was rolling beneath it. He was staring at the back of the head of a familiar young woman, who was vanishing deeper and deeper into the crowd.

"Jean-Luc? What is it?" his father was asking, beckoning the boy inside.

Jean-Luc shook his head with a laugh. "Oh Papa, it's nothing. Will you walk me to the PÂTISSERIE?"

## KIWI SOAP, FRAMES, AND GHOSTS

**Carrie Zhang**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Short Story

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**Matt**

Right before I receive the call, I am restocking the aisle of travel-sized toiletries in Mr. Jensen's store: shampoo, conditioner, deodorant, the works. As I toss them carelessly into the grey, plastic bin, one explodes, sending kiwi-scented soap all over my shirt and hands. Joanna, the red-haired cashier who keeps eyeing the 75-cent candy bars, smirks as she hands me a towel and

my cell phone.

I can still smell kiwi as I sit beside Emily, gripping her hand as she sleeps. The blur of the white walls surrounding us makes her seem paler than she actually is, and the incessant beeping from the dozens of machines makes my head pound.

When Dr. Winkleman slips open the door and beckons, I gently release Emily's hand and follow him into the hallway, shutting the door behind me.

He grips the clipboard in his weathered hands and says, "I'm sorry. I wasn't expecting another incident."

My fist slams against the cold, bumpy walls, and I groan, clutching it with my other hand. "Damn it!" My finger stabs into Dr. Winkleman's chest and I growl, just quiet enough so as to not wake up Emily, "You swore she was getting better. You're a fucking liar!"

Dr. Winkleman places a hand on my shoulder and stares apologetically at me. "I thought the medication was helping. I had hope that she would be okay, and I think she believed it too. You shouldn't give up now, Matt. Your sister will get better in time."

"And in the meantime, as I watch her fall apart, what am I supposed to do? How can I help her? How will she get better?" I put my head in my hands. "Tell me how to help her."

Dr. Winkleman sighs, "I've prescribed something new for Emily. Just try and be there for her. I am truly sorry, son. I know that this is a hard time for you and your family, but if you need anything, call me." Dr. Winkleman squeezes my shoulder and disappears down the hall and around the corner.

"See you next month, asshole," I mutter before slipping back into the room, where Emily sits propped up against her pillows.

"Matt," she sighs. "It's fine."

I take her frail hand in mine. "Let's go home."

As the rain splatters against my bare arms and face, I dash to the other side of the car to help Emily. Her glassy eyes bore into me as she says

hoarsely, "I'm capable of opening a door. I'm not so breakable." She walks ahead of me and pushes the front door open. The overbearing smoky smell surges over me as I follow her into the house where Dad is collapsed on the couch with a half-finished cigarette in his right hand. There is no syringe on the coffee table today.

I slam the door shut and throw my keys on the counter, startling him awake.

"Hey, Pop," Emily says almost serenely, leaning back against the wall.

"Where were you?" He staggers to his feet, one trembling hand gripping the worn couch.

Emily shrugs and mutters, "Hospital," as if it's no big deal.

I scoff as I tug a blanket off the couch and wrap it around Emily's shoulders. Of course my father wouldn't know about it. If I wasn't working and if Aunt Jillian didn't send us monthly checks, we would be on the streets.

"What happened?"

"Nothing that hasn't happened before," Emily says before walking to her bedroom and shutting the door.

My father does not even acknowledge me when I say, "Do you even care about your children anymore?" He keeps his eyes straight ahead as he slips past me, with his cigarette dangled in his left hand. He returns to the couch and mutters, "I'll check on Em later. I'm sorry, Matt."

I stand close behind him and say, "Your apologies aren't shit. Pick yourself up. Emily needs her father, and I need you to stop being a problem."

"Matt, I'm still your father."

I almost laugh. "It's been two years, Pop. Two years since Mom died. Two years since we've had a parent." I pause, hoping for some response, but he keeps his mouth shut. His eyes do not even move from the couch when I add, "Trust me, POP. You're not our father anymore."

