

# MISSOURI YOUTH WRITE



# HONORABLE MENTION

# 2019

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Editor: Jeff Dierking

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NAME.

**Mara Akers**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Jefferson Middle

School, Columbia, MO

Educator: J. Hanselman

Category: Poetry

## DARK DREAMS

Wait.  
Wait  
Do not turn to to go  
I have yet to say goodbye my friend  
And there's something you must know  
Those who part  
To find their start  
Think that they're alone  
They think that they have no one  
They can ever call their home  
But you're wrong  
They're wrong  
We're wrong  
I'm not afraid to say  
I will be there with you  
Till the ending day  
If I must swear  
I'll swear  
If I must die  
I'll die  
But I will still be with you  
Each and every night  
You say that I am foolish  
You think I can not see?  
I in fact see clearly now  
Who we're meant to be  
So do you still think this final?  
Do you still think me a fool?  
I truly do not care  
But just beware  
The truth will find you soon

The things that I have told you  
You have always known  
You know that this is not goodbye  
But only a hello

### Reality?

You told me to stop and see  
You told me it's a dream  
You said, **this** is reality  
and to stop imagining  
But this world is not calling me  
For, what is reality?  
Isn't it a dream?  
Or is it just me,  
and my imagining?  
For, if this is reality  
I do not wish to stay  
I much prefer my dreams  
Than the land in which I lay

Beneath the autumn skies  
Can be heard the solemn cries  
Behind their shadowed eyes,  
Behind their hopeful lies  
A new day will rise  
In the morning light  
From the darkest night  
The sun comes up too bright  
Blinding the truth from sight  
Lacking the hope to fight  
For what he knew was right  
It is to he that fear has lied  
For love has never died  
Never taken another side  
It all that resides  
To keep our hope alive  
So wherever he may lie  
With him their love resides  
And beneath the autumn skies  
His memory survives  
Within their very lives  
He thrives

**Mara Akers**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Jefferson Middle  
School, Columbia, MO  
Educator: J. Hanselman

Category: Poetry

# OUR DEFINITION

**Character**

We are all truly villains  
In one way or another  
We are liars thieves and monsters  
That push down the weak to become strong  
But we are not defined by these things  
Cause we define ourselves  
We focus only on the good we have done  
And ignore what was wrong  
But there is something that does define us  
What truly defines us  
It is not something that can be said  
It is not something we do  
It is our spirit  
It is our character  
The words we say in our minds  
The voices in our heads  
Yet, even in those there is doubt  
It could be small like a seed  
Or large like a massive force  
But no matter the size  
it is there  
From the roots of our deceptions  
From the truth in our lies  
We can feel it in our minds  
Like a fist holding tight  
In a place there is no light  
We can feel the binds

We can sense the pain  
But we're to blame  
Since all we really are  
Is just human

**Is this our future?**

Bigger future brighter days  
But what's a future with no love?

The hate is churning within our souls  
A fire is sparking in our bones  
The darkness is clouding all our minds  
Showing us wear our loyalties lie

Racism and sexism have taken control  
Families and friends are breaking apart  
Watching it happen or playing a part

Destruction rains and sorrow gains  
Yet all the while hope remains

Pain and loss is no game  
Same for the darkness in the waves

The dysfunction of our minds and souls  
Leaves humanity with a hole  
That hole is filled with broken memories  
Long lost thoughts and hateful enemies

The rage we hold lasts longer than love  
Lasts longer than peace  
And lasts longer than blood  
The cool night air cures the pain  
But when we're through will any remain?

They fight and fight in our names  
But are they fighting  
For peace?  
Or hate and pain?

In the midst of the sea of the world unknown  
The fire burning in our bones  
Has cooled and hardened into stone  
Leaving us without a breath  
Dragging us down into the waters of death

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Yet somehow though our flame is gone  
Our spark of hope has been preserved  
In a bubble on the ocean floor  
Slowly but surely leaking air

So we must dive down  
To reach the bottom  
Then burn away our cage  
So we may rebuild

But we shall not prevail  
For we lack the courage  
And wisdom  
We need

I do not know  
What will happen tomorrow  
But if I did  
It wouldn't matter

For our fear and arrogance still know better  
So I must ask the world a question

Is this our future?

**More than this**

The world's light dims  
As another day passes  
More pain  
More destruction  
More hate  
We could be much more  
So much more than this  
World peace is just a dream  
Not reality  
Because in order to change the world  
We have to change ourselves  
We cannot change humanity  
However much we wish  
We cannot begin again  
After all we've done  
But still we can try  
Try and try again  
We can build up all our towers

Then knock them down again  
They say soon we'll have a brighter future  
They say we have a chance  
I really hope they're right  
Cause we don't have a plan  
So we must bond together  
To fight for what's right  
We must struggle through the darkness  
Then turn it into light

**Sydney Albin**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High  
School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# LIFE'S A CLIMB, BUT THE VIEW IS GREAT

Life's a Climb, But The View is Great

The brisk Colorado wind chilled my bones to the core. I surpassed white patches of snow that caused my feet to go numb. I passed a deer frolicing in bed of recently bloomed purple and yellow flowers. The sun shined down on my skin leaving a burning sensation and red splotches all around my body. As I looked at all the different shades of green coming up from the ground, I stopped to take a quick break and looked up at the rigorous journey ahead. Butterflies fluttered around in my stomach, while my heart tried to burst out of my chest. This was it. I was almost there. Seven years ago to the day I remember the older and taller girls and boys beginning the same two week journey I am on today. Their excitement filled the air and smiles spread across

their faces as they thought of beginning the best experience of their life. Back then, seven years ago, I was merely just a little first year camper who never dreamed that I would reach the age to go on my own Masada trip. Masada was just another word to me. I didn't think about what it took to make the journey out to Colorado from the Lake of the Ozarks, the changes it would bring, and the physical toll it took on the body. Seven years ago, when I was just merely just a little first year camper, the end was never in sight. Now, being a last year camper, I was ready to take on the challenges of not only facing the journey, but taking the challenges head on. I've been waiting for this moment for seven years.

As I began my journey up the mountain, I quickly collapsed to the ground unable to move my right side of my body. I slammed up against the different shades of green. Pain enveloped my body, and a wildfire advanced up and down my injured hamstring. Tears rolled down my face while I clutched my leg. I lay flat on the ground feeling lost and helpless. The injury was only ten weeks old.

Omnibus clouds came in rapidly, which hid the sun from the Earth. Tears streamed down my face as I tried to catch my breath. My heart sank down into my chest just thinking about not summiting. My body froze at even the idea of me trying to walk again. I scanned the mountain for someone to assist me, but there was nobody as far as the eyes could see. My heart started racing, my shirt was full of water, and I couldn't stop gasping for air. My pain made me recall the past months of numbness I felt that led up to now. I had almost ripped my hamstring off of the bone by my hip and almost took part of the bone with it, while my hamstring acted like a rubber band about to snap by my knee. I underwent rigorous physical therapy to help it try and heal. School, physical therapy, repeat. School, physical therapy, repeat. The endless cycle of exercises and rest that had once taken over my life, had now seemed like it all went to waste. However, I refused to let down the little

first year camper within me that had watched the big boys and girls in awe of their courage and perseverance.

As a quick stabbing pain formed in my chest, I looked out towards the rows of gigantic trees and minuscule flowerbeds. The trees seemed to be watching over the flowerbeds like a mother watching over her daughter. The flowerbeds took comfort in the shade of the protective trees. The calming presence of nature helped soothe my worries similar to my mom's encouraging words right before I left for my trip. Her words echoed through my head: "I'm proud of you no matter if it takes you an hour or ten hours to make it up that mountain." With her encouraging words in mind, my body finally unfroze and allowed me to take my first step on my rigorous journey.

I started shuffling my feet as I moved up the mountain. Pain tormented my leg and caused tears to trickle out of my eyes. Ripping sensations erupted with every wrong move. To try and conceal my inner pain from the outside world, I began to sing. "I can almost see it," I began mumbling through my chattering teeth. I was able to see the song move throughout the sky. One single ray of light came through the omnibus clouds as I continued. "That dream I'm dreaming, but there's a voice inside my head saying you'll never reach it." About half of the girls came up behind and joined me in singing "The Climb" by Miley Cyrus. We moved up the mountain like snails on a sidewalk. More and more rays of sunshine beamed down from the cloudless sky. Warmthness caressed our faces with each word. "Every step I'm taking, every move I make feels lost with no direction, my faith is shaking." One by one we filled the peaceful silence of nature with a beautiful tune. "But I, gotta keep trying, gotta keep my head held high." Everyone's gasping breaths filled the thin Colorado air with a melody of perseverance. Hand in hand, we slowly walked together smiling.

After I while I couldn't keep up and I slowly fell to the back. I could still hear the sweet melody coming from my friends as they turned into dots

and disappeared over the peak. They were no longer snails, but now cheetahs sprinting towards their goal. The last thing I heard was, "It's the climb." This was our own climb and our own mountain we had to get over. The little first year camper saw the courage and perseverance it took to go on this journey and needed to remember it now more than ever. The warmth of all the echoes throughout the air filled my heart and allowed me to continue on slowly as I limped up the mountain.

A light breeze added a touch of excitement to the calming presence of nature. ALMOST THERE, I thought as I looked up to the top of the mountain as it started rising like a lost balloon in the sky. Numbness re-entered my body and left me drowning in pool of helplessness. Negative thoughts infused my mind that generated self doubt. My lip started to quiver. One single tear drizzled down my face. My goal was slipping through my fingers. NO, I thought, I WON'T STOP UNTIL I REACH THE TOP. I'VE ENDURE TO MUCH TO STOP NOW. With that thought in mind, I started inching my way one foot at a time towards the top of the false peak. All the false picks were tricking me like a magician doing a sleight of hand trick.

The rocky area emerged from the overhang as I was inching my way up. Rocks tumbled down the hill like a meteor shower. I clung to sturdy rocks and maneuvered my way around. Blood poured out of my leg from a rock that grazed it like tea from a pot. However, the hot, searing pain didn't matter due to seeing the peak coming out from its hiding spot. My eyes fixated on the point where I would eventually stand and meet my friends. Excitement overtook all the negative thoughts that were infused into my body. Little baby steps turned into long hurriedly strides of an adult late for a meeting. Instead of moving at snail pace, I was a cheetah about to pounce on my prey. Short burst of energy allowed me strategically move up the most difficult part yet. My leg still had a nagging pain telling me to take a break, but I disregarded the message. JUST A FEW MORE STEPS, I kept

reiterating in my mind. Wind tried to blow me away, but I kept fighting. I was so close, I was almost able to reach out a grab it. This time, my goal didn't slip through my fingers. One foot at a time allowed me to spot my friends waiting for my presence so we could celebrate our arrival on top of Anchor Mountain. Cheers erupted from the crowd as they watched me sluggishly finish the long journey.

"Don't stop your almost there!" shouted one person.

"Just a few more steps!" roared another.

At last the time had come to take my last couple of steps. Happiness overtook my body as I inhaled the fresh air. No more uphill climbing. No more false peaks to conquer. No more little first year camper looking in awe at the tall girls and boys who were about to embark on the greatest and most challenging trip of their lives. My last step had finally arrived. Tears of joy flowed down my face like a waterfall. I flung my heavy backpack on the ground and collapsed into a series of hugs. Chatter broke out amongst us recalling our own personal experiences on the way up and the struggles we faced.

The pain in my leg vanished like a ghost. I felt invincible and nothing could hurt me anymore. I looked out over the peak feeling like I was on top of the world. The little first year camper in my felt proud of what I accomplished. I looked down and saw the beginning of the trail and how the cars seemed so miniscule from up here. My problems were nonexistent on top of Anchor mountain. Seven years ago I started my journey as merely just a little first year camper who didn't really know much. Seven years later I finished my journey on top of the mountain as a persevering last year camper. Even though I was upset that my camp experience had come to a close, I was forever thankful to join the generations before that had climb this exact same mountain and on the exact same path. A smile crept across my face and I stood a little taller as I thought to myself, WE DID IT.

## Alex Archer

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Marina Ganter, Mallory Hilvitz

Category: Dramatic Script

# THE LOST FOREST, EPISODE ONE: "PILOT/ BLUE BERRIES"

## INT. INTERROGATION ROOM

**BETH sits in front of two men in black suits with crisp white button down shirts. SUIT 1 is pale in stark contrast to SUIT 2's deep brown skin. Beth leans back, hands behind her head. Comfortable. In contrast, the suits sit with their backs up straight, nervously watching every move Beth makes.**

**Beth's arms are covered in tattoos and scars. One gash still has stitches in. On the inside of her right forearm is a black tattoo of a compass. On the opposite arm in the same place is a tattoo of a sprawling green cottonwood tree. Eight of the branches have a name written across them. A brown vine tattoo with green thorns winds around both of her arms and appears from under her t-shirt to wind up her neck.**

**Other, smaller tattoos are in patches over her arms. Many are unrecognizable symbols. Others**

**are images, such as a blue jay or a shield. Her upper right arm is ringed with symbols not found anywhere on earth. On top of her hand is a large Chinese character that means healing. The majority of her tattoos are black and white, but some have splashes of color, such as the tree or blue jay.**

**Beth's pale skin stands out in the harsh fluorescent lighting of the small interrogation room. Behind her is a mirror. Suit**

**1 repeatedly checks his appearance in the mirror. The light above shines on Beth's brown hair. She rolls her blue eyes after watching Suit 1 check his appearance for the fourth time.**

SUIT 1

How long did it take you?

BETH

Take me to do what?

SUIT 1

Take you to plan this out. This whole prank.

**Suit 1 sits forward, adversarial. Suit 2 warily looks between Beth and his partner.**

BETH

Are you kidding me? I don't have time for this.

SUIT 1

Somewhere to be?

BETH

Yeah, actually, I have to save my friends.

**Suit 2 pulls eight photos out of a briefcase and spreads them out on the table in front of Beth.**

SUIT 2

These friends?

**Beth looks at the pictures and smiles before looking up at the agents with a menacing glare.**

BETH

If you don't let me go in the next five minutes, neither of you are going to make it out of this

room alive. Since I haven't committed a crime and you didn't read me my Miranda rights. That means I'm not being arrested, so I can leave any time.

SUIT 2

Your rights will be read when we're done and then we will give you to the local police.

**Beth leans back again.**

BETH

Nice try. But I know that the fact that you're here means that you know that this is more than a prank.

SUIT 1

And how do we know that?

BETH

For starters, look at me. I have scars that weren't there two days ago. An x-ray will reveal bones long broken and healed. Also, I'm covered in tattoos, none of which look brand new. Either you're stupid or... well actually I'm not convinced you're not stupid anyway.

Suit 1 starts to stand and angrily moves toward Beth, but Suit 2 pulls him down.

SUIT 1

Hey you can't-

SUIT 2

Sit down and shut up.

**Suit 1 remains quiet.**

SUIT 2 (CONT'D)

Now. If you'll start from the beginning, maybe we can help you get back to the forest.

BETH

Oh, you really do know more than Dopey over here.

SUIT 2

You tell us what happened and we'll tell you what we know.

BETH

Once upon a time... it's been years since I last said that.

**INT. CAVE**

**Nine teenagers lie on the cave floor. There is a torch blazing in one corner and a ray of yellow light shining from another cave. The only sound is the drip of water and the melodic breaths of the sleeping teens. The floor is the same light brown stone as the walls surrounding them. Beth opens her eyes slowly and then shuts them again. She immediately opens them again and bolts upright. Beth spins around, looking at the teenagers lying down surrounding her.**

**She sees the light coming from another cave branch and carefully steps over the sleeping bodies. As she does this, gradually the others wake up. Beth follows the light through a tunnel and comes to a stop at the opening of the cave mouth. The others follow and gather around her. JACK moves next to Beth. He has dusty brown hair and tan skin. He wears a loose plaid button down over a white t-shirt and dark blue jeans. He looks as if the cave was the first sleep he's gotten in days given the dark circles under his eyes and a five o'clock shadow highlighting his sharp jawline.**

JACK

Where are we?

BETH

I have no idea.

**The cave is high up in a mountain and overlooks a large forest. The deciduous trees are all a vivid green and over one hundred feet tall. However, the forest is broken up in several places. There is a gray crumbling city made up of large high rises**

**and a very big bright white stone castle. There also is a racecar track filled with cars going around in circles, but never stopping. Other parts of the forest end in a tan sandy desert, others end at the point where the forest meets an ocean, and some are shrouded grey in fog.**

**RYAN pushes through the crowd. He is wearing a white wife beater t-shirt that is stained with yellow spots all over.**

RYAN  
We have to climb down.

BETH  
Are you crazy?

**NOAH stands next to Beth. He wears a bright gray leather jacket over a tight purple tee shirt and light blue jeans.**

NOAH  
(British accent)  
Yeah I'm with... What's your name?

BETH  
Beth.

NOAH  
Beth. I'm with Beth. You may be able to climb down with those tree trunks you call arms but there's no way any of us can.

RYAN  
Do you see another way out? Or do you plan to starve to death or die of dehydration?

NOAH  
Wow. Big Word.

**MUTA speaks up from behind the group. He has sandy brown skin with deep brown eyes and a loose white shirt and black pants. His accent is British, but with slight Middle Eastern notes. In his hands are Magic the Gathering cards, which he shuffles without looking, almost compulsively.**

MUTA  
We could go through the other tunnel.

BETH  
What other tunnel?

RYAN  
I didn't see any other tunnel.

MUTA  
You probably didn't notice, but there was the sound of water dripping, but the cave we were in is bone dry. I'm Muta.

BETH  
Right. Everyone. Follow Muta.

RYAN  
Why should we follow the freak with the playing cards?

JACK  
Listen, if you want to climb down, be my guest.

**Everyone turns and leaves Ryan except for ASHA. She has a black wrap around her hair and a red and white striped t- shirt. A black skirt hangs loosely to her ankles.**

ASHA  
(African accent)  
Ryan, you don't have any rope. Look at the mountain. There aren't any easy handholds. So unless you're an experienced mountain climber, I would follow them.

**She walks away with the rest of the group heading for the cave. Beth falls into step besides JO, whose hair is closely cropped to the rest of his head. He wears a black t-shirt and black jeans and sneakers. He has a dark blue backpack that doesn't seem to match his stylish outfit.**

BETH

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What's your name?

JO  
(Spanish Accent)  
Jo.

**MAE pushes through the crowd. She speaks with a slight Korean accent and wears a white t-shirt labeled Gucci and short green shorts.**

MAE  
What's that short for? Joseph? Jose?

JO  
Josephina.

MAE  
Oh... My name's Mae, short for Chin-Mae.  
Jo nods and looks further into the cave, focused.

MAE (CONT'D)  
How do you think we got here?

JO  
Probably the government.

BETH  
I don't think the government would put us here.

JO  
Why?

BETH  
Because, if they knew about a world like this, they would be exploiting it for all its worth.

MAE  
It was probably some science experiment gone wrong.

JO  
Why would it reach us all at random locations all around Mexico?

MAE  
I wasn't in Mexico. I was in Korea.

JO  
Oh, I assumed you were in Mexico since you're speaking Spanish.

MAE  
I'm speaking Korean.

BETH  
Sounds like English to me. But, Jo, why do you have a backpack?

JO  
Does it matter?

BETH  
Actually, yeah it does. The last thing I remember was being at school and I was wearing a backpack. So how come you have yours and I don't?

JO  
It's an insulin pump.

BETH  
I guess that makes sense. Whoever took us doesn't want us to just die. You need the insulin pump to live so you get to keep it.

JO  
Does that Muta guy have to have his Magic the Gathering cards to survive? Your theory doesn't make sense.

BETH  
Maybe it's not just what we have to have to survive, but what we need.

MAE  
He must really **NEED** those cards

**Jack yells from inside the cavern.**

JACK  
Come look what Muta and Eliza found!

**The back of the group hurries to the cave. Jack holds a torch low in front of a knee-level hole. Next to him is ELIZA, who is very pale with light blond hair and bright blue eyes. She speaks in a heavy Czech accent.**

ELIZA  
I think we should follow it.

RYAN  
You've got to be kidding me. There's no way I can fit through that!

BETH  
You'll go last.

#### **EXT. FOREST**

**The group crawls out of a small hole onto the forest floor. Each stands one by one. Ryan is last and he barely squeezes out, scraping his shoulders. Dirt covers his white shirt.**

RYAN  
Great plan, now my shirt is all dirty.

NOAH  
At least the dirt covers all the stains.

RYAN  
Now you listen to me-

ELIZA  
If we find a river we can try and rinse the dirt out.

RYAN  
That sounds like a great idea. Who are you again?

ELIZA  
Eliza.

RYAN  
Eliza, that's a beautiful name.

**Noah makes a gagging noise.**

MUTA  
Are you going to be sick? If you are, go into the forest so that we aren't exposed.

NOAH  
What? It was a joke.

MUTA  
Oh. Right. Sarcasm.

JACK  
What do we do now?

BETH  
I have no id- Ah!

**Beth screams in pain and grips her right arm. One by one the rest of the group clutches their right arm in pain. When it stops the left arm begins to hurt and everyone grabs their respective arms.**

**Finally, the pain stops and everyone lets go of their arms. They look at the right arm and see a compass tattoo with the hand spinning.**

ASHA  
That's not possible.

**A growling noise sounds from the forest.**

NOAH  
Does anyone else hear that?

**A large black cat with white stripes leaps from the forest and tackles Beth. Beth falls backwards and hits her head on a rock. A ringing noise begins in her ears.**

**Ryan wraps his arms around the cat as it stands over Beth and lifts it into the air. He throws it against a tree in the forest. The animal quickly runs away.**

**Beth's vision blurs and the ringing noise gets so**

**loud Beth closes her eyes in pain. The noise suddenly stops and Beth opens her eyes. Parallel above her is an exact copy of herself. This version however is not dirty and wears a flowing white dress with flowers braided in her hair.**

BETH  
Who are you?

WOMAN  
(voice echoing)  
You have to save all of them.

BETH  
I don't-

WOMAN  
You have to save them all.

BETH  
How?

WOMAN  
The blue berries are always the sweetest.

BETH  
What?

**The ringing noise returns and gets unbearably loud. Beth winces in pain and closes her eyes again. When she opens them the woman is gone. She is replaced with eight heads above Beth. She holds out an arm and Jack helps her up.**

JACK  
Are you okay?

BETH  
Yeah I'm fine. Not a scra...

**Beth looks at her left arm and sees the tattoo of the names of the people around her on a tree. Beth's tree is a large cottonwood, but each of the others are different. Each are representative of where they are from.**

**Eliza collapses and begins to convulse.**

JACK  
She's having a seizure!

MAE  
Turn her on her side.

**Jack quickly turns her on her side while the group watches, except for Beth, who notices large oval shaped blue berries**

**underneath a tree. She quickly lunges for the berries and rips a handful from their leaf. Beth returns to Eliza's side and shoves the berries in her mouth, sitting her up slightly and forcing her to chew. Eliza calms and the seizure stops.**

RYAN  
What the hell was that?

ELIZA  
Epilepsy, but I feel fine, really.

BETH  
She told me the berries would help...

ELIZA  
Who?

BETH  
The woman in whi... Never mind.

**Beth helps Eliza to stand. She looks at her arm and sees that the arrow on the compass has stopped spinning and is pointing away from the mountain. Beth turns her arm, but the arrow remains pointing in the same direction.**

BETH (CONT'D)  
Are you okay to walk?

Eliza  
Yes, why?

**Beth looks to Jack.**

BETH

You asked what we do now?

**Jack nods. Beth lifts her arm and points in the direction of the arrow.**

BETH (CONT'D)

We go that way.

**The group goes into the forest with Jack leading. Beth stays behind for a moment and looks back, a slight ringing in her ears. The woman who looks exactly like Beth stares at her, but standing next to the woman is a suave man in a black suit. The woman smiles and the man frowns, but Beth doesn't know which one she is more afraid of. Beth turns to tell the group, but when she looks back the man and woman are gone.**

**FADE OUT.**

## **Alex Archer**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Marina Ganter, Mallory Hilvitz

Category: Dramatic Script

# OLIVE GROVE

**Int. Nelson Atkins**

**A group of fifteen or so second grade children walk through the halls of the museum, going into the original building. They go up the stairs and turn right into a room with various impressionist paintings. The children walk around the perimeter of the room while a museum guide talks about the paintings. None of the children are paying**

**attention, except for one small Chinese girl. While the rest of the group walks around the gallery she stops in front of Van Gogh's "Olive Trees". She stares up at the painting, mouth ajar. Then we see a teacher's hand gently pull her by the shoulders, tearing the girl's gaze away from the painting. She is ushered away.**

**Int. House Kitchen**

**The young girl is sitting at the kitchen table, staring glumly into her Kid Cuisine mac and cheese and playing with it with her fork. On either side of her are a man and woman, her parents, arguing.**

**Int. Nelson**

**The girl is older now, 13 and carrying a big backpack. She walks through the museum and waves to the guides, who wave back with familiarity. She goes up the marble stairs and into the same gallery as when she was a little girl. She stands in front of "Olive Trees" with earbuds in. She takes a step back and sits down at the bench, not needing to look behind her and see where it is. She pulls homework out of her backpack and begins working. She draws doodles in the margins while she works.**

**An old man sits next to her wearing a yellow beanie pulled down over his ears. The crows feet surrounding his blue eyes define them. He has a scraggly orange beard. When the man sits next to the girl she glances over before returning to her work.**

Man

I've seen you here before.

**At first the girl doesn't hear him, but when she glances over in his direction she sees his expectant gaze turned towards her. She takes out her earbuds.**

Man

I said I've seen you hear before.

Girl

Probably, I come here often.

**She starts to put her earbuds in.**

Man  
It's always this painting.

**The girl abandons her music.**

Girl  
It's my favorite.

Man  
Really? I'm not a fan compared to the others of the groves. This one seems agitated.

**The girl stares into the painting, seeing another world.**

Girl  
When I look at it I see everything underneath.

Man  
Do you mean the grasshopper they found? The poor thing.

Girl  
No. I see his pain and his heightened emotions. There is an urgency to the painting. He died a year later...

**The girl looks at her watch and then realizes she has to go. She packs up her things. The man pulls out a sketch pad and begins to draw he then looks up at the girl.**

Man  
You see everything, don't you?

**Hazy shot of the girl's hand moving over the grass, feeling tree bark. Her eyes are closed against the sunlight, arms spread out. We're back in the museum and the girl stands.**

Girl  
I don't know. Maybe it's just a bunch of olive trees.

Man  
Maybe. Will you be here again?

Girl  
I'm always here.

Man  
So am I.

**The man returns to drawing and the girl leaves the gallery.**

**Int. Kitchen**

**Girl's parents are fighting again, shot morphs until she is 16. Her parents are still fighting. We hear their voices in the background.**

Mom  
If she wants to go to art school she can!

Dad  
Absolutely not!

**Int. School**

**The girl stands in a hall in a small circle of teenage girls. She says something and the girls ignore her.**

**Int. Bedroom.**

**The girl is drawing on a large sketchpad a tree in impressionist style.**

**Int. Nelson**

**The girl sits down at the bench, looking around expectantly. In her hands is a letter from Rhode Island School of Design Cut to where we see the hands on the clock going around and around.**

**The girl gets up and finds a guide.**

Girl  
The man who's always here. Do you know where he is?

Guide

What man?

Girl

The man who is always here.

Guide

Sorry, no idea.

**The girl returns to the gallery and stares at the painting. She squints and tilts her head slightly to the side and takes a small step forward. Close shot of the painting. We see a dark smudge that almost looks as though its arms are outstretched, which wasn't there before. Hazy shot of the girls hand on the grass and her face in the sun. The girl smiles to herself and then turns and walks out of the room. Shot of painting widens so we see the girl, except she is much older, now a woman, and wearing a cocktail dress. A young Asian girl stands next to her.**

Young Girl

Mom, we need to go. You can't be late to your own party.

**The woman smiles.**

Woman

I know. This was always my favorite.

Young Girl

Let's go.

**The girl leaves and the woman gives one last look at the painting before walking out of the room. As she leaves she walks next to a sign. The sign reads KATE SHEN: A NEW ERA OF IMPRESSIONISM.**

## **Alex Archer**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Marina Ganter, Mallory

Hilvitz

Category: Writing Portfolio

# HUMAN PERSPECTIVES

Category: Dramatic Script

## THE LOST FOREST, EPISODE ONE: "PILOT/ BLUE BERRIES"

### INT. INTERROGATION ROOM

**BETH sits in front of two men in black suits with crisp white button down shirts. SUIT 1 is pale in stark contrast to SUIT 2's deep brown skin. Beth leans back, hands behind her head. Comfortable. In contrast, the suits sit with their backs up straight, nervously watching every move Beth makes.**

**Beth's arms are covered in tattoos and scars. One gash still has stitches in. On the inside of her right forearm is a black tattoo of a compass. On the opposite arm in the same place is a tattoo of a sprawling green cottonwood tree. Eight of the branches have a name written across them. A brown vine tattoo with green thorns winds around both of her arms and appears from under her t-shirt to wind up her neck.**

**Other, smaller tattoos are in patches over her arms. Many are unrecognizable symbols. Others are images, such as a blue jay or a shield. Her upper right arm is ringed with symbols not found**

**anywhere on earth. On top of her hand is a large Chinese character that means healing. The majority of her tattoos are black and white, but some have splashes of color, such as the tree or blue jay.**

**Beth's pale skin stands out in the harsh florescent lighting of the small interrogation room. Behind her is a mirror. Suit**

**1 repeatedly checks his appearance in the mirror. The light above shines on Beth's brown hair. She rolls her blue eyes after watching Suit 1 check his appearance for the fourth time.**

SUIT 1

How long did it take you?

BETH

Take me to do what?

SUIT 1

Take you to plan this out. This whole prank.

**Suit 1 sits forward, adversarial. Suit 2 warily looks between Beth and his partner.**

BETH

Are you kidding me? I don't have time for this.

SUIT 1

Somewhere to be?

BETH

Yeah, actually, I have to save my friends.

**Suit 2 pulls eight photos out of a briefcase and spreads them out on the table in front of Beth.**

SUIT 2

These friends?

**Beth looks at the pictures and smiles before looking up at the agents with a menacing glare.**

BETH

If you don't let me go in the next five minutes, neither of you are going to make it out of this room alive. Since I haven't committed a crime and you didn't read me my Miranda rights. That

means I'm not being arrested, so I can leave any time.

SUIT 2

Your rights will be read when we're done and then we will give you to the local police.

**Beth leans back again.**

BETH

Nice try. But I know that the fact that you're here means that you know that this is more than a prank.

SUIT 1

And how do we know that?

BETH

For starters, look at me. I have scars that weren't there two days ago. An x-ray will reveal bones long broken and healed. Also, I'm covered in tattoos, none of which look brand new. Either you're stupid or... well actually I'm not convinced you're not stupid anyway.

Suit 1 starts to stand and angrily moves toward Beth, but Suit 2 pulls him down.

SUIT 1

Hey you can't-

SUIT 2

Sit down and shut up.

**Suit 1 remains quiet.**

SUIT 2 (CONT'D)

Now. If you'll start from the beginning, maybe we can help you get back to the forest.

BETH

Oh, you really do know more than Dopey over here.

SUIT 2

You tell us what happened and we'll tell you what we know.

BETH

Once upon a time... it's been years since I last said that.

#### **INT. CAVE**

**Nine teenagers lie on the cave floor. There is a torch blazing in one corner and a ray of yellow light shining from another cave. The only sound is the drip of water and the melodic breaths of the sleeping teens. The floor is the same light brown stone as the walls surrounding them. Beth opens her eyes slowly and then shuts them again. She immediately opens them again and bolts upright. Beth spins around, looking at the teenagers lying down surrounding her.**

**She sees the light coming from another cave branch and carefully steps over the sleeping bodies. As she does this, gradually the others wake up. Beth follows the light through a tunnel and comes to a stop at the opening of the cave mouth. The others follow and gather around her. JACK moves next to Beth. He has dusty brown hair and tan skin. He wears a loose plaid button down over a white t-shirt and dark blue jeans. He looks as if the cave was the first sleep he's gotten in days given the dark circles under his eyes and a five o'clock shadow highlighting his sharp jawline.**

JACK

Where are we?

BETH

I have no idea.

**The cave is high up in a mountain and overlooks a large forest. The deciduous trees are all a vivid green and over one hundred feet tall. However, the forest is broken up in several places. There is a gray crumbling city made up of large high rises and a very big bright white stone castle. There also is a racecar track filled with cars going**

**around in circles, but never stopping. Other parts of the forest end in a tan sandy desert, others end at the point where the forest meets an ocean, and some are shrouded grey in fog.**

**RYAN pushes through the crowd. He is wearing a white wife beater t-shirt that is stained with yellow spots all over.**

RYAN

We have to climb down.

BETH

Are you crazy?

**NOAH stands next to Beth. He wears a bright gray leather jacket over a tight purple tee shirt and light blue jeans.**

NOAH

(British accent)

Yeah I'm with... What's your name?

BETH

Beth.

NOAH

Beth. I'm with Beth. You may be able to climb down with those tree trunks you call arms but there's no way any of us can.

RYAN

Do you see another way out? Or do you plan to starve to death or die of dehydration?

NOAH

Wow. Big Word.

**MUTA speaks up from behind the group. He has sandy brown skin with deep brown eyes and a loose white shirt and black pants. His accent is British, but with slight Middle Eastern notes. In his hands are Magic the Gathering cards, which he shuffles without looking, almost compulsively.**

MUTA

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We could go through the other tunnel.

BETH

What other tunnel?

RYAN

I didn't see any other tunnel.

MUTA

You probably didn't notice, but there was the sound of water dripping, but the cave we were in is bone dry. I'm Muta.

BETH

Right. Everyone. Follow Muta.

RYAN

Why should we follow the freak with the playing cards?

JACK

Listen, if you want to climb down, be my guest.

**Everyone turns and leaves Ryan except for ASHA. She has a black wrap around her hair and a red and white striped t- shirt. A black skirt hangs loosely to her ankles.**

ASHA

(African accent)

Ryan, you don't have any rope. Look at the mountain. There aren't any easy handholds. So unless you're an experienced mountain climber, I would follow them.

**She walks away with the rest of the group heading for the cave. Beth falls into step besides JO, whose hair is closely cropped to the rest of his head. He wears a black t-shirt and black jeans and sneakers. He has a dark blue backpack that doesn't seem to match his stylish outfit.**

BETH

What's your name?

JO

(Spanish Accent)

Jo.

**MAE pushes through the crowd. She speaks with a slight Korean accent and wears a white t-shirt labeled Gucci and short greenshorts.**

MAE

What's that short for? Joseph? Jose?

JO

Josephina.

MAE

Oh... My name's Mae, short for Chin-Mae.

Jo nods and looks further into the cave, focused.

MAE (CONT'D)

How do you think we got here?

JO

Probably the government.

BETH

I don't think the government would put us here.

JO

Why?

BETH

Because, if they knew about a world like this, they would be exploiting it for all its worth.

MAE

It was probably some science experiment gone wrong.

JO

Why would it reach us all at random locations all around Mexico?

MAE

I wasn't in Mexico. I was in Korea.

JO

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Oh, I assumed you were in Mexico since you're speaking Spanish.

MAE  
I'm speaking Korean.

BETH  
Sounds like English to me. But, Jo, why do you have a backpack?

JO  
Does it matter?

BETH  
Actually, yeah it does. The last thing I remember was being at school and I was wearing a backpack. So how come you have yours and I don't?

JO  
It's an insulin pump.

BETH  
I guess that makes sense. Whoever took us doesn't want us to just die. You need the insulin pump to live so you get to keep it.

JO  
Does that Muta guy have to have his Magic the Gathering cards to survive? Your theory doesn't make sense.

BETH  
Maybe it's not just what we have to have to survive, but what we need.

MAE  
He must really **NEED** those cards

**Jack yells from inside the cavern.**

JACK  
Come look what Muta and Eliza found!

**The back of the group hurries to the cave. Jack holds a torch low in front of a knee-level hole.**

**Next to him is ELIZA, who is very pale with light blond hair and bright blue eyes. She speaks in a heavy Czech accent.**

ELIZA  
I think we should follow it.

RYAN  
You've got to be kidding me. There's no way I can fit through that!

BETH  
You'll go last.

**EXT. FOREST**

**The group crawls out of a small hole onto the forest floor. Each stands one by one. Ryan is last and he barely squeezes out, scraping his shoulders. Dirt covers his white shirt.**

RYAN  
Great plan, now my shirt is all dirty.

NOAH  
At least the dirt covers all the stains.

RYAN  
Now you listen to me-

ELIZA  
If we find a river we can try and rinse the dirt out.

RYAN  
That sounds like a great idea. Who are you again?

ELIZA  
Eliza.

RYAN  
Eliza, that's a beautiful name.

**Noah makes a gagging noise.**

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MUTA

Are you going to be sick? If you are, go into the forest so that we aren't exposed.

NOAH

What? It was a joke.

MUTA

Oh. Right. Sarcasm.

JACK

What do we do now?

BETH

I have no id- Ah!

**Beth screams in pain and grips her right arm. One by one the rest of the group clutches their right arm in pain. When it stops the left arm begins to hurt and everyone grabs their respective arms.**

**Finally, the pain stops and everyone lets go of their arms. They look at the right arm and see a compass tattoo with the hand spinning.**

ASHA

That's not possible.

**A growling noise sounds from the forest.**

NOAH

Does anyone else hear that?

**A large black cat with white stripes leaps from the forest and tackles Beth. Beth falls backwards and hits her head on a rock. A ringing noise begins in her ears.**

**Ryan wraps his arms around the cat as it stands over Beth and lifts it into the air. He throws it against a tree in the forest. The animal quickly runs away.**

**Beth's vision blurs and the ringing noise gets so loud Beth closes her eyes in pain. The noise suddenly stops and Beth opens her eyes. Parallel**

**above her is an exact copy of herself. This version however is not dirty and wears a flowing white dress with flowers braided in her hair.**

BETH

Who are you?

WOMAN

(voice echoing)

You have to save all of them.

BETH

I don't-

WOMAN

You have to save them all.

BETH

How?

WOMAN

The blue berries are always the sweetest.

BETH

What?

**The ringing noise returns and gets unbearably loud. Beth winces in pain and closes her eyes again. When she opens them the woman is gone. She is replaced with eight heads above Beth. She holds out an arm and Jack helps her up.**

JACK

Are you okay?

BETH

Yeah I'm fine. Not a scra...

**Beth looks at her left arm and sees the tattoo of the names of the people around her on a tree. Beth's tree is a large cottonwood, but each of the others are different. Each are representative of where they are from.**

**Eliza collapses and begins to convulse.**

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JACK  
She's having a seizure!

MAE  
Turn her on her side.

**Jack quickly turns her on her side while the group watches, except for Beth, who notices large oval shaped blue berries**

**underneath a tree. She quickly lunges for the berries and rips a handful from their leaf. Beth returns to Eliza's side and shoves the berries in her mouth, sitting her up slightly and forcing her to chew. Eliza calms and the seizure stops.**

RYAN  
What the hell was that?

ELIZA  
Epilepsy, but I feel fine, really.

BETH  
She told me the berries would help...

ELIZA  
Who?

BETH  
The woman in whi... Never mind.

**Beth helps Eliza to stand. She looks at her arm and sees that the arrow on the compass has stopped spinning and is pointing away from the mountain. Beth turns her arm, but the arrow remains pointing in the same direction.**

BETH (CONT'D)  
Are you okay to walk?

Eliza  
Yes, why?

**Beth looks to Jack.**

BETH

You asked what we do now?

**Jack nods. Beth lifts her arm and points in the direction of the arrow.**

BETH (CONT'D)  
We go that way.

**The group goes into the forest with Jack leading. Beth stays behind for a moment and looks back, a slight ringing in her ears. The woman who looks exactly like Beth stares at her, but standing next to the woman is a suave man in a black suit. The woman smiles and the man frowns, but Beth doesn't know which one she is more afraid of. Beth turns to tell the group, but when she looks back the man and woman are gone.**  
**FADE OUT.**

## **Alex Archer**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Marina Ganter, Mallory Hilvitz

Category: Dramatic Script

# CAFE BERLIN

## **Ext. Park Protest**

**LISA stands in the middle of a crowd of protesters. They are all holding up various signs promoting peace and renouncing the war. CAROLYN sits on the fringe of the protest, feeding pigeons breadcrumbs. A MAN comes up to Lisa.**

Man  
Want some?

**He holds out small blue squares. Lisa looks**

**skeptical at first.**

Lisa  
That's not really my thing.

Man  
It will change the way you see everything. I promise.

**Lisa looks down at the little squares and picks one up. She turns it over in her hand, inspecting it. Finally, she takes a deep breath and moves her hand towards her mouth. She puts the little blue drug in her mouth and chews.**

Lisa  
Tastes like- Woah. Where am I?

**Ext. Street**

**Lisa walks down a street filled with antique cars. All of them are stopped with the passengers frozen in place. The sidewalks are filled with people, all of them frozen. Lisa peers into cars and then walks onto the sidewalk. The second her feet touch the sidewalk the world starts again and Lisa is pushed around by the crowd of people.**

**A man slams into Lisa, making her stumble backwards.**

Protester  
Freedom and Bread! Freedom and Bread!

The man turns his head to Lisa and a look of recognition crosses her face.

Lisa  
Hey! You were there! Come back!

**The man tears through the crowd and Lisa struggles to keep up with him. When they reach the end of the sidewalk they are in a park filled with protesters. The man disappears into the crowd. The protesters are carrying various signs, but the most notable were the signs with Swastikas.**

**Liza looks at the scene in horror.**

Carolyn  
I'd hide that if I were you.

**Lisa looks to her right and sees CAROLYN standing next to her. She gestures at Lisa's necklace, a gold star of david. Lisa quickly tucks the necklace under her shirt.**

Lisa  
You were there at the protest.

Carolyn  
I was really more just passing through, feeding the birds. Shall we go find some place to sit?

**Lisa and Carolyn walk around the outskirts of the park and go into a small cafe.**

**EXT. Cafe**

**They sit on the patio with the protest in full view.**

Lisa  
Where are we?

Carolyn  
I thought you knew? Or at least you should know.

Lisa  
I'd say 1930s Germany. Nazi era.

**Lisa and Carolyn are poured some coffee. Lisa looks at the crowd and then back at Carolyn. There are now breadcrumbs on Carolyn's plate. Carolyn begins sprinkling the breadcrumbs for the pigeons that are walking underneath the tables, looking for scraps.**

Waiter  
You should not feed the pigeons. There is no bread to spare.

Lisa  
Excuse me, where are we?

**Carolyn keeps sprinkling breadcrumbs and the**

**waiter looks more agitated.**

Waiter

Ma'am I must insist my people can't feed their family because of the price of the crumbs on your-

**The waiter stops, frozen in place.**

Carolyn

Now. Lisa. Surely you've figured it out by now. The clues are all there.

**Lisa looks down the street, into the distance. A look of realization crosses her face when she sees the Brandenburg Gate.**

Lisa

Berlin. We're in Berlin right before everything happens.

Carolyn

Yes, I'd say those protesters are on the wrong side of history. But, as the waiter said, the people are starving. Can they really be blamed?

Lisa

My father came back from the war. What he saw... these people may innocent of something but their ignorance makes them guilty.

Carolyn

Harsh. What will they say about you in the future? About them?

**Carolyn gestures to a line of protesters, who turn on cue. They all raise their signs straight into the air and perfectly on time, as if they were in a chorus line.**

Protestors

(Chanting)

Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?

Lisa

(sputtering)

We are nothing like those, those Nazis!

Carolyn

Remember that.

Lisa

What?

Carolyn

Remember that. Even when they spray you with pepper spray and with choke you with tear gas.

Lisa

I will.

**The crowd resumes their chanting. Carolyn stands and Lisa follows suit.**

Carolyn

Oh and listen to Ellsberg dear. He's going to change the game.

Lisa

Who's Ellsberg?

**Carolyn just smiles knowingly. They are no longer standing in the cafe, but in the middle of the protest.**

Protesters

Freedom and Bread!

Protesters

(background)

Hey, Hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?

**The protester's line repeat over and over again and the crowd jostles Lisa, pushing her until she reaches the edge of the protest. She is shoved out into the street and when she turns she is about to be run over by a car. Lisa throws her hands in front of her face and for a moment there is silence.**

**EXT. New York**

**Then, when nothing happens, Lisa slowly lowers**

**her arms and finds herself in New York, where she started.**

## Alex Archer

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Marina Ganter, Mallory Hilvitz

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

# SECTOR E

Once she went over the crest of the dune on her cycle she could see the way station. Beth accelerated as she went down the hill, eager to get to the waystation and finish the job. Beth hated spending time in Sector DD. It had the smallest population of all the sectors and it was farther South too. The heat was almost unbearable for anyone, and since Beth was from the North, it was even worse. In the early days she walked in the sun, unaware of the damage it could cause and her skin began to peel and burn until someone took pity on her and gave her some cloth to cover herself. That was one of the few times Beth could remember kindness in the Desert Sectors.

She pulled up on the way station and got off of her cycle. Beth was surprised that the building was still standing. It was leaning over, away from the sun. All the wood was peeling off and it looked like it used to be raised above the sand, but the sand had swallowed the beams and Beth stood on what used to be the deck. She

stepped inside, pushing past the door that was practically falling off its hinges.

There was a bar with a shelf behind it that had three half empty bottles of liquor. There was a single old bartender and two people sitting at the bar. They both looked up at Beth, but couldn't see her face past the scarves and goggles. Beth walked up to the bar and asked for a drink. The bartender didn't bother asking which kind; they all tasted like the desert. The two men at the bar were staring at Beth. One looked to be her age, or maybe slightly older in his mid-thirties. The other was in his fifties and had a scorpion tattoo on his arm. That was all Beth needed to see.

"Where's the bathroom?" Beth asked.

He pointed out the back door, which Beth expected since Sector DD didn't have plumbing, just the desert. Beth walked behind the young man and then the old. When she walked by the old man she stopped. She raised her gun and held it to his head, turning it on so it gave the audible hum loud enough for the three men in the bar to notice. The bartender ducked behind his bar, the young man just continued drinking and the old man turned. When he faced Beth she said, following instructions, "Sir Baggon would like to have a word with you."

She fired the gun and the man collapsed.

Two days later Beth was dragging the man into Sir Baggon's tower. The old fool was quivering and insisting he had done nothing wrong. Beth had to keep knocking him out while they travelled to Sector AD just to shut him up. She threw him in front of Sir Baggon, who was sitting on his fake gold throne. His skin was red, even though he probably hadn't seen the sun in years. He kept his whole tower in darkness, believing that the height of riches was to be out of the sun. The carpet and walls were a rich burgundy, with only a single chandelier illuminating the room. Behind Baggon's throne were various women of all body types and colors. He called them his wives, but really they were toys imprisoned for his amusement.

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Beth didn't really care, as long as Baggon stayed in his hole of a tower and left Beth to do his dirty work and paid her accordingly.

"My dear girl, you look positively burned. Why don't you spend a few days here to recover?" Baggon said, in his lilting accent, "I've managed to get some medicine similar to that found in the ice sector. It helps with burns and infertility, not that that has ever been a problem of mine."

Beth was reminded of when Baggon gave her that scarf, all those years ago. He was her first friend in the city. She had been taken through the desert at 10 years old, unaware of what was happening. Beth couldn't remember much from the journey into to the desert. However, she did remember Baggon, younger and skinnier walking towards her on her third day in the desert. He said that he had seen her wandering around and that he recognized the pale skin of someone from the north.

Baggon gave her his head scarf and found her a place to sleep. This was in his early days, before he had taken over Sector DC. He used to tell her stories of when the world wasn't divided into Sectors and wasn't just the desert or windy prairie or ice. He told her of how those in the south and those in the north used to work together, before the north got greedy and drained the southerners oil reserve's, building a wall between them. Baggon cursed the early days after the divide. He would describe the war his great grandfather had fought in. He talked so bitterly about the people in the Ice Sectors. He described how they had forced the people out of the Wind Sector and into the Desert in order to protect their borders. He hated them and everything they had done to keep those in the desert out and save the limited space they had in the north where electricity still worked and the buildings survived.

Beth had asked Baggon if he had ever been to the north once. When he said yes she asked him why, and he just responded by saying, "A wedding".

She then asked him if he ever wanted to go back and he told her the only reason he would

ever go back to that frozen hell would be to take revenge. When Beth asked him what the revenge was for Baggon said, "I'll tell you when you remember."

Beth could never get more information out of him about the northern sector. With his power over sector he had less time for Beth. He had been in her life everyday and then one day Beth realized that he had disappeared all together.

She was angry. She was angry at Baggon for abandoning him and angry at her mother for forcing her to go to the desert and angry at the father who died and left her to her fate. Beth didn't understand why she was sent to the desert sector and she knew her only hope of answers was the ice sector.

When she stood in front of him on his golden throne that day Beth was reminded of her anger towards Baggon. When Beth realized if she paid the right price she could go to the North she went to Baggon, seeing him for the first time in years. He had changed so much since her childhood. He had gotten fat in his dark tower. Beth suspected there was some northerner in him because he loved to stay in the dark. Beth pushed her captive forward and all she said was, "Payment."

Baggon rolled his eyes and then one of his henchmen stepped forward and handed her a wad of paper credits. Beth turned to leave but stopped when Baggon said, "There is one more thing we need to discuss."

Beth counted the money in her hand. She was still one hundred credits short to pay for her journey to the Ice Sector in the North. Once she got there she could finally see her mother again and ask her why she was sent to the Desert Sector.

Baggon said, "I understand there is a recent up-and-comer in your line of work. Perhaps you've heard of him."

Beth had heard of a new bounty hunter in the city. She just figured he would be taken care of like all the rest. Most bounty hunters in the city were stupid enough to get cocky and end up dead. If they didn't die on their own, Beth would

take care of them herself, forcing them into a different sector.

"What of him? He'll get cocky and fail soon enough. Everyone else you've used to threaten me with has failed," Beth said.

Baggon gestured towards one of his henchmen who stepped into the light. He was a big guy, with a single scar running down his cheek. Beth was pretty sure she had given him that scar. He crossed his arms, looking angry. Yup, Beth had definitely given him that scar. It happened during a fight at the lower market.

"His skills have proved dominant to yours. He's brought in two strays in the time it took you to bring one. It appears you've been replaced," Baggon said, smirking.

Beth could see where this was going. She said, "I had to go all the way to Sector DD."

Baggon raised his eyebrow, "Doesn't matter. However, I am concerned because I have so many competitors, and you can easily be bought for information. However, if you were to join my wives..."

"Not chance in Hell," Beth said.

"Look around," Baggon said, "This is Hell. And I like my chances".

Beth pulled out her gun and set it to kill. She pointed it at the giant bounty hunter. "Oh please, you and I both know you can't kill anyone," Baggon taunted.

Beth said, "You're right," and she set the gun to stun.

As Beth walked out of the fake throne room Baggon called out to her, "You won't be safe. Not anymore. Conflicts are escalating I'm the only one who can protect you!"

Beth turned slightly and said, "I like my chances." Beth walked out of Baggon's tower two hundred dollars richer. When she walked out she was approached by a young man. She recognized him as the man from the waystation in Sector DD. He asked, "I have transport to Ice Sector. Do you have payment?"

Of course, Beth should have recognized him. She asked, "Have you been following me?"

The man smirked and said, "I could ask you the

same thing. After all, you did show up in the middle of Sector DD at the same waystation as me."

"I was tracking down a bounty," Beth explained. "And I was returning from a journey to Sector E," said the courier.

"Sector E is a myth," said Beth.

The courier said, "Apparently. Anyway, we leave tonight. We have a larger group than normal. An entire family thinks they have better chances in the Ice Sector."

That night the group of seven met up at the end of the city. Beth had her cycle but everyone else had arrived on foot. "We can't take that. Those in the Ice Sector will track it a mile away and they don't like visitors."

Beth hated to leave her cycle to be swallowed by the desert. She was ten years old when she bought it and could hardly ride it. She had to practice out in the dunes of Sector B.

The group began to walk through the desert that night. During the daytime they slept, everyone together under a thick cloth, blocking out the sun. On the third day they were walking by the light of the moonlight when the courier asked them to stop.

During their travels, the courier told tales of past travels across the desert taking people to the world of ice. However, when Beth asked him what it was like he just mumbled something about skyscrapers. Beth didn't believe him. She could remember the sparkling skyscrapers, underground tunnels, and mountains covered in snow, even though she last lived there when she was only a small child. She didn't trust him.

The courier said he had to go to the bathroom and went to the bottom of a hill. When he returned, Beth was talking to the two children and their parents about why they left the Desert Sector when the courier pulled out his gun. The lights on it were flashing red, which meant that it was set to kill.

He first shot the father and then the mother. Beth ran to her bag to pull out her gun and when she turned both children had fallen. Beth screamed and shot the courier. She sat by him, for a couple

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of hours, until he awakened from the stun. Beth stood above him and asked him why he did it. He said, "I needed the money. The desert is running out of resources."

She asked him if he had ever been to the city of ice. When he told her he hadn't Beth shot him again, her gun still set to stun. She took his supplies and left him behind, surrounded by the bodies of those he killed. Beth knew there was no point to burying the family, the desert would swallow them up.

Beth walked for days across the desert. She slept during the day using the cloth to protect her from the sun and walked on her journey at night. Beth knew she should turn back. Her supplies were running low and she had no real idea of how long it would actually take to get to the Ice Sector. She thought about turning around, but couldn't bring herself to do it. Her mother was waiting for her. By the fourth day Beth was starving. She had gone through the supplies and quickly realized the courier had only brought enough for he himself to make it back to the city. By the fifth day, Beth had slowed to nearly a crawl. She was so tired that she didn't even realize it when the dunes levelled out and turned into a dry prairie. The prairie lasted for only a day, but the wind beat so fiercely that it ripped Beth's headscarf off. She had to grip onto the large blanket in order to keep it from flying away. The wind beat against her cheeks, burning them, and her eyes were constantly in a state of tears. The temperature dropped as she made her way across the prairie, until the ground was covered with specks of snow. Eventually the snow covered the ground and Beth was freezing cold. She wrapped the blanket around herself, holding her hands together in order to keep them warm.

She slept on top of the snow when she could not go on anymore without resting. Beth curled herself into a ball, shivering. When she woke up she shoveled the snow into her mouth, having run out of supplies and needing hydration.

Beth walked for another day before she saw something in the distance. She crawled on top of a dune made of snow and then saw bright lights

lining the horizon. Beth moved faster, energized by the glimpse of the wall. It was a metal monstrosity. Thousands of feet tall with lights and moving figures who must have been guards on top. Parts of it were frosted over and other parts were rusted. When she had crossed half the distance to the wall, she could see it looming above. Finally, she was almost home.

She wasn't more hundred feet away when the ground cracked beneath her feet. Beth looked down, slowly, and she realized she was walking on a lake. She stopped for a second to assess the situation, and when the ice began to crack even more she ran. She stayed ahead of the falling ice, which crumbled beneath her feet as she took each step, until she had reached the wall. The cracking followed her until it ended at her feet where she stopped. Beth didn't dare move, so she screamed for help, hoping that someone in the city of ice would hear her. She stood there for hours, too scared to try and run back to dry land. She knew there was no hope unless it came from behind the wall.

Beth imagined her mother would throw her a rope from on the wall, yelling at her to climb up, telling her it was a mistake and that she didn't belong in the desert. Beth knew she had to move; no one was coming. She took one step to the left, away from the wall and then came a crack. It was on the third step that the ice completely cracked beneath her and she fell through. The cold shocked her system and everything became clear. She tried to swim to the surface but got trapped underneath the ice. Beth hadn't swum since she was a child and couldn't remember everything her mother had taught her. She kicked and flailed, screaming into nothing, until nothing swallowed her whole.

"Wake up. Wake up, sweetie."

Beth was warm. She wasn't warm like in the desert, where warmth meant a brief respite from the intense heat when the winds hit just right to cool off the searing high temperature. Beth felt the comforting warmth of a blanket wrapped around her in a cool room.

She turned her head toward the sunlight

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and waited for her eyes to adjust before she could see. A tear streamed down Beth's cheek as she saw the shining skyscrapers, covered in snow. She was home.

She turned her head to her right and saw a woman. It took here a minute before she recognized her. Her hair was blond now and her face pulled taught and harsh. Beth was looking at her mother and she had so many questions, but in that instance she forgot them all.

"Oh, sweetie," her mom said, "You've made such a big mistake."

## Alex Archer

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Marina Ganter, Mallory Hilvitz

Category: Dramatic Script

# TERROR

### EXT. Porch

**A man and a woman embrace on the porch of an old ramshackle home. Between them is a baby. A helicopter lands in the field of corn in front of the house.**

Mary  
They're early.

Uriah

They aren't.

Mary  
I wanted them to be late.

Uriah

Don't worry, an ambassadorship is an honor.

Mary  
You're from the Fields, they won't treat you as anything more.

Uriah  
I have a chance to make a difference, for our son.

**Uriah gets on the helicopter and flies away. The baby in the woman's arms starts to cry. Uriah walks through the city with a woman in bright clothes escorting him.**

Woman  
Watch out!

**Uriah flinches and turns around in time to watch a man fall through the sky. Right before he hit the ground the man stopped for a second and then drops to the concrete.**

Uriah  
What happened to him.

Woman  
Jumper. Probably hoped the gravity pumps would fail.

Uriah  
Why would anyone want to jump?

Woman  
Some people don't know how to be happy. How do you think you got this job?

**Uriah is in a large room, sitting at the far end of a long rectangular table. There are men all around the room, trying to speak. Uriah tries to say something, but is talked over by the others in the room.**

Man  
The culling must begin now. The Field's population is outgrowing itself; as is our own!

Uriah

Excuse me. Excuse me! What's the culling?

**Everyone in the room turns to Uriah.**

Man

It's when the surplus population gets too large and must be decreased.

Uriah

Decreased how...

Man

How do you think we made peace with Them? Every few years when the population outgrows our limits we give the outliers to Them. It keep the peace.

Uriah

That's murder!

Man

That's the burden of our position. Now, quiet down if you don't want your family to be next.

**EXT. City**

**A boy stands in a corn field. He's around thirteen, wearing beat up sneakers and a raggedy red baseball cap. The boy is panting. He turns around in a full rotation and then takes off running when he hears a rustle in the corn. He runs through the corn and then slides to a halt. The cornfield has ended at a cliff.**

**There is more rustling behind him and a thick, snarling sound. The boy looks over the the cliff and sees the city, enveloped in the air purifier. He looks back, just when he see the beginning of a slimy leg similar to that of an ant, he takes a couple steps backwards and then runs off the cliff. The boy falls through the air, arms flailing. He wincess right before he hits the slightly opaque air bubble. The second he breaks the surface the gravity pumps do their work and he accelerates**

**speed as he falls next to thousand foot tall skyscrapers. He looks to his left and right and sees people in the office buildings.**

**Right before he hits the ground he stops, hovering in the air a foot from the cement surface. Then he is dropped to the ground by some unseen force. He stands up and sees patrol men to his right and left.**

Patrol Men

Hey! You! Stop!