He stays on the couch as I return to my room without another word. As I open my bedroom door, I can hear the shuffling and the fiddling of his hand opening a box. He's lit another cigarette.

It is in times like these that I wonder if what Emily is doing to herself is so wrong. No matter what Dr. Winkleman prescribes, she'll keep trying, and Pop is too far gone.

But then, I hear Mom's voice in my head.

#### THE VERY DEFINITION OF BROKEN MEANS THAT IT CAN ALSO BE FIXED.

##### Emily

When I finally hit the water, it doesn't hurt as much as I thought it would.

I know that Dad is probably at home smoking whatever he could buy, and Mom is, of course, dead.

Matt will be just fine without me. I'm the one holding him back. Maybe when I'm gone, he'll get out of this town. Go to college. Find a pretty girl to marry. Have two kids. He'll probably name one of them Sarah, after Mom.

I tell myself that I am doing everyone a favor.

More than anything, I want to see Mom again. Every time I feel my body giving in and my mind drifting further and further away like being washed out to sea, I can hear her voice. But every single time, I find myself in another hospital bed with Matt clutching my hand, pulling me back to shore.

After swim practice ends and the coaches are tucked away in their office, I sneak into the pool and tie weights around my ankles before plummeting into the deep end.

It doesn't work.

Matt tells me that Coach Phillips fished me out of the pool right after I blacked out. Lucky me.

My nurse's name is Shelly, and she has the biggest nose I've ever seen. Matt scolds me as I stare at her while she readjusts one of the many tubes that slides through my skin. They're trying to keep me alive, I guess.

Here's the thing about nurses. Most of them stare at me as if I'm some broken object, and then, they shove a juicebox and a bowl of mashed potatoes in my face like that's going to make me better. Dr. Winkleman is even worse. When they think I'm asleep, I can hear Matt and Dr. Winkleman bickering in the hallways. Matt is

always angry, and Dr. Winkleman is always sorry.

Through the window, I can see the doctor hand Matt another prescription written on a crisp yellow note. Dr. Winkleman does this every month. The same routine. Sometimes I wonder if he does this with every person he tries to save. They need help. Here, hand them a prescription, because medicine solves everything.

Medicine can't solve everything. If it did, Mom would still be here.

Matt returns to the room, gently shutting the door behind him.

"Matt," I say. "It's fine."

He tries to cover his anger with a brief smile.  
"Let's go home."

The rain makes a soft PITTER PATTER sound against the windows as we drive home in silence. After he puts the car in park, Matt practically flies to my side to help me out.

"I'm capable of opening a door. I'm not so breakable," I tell him. He nods and takes a small step back. I want to thank him for taking care of me, but instead, I walk towards the front door, pushing it open. The television is still on, and Pop is sprawled over the couch with a cigarette in his hand. At least it's not crack or heroin today.

Matt comes in behind me and slams his keys on the counter. Pop springs awake, clutching his cigarette to his hand.

"Hey, Pop," I say quietly, pulling my sweatshirt tighter around me. There's a slight chill in the house. Or maybe it's because I'm always cold, even in the summer. Matt places my favorite blanket over my shoulders as I lean against the wall.

"Where were you?"

I shrug. "Hospital."

I don't blame Pop for never seeing me in the hospital. After the cancer consumed Mom, I can't blame him. We all have our own ways of dealing with the pain, but Matt doesn't understand. I don't think he will ever look at Pop the same way.

"What happened?" Pop grips the living room couch like a cane and stares straight ahead at the wall. Matt perches by my side, glaring at Pop.

"Nothing that hasn't happened before," I say quietly before walking to my bedroom and shutting the door. I collapse against the bed and reach for the frame of Mom and me that rests on my nightstand. The frame digs into my skin, and I can feel the scorchingly hot blood pouring out. It stains my sheets that Matt will clean tomorrow without me asking, that Dad will not even notice.

I sigh.

There is always tomorrow.

## Pop

She will not leave me alone this morning.

As I'm brushing my teeth, I glance into the mirror and see Sarah standing behind me, smiling. I splash my face with ice cold water and look in the mirror again. She's still there. I hope she doesn't talk today.

After I get dressed, I head into the kitchen for breakfast. Or maybe it's lunch now.

When all that is left in my bowl are soggy Cheerios, she is back, sitting in front of me, smiling. Her hair brushes against the top of the table as she gazes at me with her ocean deep blue eyes. She always believed her eyes were her best feature.

Sarah follows me to the refrigerator where I reach for a pack of beer and head to the couch to watch the baseball game.

I glance at the calendar that's tacked up on the wall. Shit. I have a shift in an hour. Danny is not as forgiving as he used to be about skipping shifts. I glance to my right. Sarah is still there, sitting on the opposite couch, smiling at me. I can't go to work today. She'd follow me there, and I haven't figured out a way to explain that my wife is haunting me.

I can't focus on the game.

"Leave me alone," I groan, stumbling to the kitchen where I reach inside my coat pocket for a pack of cigarettes that I swiped from Danny's office. I can feel her eyes boring into my back as I light it, cupping a hand over the flame.

Though there was a time when I would hope for her to appear, her ghost is a constant reminder that I'm alone. But, the cigarettes and beer are

not enough to make her disappear. I remind myself to see Stanley this weekend and to pick up some cash from the bank. He doesn't accept any bills bigger than the twenties.

I return to the couch, and she follows me. Smiling.

By the time I wake up, it is dark and raining outside and the game is over. The Cubs lost. I know I've missed my shift when I see three messages and a missed call from Ron who works at the shop with me. I'll have to call Danny later.

The front door opens behind me, and Emily walks through, with her brother close behind.

Matt stands with his arms crossed, frowning down at me in his usual disapproving way. Emily leans against the wall with a drained expression, and Sarah stands behind her, smiling. Her hair is now tucked behind her ears.

"Hey, Pop," she says, tugging at the strings on her sweatshirt. Matt glares at me as he snatches a blanket off the couch and places it around his sister's shoulders.

"Where were you?"

She shrugs and says, "Hospital."

"What happened?" I take a step forward, clutching the battered couch for support. I wish Emily would come to me like she did years ago, but she never does anymore. I look at my daughter, with her fading blue eyes and tangled, curly blond hair. It seems like she is disappearing right in front of me. My mistakes are her cancer, and just like Sarah, they are both struggling to stay afloat.

I glance at Sarah. I wish she would get angry at me. I wish she would scream, and hit me, but she never does. But I know that if she were still alive, she would never forgive me for being the father who left his children to fend for themselves.

I hear Emily quietly say, "Nothing that hasn't happened before," before turning around and padding back to her room.

Matt takes a step towards me and says, "Do you even care about your children anymore?"

I keep my eyes on Sarah and say, "I'll check on Em later. I'm sorry, Matt." I slip back to the couch.

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Sarah follows, sitting down on the couch to my right. Smiling.

I feel Matt behind me as he says, "Your apologies aren't shit. Pick yourself up. Emily needs her father, and I need you to stop being a problem."

"Matt, I'm still your father."

He scoffs. "It's been two years, Pop. Two years since Mom died. Two years since we've had a parent." He pauses, but I can't bring myself to argue with him. He's only stating the truth. "You're not our father anymore." He stomps away.

I sigh as I stare at Sarah who is still smiling.

I reach for another cigarette.

WRITING  
PORTFOLIO

## Samiya Rasheed

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# DISCONNECT

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

My mother mourns leaving her own country so deeply it runs through her veins into mine. Bangladesh is what she knows and what she loves. She spends her time showing me her culture: spinning through dances, running through poetry, and wading through history. I, in turn, cannot read her Sanskrit language. My Bangla is passable, but the prose she serves leaves me helplessly thumbing through a Bangla-to-English Dictionary. Bangladesh. A slowly sinking country of dark brown soil and dark brown people that I have only ever loved by proxy. Her holidays are mine. Her foods are mine. Her blood is mine. Yet I hear of the trailing, frayed tales of the Liberation War beginning with a genocide of **MY** people, and I feel the disconnect. It happened when my mother was eight, but I cannot imagine it.