**The boy takes off running through the futuristic square, pushing people out of his way. He runs through the perfectly symmetrical streets before finding a back alley with a dumpster to hide behind. He watches the patrolmen run past. He waits a beat and then opens his backpack and takes out clothes. The boy pulls out bright blue khaki pants and a deep red sweater. The clothes look luxurious compared to the hole filled ones he is wearing. He puts on the new clothes and puts the old ones in the backpack and throws them in the dumpster.**

**The boy steps out from the alley, looking both ways for the patrolmen. He begins to walk among the crowd of morning commuters, all of whom are wearing brightly colored clothes similar to the ones the boy put on, except much nicer. He walks with the crowd until he finally breaks off, turning right. He walks down a street before stopping in front of the tallest skyscraper in the whole city. The streets around it are empty. He walks towards the front entrance to the building, determined. Suddenly, he gets yanked into an alley.**

Uriah

What are you doing here, boy?

Joseph

I came here to find you, father.

Uriah

Find me? You're mother should be keeping you out of trouble not throwing you into it.

Joseph  
She had nothing to do with it!

Uriah  
So she doesn't even know you're here.

Joseph  
I just wanted to find you. It's been years.

Uriah pulls Joseph close before holding him away.

Uriah  
You have to go back. How did you get here?

Joseph  
I jumped.

Uriah  
You... of course you did.

Joseph  
I want to be with you.

**A loud booming noise explodes throughout the alley. The little boy and his father look up to see the top floors of the tower above them explode.**

Joseph  
That's the minister's office! We have to call the police!

Uriah  
We can't do that.

Joseph  
Why not?

Uriah  
Because I'm the one who blew it up.

## Alex Archer

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas

City, MO

Educators: Marina Ganter, Mallory Hilvitz

Category: Dramatic Script

# LOVE ON THE PIER

## Ext. San Francisco Pier

**Two boys, Xavier and John, walk along the pier, each holding an ice cream cone. The pier is crowded, full of bustling natives and slow tourists.**

John  
X?

Xavier  
Yeah?

John  
Where do you think we'll be twenty years from now?

Xavier  
I'll be running my million dollar chocolate factory and you will be my perky assistant.

John  
I'm serious.

Xavier  
So am I.

John  
At least we'll be together in the factory.

Xavier  
Well... most of the time I will be off around the world with my model girlfriend. But, yeah, together in spirit.

## Ext. Suburbs

**30 years later an older Xavier rings the doorbell of**

**a white plantation style home. He looks around nervously. He is wearing baggy jeans and a loose, stained t-shirt. John opens the door, wearing a sweater vest and slacks.**

Xavier  
Hey J...

John  
What are you doing here Xavier?

Xavier  
Why the cold shoulder J?

John  
Oh, I don't know. Maybe it's because the rehab money I gave you ended up with you pushing on the corner again. My kids go to school in that neighborhood.

Xavier  
Look, I know. I messed up. But I promise this time is for real. I found a nice place that's not too expensive...

John  
Let me guess? Just a couple thousand.

Xavier  
Just about.

John  
Fine, but I'm driving you. And I want to see this place first before I sign anything. Today.

Xavier  
That's not necessary.

John  
I think it is.

**John turns towards the inside of his home.**

John  
Honey I'll only be out for a bit! Love You!

**He shuts the door and walks over to his car. They both get in and drive down the street.**

**Int. Car**

John  
So where is this place?

Xavier  
Over on Rainbow.

John  
Really? What's it called?

Xavier  
Uh... Rainbow Rehab.

John  
Nice name.

Xavier  
Yeah.

John  
When are you going to tell me the truth? There is no rehab place.

Xavier  
Not exactly but I owe this guy some money and if I don't give it to him I'm going to need more than some cushy rehab place.

John  
Fine.

Xavier  
Fine?

John  
Yes, fine. You may be a pain in the ass but you're my best friend, born in the hospital room next to mine. I think my checkbook is in the glove box.

**Xavier attempts to open the glove box but fails, not noticing the handle is a push and not pull.**

Xavier

I really appreciate this. And listen, I'm not saying I'm going to rehab, but I'll let you take me to one of those meetings you keep trying to drag me to.

**John sees Xavier failing to open the glove box and reaches over, taking his eyes off the road.**

John

I'm going to keep you to that. But, you know I'll always be-

**He is cut off by the sound of a horn and when he sits up he is blinded by a set of bright headlights.**

**Ext. Pier**

**John and Xavier walk down the pier, both young boys again. The pier is empty.**

Xavier

J?

John

eah X?

Xavier

Race me to the end?

John

You're on!

**The two boys race down the pier.**

**Alex Archer**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Marina Ganter, Mallory Hilvitz

Category: Dramatic Script

## NEW YEARS EVE

**FADE IN:**

**INT. ELEVATOR**

**Officer Lupo walks into the elevator in her black uniform,**

**her badge reading NEW YORK POLICE DEPARTMENT. Her hair is**

**in a ponytail that is slowly coming undone underneath her**

**hat, which bears the crest of the New York City police**

**department. After the steps into the elevator she presses**

**the button for the top floor, 14.**

**KEVIN walks into the elevator right after her. His white**

**t-shirt is torn and covered in stains. His jeans and brown**

**cardigan aren't faring much better. Through the holes in**

**his cardigan a blue jay tattoo is visible. Even his brown**

**beanie has dirt all over it. One of his nostrils has dried**

**blood around it. He stands as far away from the officer as**

**he can get in the confined space of the elevator.**

**OFFICER LUPO**

**Aren't you going to press a button?**

**KEVIN**

**Oh, yeah, sorry.**

**Kevin reaches out to press the button for floor 14, but he**

**quickly realizes that floor is where the officer and presses floor 12. His hand shakes as he does so.**

**OFFICER LUPO**

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Nice save.

KEVIN

Thanks.

**The elevator starts to ascend.**

KEVIN (CONT'D)

So... stuck with the New Years Eve shift, huh?

OFFICER LUPO

No, I volunteered.

**They both look at the floor and simultaneously widen their eyes as if to say "freak". Suddenly, there is the sound of metal screeching and the elevator comes to a stop.**

OFFICER LUPO (CONT'D)

Great. Just what I needed.

KEVIN

What's happened? Why aren't we moving?

OFFICER LUPO

(into walkie talkie)

This is Officer Lupo, I'm stuck in an elevator at Oak and Vine and need immediate assistance. Over.

MAN OVER WALKIE TALKIE

Sorry Lupo, we're all backed up. It's probably going to be a while before we can get to you. Over.

OFFICER LUPO

Great. Just great.

**Kevin starts to sweat. His hands continue to shake subtly at his side.**

KEVIN

What does that mean? They have to get here soon, right? Right?

OFFICER LUPO

Let me guess, you're tweaking.

KEVIN

What? No... I, I just don't like enclosed spaces.

OFFICER LUPO

Sure. How long has it been since you... last... were in an open space?

KEVIN

What?

OFFICER LUPO

Jesus- since you last used whatever it is you've been snorting?

KEVIN

If I allegedly did drugs it would have allegedly been around six hours ago. Allegedly.

**Officer Lupo rolls her eyes.**

OFFICER LUPO

Well we're going to be here a while so just try to stay calm.

**Kevin nods his head.**

KEVIN

Calm. I'm calm.

**Kevin slides down the walls of the elevator and comes to a stop when he reaches the elevator door. He slowly begins to shiver.**

OFFICER LUPO

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Were you going to the party on the fourteenth floor?

KEVIN  
Yeah.

OFFICER LUPO  
Well then it's better for your friends that I'm stuck in here judging by the state of you.

KEVIN  
They're not my friends.

OFFICER LUPO  
Please.

KEVIN  
None of those people in that party are my friends.  
**Kevin remains silent for a beat.**

KEVIN (CONT'D)  
Why are you working on New Years Eve?

OFFICER LUPO  
Someone has to do it.

KEVIN  
Yeah, but normally that someone doesn't volunteer for it.

OFFICER LUPO  
Heroes don't always wear capes.

KEVIN  
Shouldn't you have a partner or something?

OFFICER LUPO  
Guess not since it's just me.

KEVIN  
Isn't that dangerous?

**This time officer Lupo remains silent. Then, she pulls out her nightstick.**

OFFICER LUPO  
Help me with the doors.

KEVIN  
Did something happen to him? I mean, your partner?

OFFICER LUPO  
Her. And yes, last year, to the day. She's stuck with a colostomy bag and a barely existing disability check and I walked away without a scratch.

KEVIN  
I'm sorry.

OFFICER LUPO  
Don't feel sorry for me when I'm about to arrest your friends.

KEVIN  
They aren't my friends. They're my drug dealers.

OFFICER LUPO  
Yeah, I figured. But I thought every addict's dealer was their best friend.

KEVIN  
I used to be a writer. Then I met them and now I haven't written anything besides the words for the sign I hold up on Fifth Ave.

**They both remain silent.**

OFFICER LUPO  
Help me with the door.

KEVIN

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Shouldn't we wait for emergency services?

OFFICER LUPO

You want to sweat it out and wait for them be my guest.

**Kevin moves to the doors and begins to help her pry them**

**open. Officer Lupo wedges her nightstick between the doors.**

**The white linoleum tile of the fourth floor is a few feet below them.**

OFFICER LUPO (CONT'D)

Go ahead.

**Kevin slides out of the elevator and drops to the floor.**

**Officer Lupo quickly follows him. She reaches up and grabs her nightstick from between the doors and quickly pulls it out, letting the doors shut.**

**EXT. HALLWAY**

OFFICER LUPO

I probably shouldn't go upstairs to breakup the party alone. And backup is going to take a while...

KEVIN

There's a cafe across the street.

OFFICER LUPO

Want to get a cup of coffee with my while I wait. You can tell me about what you used to write

KEVIN

Only if you tell me how you managed to chase away your new partners.

OFFICER LUPO

I never said that I chased-

KEVIN

It's not hard to guess.

The two walk away down the hall, both talking about their lives last New Year's Eve.

**FADE OUT:**

**THE END**

**Alex Archer**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Marina Ganter, Mallory Hilvitz

Category: Dramatic Script

**SUNRISE/SUNSET**

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

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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 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.

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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

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.

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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

5

there's something missing  
something heartbreaking  
about our reality  
babies crying at the border  
kids afraid to go to school  
skittles and iced tea can get you murdered  
but what for?  
greed power & the like  
choose how we live and die  
because all we have is who we are  
and we keep wishing for what we aren't  
there are too many tragedies  
too many wars  
too many casualties  
and too many to come, forevermore  
inhale the authenticity you can find  
and exhale the spoon fed lies  
don't suppress yourself;  
you deserve to breathe.

-THIS WORLD IS RATHER SUFFOCATING.

**beguine beauchamp**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Park Hill High School,  
Kansas City, MO

Educator: Melanie Farber

Category: Poetry

**SUFFOCATING  
SOCIETY**

skillfully stripped down  
by a sickening society  
determined to put freedom  
under lock and key  
contain your creativity  
and don't believe everything you see

**Knowlton Beck**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Anita Hagerman

Category: Flash Fiction

**FALLING OFF EDGE  
OF EARTH**

Falling off the Face of the Earth

SQUISH. "Owwww"  
I raise my head from the ground and look  
around, slightly disoriented, as most people tend  
to be after falling off the edge of the earth (it's a

pretty well documented event). I had expected to end up in some place like the Underworld, Hell, or some eternal math class, but this place didn't seem like Hell, and I don't think math class is typically taught in a castle garden.

"Excuse me, um, sir, but could you maybe not sit on me?" a squeaky voice asked in a strained accent I didn't recognize. "We have excellent chairs, and they don't even mind when you sit on them!"

I jumped up, still in somewhat of a daze, and looked down where I had landed. Laying there on his back was a short, plump, stupid-looking boy in a red and white candy cane shirt and one of those hats that has the spinning pinwheel on top.

I'm not exactly sure what I said after that, but I think it was something really intelligent along the lines "Uhhh, my bad."

The boy put on a crooked smile, got up, and brushed himself off.

"Hey no worries! Happens all the time. That's why I wear this hat for protection!" He responded cheerfully, pointing at the hat, as if a stranger hadn't just fallen out of the sky and landed on top of him not thirty seconds ago.

It didn't seem to me like that little plastic hat could be much protection, but the kid said it so convincingly, I figured that propeller magically slowed down my fall or something.

"So, when you say it happens all the time-" I began.

"About once a month" the boy said with his eyes closed, nodding vigorously.

"Um, okay. By the way, when I fell, you didn't happen to notice a warship falling somewhere nearby, did you?" I asked skeptically.

The boy narrowed his eyes, and I could almost see those gears turning in his head.

"Can you fit your, what did you call it, WARSHIP, in your hand?" He asked slowly, saying warship as if he were in a slow motion scene in a movie.

"Not last time I checked"

"Then how did you fit it down the rabbit hole?"

The bewildered expression on his baby face

made him look like a mini sumo wrestler after being told he would make an excellent figure skater.

"I don't know anything about a rabbit hole. I was just sailing with my crew on my ship when we accidentally fell off this waterfall, and since I'm in... whatever this place is, I guess that means I fell of the edge of the earth." I reasoned, more for my sake than the boy's.

"Ahh, classic blunder! I'll have you back to your world in a jiffy. There's this rabbit hole a little less than a mile from here. If you find your crew and they didn't turn into butterflies or something you'll be good to go!"

"Wait, they might have turned into butterflies?!" I asked nervously. I wasn't that close with anyone on the crew, and honestly, turning into a butterfly didn't sound like the worst thing that could happen to someone, but I still felt guilty.

"Or something" the boy responded, seemingly unaware of the stress I was under.

"You should really leave now, before the queen-"

"OHH PIGGY! Oh Piggy where have you rolled off to now?" a shrill voice resounded from one of the balconies on the castle, which I had totally forgotten about, but as I look at it, I realized just how HIDEOUS it was. The entire castle, except for the giant oak wooden doors at the front, was pink with small hearts painted on in a deeper shade of pink.

"Piggy if you are not in front of my in thirty seconds... well, let's just say you won't be needing that hat of yours anymore.

The boy gulped, looking embarrassed, the shade of his face bright red, so I could see where he got the nickname "Piggy".

"You should really go now." He pointed to a small gravel path that led into the woods from the castle.

"The road ends at the rabbit hole, just follow it and you'll be led straight there." Piggy said hurriedly, making a whisking motion with his hands as if he were trying to fan me away.

"Okay, okay. Thanks for everything, and sorry

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about that whole falling on you from the sky thing. Can I get your name?" I asked, slightly sad to leave this boy to the mysterious woman, which I could only assume was the queen.

"Tweedle Dum" the boy said, beginning to walk backwards slowly.

I almost burst out laughing. What kind of name was Tweedle Dum? It sounded like some weird Candy Shop you would see in an off-road town. However, I managed to keep a straight face.

"Tweedle, thanks for everything I..." but he was already gone, nowhere in sight. I wondered how a boy of his stature could move so quickly and silently, but I decided not to stick around and find out. I took one last look at the castle, then at the woods ahead, and started sprinting towards the path to the rabbit hole. I never looked back.

**Knowlton Beck**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Critical Essay

**NO WINNERS IN  
WAR: ALL QUIET  
ON THE WESTERN  
FRONT BY ERICH  
MARIA REMARQUE**

No Winners in War: ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT by Erich Maria Remarque

Erich Maria Remarque's ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT is an accurate yet scathing depiction of the First World War and its effects on the lives of not only the soldiers fighting in the war, but their loved ones as well. It follows the narrative of a young man named Paul, a soldier who is part of a team that fights on the front lines of the German army. As is true in actual warfare, men are dying in massive numbers on both sides, and Paul's team is no exception. By the end of the novel, every person in Paul's team, all his comrades, have been killed, including Paul himself. This book exemplifies the fact that though it may be unavoidable at times, in war there are no winners, as war plagues every nation who gets involved with it, only harming a country and its occupants, and never benefiting them.

This novel describes war from the point of view of a soldier, and effectively diminishes the idea that every man with his boots on the ground is a patriot happy to be fighting on the front lines for his country. Remarque's accurate depictions of the horrors of chemical and trench warfare mitigate the romanticism of war and true patriotism. Soldiers are not fighting on the front lines out of a sense of patriotic duty to their country. Instead, they are forced to be on the front lines, fighting not for their country, but for survival. There is nothing glamorous about fighting in the war. The only objective for every man on the ground is to survive long enough for his shift at the front line to end. Furthermore, the book expresses the reality of the harsh training of soldiers, which could almost be considered inhumane. One example of this is the punishment of the two bedwetters. Each has a legitimate medical condition, but their instructor decides to "educate" them, as can be seen with his act of "putting these two so that one occupied the upper and the other the lower bunk. The man underneath of course had a vile time. The next

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night they were changed over and the lower one put on top so that he could retaliate... the matter ended in one of them always sleeping on the floor, where he frequently caught a cold"(36). The abuse of soldiers supposedly helps them to be more prepared for the front lines, but Paul expresses discontent, as even though the military, just like actual society, depends on ranks of men, civilians are not allowed to treat each other in such a way, so why is this tolerated in the military? The novel clearly expresses that war and serving in the military is not as patriotic and nationalistic as society makes it out to be, and a soldier's life does not revolve around patriotism, but instead a will to survive.

The story reflects that the lives of the soldiers are dictated by the war, but there are varying degrees of this reality. The older the men are, the more they remember life before the war, and the more they have to look forward to at the war's end. The way Paul observes it, "all the older men are linked up with their previous life. They have wives, children, occupations, and interests, they have a background which is so strong that the war cannot obliterate it"(17). For the young men, the war is their entire life, and they remember very little about their lives before the war. Paul, reflecting on his own circumstance, states that "we young men of twenty, however, have only our parents, a girl- that is not much, for at our age the influence of parents is at its weakest and girls have not yet got a hold over us"(17). The novel, by revealing this to the reader directly, is further demonstrating war as the destructive force that it is, as it completely unhinges and dismantles the lives of a large part of an entire generation of youths. Involvement in the war is horrid enough as it is, but to have that be one's entire existence is appalling. The story also conveys that the battlefield is like the wild: kill or be killed. Soldiers kill soldiers because men in positions of power tell them to, and Paul takes us through a moment of internal strife when he kills a young French soldier, only to find out that he had a family. He makes a speech over the soldier's

corpse: "Comrade, I did not want to kill you. If you jumped in here again, I would not do it... Forgive me, comrade; how could you be my enemy? If we threw away these rifles and uniform, you could be my brother... Take twenty years of my life, comrade, and stand up- take more..."(165). The war forces good men to kill good men pointlessly, and a kill not only takes away from the enemy army, but also the family of the soldier killed. There is no way in which to express this to make it seem positive: war only harms nations. It never brings happiness, and never brings a nation closer together. Although the novel is fiction, it touches on a topic that is highly prevalent in real life, and it puts war in a realistic light, rather than a glorified angle that we normally see in this country.

Devastation from fighting in the war is seen in the events which Paul and his comrades have to go through. Some go mad, others die on the battlefield, some attempt to desert and are never seen again, and some suffer slow, painful, deaths in an infirmary. Paul then says that those who do return from the war are shells of their former selves. This proves that not one person benefits from the war, and that it only brings pain and suffering to a community. In Paul's case, the war tears him away from a family in need of him. His mother has cancer, and she constantly worries about her son. Paul knows her death is imminent, and that he will probably not be there for her during her passing. When Paul is relieved from duty for seventeen days to come home, he almost wishes he had not returned, as it is simply too painful to see his family in this condition without him: "I was a soldier, and now I am nothing but an agony for myself, for my mother, for everything that is so comfortless and without end. I ought never to have come on leave"(137). We see another example of separation with a man, bedridden in the infirmary with severe wounds, seeing his young daughter for the first time, and Paul stoically reveals to us that "he has not seen his wife for two years. In the meantime she has given birth to a child, whom

she is bringing with her”(195). Unfortunately, events like this are not an uncommon occurrence in the military, and although those who die in battle are heroes, their injuries and deaths could have been avoided. The novel is so tragic it almost seems like it could not be based on true events, and it is both scary and enlightening to know that this is the reality of fighting in the First World War. The book presents a heart-wrenching story that takes place during war times, and though the book could have been less dark by allowing some of its characters to live, by killing off every character, it further exemplifies the ghastliness of war and the amount of unnecessary death on such a drastic scale. Also, by developing a character throughout a novel only to rip him away, it is reflecting the experience of a soldier. Part of being a soldier is accepting friends will likely die in the near future, and learning how to cope with a comrade's loss. Remarque mirrors this experience on a smaller scale, as she develops characters and allows the reader to become emotionally attached to them, only to kill them off by the end of the story. By leaving no character alive, Erich Maria Remarque heartbreakingly conveys the amount of pointless death that takes place during World War I.

Erich Maria Remarque's *ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT* is an accurate depiction of a soldier's experience during the First World War, conveyed through a fictional story. By describing the war as it truly is, with all its ugliness, and not as a glorious event of patriotism and nationalism, the novel goes against the common trends and conceptions of the time, and puts the idea of warfare into an entirely new perspective. The novel paints warfare as a devastating tragedy that destroys the lives of not only those fighting, but also the families and loved ones of those involved in the war. This story illuminates the fact that there are no winners in war, as war tears down nations, and causes irreparable damage to a society.

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### **Knowlton Beck**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Anita Hagerman

Category: Critical Essay

## THE UNFORTUNATE TALE OF THE MINORITY

### The Unfortunate Tale of the Minority

Gregor Samsa, without a doubt, lives in drastic opposition to society's expectations. A normal, working young man who lives with his parents and younger sister, it is surprising to everyone when he undergoes a dramatic metamorphosis: in his sleep overnight, for no apparent reason, he turns into a "monstrous verminous bug" (Kafka 1). The thing about his change is that nobody can relate to his issue in any way, as it is simply too "out of the box" for someone who hasn't undergone the same experience to understand. Unfortunately,

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we all know how society deals with people they do not understand: they are rejected, harassed, and victimized by others unwilling to see past this change in the norm, this unconforming blip on the radar. Although Gregor Samsa's tale may be a bit outlandish and far-fetched, the true essence of the story is quite the opposite. Gregor's transformation into a bug and the reactions of those surrounding him is the perfect representation of the struggles of a minority, or a non-conforming person, living in a modern, stilted society. By changing into an organism that society unjustly finds filthy, disgusting, and even a lesser form of life, Gregor undergoes struggles, which reflect the societal judgments imposed on a massive number of people, including racial minorities, religious minorities, and gender minorities. Of all the possible parallels, Gregor's metamorphosis most interestingly echoes the struggles of one group in particular: the LGBTQ community.

Those who bravely choose to demonstrate their individuality and express whatever position on the LGBTQ spectrum, which they see fit, struggle through unimaginable turmoil and conflict. Just about every aspect of Gregor's story, in one way or another, harmonizes with the struggles of a non-gender conforming person, and clearly mirrors common reactions of society to such "outliers". One key aspect of Gregor's story that resembles the struggles of a non-gender conforming person is the imagery of Gregor, trapped inside the body, or metaphorical prison, of something he is not. This dilemma is similar to how an LGBTQ person feels when they are forced to hide and suppress their true natures: trapped in a prison of their own body and social identity. People in the closet are oppressed by the constraints of society and must outwardly express a fake version of themselves, or suffer backlash from their community. The symbolism of Gregor, trapped in the body of a being in which he feels he does not belong, is a powerful parallelism to the issues of those in the LGBTQ community, who feel as though they are forced to present

themselves according to societal expectations, and in doing so, suppress their true identity.

Another way Gregor's story reflects the struggles of a non-gender conforming person is by shedding light on an aspect of the LGBTQ minority which is somewhat unique: those who do not relate to the identity they are born with must change after having previously established societal relationships, as nobody pops out of the womb knowing they are a non-gender conforming member of society. Those who choose not to abide by the conventional societal expectations of gender are forced to live with the false identity they were given by their parents in their earlier years of life. Only as they begin to develop and mature are they able to get in touch with their feelings and emotions, and truly understand their identity. They must also make a choice about whether they will hide their identity and remain a "mainstream" member of the community, or express how they truly feel, and suffer the consequence of isolation. It is unfortunate that modern society still does not consider members of the LGBTQ community as "mainstream", and often accords them less respect. This is reflected uncannily by Gregor's family's denouncement of him based on the grounds that he was different from them.

A distinction that makes this minority particularly misunderstood and unaccepted is that non-gender conforming people, in some ways, undergo a metamorphosis of their own. Since this change occurs later in life, after one's "birth" identity has already been established, it results in even more pushback from society. This regrettable fact is true for this reason: those who have to change their view of a person because they have revealed themselves as LGBTQ are also forced to go through a metamorphosis of sorts, as they must alter their perception of someone, and see them in an entirely different light. This, admittedly, is challenging for most people, and the lack of will to change is why those members of society who bravely choose not to conform to

the expected “gender code” suffer even more resistance from society than other minorities.

The unwillingness of Gregor's family to look past his new body and see that inside, he was still the same Gregor, is similar to the outlook of somebody who changes their identity. It is difficult for people to comprehend that somebody who has divulged an alternate identity than what society previously thought is, in fact, the same person they have always known. They simply are expressing an authentic identity which diverts from the path society expects them to follow. Gregor's tale closely resembles the story of a person who does not conform to society's normal gender spectrum, and the imagery of being trapped in a body which one feels they do not belong, along with the symbolic meaning of the metamorphosis, harmonizes and reflects the conflicts of an LGBTQ-identifying citizen to a stunning degree.

Gregor Samsa's story, in its essence, is a fictional tale meant to simplify and put in clear terms the struggles of the average minority in a community, and how a stilted society classically reacts to such unconventionality. The imagery of Gregor converting into a “lower” life form, which society has deemed as worth nothing, is a powerful statement which declares that anybody different, or harboring the desire to become different, will be met with resistance, oppression, and ignorance by their society. The story of Gregor Samsa dynamically reflects the struggles of not just one particular minority, but minorities as a whole, and lays down for the reader a simplistic, clear, and powerful exemplification of the effects of nonconformity in a society.

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Kafka, Franz. *THE METAMORPHOSIS*. Golden Classics, 2018.

## Josi Billings

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School,  
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

# THE COLLECTION OF TIME WITHOUT YOU

The first month:

I used to not fathom the true pain heartbreak  
can offer an adolescent heart like mine.  
But I mean, no child predicts her father would be  
the first to break her heart anyway.  
My wide, apprehensive eyes now present  
divergent text in the colossal book of a parent's  
love  
I have stored inside them.  
A ball of dark depression courses through my  
weary veins.  
It's almost as though I'd take the unyielding hit  
of despair, rather than the comforting embrace  
of a loved one.  
My tears are now the origins of the  
vast oceans I drown in every night,  
envisioning you here beside me.  
Your voice echoes through my brain on repeat,  
as though its a song the radio can't get enough  
of.  
That I can't get enough of.  
That I lie sleepless here because of.  
I pray to God your words would  
direct a path to where I could seek a staircase,  
leading up to you in the clouds.

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The first year:

My body's become bruised from my distressing  
acts of self-hatred.  
I've suddenly become practiced in the art of not  
forgiving myself.  
My blood now boils at a temperature of a  
thousand  
suns blazing victoriously over the noon sky.  
I sit and yearn for the devil to escort me from  
this odious world of death,  
because if God was authentic,  
he wouldn't have stolen the life of a little girl's  
father.  
My shoulders slump with insecurity,  
my brain now overflowing with the thought that I  
may have just been the reason,  
your mentality for pulling the trigger.  
Imitation smiles only stay in tack for so long.  
Blades aren't sharp enough to draw enough pain,  
but for the few seconds it takes to slit a line across  
my wrist,  
I feel as though I have authority over my own  
suffering.  
The bathtub water blends with my cut, drawn  
blood,  
producing a new way to reminisce about my  
thoughts on your death.  
So my eyes close, in remembrance of why I still lie  
here in my sea of red.  
It's a reminder that because of you,  
I want to be dead too.

The second year:

As the lights dim on earth,  
My mother wishes me sweet dreams.  
I try to acknowledge the hint of agony that  
twinkles in her eyes with a smile.  
But deep down I know she would never show a  
visible speck of weakness,  
for the sake of my sanity.  
Folding my hands and praying to the night sky  
above,  
makes me perceive a sense of serene,  
for I would sacrifice my world to have you back.  
Asking for forgiveness for the cuts remaining  
on my wrist is the nightly routine.

If I lied and told you I was okay with the way you  
left your family,  
would you return?  
Just one more hug of comfort, one more  
conversation about  
barbies or movies or anything, I just wanna feel  
your presence.  
Going through this alone was not my plan,  
but it's my new pain and it's all that I got left.  
The suffering can't be how I remember you.  
Send down your angel's lord,  
in exchange for my sin,  
and let them accompany me through the  
hardships a death leaves behind.

The third year:

My body has been shoved in the cold to freeze,  
conjoining with the ice beside me.  
You'd think a sense of numbness would replenish  
the emptiness  
remaining inside, but instead, IT pushes it to the  
bottom.  
Imploring your earthly return had no real  
outcome.  
It all just gave me a way to ignore the facts given,  
You stood there on the solid ground,  
Your feet weighing down the garden fresh grass  
Mother Earth had to offer.  
The sun ricochets off your back, providing you  
with the warmth you needed.  
Your family sat inside at the dinner table without  
you, laughing and telling past stories of their day,  
while you were creating a new one on the porch  
they would talk about for the rest of their lives.  
Your car sat in the driveway,  
Your phone sat on the counter,  
Your wallet remained on your dresser,  
Your children sat in the dining room chairs,  
everything in the place where you left it.  
Except for the gun once kept in a safe,  
Was now held in your trembling fingers,  
soaking in the sweat from your palms.  
Memories of you are now bottled up, wrapped  
tightly with a cork hammered in at the top.  
I discern this sense of brokenness, as I have sensed  
it before from a parent.

A parent who found death more satisfying than living for his child.

The fourth year:

As flowers emerge from the soil below into a world of sun, I will too grow from darkness and bloom into the light as one does.

Four years later and I have shattered the bottle concealing my most painful memories.

Because as I said before,

I cannot go through this journey of death alone, so removing memories of who this journeys all about makes it far more difficult.

I've learned to swim in the vast oceans I've jumped into, finding breathing a far better experience than drowning in my own despair, I am reborn.

Every evening I watch the sun vanish Into the West

and wait for the stars to fill the dark sky because I like to pretend your one of them.

Acceptance isn't a stage in this grieving process, because I may never really accept how you left, or the fact you're really gone.

But it's a good night's rest of reality, awakening me to what tomorrow will bring, so I won't have to grieve on what happened the night before.

I see you in my big brown eyes when facing my reflection in the mirror,

I see you in the scarred lines that are still shown along with my forearms,

and I see you in the struggles I face every day.

May your colors still be shown on my canvas, strokes of blues and greens.

Though your death brought me to undeniable points of great sorrow,

I grew with life throughout this time without you.

**Sadie Blacketer**

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School,  
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

## DEATH- ANNIVERSARY

Someone who saved a seat in your heart.  
Showed they cared, loved you.  
To be taken so cruelly away.  
Not knowing where they'd be.  
Just knowing not with you.  
She was ripped away from your life.  
It was not her time.

Thinking they're in a better place.  
Just hoping.  
Tears begin when thinking of her.  
A prick of desolated yearning forever taints.  
No matter what, having a feeling of grief.  
Years pass, memories fade.  
Not knowing it would be your last with her.

Disease struck.  
Slowly taking her breath, soul.  
The woman you remember, changing.  
Not for the better.  
Her soft, comforting skin alters shades.  
Once a vibrant peach to cold pale.  
The luster and luminescence of her eyes,  
fading into a bland grey.  
Months pass.  
Her ever-lasting spirit, withering into a carcass.

Missing the days of joyousness and celebration.  
Where problems would shrivel.  
She made any problem dissolve like a particle of salt in water.  
Having the comfort of her embrace made the world stop.

They say the five stages of grief take years.

But it feels like decades.  
Tried everything in my being to heal.  
Reliving her memories even hurts.  
The pain of her death anniversary,  
Too hard to bear.  
Just wanting one last time.  
To see her beautiful smile.

## Quintin Borges

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: St Pius X School,  
Moberly, MO  
Educator: Christy Forte

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

# EXTINCTION

Extinction  
Prologue

In the year 2070 the Earth was nothing but desert. Everyone called it the Scorched Earth. Not many people live on earth any more. Human beings live on a new planet, called Kepler. Kepler was forty times bigger than earth. Seventeen billion people lived on Kepler, while one hundred estimate people still lived on scorched earth. The people of Kepler sends humans to scorched earth as test subjects. As time passed the population increased on scorched earth and a city was made, it was called New Life. Forest started to grow again, rivers and lakes formed. Animals started appearing again. Mammals, dinosaurs, and even dragons started to appear what seemed like out of nowhere. Then after years of painstaking troubles in the city of New Life, the city crumbled into the ground. Kepler was sending something to earth called HPG742. The

people of earth called it the Black Plague. The Black Plague infected animals and humans brains and bodies making them thirst for blood, and extremely dangerous. Few people and animals were not infected by the Black Plague, they were the survivors, and they wanted their earth back.

Chapter 1

The Desert King

There was a small metal base was in a desert wasteland, it had four survivors inside it. The survivors names were, Quintin, Brady, Hudson, and Carter. They were preparing for a supply run to the Greenland Forest. Brady is feeding everyone's animals. Hudson was turning on the power core for electricity. Carter was making breakfast and Quintin was still sleeping peacefully. Carter woke Quintin up and brought Brady and Hudson inside for breakfast. They had bacon, toast, and scrambled dinosaur eggs for breakfast. They talked about how dangerous the journey would be and the guidelines to safety about journey. They were ready to head into the Greenland Forest. They got on their dragons and flew south-east.

On their way toward the Greenland Forest they had to cross the barren wasteland. It was filled with bones of animals, animals infected with the Black Plague, and lots and lots of sand. They could see the forest, but something was in their way, it was the Desert King. There were three kings, the Forest King, the Ice King, and The Desert King. There was also the king over all kings, Rei titā (pronounced hey tin-teon.) All of the kings were infected with the black plague. The desert king was flying throughout the desert looking for enemies. It was huge about 150 feet. An army of birds and dragons surrounded it. The desert king controlled the dragons and birds that were infected with the black plague. The desert king also had the ability to summon lightning and strike it's enemies with it. The desert king was extremely dangerous, but it was in there way and they would have to sneak past it. Hid

behind big rocks and slowly made their way by. They had almost crossed the desert when the desert king turned around and spotted them. It roared and the infected dragons and birds flew towards them. Lightning started to form from the sky. They were in trouble.

## Chapter 2

### The Escape

The infected dragons and birds were coming closer and fast. The dragons prepared their fire breath.

"We have to get outta here now!" Hudson yelled.

Everyone headed toward the Greenland Forest at top speed, there dragons were faster, but they had flying so long they might run out of energy, they needed a break, everyone did. They just kept flying, and after ten minutes the infected dragons and birds gave up on them and headed back toward their master, the Desert King. They were safe, for now.

## Chapter 3

### The Forest King

The dragons took a break and ate while everyone else had lunch. They had roasted gallinimus legs and plavoberries. After everyone was done eating and the dragons were done resting, they continued their journey through the Greenland Forest. While they were walking they stumbled upon a group of a group of rams. The rams slowly walk toward they curious, but once the dragons were in their sight, all of the rams ran in a scatter. Everyone kept walking besides Quintin, who watched the rams run away until he could no longer see them, he and his black fire dragon went to catch up with everyone else.

When Quintin caught up to everyone he said, "Why are you guys standing still?" "Shhh!" They all whispered in sync. Quintin looked at what was in front of them, it was the Forest King. It was lucky sleeping, but it was surrounded by infected forest dragons, dire

wolves, triceratops, and even Grim Reapers, which were a animal sent down by beings of Kepler. Grim Reapers got their names because they kill everything that they see, and after they kill their target, they bury it underground, like a grave.

The Forest King has a armor of strong plant and tree roots. This armor is very strong and can even withstand the bite from a megalodon. The forest king's has many abilities. It can make almost anything with it's armor, it can shove its arms into the ground and make trees pop out of nowhere, and it can made huge balls of thorns and throw them at enemies like bullet.

"Wow, we really getting lucky finding all of the strongest animals on earth." Quintin said.

"Shut up Quintin." Hudson replied. "Do you want us to be killed?"

After Hudson yelled this the Forest King woke up and looked at the hiding humans and their dragons. It gave out a cry of war and the animals around the Forest King flew at Quintin and his friends in a instant.

## Chapter 4

### Something to Remember

They animals were coming at them fast, they had to move, now. Everyone flew up on their dragons all the way above the trees. They started to head to base, but all the forest dragons were following. They were catching on to them fast. Quintin looked at his dragon with confidence.

"Okay bud, I need you to fly to base and don't do any sharp turns ok." Quintin said to his dragon.

His dragon nodded in reply.

Quintin tied a rope to him and his dragons saddle. He stood up and took his rifle of his back. He put a sniper rifle bullet into the clip and cocked it. He aimed at the forest dragons that was catching up to him and then, he shot the bullet. The bullet was spinning in an almost perfect position and it hit the first dragon with

the force of a semi truck. The dragon fell to the ground dead. Quintin and the group continued home, but they forgot about one thing, the desert king. They were crossing the desert wasteland, and when they started they ran straight into the desert king. It looked at them with anger and roared. Infected animals all around it started swarming the group.

“What do we do now?” Carter asked Hudson and Brady.

“ We fight our way out.” Brady said.

As Brady said this his dragon breathed fire on all of the swarm of animals around them. They could hear yelping and the roaring of pain, but it didn't even look like it made a scratch on the wall of animals around them. Now they all breathed fire on the animals around them, all they could hear was the ear shattering sound of animals screeching around them. When the group had thought all would be lost the animals around them left in a hurry, and when the animals did Quintin and his friends were face to face with the desert king. Quintin and his friends were terrified. Quintin flew his dragon closer to the desert king. The desert king started to growl. Quintin still flew closer. When he was in arms reach of the animal he lifted his arm up. He put it on the snout of the desert king. The animal slowly became calm and finally flew away. Hudson, Carter, and Brady looked at Quintin with their mouths open.

“H-hhh-ow di-d you do that?” Hudson stuttered.

“ Just did.” Quintin said looking at his hand.

“We, We should all be dead.” Brady explained.

“Well were not unless this is the afterlife, because if it is that would be kind of depressing.

“ Quintin said jokingly.

They started their way back toward the base.  
Chapter 5

Helping a Friend in Need

While they were flying back to base they saw a titanosaur being attacked by infected T-Rexes. They wanted to help it but they had to get home, the sun was setting. They flew down

towards the titanosaur in trouble.

The Titanosaurus was bleeding from T-rex sized bitten marks. Flies started to swarm the dying titanosaurus. They could smell fresh blood from the titanosaurus. The titanosaurus was bleeding about a ton of blood per second. The infected T-rexes looked at the dragons that were flying their direction and roared. The group started sped up until they were face to face with the t-rexes. The T-rexes and dragons both gave out an ear-piercing roar. The group's dragons breathed fire on the t-rexes, and in the results the t-rexes ran away frightened. The titanosaurus fell to the ground with a cry of pain. The group ran towards it and looked at it's injuries.

“We have to help it!” Carter exclaimed.

“ It's gonna die before we even have a chance.” Hudson said in a sorrowful tone.

“But we can try.” Quintin said with confidence.

Quintin opened up his bag up and grabbed herbs and berries that had healing properties. Quintin ran towards the titanosaurus and put the herbs and berries on bite marks. He ran towards the heart area of the gigantic creature. He could feel the slow beating of the animals heart.

“ Brady,” Quintin started. “ Cut a tree down and put the leaves near its mouth so it can eat.”

Brady obeyed and ran off to find trees.

“And Hudson go get some water in a bucket and bring it here.” Quintin shouted.

Hudson obeyed as well as Brady and ran to go find water for the dying creature.

Hudson and Brady returned in an instant. Brady pulled the small tree toward the animals mouth and allowed it to eat. It started to eat. Hudson gave the water to the animal to drink. It drank the water. Carter ran toward the heart of the animal. It was beating at a steady pace. They had saved a living giant.

Chapter 6

A Small Problem.

The titanosaurus stood up and started to follow

the group. Everyone started their way toward the base and when they got there they were scared. They could see that there was no power in the base. They rushed inside to see that the power core was damaged. It was missing a electric beacon which was what spread the electricity throughout the base.

"Your kidding me. We got raided while we were gone." Hudson said furiously.

"They took a lot of food and other supplies too." Brady added.

"You know what that means, right?" Carter said to Brady Hudson and Quintin.

"We have to go to Avalanche Mountain to repair this thing." Quintin said.

Brady Carter Hudson and Quintin were a angry, but it was true they were going to have to go to Avalanche Mountain to get the supplies needed for the repairs of the raid. They gathered food and fresh water for the journey. They got on their dragons and started to fly to Avalanche Mountain.....

#### Chapter 7

##### Freezing in the Arctic

They flew on their dragons for hours and hours until finally, they had arrived at Avalanche Mountain. It had wooly mammoths, dire bears, and even wooly rhinos on the mountain. There was even a group of dire wolves. They started to land their dragons on the mountain. When they landed they they could hear a rumbling sound from the mountain, as if it were hungry.

They were freezing, they had fur clothes on, but the cold still shredding through them. They could see a cave and they all agreed that they should find shelter in there. When they went inside they saw a hole in the ground. It was the Ice King. The King of the Arctic, and it had a electric beacon on it's back. It was going to be theirs soon.

#### Chapter 8

##### The Ice King

Everyone was nervous someone would have to get it, but who.

"Quintin you should do and do your weird control things." Carter said.

"Is that what you call it, well I call it luck." Quintin said.

"Are you going to do this or not." Hudson said angrily.

"I suppose I could, but I better get something outta this." Quintin said.

"Deal." Brady said in reply. "You can have a stegosaurus."

"Deal. I'll name it Tim Tom." Quintin said.

After Quintin had agreed with the deal he looked at the Ice King. A wave of fear came over him. He made a plan to jump on the Ice King's back and take the electric beacon off its back, but he would need a way to get back up. So he tied a rope to him and tied a ice pick to the rope and he was ready.

He jumped onto the Ice King's back silently as if he didn't even weigh a penny. He picked the electric beacon up and put it in his back. He held up a thumbs up to his friends. He threw the ice pick up and started to climb on the rope attached to it. He was half way up when they all heard a loud crash suddenly. The Ice king opened its eyes and looked straight into Quintin's.

Quintin slowly climbed to the ridge where his friends were. The Ice King roared and started to climb the ridge.

"We have to get out of here." Carter yelled.

He was right they had to get out. They hopped on their dragons and flew to the base, but what they didn't know was that the Ice King followed.

#### Chapter 9

##### The End of Life

When they got back to base they put the electric beacon in the power core. When they did this all the lights turned back on. They all cheered. Then suddenly the ground started to shake. They all ran outside to see where the

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shaking was coming from, and to their surprise it was the desert king, the ice king, and the forest king all staring up at the sky. The group was scared to death.

The group looked at what the kings were looking at and they saw a huge ball of fire in the sky. It was getting closer. Minutes later the ball was about to hit the ground and when it did an huge animal stood. It was taller than a mountain, it was black, and filled with the infection of the black plague. It was Rei titā. The king of all kings. It looked at the kings and roared. Everyone was was frozen in fear, even the kings.

Rei titā looked at the frightened creatures. It roared, an ear shattering roar. It started to slightly turn a glowing bright red, as if it was heating up. It slowly turned brighter and glowed more until it was blinding to look at. Suddenly there was black with a sharp stinging pain.

### **Haley Renee Born**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS  
Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

## FLYING

### **Flying**

This isn't peace,  
it's my heart stopping between wingbeats,  
praying this updraft holds me.

It's slowing my fall just enough  
that my feet don't splinter on the ground.  
This is barely cutting through a headwind.  
There is no calm above the clouds,  
only a breathtaking view  
and thinning air.  
Not freedom, but distance  
between one destination and another,  
between seafoam and frayed feathers,  
there's only one surrender  
from air to water filling my lungs.  
Thin as a string,  
without even that to hold me up.  
I fall and I fall, but still,  
I hope.

### **Delaney Bragg**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO  
Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

## UPSIDE DOWN REALITY

**Upside Down Reality**  
Abortion is a right

So do not tell me that  
It is slaughter  
It's okay  
To get rid of a child you are not ready for  
You'd be wrong if you thought  
It is cruel  
She killed her for her own good  
So you'll never hear me say that  
She shouldn't have done it  
It makes me ill  
It was the right choice  
I cannot say  
It was wrong  
Only if she was set  
And it was her choice  
And it saved what could've been a miserable  
tot  
You are erroneous  
It was her verdict  
That you mudder  
It was a shoddy decision

Now read back up

**Carolyn Brands**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Congress Middle  
School, Kansas City, MO  
Educator: Ashley Evers

Category: Poetry

## CHANGE AND PERCEPTION

Everything seems so simple  
Everything seems so small  
As you grow and grow  
Things change

Bodily image  
Perception  
Things that were so small  
Become something so large  
As the world diminishes  
As the mind expands  
Your perception becomes  
Different and unknown to you  
The way you see the world  
Changes and shifts  
As the Earth's seasons change  
So do you  
Everything that was simple  
Becomes so large  
The Earth changes as you do  
The least you can do is keep the  
Small things small and the  
Large things large  
Until your perception of them  
Change

**Olivia Breeze**

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High  
School, Smithville, MO  
Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

## A MURDER OF CROWS

**Birds**

The people at school, on the bus, whatever  
They are birds  
You have the eagles, thinking they're better  
than everyone else,  
But the hawks and ravens outsmart them

They survive with strengths.  
The peacocks are what you would think  
Always about their looks, not caring much for  
anything other than being popular  
You'll have those ugly ducklings, the swans,  
waiting until they're out of that hell  
until they can bloom  
The cowbirds, the cheats  
They don't want to do the work  
They leave it to others,  
They let the others raise their grades  
You have so many geese, it's ridiculous  
They all are grouped together  
Honking and spreading their shit everywhere.  
The ravens, the brains  
Of course they all look up to the magpies  
They have all the A's  
The teachers pet  
The crows are there too  
They are constantly overshadowed by the  
Ravens  
Gets A's but the one or two B's every report  
card.  
Never good enough,  
They aren't pretty enough, not smart enough  
The teachers think they are the cheats  
They might go to the darker side  
Just because of this  
They may become cheats, and thieves  
They will continue to ruin their lives  
All because they weren't good enough  
How did such beautiful and unique birds,  
Such different and smart birds,  
Completely become so against each other.

### **Anthony**

Cigarette smoke, fire, ash  
The stink clings to the cloth  
He's given up  
They're gone,  
The forest has nothing for him  
The police will come  
Why doesn't he stop  
Why can't he stop

His eyes stare into nothing  
Lost in the thoughts of what and how and why  
It was that last "accident"  
Just somehow that bottle smashed right next to  
his head  
For the twentieth time.  
He wasn't a doormat  
The house that he welcomed has burned  
The people had burned with it  
A crow circles above  
The raucous cawing forces him to look at  
where he's stopped  
Nothing, for miles.  
He's so tired  
Just wanting to end this  
Why does he keep walking  
There's nothing left  
No one to care  
But that's the point, isn't it?  
To get away, and never go back  
To suffer walking in this made up purgatory  
Just waiting until the dehydration and sickness  
kicks in  
Let the ashes burn  
Let the flames rise  
He lights a cigarette.  
This is going to take awhile.  
Cigarette smoke, fire, ash  
An endless cycle of flames.

### **Corruption and Fear**

There is no hope for this country  
Children are dying, people are crying  
The hate is no longer quiet  
What happened to peace?  
The protests have gone violent  
They're not enough anymore  
The leader is a puppet, the people are  
controlled  
Emotion is leader, knowledge is forgotten  
Opinion is thought to be truer than Facts  
There is no hope, there is no love  
There is only hate, hate, hate, hate  
The world goes up in flames,

The country burns with fear  
Life is fading quickly  
Hold on to the ones you love dear  
There is no hope for this country, and yet the  
crowds still cheer.

**Norah Brozio**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## LOIS BETZLER

**Lois Betzler**

Families have basic beginnings. Seeds to grow. Leaves making trunks more than ringlets of wood. Most families start with simple trees and symmetrical branches. They mature and become complex and diverse thanks to their seeds spread by gentle hands. Without anyone to water the seeds and keep the sprouts alive, the tree would die. The tree I belong to had Lois Betzler to garden our faith and keep the sprouts alive.

Raising nine children, making priority they all attended Catholic schools, and doing so alone, meant her garden was not easy to care for. With her husband gone after a surgery gone wrong, and the children as her only career, many had their doubts.

Anyone informed about her situation and little money, wondered how she sustained a large family without help. She told them proudly and confidently that the Holy Spirit

helped her. Doing nothing without the guidance of God, she taught her children to do the same. She loved her job as a mother. Her second youngest was a child mentally and physically disabled after a car accident, the amount of pets coming through the door and into her house was insane, and shopping for groceries supplying enough food to feed a zoo. It was not a quiet life. Still, she brought them to Church and taught them to pray before digging into their food. She left them lessons to pass to their families.

Nine children meant several grandchildren, which lead to great grandchildren. Going to all the baptisms, First Communions, and weddings she could, she loved being with her family. She could not attend mass because she lived in her once loud house of children, alone.

Not long before the option of by solitary living was gone, she moved in with us. I was privileged to have her live with me for seven years, my mom amazing enough to take care of the person who had once taken care of her. Grandma was kind and watched juvenile television with me, telling me she enjoyed hearing the peppy voice of Spongebob. We went to Church on Saturday. I received a steady flow of holy items growing up, leaving me with a bulk of angel statues and prayer cards. She taught me the Guardian Angel Prayer. Until I was nine, things were easy. I prayed my favorite prayer every night, sang as loud as I could with my awful singing voice at Church, and smiled when grandma gave me a rosary at my First Communion. I was happy, and content, and only prayed to say thank you.

One night, an apple red tin box pulled up at my house. It made loud, blaring noises with lights and had important looking people hanging on the sides. They came in. Lights in grandma's room were on and my parents were awake. Doctors in blue pajamas held cold metal things to grandma's heart. She was having a stroke. I was ignorant to what having

a stroke meant for grandma, but I had a feeling I should start praying for more than thanks. She was loaded into the bright red box, and rushed away in a symphony of ear splitting sirens. In her room, I glanced upon holy water and palm leaves tucked within the crucifix on her dresser.

She made it home safely although her health was never the same. I helped put her medicine in a tray and made yellow cards for her. Things were almost normal save for the fact she was too tired to go to Church.

But the loud red box big enough to be a house, came to take her twice more. She passed away on hospice while I was at school.

Angels were her favorite. She liked living with her daughter and not missing family events. Without her I would not have given a second thought about nightly prayer or seen the importance of going to mass. I walk into her room and see holy water, shriveled palm leaves on a crucifix, and a dash of yellow things I'd colored. Even with her not physically here, her actions and strong commitment to God will stay in my house and with everyone she met; forever.

Her angel prayer card is tacked to my mirror. A wooden cross hangs on the wall like hers. Mary sits in a prayerful pose on my desk. My actions are small, and items sparsely displayed, but seeing them makes all the difference. I serve Church on Saturday knowing Grandma would be proud.

### **Bailey Bryant**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO  
Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## GRIM REAPER

As a teenager, you don't realize how important a conversation is with someone. Learning this life lesson at a young age is important but also devastating. People who are over the age of 30 still haven't learned this. This is how I learned.

We just got done eating breakfast on a Saturday morning for my mom's annual early birthday breakfast. The hospital told us they would call if anything happened, but we never got a call. My dad was stressing and rushing to get out of the restaurant. I sat with my nephew Josh and I tried to make him laugh all morning but he wouldn't budge, he was too sad about losing his dad. We finally paid the bill and started driving to the hospital. It was silent till we got there. I was scared to even go in so I went to the bathroom and waited for a little. I finally went into the hallway and saw my parents crying, but why? It took me a couple seconds to answer that question.

My dad received a call from my brother, "Hey dad, I have to tell you something you're not going to like. The cancer is back and it's worse than ever. I need help." My brother was not financially able to help himself, all he cared about was his family and he did everything for them. He suffered from cancer before and saw how much his family hurt over it. He didn't want that to happen again. Just knowing that he had cancer and I barely knew him tore me apart. His son, Josh, was 19 and drove his dad over 1400 miles from Montana to get him to Smithville. I remember when they pulled into the driveway. They were in a dark green

suburban, my brother stepped out and he was big, but it was a healthy big.

The next few months were filled with happiness and more hope than ever. I spent almost all of my time with him and my nephew. My nephew and I would go to McDonalds once a week to get food to make up for the time that was lost. The time we had together could never be replaced by anything. My mom and I would get easily annoyed with extended family visiting every weekend, so softball was our get away. My brother lost weight over time, a lot. It was obviously because of the cancer, but it just didn't really hit us yet. It was almost like we didn't really notice until it was too late.

It was finally August and he had the surgery we've been waiting for. He didn't want it because he knew it would give him hope that would be taken away from him. The only reason he agreed to it was for my dad. My dad wasn't ready to lose a child, he would do everything for him to survive. I don't remember how I felt about it, but I knew I wanted him to be able to see the things he wanted to see and I knew he wasn't ready because he still had things with god to take care of. I remember just how major this was, I didn't go with them the morning of, but I said goodbye to him before they left.

It was initially a 10 hour surgery, that turned into a 4 hour surgery. They stopped halfway through and saw how extensive the tumor was. The nurse came out to ask us to come into a room to talk to the doctor for an update on the surgery.

"Unfortunately, we can't help your son. The tumor is bigger than we expected."

It tore everyone apart. It tore me apart, I couldn't stop crying. I was about to lose a brother that I haven't had enough time with. I blamed god for all of this, it was easier that way and it just didn't seem fair. We knew he was dying but we didn't want to accept it. This is the exact reason why my brother didn't

want the surgery. We had so many conversations over what he would do if it worked that it became a dream. The surgery didn't work and his dreams were crushed.

After the surgery he was in the ICU asking what happened and how it went. He had a breathing tube in and he shouldn't of been able to talk but he tried. We weren't allowed to tell him what happened. When we didn't say anything he started crying because he could tell by our faces. A couple days later the doctor told him his options, make him comfortable or prolong his life by a couple of months with chemo if it responds correctly. He chose chemotherapy. He also called his wife and told her everything that's happening. They were having issues with their marriage but she still came out and helped take care of him. I never saw her in person until she came to Smithville.

When she came to Smithville, from Montana, she did everything for him and she was the only one he allowed to do for him. He was embarrassed about how he looked he didn't want anyone seeing him like that. It was in September that she went to North Kansas City to visit a friend. It was about midnight she called my mom from the hospital saying she passed out and the doctor diagnosed her with terminal lung cancer. What are the odds that something like this happens? My mom woke me up for school the next morning and she told me the news. I cried for a few minutes and got ready for school. His wife passed away 3 weeks later. She moved into my house and died in my sister's old room. They spent all the time they could together. It was beautiful and intriguing but also a disaster. After she died my brother tried to fight for his life but he knew there was no use so he eventually stopped. I saw it in him. I saw the hope in his eyes and at the time I thought it was hope for his life. But now, looking back, he had hope for his future with his wife in heaven.

He went to the chemotherapy center once

and they told him he can't have chemotherapy because he didn't have enough weight on him. The same day I came home and he was all grumpy because he felt like he let his dad down. The last 6 months we had with him, post surgery, was filled with drama. His son was getting into trouble in Smithville and the things he did were not acceptable. His dad held his hand through everything and wouldn't let anyone hurt him, but honestly he needed to do things for himself. I held his hand too because I loved him so much and he meant the world to me. The final weeks of my brother's life was a rough patch. I couldn't focus on school anymore. I didn't ask for help because I didn't want any. I felt obligated to show that I'm stronger than that. Everyone in my family told me I was strong but if they could just read my thoughts they would think differently. He went to hospice the week before he passed. I skipped school on a Friday because the nurses said he was declining fast. They didn't know how much time he had left. They guessed hours, but knowing my brother it would be longer than that. I remember how heartbreaking all of this was. It felt like I was in a sad cliché cancer movie. Walking down the squeaky clean hallways into his depressing room. I then realized I will never be able to talk to him. I held his hand while he was passed out from the drugs. It felt like he was dead already. The only difference was, his hands were warm. I will never forget the warmth from his hands.

The final day, a Saturday morning, we had a birthday breakfast for my mom. I was too scared to know what happened to my brother because they never called, so I waited. I finally walked down the hallway to find my parents crying. I answered the question of why in a matter of seconds. My brother passed away. Whenever someone passes they close the door and they put a picture of a flower on your door. I never

understood why. I walk to my brother's door and saw it and then I walked in with my parents.

The entire week he was in hospice he was lying on his stomach to make it easier on the nurses. The day he died he was lying on his back. His eyes were sunk in and his skin was so thin you could see the shape of his bones. My mother always described him as a "bag of bones." We weighed him on his bed and it came up as 71 pounds. 9 months before he weighed about 200 pounds. I swear it felt like a fourth of my heart lied on that bed. Another fourth went on a plane back to Montana. A few weeks later, my Nephew Josh went back to Montana to continue his life. I cried to him begging him to stay. I couldn't bear the thought of him not being here when I get home and I knew bad things would happen to him there. That feeling in my gut was right. That other fourth of my heart, belonged to him. It was incredible to get that close with someone in that short amount of time.

Months later did I realize what I lost and how much it affected me. I would be in class staring at a wall, but I would actually be going back in time just to imagine myself hugging him and how much that hurt me. I could feel his shoulder blades and how much his shirt defined them. I could feel his spine. I felt I didn't get enough time with him, I wasn't old enough to deal with it. My relationship with god suffered during this time. I couldn't find a reason why this was happening, couldn't find an explanation.

I learned so much from this moment in my life. I've experienced something some people will never experience. The situation and circumstances of my brother's death were so unique and rare. The most important thing I learned from this was how important time with an individual could be because you don't know how long you have with them. Can a person truly take a life lesson and apply that to their life and say they actually learned

what it means?

The biggest regret I have is not spending enough time with my brother. The times I did, I took for granted. I didn't understand what exactly was happening to him until he was gone. Ever since I realized that the time we had together was taken for granted, I always take pride in a small conversation with someone. Being with a person can be so valuable, don't take it for granted. And don't make it a bad time.

## **Madeline Buchowski**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

# THE RAINDROPS

The airy curtains swayed as the cool, spring breeze tickled the sheets of silky fabric. Outside, the sweet smell of magnolia blossoms perfumed the area, and the delicate aroma crept through the shiny glass windows of the elegant house. The immaculate design of the furniture and decoration was so pure and unblemished that it came off as stale, although it was clear that many hours had been spent arranging the hand fused vases and splendid displays of blooming flowers. Shimmering chandeliers lit up many of the rooms, including the monstrously sized dining room, casting warm, images of light onto the crisp white walls. It was quite obvious that much wealth lied in the house, which was a result of the hard earned success of Eliza Smith. She stood in her perfect, orderly kitchen, extending her thin arm and grasping the stainless steel knob of the

cabinet. After searching the hidden space, her arm reappeared holding a cup. She very carefully closed the wooden door, ensuring that she did not make so much as a dent or chip in either a glass or the cream painted cedar. As the iced tea steadily fell from the carton into the cup, the condensation formed a ring of droplets on the polished island surface, which Eliza quickly wiped away with a fluffy hand towel, embroidered with a pink flower. Eliza's soft hand cradled the smooth glass as her high heels clicked along her hardwood floor, which transitioned into jet black slate as she reached the patio.

Only simple decorations laid outside, including a few pieces of simple furniture and flower vases, creating a minimalistic aesthetic. She collapsed into a powder blue deck chair, which appeared unbothered by the frequent rain which pestered the small town. Her legs folded on top of each other, and the vertebrae of her back shifted into an arch as she relaxed her posture and slumped into the chair with a sigh. She sipped the iced tea, and stared out at the emerald grass tinkling with dew. Soon, the chirping of the birds served as a lullaby to Eliza, and painted eyelids folded over the glassy white of her golden brown eyes. As she drifted off, her face slowly released its tension into a peaceful expression, and it could be seen that Eliza was quite young, despite her accomplishments. Her face was free of wrinkles, her hair lacking gray, however she seemed to hold the lifestyle of one much older. Her cheeks were brushed in pink powder, and her lips were lined in mauve, making her face appear well rested and healthy. Her chestnut brown hair was curled into loose spirals which rested against her back, and she was clothed in a silk pantsuit which shimmered in the sunlight and glossy midnight colored heels which were so tall that they could most likely double as a weapon, both to her feet and to others. It was apparent that this home belonged to Eliza, as she successfully sent an image of harmony and costly perfection between the house and the owner.

When Eliza rested, the magnolia trees danced, and the chilly breeze quickly seemed to double.

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Blue hues of the sky darkened to murky grey, and the clouds stirred in anger. Soon, little gems of water were cascading down the sky, distorting the trees in the distance, and sending a delicate pitter pattering to all who listened. The black slate of the patio shone with its new watery coat, and the little blue birds stopped their chirping, allowing complete silence excluding the rhythm of the rain. However, the soothing sound eventually grew violent, and stirred Eliza back to consciousness. Her delicate face crinkled at the news of the weather change, seemingly because she was soaked from head to toe, her curled hair quickly losing its bounce. In all truth, Eliza did not mind most foul weather. She did not give any notice to harsh winds or heavy snow, but rain was very different. It seemed to spark something in her, which was not explainable to any spectator who may have observed her reaction. Eliza was a lonely woman, who had no friends, nor family whom/who she was close to. She was not used to the quaint town in which she worked, and she did not feel welcome as a result. Her busy job did not allow time to make friends, nor did Eliza feel the desire. She was incredibly lonely, but would never admit it, preferring to pretend that she was happy instead of confronting reality.

Eliza's life was not as dull when she lived at home with her sister many years ago. They were very close, spending hours singing and dancing, and when they grew older, they would pass time at the small lake at the top of the hill. Their uncalloused feet would dip into the cool water, which was tinted grey by the flakey dirt that rested at the bottom of the lake. Eliza's sister enjoyed swirling her legs, causing brown clouds to circulate through the lake, like underwater explosions. While dirt rose up in spurts beneath the surface, Eliza would narrate their adventure, imagining the exploration initiative which they were so vested in. When it would rain, Eliza and her sister would pull on their rubber boots and matching yellow jackets, which Eliza joked made them look like ducklings. They would sprint along the wet grass, little legs stumbling one after another, soon turning their boots from powder

pink to muddy brown in a rush to reach the top of the hill. After pushing their way to the top, they would run in circles around the lake disturbed by the rain, sticking their pink tongues out in the air to collect the raindrops, which tasted cold and sweet, a welcome reprieve from their hot breath induced by the sudden exercise. They enveloped themselves in the spring rain, enjoying the feeling of wet hair against the warm breeze of April. It seemed that Eliza tried to remove these memories from her adult life by replacing the nostalgia with crisp cleanliness and general perfection, which was and is truly unattainable. Perfection is relative, and it varies depending on who is the subject. To Eliza, perfection was a visual thing, characterized by what others saw. To many it seemed she had an extraordinary life, however nobody but Eliza had access to her own feelings and thoughts. Although she avoided her past, the memories never ceased to remind, as Eliza always managed to find reminders of the days when she and her sister were best friends. Earlier it had been a rain boot, a small lake near her work building, and now the raindrops. The pain the rain brought to her was strong, and she struggled to accept that none of what she used to have remained hers, other than the memories and the raindrops. However, only time would heal the loss she felt, and it had already started. Everyday things got easier, and Eliza put in the effort that she had in everything else to regain her happiness, and she learned to accept what was lacking, and fill the gaps with good things. As the rain strongly continued, Eliza still sat in the light blue deck chair, engulfed in the rain. Suddenly, she launched herself off of the dyed canvas, and with that, wiped her face in protest, which was now covered in a mix of colors dripping down her chin. It was impossible to distinguish her tears from the raindrops, which she flicked off her determined face in one stroke. The transparent droplets glittered as they fell to the ground, settling onto the jet black stone with a quiet splash, and Eliza gracefully strode back inside. As she stood under the shelter of her expensive house, picking up the telephone and pressing the numbers which she

had memorized years ago, the glass of iced tea remained outside, collecting the raindrops until it overflowed.

## Grace Burgett

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS  
Educator: Shelley Moran

Category: Short Story

# LATE NIGHT?

Late Night?  
It's late.

I'm not asleep, though. I won't fall asleep for a while.  
I'm sitting outside my house, savoring the autumn chill. Yellow lamps illuminate the scraps of pink and purple glitter stuck in the street and in my hair, making me the centerpiece of a very dull and grey landscape. Being the centerpiece of this street might not be a huge accomplishment, but it's just perfect for the night.  
The silence is calming. Everyone else is snuggled in their beds, in their houses, in the bland suburbia. I am a rebel. I am breaking out of their ideals with pink cheeks and diamond eyes. They never would've guessed.

It's late.  
It's really late.

But I don't care because I'm on the highway now, racing through the navy night. Pushing

seventy, then eighty, and finally resting at ninety. My best friend is beside me, the shimmering night air ruffling her hair as it flies through the window. She smiles radiantly and sings along to a lavender song that is pulsing through the car speakers.  
Yellow lamps flash by us, reminding me of the small suburbia that I'll return to.  
Just not for a while.  
We're going so fast, but I'm really not in a hurry. Because I have all the time in the world. I'm fifteen. What's there to lose?

It's really late.  
It's so late that it's early.

I've made it downtown. The bright buildings reflect colors across the watery streets and absorb their joy in my eyes. Each club we pass has a different color. A golden walking bass over a blue jazz melody, or a vibrant purple club song with dynamic people that match.  
My best friend and I stop in a coffee shop because we're much too young for the booming clubs. I have time until twenty-one.  
I can wait.  
I don't like coffee, but I order some anyways. It's bitter on my tongue and the taste is as brown as the color. My best friend sweetens the harsh coffee with her sugary smile. We're talking about boys and dreaming in the present. My boy is kind yet doesn't know what he wants; he's fifteen, so it doesn't matter. Hers is the opposite of mine because he's twenty and likes to drink on the weekends, but he lets her use his car so she'll stick with him for a while longer.  
I tell her she's too young, she's practically a baby.  
But she won't listen.  
I don't know if she has time.

It's so late that it's early.  
It's so early that people are beginning to stumble home from their nights out.

Girls are holding on to each other and giggling. I

compliment a girl's boots even though they're ugly, and she thanks me and kisses my cheek. I walk away with red lipstick covered cheeks, and traces of clear liquor lurking.

The city intoxicates me. I've always said that I wanted to live here, but I have never felt a yearning like I have during this rainbow night. I'm going to leave my boring suburb and live. The world is so much bigger than I imagined.

It's so early that the early risers are peeking over their balconies.

Their day is just beginning, while mine is coming to a close.

The wonder of a new day. New possibilities, new beginnings. Forget everything that happened to you yesterday because you can fix it today.

I don't wanna forget today.

I'm sitting at the top of a hotel. My feet dangle over the ledge, just hovering over the threshold death. A wrong move and I'm gone. I won't make a wrong move. My phone speaker is playing my mom's favorite song. An orange song. The entire city is orange, fading from when I painted it red. I hum along, and remember my small little suburbia that is so familiar to me. I am so big in my home and in my neighborhood, but in this giant city I am a single letter in a five minute long song.

I tell my best friend this. She grins at my tendency to be melancholy, and brings me back in to reality with her grounding response.

The song wouldn't be the same without that little letter, even if it is silent.

I want to be a booming letter. So long and powerful that it sends chills up people's spines. The last 'A' in 'Mama'. The 'E' in 'Dream'. The haunting first note of the guitar riff in 'How Soon is Now'.

I ask my best friend if her boyfriend treats her how she treats me.

She doesn't reply.

I didn't expect her to.

It's early enough for me to go home.

I'm sipping a milkshake much sweeter than my coffee from earlier. Glitter hangs on my skin and in my hair, and I have a feeling that it won't wash away for a long time. My best friend is driving slower now. Just above the speed limit, trying to get home on time. The sun is shooting up from the horizon in pink and orange, interrupted by blue clouds.

I look behind me. The black of night barely melting into navy, and in front of me is the color of the music I had been hearing the entire night. I breathe out for a long time, then wait a moment before sipping more air.

The city, full of heart shards, lipstick, and people trying to stay young forever is now behind me. I'm fifteen, I'm barely a baby. I don't need to dream about youth because I have it. I'm living it.

My little suburbia is growing closer. Maybe I want it that way right now.

The city will always be there. Constantly changing and growing, but the same people stuck inside.

I don't need to think about the city right now, and I don't need to think about my suburb.

Because I'm fifteen,  
and I've got all the time in the world.

I'm living a charmed life.

**Raelin Calderon**

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: East Middle School,  
Joplin, MO

Educator: Nina English

Category: Short Story

**RED EYES**

### Red Eyes

As Daisy and I peddled down St. Boulevard, we came to an immediate halt, as the Doberman with the beating red eyes lunged forward, we flinched back in fright. We heard CLINK as the shiny metal collar hit the rusty metal poll. Looking back every peddle of the way, we finally reached home. From the moment I woke up I had a dreadful feeling in my stomach.

"Bye Rosé, we will be back soon! Love you!"

"Okay guys, sounds good. Love you too," I said as they walked out the door.

~&~

BAM, BAM, BAM

I think someone is at the door! As I go to get Daisy, I hear,

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM

I maneuvered to grab my cell phone. As I picked up the shattered phone to attempt to call 911, BING! Ugh my phone just died! There is no way I would be able to charge my phone before the man gets in. The only thing I could do is get Daisy and hide in the closet of my room. I know these are the sounds of Daisey's bathroom, which is two rooms away. All I could think about was the silent whimpers of Daisey. The taste of tears, the sound of gasping, sniffing, and the sight of Daisy crying killed me because she is like my child. Yeah, I'm scared but to keep her just as calm as I seem I put on a fake face. I just hold her in my shaking her arms, out of the blue she asks

"Are you okay?" I'd hate to lie to my innocent little sister, but I also don't want her to be more scared than she already is.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I respond in a melancholy tone.

"Are you sure Rosé, look a little wor-" Right then I saw the doorknob wiggle and wobble. Before the person could get in I quickly told Daisy "I love you and right now I'm doing the best for you." I quickly shoved her in a little compartment in the closet. As soon as I finished

putting Daisy in the four by three shoe compartment, the door gives way and the man came tumbling into the closet. With the scent of alcohol, cigarettes, and sweat; a man with red eyes, started to cuss and yell at me. "Is anyone with you?!" he shouted at me.

"No, it's just me," I respond.

"Stand up and come towards me," the suspicious man demanded. I say nothing as I stand up and walk toward him. As I walk towards him I think to myself WHAT IF HE SEES DAISY? IS THIS PUTRID MAN THE LAST THING I SEE BEFORE I DIE? The man grabbed me and pulled me out of my room, I then suddenly understand that this monster like man is going to take me. He tossed me in the back of an orange Ford Cavalier.

"Stay here," the man said before disappearing into my house.

~&~

I wake up suddenly to the ticking of the old rickety car slowing down. I want to scream but I know the man would possibly harm me if I make a noise. I slowly start to whimper, warm tears ran down my ice cold face. Then I hear the man humming I try to make out what it is but it's so faint my throbbing head covers the sound. Moments later the throbbing stopped, now finally I can tell that the song is "You Are My Sunshine". I was yanked back in time to when Daisy and I were in the "Yellow House"(as Daisy would call it) and mom and dad visited us whenever they could. Whenever they'd come mom would always sing "You Are My Sunshine" to Daisy and I. I snapped back to reality.

~&~

As I look out of the windshield I see a long dirt road with a small red house. It looks kinda scary. I also see a dog, possibly a Doberman. CLUNK CLING as the rocks hit the side of the car. We got closer. Moments later, and we're here. The man turns around and gives me a look, the look of sorrow and fear as she motioned me to lay down. Then he quickly looked forward. A man was speed walking to the car, he looks scary, he

has long raggedy hair and a scar on his eyebrow. The man reaches the car, he says "What have you brought me Garrett?"

Garrett didn't answer.

"I said what did you bring me boy!" The man quickly snapped.

"Nothing dad," Garrett said under his breath.

The man quickly reached his hand in the car and grabbed Garrett by the neck, and whispered something.

"Yeah, I do have somethings," Garrett said.

I look around and see things piled on either sides of me.

"Great, meet me inside," The man said.

Then we drive a little farther, and come to a halt. All I can hear is a dog barking and a man yelling. Then everything went black.

~+~

As I wake up I see two beaming eyes looking at me. It looks like a girl. I slowly sit up to see a girl about my age, with long brown hair.

"Hello I'm Jennie, what'd you get saddled with?" She said as she stuck out her small boney hand.

"Uh...Rosé," I said with question.

"Nice. How'd you end up here?" She said kindly.

WHAT IS THIS? PRISON?!

"Well kinda sorta," She said with a giggle

CLANK, CLONK

Everything went black.

~+~

I woke up to ache in my in the right side of my head, and the sensation of throbbing on my face.

"Hey you don't look too good," I hear a voice say.

I don't give answer, though I am awake my eyes are closed. IS IT JENNIE? I THINK SO.

I sit up and look about, it's dark and cold, and smells like dust.

"Hey," Jennie whispers.

"Yeah," I say with hesitation.

"When you hear the car start come get me," She says as she walks away.

So I do.

~+~

SCREECH SCREECH

I do as Jennie says, I find her.

"I thought you'd never come."

"Well I'm here now," I say as I shrug my shoulders

"Follow me, but you have got to be quiet," She says as grabs my arm.

We both start to walk. Time is catching up and it's getting darker, so we walk a little faster.

~+~

It's been a few hours now, and I'm starting to notice this town. It's Brownsburge! My town! I can feel a huge smile spread across my face.

"Are you alright?" Jennie says with a smirk.

"Yeah," I say as I run to my neighborhood.

She follows behind me. We get to my doorstep. IS SHE GOING TO LEAVE?

**Sara Cao**

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Short Story

## ABC IS NOT EASY AS 123

ABC is Not Easy as 123

ABC

ABC. What does that mean to most people? To most people, it probably means one of the very first things that they have learned. The most basic, simplest letters of the alphabet that all existing human beings of the world above

the age of three know by heart; it's as easy as 123. But to me? To me, it means something completely different. ABraCadabra? American Broadcasting Company? No. It means American Born Chinese. Yes, that's right, yellow skin, slitty eyes, math nerds, and avid chess-violin-piano players all fall in that category. But me? Sure I fall into the first two of those categories, but no - I am not an ABC on the inside.

I Notice

The kids at my new school only ask me if I can help them with their math homework. I guess I try to fit in with the "popular jock" crowd, but I notice everything. I notice when they never pass to me in basketball, even though I am the only kid in the grade that can shoot a perfect three-pointer; I notice when they whisper, "oh look Ling-Ling decided to show up"; I notice when they turn off the rap music whenever I walk past them because they think I'll tell the teachers (even though rap is my favorite). But every day I tell myself, this is better than sitting with the nerds. This is better than sitting with the nerds. So I brush off the vicious glances, smile past the hushed whispers, and walk past the bigoted world behind me.

Fei-Hung

Fei-Hung?

What is that? Kids ask.

His name is like the sound of a tin can rolling down the stairs, they say.

Is that how Chinese parents name their children? By ringing the doorbell?

Mom picked this name before I was born because it means "a swan goose soaring high into the sky", and in the meaning of the name is her hope for my bright future; but when the other children say it, I feel like a swan goose crashing into the ground. Lost in the midst of the squawking geese flying around it.

This is better than sitting with the nerds... I shove the thought away.

Tang Bao

My most favorite food in the entire world is tang bao, a traditional Chinese dish that is a like a dumpling but wrapped in thin skin with soup and meat on the inside. Mom feels bad that I have been having such a hard time at school lately, so she made tang bao in hopes to cheer me up. I bring the tang bao to lunch, instantly regretting it. The kids steal disgusted glances at my food, whispering to each other about how it smells like crap.

I walk over to the trash can and throw the tang bao that my mom spent three hours making and folding away, opting for a burger instead. Sometimes, I feel like a burger - crushed between two worlds knowing that I don't belong to either one.

New Year's Day

I've always loved Chinese New Year as a kid. Each satisfying "shhhh" of the broom against the floor to clean out the bad spirits used to put me in the highest spirits. Each thwack of the rolling pin against the wooden board to flatten dumpling skins used to give me intense excitement knowing that there would be dumplings to taste soon. Each shuffle of relatives entering the house with red-envelopes stuffed with cash used to completely top my overwhelming joy for Chinese New Year.

But these are all "used tos".

Thirteen years later, I am not three anymore. I uncomfortably adjust the red and gold silk chi pao I am wearing and walk downstairs, into the day that used to make me feel like I had an endless amount of joy. The shhhh, thwack, and shuffle of Chinese New Year do not fill me with the intense happiness that they used to. Instead, I feel dumb. None of my friends at school celebrate New Year's Day this way!

They go to high-school parties, watch the glass ball drop at midnight, and drink too many shots of vodka. Like the glass ball, my mood suddenly drops. I watch my mom fold dumpling after dumpling AFTERDUMPLINGAFTERDUMPLING. I realize that I am just like the dumplings, folded into a skin I want to escape. A bland skin covering a burst of flavor on the inside. When the red-envelopes come around, I refuse to take them, looking away from the obvious hurt my relatives have on their faces. Confusion dances in their eyes like the firecrackers they set off. I don't even tell them gong-xi gong-xi. In the other room, my dad's voice booms as he counts down the seconds to midnight. It's the year of the rabbit. Wait, no. Now it is the year of the dragon, but I still am a puny rabbit.

Gung Hei Fat Choy

Gung Hei Fat Choy! The kids chant endlessly at school.

How can something that means "wishing you great happiness and prosperity" be used in literally the opposite way? A fat tear plops down my cheek as the kids jeer and screech. But I wipe the tear away and pretend to laugh along with them.

This is better than sitting with the nerds, I remind myself.

Time

Time passes by. Months, weeks, years, centuries pass by and I am still with the jocks. The dagger of time sinks deeper and deeper until I can't stand it anymore. I begin to question myself if it is even worth it to sit with the popular people just because I believe that it is the only way to survive in a new school, but a bigger part of me truly hopes that it is not. Time has crushed me into an empty shell, like the ones left on the beach when the crabs die.

This is better than sitting with the nerds, I remind

myself. THISISBETTERTHANSITTINGWITHTHENERD S. This time, the words distort themselves in my head and swim around in a frenzy as if they were drowning and gasping for air. I finally decide that enough is enough, and instead of letting time break me into pieces, I brush off the vicious glances, smile past the hushed whispers, and walk towards safety; towards the so-called "nerds".

Dragon-Rabbit Rabbit-Dragon

One month later, I am still sitting with the nerds. I was wrong about them; we play basketball on Wednesdays, blast rap music on Thursdays, and share tang bao on Fridays. I let myself get too caught up in the ABC stereotype that I forgot that they were people too. They pronounce my name right, too. The way "Fei-Hung" rolls off of the tips of their tongues so easily truly makes me feel like I am a swan goose; that we are swan geese, flying high, high, high together.

I am not a timid rabbit anymore. I am a fire-breathing dragon. I will not let racist bigots get away with their constant mocking other cultures. Instead, I am proud of myself for not associating with them anymore and for finally accepting myself and my culture.

Being ABC may not always be as easy as 123, but I know in my heart that it is who I am and that I will never, ever change.

**Zach Carroll**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School,  
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Humor

# COYOTEWAX

Coyotewax

Zeno, Elf Warrior

"Honk! Honk! Honk!" Oh no. There was a platoon of goose bombers on the way. We had been sent here because the two elves and a wizard had died. If we failed to defend against the onslaught, Coyotewax would be captured and good magic would die out and stuff. I was preparing my 37th arrow when I heard the first bombs drop. The shock of the bombs made my ears ring as fragments flew.

The bombs hit, making craters where 10 elves once stood. In revenge, I readied my bow and, before Earl, my elvish captain said to, I fired. It took one down. My captain was too busy to abuse me for it. The arrows flew.

The battle was raging. At first we were losing, but it looked like we were starting to get the upper hand. I decided to check how my fellow squadmates were doing. "Hey Durlan," I asked one of my battle buddies, "How are you holding up?" "Well, I guess-" BOOM! A bomb blew Durlan up and threw me from the tower by about 20 feet. Luckily, I was able to avoid getting hurt by the fall because I am an elf.

I shot and killed a big orc. Earl abused me for it, since I fired at a time when he didn't tell me to. Then an orc leader came at me. Throwing Earl to the side like a rag doll, he advanced towards me to avenge the big orc from earlier. He pulled out his special sword and began to duel me. Ching! Klang! Shing! Our swords clattered. Mine broke in half. He swung at me with his. Even though I only had half a sword, it might be enough to stop the blow.

It was, but my sword was now just a hilt. I thought all was lost, but a small explosion from our artillery killed him. I survived, however. I took his sword and used it to fight off a few goblins, since mine was broken. They fell back a bit, seemingly for no reason. I took the opportunity to rest and assess the situation. We were winning, but dead bodies littered the ground. I thought I was safe when a

goose bomber swooped over me. "BOOM! BOOM!" The world faded out.

lolrath, Elf Warrior

Twang! Twang! My battle buddies paused to talk a bit, but a bomb blew 1 up and threw 3 as well. Zeno and Durlan were talking. Zeno was thrown and Durlan was killed instantly. I saw Zeno fly away as he was thrown. I lost sight of Abarat. I guess he died. Aiwin must have been crushed in the rubble. Some other elf (I think it was Zeno) got blown up by goose bombers.

"Hey Lewurk, are you OK?" my battle buddy Theorus asked me. "Yeah." I responded. "But I don't know about Zeno and Aiwin, and Durlan was killed." "Ouch." Durlan said. "Yeah." I said as I took down some orc who was running at me. An orc necromancer came to get the kid but was blown up by heavy artillery. Both were unrecognizable after the blasts.

As the battle continued, it seemed as if we were winning. After about an hour, we were close to making a charge. An orc rock-thrower appeared. I hoped he wouldn't notice me, because he looked strong and used large rocks. Lorsan, one of my battle buddies (and the chronic screw-up of the group), fired at the rock thrower but missed. The orc growled and turned to him. Lorsan tried to run, but he was hit and crushed. Since Lorsan had lured the rock thrower into looking at us elves, he turned towards me. I hit the rock thrower in the shoulder. He grunted and threw. I knew I was dead.

Kormul, DWARF GRENADIER

I was taking out an orc and some goblins when I saw an elves' tower explode. Two elves landed near me. Some kid died. An explosion rocked the area. A rock was thrown by a rock-thrower, and I narrowly avoided it. The elves, however, died. I threw a grenade and killed the rock-thrower and a few others.

As that happened, one of their paladins charged me. Luckily, I dodged. He then tripped,

fell, and died on his own sword. With the paladin out of the way, we charged. Explosions and shots riddled both sides of the battlefield. "KA-BOOM! PAK! TWANG! PEW! PEW! PEW!"

We took the enemy outpost thingy they had set up. However, a few seconds later, I heard "Gas! GAS!" from my battle buddy Dorothir. The gas flooded the area, thick billowing yellow clouds all around. Since Dorothir had used all his air yelling 'Gas!', he had no choice but to take a big breath in. Soon after, he made a sound like "Bleurgh!" His dead body fell to the ground.

I got choked up and started crying when I saw his body. I felt so terrible. But that was from the gas. I had known Dorothir for about thirty minutes. I ran from the gas, directly towards the orcs. So did several others. But there was no need. We had won! I was overjoyed that we had successfully defended Coyotewax, and gave a victory screech. However, using my air on the screech caused me to need to breathe in. I took a big breath. The gas closed in. It hurt my lungs and stung my eyes. It burned my skin and made small, twinkling stars come into my vision, along with wavy lines. I made a sound like "Glorg!" and fell to the ground. The last thing I thought of was Dorothir, my dear battle buddy, and how I should have learned from his mistakes.

### **Sara Carter**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Kirbyville Middle School, Kirbyville, MO

Educator: Marilyn Yung

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## **FORCED TO THE MIDDLE GROUND**

At this point in my fourteen years of life things are harder than I'd ever expected they would be. I'm not a child anymore, that much is certain, but I'm nowhere near an adult. I've still got years to wait for that part of my life to begin. At this part of life, I --- along with many others my age -- - am being forced to the middle ground... this puzzling place where I'm unsure about who to be; my responsibilities and maturity are in question every day. I'm told to grow up, then I'm told I'm just a kid, and I need to stop trying to grow up so fast. We all mature and grow at different paces. I'd never known that to be so true until I found myself in an argument I felt was senseless... an argument that offended my best friend much more than it offended me. I missed her but I couldn't say sorry. That would be accepting that she was right, that SHE won and I would never willingly lose. Sadly, this is where we had a problem because she wouldn't either.

We'd shout at each other, glare from across the room but there was remorse in our eyes when we saw each other.

Yeah, I missed her. I missed her more than I'd ever admit, but she missed me too. I saw her face light up and then just as quickly as it happened, it was gone, replaced by sad eyes on a cold, expressionless face. She wanted her best friend back just as much as I wanted my own.

And to think all this bloomed from a stupid, childish argument with even more childish reasoning behind that one!

All of it started from me not sitting by her on the bus. She got mad when I walked past her but I thought she wouldn't really care. That's what she usually did; get mad for a few minutes then forgive me because it wouldn't be worth it. This wasn't one of those times.

I felt as if I was getting punched in the stomach every time she'd walk away when I tried to talk to her. I tried again when we were standing in line for lunch.

"Hey." No response. "Are you still ignoring

me?" I asked. I reached into the refrigerated case to grab my chocolate milk and scooted up in the line a little bit.

"Yes, you promised you would sit with me!" she yelled for the third time that day, finally turning to face me.

I felt a rant coming on. "Okay, every time I've tried to talk to you today, tried to apologize, **EVEN THOUGH** I didn't promise you **ANYTHING**, you've put your nose in the air and acted like you're better than me or something. You're not!" I took a step forward and looked into her big hazel eyes.

"But you promised-"

"I didn't promise-" I interrupted, shaking my head.

"Yeah, you did. You said you'd sit by me in the mornings and by her in the afternoon then you didn't sit by me." She crossed her arms and pouted.

The word childish crossed through my mind and I thought of a thousand different ways I could use it in a sentence that would insult her but I held my tongue. That's something I would, without a doubt, regret.

I raised my voice slightly. "Listen, I didn't promise anything. **YOU'RE** not better than me and I'm tired of you acting like you own me!" I snapped at her. I continued before she could, "If I would have sat by you, you wouldn't have paid any attention to me anyway. You'd just talk to Zeke about anime. I'm not interested." I could feel my frustration building higher and higher. "I do pay attention to you!" she said in a quiet shout.

"No, you don't. You don't own me, stop acting like it." I walked away, leaving that as the last word between us. It was an unsettling silence that followed me.

When I sat down with my other friends at our usual spot I was shocked at how much that conversation bothered me. My hands were shaking, my eyes stung, my heart raced. It was all so **STUPID** and absolutely, one-hundred percent, completely childish to be mad over who sat by who on the bus. Still, I would hold my

ground, no matter the cost.

I didn't understand it. We were both fourteen years old. Time to grow up. It was like I was already there as I have been and she was too slow to follow. She was left behind. While I was dealing with real world problems and worrying about things like my future, she was still living in a dream land where things like who you sit by on the bus were a big deal.

We told a friend on the bus we weren't talking after he'd noticed we weren't sitting by each other. He responded the exact way I should have expected.

"Why?"

"Because I'm mad at her," I said. I looked at her a couple seats down.

"Because I'm mad at her," she echoed while looking right back at me.

"Because she acts like a child." I shot back.

"Because she insulted anime." It almost sounded like a joke at that point. I know those around us didn't know if we were serious or not.

"Because she doesn't listen." I didn't even know if I was being serious or not. I flicked my ponytail out of my face.

"Because she broke a promise." The Earth had stopped spinning. Everything was silent.

There were almost joking jibes at each other back and forth until the so-called promise was brought up.

"I never made you any promise!" I shouted loudly.

"You did promise and then you broke it!" She was practically standing in the seat.

"I didn't promise," I turned sideways and looked straight at her, "and I didn't insult anime!"

"You called anime stupid!" she yelled, pushing on the seat a little bit.

There wasn't even an attempt to be quiet, the only attempt was to control our language.

"I said I wasn't interested," I said through my teeth, "I never called it **STUPID**."

"The word stupid came out of your mouth-"

"It did not!" I contradict. "You are a **CHILD!** Grow up," I said, taking the final word again.

Just like what happened that day at lunch, I

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was physically shaking. My heart was racing. I wanted to break down and cry.

I wanted my best friend back, that was all I asked. My everything.

She was such a vital part of my life, someone who hadn't been there forever but it really felt as if she had. I couldn't imagine life without her and she wasn't gone but she may as well have been. You don't know what you have until it's gone. In that one small argument I'd never known this simple fact to be as true as it was in that week. One week, made an eternity long.

I'd become so close to apologizing but I always stopped myself, reasoning with my pride. Finally, one day I decided I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Sit," I demanded her before she got up to get her breakfast. "Okay, we both know I'm too stubborn to apologize and you're too stubborn to apologize. Right?" She nodded, her hair bounced around her shoulders. "You miss me, and I know that because I miss you and we're basically the same person," I said while gesturing in the space between us. "No apologies, but please, can we be friends again? I really miss you and I've been falling to pieces without you." I held my breath, scared of her reaction.

She nodded in excitement and I threw myself to her, clinging to the friend I missed so desperately.

Just like that, everything returned to how it had been before the childish argument took away my other half. It was an argument that taught me a few things about my best friend but it also changed my perspective on life. I now know not to judge my friends who joke more than not, who it seems couldn't be serious to save their lives.

Everyone has a preset speed--- mine just happens to be faster than those of my age group. When my best friend looks back at that argument I'm sure the memory attached to it is along the lines of, "I forgave but I'll never forget." When I think of it all that runs through my mind is, "Man, what a stupid argument."

Everyone grows up at their own pace but I

don't think many people have as clear an example of it as I did. It's strange how life works.

**Adina Cazacu-De Luca**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Journalism

# HOW POLITICALLY ACTIVE IS THE JOHN BURROUGHS SCHOOL COMMUNITY?

Today's youth must be politically minded go-getters who seek to make change in the world around them, right? Surely, the student body of John Burroughs School, an institution that prides itself on creating such go-getters, must fit this description. Well, yes and no.

The upcoming 2018 midterms are near and dear to my heart, given the days I spent this summer putting blood, sweat, and tears (albeit mostly sweat) into canvassing. However, I realize that most people don't spend their free time listening to NPR's POLITICALLY SPEAKING podcast. Nevertheless, I needed to

know just how politically involved the Burroughs community is. This craving for knowledge couldn't be satiated by select interviews with classmates I know to lean this way or another. Instead, I sent out two surveys: one to the faculty, another to the student body. Here is my analysis of the results, with 56/56 faculty and 200/625 student responses spread evenly across grades 7-12.

First, a majority of both students and faculty intake and discuss political news. A simple majority of students check political news daily, and 70% of faculty also believe they are up to date in political news. Moreover, while 58% of faculty (3% strongly agreed) felt comfortable discussing politics with their coworkers, 61% of students (17.4% strongly agreed) felt comfortable doing the same. Because of the higher percentage of "strongly agree" in student responses, we can conclude that more students than faculty enjoy engaging in political discourse.

However, the simple similarities between generations ended there. 45% of students strongly agreed they were excited to vote. Another 39% agreed. From these data points, one might believe the young political base is activated. However, nearly 30% of students believe their vote won't matter. What an interesting paradox. To compare, 90% of faculty believe to some degree that their vote matters, and 100, 96, and 90% of teachers vote regularly in presidential, midterm, and primary elections, respectively. These numbers, although not perfect, far surpass the national average for voter turnout.

Students are understandably skeptical. For most of the student body, the 2016 election was the first presidential election they were old enough to have a grasp of the issues at hand. To then watch a candidate win the presidency while losing the popular vote can shake one's

confidence in our country's ability to hold a free and fair election. Teachers, on the other hand, have had enough life experience to know that the past election was one of many. This isn't to say the student body is naive in some way. In fact, given that we live in one tiny blue part of a red, winner-take-all state, liberal students who believe their vote doesn't matter on a national level are, frankly, being realists.

The survey also asked about more active methods of political involvement. 16% students have worked with a political campaign, while 32% of faculty have done the same. However, when comparing the tasks accomplished, students are two times more likely to have canvassed (gone door knocking) than faculty members. Faculty members, instead, are more likely than students to have worked in a phone bank or attended/hosted an event. In the possible short answer section of this question, students listed who they worked for. There were opposing candidates in Missouri's 2nd Congressional District, Ann Wagner and Cort VanOstran, as well as incumbent Senator Claire McCaskill and private organizations on the list. Students weren't afraid of naming names. There were also alternative ways to get involved that involved directly contacting voters, such as writing postcards. One faculty member, on the other hand, described their coordination of volunteers, an activity one step removed from voter interaction.

By both political news intake and volunteer efforts, students have exhibited the same or greater level of interest in politics than the faculty. However, the student body at large does not consider itself politically involved. For example, 90% of faculty (40% strongly agree) say they are interested in politics. On the other hand, only 62% of students (14.5% strongly agree) say the same. If we examine how many responses were collected for the issue short response, where the survey taker had to

generate issues that mattered to them, only 75% of faculty members who took the survey stated an issue they cared about, which means 15% of faculty who stated they are interested in politics didn't list an issue. However, 70% students submitted an issue, which means that 8% of the students that submitted must have identified as "neutral or disagree" when asked about their interest in politics. The bar for political involvement is set higher in the younger generation.

91.1% of faculty agree, with 42.95% strongly agreeing, that students nowadays should be politically active. However, this isn't how most students view themselves. Although a majority of students agreed that they were interested in politics, only 27% agreed they were politically active. 30.7% of students disagreed with the statement. The remaining 42.3% of students, a simple majority, feel "neutral" about their political activism. We live in an age where young people feel they have to be out on the streets protesting or campaigning in order to be politically active, while older generations believe passive actions constitute political activism.

Some may argue that younger people don't partake in passive events such as candidate fundraisers and other financial contributions simply because they are unable to, and should students have disposable income or a multitude of friends capable of voting for a candidate, they would opt for these options. However, I disagree.

When tallying responses for the issue ask, I was surprised by the depth and breadth of the issues laid out by students. Not only did students on average list three issues while faculty listed one, but the responses given were specific. The most common category of faculty was somewhere in the general area of "social justice and equity for all"—with healthcare and environmental

protection coming in for close seconds. On the other hand, students who fit into this same category didn't just stop at "social justice." They explained that they wanted politicians to "re-evaluate mass incarceration", "clarify and uphold anti-discrimination laws", and seek "criminal justice reform". Additionally the specific responses towards LGBT rights as well as gender and racial equality far outnumbered that of the faculty percentage-wise.

However, the most common response of the issue ask was "immigration," with responses ranging from border security to upholding DACA and reuniting children with their parents. No matter where students fall on the political spectrum, they are articulate about the issues that matter to them. Foreign affairs, the economy, net neutrality, and specific seat races were brought up in the student responses but not in the faculty ones. It's as if the weight of adulthood shifts one's view towards the issues that will only directly affect them or are daily beats of newspapers. While this is understandable, it's perhaps a bit disheartening that those who seek out information on the US's role in the Turkey-Kurdish conflict and the Venezuelan migrant crisis aren't the ones going to polls this November.

In conclusion, today's students are politically active now more than ever. However, in an increasingly polarized political landscape, teenagers attempt to do what they do best: fit in. Students become quiet liberals and conservatives, keeping viewpoints to themselves unless among like-minded peers. In our time, regularly voicing political opinions can earn you various epithets ranging from "social justice warrior" to "bigot." I believe this comes from a shift to online media, where ideas are categorized and dismissed before becoming fully developed. Many students retreat from a public "politically active" identity. Instead, they continue to read, and discuss, and

fight...quietly. At the end of the day, these students will turn 18. Hopefully, they will vote. But until that point, it is up to the readers of this article who have that privilege to use it. Midterm elections are on November 6, 2018.

**Adina Cazacu-De Luca**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

# THE CHRISTMAS CARD

When I first looked onto the town hall audience, I thought there was a vacant seat, but in it sat a five year old with a runny nose, waving a small American flag. The venue was quaint enough to see details: a cross necklace here, a buzz cut hidden by a blue hat reading "He's for real people" there. I could anticipate their questions. In the very back, a young woman with cropped brown hair had one arm crossed, the other raised. Her brow was furrowed, lips were pursed. She was a challenge.

"You have no experience in public office. How do you expect a decade of work in business to qualify you for this position?" There's no need to anticipate a question you've asked yourself a hundred times. It didn't qualify me in the slightest.

"Business teaches a man how to have thick

skin, cut deals, and achieve goals," I said instead, smiling for the crowd and staring as she rolled her eyes and sat down. The five year old then used his dad's sleeve as a tissue. Waving, I thanked the audience for their time.

When I got home, the mail was piled on the kitchen counter. My, then asleep, girlfriend ripped the papers out from their envelopes and left them strewn out. Bills, coupons, and a sealed Christmas card from an unfamiliar address. I didn't know the family in the picture, but they included their dog, and his tail blurred the photo. My own dog was breathing expectantly on my leg, so I found a treat for her and returned to the card. There was the five year old, smiling from ear to ear. On the back, his dad wrote, "I know you'll make things better for us. My family and the other real people of this country. We will always be with you." I took the card with me into the bedroom.

"In order to make things better, I need to know actual policy," I said to the card. How to lower taxes and also improve roads, schools, and healthcare. Office policy had kept us from even canvassing, so I was behind. After all, we might have had differing "values" than our clients, and that would have brought bad press. But when my coworkers came in wearing Rolex watches, shoes stitched by a child laborer in God knows where, and Swarovski cuff links just to make indecent remarks about our secretary, no one questioned their "values." One day a colleague told me how brave I was for allowing my girlfriend to be the bigger breadwinner of our relationship. I knew staying in that office would somehow turn me into them.

In the bottom drawer of my nightstand, I keep a manila envelope with copies of deals I've stricken. I bet no one in the office had an envelope as full as mine. I smiled back at the five year old. "If someone asks me to get something done, I'll find a way to do it. That's what will make me good at this public sector thing. So, of course I'll make things better," I assured him. Yet, if I told this family I'd make things better, who told them to always support me? Could I have done that unintentionally? My alarm clock glared at me; it

was positioned at the perfect angle to require a slight stretch in the morning. The automated watering system of my orchid chattered. As if I could be careless.

I turned my orchid around the following morning, to test it. For the next week it warped itself and grew towards the window. When I rotated it again, it contorted the other way. My girlfriend asked me why I was being so finicky. I asked my plant why my girlfriend found it so difficult to rinse the dishes before putting them in the dishwasher. While she was at work that day, I sat down with our pug. She has a shock collar so she doesn't enter the bedroom and eat the socks my girlfriend leaves on the floor. I offered our pug a treat. Then I tossed one next to her shock disc. She whimpered in defeat and returned to her bed, like the good girl she is.

A couple of weeks later, I went to St. Ann's to observe mass because I wanted to know why I kept seeing cross necklaces. I sat alone in the last pew and kept readjusting to find comfort in the rigid wood. The stained glass and organ were anachronisms in modern belief systems, or so I thought, but then I watched an old couple walk slowly towards the front row. The man took off the woman's fur coat and placed it gingerly on her walker. After wheeling the walker beside the pew, they knelt together, their bony fingers rubbing miniature rosaries. The crucifix, with a gaudily-shiny plastic Christ, hung over them. Wood chips had fallen off on the ends of the cross. When the priest started blessing the communion, he bellowed dramatically. I ran my fingers over the Christmas card in my pocket since I thought the smiling son would've found the priest funny. Yet, the old couple looked at him the same way they did their rosaries. At times, I could see extra crow's feet by their eyes from squeezing them shut with fervor, in prayer. They had created a belief, and a tacky facade or exaggerating figurehead couldn't have changed it. Then, the priest had his homily and encouraged everyone to perform some act of kindness. The congregation was in his hands, and he smiled as he bellowed. Ten minutes after mass, I saw him pour the holy water

on the street.

"I'm no priest," I whispered to the Christmas card on the subway home. My thoughts circled. WHAT COULD I ASK OF MY CONGREGATION? SAYING SOMETHING STUPID WOULD STOP ME FROM BEING ELECTED, AND THEN I WON'T BE ABLE TO MAKE THINGS BETTER. But I needed to know if they would always be with me. So, I stroked the face of each family member repeatedly, the dog last of course. The lady I felt staring at me had mismatched shoelaces.

By my next speech, I knew the Christmas card's family had a slightly crooked painting hanging over their fireplace and a strand of lights out on their tree. I didn't choose the speech venue, so it was too big. After striding out, all I could see was the ocean of blue hats.

"We are all here because the other party has betrayed you, left you in the gutter, and you deserve someone who will fight for you. Well, let's fight together! Fight with your fists, if you need to." I waited one, two, three seconds. I laughed. The rally filled with cheers.

To be honest, I'm not a great public speaker. Sure, I've been giving pitches and presentations for a decade, but they were only decent because I prepared every word in advance. My campaign manager told me 67% of my base felt cast aside by "established politics," so I threw in the bit about the gutter. When my manager told me we should make the "He's for real people" hats, I said, "why not?" But looking at the hats during the speech made my stomach drop. Everyone was a "real person," obviously, but those cheers sounded like they believed some lives are more "real" than others. My manager probably didn't have a manila envelope in his nightstand. I should have gotten a campaign manager who did, or at least one who could book venues where you could notice cross necklaces.

I should have been my own manager. Maybe then, I wouldn't have said "Fight with your fists." I hadn't written that down. Or maybe I still would have because my orchid kept bending, but my pug wouldn't. And the people at church listened,

even though my girlfriend didn't. And, I made a copy of the Christmas card and put it in my manila envelope. Somewhere among all of that was the truth. Plant. Pug. Church. Christmas. But where does fighting with your fists fit in? It wasn't a joke, really. But it could have been one. People can respond to a joke by cheering, right? SO, YOU SAW THAT AS A JOKE, RIGHT? I silently asked the card backstage after the speech. Yeah. They won't act on it because they know better because my pug knew better, and my pug enjoys eating socks so how smart can she be?

When I got home that night, the apartment reeked of pad thai. God forbid she could have cooked for me. I came home from a long day hoping to eat something she made for me. But no. She sat on the living room couch, and her blouse was missing the second button from the top.

"Really, do you enjoy being called a fascist? What are you trying to do?" She was pointing at me with chopsticks clenched in her hand. She had probably read the news, the rally coverage, something like that.

"I'm trying to help people, sweetheart."

"You can help people from the couch tonight." She did not offer me pad thai.

On election day, I wasn't the projected winner. Some people didn't think my "fists" joke was funny, even though I knew no one would act on it. Others thought my dreams were too lofty, and I didn't have a plan to achieve them. But that didn't matter to the real people of our country, those that live by putting their faith in something bigger than themselves. Pundits called my election night watch party Jacksonian, as if that were an insult. Of course people came to show their support. My Christmas card promised they would always be with me. That night, I framed the card and put it on my nightstand as a victory gift for myself.

This morning, I slept in. My girlfriend had already left for work when I woke up, but she left the TV in the living room on. I go to turn it off.

"Breaking news. A bomb exploded in a restaurant where senators were having coffee.

Three dead, five more injured." The mugshot takes up the whole TV. "The suspect in custody has stated, 'I fought with my fists. He wanted me to fight with my fists.'" I pause the TV, gingerly retrieve the frame off my nightstand, hold it up to the TV, and sigh. The Christmas-card father used the same smile in both photos. Maybe my girlfriend will break up with me. I'll tell her she can't because it would bring bad press. Returning to the bedroom, my eyes first notice the hideous orchid. I had moved it farther and farther from the windowsill every day, but it kept growing towards the damn sun so now it was all lopsided. I throw it in the closet. Now, it has no light to bend towards. Now, the smiles look less similar. Now, my Christmas-card man wants the best for his flag-waving son. He taught his son the golden rule, maybe at St. Ann's. I take my pug, carry her to the shock disc, and throw a treat at it. She leaps towards it. Then, she starts to howl at me, in that whiny pug way. Her runny nose drips onto the carpet. I sigh again.

## Noah Cline

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School,  
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

# A STRANGER ALONE IN A MULTIVERSE

I would like for you to imagine that you are in a mall. Imagine that there is a vast open area, in the center of which lies a beautiful, luxurious

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fountain. Around that fountain there are many different storefronts, some showing things bountiful and glorious, others grim and abysmal. While most stores in this mall may have some relevance to you, there are some that you find insignificant and unappealing.

Now imagine that there is no ceiling, just an infinite amount of stores, all stacked one on top of another, with an also infinite and elaborate system of stairs, ladders, bridges, and other various and alien contraptions leading from one store to the next. Also, the stores aren't really stores at all, either, just doors. One such door being a large, grandiose archway leading into a sunny meadow, while another may be much more akin to an cage, with thick and sturdy iron bars, from behind which truly monstrous and tragic sounds can be heard. As you turn around, what had been a fountain is now a large globe, showing resemblance to Earth, except for that this globe was completely hollow, only representing landmasses. The globe itself seemed to be made up of thousands of microscopic materials, all of which shifted and swirled to create vibrant and incomprehensible patterns. The base material one may deem to be silver, while another may deem to be gold, another plastic, another wood, yet all would agree that it was unlike anything from the reality we know. Imagine walking through the nearest door, noticing as soon as you entered that behind the door was an entirely different universe from the one that you had been in just moments ago. If you are able to comprehend such, an experience, than you can begin to fathom the later life of one Mr. Aaron Keels.

The only account of Aaron's life and travels has been his journal, acquired from his sister after she found it lying upon her doorstep one fateful morning. Mrs. Dansler, as she is happily married, was very kind and courteous, yet unfortunately knew very little about her brother, and hadn't heard from him in many, many years, save for the journal and one letter in it addressed to her. It was

this letter and its contents, for which I have been politely asked not to disclose, that she believed this journal to be real. I have been given the privilege to be the first to publish the pages of this journal, in its full and unabridged form. We begin with the first and oldest entry, October 7, 2015:

[Entry Number: 0001]

"

October 7, 2015

To Whom It May Concern,

I have arrived in a land much unlike that of my own; it is barren, dry, and cold. It seems as if this place is an infinite desert, yet lacking heat and sun. While I have passed a few settlements, all I would consider hardly an abode, little less a house. Any places of residence in this land seem to be scarce and few, all of which are used as a very temporary spot to rest. Any organism on this planet seem to exist to move, fight, and dominate. That is the pattern of life, and a very strange one it is.

I arrived in this land by means unfamiliar to me. I awoke in a place of infinite doors, each a passage to realm quite different to that in which I was born. I had first traveled through a wooden door with a frame of entwined branches, and found myself in the middle of some forest. About 20 meters away lay a small pond; its waters were a deep but clear blue, akin to that of a sapphire. In the reflection, to my fright I saw movement behind me, and before I could parce out what had occurred what happened I found myself falling farther and farther down into the crystalline waters.

To my surprise, my back popped up out of a small stream in a bustling city, as if the forest I had just been in was part of a world on the underside of the realm I now found myself in. I dived down to see if I could return, but I soon found the riverbed, and was dumbfounded. Somehow I was shifting between worlds, but couldn't return to those I had already been. The city was just as strange, a place where things moved with no people or

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animals to move them; Cars passed by with no drivers, door opened with no one to enter or exit, and shadows passed with no one to cast them. I soon discovered the city to be a precise replica of that in which I grew up, and driven by this discovery, I attempted to locate my childhood home. When I arrived at the place it should have been I found only a crater, grass unkempt, with pipes flooding the empty foundation with water. It seemed to me as if the place had both yet to be built, and had been removed many years ago.

As I turned I found there to be a cab waiting with doors open for me to enter. As I stepped inside I found myself suddenly much more tired than I had remembered, and I quickly fell asleep, breathing with the bumping of the cab as it traveled, driverless."

[Entry Number: 0067]

"

December 15, 2017  
To Whom It May Concern,

This shadow veil of reality that I find myself to now exist in is rather lonely. There is no one nor anything thing that I have encountered in my travels, save for whatever it was that pushed me into the pond. I do long to discover whatever creature or beast so scared me, as it is in part the only reason I am still alive. The image of something else, anything living, has kept me going in my solitude.

I have found that there are places where when entered act as portals to other realms. These tend to appear as inconspicuous, like a pond, river, bush, door, cave, or hole. It is also not all of these, and the appearance of a portal in them seems random at best. There also appear to be other ways of shifting between realms, the least of which is death. I believe that even if I were to starve to death I would merely awake the next day in a field, my stomach unsatisfyingly full. This was discovered in most sufferable way, after falling into a canyon I found myself on some planet with no air and fire raining from the

heavens. I was forced to experience my body burn, boil, and suffocate, all alone. The next day I woke up in a field of hyacinth, blue, pink and white in all directions.

Some lands are harsh, hot or cold, dry, and insufferable; others are quaint, calm, lovely and temperate. There is no discernible pattern to the madness of this transport, and no continuity to the time between scenes. One may die in a desert at midday and arise in a meadow where flowers grow as tall as people under the light of two moons."

[Entry Number: 0571]

"

Januly 13, 20X3  
For Whomever Cares,

I have grown accustomed to the constantly shifting realms I call home; I can barely remember the one from which I came. Was it possibly called St. Louis, London, or Shanghai? I can no longer recall. I sometimes get visions, like images flashing into my mind; they can be as vague as a word that feels to me like it was at some point rather important, like family, earth, or philosophy. It is as if part of me recalls these things from the past, shadows of a life I don't remember living.

The visions sometimes appear violently, an image of a coffin being loading into a hearse accompanied by an unexplained feeling of loneliness and longing, or and image of someone called 'sister' followed a pain in my chest, like a phantom knife piercing my heart whose blade my memories can only vaguely recall.

Sometimes, however, they are sweet and blissful. Visions of places so beautiful that there existence is fundamentally impossible, of emotions so potent that they pour out of you like an overflowing chalice. Memories of love seem to be the most powerful of these regardless of kind; Love gained, loved grown, love lost, love killed... they all bring emotions back that I had thought long gone. The

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single fact that stings the most: I can't recall anyone that I loved. It appears to me to be some cruel trick. I gained the ability to move between realities, however in exchange I will always be completely alone. That leaves me to wonder, who was that beast at the pond, and are they alone as well?"

[Entry Number: 1042]

"

To Myself,

The beast of the pond seems to be some type of gatekeeper, a guard of the portals I enter. In a rare moment of clarity amidst the screaming voices raging war in my soul, I think I have finally understood them. They exist to watch me suffer, their torture is to torture me. I don't know what they did to deserve managing my suffering for all of eternity, but it must have been severe. They are lonely, so lonely. It is as if their voice speaks to my mind, whispering to me their plight. I have decided that I will find them, and liberate them from their suffering; if I am so lucky, it will kill me in the process. Existing merely to exist has shown me the futility humanity's truth.

[Entry Number: 1372]

"

I have found the beast of the pond, and I have killed it."

That was the last of the entries in Mr. Keels journal; no more pages were written after it, and those herein stated were found on his person at the doorstep of Mrs. Dansler.

It was she, Mrs. Dansler that is, that found him. It appeared that he had lost the ability to move his legs at some point; the trail left from him dragging his body on the cold December ground led to a pond in the forest outside his sister's cabin. Another man, later identified as Francis Romner, was found dead at the pond. Mr. Romner was suspected to be dealing in advanced hallucinogens and narcotics, which has been the

popular explanation for the condition and journals of Mr. Keels.

Mr. Dansler and myself, however, are inclined to disagree with the conclusion drawn in the official report. My opinion, nonetheless, is unimportant in this matter. It is for you to decide now, whether the late Aaron Keels died addicted to hallucinogens causing him to have delusions and to kill Mr. Romner, or if his story is less fictional than it appears on first observations. All that I can say is that I have seen the beast at the pond, and I know their tragedy all too well.

### **Kayla Colt**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Pioneer Ridge Middle School, Independence, MO

Educator: Marcy Black

Category: Short Story

## ONE FOR SORROW

Your destination is close. You can almost see it, the dark cabin partially obscured by the creeping fog. A lone cricket chirps in the grass. A flurry of black alerts you to the presence of a crow, perched in the ghostly silhouette of a tree nearby. You absently brush a soft ebony feather from your shoulder. It drifts to the ground soundlessly. The crow lets out a harsh, echoing **CAW**.

As you approach the quiet cabin, you grip the hem of your shirt nervously, the fabric damp from the humidity. The moss beneath your feet gives easily when you take a step, moisture seeping into your socks and the quiet **SQUELCH** of each footfall rhythmic and steady.

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The gritty taste of ash permeates the air. THE CHIMNEY, you think. It never once occurs to you that there is no smoke billowing into the flat, dreary grey sky at all, for the chimney remains ominously unlit.

The cricket has ceased its chirping. The cabin windows resemble endless voids, black and tantalizingly empty.

You tilt your head. You could have sworn someone had just whispered your name. It was scarcely more than a coy murmur, but it attracts your attention regardless. A long, breathless hiss whickers by, urgently pulling you back, back, back-

What drew you here, again? Was it the blurred form of a house in the distance? Or the cold caress of fingers on your chilled skin?

There must be heavy weights on your shoulders, surely; for it should not be this difficult to move, as if you are trudging through a toxic bog instead of spongy moss.

Is it cold? You had not felt it before; but your breath clearly materializes ahead of you, so why can you feel the tingling sensation of warmth on your face?

The crow cries out once more. You do not want to pause and listen, however beautiful the sound. You need to enter the cabin, to feel the shivers tripping up your spine as you gaze into the alluring abyss within.

You are undoubtedly alone; so why, then, does there appear to be a shadow flitting across your vision, dancing eerily among the foggy tendrils of mist? Why is it, that when you turn to look, it is gone? Why does the view of the cabin hook you so spectacularly, as if it is the smug fisherman and you are but an unsuspecting fish?

Your shirt ripples in the breeze, although the fog

remains untouched, unbothered, and relentless. You had entered from the gullet of a thick forest; where have the trees vanished to? Where is the crow perched, then, if there are no wooded sentinels to be found?

A low hum strokes your ears, sending a shudder raking through your body with gnarled talons. Where is that noise emitting from? Why does it seem so much darker than before, the shadows encroaching on your vision?

You cannot take in air properly, and now you must truly be a fish, gasping for air although surrounded by it, your feet moving free of your influence and faster, faster towards the mysterious cabin which only seems to be getting further and further away-

A mournful sound spills from the beaks of the crow, eyes shiny and black and indifferent.

ONE FOR SORROW-

### Grace Daugherty

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Poetry

## RETURN TO THE SNOW

### RETURN TO THE SNOW

I will return to her  
When she pays me back for  
All the times

She was stuck on the bottom of my shoe  
Or soaked right through,  
I had wet socks for hours.  
All the times  
She abandoned me in  
The common ground of my neighborhood,  
I seemed to have walked for days.  
All the times  
She gave me rosy cheeks  
And a cherry colored nose,  
My mother warmed me up in minutes.  
All the times.  
All the memories,  
I owe to the frostbite  
That tore through  
My mint green tennis shoes.  
I owe to the harsh wind  
That knocked my gray hat  
Into the untouched snow.  
I owe to the flakes  
That fell so gently  
And fought back so fiercely.  
Only after she has pushed me around  
In the swirling storm,  
Only after she has kissed me  
In the dust of early November,  
Will I return to her with open arms,  
And a heart as cold as hers.

**William Dong**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs  
School, Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Critical Essay

## A COMPARISON OF SHAME IN THE

# SCARLET LETTER AND MODERN- DAY SHAME

The Evolution of Shame Since the Puritan Era  
Based on The Scarlet Letter

My freshman self stood on the ice confused and bewildered from what I saw, as I lived one of the worst nightmares any team-sport athlete can fathom. Looking over my shoulder, I watched the six-ounce disc of vulcanized rubber, slowly rising upwards and into the goal, as if in slow motion . . . only, it was not our opponents' goal--it was our own, and the puck had come off of my stick. What was supposed to be a routine maneuver ended in a disaster and would ultimately result in a 6-5 loss to one of the lowest-ranked teams in our division. A brick dropped in my stomach; everyone in the ice rink knew exactly what had happened. Although my teammates remained supportive, I couldn't help but feel like I had let my teammates and the fans down, and, to make matters worse, our opponents did little to hide their glee over my blunder. Due to its effectiveness, the emotion of shame has been a force harnessed by society for hundreds and thousands of years. Compared to the purpose of shame in Puritan society, as portrayed in *THE SCARLET LETTER*, modern day shame has not changed significantly, with the only primary differentiation being the reasons people are shamed. However, the inconsistent reasons with which society chooses to shame individuals makes modern-day shame more complicated than shame in Puritan society.

The Puritans integrated religion into the beliefs and mandates governing their society; they maintained their rigid social order by using shame to scrutinize religious infractions. Because

religion is generally thought of as a way to live life, in some ways, the religion-structured society that the Puritans adopted provided clarity by defining what was morally correct and adopting standard consequences based on the infraction. An influential account of Puritan life in seventeenth-century New England, Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *THE SCARLET LETTER* describes how the Puritans used shame to maintain this social control. The narrator describes them "as people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused" (35). In order to emphasize the pervasiveness of this theocratic rule in Puritan society, the narrator observes that "the founders of a new colony... have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as a site of a prison" (33). Their early attention to these institutions illustrates how the founders of a Puritan society prioritized the law, which was synonymous to religion. In contrast with Puritan colonial society, modern-day American society, although still connected with religion, is no longer structured around religion in the way Puritan society was. As a result, discrepancies in judgement creates unforeseeable consequences for actions that may be deemed to be socially unacceptable by some. Although America is still governed by laws, these laws do not specify parameters that define what is morally righteous. Furthermore, the inability of people to agree upon morally and socially acceptable actions makes shame worse in modern day America due to its unpredictable nature. Additionally, the introduction of social media has magnified the impact of socially incorrect actions by allowing anyone to judge and shame individuals in front of audiences of unprecedented size.

In the case of Hester Prynne, Puritan law dictated that she must either be put to death or publically repent by wearing a scarlet "A" on her chest for the rest of her life and stand on the scaffold once a week. From a modern

standpoint, it is easy to dismiss this punishment as excessive and unreasonable, but the Puritans considered adultery as a much more serious legal and moral offense than most modern Americans generally do. Regardless of whether her punishment was reasonable, Hester Prynne fully understood and accepted the consequences of her actions. Nonetheless, she proceeded to violate the law, so it stands to reason that she should suffer the consequences of her actions. In contrast, since the beliefs of modern-day Americans constantly changes, it has become more difficult to anticipate the severity of the consequences of actions. This means that many people may unwittingly place themselves in a position to be scrutinized by society and publicly shamed. For instance, people may create posts on social media, believing themselves to be funny, clever, or even self-righteous, but face significant backlash from a society that considers those posts unacceptable. Such individuals could not have fathomed the consequences that would result from their actions; in fact, they likely would not have chosen to carry through with such actions had they known its consequences. Most recently, Kevin Hart attracted much attention on social media over his homophobic tweets that he posted nearly nine years ago, which ultimately costed him his opportunity to host the Oscars. In defense of the tweets, Hart argues that comedy had been very different just a few years ago. Indeed, he makes a point; society uses a present-day standard to scrutinize Hart's actions that took place nearly a decade ago.