I am defined by Bangladesh, but also defined by the split between her and me. My mother was born in Comilla. My father was born in Dhaka. My sister was born in Perth, Australia. I was born in Omaha, Nebraska; I have never lived far from it. My first tongue is English; so are the songs I dive into, the words I weave, and the past I drape myself in. Here, miles away from any tumbling ocean, are my roots. I spend my days willingly, cashing in hours for creating stories and people

that I will never know. The earth travels its spin, and my tales appear lazily in smudged, inky English. Sometimes, I cash in my hours to imagine the salt-water people of Bangladesh: riding rickshas in the ever boisterous city or on tin roofs under coconut palms. I ask my mother of prettier, formal words for this and for that as I try to paint her home into something I can understand. The roads form in a dusty copper traversed by a thousand feet in all manner of shoes. The cars must travel slowly; the foot traffic will not stop for them. The air is filled with smoke and spice and the overlaying voices of both symphony and cacophony. The people wear anything from rich, embroidered saris of any color to tucked dress shirts and trousers as they amble, shop, and yell up at boys playing badminton on roofs, holding their birdies. There is no English plastered on the walls. There is little familiar to a girl who has lived in midwestern suburbs her entire life.

It is not real. I have only ever loved Bangladesh from a distance, and these dips into her image do nothing to make her clear to me. I am creating newness that will not translate into my mother's sepia toned past. Neither can I ask her to change what I have made. Her eyes glide over the double-spaced, 12 point lines I gave days to and get hitched on certain syllables like getting splinters from wood. In trying to explain, I end up looking into identical brown-black irises and being struck silent at the gap.

She once told me, as we drove home on an innocent little road in Leawood, Kansas, you learned the important one. That she wished she could carve words in English like I did. Yet **THESE WORDS**, formed mindlessly in careless Bangla, struck like a bullet. Is that truly what she thought? That it was better to leave behind generations of heritage for the clinical English I wield in America? How does one judge? I am Bangla, and I am American, but one is a country I have breathed for sixteen years and the other is a country I have visited twice. What did I gain and what did I forfeit?

I don't know if I'll ever find out. If that's a given or a decision. I try to keep them both: Bangla

American and most definitely first generation: defined by polaroids of Bangla coasts, soles in American prairies, and dreaming of the Pacific passage. But the line between what I am and long to know is crust, mantle, core, adverb, participle, noun, and I haven't kept pace.

I suppose that's entropy; natural law. Heat and history lost over a thousand miles, ruling it greed to crave both ends of the Earth, leaving green-ink English a cold comfort, and weaving tributaries into the great river of my bloodline.

(The distance aches.)

## SMILE DEAR, IT DOESN'T MEAN A THING

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

### MEET ME UNDER THE CEILING FAN

Maa spouts words like a river, fast and unrelenting. Dad barks word like a growing thunderstorm. They could so easily flow into each other's words. They don't, but that's okay. I sit beneath the creaky ceiling fan and play songs under my breath.

They yell at each other, unrepentant. It's like a hurricane, equal parts storm and ocean. But I sit within orange walls and it almost fades away.

And I'll go down to them, their word dragging me, and I'll sing a little louder. Make their words shy away from mine. It's a battle without declaring war.

Dad will sit down with dark brows and tired eyes. Maa will stand disapproving in frown lines. We'll sit and sit and I'll sing inside my own head and the glares they hurl won't get by.

But the hurricane starts again, and their words

ricochet on the walls behind me and I'm sad. But neither will ever truly say they're better apart. So the hurricane continues. I sing songs under my breath.

### MAIA AND TURTLE NECKLACES

She said she wanted to run. I asked what stopped her. She said Jack.

Maia, who lives across the street and sleeps with a hammer, decided we were sisters. I nodded, and that's what we became. She's the girl with rose cheeks and a cloud in her mind. She's always too sad and too wild, like she's dying everyday. She takes pills for sleep and calls at 3 AM with sobs in her throat. She kisses boys and loses love and she asks if I'll ever leave. No, because we're chained together now and I can see too many broken links to break another.