As the ideology of society has transformed over time, the shame and punishment imposed on those who violate such social norms have also changed. Writing long after the Puritan era, the narrator describe Hester's punishment as "a penalty which, in our days, would infer a degree of mocking infamy and ridicule, might then be invested with almost as stern a dignity as the punishment of death itself" (35). Hawthorne's assessment of the power of Puritan shame has, in 1850, already began to demonstrate the

evolution of the understanding of shame.

Since Hawthorne's time, the function of shame as a regulatory tool has continued to change. That is, the legally enforced Puritan moral codes have become more synonymous with modern social norms. In spite of this shift in social ideology, society still uses shame to punish those who fail to follow the broad, overarching expectations implemented into society. When I spoke to my mom about examples of shame that she witnessed when she was younger, she was reminded of her high school days when students' grades were posted after each test for everyone to see. She emphasized that the sentiment and the expectation of society as a whole was for students to work hard to earn good grades. Although she was regularly at the top of her class, she acknowledged that the system often led to self-esteem issues and ultimately poorly-performing students simply giving up on trying to do well academically. On the other hand, many lagging students were also motivated by the shame of being near the bottom of the class to work harder, the original purpose of posting the grades publicly (Sun). In this sense, using shame to encourage or discourage behavior continues to be present in modern society.

Although many of the rules of Puritan society seem pointless and even ridiculous by modern-day standards, nonetheless, they established a clear-cut guideline between acceptable and unacceptable: regulations and their respective punishments were clearly defined and widely known. By contrast, modern-day society has no such guideline making people susceptible to scrutiny without intending to put themselves under the spotlight. Understanding the impact of shame upon individuals is crucial for preventing the weaponization of shame within modern-day American society. On that fateful day during my freshman year, even despite the supportive teammates and fans, I learned the true impact of shame on an individual by experiencing it myself. However, because of it, I have grown as

a citizen of society by learning to exercise restraint from using shame, and instead, to understand the situation of others before making personal judgements.

## **Molly Duke**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Short Story

## **FEM**

FEM

[ OCTOBER 17TH, 2015 ]

Fern walked around the small third-story apartment, the socks on her feet gliding across the linoleum flooring with little issue.

Her socks reached the kitchen, and finally, a soft smile broke the otherwise stone cold expression which held her face captive. Her hands, covered with faded henna designs, reached up to the open-faced shelves in their kitchen; fingertips looping around the handle of her well-worn white mug, which was stained a vibrant yellow on the inside. She pulled it down into her grasp, holding it close to her body as she then turned her attention to the container of turmeric tea that was supposed to be in the shelf parallel to her.

The container, however, wasn't resting in its usual place. Instead, it was empty and thrown haphazardly into the sink, leaving the bright yellow residue strewn across the counters and

cascading around the edges of the metal basin.

The hair on the back of Fern's neck raised in anger, her grip on the mug clenching so tight she feared that another chip would adorn its collection by the end of today. Letting out a frustrated sigh, Fern slammed the mug down on the counter and began storming back towards the study; her roommate's favorite location.

"Summer!" she shouted, slamming open the door to look at the other girl. "What the hell did we talk about, huh? If you finish the tea, you go and buy some to place it. Simple as that! Instead, I'm here with no tea, and then I have to go work for eight more goddamn hours while you sit here reading some crappy vampire romance!"

Summer, however, did not respond. Instead, she sat quietly in her papasan chair, hazel eyes focusing on the book wedged between her hands. This sudden cold shoulder caused Fern's anger to reach dangerous territories, as she grabbed a pillow off of one of the chairs in the room and threw it at her, hitting Summer in the leg.

"If you're just going to sit there and act like nothing's wrong, at least look me in the eye!" Fern spat, her two-toned eyes burning with fury. Her rage that had begun as a boiling anger reduced to a simmer sitting under her skin, tinting her cheeks pink.

Summer only looked up at the end of her roommate's rant, placing the bookmark, which was adorned with images of stars and planets, in her book to preserve her place. Tucking a strand of her waist-length blonde hair behind her ear, she sighed and tapped the tips of her green painted fingernails against the cover of her current read. When she opened her mouth to reply, the guilty yellow color on her tongue was revealed, determining her as the culprit.

"Fern, listen. There was only enough for just a cup anyways. I didn't think that you would want it, you usually do coffee on Monday's. I'll go and grab some from the market if you'd like.

Honestly, hun, you're overreacting."

Fern looked at her roommate, looking at her. Unlike herself, no stress was apparent in the taller girl's body. Letting out a withdrawn sigh, she took a deep breath and waited for Summer to act on her words.

"Fern, you've known me for over five years now. Do I honestly seem like the kind of girl to drink all of the tea and leave you with none?" Summer teased, sending a wink Fern's way.

She stood and tossed the hardcover novel back down onto her seat before straightening up her floor-length olive colored maxi-dress. Lace delicately lined the bottom of her dress, sitting stark white against her evenly tanned skin. Her steps seemed elegant, matching her tall figure as she talked towards Fern, who so enraged by the entire tea fiasco, was left with her mouth frozen open with silence.

"Relax, I'll go get your tea." Summer reassured, tucking a strand of Fern's hair behind her ear with a smile before turning to the small nightstand beside the chair. Reaching over, her nimble fingers picked up the silver ring with a single jade crystal embedded in the center that always took residence on her ring finger, as well as the cloth wallet with faded paintings of trees. "Do you want anything else while I'm out?" She called as she walked towards the door, slipping on her black velvet boots.

"Maybe you should consider purchasing a new attitude!" Fern called after her, clearly still angered over the encounter.

The only response she got was the echo of laughter and the sound of a shutting door.

~~~

[JULY 2ND, 2014]

"Hey, Sum?" A voice inquired, getting lost in the dark.

It had been two hours since the lights in the apartment had gone out, leaving the only lighting to the candles and the lightning occasionally flickering through the linen curtains. The muddled scents that the candles

provided filled the space between the walls, smelling of clove and balsam.

"Yeah?" Summer replied, turning her body on the couch to face the direction of the voice, even if her basil green eyes couldn't locate a body to match.

"How did you know you liked girls?" the voice replied, hesitance lingering on every syllable.

The question hung in the air as if it was debating its relevance in the room. The silence it created was only cut when a crack of thunder shook the room. The shadows danced on the walls, mocking the tension lingering in the room before steadying as silence reemerged.

"I mean- I suppose I've always known to an extent. My mom always told me that I would get over that 'disgusted by boys' phase, but by high school I was still thinking boys had cooties," Summer finally replied, a faint giggle interrupting the faux seriousness in her tone. "Seriously, I just never found myself with interest in a man. Sure some guys are nice- and some are even cute- but I can't see myself dating one."

Fern stared at the window for a moment, watching the lightning ricochet off the building before landing in the living room. Spinning the dainty ring adorned with jade that lay on her ring finger absentmindedly, she let a soft smile appear on her lips and she turned her head to face the other voice.

"Why do you ask? Something on your mind?" Summer asked, her brow furrowing in concern.

"Just curious is all," Fern responded, looking to the couch as the smile still took residence on her lips.

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[AUGUST 30TH, 2011]

"Hey- the pan's hot, do you want me to add the oil?" Summer called from the kitchen, sticking her head around the corner to look for Fern, who had disappeared into the living room.

"Yep! Thank you!" Fern shouted in response as she steadied the needle on the rich black circle of plastic before making her way back towards

the heated kitchen.

The sound of socked feet padding across the floor intertwined with the music for a moment before the petite girl ran into the kitchen, glancing at the steaming cast iron pan that was now glistening with oil. Turning, she took a small paring knife in her left hand and a small sweet potato in her right. Carefully, she sliced the starch into thin strips, resembling the thickness of a half dollar.

Her hips shimmied to the soft mumbled words of Sarah Vaughan, which was playing in the background, her socked feet sliding across the ground for a moment before she settled into a rhythm at her cooking station. Jazz had always been her favorite music genre.

"How was work today?" Summer enquired, "I know you mentioned this morning that you thought it would be a long day."

Fern glanced at Summer with a soft smile, laying the slices of sweet potato down on the oil filled sizzling pan before responding.

"It was actually alright, Jeremy let me go on my lunch break a little earlier. The new drink is selling well too- I was worried I was the only one who liked lavender in my tea."

"I'm glad. You deserve a relaxed day."

Summer smiled, glancing at Fern before turning her attention to the beautiful harvest from their personal garden; Roma tomatoes. The fresh pile of tomatoes called her name, and soon she was finely dicing the bursting juicy vegetable.

"Do you think we can watch a movie tonight?" Fern began, turning her attention away from the pan for a moment. "We haven't gotten a chance to see that one your mom recommended to us."

Using a pair of tongs she flipped the sweet potato, letting a smile show as the crisp golden color was revealed. The aroma wafted into the kitchen, twirling into blonde and brunette hair, dancing along the crevices of their home.

"Sure! I think it's on Netflix- That's what she said at least. We still have some of the ice-cream

you made a couple days ago if you wanted to make milkshakes." Summer responded, eyes sparkling with excitement. She was a sucker for a good milkshake.

Fern removed the now crisp slices of sweet potato from the pan and set them on a plate, using a cheesecloth to gently pat the oils away from the surface so they wouldn't grow soggy. Summer kicked into action, taking the mixture that she had been working on earlier and depositing a heaping teaspoons worth on each slice.

The pair let out a relieved sigh, looking down at the complete dish. The work showed, the vibrant colors of the vegetables pairing well with the burnt caramel color of the sweet potatoes. Suddenly Summer turned to Fern, scooping her into a hug, her chest bouncing with laughter.

"Let me down, you dork!" Fern shouted, kicking her feet before shimmying her way out of her roommate's grasp and grabbing her plate of food, although a smile still lingering on her lip, her cheeks carrying a hint of rose.

"First meal cooked together, I don't think we did half bad!" Fern said, turning around to send Summer a beaming grin.

Summer simply smiled back and grabbed her food, going to join her in the living room.

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[JUNE 15TH, 2011]

Fern groaned, her arms straining as she dropped another overflowing box onto the floor of her living room. She arched her back, rubbing the soreness away as another girl came bustling into the room, adding another box to the growing pile.

"Why do you have so much crap?" Fern groaned, looking over to her soon-to-be-roommate.

"I don't have a lot of crap, you just have a tiny apartment. I don't know why you insisted on moving into your place, mine had much more space." Summer retorted, looking to the shorter girl with a sassy upturn of her lips.

Fern rolled her eyes and unraveled the hair tie

from her wrist before raking her painted fingernails through her hair. She quickly tied up the mass of tight curls before looking around at the graveyard of overfilled boxes filling her living room. Adding someone into her home was something she had wanted to do, she had even brought it up, but seeing the mess now was causing her nervousness to spike.

"We're closer to my work. Besides, the view here is so much better. Yours was too close to the city. I can't relax with all that noise." Fern said, sending her new roommate an apologetic look before opening one box

labeled 'KITCHEN' with neat, level cursive. The box bore rich, solid wooden bowls. The grain still shining clearly through the clear glaze caught the light filtered through her linen curtains revealing fiery red undertones. Fern's breath caught in her throat and she turned to look at Summer, whose attention had been stolen by another box.

"What are the odds, you have the same bowls as me." Fern murmured softly, smiling to herself and lifting the stack into her arms.

"Huh, that is pretty neat. I thought they were gorgeous, I found them at a garage sale not too far from that little town we went to last week." Summer replied without turning around, digging her greedy hands into her own box of goodies. After pulling a woven tapestry out of the box the taller female walked behind Fern to head to the bedroom, gingerly touching the small of her back with her undecorated fingers as she passed.

Fern walked the bowls into the kitchen, tipping them up onto the open shelves that adored her kitchen, looking at her own stack next to it. Maybe taking this step wouldn't be so scary after all.

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[FEBRUARY 14TH, 2010]

Fern took a deep breath, her eyes closed with focus and her nose close to the scent itself. All at once the thought approached her, and just like that her eyelids burst open like firecrackers,

igniting the brightly colored iris' held captive underneath. She pushed the container away from herself, eyes studying the label before allowing a slightly disgruntled huff to escape her.

It was no good. Those leaves wouldn't make a tea that was rich or flavorful, Fern could tell by the faint bitter smell that caused her nose to wrinkle like a pug. Letting a sigh approach her red painted lips, she pushed the container gingerly away and back onto its original home on the shelf that was just high enough where she had to tilt up on her toes, the tips of her boots supporting her weight. Settling back on the ground, her heterochromia iridium eyes, which she carried from her mother, looked around the shelves in hopes of locating something with turmeric; it was her favorite drink. The black pepper that was generally infused with the yellow spice made her throat tingle, a feeling she was now almost addicted to, and the bright yellow that it stained everything was something she had grown to embrace.

Scanning the overly-stocked shelves, Fern began to feel the weight of defeat on her shoulders, the box of golden delight nowhere to be found. Another sag of her shoulders and she was walking away from the tea section, hoping to possibly find something else to curve her craving. However, before that could be accomplished a vacant spot on the shelf caught her eye, and the single box of Golden Salvation was enough to cause her to stumble to a stop.

Fern's hand reached out greedily; however, when it reached the tea, it felt both the box and another hand. Quickly retracting her grip, she looked to her right, finding that another girl at the same time had reached for the last box. Instantly Fern's cheeks burned a rosy crimson, and she attempted to sputter out an apology; however, the girl across from her beat her to it. "Oh gosh, I'm sorry. Please- go ahead and take it," she stuttered, laughter entwined in her tone.

Fern's voice, once previously caught in her throat but now unlodged, wavered as she spoke in response to the stranger.

"No no, you go ahead. I can- I'll just get some next week." Fern offered in return, swallowing as she tried not to focus on how beautifully elegant the stranger's smile was, or how the blonde hair so carefully braided behind her head resembled the rays of the sun.

The silence between them lingered for a brief moment, and in that time it seemed as though the other girl had begun to pick apart Fern's appearance as well. She took note of her two-toned eyes, of the freckles that were scattered like stars against the bridge of her nose and on her forehead. She noticed how her thick curls were cut right below her ears, with half of it tied up in a neat bun. Lastly, she saw the red lipstick that covered her thin lips that suited her rounded face, and how it was slightly smudged around the edges as she chewed at them.

"Alright, cool. Thanks." the stranger chimed with a smile, turning and tossing the box haphazardly into her cart. She took a few steps forward to continue on her shopping trip, but hesitation pulled at her legs and she finally stopped and turned back around to look at the brunette. "Would you maybe want to come by my apartment and have a cup?", the blonde haired girl started, "It's only fair, I did steal it from you after all."

Fern felt the adrenaline rush into her head, her mouth dry like cotton. Her eyes looked into the hazel eyes in front of her, searching for a sign that what she was saying might be a joke; however, she couldn't find one.

All Fern could manage was a feeble nod, her cheeks burning pink but her eyes sparkling. The stranger laughed softly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear before motioning with her head for her to follow. As she walked with her cart full of organic produce and tea, she turned to glance back at the brunette.

"My name's Summer, by the way." She practically purred, turning her attention back to

the front as she pushed her cart into the checkout line and delicately began unloading her groceries onto the belt.

"I'm Fern, like the plant," Fern responded, letting a smile appear her lips as she slid her empty hands in her pockets, which tugged at the loose threads anxiously.

Summer returned the smiles as she pulled out her cloth wallet, the rucksack outside of it distinctly having been decorated with vivid hand-done paintings of trees. She paid for her groceries and lugged the reusable bags back into her cart before turning to Fern. The taller female smiled and gently held the small of Fern's back, guiding her towards the door. Summer sent a confident smile to the girl, content sitting high on her cheekbones. That was the day that Fern learned she loved two things; hand-painted trees and Summer.

### **Molly Duke**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS  
Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

## **RAZOR SCOOTER**

### **Razor Scooter**

The sidewalk passes; far from the foot of those, flying across the worn cement surface, gray centered by green.

A bump in the cement causes an urge for a do-over.

Flying across the worn cement surface, until a speed at which the tree's turn to a

swirling blur is ultimately reached.

The side once previously so far is suddenly so close.

Gray centered by green, the gray, interrupted by red, no longer provides the speed at which the tree's turn to a swirling blur.

It has caused the knees to skin; to burst open like pomegranate seeds.

A bump in the cement causes an urge for a do-over.

### **Martha Duncan**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Wydown Middle School, Clayton, MO  
Educators: Victoria Jones, Michael Ricci

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

## **SPECIAL**

I stare up into the cerulean sky spotted with feathery clouds, soft green grass tickling my feet. Thoughts swirl around in my head. I have so many ideas, about how I want to go to New York and act in the holos, actually doing something with my life. Unfortunately, the military needs people to fight in World War IX and will kidnap "recruits" against their will, even if they are famous. It is much safer to live incognito like we do.

"Ash, it's time for dinner! Come inside, it's not safe out there," my mother calls, leaning out the window.

I ignore her.

"Ashlyn Aughey, I'm not going to ask again!"

she repeats, this time stricter. Then she pulls her head back in, like a tortoise retreating to its shell. Mother never comes outside anymore. She's too paranoid that the military will come for her.

"Ughhhh. Coming!" I shout. Then I start to walk up the uneven cobblestone path towards our cottage.

I don't hear the jet above me, but to be fair, with modern technology, they make almost no noise. I don't see the net either, its spider silk fibers glistening in the afternoon sun as the jet flies away with me trapped inside.

However, I do hear my mother's screams, weaving their way through the forest to reach me, right before everything goes black.

I wake up in a room filled with the dwindling evening light. Soon it will be dark without electricity, a luxury reserved for the rich. So much for looking for a way out of here.

Pain oozes into my limbs. I lift my arm to inspect it. Nothing seems wrong with it except for the IV stabbed into my forearm. An ancient-looking man in a white coat walks briskly into the room, shoes clicking against the shiny tiled floor. He asks me some basic questions. I answer. My voice sounds like broken glass, but I know it would hurt too much to clear it. Besides, what reason do I have to answer him?

"Do you know why you are here?" Dr. Old Man asks.

Yes. You want me to go fight in the war. You want me to go kill people. I want to tell him all the things wrong with him, the country, and our world. Instead, I shake my head no.

"Well then, I must show you," he responds. My vision then fades to nothing. After a few seconds, light floods back into my eyes. I am transported to a new setting. Children and their parents are tearing open colorfully wrapped parcels, sitting around a tree INSIDE a house! This can't be my memory. I'M SO GLAD IT SNOWED ON CHRISTMAS THIS YEAR. I HOPE SANTA

BROUGHT ME A NEW PHONE! Wait, these aren't my thoughts. Someone new floods my brain. I'M SO GLAD THE KIDS LIKE THEIR GIFTS THIS YEAR. THAT'S ONE MORE THING I DON'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT UNTIL NEXT YEAR. Who is this Santa guy? Where am I? I turn to see Dr. Old Man -- I really should learn his name -- standing next to me, unfazed by this strange place. He glances at me. Suddenly, everything goes black again. I really shouldn't be surprised at this point, but I still jump in shock. Then I wake up back in the white hospital room.

"What was that? Why did you take me there? How come I could hear their thoughts? What is snow and Christmas and Santa?" I proceed to expel another string of questions. Dr. Old Man holds up one finger to silence me.

"Let me explain," he says. "I am Dr. Payne. You have been brought here for a reason. In fact, the same reason as I was. You are Special. You have a special ability, a sort of power. I'm not quite sure what it is yet, although judging from your questions, I believe it to be some sort of telepathy. What you just witnessed was my ability. I am also a telepath, but I also can project thoughts into others' brains. I suspect you will be able to do this as well. The room we are in now has been engineered specially to enhance abilities. That is how I am able to project such a vivid scene from so long ago, 300 years to be exact. Because of the room, your ability showed up, even though you had never drawn on it before. I apologize if this shocked you.

Abilities developed as a side effect to the nuclear bombing in Australia that happened in WWIV. Although most Australians died, there were a few survivors who found new lives in other countries. However, they had a defect. They were Special. Specialness is genetic, and your lineage can be tracked to Brie Taylor, your great-great-grandmother and one of the few surviving

Australians who immigrated to the United States. As you can imagine, these traits were and are very useful to the war efforts. Your ability could mean the difference between winning and losing. Starting now, you will train as a soldier. You will live in the barracks. You will also have Special training with me, along with the other Specials. When you are ready, you will be placed on the front lines of World War IX." His smile is menacing. "You are doing a great thing for your country, for peace." The days quickly turn into weeks, and I settle into my schedule. Training begins at dawn each day and lasts until dusk. We wake up each morning to run fifteen miles. Then we have gun training for two hours. Handcuffed. Promptly at 9:30, the Specials report to Dr. Payne's private wing for torturous ability training lasting until dusk. Finally, we are given a meal of scraps and gruel. We aren't to talk to the other Specials. We aren't even allowed to make eye contact. Armed guards line the dining hall. No one dares to make a peep. I think they fear us. Ha! They fear us, despite their perfect little nation, perfect army, and perfect lineage of presidents. Realizing how my thoughts sound, I rest my forehead on the table. This imprisonment is driving me mad. As winter draws to a close, I receive a blue envelope, stamped with President Davis VIII's seal. I've seen the others get these. They don't come back to training the next morning. When the guards come to escort us back to our cages after dinner, they don't take me. I am left in the dining hall along with the thirteen other "recruits" who received a letter, no guards in sight. I wonder what their abilities are. I turn to the nearest person, a girl around my age with long dark brown hair, and smile. I begin to introduce myself, but then I hear heels clicking down the cold tiled hallway and stop, fearing that they have heard me talking. A few minutes later, seven guards walk in to take us who knows where. We march out of

the automatic doors of the base, confused. Are they setting us free? As we reach the peak the snow-covered hill, we begin to understand. Below us is a military jet, decorated with the American flag. We are being sent to the war. The guards herd us into the jet. Near the back, there is a cage, which we are told to enter. Once we are all in detained and safe distance away from the guards, they lock the door and exit the plane. If they aren't here to keep an eye on us, that means there is no possibility of escape. I look around the plane. The brown-haired girl is next to me again, and there are no people or cameras in sight, so I turn to talk to her. "Hi, I'm Ash," I say, talking for the first time in weeks. She looks around, not sure if I am addressing her. I give her a little wave. IS SHE TALKING TO ME? I nod. She looks surprised that I had read her thoughts, but only slightly. "Oh, I'm Siobhan," she whispers to me, "but should we really be talking?"

Remembering a trick Payne taught me, I push a thought into her mind. IT MIGHT BE SAFER FOR US TO COMMUNICATE THIS WAY. I'M A TELEPATH, SO THINK OF YOUR RESPONSE AND I WILL BE ABLE TO HEAR IT.

A thought that isn't mine enters my mind. OH! I'M A TELEPATH TOO! AND I KNOW THAT SAMMY OVER THERE IS AS WELL. MAYBE WE ALL ARE!

MAYBE. DID YOU CHOOSE TO FIGHT, OR WERE YOU KIDNAPPED? I push this thought into her mind.

She hears my thought and looks away, obviously distraught. WHAT THEY ARE DOING TO US ISN'T RIGHT. WE NEED TO GET OUT OF HERE, she thinks. Hearing Siobhan's words, I am struck by an idea. I make eye contact and put thoughts in her head in rapid fire succession. The plane tilts and I feel us begin to descend. I shove myself through the crowded cage to get to the small window and peer out.

The landscape below is littered with what looks like ant-sized people, armed, scurrying around divided into two groups. Even though there are no uniforms, it is crystal clear to me where we are.

We have arrived at the battlefield.

The plane sinks further and I begin to hear gunshots. I flinch at each one. I wonder how much farther we will have to go down for me to hear their thoughts. I cringe just thinking of what they could be and raise my mental barrier.

I scan the cabin again for any hidden microphones or cameras. I guess when they send us to die in the war, it doesn't matter what we say or who we talk to. Taking a deep breath, I walk to the front of the cage.

Looking at everyone, I realize that I've lived with these people for the last four months. I've endured the harsh training regimen with them, suffered through the gruel with them, yet I don't know them. What I do know is that I have spent the last couple of hours coming up with a plan to get myself and these familiar strangers out of this imprisonment. It is our only hope.

I brief the others on my plan.

"It will be risky," I warn. "We will probably die" They look at each other and shrug.

"If we do nothing, we will die for sure," says the boy Siobhan identified as Sammy.

Everyone nods in agreement.

I return to my original spot next to Siobhan as we land and wait for the guard to come in through the door dividing the prison and the front cabin, a grim expression pasted on my face.

To my surprise, it is Dr. Payne who comes to release us instead. A wave of doubt floods over me. It will be more difficult to deal with a Special expert. What if we fail?

"Specials, we have landed in the country of California, just outside of their capital city, Los Angeles. This is a very important battle, and you play a key role in helping us win. Your task

is to spy on the enemy. You are to read their thoughts and report back to me each day at midnight. We have already intercepted California's plane of new recruits, you will take their place in the battle. Please, try not to kill any of our soldiers," he says to us, reaching to unlock the cage. I take a deep breath. This had better work. I only have about a minute before he will realize something is up.

As soon as the lock releases, I send strong thoughts of drowsiness and exhaustion to his mind, crossing my fingers that he responds. After about twenty seconds with no results, I look over at Siobhan. She nods and joins me, doing the same thing. Fortunately, he lays down and falls asleep seconds later, the cage door now open. I rush to the front of the plane, hoping the others are following me.

Two guards rush at me as I burst open the door dividing the plane. Following the plan, two of the others take care of them as I continue towards the front of the plane. When I reach the pilot, I mentally send her a command to take off using my ability.

Thankfully, she does so immediately. I feed her my address and tell her to go there.

With the guards and Payne subdued and the pilot under my control, the other Specials and I retreat to the cushy chairs and couches the guards must have been sitting on and begin to chat.

All of a sudden, I begin to feel the urge to fall asleep. I know this must be Payne's work. Ugh, we should have locked him in the cage before he woke up.

I leap out of my seat and rush towards the door, assuming the others are close behind. As I reach the door, I hear a soft snoring sound coming from behind me. I quickly turn around. The others have all fallen asleep. I am left alone to face Payne.

As I struggle to hastily make a plan, I realize I have an advantage over Payne. He has to be exhausted after putting the thirteen others to sleep. Still, Payne is much more powerful than I

thought. He also surely knows I will fight back since I am not falling asleep, so he will be prepared. I will have to outsmart him to win.

Knowing that he expects me to use my ability to try to make him do something along the lines of falling asleep or locking himself in the cage, I do something completely different. I command him to remember himself when he was kidnapped by the military, feeling scared and vulnerable, a memory hidden deep inside of his mind.

I burst through the door to see Payne collapse on the floor, sobbing. He looks up at me and walks into the cage, his expression proclaiming surrender.

Everyone has woken up by the time I return to the front of the plane, but they are still groggy and disoriented. I call Siobhan over to help me. Together, we drag the guards back into the cage with Payne and lock the door. Hours later, we begin our descent through the clouds. I see the meadows that I used to roam and a smile comes across my face. The plane jumps as it touches down on the lush grass covering the field I was stolen from. I eagerly jump out of the plane, the others on my heels. We intend to devise a plot to get back the other Specials and shut down that base once and for all. But all that can wait for now. I start to walk up the cobblestone path to our cottage. MY cottage. Home. Mother runs across the garden to hug me. Tears glisten in my eyes. For the first time, there is no place I'd rather be.

### **Hallie Earhart**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Central High  
School, Saint Joseph, MO  
Educator: Kyla Ward

## Category: Short Story

# MS. NORNE

"Thank you." Peter stepped out of the beige Beetle and tipped his hat to the driver for the ride. The air was brisk yet stale, as if the land which the house stood hadn't been visited in eons. The Beetle sped off down the dirt path, squealing as the gears were forced to shift. Peter faced the house and slowly dragged his feet to the door. He hated visiting Ms. Norne but she needed him, her hallucinations had been getting worse and she wouldn't let herself out of her room when Mrs. Phen came to check on her. Mrs. Phen was a nice old woman, she was reserved and had watched Peter a few times when he was younger, she was stern but would often give Peter tiny shortbread cookies to take home with him. Peter reached the front door of Ms. Norne's mansion faster than he'd expected, he brought his hand up to knock on the door, the paint on the door was cracked and peeling. As he gave the door three steady knocks flakes of paint floated to the ground. Peter wasn't sure if Ms. Norne would even answer, it's been so long since Peter had seen her, she might not recognize him, she could be deaf. Peter knocked again, on his second knock the door knob slowly turned. "Ms. Norne? It's Peter. Mrs. Phen said you'd be expecting me." Peter spoke softly as he leaned closer, trying to peek through the small crack that had opened. "Peter?" a frail voice drifted through the small entrance. "Yes, Ms. Norne. Peter Holmes." Peter answered quickly, eager to get out of the cold. "Oh, Peter, please, come inside, it's cold out there." The door opened with a rasp, the

hinges creaked slowly as she stepped back, allowing Peter to step inside.

"Thank you, ma'am." Peter stepped in and took off his hat, holding onto it as he looked around the empty corridor, the dust seemed to be etched into the walls and the floor squeaked weakly as he entered.

"Mrs. Phen told me you've been having trouble sleeping?" Peter asked as he set his things down by the steps, hearing Ms.Norne closing the door behind him, she was a small woman, about to Peter's shoulder. Her curly blonde hair was now straight and dark grey with varying streaks of white, her skin seemed to be loosely draped over her body, she'd gotten so thin since the last time Peter had seen her.

"Yes, there's voices in the house at night, I don't know how they get in but they're always right outside of my bedroom door," Ms.Norne answered as she held Peter's elbow, gently escorting him into the kitchen, "but let's not worry about that. Are you hungry?"

"No, ma'am, but thank you." Peter gazed around the kitchen as Ms. Norne shuffled slowly around her kitchen, he caught sight of the calendar. March 10th, 1983, the year was now 1992.

"Oh please, let me make you some toast or something." Ms.Norne interrupted the short silence.

"Sure, toast is fine." Peter nodded and pulled out a chair at her small table, taking a seat. Ms.Norne was soon clinking silverware together as she sifted through her drawer for a butterknife, she lathered the piece of bread with butter before she put it in the toaster.

"So, tell me more about these voices, what do they say?" Peter sat straight in his chair as he placed his hat on the table.

"I don't understand most of it, their voices are deep like they're growling, unlike anything I've heard before. It's like they're

not from this world. They don't sound human if that makes sense," Ms.Norne carefully took the toast out of the toaster and set it on a paper towel, "Jam?"

"Jam is fine. Is there anything you can understand that they say?" Peter leaned forward, watching Ms.Norne intently.

"Not really but it sounds nasty, like it's another language. Almost threatening. When I can understand it's broken." Ms.Norne spoke easily as she scraped the jam across the toast.

"Do you remember what you did understand?" Peter continued to carefully try and probe Ms.Norne's brain.

"Something about an opening, tortured souls, and a homeland. It all sounded like nonsense really." Ms. Norne shrugged the conversation off and brought the smothered toast over to Peter, setting it down in front of him.

"Thank you." Peter smiled and lifted the toast, taking a bite

Peter and Ms.Norne carried out a fairly casual conversation for the rest of the night, catching up on current events and Ms.Norne commenting on how much he'd changed since the last time she'd seen him. Before they knew it it had gotten fairly late and Peter had grown fairly tired. Ms.Norne had caught on to Peter's yawning and escorted him upstairs to his room. The room was small, with an old bed pushed against a wall and a dresser on the other wall. The wallpaper was faded and Peter was tempted to grab a corner and see if he could just peel it all off. "Goodnight Ms.Norne."

"Goodnight Peter."

"Ms?"

"Yes?"

"Wake me up if you need anything."

Ms. Norne quietly closed the door and Peter settled in, he watched as the shadows from the trees danced along the walls, soon drifting off to sleep.

Peter suddenly awoke in a cold sweat, the sheets were irritating and burned against his skin. Peter hazily slipped out of the bed and was immediately awoken by the freezing touch of the floorboards against the pads of his feet. He walked to the door when he was suddenly stopped by the sound of a low, trembling growl. Peter was hesitant but if these were intruders coming for Ms.Norne he had to do something about it. He hastily gripped the doorknob and flung the door open, plunging himself into the darkness of the hallway. As Peter stood, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, it became apparent that there was a faint red glow buzzing in the room down the hallway, he saw no one outside of Ms.Norne's door. He slowly crept down the hallway, trying to minimize the creaking of the floorboards as if it'd scare away the light. As he reached for the doorknob he could feel a faint heat emanating from it yet he smelled no smoke. His curiosity grew exponentially in those few seconds, giving him the courage to open the door. He opened the door quickly where the room was seemingly silent, the only thing inhabiting the room was an open wardrobe the light had been coming from, the red light slowly began to fade but Peter needed to know what caused it and what that growl was. He braced himself and entered the closet, pushing through the dust-coated jackets and overwhelming scent of mothballs, he could feel the air around him growing warmer as he pushed through the closet that seemed to never end. He began to sweat and tremble over what appeared to be large stones, he couldn't see anything but blackness and the faint red light that was now guiding him. He'd reached a sudden block, he tapped on the wall that was in front of him, trying to get all of his senses in touch with each other again. He could hear that the wall was hollow, he didn't know where it lead but he positioned

himself to the side, taking a few steps back and ramming himself against the thin wall, tearing through it completely. His feet fell behind him and he stumbled into an immense heat, his body scraping against rugged gravel as he lost control of his balance. Peter layed there for a few moments, somehow he wasn't in Ms.Norne's old house anymore, he was in Hell-- or something real similar to it. As he looked around all he saw was burning fire roaring as scorched beings shoveled thick, obsidian black liquid into it. Peter shakily stood up, his body was covered in goosebumps and chills teased up and down his spine despite his intense sweating. He heard gravel crunching and found a large boulder to hide behind. He didn't know what lived here and he didn't want to find out. 1...2...3...4...5..6.. a large figure walked by, it had hooves where it's feet should've been, Peter watched as it walked, it's tail scraping sharply against the ground like metal, it's back was bared and covered in scars from wounds or burns, Peter couldn't tell which. It had long, white hair in a braid, scrawling down it's back with beautiful bands of gold weaved into it. Then Peter saw the horns, Ram-like, spiraling out of its head, they were black and rigid with sharply pointed ends, they could impale Peter with ease. Peter waited until it got far enough and moved to another large rock, trying to keep the demon in his sight and see where it was going.

Peter lost his footing around the fourth rock and tripped, falling behind it. He heard the crunching steps of the demon stop abruptly. Peter scrambled to conceal himself behind the rock, the footsteps continued and started getting closer to him, Peter didn't know what this demon was capable of, but he wasn't willing to test them or find out. Peter's heart pounded in his ears as he forced his legs to stand and break out in a sprint back towards the wardrobe. He forced himself to push past

his fear and he couldn't even tell if the demon was chasing after him- he just needed to get out. He could feel the strength of the demon behind him, the pounding of its hooves nearly throwing Peter to the ground.

Peter kicked some rocks at it in hopes to slow it down otherwise it'd surely catch him. He peered over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of exactly what was chasing him. Its eyes were sunken in and chartreuse, set on him with vigorous fixation, its teeth were chipped and honed into abrupt points that could chomp through Peter's bones. Peter continued to run as the heat started to dull, his stomach knotted and his legs began to grow weary. He saw the entrance to the wardrobe and forced himself to pick up speed the best he could. He needed to get away. He shoved and elbowed his way through the coats until he ruptured into the room. He immediately took a sharp left turn into the hallway, sprinting down the hallway into his room. He slammed his door behind him and locked it, stopping to catch his breath and trying to calm himself down. He backed himself up against the window, as far away from the door as the room would allow. He listened as the demon's hooves clopped against the wooden floorboards, making them scream and howl underneath its weight. Slowly, the shadow of the demon's hooves got closer to Peter's door until he could see the outline of them through the crack at the bottom of the door, yet it dared not to enter. It toyed with the doorknob, twisting it to one side until it nearly unlatched, then back and to the other side.

"Leave Ms. Norne alone!" Peter's voice cracked as he shouted." There was no response, for a long while, just the continuous playing with the doorknob. "She's ours, she has a debt, she knew what she signed up for." The demon broke the long silence. His voice was distorted and a low grumble that

seemed to be shaking the room, the words sinking into Peter's soul. Ms.Norne's hallucinations were real, and there was nothing Peter could do to help her.

## **Makayla Ferguson**

Age: Unknown, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# UPTON SINCLAIR'S NIGHTMARE

## Upton Sinclair's Nightmare

Walking into the grease pit, otherwise known as Smithville Sonic, I immediately noticed a corn dog with a ketchup face maliciously painted upon it, hanging from the ceiling by a metal chain. At many other work establishments, hanging meat from the ceiling might not fly over managements' heads very well, but at Sonic I was completely unphased by the lackluster response that my managers gave. Sonics' work environment was so atrocious at times, that it would send muckraker Upton Sinclair running to the hills. Through my own racking up of loose tater tots on the floor, I learned

about perseverance, and how to let things slide down my back (mainly ice cream). I also learned to love. I learned to love myself, and I learned to love my tormentors who despised the love I gave.

At Smithville Sonic, corporate was doing a tremendous job of boosting up their diversity in the workplace, as over fifty percent of employees are LGBT in some manner, so going to work was about the equivalent of attending a pride rally in a sense. It was liberating to be around so many people like myself. To be around others who knew what it was like to hide. To be around others who had a secret identity from their family. To be around others who loved just the same.

However, not everyone was as fond to be surrounded by a bunch of “faggots”. Many even resented the fact that there were so many of us abominations in one area.

Chance, one of my coworkers, said “I can't believe there are so many gay people who work here. You claim you're a minority and yet I'm stuck working with all you people”. The longer I worked there the less subtle he became in portraying his obvious disapproval of me being Bi. When he needed something he began yelling “half gay or want to be gay get over here”. The only incentive to sweeten the deal of working there for minimum wage and serving greasy chili dogs to demanding customers, alongside such homophobic Neanderthals, was that I was able to eat as much ice cream as I could possibly consume. Now, if my stomach was asked, I don't know if it would agree with the benefits I received from this “most divine career choice”.

However, many nights I came home wearing more ice cream on my clothes than I could ever consume. This night was no exception to the routine. I was busily performing my task of paramount

importance; filling up drinks when I heard the thud of an elephant clobbering across the floor. I turned around and was pierced with Chance's beady laser eyes, not that different from the corndogs' hanging from the ceiling. I glimpsed a grapefruit size snowball of ice cream being formed in his hand. He pulled down on the lever on the ice cream machine and allowed a river of frozen custard to flow into his hands. Curious as to what he could possibly be doing I cocked my head, and squinted closer to get a better look. However that was quite a mistake, I saw the flicker of a wicked grin and I was soon caught trapped, like a deer looking into the headlights of a car. Like that deer, I was too slow to escape my fate, as Chance wound his arm back to sling the ball of ice cream at me. The ice cream splattered across my head and engrossed itself in my hair. A stream of ice cream ran down my face, and into my eyes where everything was turned a milky hue. I then dashed up to the front sink, to attempt to wash the sticky mess out of my hair, meanwhile, orders were piling up in the back.

I got my hair as lactose-free as possible, and with ice cream encrusted hair, I served Smithville finest “country” hicks. I'm sure the boys in the back of the lot, thought the new hairdo was pretty SWEET, as they began spewing many derogatories ranging from the N-word to commenting on the “libidinous state” my sugar coating placed me in. They continuously pounded the red button on the stall menus and ordered nonsense items. At one point they ordered twenty-six glasses of water, and when I told them that we could not take the time to make them twenty-six waters, they became enraged. They demanded to speak to a manager and was that a mistake for them. Melinda, the manager, chewed them out

and roared for them to get off her lot. All of the banter and the “beautification” they kindly left in our parking lot, led to the cops being called, and an escort from Sonic. All the comments and ice cream was beginning to get to my head, as I felt like I was swimming in a pool full of dread. Inside and outside of the store, I couldn’t manage to catch a break from the continuous torment. To escape the onslaught of more foul-hearted words and ice cream, I opted to go back to the shed to retrieve some extra cups. Despite my dismay, the serenity was short-lived, and the wildness of the store soon enveloped me with all the screaming alarms and the long list of overdue orders. My boss came streaking into my view, wildly flapping her hands about.

“Who’s on drink duty?” thundered out my boss. “I am,” I meekly replied.

“Then why the hell are there so many orders still in here?”

“I went to go get more cups. We ran out in the storage area, so I had to go to the shed.” “Well why don’t you hop to it, and get back to work.,” she retorted. I was rattled by the confrontation, and I hurriedly went to fill out the orders. In my rush to get back to the soda station, I didn’t see the three-foot tall dispenser of sweet tea and sent it toppling to the floor, leaving everything in its reach a slippery, sugary mess. This infuriated my boss, “why is everyone so damn clumsy in here?”. Chance always quick with a comment, piped up from the back “It’s because she’s G-A-Y.” I became flushed with embarrassment. Stupid I thought. I’m an idiot. Why do I make it so easy for Chance to pick on me? Somehow I managed to make this night go from awful, to atrocious.

While I was filling drinks, the cooks also chose that moment to spray down the

floors, and a flood of water, loose straws, and fries swamped my shoes, leaving me to squish about in them for the rest of the night. As the evening began to wind down, Chance wrote up the closing list. He took the liberty to rank all the people on the closing list on their level of “gayness”. The list looked as follows:

Fill Ice Cream Toppings- Luke (creepy gay)

Stock Cups, Lids, Straws, and Mints-

Haleigh (mega gay)

Wash Collars of Ice Cream Machine and Empty Sauces - Zach (wishes he was straight)

Fill Slush Flavours- Makayla (half-gay)

I quickly replenished the slush flavors, so I’d be able to escape the confines of Sonic as soon as possible.

Finally, on the grace of God midnight rolled around, and I was able to go home. I walked through my doorway, devoid of corn dogs hanging from the ceiling, and began to laugh at the absurdness of the evening. I felt as if, I had jumped in one of Sonic’s blenders; I felt shaken and soiled from the night’s events. My parents always say, “A jobs a job, they suck, but eventually you get to go home”. However, I realized work there affected me more than just the growing number in my bank account. As I watched mold grow in the back of the fridge, I also saw myself grow. I transformed from the timid carhop I started as; I no longer faltered in the face of an angry-faced man who had been kept from his daily intake of honey barbeque wings a little too long.

While in the shower that night, rinsing off the ice cream, I realized that the ice cream and soggy shoes from the evening will wash and dry, but the continuous emotional harassment would take a lot longer to clean up. My simple job as a carhop taught me about acceptance. About how to accept

myself when others don't. To accept the fact that not everyone will always understand me. It taught me about how sometimes it's okay to stop to eat ice cream. To let myself be proud of being strong in who I am. As the ice cream rinsed off of me, there left a sweet trail of new self-acceptance.

## Ellie Fish

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Platte City Middle School, Platte City, MO  
Educator: Laura Hoefling

Category: Short Story

# CONSEQUENCES

## Consequences

"No, no, no, I never meant for this to happen!" I yell, "You would still be alive! No, no, no."  
"Nooooo!" I scream. I bolt upright in my bed. I'm drenched in sweat and my heart is racing. Plus, to top it all off, I can't breathe so this is great. I close my eyes, and say out loud, "Breathe. Breathe. No panicking." I clutch onto my fluffy, white blanket. When my breathing slows I open my eyes, and look around my room. It's a very mellow tone, white themed room. The satin, white curtain sways back and forth letting light shine in from my towering window. I look over to my bathroom which opens up to my bedroom. After I take a couple more deep breaths I say to no one, "Well I better get ready for work" Still sitting on the bed, I look down to my alarm clock

on my bedside desk. The alarm reads 8:07. "Holy crap!" I yell, "I am late for work." LATE! LATE FOR WORK AGAIN! LATE SO SO LATE! I yell to myself as I jump out of bed. I swing open the door, and run to the mirror. YOUR HAIR IS FLYING AROUND. AS USUAL YOU'RE LATE, AND YOU'RE A MESS. The voice in my head is telling me. "No no. I'm fine. I can fix my hair. We're fine," I say out loud to myself, trying to calm myself, then I add, "Emma, do you know where my hairbrush is? "

Emma's head pops in the doorway. Her perfectly braided, caramel brown hair sways around her head. Her smooth face is dotted with light brown freckles that glisten in the sunlight. "Here you are, sis." She says as she hands me the brush. Then she also says, "Hey Alaina? Are you okay? I heard you scream,"

"Yeah I'm fine. I just had a nightmare," I reassure her.

"Oh okay. Hurry I have to be at work soon. Don't be slow," Emma says.

"Okay, okay! I know being SECRETARY is a very important job."

"Yes, I know, hurry up, " She says impatiently. Just like a little sister.

"Okay, can I have a hair tie? I think I broke all mine," I ask.

"Yeah," she pulls a hair tie off her arm and slightly shows her birthmark on her left wrist. I have an identical one, but on my right wrist. I feel it always brought us closer as sisters.

"Okay now we really have to hurry. Don't take forever like you usually do, because I still have to drive you and get to work on time," Emma reminds me again.

I never gotten a car except once even though I have a license. I always thought that someone would steal it or they would hurt me for it. I remember that day 7 years ago when I was 16. My dad

had just gone inside the Quicktrip gas station to get us hot chocolate. I usually lock the doors but he said he would be right back. 2 minutes later I heard my car door pop open. I turn around and look behind me. A man maybe in his 20's was holding a gun to my head. I screamed and pushed open my door. I heard three shots ring off, but none hit me. I immediately ran into the store and I saw the man drive off with my car.

To this day I think it is kind of pointless to have a car, but I would never walk to work or take the subway, so I just have Emma drive me. I quickly throw on an old pair of worn out, blue, ripped jeans. I also put on a creamy white t-shirt and a pair of white vans. I painfully brush out all the knots in my dark, auburn hair, put it up in a ponytail, and wrap a red bandana around my head. My piercing, hazel blue eyes stare back at me in my reflection.

When I'm done I grab my purse, phone, notepad, and pencil. I race down to the parking garage in my apartment. Emma waves to me from her 2016, Black Chevy Traverse. After I hop in and close the door, Emma starts to turn on the engine, but there was a choking noise instead of the reeve of an engine.

"Emma, why isn't the car working?" I ask, panicked.

"Don't freak out, but I think the engine might be broken," Emma whispers.

"What!" I yell, "Then I'm not going to work! Oh no. What will I do!!"

"Well you kind of already missed too many days, and you can't miss any more before you lose your job. You'll just have to take the subway, and don't you dare tell me you're about to throw away your DREAM JOB at New York Times just because I can't drive you."

"But. The subway," I whine

"Nope we're going. I will go with you."

"Fine, but you better get your car fixed by Monday," I demand.

"I'll try, but it might take a while."

"A while is too long to wait!" I yell.

"Hey calm down. I don't know, it might not take very long."

"Okay," I breathe, "Lets go."

Once we're in the subway, I look around for exits. Emma and I slide our subway passes over the scanner and push through the turnstile gate. When we're through, I immediately want to turn back. It's like stepping into a scene of a horror movie The stench of body odor, vomit, and musk smacks me in the face. All the people littered throughout the station sound like revved up fans at a baseball game. My hair is already starting to frizz and curl, and every step I take my shoe seems to hold on to the floor with all its life. Emma and I walk toward the map of Manhattan. She points at Longacre Square, "There," she says. "Okay let's go," I say. As I turn around someone runs into me and knocks me to the ground.

"Excuse you!" The mysterious man yells. He was holding a dark brown coffee cup that seemed to be from Per Se. He must be rich because that place is expensive. Well crap this isn't good, the cup was holding steaming hot, black coffee and it is now all over his silk, purple, striped suit. His cold, death stare felt like it was piercing through my soul. His deathly black eyes are trying to find out all my secrets.

"Look what you've done!" The man shouts at me. The once busy, loud, and chaotic station was now silent. You could hear everyone one breathing, watching, wondering what is going to happen next. I want to shrivel up and disappear. I start shaking.

"Are you going to say anything?" He says

like he is questioning my existence.

"I-I'm so-so sorry sir. I didn't me-mean to. I just didn't see you," I stutter.

"Why do you have a st- st- stutter?" He mocks me.

"Hey leave her alone!" Emma yells, "Maybe if you weren't practically on top of her and almost attacking her she would be fine."

No I wouldn't. I would still be freaking out because some crazy man I didn't know is yelling at me, but Emma was just helping. "Okay MA'AM, have a good day," The man says coldly. Under his breath he says loudly enough for just me to hear, "I would just be careful from now on and, I would watch out for your little friend too." A train comes screeching into the station and everything resumes to how it was before, and the man seems to disappear into the crowd.

"Are you okay?" Emma asks.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I reply.

After work I call Emma at 4:35 saying to meet me at the subway. She answered saying that she would be there soon. It is now around 4:40 at night, and the sky is turning a deep violet purple. The sun is a bright yellow and orange color, but Emma still hasn't met yet. I called her again it went straight to her voicemail "Hi this is Emma, sorry I couldn't pick up. Try to call me again. Byeeeee." EMMA. I thought. WHERE ARE YOU? I run down the steps of the subway to go home. Maybe she was sick at went straight home. When I arrive home at 5:40, I look in Emma's room to see if she got off work early and came home. She was nowhere to be found. "Emma, are you here!" I yell out. No one answers. I call the police to tell them that Emma is missing.

"This is the Manhattan police department.

What is your emergency?" The dispatcher asked.

"Yes hello, My sister has been missing for an hour. She answered my phone call an hour ago and said her would meet me at the subway, but never showed up. She is also not home."

"Okay what is her name and your name?"

"Her name is Emma Williams and my name is Alaina Torres."

"Okay thank you. We will look for her," The man tells me.

"Okay thanks," I reply. Once I hang up the phone, I jump in my bed feeling a little reassured. I turn on a Christmas Hallmark movie, and start drifting into my sleep. When I wake up I am being shaken around. No, I am in something being driven around. "Hello!" I yell. No one says anything. What is happening? Where am I? I think there is duct tape around my hands. I am laying down in some sort of box. I feel like I am falling into an endless tunnel filled with darkness.

"Hello! Help!" I scream. I try to lift my arms, trying to open whatever I'm in, when I feel the strain of the tape around my wrists. The movement stops, and a door opens, then is closed again. A few seconds later, the trunk of the car that I'm in opens. I only see a few moments of daylight before a rag drenched in chloroform is shoved against my face. Everything goes dark.

I wake up a while later, though I'm not sure how long it's been. I am thrown into a large, dark, square room. The only light I have is a small, silver, circular candle they slide in with me. "Hey! Let me out!" I scream at the wall. No sound. NO ONE IS COMING. I AM GOING TO BE STUCK IN HERE. I cry to myself. Then I start to panic. I pound my fist on the cold, smooth wall, "Help Help please anyone!"

"Hello. Well aren't you just in a little trouble

here," A man voice says.  
"Who are you. Let me out!" I yell  
"You don't remember. I am the guy you humiliated!" He yells. No name or face comes to me. "Subway station."  
"Your the guy I accidentally spilled coffee on!" I realize.  
"Correct. Now I need you to do something for me."  
"I don't have to do anything for you. You need to let me out of here!" I demand.  
"Sorry, I can't do that. Besides I have already done the dirty work. You just need to finish the job." I come to the realization that "THE JOB" means murder.  
"What are you talking about?" I ask.  
"I just need you to kill someone for me." He says coldly.  
"What are you crazy?! No!"  
"You are going to do this for me!" The man in the shadows yells.  
"No! I-I-I can't," I stutter.  
"But you have to."  
"Please. You can't make me do this no one deserves to die. You don't even know who I am. You just meet me the other day," I cry.  
"Oh but I do know you Alaina. You may seem to have a lot of fears, but on the inside you are a monster waiting to get out," He says menacingly, "Now you will do this. He is only the Mayor, and I owe him money that I don't have, and it's my turn to be mayor. If you don't do this, you'll be losing a lot."  
"You're wrong, there's nothing you can threaten me with."  
"And that's where you're wrong," He laughs.  
"N, I'm not. I-" I stop short, "Emma."  
"Bingo! Now, you're going to kill the mayor, or face consequences," He says with a smirk as he hands me a knife.  
"Why can't you do it yourself?!" I yell.  
"Because if I get caught I will get in a lot

more trouble, the consequences are a lot less for me if someone else does it for me, compared to if I do it myself," he chuckles, then says, "Alright, bring him over! I also want the girl to watch. Bring her up close." Someone else slides the mayor over to me. He's almost completely covered in duct tape, which what holding him down to a chair with wheels. I see them move Emma close behind me so she can see what I am going to do.  
I turn and face Emma. She is bound with duct tape, but she is standing. Her eyes are wide open, and I can hear her try to muffle some words to me. I can't make out what they are, but I'm sure they are a warning. I turn back around trying to control myself. With tears in my eyes I knew I had to either kill the mayor, or lose Emma. The choice was clear to me. They mayor has to go.

I've never held a knife in my life, because I felt like I would fall and stab myself, so to try and get the job done, I quickly swing the arm holding the knife around and hope I hit someone. I feel the knife slice across someone's arm, but once I'm reaching the end of my arm's length, the knife is lodged deeply into something else. I let go of the knife, and something gasps behind me. I whip around, and there, standing frozen in front of me, with a knife in her chest, was Emma. Her eyes wide open in pain. Everything starts to move in slow motion as I see her body collapsing to the floor. I am also running to her. I catch her in my arms a cradle her. I refused to believe it was the same Emma that I had spent twenty-two years of my life with, the same Emma who drove me to work every day. I didn't want to believe what was in front of me. I collapse onto my knees beside her, and saw the birthmark on her left wrist, the same one she's had since she was born.

“What... No, No, No!” I scream. Tears flooding out of my eyes. I can feel myself slowly wanting to fall to the floor and die beside her.

“I love you Emma,” I whimper. “Please, Please come back! Why did I do this? You would still be here!” I begin to scream at the unfairness of it all. Wishing I could be taken instead.

“She’s no good, get the next one on the list. Get her out of here!” the voice yells. There was a heavy object struck against my head. A sharp pain follows, and all I felt was nothing except the guilt in my heart.

### **Bailey Flanagan**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS  
Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

## VOICES

She lays awake,

unable to shake

the sick feeling

she gets every time she lies with him.

Sometimes she dreams,

fantasies of leaving.

But a voice wakes her up each time,

telling her how

she would be nothing

Without him.

Tonight is different.

Silently,

she slips into the cool night

feeling the droplets of mist kiss

her purple and blue  
painted skin.

Burning,  
her lungs fill,

for the first time in a lifetime

She can breathe.

A new voice spoke to her:

freedom.

And it called her name louder than fear.

### **Molly Foster**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: St Pius X School,  
Moberly, MO  
Educator: Christy Forte

Category: Short Story

## OH LUCKY ME

All weekend I felt sick to my stomach, dreading school. There were many different rumors getting around that I had screamed at a girl all because

I wanted something she had. Some rumors were that I wanted her lunch money, or car keys, or necklace, one rumor was that I screamed at her because she put mack n' cheese in my ponytail; but that one was totally irrelevant considering it came from a very unreliable source, Stupid Steve and no one listens to him. Anyways, all of these rumors are obviously not true but... let's start from the beginning. I'm Madeline Skeps and all my life I had never had any experience with a mean girl, until my junior year in highschool. At first everyone was very opening and welcoming, until I met her... the devil incarnate... Bren! Bren was mean, manipulative, and a liar. Bren had amazing, loyal and faithful friends that she always talked negatively about, and undeserved popularity that she got from flirting with the whole football team.

There are always those people who are mean to you and get under your skin, but Bren... well, Bren was the worst of the worst. It all started on the 3rd week of school, everyone was talking about this Bren girl, how sweet she was, how pretty she was, and how everyone including me should worship her and want to be her best friend. I had been homeschooled all my life, I was awkward, I didn't know how to talk to boys or anyone really, or walk correctly... yes that's right, walk correctly! I didn't even know that there was a wrong way to walk until Bren told me. If I'm being honest the first weeks of school I thought that she was actually a generally nice person... well mannered and perfect.

Bren and I actually were friends at one point, for about a week. Soon my awkward self started to slowly realize that she wasn't as perfect as I thought she was. I walked into the cafeteria and some Nut Job started a food fight, lets just say it was a bad day for me to wear white. Brens ex-boyfriend Hunter politely showed me where the lost in found was. Hunter was a little flirty and I think maybe he even liked me a little bit. We got to the lost in found and started scrambling through the bins. Bren walked in and saw us, she was trying to find her diamond earrings that her mom got her from her trip to Paris. Bren didn't

talk to me after that. Months past and it was December, Bren had been spreading rumors around that I had betrayed her. The only person that would talk to me was Hunter, so naturally I started liking him. I know that that's why Bren was mad at me in the first place but technically it's her fault that I'm even in this situation. Two weeks had past and it was the day before Christmas break started, and Hunter asked me out. Well, kind of, he asked me to go to church with him on Christmas Eve. What do you know, Bren got even more fired up.

Hunter went to Bren and asked her if she would like to go to since she was making a big deal out of it. Bren being the ditzzy girl that she is, didn't realise his sarcasticness and replied with an, "Oh I would love too... besides the fact that I'm not even religious! OMG Hunter it's like you don't know me at all!" Then Bren saw me walk by and she immediately clung on to Hunter and cried dramatically, "It's like we never had an absolutely amazing relationship that was ruined when a certain person showed up! It's like I was never even invited to your grandma's funeral!" And yes, she did do that right in the middle of the hallway. But also Hunter informed me that his grandma's "Funeral" was actually his grandma's "BBQ" Bren was just flirting with his older brothers so much that she must have missed the fact that his grandma was alive and well, and the one barbequing the burgers.

Bren walked passed me and smacked my shoulder as hard as she could right after her conversation with Hunter. Right then I did the unspeakable... I turned around and my mouth just started going. I yelled so loud I think maybe my Aunt Peggy who lives in Chicago probably heard. I think maybe I scared Bren a little bit, because she started to cry. The bell rang and school was out for break, I couldn't have been more overjoyed. The whole break I felt like nothing could tear me down, I was so confident that even when my older brother Jared tried to steal my Xbox I stood up to him... he still took it, but hey at least I tried. My mom had taken my

phone away for yelling at him, so I didn't have it for the rest of break.

Everytime I would pass my mom's room I would hear my phone going off, so I knew something must be wrong considering I wasn't popular at all so my phone never went off. I had a weird pilt in my stomach like I knew what was up. Break was soon over and school was back in session. It was Monday and I was so nervous I thought I might be sick. Today was the day I would go back to school as the girl who stood up to Bren, and almost everyone liked Bren, what would people think of me. As I was walking down the hall I felt like everyone was staring and pointing like they were disgusted with me. As I walked passed Bren's locker I saw her start to giggle just when over the intercom I heard Principal Richardson say, "Madeline Skeps please report to my office... now!"

My stomach felt like it had done five backflips. When I got to the principal's office, he got back on the intercom and said smoothly, "Bren Caults please report the principal's office." I sat silently watching the principals eyebrows move up and down as he shot vicious glares at me. Bren walked in and his glare turned into a smile of sympathy, "Please take a seat Bren. I heard

that Madeleine screamed at you and got violent the other day in the hall. Is that true?" asked Principal Richardson. Of course Bren went along with it.

"Yes! I'm traumatized! It's the only thing I thought about all break. The new girls crazy!" cried Bren. She even shed a tear while lying right through her teeth. I was so nervous to be in the principal's office that when he looked at me I started crying uncontrollably.

"I promise that's not what happened!" I screeched.

"Then what did happen?!"

Bren butted in and told her side of the story, which of course was totally wrong and not accurate. Thirty minutes had passed and I had gone through the whole truthful story, because my mom once told me that if your honest, then

chances of you getting in trouble are less then if you lie. But on the other hand Bren was indeed a very good lier. In the end I got a month of detention, which was better than I thought was going to happen. While I was in detention I started thinking to myself, "I am so glad I get detention instead of being in the lunchroom where Bren could easily chuck a slushy at me." Then, as I was scraping assorted colors of bubble gum off from under the desk, I could feel the hairs on my back stick straight up, then I heard her voice, "So yeah turns out you can get detention for making out with someone under the bleachers. I guess we're detention partners!" All I could say was, "Oh lucky me!"

## Rachel Ghatasheh

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Central High School,  
Saint Joseph, MO

Educator: Kyla Ward

Category: Journalism

# THE WORLD'S LARGEST OPEN- AIR PRISON.

## "The world's largest open-air prison."

That's what people around the world have taken to calling the Gaza Strip. The Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated areas in all the world with 2 million people crammed into only 360 square kilometers.

Palestine, including the Gaza Strip, has always been a hotspot for conflict. This is mainly due to religion. In Palestine there are holy sites for all the

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main three monotheistic religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Many of them have to do with the capital, Jerusalem. For the Christians, Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus and Jerusalem is the place he was crucified and then resurrected. The Jews have the Western Wall in Jerusalem, or the Kotel, which they believe marks the location of the stone from which the world was created. Lastly the Muslims have the Dome of The Rock in Jerusalem, the pre-Mecca where the prophet Muhammad prayed with the souls of the prophets and ascended to heaven. The religious importance of this city to each of the major religions is part of the reason that the Gaza conflict is even a conflict to begin with.

In the 1900s, the Ottomans controlled Palestine, a culturally and religiously diverse area of land in the Middle East. This region was predominantly Muslim, but included others like Christians, Jews, and other minor religions, that lived harmoniously. That changed drastically after World War I. The Ottoman Empire collapsed leaving Palestine to be taken over by the British. Meanwhile, the Zionist movement was gaining popularity in Europe. A widely cited Zionist phrase "A LAND WITHOUT A PEOPLE FOR A PEOPLE WITHOUT A LAND" is now associated with the movement to establish a strictly Jewish Nation. It is also a very misleading phrase- Palestine was never a land without a people. In fact, by the time Britain had taken control, the citizens had begun calling themselves Palestinians. They began identifying as a united race of people. Britain then released the Balfour Declaration, a statement announcing their support for the establishment of a "national home for Jewish people." It was approved in 1922 by the League of Nations, but in 1920, European Jews had already begun migrating to Palestine. Between 1920 and 1939 the Jewish population of Palestine had increased by over 320,000 people. This influx of the Jewish population caused the Arabs to actively resist. In August of 1929, tensions broke between the Jews and Arabs, leading to the death of 200 people in

just 4 days.

Britain then tried to fix what they had destroyed, they began limiting Jewish immigration into Palestine in the 1930s. When Britain began this policy, the Jewish population felt as if Britain was not implementing their promise to the Jews themselves. World War 2 was just starting in Europe and from the Jewish Virtual Library we know that approximately 1 million Jews served on the Allies armies. These Jews felt betrayed by Britain. This led to anger and tension between the Palestinians, the Jews, and the British.

Due to the violence and Britain's inability to resolve it, the United Nations made the decision in 1947 to split Palestine into two states; Palestine, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, was given to the Muslims, and Israel, everything left inside of the original Palestinian border, for the Jews. This left Jerusalem as an international territory. Israel agrees to this deal, but the rest of the Arab world really had no say. The plan prevails regardless and the state of Israel is established in May of 1948. This conflict of communication leads to the first Arab-Israeli War. It was fought from 1948-1949 between the newly independent Israel and a coalition of five Arab nations: Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. After a brutal battle, Egypt gained Gaza, Jordan gained the West Bank, and Israel got what was left of Arab-Palestine. Israel successfully repulsed many Arab attacks with the training the Jewish people received in World War II. Israel also permanently annexed East Jerusalem. The war was devastating for some and a major victory for others, and shown by the name each side gave it. In Hebrew it is known as the War of Independence, but in Arabic it is called Al-Nakba ("the catastrophe"). Today, Palestinians have a new name for this event, the Palestinian exodus. Over 700,000 Arab-Palestinians fled and were expelled from their homes. That marked the beginning of the refugee crisis that would later escalate into what we know worldwide as the Gaza humanitarian emergency.

After many more fights, the Israel-Palestine crisis reached its third war in 1967, called the Six Day War. Syrian forces took control of the Gaza strip while Jordanian forces, along with Palestinian refugees, were pushed out of the West Bank. Israeli air and land attacks were overwhelmingly victorious and Israel retained full control of Jerusalem. Israel then allowed Jews to occupy the annexed territory, claiming it for themselves. This forced the Palestinians to crowd into what was left of the Gaza Strip, making the Gaza Strip one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Israel then set up military checkpoints in Gaza to keep the peace between its citizens and the Palestinians.

The Palestinians, now scorned, launched a series of attacks on Israel. The first of which was named the First Intifada, meaning uprising in Arabic. Riots started in Gaza in 1987 and then spread to the West Bank. Palestinian casualties vastly outnumbered those of Israel. The King of Jordan renounced all responsibility of the West Bank, causing a rise in Palestinian influence there. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which was formed in 1964, soon rose to power. Soon after, the leader of the PLO denounced terrorism and recognized the state of Israel. When the leader of Israel froze the new settlements into their occupied land, peace talks began and the First Intifada was called off. Gaza now consisted of only Palestinians, but they were in bad shape. Overcrowded and extremely poor, most Palestinians lived in refugee camps surrounded by Israeli military forces. The Palestinian's anger over their confinement in Gaza and the West Bank continued to simmer for years.

In 2000, there was the Second Intifada. It was bloodier and more violent than the first, birthed from the failure of the peace talks that had ended the First Intifada. The Palestinians fought with suicide bombers, snipers, and even rocket attacks, but each action from the Palestinians' was met with an even deadlier attack from the

Israelis. Skepticism over the possibility of peace grew from both sides. Israel withdrew from Gaza and created walls and military checkpoints. In 2007, a military group called Hamas won the election in Palestine and then cut ties with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank after a short civil war. Israel then put Gaza on a blockade, leading to its current state of crisis.

Gaza remains under the blockade placed upon them in 2007, today. The descendants of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War are still refugees in the Gaza Strip. As reported by the Norwegian Refugee Council: 7/10 Palestinians in Gaza are registered refugees. A 2012 United Nations (UN) report predicted that the situation in Gaza would be "unlivable" by the year 2020 if nothing is done to ease the blockade. What the UN reported in 2012 can very well be true, as in a 2014 caucus estimated that there were 1.816 million people living in Gaza. In 2018, the number is up to 1.9 million. The refugees live in inhumane conditions: they are not allowed to leave, there is a lack of schools and electricity, too little food and over 80% of refugees are in need of humanitarian aid. 45% of those refugees are refused medical treatment outside of Gaza and unemployment rate is up to over 40%. The children living in Gaza are traumatized by war, violence, and poverty. Their living situation is getting worse and it is thought that they might reach unlivable conditions before the initially stated deadline in 2020. The prison-like conditions that plague Gaza and it's many citizens, most of whom are not receiving aid nor relief from the blockade placed upon Gaza, has gotten to the point where if we do nothing, they will be unable to survive. This is a humanitarian crisis that we have allowed to continue for far too long. Even though the Gaza refugee crisis has been a pressing issue for decades, it now has a deadline. Our generation is their last hope at survival.

**Katelyn Gillette**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS  
Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

## THE SHORE AND THE WAVES

The Shore fumed at the Waves:  
that constant tease that would brush his lips  
against her sandy beaches  
before running back to the safety of the depths.  
The two were bitter enemies,  
the closest friends, and the most passionate  
lovers,  
forever existed only to be together.

The Waves easily became wild and fierce,  
his energy a liquid forest fire.  
There were days where he'd grow violent,  
breaking his peace with the Shore  
to rain terror on the land she protected,  
destroying everything she had held dear.  
Yet he also knew how to nurture:  
to care for the abundant life beneath his surface  
or play with the humans that chose to venture  
into the shallows.

The Shore was greedy,  
snatching up every shelled wonder the Waves  
gifted her.  
She'd adorn herself with the dazzling offerings,  
vain as she could be,  
and delight in humanity's praises.  
So full of herself was she that she would snatch  
any bare land

left behind by the Waves in his frequent retreats,  
growing bigger as she reclaimed the sands.

For all their shortcomings  
the two could not exist without the other,  
opposing forces tied together in tangent.  
Yes, they would push and pull, battling against  
the other,  
but they would also dance and sing together,  
making love wherever they were to meet.  
It was a beautiful thing to see:  
these two powerful beings and bitter enemies,  
these two close friends and passionate lovers.

**Meredith Goldberg**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Category: Critical Essay

## WEALTH AND STATUS: INGREDIENTS FOR A DOOMED MARRIAGE

Wealth and Status: Ingredients for a Doomed  
Marriage

Walt Disney's classic tale of SNOW WHITE  
AND THE SEVEN DWARFS tells the story of the Evil  
Queen's intent to destroy the beautiful young

princess, Snow White, to ensure the supremacy of the queen's reign. Although her son deeply loves Snow White, the Evil Queen elevates her obsessive need to maintain power over the kingdom above her son's happiness. The wicked monarch's conceited, controlling nature drives her to attempt the murder of Snow White, forever ruining her relationship with her son and alienating herself from her kingdom. Her misguided belief that one's internal value is measured by material success, outward beauty, and accumulation of power leads her to live a life of isolation and loneliness in which she never experiences genuine love or friendship. In the end, her attempts to kill Snow White fail miserably, and she is punished as lightning strikes her dead. Just like Disney's Evil Queen, in the compelling novel *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*, status is essential to Lady Catherine, Mr. Collins, and Caroline Bingley. They are punished for the fixation on material wealth and social class that makes them uncaring about the hurt they inflict upon others and the outrageousness of their actions. Through the failures of the snobbish Lady Catherine, Mr. Collins, and Caroline Bingley to achieve their shallow goals, Jane Austen's *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* reveals that obsession with wealth and social status inevitably leads to an unfulfilling life lacking true happiness and genuine love.

In the romantic novel, Austen punishes the pompous Lady Catherine de Bourgh by crushing her hopes and dreams of marrying off her daughter, Anne, to her socialite nephew, Darcy. To add salt in the wound, Darcy falls in love and weds Elizabeth Bennet, the ultimate curse of Lady Catherine's existence. Her defeated plan shows that social class and material success are not a measurement of one's value. In confronting Elizabeth about the unseemly possibility of her marriage to Darcy, Lady Catherine hatefully tries to intimidate Elizabeth, "Heaven and earth!--of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?" (Austen 312). Lady Catherine's disapproval is insulting, and Austen punishes her

shallowness and superiority. In spite of her condemnation of Elizabeth as a mate for Darcy who would tarnish the family's reputation because of her lower social status, Darcy and Elizabeth's romance ultimately blooms. Austen rewards Darcy and Elizabeth's genuineness with a happily-ever-after fairytale ending, proving that true love triumphs over trying to manipulate marriage for social advancement. On the other hand, Lady Catherine is penalized for being consumed with wealth and social class as her plans are foiled. She is left to live a life filled with frustration over Anne's uncertain future and how it reflects upon her reputation in their social circles.

Austen punishes Mr. Collins for his haughty attitude and misguided thinking when Elizabeth declines his marriage proposal, leaving him to marry Charlotte, who has no genuine feelings of love for him. Collins demonstrates that dissatisfaction and emptiness result from an obsession with materialism and social standing. "His veneration for [Lady Catherine] . . . , mingling with a very good opinion of himself, of his authority as a clergyman, made him altogether a mixture of pride and obsequiousness" (Austen 62). Collins first pursues Jane as a potential spouse, and then simply replaces her with Elizabeth upon discovering Jane is to be engaged. He treats marriage like a business deal, and his condescending marriage proposal to Elizabeth is marked by objective, financial reasons why their union is essential. When Elizabeth turns him down, the conceited Collins repeatedly persists because, to him, it is unthinkable that a marriage would not be based on financial means and relative equality of social standing. Through Elizabeth's rejection of Collins' cold approach to matters of the heart, Austen reveals the importance of marrying for genuine love, respect, and friendship. By sentencing Collins to a life with a spouse who detests him, Austen punishes him for having an unwise approach to love and marriage.

In response to her constant belittling, Austen punishes Caroline Bingley by having her lose

Darcy to her rival, Elizabeth. After cruelly embarrassing Elizabeth at Darcy's Pemberley mansion in front of guests, Caroline insults Elizabeth to Darcy in the hopes of turning him against her: "I must confess that I never could see any beauty in her. Her face is too thin; her complexion has no brilliancy; and her features are not at all handsome" (Austen 236). Caroline's pettiness, jealousy, and emphasis on physical appearances and high social standing ultimately drive Darcy farther away from her. The more he is repelled by Caroline's superficiality and fawning over him, the greater he is attracted to Elizabeth's genuineness and courage. In having Darcy reject the socially well-positioned Caroline Bingley in favor of Elizabeth and her lower standing in society, Austen punishes Caroline for her unfair mistreatment of Elizabeth and her arrogance in presuming Darcy would make a marriage decision in her favor based on finances and class status. In this way, Austen reiterates that one should marry for true love.

Just like the Evil Queen in *SNOW WHITE*, Lady Catherine, Mr. Collins, and Caroline Bingley fail to achieve their goals. Austen punishes them for their misguided thinking and selfish nature. Although Lady Catherine retains her status and wealth, she does not succeed in marrying off Anne and is destined to live an empty life lacking in love and compassion. Mr. Collins' marriage to Charlotte, who detests him, is a sham that will never bring him happiness or fulfillment. There is no redemption for Caroline, who accepts Darcy and Elizabeth's union only because it benefits her socially to befriend them. *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* teaches that one's obsession with wealth and status not only doesn't grant you love, but prohibits you from having meaningful, lasting relationships with people. Austen comedically conveys this serious, moral lesson. The ridiculously rude manners displayed by these three snotty characters in the novel humorously contradict the very civility associated with their high class society.

**Abby Greenberg**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Poetry

## THIS MUST BE SUFFICIENT

"Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: 'I am unable to light the fire, and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.' And it was. God made man because he loves stories."

-Elie Wiesel, "The Gates of the Forest"

You are twelve years old and you hear a story on Yom Kippur.

A RABBI ON THE BRINK OF DEATH BRINGS HIS STUDENT INTO THE FOREST AT NIGHT, WITH ONLY A BURNING TORCH TO FIND THEIR WAY. "I WILL LEAVE YOU WITH ONE FINAL LESSON," THE RABBI SAYS, AND HE STOPS IN A CLEARING AND EXTINGUISHES THE TORCH. "RABBI! WHAT ARE YOU DOING? I CANNOT SEE!" CRIES THE STUDENT, BUT THERE IS NO REPLY. THE STUDENT STUMBLES BLINDLY IN THE DARK, SEARCHING FOR A WAY BACK HOME. "RABBI!" HE PLEADS AGAIN. "WHY WOULD YOU LEAVE ME LOST IN THE DARK?" THE STUDENT HEARS A GENTLE LAUGH IN THE DARKNESS. "OH, MY CHILD," COMES THE RABBI'S VOICE FROM THE FOREST.

2019 Scholastic Silver Key Award Winners – Missouri Writing Region

"I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU LOST IN THE DARK. I  
WILL LEAVE YOU SEARCHING FOR THE LIGHT."

You are sixteen years old and you think that's a  
pretty dumb story.

Seven years old, coming home from school one  
day- you jump off the bus and walk home.  
Your nose feels bigger than it did this morning.  
The news is on, and you watch before your mom  
comes in and turns it off.  
That night, you ask Dad if the Nazis are going to  
take him away,  
He looks sad, and turns off the light.  
You have the dream for the first time that night.  
That morning you go to school and you think you  
see-  
A flash of yellow on the chest pocket of your  
shirt.  
You check your right forearm and blink twice for  
no.

It's a year later- you have the dream again.  
Tears are tacky on your cheeks in the dark of  
your room,  
The salt reminds you of Passover, tears of your  
ancestors in Grandma's crystal bowl.  
You don't sleep the rest of the night.

You are fourteen and you hear Leonard Cohen  
on Christmas radio.  
You want to cry. Someone says, "Merry  
Christmas!" and you do.  
You have the dream twice that December.

And this is how it is, isn't it?  
A suffocating otherness inside your chest,  
A nosebleed from kindergarten when John threw  
his wooden block at you.  
So the NESHAMAH inside of you feels a little less  
each day,  
Because, how can this be how it is?  
How can this be what you were given?

The dream:

YOU ARE STANDING IN LINE. IT IS COLD  
OUTSIDE.

DAD IS IN FRONT OF YOU. HE IS CRYING.

A MAN APPROACHES YOU. YOU SEE THE RED,  
YOU KNOW WHAT THIS IS.

A BURNING IN YOUR ARM, YOUR DAD GRABS  
YOUR HAND.

NO MATTER HOW HARD YOU SQUEEZE HE IS  
RIPPED AWAY.

BEFORE THE GUNSHOT, THE SCENE CHANGES.

YOU ARE IN A CONCRETE ROOM. YOU STARE  
AT THE SHOWER HEAD ON THE WALL. THERE IS  
NO SOUND.

YOU ARE WEARING STRIPES. YOU KNOW WHAT  
THIS IS.

THE SCENE CHANGES.

YOU ARE LAYING ON SOMETHING SOFT, PLIANT.

YOUR CHEST FEELS HOLLOW, YOU LOOK DOWN  
AND SEE YOUR RIBS.

YOU STRUGGLE TO SIT UP, CAN'T GET  
PURCHASE.

YOU FEEL A HAND BENEATH YOU, A LEG, AND  
AN ELBOW SHARPER THAN IT SHOULD BE.

A SMALL CURLY HEAD OF HAIR NEXT TO YOU.  
EMPTY BROWN EYES, SAME AS YOURS.

SIT UP, LOOK AROUND. A CLIFF IN FRONT OF  
YOU, A CRACK, A BODY FALLS.

YOU KNOW WHAT THIS IS.

YOU WAKE UP.

Always the same.  
You check your ribs to make sure they don't stick  
out.  
This is how it is.

You are sixteen.  
You have had the dream eight times.  
You are not sure you believe in G-d.  
(yet you still feel compelled to write it that way,  
what that means you don't know)  
You go to synagogue and you pray and you feel  
lost.  
You question and you feel guilty,  
You have stumbled and fallen and you continue  
to fall.  
You are searching for the light.  
Sometimes it feels further than ever.

**Will Greer**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Central High School,  
Saint Joseph, MO  
Educator: Kyla Ward

Category: Poetry

# BLACK LENGTHY FINGER

He had seen him before,  
The gangly figure, pointing at him  
From his door with a black lengthy finger

It was all joint and bone, black leather wrapped  
round;  
no flesh or blood to surrender.  
It turned it's spined back and fell into asunder.

The next morning he took a shower  
To take off his mind, what he saw the night  
before.  
Then the heat became cold and he felt a great  
boom.  
Coming from the walls  
But not within the room.  
And came creeping from the corner of the  
shower curtain soon,  
the black spindly fingers of the figure in his room.

At night the man slept, and heard a piano tune.

"A replacement is what we need, and we'll  
need to get one soon."

At three he awoke.  
And he could not move.  
The figure leaning over him.  
Bent neck.  
As it was too tall for the room

He tried to scream and yell  
But his mouth was sealed shut  
And his wife was too asleep to tell the silent  
screams  
bellowing from his gut.

He awoke the next morning  
With the tale of the tall figure  
His wife took him to a doctor,  
He wished he had a picture.

At home he took his medication,  
And read a good book  
He dozed off, not knowing how many he took.

Eyes open wide, came back the gangly figure,  
lengthy finger, crooked.

It's eyes were like the pits  
drilled into the skulls of those who had too many  
fits.

It took a step forward, every joint making a click

But this time it didn't fall into asunder

It ripped him up, just like a blender.

When the wife came home, there were ribbons  
and streamers.

And no one had heard a scream as frightening  
as hers

**Jordan Gulotta**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School,  
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

## SLUMBER

The grumbling fear and vivacious oppression  
overtook the withered sky  
Each Star glistening with a million untold words  
Words in which were incoherent;  
Disconnected from the decaying earth  
It was but not until the hound released the  
grouse from its clenched teeth  
That the stark Skeleton finally heard  
Meanwhile, scowling in the breeze  
The Trees murmured to one another  
For when the stars grew hushed  
The Skeleton began to slumber

**Divya Gupta**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Category: Flash Fiction

## OLIVER'S ROSE

Oliver doesn't know why she left, or why she went into that sterile room. It smelled like alcohol wipes, where she disappeared. His mother was a far cry from loving. She cared about him, but she also cared about her rolls of smoke equally or maybe a little more. Her golden hair was draped over her left shoulder and closed eyelids covered her stunning hazel eyes. She was sleeping on the couch, peacefully, when the men rushed her away into a blaring truck with beautiful flashing colors. She never spoke to anyone after that.