Maia who sails like a ship half-sunk always looking for a rescue. People leave her so often. She says she's dying and she's fine. She's so far from fine. Plugging up holes with eyeliner and pencil skirts to ignore the flood. She falls in love too quick and still keeps a trail of broken hearts behind her. She screams into the ocean and cries as it beats on her walls. And the SECOND it stops, she'll always trust it to stop forever. Try to lead her away but it'll always begin again. And when she calls I can only listen.

She called again and said I LOVE him. I shook my head and wrote letters about heartbreak.

And when it fell apart and she sobbed clutching turtle necklaces, my heart fell and I held this shipwreck of a girl.

Oh Maia, what's holding you back?

### WHISPERING THROUGH THE CRACKS

Because it began in a car ride on they way home. With three almost strangers and the lowlights of shy faces in white light. Crevices revealed in the dark with the shining light of a

phone in her hand. Typing notes. Typing notes to ME.

I USED TO BE SUICIDAL. I'M GETTING BETTER, BUT IF I EVER COME HERE WITH BRACELETS, JUST HUG ME. AND TELL MY MOM. BUT I'M GETTING BETTER. JUST WANTED SOMEONE HERE TO KNOW.

And then she'll turn her eyes to me and ask in that lowlight. DO YOU GET IT? COULD YOU HELP? And I'll suffocate on my own silence because I've never known what to say to brave strangers in the dark. Willing to tell me who they are. Freely tearing their hearts out and hoping they didn't bleed.

So I'll try to nod and lay my head on her shoulder, but somehow all I see is someone else and GOD WHY WOULD YOU TRUST ME?

Because the first time I saw it I never realized it was brave. I took it as a fact that I could live through but didn't really understand.

When that girl of constellations and sad poetry stood up to me and admitted. That girl I hold dear and know so much farther than this stranger. A girl of flashlights and charcoal and all the things I can't list, and who told me nothing and everything in one moment.

#### BUT WHY ME?

Because she walked to me in the middle of class with a smile painted upon the skin and hesitance muraled in her eyes and shadows hiding in fluorescent lighting. Raised a hand and there it was, inked into her hand because how else would she ever say it? Penned in. Blue ink in the valleys and mountains of her palms, slipping across her wrists and her arms and her being. Bravery somehow spilling onto linoleum tiles.

#### Cutter

And there it was. Her very being spilled out in blue-black blood. And so it went. A steady stream or her blood rearranging into words and poetry and novels.

And to this day I'll never know how she did it. And why she told ME. But GOD was that more than we could've hoped.

## LIKE A VIRGIN (END OF THE ROPE REMIX)

Category: Short Story

"You know what's great about this entire generation? We're like 90 percent atheist and everyone's morals are fucked. Like we love everything, but also—"

"It's all blood, sex, death."

"Yeah. We're wilding out, man."

"Especially that death part, my dude. I crave the sweet embrace of oblivion, please and thanks."

"Amen to that."

My mother doesn't wear a hijab in the house so her locks flow heavily over her shoulders. In her age they should be thinner or grayer than they are, but they seem suspended under the shawl. She looks like a young woman from the back. Her face tells a different story.

"Mamoni, go into doctory. You will be so happy when you are older. Please, Shonamoni, for me? I love you," she pleads in a saccharine voice into my chest. It seems like she is growing smaller rather than me changing at all. Every year adds another weight to her shoulders. (And more desperation into her plea for my future.)

Carefully, I untangle my limbs from hers and, gently as is possible, push her back.

"No."

It's soft over the 6 inch gap between our faces. I back away further. Her eyes harden—or maybe I can't see the glare of the windows in them anymore, I don't know. She gets even smaller. A flinch runs up my fingers. I add abortively, "Sorry." I don't think it helped.

People talk about young love as if it's anything more than a mad rush to satisfy hormones that are suddenly on fire. Between the cinderblock hallways of schools there are hundreds of hook-ups. Cheap cherry lip gloss travels daily down a river of spit and smiles. It's the most exciting thing that could happen to you.