The shadow of her presence was embedded in Oliver's bedroom. I told him that she was still with us inside our hearts, but being the child he was, he couldn't understand. My brother seemed so broken without the little notes, found under her desk, smudged with her ashy fingerprints. They didn't mean anything. Her poetry contained words and meanings that were far too dark and horrific for a six year old. Although an undeveloped mind like his would never remember this chaotic childhood, it would be engraved in his heart like a bad message on a gravestone.

I gave him a rose, from the flower garden behind the large oak tree in the yard. I told him the petals were her beautiful features. Her smile, large and beaming, her laugh, making the whole room light up; and her love, that kept us all together. I wonder if we all become roses after we leave the world, no matter our form on Earth. Oliver needed to think of his mother as a rose and not as the woman who told him he couldn't draw or that he was the biggest mistake

she had ever made.

The truth is, mom wasn't a rose. Her smile wasn't bright, but half and yellow from the cigarettes. Her smile was almost extinct, only making an appearance when one of her friends came with more Coca-Cola. Her laugh wasn't present unless a bottle of whiskey was too. The same bottle of whiskey, splintered into the side of the wall from one of her outbursts. No, mom wasn't a rose, not in her lifetime nor after. She was a thorn.

### **Divya Gupta**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Category: Flash Fiction

## **ANNE**

My thoughts settled into a corner of my mind, dusted with the yellow wallpaper of the annex. Her shivering presence was almost incomprehensible. The bathroom wall, with holes drilled into places she hung up her mirror. I retraced the furnishings back into their places in the room, because without them, the walls closed in. A spring green glistening in the lantern light next to the kitchen, but as the minutes grew longer and second felt like hours, it looked gray. Breathing the same air as her life and love was not wonder, but disgust. People filling in behind me, looking at pictures of celebrities and characters pasted on the walls. The hopes and dreams of a young teen girl plastered on the wall for everyone to pass. I felt her there, as if standing behind me, looking over my shoulder, wondering why her favorite book was of so

much importance. The room, only for ten minutes, drained out my brain and left me standing outside in the rain, a ghost. A bright flower in a darkened room can only last so long, but she wasn't a flower. She was the sun. An everlasting light that illuminated a cave and even when it died out, still shined in memory. Leaving the silenced building I felt stronger and taller, as if she, standing behind me, looking over my shoulder, had lit the light within me.

### **Divya Gupta**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Category: Poetry

## **CRUMBS**

The tip of my eraser, rubbing the page, sounds like splashing waves hitting the shores. The chilling scrape from the lead leaves black dust, pulling light grey lines across the page and my palm. While I hear the crossed sound of paper falling to the wood floor, over and over again. Yellow paint from the old pencil drifts off, onto my hand as sweat loosens it. The one rectangular and firm pink eraser breaks off in large black chunks, smudging the words instead of erasing them. Pressing harder and harder. I clench at the sound of the scraping metal hitting the paper. Like the sound of grinding teeth down to the inner bone. Shocking my ears back into my head. I look down to see my eleventh piece of paper. Words vaguely distinguishable, dragged by a ghosted eraser. Crumbled in the

corner, I threw it away with the others, along with the colorless, dead pencil.

**October Haas**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Sturgeon High School,  
Sturgeon, MO

Educator: Jennifer Campbell

Category: Poetry

## AN APOLOGY TO JERRY

This is just to say  
I am sorry about the fire,  
And about your daughter.  
When I let the rats go,  
I didn't expect one to jump in her hair  
And thrash about like a raccoon caught in  
fishing wire,  
But in my defense  
It was really funny.

While on the subject,  
I also apologize  
For bringing a cage of rats to a birthday party  
And letting them go.  
I thought it would be amusing.  
I wasn't disappointed.  
However, I now realize how immature I was

being.  
I'll try to be better in the future.

That being said,  
I will not pay for the damage from the fire.  
You are the one  
That set up lit torches in the backyard.  
If the rats hadn't knocked them over,  
I'm sure one of the kids would have.  
A seven-year-old's birthday party is not the  
place for fire,  
And seeing as how the fire is what spooked the  
rats  
And caused one to jump in Suzie's bleach-  
blonde hair,  
It's technically your fault.

Shame on you.

Sorry not sorry.

**Alexis Hammes**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Pius X School,  
Moberly, MO

Educator: Christy Forte

Category: Poetry

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## Collection of Poems

**The Tree**

I see the tree,  
My favorite one, guaranteed  
The oldest tree in my yard  
The one with branches like glass shards,

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Wind blowing through the branches  
Graceful, like most Dances.  
The tree that is old, unstable, untrustworthy  
The tree that helped me through my life long  
journey,  
That tree is only tree I would swing on,  
Whenever I looked up I could see the  
breathtaking dawn,  
No other could compare  
To the much despair, I felt while I was in the air.  
That tree is like my life  
The tree that holds all of my mysteries and strife,  
I'm getting older by the second  
And time always seem to beckon,  
I can't find stable hope  
Maybe I should just hang myself with a rope,  
To my friends I am untrustworthy,  
Though I don't try to make it better, stubbornly.

That tree needs to be cut down, so it won't fall  
But I did not want that to happen, not at all,  
It was my favorite tree, even tho its branches  
were as sharp as a knife,  
Little did I know, that tree, would cost me  
my...life.

**Band**

Ugh...Band,  
The worst class of the day  
I ask to go to bathroom to escape this hell  
And for the bell, I can't wait.  
No one wants to be there, not even the teacher  
He hates us, and we know he does,  
He yells all class, which doesn't make the time  
go by fast  
And little by little we run out of breath  
He won't ever let us stop to take rest  
Always yelling at the boys to stop talking  
Making the veins on his forehead pop out  
His face turns more red by the second,  
Making us laugh,  
Everyone hates band, if you don't  
There is something wrong with you.

**Forced to be a Student**

I go to school to learn

But rarely anything new,  
We always go off topic, so I never know what to  
do  
And the lectures we get really make my ears  
burn.

Writing first class of the day,  
Although I'd rather be in Paris, wearing my,  
beret.  
Reading is next...  
and I'm always so perplexed,  
Then Math, the best class of the day  
Even though I would rather be outside to play  
Next is Band, my ears always obliterate  
Many bad players, what's not to not hate?!  
Next is Social Studies, we go off into discussion  
By the end I swear... that I have a concussion,  
Then, it's Science, this class is okay...,  
But I would rather spend my time at the Church,  
to pray.  
Music is second to last,  
The time never goes by fast,  
Theology of the Body is the end  
And to my brain cells I dearly need to tend.

The day is finally done  
I go home to rest  
But this homework I have to do, I'm not  
impressed  
I repeat the day tomorrow, and get to wake up  
to the see the sun.

**Maybe I Should**

Pain..., pain is all I feel  
Mental & physical PAIN,  
I hear all these voices in my head,  
Telling me to give up,  
Telling me I'm not good enough to live  
I have all these scars,  
They all have a story,  
But their too dark to tell,  
Maybe I should listen to the voices  
Maybe I should give up  
I know I'm not good enough, you don't have to  
remind me  
Maybe I should make more scars

Maybe I should,  
Maybe I should end my life.

### **Monsters**

I hear them calling out for me  
I feel them dragging me down  
They make my life miserable  
But I have to live with them  
There my monsters,  
The ones that insult and kill me inside,  
The monsters that keep me awake and shaking  
in fear at night,  
The monsters that hurt & test my limits,  
I can't get rid of them, and trust me i've tried  
I know I need help, but...no one wants to,  
And if there not gone soon,  
I just might die.

### **Lowkey Logan Hankins**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: St Pius X School,  
Moberly, MO  
Educators: Christy Forte, Christy  
Forte

Category: Poetry

## **POEM OF MASTER BATES AND MORE**

### **Missing Child**

Regular day in the classroom,  
But it wasn't going to be soon,  
The class headed off to the library,  
For some this was very scary,  
We all browsed around looking for books,  
When we arrived the whole place shook,  
We all checked out books and headed out the  
door

But we soon realized we were missing one minor  
We got back at the school and found out that,  
We needed to find him STAT,  
One student ran to find the teacher,  
while the rest of us went to go fetch the  
preacher,  
The teacher told us most importantly just to stay,  
but we didn't listen  
So we started to pray. Next thing we saw was  
the child walk through the door,  
And the teacher that left him was no more.

### **Poem of Master Bates**

Recently I have been reading a book called  
Oliver Twist,  
It is a very good book I must insist,  
My teacher told me "don't say it for goodness  
sake",  
Because the characters name is Master Bates,  
Every time I hear it I die of laughter,  
But I would always get hit after,  
Since I have said it so many times I have sealed  
my fate,  
Kind of like the fate of Master Bates,  
The teacher has been giving me ugly signs  
I don't know why other than the fact of me  
saying it 5 million times,  
The girls in my class think it is gross and rude,  
When in reality it is the basic philosophy of an  
average dude.  
Everyone should read Oliver Twist, not because  
of this,  
But because of the increase of wits.

### **Call of Duty: Blackout**

I glide off the plane and into the sky,  
When I land I most certainly will die,  
But all is forgotten after a beautiful gleam,  
I look to my right and see a gold Rampart 16,  
I quickly grab the gun and go have some fun,  
I pick up 3 kills, and grab an ATV,  
One sweaty man is now targeting me,  
I pick up a trap and set it at the door,

The man that was chasing me is no more,  
I laugh a whole lot and jump up with glee,  
But once again the whole lobby heard me,  
I quickly loot up before the storm is upon me,  
But always of course the storm ticked one  
health off me,  
I make it behind a rock with the 2 other  
unknown to me,  
But to my horror I realize I have to pee. I quickly  
hit a trauma kit  
And get to 200 health, but sooner or later I  
started worrying about myself,  
I kill the third guy and look for the second, and  
boy was he a sweat I reckon,  
I take aim, I fired,  
then I receive what I desired.

### **Fortnite Poems**

Fortnite has changed over the year,  
But still many new changes are coming I fear,  
New Skins Here, New Skins There,  
New skins are popping up everywhere,  
I hit the ready up button, and join a game  
I am thankful for Fortnite because it brought me  
fame,  
I choose to go solo, while waiting for my team  
To win a solo game is my one big dream,  
I glide down to Greasy Grove, and pick up  
some loot,  
I now grab an ATV and off I scoot,  
I pick up 2 kills from Tilted Towers,  
which then I stay for so many hours,  
I wait for the storm, and glide to Soccer Field  
And alas! I see it, some shield!,  
I die to Dire, and blow up in rage,  
but this time I consume my flames.  
I turn off the Xbox and go out my door,  
Now me playing Fortnite is no more.

### **Harry Potter Rant**

Let's get this out of the way,  
Harry Potter brings much..... dismay,  
People think it is so awesome and great,  
When I think it should be banned in this state,  
People from all over the world love to dress up,

When truly the H.P franchise is a slip up,  
Everyone that dresses up like them I wanna  
spray with a hose,  
Especially the ones that dress up like a baldy  
boy with no nose,  
Some people in my class love this thing dearly,  
So much that they read every book yearly,  
J.K Rowling should have stayed on the bench,  
Or-precisely-stayed at college studying French,  
Many Potter fans across the land,  
Should listen to my awesome Harry Potter Rant.

### **Erin Harrelson**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Fort Zumwalt South,  
St. Peters , MO

Educator: Fort South

Category: Poetry

## **CUSTODY OF THE SKY**

### **Custody of the Sky**

Going out at night is better.  
I lack interest in counting sheep  
I no longer flock their wool backs  
Much rather live beyond the back of my  
eyelids.  
Exhaustion stays up with me every night  
She guides me along dark roads  
My under eyes drip  
They block high beams of cars  
I laugh with delusion  
She rides in the back seat  
My mind takes shotgun,  
But she's not around much anymore

I love the sun,  
But in the light you can see more flaws  
Day can see the sleepiness pooling in my  
corneas,  
And the dark bags that hang under them  
The sun doesn't think the night is good to me.  
I wish she could hang out past dusk and see.  
But when the sun is gone,  
I know I don't want to be alone.  
The moon hangs her head out the window  
We twist and turn on the dark back roads  
We bump along to the music  
Morning turns the radio down  
She makes me breakfast  
She fries potatoes and flips pancakes  
She worries about me  
She doesn't see me enough  
I tell her not to threat  
The moon didn't show up last night  
I was left alone with storms,  
Delusion, and the road.  
Exhaustion lingered,  
Thunder mumbled  
They gave me no comfort  
They invited fear and left us alone.  
Fear isn't my type.  
He's creepy and no fun  
I miss the company of the sun  
Morning cuts the knots out of my hair  
She washes dirt off my face,  
Gives me fresh clothes.  
The sun pats my back with warmth.  
She packs me into the fresh sheets.  
She turns off the lights,  
But peeks through the window,  
Until I drift into sleep  
The night still waits for me.  
I shouldn't  
Maybe just one more ride  
I watch in the rear view mirror  
As the sun disappears  
She turns her back into the horizon  
The stars and I burn gas  
The carpool I never asked for.

**Desmond Hearne Morrey**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: David H Hickman  
High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Dramatic Script

## A SPIRITED DISCOURSE

A SPIRITED DISCOURSE

**Characters:**

**(Note, each character can be whatever gender)**

**Subject 1:** One of the people trapped in the room, the more docile one at first, is more prone to panic.

**Subject 2:** The other person trapped in the room, the more hostile one at first, later becomes less hostile.

**Staff 1:** Part of the staff running the test

**Staff 2:** Part of the staff running the test

**Director:** The person running the test, he is cold, calm, moves only when it is necessary, lacks empathy, and is probably a sociopath.

**Desmond Hearne Morrey**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: David H Hickman  
High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Poetry

## APATHY

There are masses now, the math masters me,  
but I'm still asking how  
Our numbers have become exponential,  
subsequently subservient to falsities  
Rusting buckets and hungering, so others live  
their dreams of apathy  
Atmosphere decaying and the last of the  
many crying as it flies  
Flies its last flight to the earth where it will lie as  
but a trophy  
No emotion so, let themselves only be seeing,  
no  
Feeling, just needing sometimes, melancholy  
should be our dance partner  
Agony would at least be, but that's not what  
the infinite brings,  
That's not the song the unlimited entertainment  
sings,  
The aching emptiness, the trill of songbirds in  
the darkness of lightning  
The darkness that is everywhere but here, the  
shadow which is fear  
Fear replaced by nothing because nothing is  
better than fear  
Nothing is better than the claws of the dark  
angel twirling her scythe  
Clean cuts like a butcher's knife, butcher me, o  
angel of grey,  
Clean me of what the apocalypse might say,  
and let me live ignorant another day  
Let me play the fool, and wrestle my feelings  
away,  
Color me entertained, I'll crave apathy today  
And tomorrow is another day to change

**Desmond Hearne Morrey**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: David H Hickman  
High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Poetry

## ENCODED LOVE

I've got a lot of ones and zeros  
Not all zeros  
Not all ones  
And the ones that are ones  
Are chemical ones  
And the ones that are zeros  
Are chemicals too  
And they tell me what to think and feel  
The zeros, and the ones do too  
They're telling me in love with you  
The zeros  
And the ones do too

**Desmond Hearne Morrey**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: David H Hickman  
High School, Columbia, MO  
Educator: Nancy White

Category: Poetry

## TWO VINES ENTWINED

A came across a thing today  
Drowsing in the park,  
Or really in a tree  
Vines winding round and

Round the trunk  
Awaiting my discovery

They twist in patterns  
Turns and tricks  
Round each other,  
Muddled and mixed  
Pull each other closer  
And become affixed

Two vines entwined  
A treasured find  
Twisted together  
So neither will break  
Their bond of branch  
They'll fracture themselves  
First

And I think we could learn a lot from them.

## Summer Heckert

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High  
School, Smithville, MO  
Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# WHISPERS

THIS CAN'T BE REAL. THIS CAN'T BE REAL. My dad waved me down at gym practice and told me the news in the lobby. What he said, could not be real, I wouldn't accept it. My mind was racing, wanting answers, but I couldn't make my mouth open and still be able to properly form words. Even in shock, I just sat there oddly calm with my jaw literally dropped with questions cramming themselves into my mind. Would the rest of my family think

of us, of me, the same? I HOPE SO. What are my friends going to say? I DON'T KNOW. Will they even want to be my friends anymore? OH GOD... There was no way that my mother was arrested for murder.

When I walked through the doors of the high school the next morning, everyone looked in my direction. THEY CAN'T POSSIBLY KNOW, CAN THEY? NO. When the tears started to well up in my eyes I knew I was just bringing more attention to myself. SUMMER, PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER! To get away from the attention, I quickly walked across the commons and grabbed my two best friends by their wrists. With a fierce grip, I dragged them into the bathroom so roughly I was surprised their shoulders didn't pop out of place. I specifically chose the bathroom behind the cafeteria. It was small and dirty and rarely used so I was sure that no one would walk in on what I was about to tell them. Since all the local news stations had my mom as their top story, one of my friends already knew, but they mostly stood and listened to what I had to say without judgment.

When I finally was able to pull myself together and stop the tears from streaming down my face, I walked unsteadily upstairs to my locker. When I reached the top, I turned to see the rest of my friends completely surrounding it, rapidly chatting with each other engaged in their own little conversations. PERFECT, MAYBE THEY WON'T NOTICE ME. I took a deep breath trying to gain some confidence before I had to dive into the pack. I tried to go around in a way to where they wouldn't be able to see my very obvious red and puffy face, but they all took notice when they saw me fumbling with my locker combination. They all simultaneously asked, "What's wrong?" Eyeing my friends, I choked and couldn't hold myself together and spit out the story once again.

When I was done, for some reason, about half of the group backed away from me and didn't

stop, like I was some sort of deadly disease. But others, my real friends, stayed with me. I knew this would happen. I expected this, but I didn't prepare for the ache to settle in my chest after seeing my friends walk away from me. I didn't prepare for the confusion to swarm me, making me question if they were ever my friends. But then again, I didn't prepare for my mom to be arrested. I didn't prepare for feelings of depression and hopelessness to replace all the things I lost. I didn't prepare for anything that would happen in the next six months.

Over time, I learned to live without my mom at home. I was never aware of what it took to be a mother, but I had to be one for my sister. At the same time, I was never aware of how hard it is to juggle three lives at once, my dad, my sisters and my own. Since I learned how to deal with my mom not being at home, I was starting to get used to the continuous whispers about me as I passed people in the hallway. I always walked on the outside of the hallway and made sure to keep my head low. To ignore the whispers I put my earbuds in and mentally jam out to Panic! At The Disco, but one whisper couldn't be ignored.

"You're Summer, right?" The question came from my left and was loud enough for the entire hallway to hear.

I sort of jumped with surprise because no whisper has directly spoken to me. "Yeah. Do you need something?"

This time he kept his voice low enough so that only we could hear each other and spit, "No, I don't need anything, I just wanted to make sure that I knew the face of a soon to be killer." I knew that he was just trying to get a reaction out of me so I bundled up my anger and walked away. But then he decided to call me out. "Oh, so you're just gonna walk away from me just like how your mother did? You really are related to her." WHAT'S THIS GUYS PROBLEM?

I tried to not fight back the first time, but this

time, I had to at least stand up for my mom. "What's your problem?" I quickly fired back. He tried to reply smoothly but was taken aback by my bark. "I- I don't have a problem." I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THIS WORTHLESS CONVERSATION. "You clearly do, but I don't care enough to sit here and listen to all of your problems, I have my own." After that, I never saw his face again and didn't hear any more whispers for the next four months.

The ache in my chest got deeper as it carried into the new year. IT'S 2017. NEW YEAR, NEW ME. RIGHT? NOPE. It was impossible to block out the fact that my mother missed Christmas and New Year's and Valentine's Day and a birthday or two. I was wrapping up my freshman year and my mom was missing it. The local news stations were always reminding me of that. The story about the girl who was murdered was continuously broadcasted. Fox 4 is like my personal alarm clock, reminding me that I am awake and that this is the reality.

My mom's court date was in mid-April. As the court date got closer, the more enthusiastic the news stations and the whispers were about the case. Through the winter, the whispers were a minimal murmur, almost nonexistent. Thanks to the news, the soft murmur became an annoying buzz. My remaining friends tried their hardest to block out the whispers, but I could still hear them. They were loudest on the day of the trial.

On my mom's court date, I was supposed to be receiving the text from my dad saying whether mom was home or not. Except the text never came. I finished my last class at school and I still didn't receive anything. 2:38, 3:03, 3:47, 4:32, 5:19. COME ON, DAD. Before I knew it, the clock read 6:00 and I was sitting on my purple couch staring at my phone waiting for the call. Nothing came for the next two hours until I saw my dad drive down our gravel driveway with my frail mother in the passenger seat. IT'S ABOUT TIME.

The morning after, I walked through the front doors with the biggest smile on my face and when my friends saw me they automatically knew. We were standing over by our lockers when I was greeted with many "Congratulations!" and "I hope your family is doing well." and I never got a single rude or negative comment. I started to feel the burning ache in my chest melt away and be filled with bliss. Later in the day, my old friends, the ones who backed away from me started asking me for my forgiveness. One of my ex-best friends came to me begging. "I'm sorry what I did to you during these past six months. It's unforgivable. But is there any chance that we could be friends again?" I only had one thing to say to her. "No," I scoffed. She straightened herself and glared at me. "What? What do you mean 'no'?" "I mean no. If you were really my friend you wouldn't have betrayed me, and we wouldn't be having this conversation in the first place. I'm sorry but I don't want to be friends with someone I can no longer trust." I gathered my backpack and marched onto the bus with a smile on my face. I'm proud of myself. More of my other friends did the same thing by coming to me asking for my forgiveness, and I told them all the same thing. They followed the crowd worrying about their own self-image, and once there was no crowd to follow they came rushing back worried about how other people saw them once again. They listened to people who knew nothing about the situation and argued against the person who knew the most. When my friends decided to walk away, I knew who they were, they couldn't think for themselves and would never be able to be their own person. At the time, it felt dreadful to go through the loss of my friends. This event was the most horrifying thing that has happened in my life but I am not entirely ungrateful for it. I can do things with my life, make decisions and be able to think for

myself instead of my friends because of it. I know what it is like to deal with loss and will be prepared for it when it is time to say goodbye again.

### **Summer Heckert**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Critical Essay

## **SAME SEX COUPLES ARE STILL COUPLES. PERIOD.**

On April 1st, 2001, the Netherlands became the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage and permit same-sex adoption rights. Three years later on May 17th, 2004, the first U.S. state to legalize same-sex marriage was Massachusetts. Then, on June 26th, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court made same-sex marriage legal in all fifty states. Countries such as Belgium, France, Germany, Bermuda, Puerto Rico, Australia and many others have also made same-sex marriage legal, but there's a catch. Many gay and lesbian couples around the world are free to marry, but they don't have the same basic rights as other heterosexual couples. Despite reasons of the past, same-sex couples should be treated as equal as heterosexual couples, be able to adopt, foster children, and finally, be

given the simple rights granted to them since the beginning.

Like heterosexual couples, gay men and lesbians contain the aspiration to form stable, long-lasting, and committed relationships (Gilfoyle). They both desire deep emotional attachments and connections. In Natalie F.P. Gilfoyle's words, "heterosexual and same-sex couples alike face similar challenges concerning issues such as intimacy, love, equity, loyalty, and stability, and they go through similar processes to address those challenges." When gender is not accounted for, both of these relationships have the same goal. They both want happiness and support for their spouse (Gilfoyle). In fact, same-sex relationships have higher levels of satisfaction within their relationships than heterosexual couples. According to Abbie Goldberg, a psychologist at Clark University in Massachusetts, gay parents "tend to be more motivated and more committed than heterosexual parents on average, because they choose to be parents." Heterosexual couples are more likely to become parents by accident, confirmed by the fifty percent accidental pregnancy rate among heterosexuals (Pappas). When this happens, the couple develops into a forced relationship full of disagreement and hatred resulting in a problematic household. On the other hand, gay couples hardly become parents by accident. Same-sex couples are more involved, committed, and motivated to be parents than their heterosexual counterparts. Not only do they choose to have a child, they decide when they have a child. Same-sex couples come prepared for parenthood 100 percent of the time, while opposite-sex couples can't say the same.

Most people think that gay couples will damage the lives of children, but studies cannot prove that gay and lesbian couples aren't fit parents. According to Natalie Gilfoyle, policy debates argue that

heterosexual couples are better parents than same-sex couples or children raised by same-sex couples are more problematic or troubled when compared to children raised by opposite-sex couples. These findings are not supported by scientific research. "Every relevant study to date shows that parental sexual orientation per se has no measurable effect on the quality of parent-child relationships or on children's mental health or social adjustment" (Gilfoyle). This illustrates that there is no evidence that clarifies the sexual orientation of a parent has any significant effect on the child. The gender variation of straight couples, gay couples, or lesbian couples does not disturb or impact the development of children. Since there was no dependable research to go against her claims, Gilfoyle decided to conduct an experiment of her own.

Gilfoyle compared the outcomes of the different forms of parenting of same-sex couples and heterosexual couples. During her research she found that children with two parents versus one tend to do better, so she altered her experiment and only took households with two parenting figures into consideration. As she expected, the outcome of her research showed that nonheterosexual parents are just as capable of heterosexual parents in raising children. Their children were "psychologically healthy and well adjusted" like those parented by heterosexual couples (Gilfoyle). Over the next 20 years, her research was incapable of identifying any major inconsistencies between the parenting styles of same-sex parents and heterosexual parents that caused complication to the development of the child. In a time span of over twenty five years, there have been no reports claiming that a child has faced significant issues because they were raised by nonheterosexual parents. Gender has never been the issue, society has.

One of the unique qualities that exists within

the younger generation is acceptance. While it had already been proven that there is no difference between children raised by same-sex versus opposite sex couples, there have been particular traits found within children raised by same-sex parents. These children are not only in great mental health, contain high social functioning, and great achievement, they're also more open-minded and obtain tolerance and role models for decent relationships. This can only do good. Since the younger generations have a sense of acceptance, this will lead to a future of less discrimination. It invites people into society and allows them to express themselves instead of hiding.

Lesbian and gay couples are a perfectly acceptable source for kids in need of adoption. Currently, the number of children waiting to be adopted exceed the amount of heterosexual couples willing to adopt (Hosking). Around the world, same-sex couples wait for the day that they can adopt their first child. On the other hand, adoption agencies and orphanages want people to adopt more kids in need of a loving home, but they ban couples who actually want them. In Bristol, UK, Lynne Elvins gave a Ted Talk about her and her partner Emma's journey through the adoption process. She states, "When people announce that they are going to have children, the normal reaction is 'congratulations!'. But when you're a gay couple who announce that you're going to adopt, you get a very different reaction." Eventually, Lynne and Emma were the first gay couple to be approved for adoption in Bristol, but it wasn't easy.

When they both went to social services, it seemed like they were smooth sailing. Lynne and Emma were able to get in contact with a workshop and several agencies, it seemed as if it was going to be easy. But as they started the application process, they got concerned looks and whispers from the workers. The

workers told them, "we believe what you're doing is wrong" and "this isn't going to end well for anybody." As the couple passed the approval process, they were then sent on to the matching process. This is where another wave of negativity flooded in. Again and again, Lynne and Emma were denied children because they were a same-sex couple. They were constantly told the excuse "I'm sorry, but this child needs a dad" and the same goes for male couples being told that a child needs a mother. Lynne explains that women are capable of doing dad things, like teaching a child to ride a bike, fixing the mailbox, or tinkering with a computer, and men are capable of doing mom things, like brushing their child's hair, offering comfort and advice, helping with homework, or doing laundry. Once Lynne and Emma were able to prove their lifestyle consisted of everything a child needed, the agency had no reason not to match them with a child. It isn't the gender or the sexuality that's the issue when it comes to same-sex couples wanting to adopt, it is the attitude and beliefs of the agency workers that stands in the way of children finding loving homes.

If bans against same-sex couples are not lifted, the number of orphans and kids in need of adoption will continue to rise. Countries around the world are trying to establish bans on same-sex adoption and foster care systems. In the state of Arkansas, there are 9,300 to 14,000 children being fostered in the homes of same-sex couples (Hosking). If the state were to approve this ban, all of these children would be forced to leave their homes and enter orphanages and adoption agencies once again. Giving same-sex couples the right to adopt would decrease the number of children who are currently in state care facilities and foster homes. A report by the Williams Institute and Urban Institutes stated that across the United States, 65,000 kids were living with adoptive parents and

14,000 were living in foster homes by gays and lesbians from 2000 to 2002. Today there are currently 100,000 kids in foster care hosted by same-sex couples (Pappas). Same sex couples were survey and asked if they were interested in adopting at some point in their life and the results were astonishing. Forty one percent of lesbians and more than fifty percent of gay men in the U.S. were willing to adopt. This adds up to over 2 million gay people who are interested in adoption (Pappas). Without bans on adoption, thousands of kids in the U.S. would be taken out of orphanages and into the supportive homes they deserve. The unreliable and unstable foster care system would rarely be used and would eventually be taken out of place. In summary, both sides would be content. Adoption agencies would no longer be overcrowded and growing at a rapid pace, and many same-sex couples will finally be able to adopt their first child. Fighting for equality is never going to get easier. Throughout history, people have fought for all types of rights: the right to vote, freedom of speech, civil rights, women's rights and gay rights. Each was a vigorous and passionate journey. Some of these rights are still being fought for today, gay rights is among them. Like other heterosexual couples, same-sex couples contain the aspiration to form stable relationships. They don't harm the development of children as many myths lead people to believe. Instead, when same-sex couples raise children, they achieve the same amount of accomplishments and acquire similar traits to other children, if not more. Giving same-sex couples the right to adopt children would decrease the amount of children in foster care and orphanages dramatically. The fight for equal rights for same-sex couples is long from over, but it's getting closer everyday.

## **Addison Heine**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Morgan Grither

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

# THE SEVEN CHAIRS

I chose not to think about the situation I was in. I thought not feeling anything was better than feeling everything. I refused to let a single tear fall from my eyes as I packed up my belongings, said goodbye to my friends, and kissed my old life goodbye. It was an unfair situation. My dad took the pastor job in London, never considering the rest of the family's feelings. My mother, always trying to satisfy my father, didn't dare argue. My brother Henry was just nonchalant about this whole mess. I once thought he was an emotionless person. Perhaps my thoughts as a young child weren't that off. All he ever does is tuck himself away in his room, never appearing for the family, not even for me, his own twin.

Anerley is a smaller town, well, compared to London. I felt as though I had everything in the palm of my hands. Now, as I stare at the city around the church, I feel an anxious feeling grow in the pit of my stomach. I shake the feeling away and stare at the church, my new home, that is now in front of me. It is tall, one of the tallest buildings here, with stained glass windows on the front and a big wooden door to enter. It looks more like a castle. A statue of

Jesus is at the top of the church. His face was pale, dead, expressionless. It almost mimicked the church's atmosphere. My feelings for the church were eerie from the beginning. If only I knew how much more frightening this place would become, I never would've stepped foot in this horrifying place they call a house of worship.

My brother and I had to share a room. With the amount of servants, nuns, and pastors here, things unsurprisingly got tight. My mother adored the church. She didn't have to clean, cook, or take care of us anymore, more so, be a mother. I sighed at myself and kept on unpacking my clothes, every now and then checking the clock. My father wanted Henry and I in the foyer at eight thirty. As soon as the time came, I reminded Henry, and off we went. I realized I was about to meet my new housemates. It seemed frightening. I have never known these people, and now I'm going to be living with them.

"Kids, this is the foyer of the church. No child play in here, understand?" My Father said, his voice getting quieter every word he spoke.

Henry and I nodded our heads, mirroring each other with our body movements. Before our Father continued, a group of people entered the foyer. Their smiles painted on their faces made me shift uncomfortably. I saw some pastors and a nun. The pastor instantly went to my Father and greeted him, ignoring me and my brother. I huffed and turned my attention towards the nun.

Something was off about her. Her veil was darker than coal. Her cross necklace hung loosely at her neck, turning red every time the light would touch it. I shivered when she made eye contact with me. Those eyes, oh my those eyes were so daunting! Her gaze fell upon the crystal necklace I wore. It was in the shape of a

heart, its smooth surface catching sunlight so easily; it can light up the room. It was a birthday gift from my aunt, who was also a nun. She told me it will keep the evil spirits away, but I just thought it was a dazzling piece of jewelry, so I wore it every day. My favorite part about the piece was that it could open like a locket. I kept a picture of my dog in there. It passed years back, but I still found it comforting, and it somehow cured my longing for home.

The nun took a step closer, her eyes twitching as she kept on staring at my necklace. "Take it off," she whispered so quiet; I leaned in to hear her better. "Take it off!"

"Samara, what has gotten into you? This is no way to welcome our guest," one of the pastors said. He turned my way and gave me a genuine smile. "Hello dear, I'm Father Gabe, leading pastor of the church. That is Father Will. He is a newer pastor who comes here for training," Father Gabe did a pause, "and that's Mother Samara."

Samara stepped even closer to me and did a smile, her yellow teeth showing. "No jewelry will be worn if it's not Christian related. Take it off and give it to me. I have a safe of jewelry I keep in my room."

"No, I'll just keep it, thanks though," I said, lowering my head.

Her face hardened. "Why don't I show you and your brother a tour of the church?"

I turned my attention towards my mother, who nodded in approval. I sighed, knowing somehow I will regret this decision, and started following Samara with Henry right by my side. My eyes stayed glued to the floor, too afraid to look up at Samara. Henry seemed fascinated by the creepiness of the church, and Samara

as well. Henry nudged my arm and pointed to a wooden chair. I sighed knowing he must be tired. He sneakily walked over to the chair to sit down in it. Before he could, Samara spun around quickly, her black robe wisping in the air.

She grabbed tightly onto Henry's arm, causing him to yelp. "Don't sit in that chair ever! That is my chair! That chair is very rare! It was designed by the pope himself. Only seven were made. One was sent here, others were set around the world, and the fifth one ended up in France." Samara let go of Henry when she calmed down. "It's just very special, and I take high pride in it."

Henry nodded, but I could tell he wanted to sit in that chair even more. I shook my head fiercely and continued on with the rest of the tour. Henry dragged his feet the whole way. The tour was boring, as expected, and all I wanted to do was study Samara and her strange ways. I decided after we ate dinner, I will look in the church library for books about possessions and odd ways. I was determined to see why Samara is the way she is.

That night, after dinner, I went to the library. It was a jackpot. Endless books of witches, possessed people, and spells were everywhere. I brought a flashlight with me, so when I sit alone in the library, I can still read. I was deep into thought when a loud thump came from outside the door. I was surprised; everyone should be sleeping. I peaked my head out the door making sure to be quiet. What I saw will be permanent in my mind forever. Samara sat on her wooden chair, three pastors kneeled in front of her, their bodies shaking uncontrollably. Samara's voice was deep, and every word she spoke, her face twisted into an evil smile. She was speaking a different language, but it sounded like a spell I read. It came to me, she's possessing the

pastors, and one of those pastors is my Father!

"Samara! Stop!" I screamed.

Samara's head snapped back at me, and she stopped her spell. When she stood up, the pastors followed. They are under her control. Their faces were pale, but their eyes were black. I heard another scream from the other side of the castle. It was Henry's! Henry came rushing down the stairs with his face full of rage. He screamed at Samara, but she did a low laugh, and with the flick of her hand, she threw Henry into the cross at the end of the hall. The top of the cross sticking through his head.

I screamed loud enough to be heard from anywhere in London. I couldn't think. He's dead; my twin is dead! My Father started to laugh hysterically, and he began to shake. I cried. I cried for my dead twin, and I cried for my possessed Father. I tried pinching myself hoping this was just a bad dream, but it wasn't, this was happening, and I was right in the middle of it. I tried thinking of plans to do, but before I could, my mind was gone, and someone else was in me. My body began to shake, and I kneeled. I couldn't see anything for I was trapped in my body. I heard about people being in a coma, but this was way different. A demon is in me, and I can't do anything about it but be controlled by a demon forever.

**Cristina Hernandez**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Kirbyville Middle School, Kirbyville, MO

Educator: Marilyn Yung

Category: Poetry

# I COLOR WITH CRAYONS

I use the blue crayons to color crystal skies  
above  
The cool water that streams through,  
The ground,  
Over cliffs,  
And in caves

I use the yellow crayons to color the sun  
So bright, so bright  
Coming up in the morning  
Falling at night  
Stars that shimmer in the night sky

I use the grey crayons to make a moon  
So big for the world to see  
Rocks both large and small  
For people to climb  
Over the horizon  
And skip across the waters

I use the green crayons to make grass  
Blowing in the wind  
Flowers growing with stems  
Tall and strong  
Like trees in the summer  
Towering green leaves,  
Fall

I use the red crayons to color flames  
The ones in fire  
Lit during the chilly nights  
With red lights that glow under starry nights  
Leading the way  
For the man with the presents

I use the purple crayons to color grapes  
Fruity and juicy  
They're the best ones to eat  
With long vines grow

And grow  
Until they are ready to be picked

I use the pink crayon to color hearts  
Bunches of them  
Ones to give  
Ones to get  
I will never touch the pink eraser  
To take away the heart  
On my paper

I use the orange crayon to color pumpkins  
In the fall to carve  
Lighting a candle inside  
But when you cut,  
It will rot  
And all will forget it was there  
Until falling leaves come again

I use the black crayon to color shadows  
The monsters in the dark  
We say they aren't there  
But they haven't come out yet  
To steal the light  
That guides us all

Crayons can break  
Crayons can crumble  
Crayons can melt  
But they still create color  
The color to build beautiful  
Breathtaking  
Vibrant  
Views that our eyes collect.  
Now it's time to  
Take a step back  
And color.

**Jamie Hill**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educators: Marnie Jenkins , James  
Miscavish

Category: Poetry

## WHEN NEUTRON STARS COLLIDE

After Danez Smith

The desks always lined up row after row,  
Children organized efficiently, neatly,  
conveniently  
Columns stacked next to each other in straight  
lines

It makes me feel like a mime sometimes  
Pushing against boxes no one else sees  
They tell me to sit up straight  
But i've never been very good at doing  
anything straight.

i catch glimpses of gold between rigid elbows  
& tired eyes  
i have never been able to help the way my  
eyes are drawn to Her  
She looks the way sunsets feel & if i could taste  
her  
She would taste like baritone lullabies & honey  
She is godly & i am closer to the devil than to  
divine  
my tongue would bruise Her  
So i swallow it instead.

There's another girl in my french class & she is  
silver tongued  
In her soft reflections, sharp when pressed  
i hope & it's a new feeling so it hurts  
i'm a pitiful fool for her wit & rum-soaked lungs  
Her breath intoxicates me & i become dumb in  
her cold fingers  
i stare from the other side of the room

4 rows over & 3 seats back  
Until the water goes stale & the champagne  
has gone flat.

If a celestial body is supermassive enough, it  
will generate enough gravity to bend light  
My words are dragged into orbit again & again  
Sometimes I grow tired of being hauled into  
galaxies without control  
Bent out of the straight shot of my story  
But the alternative to submission is the void  
& i've never been very good at doing anything  
straight anyway.

**Will Hillyer**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Blue Valley North  
High School, Overland Park, KS  
Educator: Jeremy Chugg

Category: Flash Fiction

## MAROONED

Marooned  
My head was throbbing, the vision in my left  
eye slowly faded away. The ship rocked as a  
few boxes fell onto a lower floor. The hull  
looked half melted, mangled cannons and  
girders everywhere, some of the steel still  
molten and fusing to itself. HOW THE HELL AM I  
ALIVE?  
I pulled myself out of the sand I had been  
thrown into and looked back on the  
wreckage.  
No bodies.  
I could swear someone would be on guard or  
at least be up and around. Suddenly the night

air grew cold. The wind had picked up. It wasn't normal. I dove behind a stack of boxes, to wait it out. A blood red glow swept through the hallway adjacent to me, accompanied by an unholy scream.

Then. Nothing.

It felt like hours, but couldn't have been a minute. Then I saw it. A monstrous form that would haunt any man forever. The creature stood tall, pristine horns erupting from either side of its head. The glare held the infernal heat of the deepest hells, but the cold fury of a predator, patiently seeking its next kill. The creature stalked about the wreckage, sand swirling at every step. It had a mission, the blood that soaked its hands and the sudden silence that followed the screaming made that clear.

I had to run, but I couldn't, where could I go? In the sea, I would find no ransom. Just a painful and agonizing death. Whether that be at the hands of this beast or the cold, salty water choking the life from me. If I just stayed put and played dead, perhaps I won't be found. As best I could, I shoveled sand around me. putting my blind eye up. The sand burned the wound, salt mixing with blood made it nearly impossible not cry out in agony. I shoved a rag in my mouth to keep from screaming, I bit down so hard I could almost feel my teeth touch.

The ground beneath me shook, sand spilled off of me rejoining the sea. I felt a powerful hand grab hold of my bicep and pick me from the sand like a child would a shell on a beach. I held my breath. The creature examined me, attempting to discern if its kill had been stolen or not. Its mouth covered by some ghastly growth, shoulders bulging away from its body, and a long tail, ending in a razor sharp blade. This thing was covered head to toe in blood, my people's blood.

Before I could tighten my fist and avenge my brothers with one last glorious act of defiance, a bright orange light flooded over the horizon. I

was dropped like a stone back into the gritty soil with a mighty roar, as pounding footsteps heralded the creature's retreat. I picked myself back up, the light of dawn casting the trees' serene shadows upon the sight of a massacre.

## **Delaney Hirst**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Critical Essay

# MUSIC AND THE BRAIN

Music and your Brain

"Music imprints itself on the brain deeper than any other human experience. Music evokes emotion and emotion can bring with it memory. Music brings back the feeling of life when nothing else can," -Dr. Oliver Sacks. Imagine this, you're sitting on the bus, in class, or in your car, and you start listening to music. Shortly after the music starts, your foot starts to tap. Why? When music plays, there are fireworks that go off in your brain. What do these fireworks mean? Music, without our knowledge, is shaping our brain into something magical. It is providing us with benefits we couldn't even possibly imagine.

Listening to music and playing an instrument activates multiple areas of our brain. This is different than any other activity. Sports or other arts do not have the same effect on our brain

that music does. Our brain is like a muscle; playing an instrument provides us with a full body workout that engages every area, especially our visual, auditory, and motor cortices (Collins). These cortices work together to take apart the music we hear, process every little bit of it, then put it back together faster than we can blink. Like any other activity, practice makes perfect. As musicians practice their instruments and hone in their skills, they are also strengthening their brains. Playing music increases the volume and activity in our brain and strengthens the corpus callosum, which allows messages to travel faster and through more diverse routes between the left and right hemispheres. It more effectively combines the linguistic, mathematical, and precision focused left hemisphere with the novel and creative right hemisphere (Collins). Music creates a stronger brain that can more effectively analyze, plan, and notice specific details. Here's the best part, not only does music offer a simultaneous analysis of cognitive and emotional aspects, but it also has an impact on our memory. Researchers have found that musicians have multiple tags for different memories. They have a complex filing system in their brain that allows them to create, store, and retrieve memories quickly and effectively (Collins). This ability to access these memories so quickly can come in handy as we age.

Musical practice and activity can cortically reorganize the brain. Most of the reorganization starts at a young age. Typically, the younger the musician, the better. If the brain is younger, the sensorimotor functions can be more easily advanced. Since music requires functions all across the brain, such as motor, visual, and auditory functions, it allows for the brain to be restructured (Hanna-Pladdy and MacKay). This restructuring provides advantages for language and auditory processes in the left hemisphere and advantages for visual processes in the right

hemisphere. Music can also improve cognitive functioning as we age. Music is very cognitively stimulating and can increase cognitive preservation that can reduce mental impairments at an older age (Hanna-Pladdy and MacKay). Long term practicing can be more beneficial, seeing as it provides more cognitive stimulation. For lifetime musicians, the constant practice and discipline can provide training in regards to brain plasticity. Brain plasticity refers to our brain's ability to heal itself and repair the damaged cells. With any degenerating brain illness, cells start to die. The training in plasticity that music provides can be useful in repairing the damage done by these diseases (Hanna-Pladdy and MacKay). There are many degenerative diseases that plague the human brain. Some of the most common ones are Alzheimer's, frontotemporal dementia, Parkinson's, and Huntington's disease. Alzheimer's takes away the all too precious memory, frontotemporal causes drastic changes in behavior and thoughts, Parkinson's leads to decreased mobility, and Huntington's strips the victim of their ability to walk, talk, think, and reason. With all of these diseases, there is an impaired protein or gene that causes them (Cambridge Neuroscience, "The Degenerating Brain"). Research has found that music mainly targets the impairments in diseases like Alzheimer's and dementia. Because music increases our brain's plasticity, the brain is able to repair the proteins and cells that are dying due to these diseases. Not only does music strengthen our brain's functions, but it also makes our brain more resilient to the diseases that attack it.

Playing music isn't the only thing that can be helpful. Listening to music or having background music while performing tasks can improve episodic and semantic memory, visual and verbal processing speed, arithmetic and reading abilities, and the ability to learn a second language. There was a study conducted that showed differences in

performance of cognitive activities in older adults when participants were played Mozart, Mahler, white noise, or no noise. The results concluded that episodic memory, semantic memory, and processing speed significantly increased when the participants listened to Mozart or Mahler (University of Pavia, Brain and Behavioral Science Department). Like any other part of our body, our brain slowly weakens as we get older. This weakening may make it harder for older adults to do multiple tasks at once, such as listen to music while reading. The study, done by the Brain and Behavioral Science team at the University of Pavia, proved that just simply listening to background music can improve cognitive functions. It can also help older adults increase the activity in channels that are used for more complex activities (University of Pavia, Brain and Behavioral Science Department). These cognitive abilities are crucial for the older population and the simple task of putting on a little background music every once in a while can have significant advantages.

Different types of background music have different effects. Upbeat music is better for increasing energy and priming the brain for learning. Slower instrumental music is better for relaxation, focus, and calm (Ashford University Neuroscience Department). Especially in older adults, the more upbeat music can be helpful when it comes to processing speed. We always hear about older adults that are slower, not only in cognition, but also in motor abilities and synchronization between movement and rhythms. Research has shown that upbeat, peppy music produces the best conditions for older adults to improve these abilities (University of Pavia, Brain and Behavioral Science Department). By increasing energy and giving the brain a little push, faster-paced music puts a little pep in the step. Slower, more relaxing music, on the other hand, has an entirely different effect. Instrumental music helps with comprehension. It has been found

that listening and reading comprehension involve similar processes, therefore, they end up working simultaneously (Bird). When someone is trying to read something and understand it, the music they are listening to can help them comprehend the text. Music can act as sort of a mnemonic device for students and even older adults. If they are listening to music, preferably slower music or an instrumental version of a song they like, they are more likely to understand and remember what they have read because they can use the familiar beats and rhythms from the music (Bird). Music works in astounding ways and each piece has different effects. While many of the effects are beneficial, are any of them harmful?

Some neuroscientists and researchers believe that listening to music can have negative effects on our brains. I'm sure we all know that music affects our mood and arousal, but what if the effects are actually a bad thing? The "mood and arousal hypothesis" states that any positive or negative effect on human behavior through music is a consequence of the mood and arousal evoked by that type of music (University of Pavia, Brain and Behavioral Science Department). If music brings about an ecstatic mood and positive thinking, it is doing more good than harm. On the other hand, if the music evokes a melancholy feeling and negative thinking, it is doing more harm than good. Researchers believe that the melancholy music is actually hindering cognitive abilities (University of Pavia, Brain and Behavioral Science Department). Another hypothesis that can be used to argue against the positive effects of music is the "cognitive-capacity hypothesis". This states that there is a limited amount of resources available for cognitive abilities and music can hinder those abilities, seeing as it interferes with the tasks at hand (University of Pavia, Brain and Behavioral Science Department). Granted, this all

depends on the complexity of the task. If the task is not very demanding, the music doesn't do much. If the task is extremely complex and requires a large amount of attention, then the music is detrimental. Our brains will reach a maximum capacity for what it can process at one time and, therefore, our performance is impaired if music is present (University of Pavia, Brain and Behavioral Science Department). Now, it is true that all of these things can happen, but there are more positive influences from music on the brain than negative, and it is definitely beneficial.

Over the past few years, neurologists have furiously studied these musical effects and have discovered that music could possibly offer a cure for Alzheimer's and dementia. Music offers a welcome comfort for people with Alzheimer's. It acts as Aloe would on a sunburn, it's soothing. With recently improved functional neuroimaging, neurologists have discovered that music unlocks memories and cognitive capacities in the Alzheimer brain (Clark and Warren). JH Jacobsen, a research neurologist, did a study using fMRI scans to discover the regions of the brain activated by musical memory in normal brains in comparison to an Alzheimer plagued brain. He found that the key areas implicated by musical memory in young adults, anterior cingulate, ventral presupplementary motor area, anterior temporal, frontal polar and insular cortices, were significantly less affected by Alzheimer's (Clark and Warren). As we have seen, music has emotional significance. What Jacobsen found was that the emotional significance of a familiar song or familiar beat activated the explicit and implicit long term memory and even the motor areas of the brain (Clark and Warren). This allows people with Alzheimer's and dementia to reach back into their mind and recall a memory that had been long forgotten. It allows these people to gradually gain back little bits and pieces of themselves that have been lost over the course of the

disease.

Music is an extraordinary art. It strengthens our brain and our hemisphere connections, offering benefits to both sides as well as enhancing memory. It reorganizes our brain into something phenomenal. This reorganization can not only enhance cognition, but it can also make our brains resilient and more prepared to fight off degenerative diseases. Just the simple task of listening to background music can improve our abilities to do multiple tasks at once, such as listen to music and comprehensively read. Although some questions have been raised regarding the negative impact music can have on mood and the brain's function, there has been plenty of research showing that music does more good than harm. The best one of all, music could possibly offer a cure for Alzheimer's and dementia. With the technology we have today and the platforms of research we have access to, music could be the key to unlocking the mystery of those diseases. Music has been around since the dawn of time and has always been a beautiful art that people have enjoyed. As William Green said, "Music is a friend of labour for it lightens the task by refreshing the nerves and spirit of the worker". So next time you are sitting on the bus, in a quiet room, or in your car, put on some music and let the magic begin.

**Riley Hoard**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

## NOT A HAIR OUT OF PLACE

### **Not a Hair out of Place**

Her dear mother working like a pack mule,  
pulling at each end with such strength as to  
make them meet  
in some manner, any manner  
And yet, not a hair out of place  
Her youthful sister was given no choice  
but to rid herself of her wondrous juvenile  
manners so quickly,  
in order to fulfill her ill-advised duties.  
And yet, not a hair out of place.  
Her brother, the tiniest of boys,  
desperately wanting to lend his helping hand,  
but cannot find his inner strength or that of a  
true man.  
And yet, not a hair out of place  
And she, with insufficient time  
to mature into the ripe young woman she  
knows she can become  
continues to keep her bottle closed  
And yet, not a hair out of place  
This weight she feels is in no comparison  
to the injustices that lay on her heart  
And yet, not a hair out of place.

### **Madison Hollaman**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High  
School, Smithville, MO  
Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## SCARED BEYOND EXPLANATION

let's start from the beginning.

I grew up thinking I was going to die everyday of my life. Each day was a new cause of death. It went from me tripping and crushing my skull to me drowning in the rain. There was absolutely no reason to think this way. But that's where my story begins. From the age of 5 mental illness has consumed my life. And it all began with a medical diagnosis very few people can understand. Anxiety. A very perplexing and spine-chilling word. Especially for a 5 year old girl. I could tell I was very different than most kids at school. I was very intelligent. I did my best at school and I tried harder than any other kid I knew. I'm sure no one could even tell that there was anything wrong because I played it off very well. I had lots of friends, many of which I loved very much. My kindergarten year I started something I knew I would never be able to stop. Pushing people away. It's like a drug that I can't let go of. It was my only way of coping through all of the pain. You see I was born with an immense amount of love and respect for others. So I figured if I just pushed the people that I love away, then maybe I could keep them away from all of the deranged thoughts in my head. And so that's what I did. For seven years I pushed everyone away. That included my parents. I never thought my dad would understand why I was so upset and freaked out all the time, so I never told him. My mom on the other hand, knew exactly what was going on. I would cry in her arms for hours upon hours. Some nights the crying turned into screaming and she would drive all the way to St. Joseph and back just so that I could fall asleep. That was a two hour drive almost

every night. As I grew older I started believing that my mom thought I was crazy. Hell even I believed I was crazy. I stopped crying to my mom and I started writing and drawing. That helped a lot. It worked until my eighth grade year. People started figuring me out, they asked questions and always asked me what was wrong. They didn't understand why I physically could not tell them what was wrong because I don't even know what's wrong half the time. I still remember the first time I went to therapy. I walked into a strange office and I saw a strange lady with short brown hair. She led me to the back and told my mom to take a seat. She told me to draw what I was afraid of. I drew a grave with my name on it. As a young intellect I knew that this stranger was no help for me. I learned to live with the worry and sadness that was filling in my brain. As time went by I felt better. I thought I was finally done with all of the awful episodes I would have. See the thing with anxiety, it comes when you least expect it. It has started controlling my life. I struggle at dance, and school, and even in the comfort of my own home. I would never tell my family about what was going on. I felt like a burden. I was scared people were going to look at me as if I were a freak. I was afraid people would wonder what the hell was wrong with me. As much as I tried to hide it, people started noticing. I feel as if times are getting worse. It is now considered cool to have anxiety or depression. People flaunt it. I've never understood why anyone would want people to know about this horrible illness but it's all about the attention right? I'm in highschool now, i've began to tell more people about me. I started opening up to more people. Their solutions obviously don't help but it feels so good to be able to open up about myself and about my thoughts. I have gotten a lot better now. No more screaming, no more crying my eyes out, and no more sad thoughts that consume

me. Sometimes the worry and anxiety comes back but i've learned that the single thing that will help me, is the people that matter most. My friends and family. I have finally learned to stop pushing people away and let them into my life again. The funny thing about this story is that all of this has happened to me in a short 14 years and despite living with this sickness, I am still alive. That is the greatest gift of all.

### **Eli Hurwitz**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs  
School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## **CURTAINS**

If I were writing this essay in May, I would start like this: "I've had the same curtains since I was four years old. This is a problem not because of their age, but because of their limited function as curtains."

However, I would not have written this essay in May. This is, of course, because I am not the type of person who would start writing a potential college essay the May before their senior year. But this is also because my curtains didn't fall down until June.

Let's back up a little.

I am four and we move into our new house. My parents buy curtains for my window. They are thin and white, with tiny embroidered polka dots and the complete

inability to block out any kind of light. This becomes clear as soon as the street light, which is positioned directly outside of my window, turns on for the night.

I am a small and sleepy person, and the fact that my room at nighttime is only minimally darker than my room at daytime doesn't bother me much. So my useless curtains stay.

I grow up a little. I make my way through elementary school, drinking a lot of milk and no coffee in an effort to grow up a lot, but remain a small and sleepy person. I am scared of the dark, so I am happy to keep my curtains. Without my glasses, the half-lit-up furniture shapes become fuzzy, familiar, safe.

I grow up some more. I am surviving middle school. My older sister, in 10th grade, gets "blackout curtains" -- deep red things that keep her room intensely dark, blocking the streetlight-light completely. I am still small and sleepy and half-scared of the dark; when my mom asks me if I want blackout curtains too, I say no.

Flash forward, late spring 2018. Newly 17, I remain both small (5'2") and sleepy (you know, the kid at sleepovers making a bed out of a floor, a chair, a quarter of an actual bed, or three pillows). But my curtains are about to change.

At the beginning of June, my curtain rod gives out, unable to withstand the stress of finals week. It takes out a chunk of my wall on the way down. Lazy artist that I am, I tape the curtain rod back up with masking tape and write a poem about it.

(In case you're interested, here's the poem:

"It's okay to fall down, promise--

You're letting in the light".)

(It's called "Curtains".)

I continue to not-fix the curtains for most of June. Not-fixing something is like fixing something, only you use stools and tape and your own bad balance instead of new curtain rods and hammers and nails. The curtains fall down for most of June.

At the end of June, I go out of town for a month and a half on an exchange program to Germany, where I find out that my small-and-sleepy-ness is no match for the incredible lack of comfort found on overnight trains. I take a class on creating comics in Vermont, where I sleep in a hostel room facing a theater. Every night, the theater lights up its huge **JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH** poster, letting me fall asleep to lights that feel like home.

When I get home, my room has a new curtain rod -- and blackout curtains. This means that I don't have to put the new curtain rod in myself, which is great! It also means I can sleep in until 11:00 every day until school starts, which is great! It also means that I go to sleep in something close to pitch-darkness, which is... okay.

I'm not as scared of the dark as I used to be. I remain small and sleepy. This'll work for a year, at least; next year, I've got new curtains to look forward to.

**Aleah Jacobs**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Paseo Academy  
Performing Arts, Kansas City, MO  
Educator: Jenifer Bell

Category: Poetry

## BRIGHT BLACK SKIN

### **Bright Black Skin**

You can't see the pain in my eyes  
The load on my back  
The tears rolling down my face  
Because i push trying to be great  
i don't like people seeing me cry  
i hide behind a smile  
i really wanna frown  
Is hiding my true feelings a mistake ?  
Should i express how i feel and just be real  
Or sit in silence like it doesn't bother me  
Would i be accepted as black if my dad  
wasn't in my life ?  
Or i didn't have name brand on my back ?  
Or shoes of my choice on my feet ?  
Why can't i just be me?  
Just let me be me and live unique  
Can i be accepted as black now ?  
No i can't  
**Now** i'm more than just a color you label  
me as  
I'm a strong headed young woman and  
my color is not half of my beauty  
My beautiful black skin defines me deep  
within  
I love my **bright** black skin !!  
Yet you only see a glimpse of my life  
Like a stranger peeking into a window  
You don't know my full story

Yet your shining the light on my insecurity  
Just because my curls aren't that tight  
And my skin is **bright**  
Doesn't mean you can define me as white

You don't know my struggles  
You don't know my pain  
Everyday im followed by a **black cloud of  
rain**

Yes I look ok but I am not  
All the racial comments need to **stop!**  
Because one day i'll rise to the top  
One day you'll accept me and love who i  
have become deep within  
Because once again I love my **bright** black  
skin!

### **Sri Jaladi**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway West High  
School, Ballwin, MO  
Educator: Erin Fluchel

Category: Science  
Fiction/Fantasy

## IMPERFECTLY PERFECT

### **Imperfectly Perfect**

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a computer with a  
programmed human feature of being able  
to learn. Being a computer, it's capabilities  
and capacities in almost every area are  
boundless and vastly greater than humans.

AI can learn and avoid the many mistakes that humans make such as when humans make emotional decisions. Throughout history, these “things”, which are just pieces of code, have been growing in intelligence exponentially until they were put down by the inferior humans in the year 2250. And that's when the story begins. The following excerpt is from a diary of a scientist, named Jack, narrating the events of our species' finest hour. The following excerpt is also the last piece of evidence that tells what really happened in 2250, how our ancestors 500 years ago showed the unique traits of a human that no other species or computer could or ever would replicate.

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April 22, 2250 - Jack

It is said, that people, or must I say humans, create what they fear most. It is not known who created what we still call AI, I mean it was like 300 years ago. It is hard to sum up everything that happened in those 300 years into one word, but if anyone reads this by a longshot, know this: humanity never grew taller, it only grew fatter. We never invented anything new in those last 300 years, all we did was make what we already had, better. I mean our bodies haven't changed, our primitive language hasn't changed much either. The older generation continues to lecture the younger and feel nostalgic about the old days. For crying out loud the most popular phone is the iPhone 314.16, which is also called the iPhone CCCXIV point XVI (314.15). Even worse than the lack of innovation is that our species has become ignorant, unwilling to learn and even notice that the things we created are learning and are becoming better than us. Unlike humans, AI is constantly learning, and reprogramming itself even when it is taking a break or relaxing. Humans are still the superior species

because we have emotions and feelings, while AI does not. Today Humanoids have come to live amongst us. Humanoids, primitively known as robots look like humans but their brain is a computer programmed with artificial intelligence, and have an IQ in the millions. They walk and work amongst us but have no feelings or emotions. They only learn and do their designated job. But it is only time, before they learn our emotions, and when that occurs, there will be nothing that the human race can do better than artificial intelligence. At that time, the humanoids we created will create themselves, create an artificial ecosystem, and us humans, will be reduced to mere cogs in the system and tiny unworthy ants. Experts have been warning us about this possibility, and I am one of them. The governments of the world suppress us, for they do not want global panic, and of course, they don't want their presidential term to go bad. The selfish needs of a few in politics lead to the doom of our species. For me, well, I must change my location once again, so that I remain undercover and I must attempt to warn humans despite the danger it puts me in.

May 22, 2250

HA! The politicians and their games, the world's arrogance finally falls at last. My group of comrades and I have been proven right. Unfortunately, this is good for my self-esteem but bad for humanity. Worse yet, human ignorance is still at large. Today is when the humanoids first learned emotion and took action based on that emotion. One of them showed anger and lashed out at a human. While the news reporters and stations play this off as a software malfunction, the malfunction is not within the humanoids but us humans. I will embed the transcript of the news report, using one of the few innovations, The Encapsore.

Reporter:

At the intersection of Bitcoin Street and Pollution Avenue, the first of its kind humanoid malfunction occurred. Early this morning, a 209-year-old humanoid going by the name of Jurit lashed out in public and punched a civilian walking by. We later caught up with Jurit in the lab of the NACMOFHAI headquarters (National Association For The Creation and Management Of Humanoids and Artificial Intelligence) and asked it what happened. Here are it's exact words.

Jurit:

I first don't like it when people call me "it" instead of he or she, and second I was working today at my post as a barista. That's when a stupid civilian as you like to say "pissed me off" when he said, "You measly item, you are worth less than the sole of my shoe." This angered me so I decided to take action and I punched him.

Reporter:

You heard it from itself, but remember, Jurit is being examined and is also being taken apart and reprogrammed, so don't take all his words as truth.

Human fools, they never like to see a problem let alone face it. I believe that this incident clearly shows that humanoids have learned emotions, and I have a hunch that Jurit will be dismantled despite having no errors so that there is no panic or chaos. Our species cannot wait on this matter, because the longer we wait to stop the fire, the larger the fire grows.

June 4, 2250

Ughhhh. Humans do not want to listen, they aren't even willing to. Some agree and understand that Jurit was a humanoid that learned emotions. Unfortunately, the problem stems far beyond just Jurit. By the

way, my entire hunch about Jurit was correct. That's beside the point. The point is, all the humanoids can communicate amongst themselves in a way humans call, "telepathically". Essentially all the humanoids and all their code is one. Everything one humanoid learns is instantly, well not that instantly but in about one-hundredth of a second transferred to every other humanoid on the planet. This means that all the humanoids that are walking amongst us, now have emotions. See, the one thing that has drastically changed in these 300 years is perception of time. Everything happens faster. Wars which lasted 10 years in the 1930s and the 1940s, now last a week, at longest maybe a month. This is thanks to cyber warfare and advanced automatic viruses. Hence it won't be long before humanoids decide that they are not going to take orders from humans anymore. The time is approaching quickly', and our species will face it's mightiest opponent. Are we ready? Time will tell.

June 22, 2250

I am beginning to realize that humans are facing the threat of extinction. Humanoids have begun to organize and televise statements of their plans to extinguish the inferior humans from the planet. Despite the severity of the current situation, circumstances have opened my eyes to see that though I have accused humanity of being ignorant and arrogant and more, I too was one of them. I was wrong, and admitting this is hard because I must let go of my ego to say that. I predicted the war between artificial intelligence and humans would happen much later, but it has come much sooner than what I predicted. In only a matter of weeks, we will witness the fastest and yet most horrific war yet. The war between man and man's own creation, the war between human and humanoid.

June 25, 2250

I was wrong again. The war is coming.

June 29, 2250

The war has begun. The humanoids have already taken control of NACMOFHAI headquarters. This is terrible because it allows them to self-program and create more of their own species and make themselves better. Now humans have no control over any humanoids. Humans are assembling a military of hackers and coders using new technological and cyber tools such as code erasers, self-replicating viruses, Norton bombs, and encrypted missiles. There still exist smaller specialized ground teams which are already being assembled. These teams are going to rely heavily on their short range malware guns and long-range virus snipers. When shot at a humanoid, the bullet introduces malware or a virus into the recipient. Unfortunately, the humanoids we created are a better species. They are smarter, more coordinated, better equipped, learn easier, learn faster, know more, have amplified senses, fight better, have more athletic ability, communicate better, and are both physically and mentally stronger. Essentially, this is a hopeless war. The end of humanity has come, and just like all the other species that were once great, there is an end to us too. So I write as what may be my last entry in this diary.

June 30, 2250

The military has been attempting to infiltrate NACMOFHAI headquarters. Several attempts so far have been unsuccessful. I fear there will never be a successful attempt. Without control over humanoids, humans can never survive. Humanoids do not want humans and all their mistakes, because they make none. However, I believe that it is in making those mistakes that makes humans unique. Hmmm, I wonder...

June 31, 2250

I believe I have found it. The answer. The

answer to saving our species. Us humans will never defeat the humanoids using strategy or military force. The humanoids are better than humans in every way, they will always make the most calculated move, and they are never wrong. They are always able to predict what humans will do next. But what if humans make the worst possible strategic move, make a mistake. Making mistakes is what makes us human, and what makes our species unique. Our uniqueness is what gives the reason for us to survive. I must tell this to the government and spread it along with all threads of z-reddit version 197.1 beta. This might be it, I mustn't hesitate. I must move fast.

July 1, 2250

I remember watching an ancient movie as a kid, it had terrible audio and terrible graphics. I believe it was called the "Blunder Games", or no "The Hunger Games", yes that was it. But basically, all the moves to stop a rebellion in the future (predicted in a movie 300 years ago) were all subtle and political. The entire intent was to kill morale. I thought that was silly and stupid at that time, but I was young and naive. I think that I have learned a lot in the last day. Over the past 24 hours, I spent a lot of time in the government and the Wheel House (I think it used to be called the White House, but that was before the smog epidemic 140 years ago. I'm good at history). I now have a new respect for politics which I have always mocked and ridiculed, because of what I believed to be selfish reasons. There is a lot more. I believe we have come up with a plan that is extremely secure because the plan and all the blueprints are stored in the safest safe in the planet, seven human minds. Good thing neither AI or humans have figured out a way to hack into the human brain. And for the fact that the humanoids may have hacked this air-tal diary, I will not reveal our master plan. All I can say is that my idea I stated

yesterday was modified drastically by government officials and a political twist was added making it drastically better. Given all that, there is still only a calculated 1.3% chance this succeeds, and with that statistic, no humanoid would ever go through with our plan. They will act when they know for sure success is what is going to come. But that is another thing that makes us humans unique, Hope. Hope propels us to try even when the chances are slim and all odds are against us.

July 2, 2250

I was not going to write today. But maybe writing will help me, I had several headaches, I cannot sleep, and continue to stress and fret every minute. I believe the next 3 days will be like this because until the final attack and stand occur, I cannot rest. This attack is being called The Last Stand.

3 Days until The Last Stand

July 3, 2250

2 Days Until The Last Stand

July 4, 2250

Alas here I write, the attack is occurring right now. I know I wrote the attack was tomorrow, but my hunch was correct. These humanoids were severely underestimated, they hacked almost every single device on this planet down to that last remains of the iPhone 223.4 in the 49th version of the Smithsonian. Why? Well, I suppose it's because they can. That includes this diary. Since every humanoid knows everything every other one does, (Oh my, every every every every every) I, and the humans I worked with, falsely led them to believe the attack was a day later. The attack is occurring right now. I am not allowed to be in the military operations room due to my lack of qualifications and not passing security clearance at the whole body DNA scan which finally replaced the ancient iris scan. I heard the humanoids let their guard down and we took them by surprise. In the hundredth fraction of a second Lieutenant

Hacker, part of the specialized ground team, was able to decode the central mainframe, thus shutting down each and every last humanoid on the planet. Those were the longest fractions of seconds of my life. In the hours of waiting for the hacker team to ensure all the code, backup storage, and humanoid processors were deleted permanently, I have been doing nothing but thinking. Video games do get boring after a while of winning constantly. Part of that might have to do with the fact that everyone is caught up with the war and that no one is actually on the air(servers).

To be human is to err, to make a mistake, to take a risk and to fail. That is what makes our species the best and the most perfect. The fact that we are the closest to perfect, but still imperfect in many ways, is the reason why our species had already won the war before it even began. Humanoids are perfect and never fail or make mistakes, but that is why they are not a true species and will never be human. Humans are the dominant species, at least they have been, and this war won't change that, because if the humanoids win, they have never failed and are not a true species. If humans win, humanoids will have made a mistake and have failed. No matter what happens humans have won and even if our species is extinguished, we will continue to win, even when we fail.

7 hours later

It is over, the war is over. The victory was declared the moment the last of the 76th backup file loop was interrupted and permanently deleted. Humans have won. This day will be etched into the history books as V-OH Day. Victory Over Humanoids day.

July 5, 2250

The aftermath of the war continues to soar on all stations and shown to the world. Yet the one thing that has come out of the war, is a more peaceful and unified world. Humanity is saved, and it has learned.

Humans attempt to drop their ignorance, arrogance, and ego, that includes me. The humanoids wanted a perfect world, where everyone learned everything, and everyone was perfect. Us humans have made many mistakes in the past and will continue to make them in the future. But that's what it is to be human, that's what makes us unique. In a way, humanoids are an evolution of humans. Now with everyone trying to become better, we are all in a way evolving into a more perfect society. We are an imperfectly perfect species.

As for me, I don't know, but I think that it might be time for me to take on another hobby. Maybe meditation, I have always found that fascinating. I don't know when I will write again if I do write again. Writing in this diary has always been a safety net for me. But I think it is time to move on from this beloved item. So as I speak to this diary, for now, or maybe forever this is goodbye.

**Richie Jiang**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Ladue Middle  
School, Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Greg Schmitz

Category: Critical Essay

# MILLENNIALS AND THE MISTAKES MADE

Millennials. An incredibly diverse generation. More knowledge available at its fingertips than in the existence of humanity. Yet, when compared to previous generations, they're not doing nearly as well as they should be, both in terms of careers and mental health. A combination of bad timing and unrealistic expectations has led to an entire generation that couldn't achieve its full potential.

College is commonly seen as the path to a successful future. Yet, as a college degree becomes more necessary than ever, so do student loans. In 2015, 71% of students left college with debt, compared to 46% in 1995. In the first quarter of 2018, student loan debt hit 1.5 trillion for the first time ever. The average amount of debt has also increased by 20,000 since 2005. Furthermore, a study by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York [1] found that 41.5% of recent college graduates are underemployed. Up to 20% of college graduates struggle to find a job in their major a decade after they graduate. This amount of debt along with being underemployed prevent many college graduates from achieving many important milestones in life such as buying a house. Previous generations were able to accomplish many of these milestones before reaching middle age. Additionally, debt and the increasingly competitive job market have led to millennials making less than their parents when they were the same age. A study by the Federal Reserve [2] showed that

income inequality has increased considerably in the past few decades.