(I'm not a stranger, though. There's a certain one. Lips cut into his face like clay, always chapped as well. A soft pink. I try not to stare as he walks by, but we are all slaves to our bodies.)

Dad comes home at 9:21 pm with a storm riding his brow line. His hospital is only 42 minutes away but he is always oceans away from us; a different weather pattern of cold updrafts and air currents. Maybe, that's why it always ends in disaster. Frigid words crashing into the blazing tropics my mother so misses: it's a recipe for a storm. Rain is dripping from the plaster ceiling and gathering bestowed the tiles. I find lying under the ceiling fan helps; it's less noticeable on carpet.

(My mother's dreams permeate the cloying humidity. To have a base to stand on, riches she could depend on when they began swinging harsh words and harsher stares would change everything for her. By God, I cannot become this.)

The weather is stifling.

"Hey. Wanna fuck?"

I whip my head around towards him.

"What?"

"I mean. I know you and you know me? It doesn't have to be that big a deal? I know we're both looking for some experience."

"Umm....."

I don't give him a response.

(Panic.)

It's a sin to date. It's a sin to not marry, to not swear yourself to the first person that makes it under the folds of your skirt.

Of course I believe in God's laws. How could I not in the home of such devout believers?

"Mamoni, think about your future. I will find you a prince and you will have wonderful beautiful children, but you need to have something first. A job to stand on. The woman should always have more power than the man so he does no push her around. Okay mamoni?"

"Maa..."

What to say in return. That's not the future I want. I don't want an endless cyclical fate, reruns fo my parents, a magnifying glass to all my flaws, and God forbid I don't reign over whatever family I may build.

I haven't had a first kiss. No relationship either. My sister lied for 3 years saying she'd never then go on day long dates at "libraries" they didn't suspect. I've had nothing like it, a barren desert for a love life.

"God, I just wish I had a boyfriend, you know?" She lies her head in my lap drapeng her hair over my thighs. "It's cold, and I'm cranky and want to cuddle." She glares.

"Mmmhmm, I hear you," I say curling my pinky in her locks.

"We've been friends for forever. You'd tell me in you ever did anything right?" She bounces back up exuberant as ever, forcing a smile out of me in turn.

She pauses.

"Or if you did **ANYTHING**, right?" She wiggles her eyebrows madly, moving as if there were a oiled machine behind them, a hysterical metronome.

"Ummm," I choke, strangled and flustered. She dissolved into giggles and loud guffaws, and I try my best, but my throat seems weighed down by the cloying weight of my larynx.

The other shoe will drop at a speed of 9.8 m/sec and gravity feels too real.

It goes like this in my mind, playing like a medical slideshow of some tragedy or other—not to illicit some kind of sympathy, humanity but to stare at vacantly. Great midnight skies hanging from our lower lashes, pointing out tissues violated and arteries hit. Blank pupils we glade over; maybe they're reflections anyway. The first slide is a title, badly printed stock font in 16 pt. script. An empty form dragging over acne down my spine, over black hairs on potting-soil skin: still dirty from dollar store body wash and hygiene habits that are slowly swirling down the faucet drain, only caught on the knotted mass clogging all my pipes. He must ignore the tack that creates my curls, trudging over the desert skin that rubs off my arms. He'd ignore the grid system my body must make, a highway system leading away and towards in equal measure with cellulite stretch marks and fat roll creases. There's an indent from where the elastic of my three year old panties dig into my waist, and I have never bothered to fix it. It grows along with the wrinkle atop my forehead. Stunning, surely. It doesn't matter; I flip the slide, and he ignores the jiggling fat along my thighs. I, in turn, might deny his. I don't know. He has never been anything but a blank specter of hands and breaths and movement.

Touch is hard to create in the hollow sound of a ceiling fan and the falling hours. I make a laundry list of adjectives instead: rough, unpracticed, unpleasant, seeking, and sorry. Fingertips reaching down into rough, purple-brown lips in the drag of callouses and dry flesh. Is it planned? Is there time to prepare or do we ignore his slightly too long nails and what gathers beneath them? We are not close. Those hands are the only place our flesh meets. Cut breaths hang in the overcast, humid skies and we do not make our wooden eyes meet. A hostage situation were we are both jailers and complacency means locking the ink running down our throats behind the pearly gates at our jaws. So I lie passively, bones seeping lower with my weight.

The slides are digressing—I could not keep up anyhow with my slurred, ink blot notes. 12 pt. text

starts filling over the white backdrop and the images dwindle. It would hurt I think. I cannot imagine an all-encompassing ecstasy that brings so many back when the only thing that's existed there has been the thick gush of blood sometime near the 20th. Friction. Girth. Hurt from a stretch that really wouldn't disappear even after he did. Our hips would have to meet now. Despite the circumstance, maybe I'd take note of the change in shade between his glowing peach skin and my ashen brown, and, if I couldn't bring myself to look, maybe I'd stare at our nearly brushing elbows. He becomes more human as the vision fades: he must be uncomfortable too. He must be a person like me. But I don't want to think about it anymore because I'm quivering from the air vent at my feet, and maybe the diluted horror I can't seem to escape.

I get up. The stray web of hairs that have gathered on the carpet stick to my arms, almost solid enough to be grounding. My wrists tremble under the weighty silence.

It's like the feeling you get when you're absolutely starving. Ravenous for any morsel of food that could come your way. But you wait far too long and suddenly you've looped back to nauseous. It's a strange desperation of needing food, but not being able to bear the thought of it.

My parents are gone, and the house is still except for my ceiling fan. I don't want an empty house.

## AMBITION, LOVE, AMBITION

Category: Poetry

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Ambition, Love, Ambition

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Hours are not spent well in lethargy  
nor in deep-seated exhaustion  
Hours are rarely spent  
more—lost

I live in a state of competition  
Each breath a race to completion  
I have almost spent more time—  
absence over sleep  
But my resume will be beautiful

Reflect: I am clawing over the gaping maw  
the pitfalls of failure, of burning out too soon  
I don't have the minutes to breathe  
the air is thin on this Godwin Austen we built  
I'd still summit with my lungs collapsing

I hold in this brittle absence of warmth I made  
where my joys drained out into obligation:  
a ladder rung towards those burgeoning heavens  
where the oxygen is honeyed sweet  
tinged acrid by ozone  
and Nike will smile sphinx-like and proud

For now I am drinking  
the chalk pastel fumes  
and bunsen burner lights  
Talent is unattainable as it become the scale  
the colors have never been so vibrant  
I try, yet

Script. Running letters, rushing water, ink in motion  
My craft is lovely—I am not so fine for it  
I am ink boiled down  
globules, mucus: it does not run well  
the time taken  
I cannot keep up  
My dreams are out-lapping me

AMBITION, love, AMBITION  
fake the talents you don't possess  
Cheapen their worth—  
inflation in the face of the girth of expectation  
paint all you do in jewel tones even as you drown  
the more that you have, the better  
Don't pause and leave your fields fallow

the seasons are quick

It is not so far now  
I will approach that great leviathan— presenting  
what I almost could have built,  
in the cherry red ink I siphoned off my veins,  
the eldritch horror I assembled with every  
mercurial hour  
Pleading, am I enough?

It will not dredge the void I insisted upon  
nor erase the hours I spent hefting a reverent  
ideal  
I'll chant ascension in GLORY GLORY GLORY  
Though I am no more than the sum of my parts

The answer  
will be mundane  
Take that as it is

## VIRGO, VIRGINIS

### Category: Poetry

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Virgo, Virginis

Start small  
the changes we swore to in  
resplendent troths, without vision because  
I burst forth from childhood  
flat chested frail wristed pinions  
not yet grown: all down  
and yielding. So told DO NOT FLY  
compress  
bind  
breaths are secondary to hiding  
we know  
we know  
who sanctioned  
this artless surgery— of  
stretch marks and underwire

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fear. that somehow freedom  
is a fault my own  
tend or trample  
your suburban flowers, the sacred  
distance between  
thigh to thigh  
we were already ashamed  
to begin with