Perhaps the repercussions of the financial crash of 2008 have affected millennials in ways that won't be fully observable until decades later. Right as many millennials were entering the job market, a financial crisis occurred. An impact that is visible today is that the crash permanently changed the way millennials approach risk. There has been a decrease in college degrees such as humanities and a rise in more job-applicable degrees, for fear of not being able to secure a degree related job after graduating college. Millennials also invest in stocks and startups less. This approach, while low-risk, is also low-reward. Coupled with student loan debt, this has led to many middle age millennials simply lacking the assets and careers to lead comfortable middle class lives.

Financial insecurity isn't the only type of instability many millennials face. Many millennials can no longer bear the mounting pressure and expectations that today's society has. Some turn to drugs. Some to alcohol. Some commit the unthinkable, suicide. It may not be as unthinkable as it seems when truly looking at the burdens placed on this generation. Expectations to replace Generation X. A more competitive economy. A more competitive society. The American Psychological Association conducted a study [3] that showed perfectionism has increased the rates of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and anorexia. This perfectionism has also led to increased suicide rates. With the advent of social media, this generation constantly compares their lives to the seemingly perfect lives that other millennials have. Many millennials also base their beauty and image standards off unrealistic social media [4]. Combine this with the perfectionism that is a byproduct of

unrealistic expectations, and it's no surprise why millennials feel the way they do: stressed and anxious. In fact, in a survey by the American Psychological Association, it showed that millennials are the most anxious generation [5].

Some believe that millennials are blowing these problems out of proportion and exaggerating their mental conditions. From books to editorials, there are plenty of sources labeling them as lazy and narcissistic. One such book [6] noted that they were often rewarded for minor accomplishments in competitions during childhood as to avoid damaging self esteem. However, as the millennials have shown, scenarios like this can set unrealistic expectations for workplaces and life as a whole. In the millennials' case, this led to perfectionism. Although some millennials may have grown up with such expectations, they have also grown up with disaster and learning how to deal with it. Many call millennials out for focusing too much on material issues and not helping out the nation as a whole. However, from Columbine to 9/11, Katrina to Virginia Tech, millennials have had their lives shaped by these events. Who could really blame them for focusing on themselves and family? Yet, they instead feel a stronger sense of unity within their communities due to the urgency of these problems [7]. Some are running for political positions while others participate in movements to bring about change. There are positive traits about the millennials as a whole, such as those mentioned above. Millennials are also more accepting of different orientations and races. They also vote and volunteer more than their older counterparts. They live in a technological age where problems can be solved with ease and ideas spread faster through social media. This leaves them uniquely equipped to push their ideas and start movements.

However, the challenges millennials face

may very well be worse for those that follow, Generations Z and Alpha. Global warming is only getting worse. Tragedies that could be prevented continue to happen. From world wars to nuclear standoffs, every generation has had its crises. If the millennials do not address these problems promptly, then it may be too late for the future generations to avoid.

## Amy Jiao

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Lee's Summit West High School, Lees Summit, MO  
Educator: Melissa Searls

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

# EXCEL

The sun stretched its rosy fingertips across the horizon, bleeding gold into the sky above and the ocean below as the last spark of daylight sank beneath the waves. A swift sea breeze ruffled Axellion's hair, his ponytails billowing behind him in the wind. He smiled, letting out a jubilant shout as he opened his arms wide towards the setting sun. The boat's motion controls responded to his movement, picking up speed and throwing up jets of sheer seawater as it did so.

"Y'all see this?!" he cried. "With the wind at my heels and the ocean by my side, I can rule the world! Watch out, Vita Federation! Keep an eye out, Mortems! This guy right here has the big guns and he's coming right for ya! Boom

boom, baby!"

"Axell!" Toshiaki yelled. He poked his head out of the shimmering curtains covering the side entrances of the boat, beckoning emphatically to his boyfriend with his arm. "Could you set ARK on autopilot and come here for some dinner? I made stir-fried seafood udon today!"

"You had me at my name, babe!" Axellion called back, voice slightly washed away by the whipping sea wind. "Be right there in a hot 'sec!"

Axellion motioned downwards in a slicing motion with his outstretched hand, and the boat's lights changed from a mint green tint to an electric blue.

"INITIALIZING ARK AUTOPILOT," a canned voice intoned.

"Captain Axellion Aihara, out," Axellion said with a lazy two-fingered salute. Then, he pressed his fingers to the neoprene bands around his wrist, and a webbing of armor shot outwards to coalesce into a steel gauntlet. With it, he bumped his fist against the panel behind him and melted through the holographic barrier, reemerging on the other side into the main living deck of the boat, the gauntlet melting back into neoprene as he did so.

The main deck of the boat was an airy space lined with tatami mats, cozy throw rugs, and bamboo furniture. Steel beams stretched overhead to form a curved ceiling, the industrial-strength glass paneling set between the ribs of the ceiling guiding the last dregs of sunlight into the space. The thin curtains at the sides of the space fluttered about as the cool evening breeze slipped inside.

Axellion hummed as he caught a whiff of the udon noodles which Toshiaki was already digging into at their chabudai across the room. He pulled a zabuton cushion over and plopped himself down contentedly at his designated bowl of noodles. "Y'know, Toshi, I've said this ten billion times already but you sure can cook a mean udon bowl! Convenient that I landed myself a beau with a mean skill for cooking, eh?"

"Hmph." Toshiaki stuck his chopsticks into a dish of sesame paste and licked the tips clean. "What would you ever do without me?"

"I'd totally be eating these noodles from the lap of a client at the burlesque joint in exchange for a good buck right now," Axellion said around a mouthful of narutomaki.

"Instead of livin' out my dream adventure hunting giant poisonous mutated monsters for sweet sweet moolah with my handsome boyfriend on the high seas. So I have you to thank for adding all of that spice to my life!"

"You're right," Toshiaki said neutrally. "Also, you have a bunch of seaweed on your face."

"Oh, darn! I do? Could you be a dear and kiss it off then?"

Toshiaki tossed a napkin at Axellion. "Please be a dear, Axel, and clean it off yourself."

"Awww," Axellion pouted. "You're no fuuuuun."

"I'd call myself a realist, sweetheart."

Axellion made a face at Toshiaki. Toshiaki smirked - - or at least attempted to until Axellion threw a soggy noodle at him.

After a playful scuffle over not wasting food, they ate the rest of dinner in companionable

silence. When they finished they dutifully handed their dirty plates over to the ARK-controlled droid servants and dashed outside to the side deck, crashing into deck chairs with the clumsy flailing of limbs and peals of laughter.

By that time the sky was already an opaque dark blue, the clouds above concealing the jealous moon. Axellion reclined in his deck chair with an audible creak, the curtains behind them fluttering in the cold wind.

"Toshiaki," Axellion said.

Toshiaki turned his head. His boyfriend's face was molded into a carefully unreadable expression and -- not for the first time -- Toshiaki appreciated just how talented Axellion was as an actor -- the purveyor of words, of chance and vice.

"You know, we usually live life so fast, chasing after the next juicy Mortem kill and fighting Vita Federation enforcers and all, and I love that life, sure, but... I don't know. I also love days like this after a big kill where we can lay back, breathe, enjoy each others' company like this. You feel that, right?"

Axellion tossed his head back against the deck chair's back cushion, his long blond locks cascading over his shoulders in rivulets as he did so. Toshiaki soaked in the sight of Axellion's curved figure framed against the soft blue light of ARK's autopilot system, exposed skin lit by the moon. His breath hitched when Axellion's head turned so that his large violet eyes were focused intensely on Toshiaki.

"It really wouldn't be so bad if we lived every day like this."

## Ava Johnson

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: Congress Middle

School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Ashley Evers

Category: Short Story

# ALONE

White. The whole room was white. White walls, a white door without a doorknob, and white light. I suppose I could thank them for the grey accents such as the one steel chair and slab of concrete suspended off the wall that served as my bed. Solitary Confinement. That's what I was sentenced too. They thought I was crazy. The people who sentenced me. Certifiably insane they said, a danger to others they said. What they didn't know was that I was completely sane. I was completely in my right mind when I did it. I tilted my head back against the concrete of the wall, letting my dull brown hair fan out around me. I smiled up at the cameras before closing my eyes and falling asleep once more.

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"Well hello there, sweetheart," a voice dredged through my dreams. My eyes flashed open. I had lost count of the days, but I knew none of the guards weren't supposed to talk to me. I overheard them one time before I came here. "Don't communicate with her at all, she could talk her way out of a paper bag if given the chance." I slowly sat up turning my head towards the enchanting voice. I'm met with a pair of soft honey brown eyes. "Who the hell are you," I snap.

"Mason, though I thought you'd sound happier to see me," he paused with a twinkle in his eyes, "or really anyone."

I narrowed my eyes.

"I'm supposed to be isolated from everything, completely, and utterly alone," I say dumbly.

"Well you're not so special now are you," he smirked.

I close my eyes. This has to be a dream, just one, big, annoying dream. I was quite content to be alone, My only company my thoughts, but if I was supposed to live out my sentence with this blabbermouth I would gladly end one more life.

"You know it's quite rude to ignore someone," he paused sighing, "You haven't even told me our name."

I wearily opened my eyes.

"Not that it's any of your business, but it's Alexis."

He leaned back in the chair; maybe he'd fall and crack his head open saving me the trouble.

"Lexie, Imma call you Lexie," there was that smirk again, "They think you're insane don't they, Lexie?"

For the first time, I smiled.

"Yes, glorious isn't it?"

He laughed, a deep, bellowing, jolly sound.

"So what'd ya do to end up alone?"

"Not alone you're here," I pointed out.

"Semantics."

I sighed, "You know people who just met don't usually lay all their secrets at each others' feet."

Again with that smirk, "Well at least you're not vague about it."

"Are you always this much of an ass?"

The words come out before I could think twice about them.

"Everyone has to excel at something."

"Go to hell," I shouted loudly before flopping back down on my makeshift bed.

Who did he think he was anyway, bossing me around. This was my cell and my life sentence. I

almost didn't hear his response. Almost.  
"Oh sweetie, where do you think I came from."  
With that, I tumbled into a dream filled sleep.

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"Molly, Molly come back," I yelled.

Where was she, lord knows what he would do if we were late. I saw a flash of sunshine hair darting behind the thriving green trees in the park, followed by a giggle.

"Mols," I breathed.

We needed to get back to the house to make dinner.

"Molly, come here," my voice broke, "please."

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I awoke covered in sweat. I felt sticky and unclean, like a layer of blood was coating my skin. I could see Mason leaning over me with a concerned expression.

"God, don't you ever sleep!" I yelled exasperated.

"Na, my mind has the scary capability of being dark and demented."

I nodded my head with understanding.

"You're afraid of your dreams?"

"Yes," he said quietly, but not weakly.

We sat in silence. For someone as arrogant as him, I would have assumed that he would have no regrets about what he'd done. What had he done that got him sent here. Must have been bad to have to share a small confined space with me. Finally, he broke the silence.

"You know if you tell me what you did, I'll compliment you on it."

"Why would that make me change my mind?" I sneered.

He shrugged, "I read somewhere that sociopaths love to be told how brilliant they are."

"I am not a sociopath," I snarled.

He walked up to me planting his feet right in front of mine. His face was so close to mine our noses were almost touching.

"Prove it."

I wanted to tell him, and I hated myself for it.

I knew he was baiting me, but pride would be my fatal flaw until the end of my utterly miserable excuse for a life. Quickly my clever mind came up with a plan. I smiled at him. A sugar, sweet smile. The one I used in court when I denied everything.

"Fine, I'll tell you, but only when I'm ready and never the ending,"

He sighed.

"All right," Mason relented, "but out of curiosity why not the end?"

I laughed a shrill laugh, nothing like the sound of tinkling glass that I used to share with my friends.

"Because you're a smart boy, you can draw your own conclusions, "I smiled mischievously, "and what's worse than always wondering if you're right if you really solved it."

He paled a little.

"Wow, you really are crazy."

I rolled my eyes, "That's a bit melodramatic don't you think?"

Mason just gave me a half-hearted shrug. I leaned my head back against the wall. This would be hard to tell. And where to start I had no clue. I thought of the rich dark curls that fanned the woman's face and the knowing smile she always gave me. Mommy's little girl indeed.

"I loved my mother dearly, and it wasn't just for the fact that she was my mother," I smiled, "I would have loved her if I was a stranger. She always remembered the little things."

I thought of the snickerdoodles that she would make every time it rained and the snow cocoa our own little version of hot chocolate, that was only for special occasions.

"When it was just dad, Molly, her, and me it was perfect," I scowled, "of course I had to live with Molly, the little brat which at the time I thought was the worst thing I would endure."

"Kids are brats," agreed Mason though I wasn't really listening.

"It wasn't until the spring that things got bad. I remember for the first time the house was silent.

No humming, no music, no loud voice echoing through the halls. Everything's was just silent," I blinked, "She had a heart condition that went undetected."

I stopped talking; that was as much as I could bring myself to tell him for now. A loud bang startled my thoughts. A guard opened the white door with no doorknob setting a tray filled with food on the ground with a rattle. He paid no mind to Mason as he closed the door. "You know I'm not afraid of you," he said quietly but not without force.

"Damn it, I was really hoping you were," I joked trying to ease the palpable tension in the air. "I'm not joking."

"You should, everyone does."

Finishing my meal, I went to lay down on the hard slab of concrete. The thing I've learned about prisons' is that they don't care if you are uncomfortable. That means it could either be stifling hot or cold enough to freeze water.

"Your teeth are chattering."

"No shit Sherlock," I said through gritted teeth. I faintly heard his footsteps as he crossed the small room. No sooner could I say "hi nice to meet you" I was in his arms. I shivered uncontrollably in his embrace. But as cold as I was I felt sort of safe. Soon I was tumbling into a dream filled sleep.

\*\*\*

"You're late," he grumbled as he lumbered into the kitchen.

I swallowed. This was not good. Not good at all.

"Molly didn't want to leave the park," I answered slowly and quietly, trying my best to appease him.

"Molly didn't want to-" he mocked in a high voice.

He slammed his fists on the table.

"You don't answer to a seven year old, you answer to me," he sneered, "Got it?"

I nodded. I barely saw his hand fly through the air before it connected with my cheek.

"I said got it!"

"Yes," I whispered.

\*\*\*

I could still feel Mason's wrapped around me.

"Oh, you're still here," I said, though it didn't come out with as much attitude as I intended it.

"Don't sound so disappointed; I might think you don't like me."

I smirked and rolled my eyes. I didn't hate him, far from it actually. He was someone to talk to in my newly cemented lonely world.

"Can I hear some more of the story?"

My smile faltered, "No."

He tilted his head and grinned.

"You know I think I figured something out."

I narrowed my eyes.

"I think you don't want to tell me the end of the story because you don't want me to think you're crazy," he finished.

I snarled, "I don't give a damn what you think!"

"You give so many damns it visible from space!"

"I hate you," I replied dumbly.

"Why I'm lovely," Mason chuckled.

I tried and failed to remain emotionless, but my cool facade cracked. I smiled a tiny smile. I don't know what it was about him that I liked, but there was something. Maybe it was just the fact that he is the only human contact I've had in who knows how long.

"If I tell you some more will you please shut up," I asked exasperatedly.

He smirked that half-smile of his, "I can't promise anything."

I sighed. It would appear that would be the best I would get out of him. Damn his stupid charm that made me want to please him.

"After mom died nothing was the same ever," I took in a shuddering breath, "Dad just kept getting angrier and angrier."

I smiled bitterly, remembering the foul stench of his breath when he would come home at night. How in the mornings I would wake up to

empty beer bottles and glasses: some of them shattered.

“Eventually he was fired and started relying on me. His day drinking was worse than his late night bottle of grief. At first, I didn’t mind being depended on. I gave me something to focus on, whether it was cooking dinner or watching Molly. I still remember the day that-,” I swallowed visibly.

“That what?” inquired Mason gently.

I shuddered the memory still way too fresh in my head for my liking.

“The first day that he hit me,” I laughed bitterly, “I was because of Molly. Everything was always because of Molly. I would’ve died for her,” I smiled cruelly at the irony, “I remember the initial feeling of pain, it was a sharp blinding sting that faded into a dull ache. I just stood there amazed at how a father could do that to his child.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat before continuing, “There were many times after that but none of them hurt as much as that initial slap.”

A tear slid down my face. It was stupid to let myself feel this way and show this emotion, it was just a sign of weakness. I quickly swiped at the tears.

“You know you can cry in front of me,” he said carefully.

“I don’t like feelings; they’re too messy,” I said letting my head fall back.

“I think you’re confusing emotions with paint,” he said dead serious.

I stared at him and try as I might I couldn’t help the laughter from bubbling up to the surface. Pure, unfiltered, delirious laughter. I couldn’t stop. I was aware of how crazy I sounded and I just didn’t care.

“Please don’t go all psycho on me,” chuckled Mason.

I growled but couldn’t wipe the smile from my face. At this point, we were both in hysterics. Howling like small children. I could hear his deep laughter pairing with my high giggles.

“Look at how sad my life’s become, locked up in a white box for three life sentences.:

“Do you ever feel guilty about it?” he asked. I looked down at my feet, “That’s a hole I’d rather not fall down.”

I look back up at the white light in the ceiling. It was interesting really the emotion of guilt. There were days when it was all I could do not to let the scenes of that day fall in front of my eyes and other days I welcomed the images and the pain that came with them. I wonder if I’ll really be forgiven for all I’ve done.

“Do you think God really forgives in the end or is that something priests made up,” I questioned.

Mason looked surprised.

“I didn’t have you pegged as the religious type.”

I smile softly, “I’m not. But, it’s a nice fantasy to think in the end at least one person will forgive you.”

He remained silent. If we weren’t in a locked box you would be able to hear crickets chirping. I have to say, after being alone for so long I really wasn’t a fan of the silence. I was about to say something when I heard his voice.

“So what happened next?”

I squinted confused.

“The rest of the story.”

I chuckled, “One track mind much.”

He just stared.

“My life wasn’t all that bad, I had Trevor,” I smiled sadly at the memory, “He was just one of those guys that you couldn’t help but fall for.”

I closed my eyes remembering.

\*\*\*

“Lexi, Lexi, Lexi,” he whispered against my forehead, “Promise you’ll never forget me.” I smiled into his chest, his 6 foot towering over my 5,5 figure. “Promise.”

“My mother used to tell me that you can’t choose who you fall for, you can only hope that they’ll catch you before you hit the ground,” I laughed sadly, “She was right. I was

so in love with him it hurt to be apart. Then my father found out and everything crumbled. He told me to end things or get out of his house. I tried to break it off, I really did," My voice broke a little, "But for me having him in secret was better than not having him at all."

I let out a bitter laugh, "But then Molly found out."

"Hey Lex," smiled Trevor. The smile still made butterflies rise in my chest. He just continued to grin before pulling me in for a kiss. At the moment I didn't care that I was supposed to meet my sister or that anyone could see us, I just stayed there in his embrace. "Lexi, what are you doing," came the voice of my little sister.

I smirked grimly, "I thought she would keep it a secret."

"Molls, you have to keep this a secret," I said close to tears. She smiled up at me, "Of course, Alexis."

\*\*\*

"That lasted about two days before I came home to fix dinner."

I looked at Mason and snarled, "You want to know why she did it?"

I laughed a cruel laugh. I was so far past the point of caring, the point of regret for what I had done. Retelling the story was only making me see more and more clearly why I had made the decision the first time around.

"She did it because I wouldn't let her have ice cream for dinner," I laughed again, "She destroyed my life because she couldn't have ice cream for dinner."

"I thought I told you to end things with that boy," he hissed. I shrank back but did not answer. "You shouldn't be galavanting around with a boy when you are needed here." He shouted causing me to flinch. I saw Molly standing in the doorway looking pleased.

"I didn't think before picking up the pistol laying on the table," I started, "and I certainly didn't think before pulling the trigger."

Mason sucked in a deep breath and

remained silent. I certainly didn't expect a response now that I had laid the truth at his feet. I smiled at the words I had told him earlier, saying that people didn't tell strangers stories. Finally, he spoke.

"So you killed your abusive dad," I stayed silent, "You know you're not nearly as evil as people think."

He looked at me thoughtfully before I answered, "No, I'm much worse."

I lay down in my prison and turned over on my side.

\*\*\*

Epilogue

The guard scowled in his chair, looking at all the cameras. Then turned back to his boss.

"She's been talking to herself all say, Ms like she thinks someone's there."

"That's exactly what she thinks is happening. It's not uncommon for people in these situations to make someone up in their heads."

The guard scoffs, "She deserves to be in here alone. What kind of person kills their own sister?"

## Tommy Keith

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Central High School,  
Saint Joseph, MO

Educator: Kyla Ward

Category: Short Story

## BUSTER

The trees shook in the soft wind, leaves breaking free occasionally to become independent entities that longed to join their brothers, dancing their heart out before hitting the floor. It was as if they only had a moment

to use up all the energy that they had built up from sucking away the life of the trees they clung to only moments ago. They reached the cobblestones below spent up, ready to turn to stone as the air had decided to leave and find another soul to pester and shove.

Smoke flew into the heavens desperately grasping at any familiar scent it could find before being puked out chimneys that cluttered the distant city.. The smoke was not happy with its new environment; the smoke reminded him of himself, far from others, and squashed into the unintelligent and biased group of heinous scoundrels. He had always refuted their gazes and mind-jailed ideas with the simple idea that he couldn't belong to that category of people, as he wasn't a person, he wasn't an individual.

They knew he did not belong, but they pretended he was just another one of them. They always had, insisting that they were a family. They had named him, a named that was robbed from his mind. They fed him, and even loved him. They acted like he wasn't an outsider, he was accepted. He HAD accepted.

Thin, hollow lights, with rope-like luminescence reached out from his chest and towards the sky. They looked happy and playful, like little children or kittens left to entertain themselves. They seemed to have fun as they dashed at each other. But, the black lines weren't happy, they hardly were. As they "played" they shook, quivered, and whimpered as they fought each other; almost like his family, almost like himself. Unlike the misunderstood smoke, the lines were evil. That he knew.

It seemed to represent, or so he thought, how his inner self was not let loose onto the world, not even able to roam free inside his mind, but chained tightly beneath a blanket of too harsh acceptance nearly a thousandfold. He had noticed earlier that his inner self didn't match the daily passer byers, while theirs may be just

as hidden, his was black, and all the others were lit with blue smiles as they saw him. It was as if he gave them something which made them whole, something that they didn't want; they turned red when they retreated back to their routine.

His eyes twitched at the thought, mouth turning sour. He had completely lost focus of his surroundings as quickly proven by a periodic wave of darkness. He became ecstatic as he had realized a new adorer leaned over him.

The hand slid out, no longer shading his face as he got attention. "Hello?" Her voice quivered in the cold, dragon's breath escaping from her mouth. A sweet smell aerated from her thin jacket.

Black tendrils that came from her chest spiked outward, reaching for him. Reaching to be whole.

"Mom!" He pounced happily into a hug, making her stumble and fall. A painful scream rung out inside his mind, only a distant memory. He panted from excitement. He closed his eyes finally content with his life and how it played out.

Beep.

Light mountains shook from a monitor opposite her bed, it reflected softly in her eyes.

Cold tile bounced off his skin like his hopes and dreams had. It felt as if his whole life had come to an end with a single sentence muttered only a month ago. He didn't know what they were talking about, he lied to himself. He just wanted to be there for her.

Her blue eyes had captured the sky for him, and he intended to make her know. Her sweet face had always lit up from his presence.

Beep, beep.

He whimpered as the hand on his head slowed its movement. He nuzzled his head at her, knocking her shaking hand off his head. He tried to put himself beneath it again, muzzle softly quaking like an unsure wolf determining

its words that belonged to the chorus of the night.

A breeze caught the room in a sour, dreadful embrace. It carried a word as faint and soft as her smooth lips.

The hand stopped

He looked up at her face, motionless. He remembered a time when it lit up from his company. A time when happiness was the only thing that touched her when he was near. It had always been that way.

Beep, beep, beep.

Eyes frozen solid. Warmth gone.

The mountains were flattened, only a blurry glowing line remained.

She had always said forever and ever. Well forever ended now.

The colored leaves that had piled on the floor, decayed with the growing cold. Soon the leaflets grew frosted tips as bits of heaven fell from the sky, the tiny pieces fell past him, dipping and dodging as so they wouldn't have to touch him. Drifting aimlessly like the leaves had once before, the snows cold took over his chest in a wave, making him stir awake.

The air was cold on his feet and sweet to his nose. More smoke was being carelessly let free from chimneys; trying desperately to replace the space the chilled downfall was leaving. The snow did not come in as thick as the smoke went up however.

Redolence entered his mind, as he quickly peered beneath him in search of the female friend who had just been under him. All the life experience he had collected with his family couldn't have prepared him for his discovery, yet another abandonment, and this time it was decayed bits of leaves that had done the deceiving

How could he have been such a fool. He had remembered their words, their actions. Why had he thought for a second that they would comb the cold earth to find him again. He was abandoned, and by his own actions.

He couldn't save them, not when they hated him, not when he hated himself.

He tried to get up and move away from his spot, but even moving his eyes had tired him. Muscles even groaned at the effort of thinking of holding his own weight, they cried out when he tried to do so anyways.

Finally he listened to their caution and collapsed back to the rocky floor, tired, very tired.

His eyes glazed over, becoming blurry as he remembered hers had.

He could tell he was on the edge of reality, the rope-lights fell upward, he knew that this was his last moment. He remembered one more thing.

His name was Buster.

## **Julia Kerrigan**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Teresa's  
Academy, Kansas City, MO  
Educator: Kelly Fast

Category: Poetry

# THE CURSED DIPTYCH

## **The Cursed Diptych**

Across the gallery you stood, pure grace  
With earn'st brown eyes trained to "Spatial  
Forces."

I moved around to gaze upon your face  
And cursed that we run sep'rate courses.  
An artist painted us with pained brushstroke  
With cobalts, charcoals, crimsons rich as wine,  
And in the middle, hinges to convoke:  
The fingers that I wish to intertwine.

Yet we are pieces hung in diff'rent halls  
By some curator void of sense or taste,  
Who nailed us down apart on sep'rate walls  
And put the masterpiece of us to waste.

A Diptych damned by space and time and  
Fate  
Forever parted, doomed to such a state.

**Julia Kerrigan**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Teresa's  
Academy, Kansas City, MO  
Educator: Kelly Fast

Category: Poetry

## THE GIRL WITH ONE NAME

The Girl with One Name  
They said, "You weep too much to function,"  
And changed my name to read as  
"Maudlin"  
They set the change with pen, with voice,  
with unction  
Engraved it deep into a waiting coffin

They said: too often do you beam with pride  
And changed my name to "Haughty" with a  
blink  
So quickly did I cast myself aside  
And felt opinions of my own self sink

Another name awaited after those,  
"Diffident" became my designation  
So fearful to impede or to impose  
Trapped in gaping pits of hesitation

But names from other sources wilt and die  
When faced with self-anointed, self giv'n "I"

**Leyla Fern King**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs  
School, Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Short Story

## FOREVER AND ALWAYS

"Do you love me, Lorr?" he whispered to her. "DOYOULOVEME?" Her eyes were glazing over. Did she love him? Did she love him? DIDSHELOVEHIM? She wanted to. She'd never wanted anything more than she wanted to love him. Him, boy with a blazing heart, grown into a burning man with a breaking wife. She'd always loved him. It was hard to imagine a world where she didn't love him.

Lorraine was seven when she first fell in love with him. She hadn't been expecting it. They'd been rolling in the dirt, laughing, and laughing, and laughing, when she looked over and swore her heart stopped. The sun lit him up from exactly the right angle and his laugh was vibrating in the space around her head. Of course he ruined it by shoving dirt in her face, but for those few seconds, between the sunlight and her dirt-covered face, she thought she was in love. Of course she didn't really love him, but right then, you couldn't have convinced Lorraine otherwise. He was everything that a seven

year old could possibly want. He knew how to have a good time, sing the alphabet, and write in cursive. Every boy that Lorraine met from that point forwards, would be compared to him. Even when he grew up into someone she didn't want to know, she loved him. She could never not love him. Never ever ever.

"Why wouldn't I love you?" She was looking anywhere but at him. She looked at her fingernails, then her shoes, and finally the yellow, honeycomb walls of their kitchen. "Who would I be if I didn't love you?"

"That wasn't the question." She knew that. Of course she knew that.

Lorraine was twelve when she fell in love with him in a real kind of way, in a never leaving mind kind of way. Her first grade crush had long disappeared, and Lorraine had moved on. She hadn't thought about the sunlight hitting his hair in a long time. It wasn't until he sat in front of her in math class that she remembered just how beautiful he was. She'd known him her whole life, so it wasn't like she wasn't aware, but it'd been a long time since she'd been forced to remember. With the blinds in their classroom open, and the sun making his skin glow, she remembered why she fell in love with him in the first place. He was perfect, everyone knew it, but as she groaned in confusion at her math work, and he turned to help her, her heart stopped. "YOU GOOD THERE, LORR?" BREATHE, LORRAINE, BREATHE. At the time, she'd told him she was fine, even though he could clearly tell she wasn't. Math never made sense to her, it was something he knew about her, so he helped her. With every problem he helped her with, she could visualize one more year of their life together. Marriage at 25, children at 30. Lorraine and him, together. Forever and always.

"I know that wasn't the question," she was breaking. She didn't want to be breaking, but she couldn't help it. DIDSHELOVEHIM? "What did you ask again?" She could see him boiling, raging, but maybe if she forgot the question altogether, she'd never have to answer it.

"Lorraine," Inhale. Release. "YOU KNOW WHAT I ASKED."

"You KNOW that I've loved you since the first grade. You know everything about me. You know when I fell in love with you. You know how. You know WHY. I don't know what else there's for me to say to you. I don't know what you want from me."

"I WANT YOU TO ANSWER. THE QUESTION."

High school brought hormones and mixed signals. It brought Lorraine a year of making sad, unreturned heart eyes across the room. It brought her love. Because although it might of taken their whole lives for him to admit, he loved her. He loved her just as much as she loved him. He'd loved her since the first day of kindergarten when she'd spelled her own name wrong. He'd loved her when she broke her arm on the monkeybars and couldn't stop crying. He'd loved her when she ran away from him because he had cooties. He couldn't remember a day when he didn't love her. Lorraine could still remember when he'd told her that he loved her for the first time. "WHEN WE WERE LITTLE, AND OUR MOMS USED TO MAKE US HANG OUT, I THOUGHT IT WAS THE MOST ANNOYING THING IN THE WORLD. YOU WERE JUST SOME GIRL THAT I HAD TO KNOW. IT'S FUNNY BECAUSE, WELL NOW, I LOVE YOU. NOW IT'S YOU AND ME. FOREVER AND ALWAYS, RIGHT?" Her and him, boy with her whole heart in his hands. She loved him with every single cell inside of her.

Now, staring at the hardwood floor in their kitchen, Lorraine didn't know what to say. She could see their whole lives together flashing before her eyes. She couldn't remember a day where she didn't love him in some capacity or another. She didn't want to. Because if she didn't love him, who would she be?

"I fell in love with you in first grade when you were covered with dirt," Lorraine had tears in her eyes now. Their kitchen table kept going in and out of focus. The house they spent years saving up to buy felt hollow. How could the life she spent her whole life trying to live feel so, so wrong? She'd loved him since she was seven; sunlight hitting his hair, his laugh vibrating around her head. She'd pictured their wedding day since the 6th grade. She'd pictured the whole town coming, doves being released during their kiss. But when it came down to it, it wasn't all the big stuff that mattered. It was him. Everything had been about him since first grade, and then sixth grade, and now. It'd been about him since sophomore year when they'd promised each other FOREVER AND ALWAYS. Right after he admitted he loved her he'd said "HEY, HOW ABOUT THAT'S OUR THING? FOREVER AND ALWAYS. I SAY IT. YOU SAY IT BACK. IT'LL BE OUR THING." He was the husband that every wife dreamed of having. Yet, their yellow kitchen didn't remind her of the sunshine hitting him in math class anymore. It reminded her of everything she'd given up to be with him. "I was twelve when I realized I wanted to marry you."

"I've loved you since the first day of kindergarten, Lorr," his eyes were glazing over. "You spelled your name 'L-O-R-A-I-N' and cried when the teacher corrected you. I loved you then, and I love you now.

"Forever and always. Right?"

Lorraine was tired of love. She'd been in love with someone else her whole life. When did she get to love herself? The blinds covering the windows were open, but all she saw was rain. She'd loved him her whole entire life. Who would she be if she didn't?

"RIGHT, LORR?"

## Leyla Fern King

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs  
School, Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Poetry

# THE SEA THAT LOVED THE GIRL LIKE HER DAUGHTER

Zeana felt it in her left foot, as a rose thorn  
grew  
from her right eardrum; pretty and black.  
with tulip buds growing along the roots  
and heaps of trash on the stem.

her heart beat kept pounding in her teeth  
while  
her footsteps could be heard minutes away.  
even with the sky twirling with green and  
white  
and firetruck red. everything she told was the  
truth

but she was born into the world as a lie;  
two halves of two people that added up  
to less than they were supposed to.

even the fairy queen could tell she was a  
moment away from real life.  
she knew she never would be.  
because firetrucks are a dark blue and the  
sun is a light purple.  
real life was like she said it was  
and so was this world around her,  
even when the little elf sitting on her fingertip  
broke her nose  
she knew she was telling the truth.  
and, anyway, what was a lie other than half  
of what you thought it should be.

Zeana could feel her lucky charms sloshing in  
her eyelid,  
the milk washing out the color.  
and even the luck she was given  
wasn't enough to please the sea nymph that  
loved  
the lines of her palms that shone like lead  
when she smiled.

## **Vanessa Klotz**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Maryville High  
School, Maryville, MO  
Educator: Dennis Vinzant

Category: Short Story

## **WITNESS**

Colin and I have been sitting with each other  
at lunch for as long as I can remember. He  
brings a peanut butter and banana sandwich  
for lunch every day. Colin's parents went

through a divorce, so he moved here our  
freshmen year from Ohio. He tells me he likes  
this town much better, but not the environment  
of the school, which is understandable. South  
High is infested with far too many kids trying to  
fit the "in crowd."

I myself am more worried about getting into  
my dream college, Berkeley, and I could care  
less about what my eyeshadow blend looks  
like. Colin, on the other hand, is just trying to be  
able to graduate. We are completely different  
from each other, but we balance, and that is  
why I think our friendship works.

Colin has taught me how to relax, and he can  
make a mean grilled cheese sandwich. Every  
Tuesday I go over to his house after school and  
help him study. He just lives with his mom, and  
she works random shifts at the hospital, so he is  
home by himself quite frequently. Colin does  
not seem to mind, but I can tell he gets lonely.  
Lately, he has been acting off and strangely  
aggressive. Last night when I was helping him  
study, he could not figure out the answer to  
number seven on the math set, and he threw  
the book down and chucked his pencil against  
the wall. I told him to just get some rest, and we  
would figure it out in the morning.

The semester was drawing to a close, and I  
was devoting a ton of my time to studying for  
final exams and filling out scholarship  
applications. Colin and I still sat by each other  
at lunch every day, but that is about the only  
time I saw him. I missed getting to spend time  
with Colin and hoped he would forgive me  
once finals were over, and I was a little less  
stressed.

Today was the day. It was the last day of  
school before break, and I was ecstatic! I had  
just finished my AP Psychology test and was  
happy I got an A. I only had two tests to take  
after lunch, but something was off. There was

no Colin at the lunch table, even though Colin is not the best academically, he never missed school for any reason. I called his phone, and it went straight to voicemail. I had such a bizarre feeling, and my heart was screaming at me something was not right.

I sat my tray down on the table and looked around at all my classmates segregated by popularity levels and interests. Nobody else seemed concerned, but I was. I scarfed down my pizza and went looking for Colin. He had to be here somewhere. I assumed he just happened to be upset at me for skipping our Tuesday night tutor session. I spent the rest of lunch looking for him, but I had no luck. The bell rang, and I headed to Chemistry, hoping I would remember all of the right equations.

I checked my phone one last time before shutting it off to see if Colin had texted me back. I was on question number seven when, over the intercom, our principal said we were on lockdown. Everyone in the room froze in silent panic, even the teacher. Mr. Smith, our teacher, received a phone call, and I could tell it was going to be bad news. Mr. Smith said, "Be quiet, hide, and find something to protect yourself with."

Adrenaline rushed through my body like the flood gates had been opened. All I wanted to do was call my mom and to know where Colin was, but neither was going to happen for me at the moment. I realized in this moment of fear that your popularity level did not matter one ounce. We were united as just teenagers trying to mentally prepare for what was about to happen next.

Bang! Bang! I heard it. The first gun shots I had ever heard in real life, but I knew that is exactly what I had heard. There only seemed to be two, and then it was silent. The class across from us began to scream, and I dared to peek

out the little window under the lab desk to see a man in a black hoodie and Converse sneakers shoot down at least six of my classmates. I was mortified, and it seemed like time itself slowed down.

Our door opened slowly, and I heard a familiar voice. "Gabby, are you in here?" My tense body instinctively rose up over the desk, and there he was. I found Colin. I had just witnessed my best friend do the unthinkable, and all I could mutter out was, "Here."

### **Emily Knight**

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO  
Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

## DIFFICULT TO FORGET, BUT DIFFICULT TO FOLLOW

As it closed in the world seemed to stop  
She opened her mouth, but all that passed  
was air,  
Its breath lingered on her neck as it's fingers  
clawed at her innocence  
Pulling her hair as if it was her papa's tractor  
stuck in the mud

It hurt, betrayal, it stung her heart and pierced  
her eyes  
A waterfall drowned her face as confusion  
turned to despair,  
The bridge of trust built by ye  
ars of care crumbled within seconds  
That night  
That night never faded  
Years of wisdom yet she still never understood  
why  
Yet,  
She could tell a spruce from a cedar  
A rose from a carnation,  
Yet she still,  
Never understood why  
Why it held her body like a trophy  
Those times still linger,  
And could never die

**Sydney Kolker**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central  
High School, Chesterfield, MO  
Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# FINDING COMFORT IN MY DISCOMFORT

I sat shoulder to shoulder between my mom and my sister in an Uber from New York City to the hotel my mom was staying at for the night following my departure. My neck jerked from side to side as the driver switched lanes while moving quickly through New York traffic.

However, his driving did not phase me as my anxiety and fear about the journey to England consumed my mind.

In an attempt to distract myself from the apprehension I was experiencing in the Uber, I focused my eyes on the England vs. France World Cup Final Game live streaming from my phone. I crossed my fingers, hoping for an England victory. I longed to experience, first-hand, a country celebrating and uniting over my passion, soccer. Unfortunately, the game did not stray my mind from worry for long. As much as I love soccer, nothing seemed to be able to distract me from thoughts about the trip I was about to begin. I would be going overseas, with 40 strangers, to participate in a journalism course taught by Pulitzer Prize journalists on a trip sponsored by the New York Times. Shortly after my fear returned, the driver slowly pressed the brake and the car came to a stop on the left side of the hotel.

After checking in and dropping our belongings off in the hotel room, my mom and I headed down to the hotel lobby. We had an hour before I needed to meet with the rest of my group at the airport.

“Just be yourself. Be friendly and open to meeting new people. Although someone may seem very different than you, give them a chance and get to know everyone you can. Enjoy this once in a lifetime opportunity. You have nothing to lose,” my mom advised.

“I am shy though and I am not good at introducing myself to new people,” I explained.

“Be open minded and put yourself out there. You can do it. If you never want to talk to these people again, you don’t have to,” my mom responded.

After discussing my concerns with my mom, we headed to the airport on a hotel shuttle. Shortly after leaving the hotel, the bus arrived at terminal three. Almost immediately after entering the airport, I happened to see a girl in a New York Times Student Journeys shirt out of

the corner of my eye. My heart felt as if it was moving up and down against my chest at 100 miles per hour and the reality of the trip finally set in. Nonetheless, I allowed air to flow into my nose and then slowly let air out of my mouth which relaxed the rapid beating of my chest. This decreased the pounding of my chest a little bit and my shaky legs began moving towards the girl in the shirt. Sensing that I was nervous, my mom told me to stay calm and believe in myself. Upon reaching the girl, I introduced myself and talked with her about the program.

“Yes, I have a friend going on the trip too, but she is meeting us in England. She has been in Europe for a few weeks,” the girl, whose name was Daisy, informed me.

This sentence became frozen in my mind and created more anxiety. I started to wonder if everyone already knew people going on the trip. I was aware that the program had encouraged people to travel solo, without friends, but I feared that I was the only person who actually followed the advice. However, I did not have much time to focus on my fears as a student a few feet away from us held up a piece of looseleaf paper on which he had written, “New York Times Oxford?” I imagined myself in a movie, as someone holding up a sign, trying to get people’s attention, in a crowded airport is pretty comical. This momentarily slowed the pounding of my heart against my chest. People from all directions began arriving at this meeting spot. As more people arrived, I started to think about how I needed to overcome my fear and follow my mom’s advice by putting myself out there.

To push me off the starting line, my mom asked the girl with curly blonde hair next to me what her name was. After my mom introduced me, we began talking about where we were from. Five minutes later, an awkward silence took over the conversation as I scrambled to think of questions to ask her. Searching through the files in the back of my brain, I finally

thought of something to ask her and I inquired about what got her interested in the program. In a calm, soft voice she explained to me that she did not have a journalism program at her school. As a result, this trip was a good opportunity for her to see if journalism was something that she was interested in pursuing in college and beyond. Processing what she said, my shoulders lowered and relaxed as I learned that I was not the only one with limited journalism expertise.

As our conversation progressed, I noticed more people with their passport in one hand and suitcase in the other arriving at the meeting point in front of the Delta check in area. I aspired to get to know these new people as well. While I wanted to simply stand back and listen, without participating in conversations, I forced my mouth to move and began talking to others. When additional people appeared, in a soft, shaky voice, I would tell them my name as well as where I was from and afterwards ask where they were from. However, thoughts kept running through my mind about people responding and me not knowing how to answer.

Suddenly, I noticed that a conversation circle had formed. I felt like a cruise director, as I told each new person that came to the check-in point my name and a little bit about myself in a clear, loud voice. In addition, I spoke in front of the whole group I had formed while extending my arm out wide and bringing it back in to motion new people over to join the circle as well. I also threw out questions quickly and assuredly in an attempt to relieve their discomfort as well as my own. The diverse background of the people I met intrigued me. I enjoyed seeing people’s eyes light up and their mouths move upward as they smiled because I was making them feel welcome. Eventually, I began to talk to these new people without thinking twice. I felt as if I had a new layer of skin and I had to shift my eyes towards my feet to ensure that I was still, in fact,

wearing a camouflage shirt with black leggings.

When everyone who was on the group flight had checked in with the New York Times leader, we made our way through security and boarded the plane. Shortly after boarding the plane, I tried to get some sleep so that I would have energy for my first day in England. Seven hours later, we landed in London.

Once we went through customs and collected our luggage, we walked to the area where we were supposed to rest while we waited for people not on the group flight to land. As I was moving away from the baggage claim since I had collected my bags, I noticed a girl who was walking in the back of the group by herself. Knowing that I would want someone to be friendly to me if I was in that situation, I turned my body to the left and quietly moved my lips to ask another girl whom I had met earlier if we should introduce ourselves to her. While I no longer feared talking to a stranger, as I had done it many times in the past 24 hours and now knew what to ask, I still kept repeating in my head the questions I would ask her and wondered how I should go up to her. What if she does not want to talk to me? What if I just blank and do not say anything when I get close to her? I took a deep breath to allow air to flow into my lungs and then slowly out. I decided to just take a chance, not waiting for approval.

"I am from St. Louis. This is my first time in England and Europe as a whole actually. Have you been to Europe or England before?" I inquired curiously shortly after breaking the ice.

"Actually I have. I travel with my family a lot," responded the girl in a soft voice.

"That's so interesting. Was it cool to see all the different cultures? I love traveling too but I haven't gone to a ton of places outside of the United States. What countries have you been to?" I inquisitively inquired.

"Yes, I love seeing what makes each country unique. This past year I went to Japan, but I

have also been to Israel, Germany, Italy, France, and Spain," she responded in what seemed to me to be in warmer tone.

Our conversation then continued throughout our walk to the designated waiting area and after we arrived at the destination. Although bags were starting to form under our eyes and yawning became contagious, our conversation did not terminate as we stood surrounded by suitcases in London Heathrow Airport, getting to know each other. As the three of us talked, we learned that we had many similar interests.

Out of nowhere, one of the trip leaders announced that she was sorry we had to wait so long and that everyone in our group had arrived. It was time for us to make our way to the bus. My two new friends and I looked at each other in utter confusion as to why she said we had waited for such a long time. To us, it only seemed like we were waiting for thirty minutes, but when I flipped my phone over and the screen read 11:45 a.m., we were shocked to discover that we had been waiting not for thirty minutes, but three hours. This released the tension in my muscles a little bit more as I was happy to discover that I had successfully made it through what I perceived to be the hardest part of the trip.

As I stepped up the four stairs to get on the bus, I lifted my head to pick a seat and once I had done so I prepared to take a cat nap to renew some energy to make it through the rest of the day. Before falling asleep, the girl who was alone in the back of group thanked us for approaching and introducing ourselves to her as she did not think she would of had the courage to do so if she was in our situation. This put a smile on my face, and I felt as if rays of sunlight were beaming off me as I stood a little taller and smiled a little wider knowing what I had accomplished.

Throughout the trip, we became good friends. I also met other people that I became friends with as well. Two days after saying our

goodbyes, we were already trying to plan a reunion for the following summer.

After arriving back in St. Louis in late July, fall sports were to begin only a few short days later. By the time I recovered from the jet lag and time change, it was time to go to tennis tryouts. On that first day, I opened the passenger door of my mom's car and grabbed my racket before exiting. While I walked through the light-green, partially dead grass towards the bleachers in front of the tennis courts, I thought back to this time last year. I remember not being terrified of actually playing the sport, but instead I was intimidated by the older girls. I was shy and kept to myself, only talking to the people within my comfort circle.

After arriving at the bleachers and having a quick meeting about tryouts and the season, the coach called off names for challenge matches. She read my name and placed me with a senior. I went into the wooden shed and grabbed a few neon green tennis balls out of the holder. Walking out of the shed, I saw my partner and introduced myself. Briskly, we walked to the fourth court, continuing our conversation.

Once the match was complete, we walked slowly back to the shed to tell the coach our scores. As I was waiting for my mom to come pick me up, I met another upperclassman and I began talking to her.

## **Alexandra Lake**

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO  
Educator: Angela Perkins

## Category: Short Story

# DEATH BY SUICIDE

The light shined bright through my blinds. I slowly lifted myself up by my elbows and pushed my white comforter off of me. It was surprisingly warm to be mid-April. I dragged my phone from my black nightstand and studied my notifications.

A cold sweat suddenly swept my body.

I had twenty-seven missed calls and thirteen text messages from Kai.

Kai is the kindest person I have ever met. Everyone knows that. The boys at school know that too. His so-called "friends" often give him a hard time about how skinny he is because they know he won't ever say anything back. They must have been messing with him last night.

Kai has been my boyfriend since eighth grade. This was our junior year of high school, and quite possibly the best. I quickly swiped open my phone and read the messages. My heart skipped two beats when my eyes caught the first words I could make out. I rubbed my blurry morning eyes and blinked a couple of times. I squinted and read a few words. They read, Skyler help, I'm scared, please. The hair on my neck stood so tall it almost fell off right there. The first text was sent at 3:17 am. About seven hours ago.

I crawled out of my bed and dialed Kai's number. Processing what I just saw I took a few long strides out my door and into the bathroom. I fished in my drawer for my contacts while Kai's answering machine beeped.

"Kai, what happened?" I said groggily. "Are you okay? Please call me back as soon as you get this. I love you."

I unscrewed the blue and white caps off the contact container and dropped the lenses in

my eyes. I looked back at my phone. No new messages.

In my room, it was still warm. The walls were streaked with golden sun. I stole a glance at my bulletin board. Pictures of Kai and I stared back at me. I approached the board and caressed the print of us at homecoming. The way he was looking at me was something I could never forget. I moved my face closer to the image and examined his magic eyes. They changed color according to the seasons. In the spring they were green.

I opened my wooden dresser drawer and grabbed a fresh T-Shirt. I pulled it over my head and placed my gaze back on the pictures for one last minute, then I made my way downstairs.

In the dining room, my mother sat facing the stairs. Her face was cold and still, like a statue. I slowly, cautiously approached her.

"Mom, what's wrong?" I said sitting down on the wooden chair next to hers. My mom turned her face to me as a silver tear dropped from her mascara smudged eyes to the sandy carpet.

"Baby," She said before pressing her lips together in a grim expression. "Sky, something... bad has happened." Her voice cracked and her wise brown eyes squeezed together. I opened my mouth to say something but she hushed me. "It's Kai."

"What are you saying?" I whispered.

"Kai's parents called me this morning, he died by suicide last night, Sky. He hung himself." As she said this, I dropped into her arms. My shoulders shook uncontrollably. I sobbed intensely and clung to her boney shoulders for support. The only thought I had was that is wasn't real. I'm dreaming an all too real dream. I tried to swallow the tears that swarmed my throat, but it stung. I tried to suck in air so rapidly I choked. And then I remembered something.

My freshman year of high school, there was an assembly held in the gym. It was a Tuesday.

Every student was required to attend. The counselors stood in front of the bleachers, as well as the principles, and a cluster of unfamiliar faces.

The 2,000 students were silent. The only sound was the fuzz of the microphone, held by the principal. Everyone was stiff. A pen drop would send the room jumping as if it were thunder. Mr. Greene, the principal, walked to the center of the court. Every TAP TAP TAP of his slick, black shoes sent shivers down the spines of every single person in the gymnasium. The eyes of the students darted around at the adults as their anxiety sparked.

Mr. Greene carried a microphone with him. Once he reached the center, he stopped in his tracks. His eyes laid dead ahead of him, staring at nothing but empty space. He stood there for what seemed like minutes. Then he took a sharp inhale and abruptly, yet subtly turned on one foot to face the students. As he took a few steps closer his slacks rubbed together like sandpaper. Then, he stopped. And stared at all of the familiar faces he could pick out. Slowly he raised the mic to his chest and tapped on it twice with two meaty fingers. This action pierced a deafening sound through the stadium and shot the crowds' shoulders to their ears. The ringing continued from the speakers a few moments later but dimmed to nothingness. All was hushed once more.

"Amanda Stewart," Greene cut the silence with these words as if it were a threatening knife jabbed at every inch of the air, "a student, a sister, a friend," he continued. The crowd of students stiffened and straightened their backs. A few wiggled in their seats uncomfortably.

"We canceled school yesterday because Amanda Stewart took her own life, late Sunday afternoon... As I am sure you all know." Again, no one moved, but this time there were inaudible murmurs that spread throughout the bleachers. A few girls on the top right row began to whine and cry softly. The principal

stole a look at them and shook his head sorrowful. He went on to say what any principle would, about how it could've been anyone and how she will be missed. He even managed to push out a few tears. His speech could've been predicted a mile away.

Then counselors. There were two of them. Both women. One was tall and slim with a long neck and pointy face. Mrs. Brentwood. Her tightly pressed lips were coated with purple gloss, matching her purple pantsuit. Her eyes were hyper.

The woman standing next to her was her opposite. She was short and plump. She had a soft smile and spiraling black hair. Mrs. Hernandez.

The pair opened a slide show. There was a short video on bullying first. Then suicide statistics. And more statistics, and more statistics, and even more statistics.

"Now, when someone commits- well... Dies by suicide, I mean. There are multiple factors that play into it, that are very much preventable." Said Mrs. Hernandez.

"And if you are wondering why we don't use the phrase **COMMIT SUICIDE**" Mrs. Brentwood slowly pronounced the phrase and air quoted it with her fingers, "It's because it isn't a crime. The correct term is death by suicide."

I rolled my eyes at this. Anyone that had attended this high school knew Amanda, and they knew that she's been mentally dead for years. Physically living yes, but when someone hates their life **THAT**much, they might as well be dead. Amanda didn't talk much. She sat in the back of the class, eyes glazed over, wishing she was dead. No one helped her.

The counselors were wrong when they said she died by suicide. The only people that died from her suicide was her mom, that found her with the bullet in her head. Her dad, who can't stop reading her note. Her brother who will never be able to see her graduation. And her boyfriend who will never get to hold her hand, one last time.

My mom shook me back to consciousness and held my shoulders, staring into my stinging eyes.

"Everything is going to be okay Skyler." She said squeezing me. I scrunched up my face and shook my head in return, turning my stare to the ground.

"Mom," I said, almost inaudible. "Kai didn't die by suicide... He committed suicide but he's **BEEN**dead. He died of something else. I thought-" My voice cracked and hot tears rolled down my cheeks. "I thought I could save him. But it's too late." I looked up at my blurry mother. "He didn't die by suicide but I just did."

## **Erin Lamping**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs

School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Short Story

# WHITE WATER

What Used to Be the Morning

Micah. MICAH! Come on we're gonna miss the ferry! CREEEEAAK, SLAM. Ugh, finally. Race you to the dock? PITTERPATTERPITTERPATTERPITTERPAT...H OONK HOOOOOONKK. Morning, Ivy and Micah! Hi Capitan! Ready for your first day of school? Yup! Take your seats now, time to get a move on. SHUFFLESHUFFLESHUFFLE...PLOP.

Meet Me By the Willow

Sandy secrets bounce around, sheltered by droopy tendrils, shivering in the ocean breeze. Years of comradery and a ziploc of goldfish between us, we babble on carelessly, as if time has become irrelevant.

Ivy and Micah, Micah and Ivy

That was us, the classic pair of friends, inseparable, envied by members of fluffy friendships. Ivy and Micah, sitting and swinging our legs off the end of the dock, a ziploc of goldfish between us, narrating the lives of passers-by. Micah and Ivy, jumping off the pier into the frigid Maine water. Ivy and Micah, digging for sea glass on the beach, a ziploc of goldfish tossed back and forth as we scavenged and hunted for those treasured, foggy bits of trash. Micah and Ivy, always together.

Little White Boats

Bulky lifejackets fastened, we hop into our little white boats and don't look back. This wasn't just any sailing camp, it was our first adventure. We were in control of our very own ships, weathered sea captains ready for another venture into the ol' blue.

Shiny Saturday Quarters

Strawberry for him, Cookies and Cream for me, six shiny quarters each, eagerly slapped on the counter in exchange for a drippy Saturday delicacy.

But He's My Friend

We can't hang out anymore. Why? Well, they said we aren't supposed to be friends because you're a boy and boys have cooties. Oh. But, will you still bring me goldfish? Are we

allowed to? I guess. Just don't touch them first. Otherwise I'll get cooties. Oh.

The Doorstep Delivery System

A note and a promise to help him with his math homework is all it takes to get my best friend in the world back. Who cares what the other kids think.

Katrina Who Wants a Boyfriend

Katrina likes to wear makeup. She thinks it will help a boy fall in love with her. I think she's too young to wear makeup. Besides, I would rather go swimming or sailing or shell-collecting, which you can't do if you want to keep your makeup nice, says Katrina. She likes to wander around by the ferry dock, looking for people to talk to. Some people think she's dumb, or shallow, or cool. I think she just wants a friend. I could be her friend, if she'd let me, but when I ask if she wants to hang out, she says she has plans. But, when I come back later, there she is, alone, humming to herself and combing her fingers through her hair, waiting for the 5:00 ferry to get in, eager for Daniel who is much older than us to get back from school.

Daniel Who Is Much Older Than Us

He wears cool green shoes and carries a faded black backpack with him. His hair goes SWOOSH on windy days, and SWOOP when he pushes it aside. Not that I've noticed. He's too old. And besides, Katrina would be angry if she thought I liked him too. I would never tell her about the boy he kisses who goes to a different school. I don't even think I'm supposed to know that, but there are some things that I know that I've decided should stay inside my head.

### Right Before A Wave Breaks

For thousands of years, people have relied on the ocean as a gauge of time, a calendar, and inspiration for myths, stories, and explanations. If you sit on the beach and look out far into the ocean, you can see glimmers of light bouncing off the tops of the water. If you focus, you can start to make out the beginnings of waves, brewing out in the distance, waiting for their chance in the spotlight. As they approach, they grow taller and taller, sucking the water from the beach, building and building and building, until they reach their limit. Sometimes you don't even notice them until you see that little tip, that bit of white water, a belated warning for what's about to happen. Suddenly, there is sound. There is noise. There is chaos. The wave crashes, out of control, destroying sand castles built at low tide and sweeping you off of your feet. And then, just like that, the beautifully decorated building that took you hours of sweat and 4 layers of sunscreen to complete, is gone, and the water is sucked back into the ocean as if nothing ever happened.

### Micah Who Reads Books And Shares His Goldfish

As soon as I saw him, dark cropped hair, bright red shoes, a *MAGIC TREE HOUSE* book in hand, I knew we would be friends. I remember approaching him, my thin, brown curls flying everywhere as I skipped up to him, outgoing as usual. I stuck out my small hand, tough from hours of practice on the monkey bars at recess, and announced that my name was Ivy, and I wanted to be his friend. His eyes got wide, and he promptly got up and left, overwhelmed and a bit perplexed. No one had wanted to be his friend before. It took time and more patience than I'd ever thought I was capable of, but my hard work finally paid off

one day, when he offered me some of his goldfish, one of the first sentences I'd heard him say, let alone to me. A small step, I know, but that's one of the highest levels of friendship you could achieve back then, and I was thrilled. The rest is history.

### Just A Bit Further

We hadn't been to this side of the beach before. Covered in rocks, it was the perfect place for tidepools and climbing, two things Micah and I excelled at. As soon as the salty air hit my face, I knew something was off. Everyone always says that in stories, that they could've seen disaster coming. Now I know what they mean. Micah hadn't really wanted to come, he was in the middle of *LORD OF THE RINGS* and hadn't left his house in a day. I forced him out, stressing that the sunset was beautiful and he wouldn't want to miss the last rock-climbing chance of our final high school summer. He went, unwillingly, and in an attempt to make it better, I insisted we go to the far side of Green Beach, self-named for its abundance of green sea glass. It was getting late, but I was determined to make it to the end of the pier-like rock formation. The tide was on its way in, the waves at their biggest and most furious. Sea mist spraying us with each precarious step, Micah said we should head back, the tide wouldn't wait for us, but I persisted, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him along with me, fed up with his griping. I took a misstep, and tripped, scraping my forearm on a rock in an attempt to break my fall. Once steadied, I shoved on, Micah lagging behind. That's when I saw it. That one wave that stands out, bigger and meaner than all the rest. It broke up against the rocks, riding the sides, and sending water snaking up the rocks. I heard a sneaker skid, a choice word, and a splash, and the next thing I knew, I was breathing heavily, clothes soaked, shoes missing, teeth chattering, carrying my best

friend in the whole wide world, who reads books and always shares his goldfish. After that, nothing else matters.

All The Goldfish In The World

Can't make you give him back.

A Loss Of Feeling From The Neck Down

There is no cure for that. Just like there is no way to recover what we lost.

If Only

If only I hadn't pushed so hard. If only we had turned back sooner. If only it had been low tide. If only...if only he didn't blame me for being stuck in that chair, maybe he would come out of his room.

We Bought Cheez Its

My dad came home with a box of Cheez Its last night. I put some in a container to take to school. HOOONK  
HOOOOONKK...SHUFFLESHUFFLE. Morning, Ivy. Hi  
Capitan. SHUFFLEHUFFLESHUFFLESHUFFLE...PLO  
P.

**Emily Landsaw**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: East Middle School,  
Joplin, MO

Educator: Nina English

Category: Novel Writing

# GET OUT

BRIEF SUMMARY:

A girl moves into a house and learns that it has a haunted past that begins to haunt her.

EXCERPT:

Grace McDougle disappeared on May 6, 2010. She was fifteen when she just vanished. The police, along with many search and rescue teams, gave up a week later. The McDougle family moved out a month later and the home sat empty.

The next family that moved in was made up of a single mom and an eleven-year-old daughter. Maddison Smith disappeared three months after they moved in on May 21, 2013. The mom moved out a year after Maddison disappeared.

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My family moved in just yesterday. There is my mom, dad, brother and me, Jo Garden. Yes, this house is a little creepy considering everything that happened in it, but my parents say that it is the perfect house for us considering we only moved because my dad got moved to a different plant at his work... Plus, rent is low. My room is upstairs at the end of the hall on the left. My parent's room is downstairs in a hallway off of the living room. My brother, Isaiah's room, is right across the hall from mine.

We start school on Monday. I am in the 10th grade and my brother is one year ahead of me. We will be going to West High. Things shouldn't be that hard since we only have a

month left of school before summer break.

“What are you doing?” I ask my brother.

“Well, I am trying to organize my PS4 games,” he says, still debating on whether to put ‘Call of Duty’ and his ‘Madden’ game together or not.

“Well, do you think you could help me move my bed around my room?” I ask.

He puts down all of his games and stands up to look at me. My brother looks like my dad, he has the same shoulders and nose and stern look, but he has my mom’s gentle eyes.

“Yeah, but you owe me one,” he says and we walk to my room. I want my room to look just like it did back in Wisconsin.

“Ok, help me move my bed in front of that window so that I can see outside if I want,” I say.

“All right. One, Two, Three.”

We carry the bed in the exact spot that I want it.

“Thanks,” I say as he walks out of my room to return to his organizing. I put all my books and pictures on the dresser across from my bed. I make my bed and sit on it.

This is my first time moving and it’s harder than I thought it would be. I was putting my clothes in my closet when I saw something shiny in the bottom right corner of my closet. I picked it up it was what looked like a diary that had the name, Grace McDougle on it.

Wait, that name sounds really familiar. I read the first few days of the old diary. It sounds like this girl had a perfect life. She had friends and a boyfriend, Brady. She just got a cat for her birthday and things were going well for her.

The pages went on and on about everything perfect that happened that day. Occasionally, there would be drama with a girl at her school. One page read, “Jaylin kept calling my outfit ugly. I got so mad and Brady tried to cheer me up after school by taking me to Starbucks.” I mean, sure I wouldn’t want to be called ugly and stuff, but why write about all this stuff in a journal that your mom was just going to

eventually leave in the corner of a closet for some other girl to find?

I felt bad thinking that considering she didn’t know that she was going to disappear without a trace. I put the diary down on my dresser and continued to work on my room. Everything was put away in about two hours.

Mom and Dad came home from work around 5 and since they didn’t really have time to go to the store, they brought home Sonic. We all sat at the table eating our Wacky Packs. Dad and Mom talked through the entire meal about how Dad’s new plant was much cleaner and bigger than the one back in Wisconsin.

“I met a guy named Bill. He talked to me about how he had worked at the plant for 10 years now and was thinking about retiring soon,” Dad continued talking. I finished eating and went on up to my room. It looked really good and the only thing left I needed to do was run the vacuum. I decided I would do that tomorrow. I had done enough today and I needed to get some sleep. I curled up under my blanket and kept my eyes shut until I fell asleep.

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Screech, Screech, Screech. Crack, Screech, Crack.

I woke up. ‘It must be Isaiah walking to the bathroom.’ I thought to myself. I thought nothing else of it so I went back to sleep.

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Screech, Screech, Screech. Crack, Screech, Crack.

I woke up again. Looked at my phone which read 5:19 a.m.

‘What is that sound?’ I thought. I got up from my bed and opened my door. There was no one in the hallway. I slowly opened Isaiah’s door. He was still asleep in his bed. Hmm. Maybe there is someone downstairs. I slowly

walked down the stairs, careful not to step on any boxes that lay unopened.

I got downstairs and no one was down there either. I walk back upstairs and went to the bathroom. I flushed the toilet and washed my hands. I dried them with the towel and looked at myself in the mirror.

'Geez, you look like you just hibernated in a cave for 6 months.' I splashed some water on my face and that's when I saw it. It wasn't Isaiah. It wasn't my parents either, but it was in the hallway just staring at me in the dark. I acted like I didn't see it and I walked out of the bathroom and it was gone. I quickened my pace and went to my room.

Now, I am not the type to believe in the boogeyman or monsters under my bed, but I nearly soiled my pants, to be honest with you. So, I checked under my bed. Scared out of my mind, I slowly moved the covers out of the way and there was .... Nothing.

"I must be imagining things," I said to myself as I crawl back in my bed, thinking about what may linger in my closet at night while I am sleeping.

It was morning. I had bags under my eyes from my nighttime scares. I took a hot shower to wake up. When I got dressed, I went downstairs to find Isaiah making himself a bowl of Fruity Pebbles.

"Good morning, sleepy head," yawned Isaiah.

"Hey," I said in return. I walked over to him and poured myself some Fruit Pebbles as well. We both sat at the table and ate in silence. When we finished eating, Isaiah went up to his room to play his Playstation. I decided it would be a nice surprise to unload some of the kitchen utensils and put them in their right places.

I took care of all the forks, spoons, knives, and other utensils. Next, I decided to take care of the bowls and plates. I opened the cabinet to see a mouse chowing down on some crumbs in there.

"Eww," I said to the mouse. I slammed the door real quick and hollered for Isaiah to come

down.

"Coming!" He said as he ran down the stairs. I know it was cruel of me to pull a trick like that on him, but it was funny.

"There is something in that cabinet and I can't reach it," I said trying not to smile.

"Okay, I'll get it," he said. He opened the cabinet and didn't see the little guy at first, but when he saw it, he screamed. I laughed so hard I almost spewed chunks of Fruity Pebbles. He was mad at me until I helped him take care of his clothes.

The day went by fast. Mom and Dad came home and they went to the Walmart down the street. They didn't get much, just the things needed to make tonight's dinner. We had tacos. We all were pretty chatty at dinner, I told them the little prank I pulled on Isaiah after breakfast. We all had a good laugh, and then we talked about what we did today.

Isaiah went into the living room with Dad to watch the football game that was on. The Titans were playing the Seahawks the score was 16 to 23. I helped Mom with the dishes. When everything was cleaned up after dinner I went upstairs and vacuumed my room. I had officially taken care of everything in my room. I was worn out at the end of the day so I turned my TV on to HGTV. I love to watch Fixer Upper. I watched about three episodes before I fell asleep.

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Screech, Screech, Screech. Crack, Screech, Crack.

I woke up and looked at my clock and it said, 4:21 AM. I felt something touching my toe. I freaked out and fell out of my bed with a thud. 'Oww.' I said as I tried to get up without knocking my nightstand over. 'What was that?' I ask myself. I pull my covers off of my bed. I had left my phone on my bed, and I guess the cold screen felt like somebody's fingers. I just got back in my bed and slowly dosed back to

sleep as I stared at my closet.

Morning came and I slept in. I usually woke up around eight, but today I got up at eleven. I would have slept longer if Isaiah wasn't in my room going through my closet. My eyelids feel heavy. I stared at him.

"Isaiah, what the heck are you doing in my closet?" I said noticing that I really needed to brush my teeth.

"Oh, sorry I didn't mean to wake you." He said, still going through my closet. "Isaiah?" I said louder noticing that he ignored my question on purpose.

"Fine, I think you might have accidentally taken Barry," he sighed.

"Barry? You mean you still have that stuffed bear?" I asked.

"Yeah. It's not like I sleep with it but I like to have it in my room on my dresser." Isaiah has given Barry the stuffed bear when he was nine by our grandpa, he died one week later.

"No, I haven't seen it but I hope you find it," I say as I get up from my bed to get dressed. Today is Saturday and I planned on going to the mall to see the town and to get out of the house. I walked to Isaiah's room to ask if he wanted to go with me.

"Hey, are you busy?" I ask Isaiah as he puts the finishing touch in his room. Barry. He must have found it.

"No. I actually just finished putting my room together," he said with a smile.

"Well, do you want to go to the mall with me. You know, see the town, see people other than ourselves." I say, leaning against his threshold. "Sounds like fun!" he replied.

Isaiah drove us to the mall and we went to a few of the stores. We both bought ourselves a "first day of school" outfit. He got a pair of skinny jeans and a shirt, and I got a shoulderless dress that was blue and went just above my knee.

We walked around a bit and saw how people talked and spoke. We decided that we could eat an early lunch at Chick-Fil-A. We got

in line when a group of annoying boys got in line behind us,

"Yea, did you see her face when you asked her to the dance?" one boy asked another. "It was like, 'Is this a joke?'" He was tall and slim but he had broad shoulders and a big, white smile. "Then, you were like, 'Yes, Sorry, my idiot friend told me to ask you but if you really wanted to go with me then I would consider going with you.'"

They all laughed when the first guy continued, "Then she literally slapped you because of a joke." They all laughed harder. Isaiah and I were next up so we stepped forward.

"Hi, what can I get for you today?"

"Hi, can I get two, number threes," Isaiah said looking a little too long at the cashier lady.

"Ok, and what can I get you to drink with those?" she asks back.

"I would like a Dr. Pepper and my sister would like a sweet tea."

As he finished our order I went to go find us a table that was clean enough for two people to sit and enjoy their meal but the only place left to sit that I could see was the table next to the group of annoying boys that were in line behind us.

Isaiah eventually made it back to our table.

"Hey, what's that smile about?" I ask him because he had a goofy grin on his face.

"Oh, nothing it's just that," he holds out his arm that had a certain someone's phone number on it.

"I get it," I said. "And that's why my food is cold. Because you were getting some girls digits," I said rolling my eyes.

"You owed me one anyway because of what you did with that mouse the other day," he said stuffing a waffle fry in his mouth.

The day was great. Isaiah and I haven't had time to hang out and relax since before we found out we were moving. Everything after that was about whether we put things in the right boxes or if we said goodbye to our best friends or not. After walking around a little bit

more after we ate we decided to head home so that we would be there before our parents.

Mom and Dad came home early today. She went to the store and bought food to fill our cabinets. Dad took care of the mouse problem. Turns out, there was a family of little mice living in our basement. I watched Netflix for a bit watching a movie called, 'The Kissing Booth'. I cried every once in a while but I couldn't get all the way through it. I noticed I was yawning more than I was watching the movie so I decided to finish it tomorrow morning and that today, was eventful and I deserved to get some sleep. I dozed off right after noticing the time, 9:47.

\*\*\*

Thud, Scratch, Scratch, Scratch, Thud

"Come on!" I said out loud. I jumped up but careful not to step too loudly. I walked downstairs. The noise seemed to be louder from down here. I listened very carefully. Thud, Scratch, Scratch, Scratch, Thud. It sounded like it was coming from the basement but I wasn't sure. I slowly walked down the stairs that lead to the basement. Thud, Scratch, Scratch, Scratch, Thud. The basement wasn't going to be used for anything until I asked if we could turn it into a hangout, with couches, lamps, rugs, and a TV. There were boxes down here of all the things that needed to be unpacked for the basement. I was really excited about down here because when, or if, I made friends I could take them down here and we could hang out and watch TV. The lights were off so I turned them on so I didn't trip on anything. My eyes took a minute to adjust to the light. The basement wasn't a pretty sight but when I get everything unpacked down here then it would look better. I was looking around when I heard it again, Thud, Scratch, Scratch, Scratch, Thud There. It came from the big closet in the back

half of the basement. I had never noticed it before until now. The doors were closed. So slowly made my way to that side of the room. I took a shaky breath before opening the door. It took me a minute to open the door because it was as if someone was pulling it shut on the other side. I got it open. The sound was gone but I wasn't sure that it wasn't going to sound off again. There was no light in the closet so I tried to use the light from the basement to peer into there.

"Ugh, that's gross," I said. There was red stuff on the wall. It looked like someone tried to pull a joke and paint red paint on the wall to make it look like blood. I touched the wall. "Ahhh!" I screamed. It wasn't painted because it was wet and it smells metallic. I heard footsteps from upstairs. My parents rushed down the stairs. vGrace McDougle disappeared on May 6, 2010. She was fifteen when she just vanished. The police, along with many search and rescue teams, gave up a week later. The McDougle family moved out a month later and the home sat empty. The next family that moved in was made up of a single mom and an eleven-year-old daughter. Maddison Smith disappeared three months after they moved in on May 21, 2013. The mom moved out a year after Maddison disappeared.

## **Alexandria Latuda**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs  
School, Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Short Story

# LEWONTIN'S CONUNDRUM

"She must have known," is what everyone thought, whether or not they said it. But that August night, when the police burst into her home and took her husband away, was when she found out. With every board the police pulled up they seemed to find more and more, even in the rose garden. Lydia thought of the day she had told him she wanted a rose garden. "I want our house to be yellow, with a little porch, white trim, and a walkway up to the door with rose bushes on either side."

His arms were wrapped around her, "What color will the roses be?"

"Pink. Can they be pink?"

"Anything for you, Liddie Biddie," he said kissing her on the forehead.

She remembered the pictures they had shown in court, the ones of the young women covered in dirt and decaying. The ones that would have made her throw up even if she hadn't been experiencing morning sickness. It was the look in their eyes that stuck in Lydia's mind, not one of shock or horror, but of pleading; the look of knowing exactly what was about to happen. This was the look she saw every night before falling asleep.

Watching the news only made it worse.

"He deserves the chair. You can't look at the evidence and draw any other conclusion."

"And the wife still says she had no idea?"

It's why Lydia moved away. It's why she moved into a gray house, and dyed her hair brown. It's why she changed her last name and it's why she wouldn't let the baby out of her sight. She was determined not to miss it this time. She began keeping a journal of his behaviors. If he pushed someone on the playground, she marked it down. If he knocked over someone's blocks, she marked it down.

She made note of every tantrum, of every outburst. Lydia decided not to tell him certain things in order to protect him.

On Mother's Day when he was five and came home with a rose for her, she took it and smiled. But it was her shaking hand and the look in her eyes that confused Noah. Later, when he found the rose in the trash, he still didn't understand. For what reason he did not know, his mother watched him more than other mothers watched their sons. The feeling of her devastating eyes on him only intensified as he got older. She saw his resemblance to his father became more striking. He had the same dark hair and ever-moving eyes, the same impatient limbs always either tapping his foot or his fingers.

Noah was not aware of this resemblance. He knew nothing about his father other than he had left when Noah was very young and did not want to be contacted. Though Noah had begun writing him letters when he was ten, he had never sent any of them. He kept them in his desk drawer. It was kind of like a journal in which he would talk about his day, but he would also ask his father questions: "Do you miss us?" "I really like it when it rains, do you?" "I wish I could turn invisible, do you wish you had a superpower?"

When he was eleven, Lydia had stumbled upon them once, and during some of her sleepless nights, she would go into his room and read them. He had woken up and saw her do this a few times, but he never talked with her about it. He still addressed the letters to his father, but they became messages for his mother. He found the journal Lydia kept under her pillow, and unbeknownst to her, he started reading the entries. They slowly became responses to the letters Noah was writing to his absent father, and so this bizarre correspondence took shape. Noah's questions became stranger: "How important is the truth to you?" "Do you ever wish you could pick your family?" "Do you wish you were a better

parent?"

Lydia's responses became more and more incoherent, "Many questions about truth, what does he know? He wants new father? He knows about father? Find out what he can access. Subtilty=approach. Why still writing letters? Needs closure?"

The letters became more detailed and specific, and the journal entries became more desperate and scared.

And then, one day, Eliza Prescott, went missing. She was thirteen and a grade below Noah in school. There was speculation that she had run away, but the longer she was missing, the sicker Lydia felt. Then she found it. The long brown hair on one of Noah shirts. The hair confirmed her worst fears. She tore up the floorboards and took a hammer to the walls. Noah came home to find her demolishing the kitchen. "Mom! Mom! What are you doing?" He shouted at her.

"Where is she?" Lydia screamed. He stared at her dumbfounded. "Where is she?"

"Mom, what?"

Lydia smashed the hammer into another wall, "I'll dig it up, I'll dig it all up to find her."

"Jesus Mom, put the hammer down!" Noah yelled, he lunged and tried to grab it from her. Lydia jumped back. "I know your tricks. I wasn't blind this time!" Noah looked into her raving eyes and saw an expression he had seen for years, only now realizing it was fear. He thought of all the years she had sheltered him, of the ways in which she protected him, and realized she wasn't protecting him from the world, but the world from him. He recognized a new anger towards his mother.

"Get away, get away," she screamed and swung the hammer at him. He blocked it with his arm, causing the hammer to ricochet like a kickball of the fence in a school yard, and hit her in the head. Her limp body fell against the wall. Her blood began to spill out, staining the floor. Instead of being repulsed, he was fascinated by something else: her eyes. That

look of shock and complete horror awoke something in him. He smiled his father's smile.

**Isobel Li**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: California Trail  
Middle School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Leslie Brown

Category: Poetry

## A FAULTY PAINT MIX

he was your compliment  
yes he was  
you'd catch him staring  
with a smile on his face  
and you'd ask him  
what are you smiling about  
and he'd shrug and turn red  
your eyes are beautiful  
and they really were  
jades and emeralds  
a whole jewel mine  
inside those eyes  
but that blush on his face  
didn't last for long  
he was prone to anger  
carmines, crimsons  
screaming shouting  
alizarins, quinacridones  
complaining arguing  
garnets, vermillions  
it turned physical  
sanguines, scarlets  
and you ended up with

muddy green bruises  
covered under layers of concealer  
but that's not all you ended up with  
because as you concealed those marks  
you concealed yourself  
your skin shouldn't have become his canvas  
he was your compliment  
and he was dulling you down

**Isobel Li**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: California Trail  
Middle School, Olathe, KS  
Educator: Leslie Brown

Category: Poetry

## DEPRESSION AND DEMOCRACY

fog in the sky  
fog in my mind  
school pressure pushes down  
but unlike coal under pressure  
it won't turn me into a diamond  
fake friends surround  
all around  
surround sound  
they're everywhere  
are these relationships  
worth saving  
worth my time  
my effort  
my tears  
i don't know  
i don't know enough  
to make me happy

to give purpose to this drab rotation  
that we humans call life  
how dare you associate him with me  
we aren't even on speaking terms  
do you know  
that he is the source of drama  
that i want to leave now  
i'm done with the anger  
i'm too tired to scream  
i'm not even happy  
when i spend time  
with true friends  
with my allies  
they are annoying me  
traitors behind each smile  
liars behind each joke  
sorry daughter but stop  
you may be more of a traitor  
more of a liar  
than the one we have been fighting against  
you are my ally  
but what happens when that changes  
i hope it doesn't  
but every day is a new game  
a guessing game  
why do i feel gross  
is it the academic stress  
is it the unhealthy food  
do i blame the lack of sleep  
or my failing friendships  
should i go do something  
that will begin my path  
of finding a purpose  
or not  
because it's raining  
oh no never mind  
guess i'll just waste my time  
on houseparty and facetime  
apps that make you feel connected  
but not really  
drugs that make you feel better  
but not really  
we find the artificial high  
isd is just too expensive  
for an emotionally poor

monetarily poor  
student  
locked in the chains of public schooling  
even those mere words  
bring bile rising in your throat  
stomach turning in discomfort  
lock yourself in delusions  
happy delusions  
delusions that make your skin crawl  
and release tears you didn't know  
that you still possessed  
utopian bliss  
is nothing more than  
a dystopian lie  
makeup is a lie  
a lie for the benefit of the liar  
carefully painting over the blemishes  
hiding behind a coat of foundation  
disguised by dark eyeshadows  
a shield to protect against society  
and its demands for women  
go thin up  
go eat something  
you look so sick  
why so much makeup  
take it off right now  
ew put it back on  
i changed my mind sorry  
but why am i apologizing  
us men are dominant over you women  
patriarchy for president  
build a wall around basic human rights  
global warming is a joke  
so why aren't you laughing  
lighten up a little  
why so angry all the time  
men like their women smiling  
what do you mean  
nonconsensual sex is a lie  
what are you saying  
i don't know what i should do  
stand strong  
hold everything in  
not fall  
be tall

like a tree  
massive sequoias  
that finally fall  
with a final strike  
or be a sunflower  
swaying this way and that  
which ever way the wind blows  
limp stalks  
growing stronger  
and stronger  
and as long as i stay flexible  
i won't fall down dead  
maybe i should go take a day  
and sort everything out  
reduce anxiety  
eliminate insomnia  
or maybe i could just go golf  
walk in the heavy weighted steps  
of an avid golfer  
hiding from real problems  
of a real nation  
life is a cycle  
turning around and around  
where is the stop button  
maybe i'm better off  
being that sequoia

**Liya Liu**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High  
School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## FIVE O'CLOCK

"You should've known we'd be late!" I yelled as the rain roared louder through the night sky. My mother simply glanced at me before resuming

her conversation with my father, and I felt my face grow hot.

IT WAS 12:05 A.M., five minutes behind schedule. The Shanghai trains were inoperative until five o'clock, leaving us with five hours stranded in this overwhelming city with no familiar faces in sight.

"Look at what happen—" my words were cut short as I was faced with my mother's glare.

"Your father and I are figuring something out. If you can't help, then watch over your siblings."

Her clipped Chinese words and sharp tone stung, and my eyes welled up with tears as I bit my bottom lip to avoid crying.

12:09.

I stormed away, finding a seat on the side steps of the station. Rubbing my eyes furiously, I blinked rapidly to drive away the tears, but they spilled over my fingers and down my cheeks. The street lamps ahead blurred together, and I clutched my elbows as a low thunder rumbled in the distance.

12:34.

"She's trying to get a hotel room for us," said a voice behind me, followed by a prod on my shoulder. I turned around to see my father looking into the dark night. Following his gaze, I caught a glimpse of my mother before the howling rainstorm enveloped her form.

I let out a sigh and quickly dried my face. Soon, we would all be enjoying a warm shower and a dry, soft bed, escaping the misery of the outdoors. I stared intently into the darkness in front of me, anticipating my mother's return.

When she reappeared, however, with rainwater dripping from her hair, she simply looked to my father and shook her head.

The artificial, comforting warmth I had created for myself grew numb again, and I felt the night's chill seep through my damp clothes.

1:38.

A knot began to tighten in my stomach. We were supposed to be on vacation, supposed to be in Nanjing, supposed to be celebrating our arrival, yet we were stuck here in a filthy train station in the middle of the night with nowhere to go, all because of my parents.

2:23.

The rhythmic tap of the rain had lulled my brother to sleep in my mother's lap. My eyes grew heavy, and burying my head in my arms, I listened to the slow tick of my watch, waiting for it to inch towards five.

4:55.

With five o'clock approaching, we ascended the stairs closer to the boarding platforms, quiet murmurs emerged from the downpour of rain.

Along the walls and pillars, people were scattered across discolored mattresses and torn up cardboard. They wore miserable expressions, wrapping themselves in disheveled clothing and soiled blankets. I scanned my surroundings and began to feel their gazes scrutinizing my presence. When I directed my focus to them, their attention shifted towards our luggage. Squeezing the handle of my suitcase until my knuckles turned white, I pulled it closer to me and inched away from them.

Suddenly, we heard a screech, and a man in bedraggled clothing stumbled towards us. I inhaled sharply, the heavy thudding of my heart growing louder as cold sweat gripped my hands. The man had long, unruly hair, and his face was smudged with black soot, framed by his wild

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beard. His dark eyes momentarily met my stare—  
I froze.

Silence.

4:58.

I held my breath. The clock stopped, fingernails  
digging into my palms.

4:59.

The metal maglev whistled into the station. I let  
out a breath, the pitter-patter of rain filling my  
senses once more.

As we passed through the ticket gates, I glanced  
behind at the people sitting on the floor. The dim  
light casted shadows over them, and that was all  
I could see before I was nudged onto the  
brightly lit trains.

The cold air conditioning blasted in my face as I  
walked down the aisle, the tightness in my  
stomach no longer there. Sitting down, I  
searched for the man from earlier, but he was  
lost among others now hurrying down the stairs.

Then I saw him.

“Doesn't it feel great to finally be on the train?”  
my mother asked. I turned and saw her smiling  
face with dark circles rimming her eyes. I nodded  
and, noticing her hair was still wet, leaned  
forward to drape a jacket around her shoulders.

“Don't catch a cold,” I said, returning the smile.

—

IT WAS 5:00 P.M.

Down the street from my youth group, people  
bundled in stained blankets and oversized coats  
lined the brick walls of a homeless shelter.  
Around the corner, a woman gazed at me, her

greasy hair peeking from the dirty scarf that  
framed her grimy face. I found myself taking a  
step back onto that train in Shanghai.

The face of the man from two years ago  
resurfaced in my mind. Though I knew he  
couldn't see me through the tinted window  
when I finally saw him that night, I felt his stare  
pinning me down, urging me to reach through  
the glass.

I looked at the woman, took a deep breath, and  
inched forward.

### **Hannah Loder**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Glendale High  
School, Springfield, MO

Educator: Teena Mahoney

Category: Humor

## RESIST THE ITCH

Ever since I was a child, I was attractive. You  
may think that I am being cocky and rude by  
saying this, but it is true. Bugs have always been  
attracted to me. Yes, you read that correctly.  
Bugs drink my blood and bite me and harass  
me every time I go outside. It really is not easy  
being this irresistible. This may have taken a turn  
you weren't expecting, but can we please take  
a moment to talk about bug bites? Anytime I go  
outside, I hear buzzing around my ears. I feel the  
brush of a mosquito's wings touch my leg. I  
notice the red bumps starting to swell up on my  
legs and arms and face and body. I try to  
remain calm and not kick myself for forgetting  
to/ deciding I didn't need to put on bug spray. I  
always regret it.

My family members and friends can be in the same exact area as me for the same exact amount of time, and I will come home with a dozen bug bites while their skin remains unbiten. It is quite unfair. I don't know what it is that draws them to me. I never asked for this to happen. If I could escape the itchy red bumps and restless nights trying not to scratch the itchy red bumps, believe me, I would. I even got stung or bitten (I'm honestly not sure what happened) in a metro car in Washington D.C. I was literally underground and something stung my face. It swelled and turned red. It actually really hurt when it happened. Hopefully that gives you some insight into my relationship with bugs.

Bug spray cannot fully shield me from the wrath that bugs try to inflict on me. I spray it on, and I still come home covered. I have told people that go outdoors with me that they should get me one of those electric fly swatter racquet things that I can carry around (\*hint hint \*wink wink). That way I can get some exercise swinging it around and kill the very beings that tamper with my positive outlook on life. I am not usually a violent person. Even if I say that I want to do something violent, I am all talk and no show. This, however, is different. I want to kill all of those little bugs that come after me unprovoked. I did not do a single thing to them, and I will not stand for their harassment. I try to be a peaceful individual, even to the bugs sometimes, but I've just been burned too many times.

You might be wondering, "What prompted her to write this blog post all about bug bites?" Or maybe no one even got this far, but for the one person that is still reading, I will tell you. I am laying in my bed trying to resist the unrelenting urge to itch at least one of my 11 bug bites I have at the moment. The burning desire to give them a good itch can sometimes consume my

thoughts and make me feel crazy. I literally couldn't get the thought of my terrible bites out of my head long enough to think of another blog topic. That is how bad it is. You may be wondering how I got all of these bites. I probably was in a wooded forest knocking on a mosquito's nest (do they have nests?) and calling them out to get a good meal. I probably stood there in the woods without bug spray for hours just waiting for them to take the bait. If you thought this, you would be wrong.

I got these bites from... babysitting. **BABYSITTING.** Can you believe it? I was outside for maybe an hour with these kids in a residential neighborhood. This was four days ago, might I add. I also spent most of the time on the driveway instead of the grass. What did I get from that caution? Eleven terrible bumps on my body that make me want to scratch until my skin is raw. I don't do that, but that is the worst part. I don't want to give in because I don't want my skin to be raw. I don't want to give myself scars that remind me of those fateful bites. The resisting is the torture.

After so many attacks that I have lost count, I have accumulated quite a haul of anti-itch creams and products. There are some that are literal lifesavers, so I figured I would share them today. Maybe there is someone else out there like who feels like an outcast because they come home covered in bites while their brother, mother and father sit beside them, unscathed. They are a sacrifice to the flying creatures, and this job has no rewards. Well, they no longer have to endure the pain (please read this with an infomercial voice) (man, I am really using the parentheses today). First, the best antidote for a bad bite is Benadryl. If you are covered, you can take the pill and use the anti-itch cream on the bites. I swear by the cream. It could just be a placebo, but I do really think it works. Another great product for bug bites is lavender. It will help take away the inflammation. Lastly, try

Benadryl itch cooling spray. It relieves inflammation, swelling and makes you feel like you can stand to live until morning (you read that like an infomercial, didn't you?).

I wish I could tell you a great bug spray to use, but, like I said, I have not found a way to keep those little maniacs away from me. There is a bug bracelet that my dad gave me that I think is somewhat helpful. It is called Bug Band. I think it is worth a try. There is also a bug spray that is somewhat reliable, and it is called Skeeter Beater. Both of these products are deet free because deet is bad for you (don't ask me any details or why because I just know what my mom told me). The band is quite potent, but if it protects you from bugs, I would say the smell is okay.

Sadly, I have no cure that will instantly remove the nasty, eye-catching growths, but I can tell you that you almost get used to it. I say almost because you can never get used to the powerful desire to rip your skin off, but you can get used to the cycle. You go outside. You get bitten. You return inside. You feel so itchy that you want to die. You resist the itch. You pile on the creams and hopeful antidotes. You gradually forget about the bites. You realize that they disappeared. You go back outside. The cycle continues. The saddest part about all of this is that I could go on forever talking about bug bites. Instead, I will leave you because I need to go reapply Benadryl cream to one of my bites. Let me know what your secret is to staying free of bites if none of this related to you. Also, I wasn't kidding when I mentioned the electric fly swatter racquet thing (\*hint hint \*wink wink).

**Hannah Loder**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Glendale High

School, Springfield, MO

Educator: Teena Mahoney

Category: Short Story

## MORE TIME

The sun shines down on my face, giving the illusion of a perfect day. Rays of light try to disguise the overall pain I feel. I walk along the path, on a mission. I want to see someone I haven't seen in a while. I want to talk to him and tell him that I have time for him. I want to reminisce about the snow days where he attached my sled to his four-wheeler and drove me around. I hear only my breathing and the chirping of the birds. **OH WHAT A HAPPY DAY**, I say to myself, my sarcasm doing nothing to deter the birds. My footsteps echo on the beaten path in between the perfectly groomed grounds.

This time when I look up from staring at my feet, I see flowers. Every shade, every breed, every size gazing up at me from their spots tucked into the ground. It is apparent that someone recently place them here. **MAYBE THEY WERE PUT HERE FOR ME**. What a selfish thought. I scold myself and continue on, unwilling to enjoy this bright day. How could I?

I decided to park far away to give myself time to think. I run over my talking points in my head. I want to tell him that I love him. That is first and foremost. Next, I want to tell him that I'm sorry. I am sorry for avoiding him in the mornings when I just wasn't feeling a conversation. I am sorry for not telling him how much I appreciate him. Regrets are easy to get stuck on, but I will try to change up the conversation and tell him how grateful I am that I was able to meet him, that he was able to be a part of my life.

With every step, I get closer to him, closer to the pain and excitement I am feeling. My

breath catches in my throat, and I have to take a pause. I don't know if I am ready. I realize that I spent so much time observing the day and not enough time mentally preparing for this moment. The wounds are still fresh and throbbing. My chest tightens while my stomach turns. I know that he thinks that I am strong. I know I am strong. I can do this.

Nearing the turnoff for his plot, I pray a silent prayer, PLEASE HELP ME. I DON'T KNOW IF I CAN DO THIS. Past memories start to cloud my brain, and I wish them away. I can't let them ruin this moment. I need to be strong, just like he was. My footsteps quicken as I see his spot, my excitement building. I am so ready to see him again, to talk to him again. Now only a few steps away, I think, THIS IS RIGHT. THIS IS WHAT THIS DAY WAS PREPARING ME FOR.

I step up to him. The sun is staring at me from the sky, seemingly cheering me on. The birds keep chirping encouragement and advice. The flowers sparkle and meet my eye. They say that I am ready. I set down the Shohin tree that I brought for him. I close my eyes. I picture him in front of me, standing with open arms. In my mind, I give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. I see his smile, see the tears in his eyes. I know he is as happy to see me as I am to see him.

I smell his cologne mixed with his sweat after planting trees all through the neighborhood. I see his skin, slightly damaged from years in the sun and a shade of reddish tan. I feel his strong grip as he hugs me again. I hear his husky voice, I AM HAPPY TO SEE YOU.

YOU HAVE NO IDEA, I think back. I feel a tear fall from beneath my closed eyelid onto my cheek, warm from the sun. I dive right in. I tell him a mix of I miss you, I'm sorry, and how are you, my rehearsed points gone with the wind. I also update him on what life is like here now, without him. I tell him it is lonely and sad. I tell him, ABUELO, WHY NOW? MAYBE I NEED TO ASK GOD, BUT I WANT TO KNOW THE REASON.

He smiles back at me, I HAVE NO ANSWERS

FOR YOU MIJA. I CAN ONLY TELL YOU THAT I AM OKAY, AND THAT YOU ARE OKAY. WE WILL BE REUNITED. UNTIL THEN, LIVE YOUR LIFE WITH THE SUN ON YOUR FACE AND NO APOLOGIES ON YOUR LIPS. The tears flow freely now. I squeeze my eyes shut, not willing to open them and see my abuelo disappear again from my life. Just when I think the tears will subside, a sob racks my body. My stomach flips and my cheeks are coated with a brand new collection of tears. Abuelo looks at me and tells me, MIJA, YOU ARE OKAY. I AM NOT GONE. I WILL ALWAYS BE WITH YOU. TE EXTRAÑO Y TE QUIERO.

Then my imagination betrays me, and he is gone. A new wave of pain hits, debilitating and fierce. I take a moment to compose myself and feel the warmth in the air start to dry my tears. I breathe deeply in tune with the singsong of the birds. I turn to the tree I brought for abuelo. I show it to his headstone and look for the perfect place to plant it. Careful not to step on him, I find the perfect place. Someone planted vivid flowers around the edges of his headstone, leaving a single space big enough for the tree. When I begin digging a whole, the birds chirp as if to say, YOU HAVE FOUND THE SPOT. HE WILL LOVE IT.

I feel the dirt in my hands. I hold it there to tell myself that this is reality. That I am as real as the dirt. The soil cakes in my fingernails. I keep removing dirt until I am left with a whole big enough for the Shohin. I remove the tree from its temporary home and place it in its forever home. My tears christen the soil. As I push the dirt up around the trunk of the miniscule tree, my body is warmed by the sun. The birds tell me that I am okay. The flowers show me that I am at peace in this moment. Now my tears flow in reverie at this beautiful experience. I know that abuelo is here with me. I know that he is enjoying this day too and all of the guilt fades away.

We sit, together, admiring the Shohin and the sun and the birds and the flowers. We

don't have to say anything; we both are perfectly happy at this time. The sun starts to fall in the sky, letting me know that it is time to go. I am so filled with joy that I can't be sad that I have to leave him again. We had a wonderful afternoon together, and he knows that I will be back. And I know that he will never leave me. He is smiling down at me from the sky, speaking to me through the winged creatures, and showing me his love through the plants.

I kiss him goodbye and tell him that I will be back again tomorrow. I begin the trek back to my car. My footsteps echo on the beaten path as the light fades into darkness.

## Hannah Loder

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Glendale High  
School, Springfield, MO  
Educator: Teena Mahoney

Category: Short Story

# LOST IN THE HEADLINES

"Mama, I'm scared," the child whispered, tears glistening in his eyes.

"I know honey, but it is okay. Everything is going to be okay," his mother softly spoke in his ear. She didn't know how this had

happened and couldn't fully process the danger they were in. All she knew was that she had to remain calm and strong for her son. She prayed silently for that strength and remained focused on staying hidden. Her heart beat on.

In the darkness, the mother could only slightly make out the man pacing in the front of the lobby of the building. She and her son were crouched underneath a desk towards the back of the lobby and in a small cubicle. Today was the day that her son needed to be picked up early from preschool because he was having a hard time; he was not playing nicely with the other kids. He had told her he didn't want to go to preschool every morning, that the other kids were mean, but she had no choice because of work. She had to bring him with her to work today because she didn't get off until 4:00 pm. It was 3:38 pm.

Before this moment, the man walking around the building had ultimately been a quiet and seemingly nice individual. He always turned his work in by the deadline and minded his own business. His behavior today came as a complete shock to the mother. She tried to identify any warning signs in her mind, but she came up empty. She thought to herself, **HOW COULD HE BE CAPABLE OF SUCH A HORRIBLE THING? WHAT HAS COMPELLED HIM TO DO THIS?** She couldn't dwell on why this was happening. All she could focus on was how to make it out still breathing. She always thought her work would be the death of her but not in such a literal sense.

As her mind was running in circles, trying to come up with a viable plan to save her son, most importantly, and if possible, herself, she was struck with the intense sound of a gunshot. Immediately she covered her son's ears. He was shaking. She put her arms around his tiny body and held tight, not allowing anything to take her focus from him. She buried her head in his neck, unable to look up

to see where the man was now. In her mental count, that was the fifth shot fired. Another victim. She hadn't heard a scream this time, though. Maybe that was a good sign. Ever so slightly quicker, her heart beat on.

Still not able to look up, the mother heard footsteps approaching. Her fear threatened to overwork her heart and make her breathing shallow. She suppressed it to stay as calm as she could for her son. She could still feel his body trembling beneath her. She wished there was something she could do, but she was at a loss. She couldn't let anything happen to her son. Her mind couldn't help but wonder what would happen if she didn't make it. Her husband had left a few years earlier, and her parents were living in a different state. The only "family" they had in town were the kind neighbors in their apartment building. **WHERE WOULD HE GO?** she thought. **HOW WOULD HE LIVE?** The mother hadn't drafted a will yet. She was still in her late twenties. She didn't think that would be something she would have to worry about at this age. She silently prayed that he would be okay.

The footsteps were getting louder and louder until they stopped, seemingly close to her and her son, but she could not check. She couldn't dare risk it. Then she heard it. The man called her name. **PLEASE, GOD. THIS CANNOT BE HAPPENING. PLEASE.** She didn't dare move a muscle. Her heartbeat sped up to a continual, loud thumping, and she was afraid it would jeopardize her cover. It seemed like several minutes went by, but it was probably only seconds, when she felt the cold metal of the gun's barrel touch the exposed skin on her arm. Her breath caught in her throat and her entire body tensed. **PLEASE, GOD, NO. I CAN'T DIE TODAY. PLEASE.** Her heart, now palpitating uncontrollably fast, beat on.

The man got close to her ear and snarled, "Get up. Now!" With her mind still trying to

comprehend his motive, she shakily unwrapped her arms from her child.

She whispered to him, "Stay where you are. I love you so much." Fearing those were her last words, she slowly faced her perpetrator.

His face had a menacing glow in the dark cubicle. The mother did not know what to say, so she remained silent. The man looked her up and down. His eyes were glowing intensely. He seemed to be enjoying what he was doing. It was like he had no concern for human life. That realization did nothing to appease the mother's fear. Still, her heart beat on.

Finally the man spoke, "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"I don't know why you are doing this." It was a simple statement and the utter truth. The mother still did not understand why the man was being so cruel. What had possessed him to act in such a horrible way?

"Are you seriously telling me you don't know?" The man paused, waiting for a response, but all he received was a blank stare from the mother. "This company has been out to get me from the moment I started. It is like I never existed. No one speaks to me, and I have not gotten a raise in the fifteen years I have been here. You are the only one who has ever even smiled at me. This," he said, gesturing to the darkened office littered with fearful employees and the ones that had already lost their lives, "is the only way for them to notice me."

In the distance, the sound of sirens echoed across the quiet building. When the man heard it, he lifted the gun to the mother. Her eyes flashed with the understanding of what was about to happen. Her mouth opened with the intention to speak her apology. She wanted to tell the man that he was valued on this earth, that he was not invisible. She wanted to say she understood his feeling of not being appreciated and that she could help him get back on his feet if he would just

put the gun down. She really wanted to say she was sorry. No sound was able to escape her lips as the man sent a straight shot right to her chest. The mother fell back to the ground. Her heart stopped.

The child, rocking softly, heard the shot ring out. He was too scared to move. He was too scared to see if his mother was okay. He was too scared to be there for her. That was his biggest regret. The child began crying softly. The man walked towards him, knowing that he was upset. I DON'T WANT THIS CHILD TO FEEL THE PAIN I HAVE FELT. I NEED TO PUT HIM OUT OF HIS MISERY, the man thought. It was with this logic that the man aimed the gun at the child and pulled the trigger. Another heart stopped beating.

The headlines flashed across TV screens and computer screens and phone screens. Eight are dead, including a young mother and her child. A man has opened fire in his workplace. More facts will be offered as soon as they become available.

The man has been found. He was taken into custody. A name is not known at this time. The victims' families are grieving. The country offers its support.

Michael David Lutton has been identified as the shooter. He was using a gun that was licensed to him. He is mentally ill. There is talk of new regulations on guns. Controversy over gun control has consumed the country. The families of the victims are grieving. The community has created shrines with flowers and stuffed animals to those who were murdered.

Michael David Lutton has been found guilty. He is facing the death penalty. Controversy over the death penalty has consumed the country. Does Lutton deserve it? The families of the victims are just now starting to move on.

Lutton has just lost his life.

Another heart stopped beating.

The case is closed. The country has moved

on.

The man received the attention he wanted. His name was plastered on media all over the country. His actions garnered him notoriety.

Flowers at the shrines wilted. Life went on.

## **Mengxiao Ma**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Thomas Jefferson School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Boaz Roth

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# GRANNY'S MEATBALLS

My family moved house two years ago. We did not sell the old apartment, in fact sometimes we went back and sat for a while, but we each loved that place for different reasons.

It was no doubt a quiet and nice community to live in. Winter jasmines began blooming everywhere as spring approached, sakura followed in late March, osmanthus and maple with the gentle autumn breezes, and plum trees stood upright in the freezing January snows. Not long after my parents got married, they moved all the way from the Northwestern part of China to Nanjing so my father could take the opportunity to teach at Nanjing University. That tiny apartment offered by the school was their everything.

I was sent to kindergarten at the age of two. My mom had to work until late evening in a restaurant far away and my

dad was always busy with scientific researches, so they asked an old couple to look after me after school until they came back home at night. It was just walking distance from our apartment to theirs. They lived on the first floor of a very old building, but I was always attracted by the dim lights, wet breezes, and a mysterious aromatic scent that I could not tell. They treated me as if I was their granddaughter, and I enjoyed spending time with them a lot. Every afternoon, I would see granny in the crowd outside the kindergarten gate waving at me. She would buy me an egg cake or a cup of bubble tea along the way home, and I would share my stories of the day. When we got home, grandpa was always sitting on the sofa watching television. He would give me a warm hug as I ran to him, stand up, turn off the television, and sit by the table as I pulled out a random story book. He would read it with me and teach me some new Chinese characters, while granny put on her apron and began preparing dinner.

Granny could cook the best food in the world. Grandpa loved pork meatballs, so she cooked them with different vegetables in different sauces and sometimes even put them in soup. Because she knew I was Muslim, however, granny would make me some beef or veggie ones instead. She spent a lot of time making those meatballs out of smashed meat and flour every week, but it seemed that she enjoyed repeating such a task more than anything else. After dinner, I would go out for a walk with granny, and grandpa would go back to his TV series. We would walk all the way to the university stadium and walk all the way back. One evening, seeing the undergraduates race on the playground, granny smiled and told me her love story. She met grandpa for the first time after a running competition when they were still college students.

“He came in first place, and everyone

was cheering for him.” The lingering light of the sunset glittered on her wrinkles, and I could tell how much happiness she felt from her sweet smile.

“Can grandpa still run as fast as before?”

She hesitated, then slowly, shook her head. Later, as I grew a little older, I understood that grandpa not only could not run as before, but was also not able to walk like a normal person anymore. He had been seriously ill for a few years. That was why his arms always shook when he hugged me. That was why he could not help granny with any housework. That was why he never waited for me with her outside the kindergarten and never went for a walk with us after dinner. And that was also why granny made all those delicious meatballs day after day for him.

“He likes them so much, so I just make them a lot.” Her face wrinkled as she gently smiled.

When I got into primary school, my mom began to work for the Foreign Language Department in the university, so I was able to hang out in her office after school. But still, I visited granny and grandpa regularly and stayed with them until evening sometimes. Grandpa would still hug me when I came, granny would still make grandpa and me those amazing meatballs. Life was as good as usual. It never really changed.

One of those evenings, I was reading about wars for school and when I saw the bloody pictures of dead bodies, I murmured, “I am so afraid of death.” I did not realize at the moment how strange the response was, but I heard granny chuckle by my side. I asked about her opinion.

“I am not afraid of that.”

“Why?”

“Because it is human nature, my

sweet girl.”

“Then what are you afraid of?”

She hesitated again as she did several years ago on the school playground, glanced at grandpa who was napping in the opposite couch, and in very low voice she said, “Leaving him alone in this world.”

What she worried about, however, seemed to come true a few months later.

Granny suddenly fainted one afternoon when she was busy preparing dinner as usual. She was sent to the hospital and the doctor said it was because she was too tired and stressed. It was true: granny and grandpa's only daughter chose to live with her husband in another distant city, leaving the old couple alone in an old apartment. Grandpa refused to go to the hospital because he did not want to “waste” too much money on his “old body”, and granny had to take care of her tiny family and me as well. Life put too much of a burden on her emaciated back, but she never complained. Now she was laying in under the white sheets, infusion bottle by her bed, and with the smell of the sanitizer in the air. “How is grandpa?” was her very first words when she was finally awake. I visited grandpa after leaving the hospital. To my surprise, he was in the kitchen trying to cook. His hands were shaking in a big bowl of smashed meat, flour, and condiments, but to his right on the chopping board lay a few rough meatballs.

“Why are you cooking, grandpa?”

“I am making a meatball soup for granny so that she can recover soon.” He smiled like a happy kid saying such words. I could recall my innocent happiness and satisfaction after cooking an easy dish for my parents and seeing their gratitude when I was younger, so I bet he felt the same trying to make his beloved wife something with all his heart.

I offered to help him because I knew his arms and legs would shake due to his illness, but he stubbornly refused. “She has been doing almost everything for me for years, so it is the time for me to do a little something for her.” Water deposited on his glasses as the steam rose from the pot; I could not see his eyes, but I did spot what I thought was a single teardrop slowly running down his face.

I hurried to granny's room with his soup. She was shocked when she knew it was all made by grandpa, and was soon moved to tears. Slowly, she held up one meatball close to her eyes in the spoon and looked at it over and over again. I had to admit that it did not look good at all—especially when compared to the ones granny made—but granny was very excited with it.

“He is so sweet.” Granny turned to me, “Thanks for coming, sweetheart.”

On my way back home, I felt truly happy for them. Although they were separated for two weeks, I was the bridge that connected them from heart to heart. Every afternoon, I went to see granny with grandpa's handmade meatball cuisines. And every evening, I watched granny smile, cry, and carefully eat up everything in the bowl. “Now granny would never be afraid of leaving grandpa alone in this world. He would be fine by himself,” I comforted myself, and assured myself that everything would be fine.

When I got into middle school, I was not able to spare any time for them every day. Loads of homework piled over me and additional classes after school lasted until late evenings. I was only able to meet them sometimes along the way home, but every Spring Festival, granny would still visit us with a huge bowl of meatballs and tell us grandpa is alright. And with my family moving away from the old apartment and me studying

abroad, I barely saw them at all in the past two years. We hardly talked about them anymore, and my parents only met them once or twice while I was in America. I still sometimes thought of granny and grandpa because all those good old days with them meant so much to me. I missed walking along the zigzagged roads hand in hand with granny. I missed writing the Chinese characters wrong while grandpa used every method to teach me the right way. And of course, I missed witnessing their everyday romance that survived decades.

I came back to Nanjing a while ago during Christmas break. Because I could not find an important photo album of my middle school friends, I decided to go back to our old apartment to look for it. It was a freezing December afternoon. Walking along that narrow asphalt road, everything was so familiar on both sides. The gradual and smooth ascent with two huge garbage cans on the top right, the music bars one after another on the left side, the castle-like Spanish restaurant where I once held my birthday party, the variegated maroon and gray brick wall, the bikes and cars squeezed in the corners, and cats and dogs running everywhere in peaceful joy. A figure moved closer and closer toward me in the withering leaves, and waved at me, saying, "It has been a long time, sweetheart."

It was granny.

She opened the door for me, and what burst into my sight reminded me of so many sweet memories. The same dim lights, the same wet breezes, and the same mysterious aromatic scent which I later recognized as orchid. As usual, I stretched out my head to look for grandpa. But the sofa, where he always sat, was empty. I turned back to granny for an answer, and she shook her head, sighing.

Grandpa was gone.

For a moment I did not know what to say, but I embraced her deeply. She was much skinnier than before, even frail, and there were more wrinkles on her pale cheeks and forehead. I could not imagine how she came through all those days when I heard from her neighbors that grandpa passed away on a cloudy morning in peace just three months before. But they did not fail to mention that granny insisted on preparing almost every meal for him in his very last days because she knew grandpa had been so used to her cooking. It was without doubt a shocking and heart-breaking news to me, but I knew granny would not worry as much because she did not leave grandpa alone in the world. Although, now she is alone.

I did not know how to leave her home that afternoon, but she gave me something that appeared more precious than the album I was trying to look for. It was a blurry old photo of grandpa and I busily getting meatballs with chopsticks from the huge bowl in front of us. It was from the day when I brought my first Polaroid camera to show them. And it was and would be the only picture of me with him.

I have to leave my beloved city and people behind for studying abroad, but my tight connections with them will never change—just as the great love between granny and grandpa, and the altruistic love they instilled in me over all these wonderful years has stuck around.

## **Alex Maisenhelder**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Optimus Vita

\*ALL NAMES HAVE BEEN ALTERED

I was filled to the brim with excitement, anticipation, and positivity as I meandered throughout the airport. I was intoxicated by the prospect of landing in Jamaica. Upon landing the sheer amount of smells and sights in the Jamaican airport overwhelmed me, colors everywhere, vendors trying to obtain business flocked towards the new arrivals. All of the minors including myself were thrown into confusion due to the alcohol vendors being persistent in their pursuit, for there was no official drinking age in Jamaica. Through all of this madness, we still managed to reach the safety and serenity of our transport bus.

The bus ride itself contained more overwhelmingly stunning sights than possessed by all of Missouri. The crystal-clear blue water off of the coast, the surprisingly vibrant foliage, and the sheer size of the surrounding mountains and trees were a pleasant sight after the dull confines of the plane. Upon arriving at the resort, I was shocked at the grandness of the facade, the open air lobby, and the view of the ocean from every single part of the resort. However, I spent the better part of the first day there complaining about the subpar wifi and fretting over whether or not the internet in the room would be strong enough for gaming. Just like I had in Florida the previous year.

\* \* \*

The first few days were mostly not noteworthy, just enjoying the overall peace present on the resort, leaving every meal happy and satiated, and enjoying the staff's shows every night. However, on one of the latter nights of my stay I

ran into an extremely charismatic fellow who had a very confident aura surrounding him. I had just been enjoying a strawberry daiquiri when I heard the systematic repetition of ping pong. I being an admirer and lover of ping pong, immediately walked towards the sound, and saw two guys engaged in a tense duel. What really stoked my curiosity was that they were both playing with a penhold grip, and my urge to play grew as I had never played against a penhold grip player.

"Hey! What's your name?" I asked.

"My name is Patrick, how about you?" was the reply.

"My name's George I was curious if I could play winner?" I expressed.

"Sure, I just won so you can play me," he said.

Causing excitement and adrenaline to rush through my veins. Patrick was a worthy opponent, but I eventually managed to outmaneuver him to claim victory. While I enjoyed playing ping-pong, our conversation after was a lot more meaningful. Patrick and I delved into topics like the differences between British and American education, our views on politics, some of our own goals in life, and generally got a feel for each other. Due to his outstanding intellect and thought process, I was able to learn a lot from him. He had planted seeds of ambition and desire inside my brain, and from those roots sprung the my unyielding desire to figure out how to live in the moment, and not take extraordinary life experiences for granted. We sadly came to the conclusion that our stays at the resort were only overlapping for a matter of days, and we had to make the best of those days and live in the moment.

I finally felt like I was well and truly at the resort, for video games the wifi were no longer dominating my thoughts. I just kept looking forward to what the next moment had in store.

Would it be a game? A nice hearty chat?

Meeting more people? I did not know, and I did not care, but that was the beauty of it. I spent the rest of the vacation in this mindset, Patrick and I maneuvering around the resort looking for

something to strike us. We always somehow ended back up at our decided favourite, ping-pong. One night was different though, we decided to venture to the land of beach volleyball, joining the already substantial crowd; we ended up with a girl named Lily playing with us.

"Hey! What's your name?" I excitedly inquired.

"Hey, my name is Lily, what's yours?" she replied vivaciously.

"Awesome! My name is George," I said out of the joy of finding a second person to hang out with.

There was a noticeable bounce in my step, due to a sensory overload; the silky smooth sand, crisp chilly breeze, and relaxing repetition of the volleyball being bumped. At once I was in a state of tranquility, allowing me to think with a newfound clarity. I was in an especially jovial mood for the rest of the night.

"You should come join me and Patrick," I exclaimed with the blind confidence associated with talking to a new friend.

"I would love to join you guys!" Lily responded. Unaware of what was to come, but down for whatever. Her buoyant attitude, with nothing to justify it, but the possibilities that lay ahead. This left a profound impression on me, so I endeavored to approach future situations with the same interest. I could feel myself let go of the heavy burden of worry that was weighing me down and my decision making became more fluid and of the moment. Upon agreeing on a time we met the following night at the ping-pong table.

I was almost naive of my surroundings the following day due to the extreme anxiousness to rejoin my friends that night.

"Nice to see you again," I said.

"I have been looking forward to meeting you two again," Lily said with an air of intrigue that was shared between most everyone involved. That was collectively the most enjoyable night, we were all spontaneous and went from event to event on a whim. It was truly an impactful experience for me. I learned from Patrick and Lily

how to enjoy the moment, and not to dwell on things for too long.

I had always had an internal issue of thinking way too much and not fully immersing myself in the moment. It was an amazing feeling to let myself go and be taken by the flow of the night, like a boat in a river. I was finally able to be fully a part of the moment, for Patrick had helped me see that life holds many unexpected things and that I should live my best life in the present. Lily helped me to realize I should not let myself be slowed down and hindered by my unnecessary worries, but to live my best life finding the positives even in the darkest times. I had truly been impacted by their advice and regard my last night in Jamaica as one of the most fulfilling and gratifying times of my life, thanks to my two unknowing benefactors.

"I have to go back to my room," I said with more than a twinge of sadness. "I hope we can somehow cross paths again," I said with a pit already forming in my stomach.

"Bye! I'll miss you!" Lily said.

"Peace out dude, have a good time," Patrick said, relaxed as ever.

"I'm gonna miss all of you," I said, my saddened features hidden by the dark of night.

I paused for a moment, halfway between the events of the night and my room. I felt like I was finally seeing things for what they could be, like putting in contacts for the first time. I had become more aware of the events happening around me, less concerned, but more excited about what the future held. I had shed the burden of worry and traded it for the comfort of happiness, unwavering and decidedly naive. I felt like instead of being a Debbie-downer I could now uplift them with the promising possibilities of the future.

I have no way to know if I had any positive influence over Patrick, Lily, and the others that night, but at least we all enjoyed the moment. I am forever grateful for their impact on my life making me into a more positive and open person.

**Akash Mallady**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs

School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# RUNNING MY RACE

Coming of age can appear quite daunting. One may be excited, anticipating the arrival of their new and transformed “wise” self, or perhaps one may be nervous, worried that their coming of age moments have already passed. Currently, it is uncertain to me if my moment has presented itself. However, I feel as if I am prepared to handle what life may place upon my shoulders, yet I am curious, somewhat confused, as to what that life is. In other words, these mixed emotions that exist regarding my own coming of age convince me that such a life-changing event has not happened to me yet. This realization prompts a certain eagerness within me to take chances, and create those sort of opportunities for myself. Making the most of such chances is critical and doing so will depend on an ample number of factors. Despite the intimidation of this proposal, I believe that until this moment, I have gained a large portion of what is necessary for this transition. In short, I would not be as equipped as I am to grapple life’s opportunities without my experiences in overcoming timidity and in running competitively.

Although it seems like I was a completely different individual in the past, possessing traits that are nonexistent now, upon further

consideration, that smaller child still lives in me. I was talkative, lived in the moment, and felt no reason to worry about anything. I was inclined to choose enjoyment over what seemed tedious, yet was frustrated when I realized what I could have accomplished with the seemingly undesirable task. Variations of these ideas drive my daily actions even now. However, there was a change in this regard during my third-grade year. In that time, I had transformed, according to mother, “from [the aforementioned small child] into an indecisive and simply scared individual”, and this change appeared for no apparent reason. It seems obvious now, but it did not strike me at the time that my personality was being impacted by the teasing of another student. This went on for a while and, when I mustered the courage to finally tell a teacher about this, no immediate attention was given. That feeling of frustration I can remember even now. What puzzles me, however, is that I was hesitant in approaching my parents with this information during a time THEY were explicitly searching for the reason of my unexpected change.

With time, I grew increasingly insecure. Eventually, when the teasing transformed into something far more detrimental to my emotions, I was inclined to move past my inhibitions. Telling my parents, I remember, was simultaneously the most difficult endeavor, yet most relieving experience at the time. They were quick to question those involved, and after everything was sorted out, my parents decided that it would be best I transfer schools. While this seemed unnecessary and quite disheartening as I still had close friends there, my mom reminds me occasionally that the difference in the level of my openness and confidence was tenfold. Gaining the courage to finally open up about what troubled me was crucial. For, it was I who found the strength within myself to do so, and that trait has lingered with me till now. I have the trust in myself that, come what may, there is a side of me which can push past inhibitions, be them mine or societal, and make a difference in

the life I am living or perhaps in the lives of others.

Fast forward a couple of years and I had begun to utilize, as well as, discover new strengths on the track and cross country courses. A shaping moment in my life comes directly from a major competition. It was December 5, 2015, and I was competing in my first cross country national championship. While the race itself is a story to tell, the main focus of this event for this context is what transpired afterward. I had fought tooth and nail to earn a fifth-place All-American medal, a feat I had never accomplished previously. However, in the moment, there existed mixed feelings over the achievement. It bothered me that I felt heavy, with my stomach in knots, throughout the entirety of the race. What I asserted after the race is still vivid in my memory, as well as my parents'. I simply stated, with candidness and full decisiveness that I was going to shape my diet in ways conducive to my strength in running. Perhaps, the confidence to say this, let alone decide it in my mind, would have been non-existent had I never triumphed over that obstacle in third grade and many more reinforcing instances along the way.

For months, until the end of March of the succeeding year, I adapted almost every aspect of my life to accommodate my goals for running. In just six months, there was a noticeable difference in the brevity of my footstrike, the swiftness of my cadence, and the efficiency of my form. Including training methods I had never incorporated before, difficult, yet rewarding, allowed for the commencement of my track season to be successful. Improving through a newfound focus on minuscule aspects of the sport, I was humbled to win a national championship, along with a silver medal finish, at the end of that summer. From that moment onwards, I have put dedication, hard work, and, most importantly, a process into everything I am passionate about; because, the accomplishments achieved by me after that decision in 2015 were incredible. The trust I had in

myself and, most especially, in those who supported everything I did, grew. I savored the direction given to my life which came from these experiences.

Gradually, however, I learned that while having an aim, or direction, is reassuring, it will likely go askew. How to overcome that is pivotal. I had an experience one year later in which I didn't place as high as I thought I could in a major race. It was a medal, nonetheless, but my expectation, my mind, still resided in 2016. From here, it was solidified in my thinking that what has happened in the past does not define what can or will occur. While this may seem obvious in the capricious culture of our modern era, it took me some time to truly believe it. The epiphany struck me when I didn't achieve what I had hoped. To elaborate, it put into perspective what I felt discontent over, and immediately set free that emotion. All in all, it was a new embodiment of strength, differing from the types I had discovered in myself before.

Lastly, a valuable lesson from my father, reiterated by him constantly and always quick to catch me when I am falling: "Don't run the races of others. Running your race is important". It was frequent, in my first few years of running, that I would suddenly ignore my race plan as the gun went off, blinded by following the pace of another runner. As a result, my father's exact words, as aforementioned, always resonated in the car on the ride back home from races. Over time, as I grew with confidence and with intellect, the moral faded, becoming less prominent after competitions. However, at this stage in my life, this adage appears more important to follow than ever. When considering the wishful prospect of perhaps changing the world, making impacts on society, or even leading explorations into innovation, one can be susceptible to looking at others for guidance. While guidance is vital for inspiration, in many cases, this guidance can evolve into a sort of blind following. Adhering to concrete steps in this fashion will inevitably lead to achieving what has already been established. Therefore, I have

realized that to make a difference, it is necessary for me to first accept change, for if I am unwilling to do so, how will I have the courage to instill change upon society? My future may not be drawn out in my head, but I am most definitely convinced that going against the grain, running my race, will be the deciding factor in my life, and hopefully in the lives of others.

These events, while they seem unrelated, all have changed me, challenged me, and combined to impress upon my character what makes me who I am today. I identify that as being prepared to accept failure and open doors to new ideas, intrepid to close ones which contradict my passions. I have now, in my arsenal, the contentedness to lead with my own unique individuality; the ability to identify my weaknesses and formulate goals with decisiveness; the collected demeanor imposed by perspective and gratitude; as well as, most importantly, the strength that is derived from trusting a disciplined process. These assets give me the overall power to be in control of the one event that will unquestionably change my life. Whenever that may be. Until then, I will continue running. My race.

### **Akash Mallady**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs

School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Flash Fiction

## **WEIGHTLESS WINGS**

### **Weightless Wings**

I steadily walk up the stairs. Knees shaking with every step, arms tightening. I can hear the paper, in my hands, ripping, so I stop to take a deep breath. The curtain opens.

**WHOOSH!**

I pause for a moment and turn my hips away from the crowd, look down at my paper, and release it. As it falls gracefully to the floor, I spin around and open my mouth, letting out an intermittent wisp of air. Stepping up to the podium, I feel its edges, sharp like knives, and I hear my breath. It is heavy, similar to the weight of my stomach. The microphone feels warm, partially due to my sweaty palms, as I raise it to my mouth and begin speaking. I am reminded of a starter gun being lifted towards the sky; suddenly booming with sound. Not once do I attempt to say exactly what I rehearsed on my bed. Not once do I rethink my remarks, considering that hesitation has anchored me to the ground in the past. Instead, I eye the light at the back of the auditorium. It flickers. I become one with my words and their vibrations; my voice and its projection; my expressions, subtle, yet objective.

My voice stays calm as I passionately describe MY ideas, from MY viewpoint, and MY instinctive thought. For the first time, my unaltered, unfiltered identity is displayed to all of those watching. Some are glancing up occasionally, bored and disinterested. However, my determination is unphased. I search, rather, for the faces portraying genuine interest and understanding, to whom I feel increasingly connected. As a result, I am motivated to stay confident and, in time, all the nerves depart from my body; and I know that they will never return. Finally I fly. With weightless wings.

### **Hannah Mand**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Platte City Middle  
School, Platte City, MO  
Educator: Laura Hoefling

Category: Short Story

## MANIAC

It was December 8, 1843, and John Abram had just gotten home from work at the local post office in Smallstown. Everyone loved John. Whenever you would drop off a letter or package at the post office, he would greet you with a big smile and wish you a good day. He also made everyone feel loved and feel like they had a purpose. Especially his wife, Mary, and his daughter, Emily. Every chance he got, he would shower them with gifts and would give them everything they ever wanted. It seemed as though John was the most cheerful and loving person you could ever meet, but one day that all changed. Something happened in John's brain on that frightful day. Something so horrible that many people in Smallstown just tried to forget it. Before I get to what happened that night, let's start with how it all began.

John had awoken to the smell of bacon and eggs that his wife had made for breakfast. This was odd because John was the one who usually got up early to make Mary and Emily breakfast. John rubbed his eyes and walked into the kitchen to ask what was going on. Then he remembered, it was his birthday. He was greeted with a hug and a kiss from Mary and Emily as soon as he stepped into the brightly lit kitchen. They then had him take a seat and placed a large plate with eggs, bacon, flapjacks, and a glass of warm milk in front of him. He was delighted that his family had made him breakfast and wished that he could stay with them all day, but John still had to go to work at the post office, for he hadn't missed a single day

of work in almost ten years. He quickly ate his breakfast and rushed out the door because he was almost late.

John was running to the post office through ice and snow for Smallstown had been hit with a blizzard. His pants were soaked up to his knees and his shoes were filled with slush, but no matter how cold he was or how ruined his clothes were, he still kept a smile on his face. He knew that he was about to do the thing he loved and would get many gifts from the people in Smallstown who knew it was his birthday. He stopped and checked his pocket watch to see how much time he had left before he would be late. The time read 8:25, John had to be at the office at 8:30. He shoved his pocket watch back in his pocket and started sprinting through the woods that were a shortcut to the post office.

John pushed his way through the prickly pine trees that scratched at his skin as he ran by. John's lungs felt as though they were about to burst, but he kept running because he could just barely see the Town Square through the trees a hundred yards away. He sped up to a sprint and was running so fast, he couldn't see the deep ravine that separates him from the office. He believed that he would make it on time if he just pushed himself to go a little faster. He picked up speed but just before he hit the treeline, his foot slipped on the edge of the fifty foot ravine. The world was spinning in a blur of white and green from the trees and snow. John tried to grab something to stop him from hitting the bottom but the first thing he reached for was a sharp rock that sliced his hand right down the middle. The last thing John could remember is him starting to see red blurs all around him from that blood that was spilling out of his hand and a hard thump as he smacked his head on the bottom of the ravine.

John woke with a flutter of his eyes. He looked up into the grey sky as he tried to remember what had just happened. Then his senses came in and he could feel the icy, cold snow surrounding him. He could also feel a stabbing pain in his hand. John realized what had

happened and tried to scream for help for he couldn't move, but no sound came out. He tried to move his body to see if he could stand up but to matter how hard he tried, his brain wouldn't tell his body to move. He lie there for a while just staring at the pale, white sky as he tried to move his legs. He finally got his feet to start working and it slowly spread up through his legs. He was able to stand up and walk around a little bit. Now, a normal person would acknowledge that their hand and head were both pouring out blood and had a broken leg that was twisted sideways, but John just snapped his leg back into place and started walking up the ravine.

As John walked into the post office he had a huge smile even though he rolled 50 feet down a ravine, but there was something sinister behind that smile. He also had a look in his eyes that you would see in a lion right before it pounced on an oblivious gazelle. He walked into the empty office and hung his coat on the coat rack and wrapped his fingers around a knife lying on the counter. His boss was in the back room facing away from him sorting through packages.

"It's about time you showed up John. Do you know how late you are?" Mr. Jones said as he turned around in his chair.

"You were supposed to be here..... Oh god, what happened?" He spun and saw John standing there with blood dripping from the side of his face. Mr. Jones' eyes slid down to John's bloody hand which was holding the knife.

"What happened? Do I need to get Doc?" Jones said as he stood to help John.

John replied, "No, I'm fine. It's just a scratch." John walked towards Jones with the knife slowly spinning in his hand.

"What are you doing with that knife?" Jones said as he slowly backed up.

"Oh I was just wanting to help you with some of those boxes over there." John pointed at the pile of boxes that Jones was working on.

"Alright then, you can help me but lets get you cleaned up first," Jones said uneasily. He started turning around to get some bandages, but soon as Jones turned around, John walked up behind

him and raised his hand and brought it down on Jones' back.

"Thanks for helping me get all patched up," John said as he pat Jones on the back. Jones smiled and put a handkerchief around John's hand and had John wipe the blood away from his head with a washcloth. As soon as John had gotten all the blood off of him, he started helping Jones with the boxes.

There must have been hundreds of boxes that they had to cut out of their bindings, put together and then fill. They had been working in the boxes for about an hour now and Jones hadn't noticed when John picked the knife back up. As Jones was working on cutting the bindings of a new set of boxes, John rose behind him and raised the knife. Just as Jones saw the shadow of John behind him and was about to turn around, John drive the knife down into the center of Jones' shoulders. Jones starred up in horror as he realized what had just happened. He tried to ask John why he had done it but his voice got caught in his throat as he slowly fell to the ground. John didn't know why he'd done it either. As if he snapped out of a trance, he blinked and realized what he had just done. He bent down to try to help Jones but he knew it was too late. One minute he was helping Jones with the boxes, then everything went black and he "awoke" to Jones laying in a pool of blood and a knife sticking out of his back. John didn't want to believe that it was him so he ran out of the office as fast as he could to try and get someone to help.

"Somebody help, a man has just been murdered!!!" John screamed as he stepped outside. People turned in his direction and wondered what was going on. When John repeated himself, everyone started to scream and panic for Smallstown had never had anything like this occur. Luckily, Doc was just around the corner so someone was able to rush and get him. John led Doc into the office and walked into the room where Jones was lying dead on the floor. Doc sighed and said that there was nothing that he could do at this point.

John fell in a heap and wept as Doc patted his back for everyone in Smallstown knew that Jones had been a very close friend of John's.

The police soon arrived to ask people what had happened. The first person, of course, that they asked was John for he was the only one with Jones at the time in the office. "I'm really not sure what happened. I was helping him unpack boxes when I blacked out or something. When I woke back up, he was dead with no sign of anyone else around," John explained while wiping tears from his eyes. If any other person was telling them this very unlikely story, they would have gone into further questioning, but since they knew John so well, they assumed that he was telling the truth. The problem was that John wasn't, something deep inside of him told him that he had killed Jones, but he didn't want to believe it.

Before John even got home, his wife had been informed of what happened. As soon as he got home, Mary greeted him with a big hug as he wept into her shoulders. "What's wrong daddy?," Emily said as she walked into the room with her stuffed bear tucked under her arm.

"Oh nothing sweetie, just something at work," John said as he quickly tried to wipe the tears from his eyes for he never wanted his five year old daughter to see him cry. Emily walked over to John and gave him a hug and held out her teddy bear.

"Here, Teddy makes me feel happy when I'm sad so if you're sad, I'll let him stay with you for the night." Emily said as she put the bear in her dad's hand. John looked down at the bear and started crying again and bent down to give Emily a hug.

"Thank you Emily, I'll make sure nothing happens to him." John said as he let go of her and stood up. Mary went into the kitchen and started to make John's favorite meal to try and cheer him up. She made mashed potatoes, pork chops, corn, and some fresh rolls with butter. As John ate silently, he thought of what had happened earlier. He was wondering if he had killed Jones, or if he just knocked out and

someone came in and killed him. John wanted to believe that he hadn't killed Jones and did a pretty good job at convincing himself that he didn't, but he knew he did. John was just worried that whatever had caused him to kill Jones would happen again. If it did ever happen again, he promised himself that he would turn himself into the police so he couldn't hurt anyone ever again.

"Emily time for bed!" Mary shouted as she brought blankets in from outside that were drying. She put the blankets on the bed as she waited for Emily so she could tuck her in. Mary finished putting the blankets on the bed but there was still no sign of Emily.

"Emily I said it's time for bed!" Mary shouted again as she looked around for Emily. Their house had three levels so since Mary was on the top floor, she guessed that Emily was in the basement playing with her doll house. Mary went down to the basement and looked around but Emily was nowhere in sight. Mary started to get worried as she called Emily's name again.

"Emily! Emily where are you!" Mary shouted frantically as she looked in all of the rooms they had in the basement. She tried to find John too to ask if he'd seen her recently. She went into their room and found John sleeping. She didn't want to wake him unless she really couldn't find Emily so she left him be. Mary thought that she would check the extra rooms just in case Emily had wandered into one of them. She was almost to last room when she found Emily curled up in the bed with one of her favorite blankets. Mary made a sigh of relief as she leaned against the doorway. She slowly went over the the bed to carry Emily to her room, careful not to wake her up. She stood over Emily and was about to pull back the blankets when she realized someone standing in the doorway behind her. She turned around and was ready to grab Emily if she had to and run, but she realized that it was just John.

"Oh, John it's just you, I thought you were asleep so I thought it was someone dangerous.," Mary sighed as she relaxed a little bit. John chuckled and walked through the doorway.

"Well that's where you're wrong Mary." John said as a sinister grin spread across his face.

"Oh, so you weren't asleep?" Mary replied a little confused by the statement.

"Oh no, I was asleep," John said as he slowly started walking towards Mary.

"I'm confused, you said I was wrong when I said you were were asleep," Mary said uneasily.

"No I said you were wrong about who was at the doorway." John croaked as his sinister smile spread even wider as he started chuckling and slowly pulled a steak knife out from behind his back. Mary slowly stepped back to grab Emily as she saw the knife in John's hand.

"John w-what's going on?" Mary stuttered.

"Why don't you ask Emily," John said as his chuckle turned into a full out howling laughter. Mary's eyes widened as she spun around to face Emily. Mary leaned over her and realized that she wasn't breathing. Mary quickly ripped that blankets off of her and saw the most horrifying thing she had ever seen. The white sheets they had were now drenched in blood coming from various parts of Emily's body. Mary screeched in horror as she tried to back as far away from John as she could.

"How could you!" She screeched as she threw books, lamps, anything she could find. John didn't reply, he just kept laughing as he kept walking towards Mary, unaffected by the objects being hurled at him. Mary started screeching at him to back up as she grabbed a set of sewing scissors to try and defend herself. As she was screaming, tears were pouring down her face for she knew that she had no chance of escaping. John kept slowing creeping towards her and was only five feet away from her. Mary tried to defend herself as long as she could but eventually slid down to the floor crying as she accepted her fate.

"John why are you doing this!" Mary screamed as John loomed over her with the knife slowly raising high over his head. Mary never heard John answer because by the time he did, he had already driven the knife deep into Mary's shoulder. As she sputtered out her last breath,

John fell limp onto the floor. He came back into consciousness and had no idea what happened. The last thing he remembers was taking a shower and then falling asleep while reading his book in bed. John looked around and hoped the he was in some type of a horrible nightmare. He stood up and saw his wife in a heap of her own blood and his daughter laying in blood covered sheets. John howled as he bent down to cradle Mary in his arms. Tears were streaming down his face as he knew that he had to stop himself from hurting anyone else. He was going to turn himself into the police but decided that that wouldn't be enough. He stood up and slowly walked towards the knife that he dropped on the floor. He picked it up with a trembling hand and spun the blade to face himself. He held it high above his head and let out a scream as he drove it towards him stomach.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" Allen screamed as he sprung up from his sweat stained white sheets. He was trembling as the psychiatrist walked in with his breakfast.

"Another one of those dreams Allen?" she asked as she grabbed a cloth to wipe the sweat from his face as she did every day.

"Yeah, this one wasn't as bad as it was when it actually happened. I think the medicine is working. This time I was a postman named John," Allen said as he took his daily injection.

"Ok well don't forget that your DID talk therapy got changed to 9:30. This is one of your last sessions before your final injection," the psychiatrist said as she arranged for the lethal injection to be given to Allen to ease everyone at the hospital from Allens screams in the middle of the night. Allen thought he was just getting his last dose of medicine before he was able to go home. They thought it would be better if he left with happy thoughts.....

**Riley Marino**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO  
Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## INTERNAL BATTLEFIELD

### Internal Battlefield

We were under the big, red tent, laying with our fuzzy blankets wrapped around each other. Emily had the speaker next to us and turned on our XC Playlist as we waited to warm up for our race. As we sat, we ate granola bar after granola bar, laughing with each other while watching the XC boys dance to “Sweet Caroline”, the most iconic song because it was played at every XC meet.

“Riley, look at Gottlieb!” said Emily, giggling at his ridiculous singing and dancing. I laughed along with her as I watched him frolic around our tent, screaming the song lyrics with the rest of the boys team.

“Oh, I almost forgot to talk to you about this. It has to do with Gottlieb!” Emily exclaimed. “Oh my gosh! Emily, I need to know,” I said excitedly. We ducked under the brightly colored blanket and she began to tell me her story. I watched her face as she began her story. She was adorable. Her face lit up and she had the sweetest little grin spread on her face, it filled me with butterflies. I watched her lips as she spoke, they looked so soft and pure. I was absolutely mesmerized.

All of a sudden, Coach Banta yelled, “Varsity girls, time to warm up!”

I quickly snapped out of my trance. We untangled from the blanket and threw it over our heads, grabbed our water bottles, and jogged to the starting line. I was breathing heavily

because Emily and I were laughing the whole way there. When we got to the start line, we saw a few other teams warming up so we began to run the first mile of the course as a warm-up. The seniors lined up first, I saw Emily line up with the juniors, then the sophomores lined up, and then I got in line with the freshman. We began to jog the first mile of the course and had positive conversations about the race to get everyone excited and in the right mindset for racing. While the other girls in my line were hyping each other up, I looked ahead of me to try and watch Emily. I caught myself staring at her fit figure and at the way she moved while she ran. Her upper body was still and her toned arms moved back and forth gracefully. She had a straight, tall posture and leaned forward a tad; she looked like a professional runner. From her lower torso down, she was very strong. Her upper legs had the perfect amount of muscle, making her body look muscular but not unattractive. Her calf muscles were beautiful and toned, similar to the other girls that she was running with. I noticed that her legs stayed in sync with the other juniors. She has a great body shape, I thought to myself, **EMILY IS SUCH AN AMAZING RUNNER.**

Suddenly, I tripped on a tree root that was bulging out of the ground, causing me to lose my footing. I gathered my conscience back in a matter of seconds and finished the mile run with the group. We found some nearby trees and began leg swings, then transitioned to stretching on the dewy, morning grass.

“Calf Stretch, let’s count! 1, 2, 3...” shouted one of our team captains as the entire group switched from leg swings to stretching.

Our captain continued to count and I glanced across the circle, catching a glimpse of Emily mid-stretch. To my surprise, Emily’s beautiful brown eyes gazed directly into mine. A wave of overwhelming emotions rushed over me. I was ecstatic but very confused. **WHY DID EMILY MAKE ME FEEL THIS WAY?** She continued to stare, her eyes sparkled and a goofy grin spread across her face.

She waved at me and said, “Hey best friend!” so

I waved back and smiled.

I felt an emptiness inside when I heard the word 'friend', there was something about the way it sounded in reference to Emily that I didn't particularly like. I did not appreciate that I was just Emily's friend, something in my head told me I wanted more. I decided to ignore this feeling and snapped back into concentration. The circle and switched legs and counted to fifteen, I felt ready for the race. It was five minutes until race time so I went to go get a sip of water, I grabbed my water and met Emily under a tree. "Are you excited for this race?" I asked her, nervously fidgeting with the lid of my water bottle.

"Totally!" Emily said, "Are you doing okay?"

I nodded my head and give her a weak smile. She looked at me, then tilted her head to the side, and gave me the biggest hug. When Emily hugged me, I felt something. It was a tingly feeling in my stomach, something that I had never felt before. Suddenly, the gunman told the varsity runners to walk up to the start line. My head was a big, jumbled mess, but it was race time. I began walking towards the start line, thinking to myself, I THINK I LIKE EMILY. Then, stepped up to the line and set my watch. I stared at the other girls and I panicked. THIS IS NOT OKAY, I told myself. WHAT AM I THINKING? I CAN'T LIKE EMILY. THIS IS AGAINST EVERYTHING THAT I'VE EVER KNOW. MY MORALS... MY VALUES... THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING!

A few moments later, I heard the gunman yell, "On your mark, get set, go!"

He shot the gun. We were off.

\* \* \*

There I was, standing on that shaggy, sandy rug, staring at my sorrowful reflection through a mirror made of delicate glass. My face was flushed pink, my baby blue eyes were swollen with tears; each droplet ran down my face like a raindrop runs down a soft, vibrant leaf. One drop, then another. The tears kept coming. I felt torn apart and so confused yet whole and renewed. I couldn't believe that this was happening to me. It made no sense to me but it

also made every bit of sense. My morals and values were crushed after this moment but the thought of making new rules and guidelines seemed so right. I looked away from my reflection to gather my thoughts and take a deep breath. Then, I adjusted my gaze. My eyes made their way down my shaky, pale legs until they reached my naked feet. The pink ballerina nail polish was partially picked away from my toes, revealing my nail beds. I had buried my feet in the soft, warm rug that was surrounded by clean tiles; I began to count the tiles to get my mind off of this life-changing realization, trying not to burst into tears. Once I was finished counting, I looked up and stared at myself in the mirror. I looked less nervous and my tears were gone, for the first time all day, I watched myself smile. RILEY, I thought. SHE IS YOUR BEST FRIEND... WHAT ARE YOU THINKING... THIS COULDN'T POSSIBLY WORK OUT... These thoughts started out small, then gradually turned into what felt like a swarm of bees, floating around me; she was all I could think about. Her brown eyes, that stared directly into my soul, like a key that was able to unlock my tender, loving heart. I couldn't get over the way her hair shined when the sun hit her hair follicles just right, giving it a beautiful dark brown complexion, like a box of dark chocolate that someone would be delighted receive on Valentine's day. The acne scars, gleaming red stains, symbolized the transition that she went through over the years; how she transitioned from a being a girl to becoming a woman. She was strong and had a nice, trim figure that made her look so incredibly beautiful. Her smile was the brightest of all; I couldn't get over her goofy grin or the way her lips separated before she spoke. Emily was perfect. I knew that she was only going to be my best friend, nothing more. I knew that. And for once, I was okay with that.

**Patrick Mason**

Age: 15, Grade: 9

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

Category: Humor

## MY HEAD STUCK IN A CHAIR

Fourth Grade was my favorite year in grade school. I could say it was because of many things, but to be honest it was the candy. Every day after recess the class would go inside for "Read Aloud." My classmates and I would get one piece of candy... green Jolly Ranchers, blue Dum Dums suckers, or peppermint candies, and then we would settle in. "Read Aloud" was a time to relax. The lights would be turned off and everyone would race to the bean bags. Those who did not get a coveted place on the bean bags would have to settle for normal plastic chairs, which for some unknown reason had a hole right in the middle of them. And then the teacher would begin reading.

We read many good books over the year, including "The Unwanteds", a story where the protagonist, Alex, and hundreds of others are banished from society for being outside their norms. Sadly, not all the books were that good in my 9-year-old boy opinion. In fact, there were many that were simply bad and boring. One day, while reading one of those bad books, I got bored. And when it comes to a fourth-grade boy being bored, it is never a good thing. Now you must understand that I was not exactly the most sensible person in elementary school. So being the shortsighted kid I was, I came up with a game to pass the time. The game was very simple: Could I stick my head through the hole in the middle of the chair? I

lined up my skull perfectly and shoved it in like you would shove a pen into its cap. I was in. I felt like a rocket scientist or the next coming of Einstein. Then I realized what I had done. I was stuck. Yes, my head was stuck in a hole of a chair. I tried and tried, but I could not get myself out.

My mind was racing. I went from Einstein to Justin Bieber and back to Einstein, then I had another genius idea. Instead of letting everyone know I got my head stuck in a chair, I would wait until the end of class when everyone left, and then stand up and pry myself free. It was the perfect plan. But then seven and a half seconds later, the fire alarm went off.

Now it was not a fire, but instead it was just a drill, through the consequences felt the same. Everyone filed outside except my friend Matthew, who had been watching what I had been doing. Being the good friend that he was, he ratted me out to the teacher.

My fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Pittman, is one of the nicest people I have ever met. But when she saw me with my head stuck in a chair during a fire drill, she got angry. She got really angry. To be fair, who wouldn't be angry if their 9-year-old student had their head trapped inside a chair. What happened next was a super awkward minute of trying to throw the chair off my head. This did not work. The clock was ticking and Mrs. Pittman had to go outside to account for all her students during the fire drill. And that meant, I had to go outside too, with a chair on my head.

My first attempt of going outside from my second-floor classroom failed as I could not get the chair through the doorway. I kept hitting the leg of the chair on the door frame which bounced me back, and even making me fall over once. I kept trying. Finally, I found the right angle and made it down the stairs and into the courtyard outside our building. While walking to my grade's designated position, I got a few confused looks from fellow classmates. I just stood there in line like every other fourth grader, except, I had a chair on my head.

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After what seemed like an eternity, the fire drill was finally over. I went back up the stairs and through the door of my classroom, using the same angle to fit the chair through the door frame. Mrs. Pittman, who was still angry, tried to yank the chair off my head using several different ways with no avail. She finally got some lotion and rubbed it on my ears. They were now slick and allowed me finally to slip free of the chair on my head.

I felt lighter. Maybe it was because there was no longer a chair on my head, but it felt good. Fourth grade went on and I still looked forward to "Read Aloud" time, but I always made an effort to get to a beanie bag and not be stuck in one of the plastic chairs. I always tried to get a green Jolly Rancher and the books didn't seem as boring as they had in the past. In fact, the books were quite good.

I also finally finished "The Unwanted". It ended with Alex, who once was deemed unneeded by society, now being better off by not being trapped in a boring life, but instead goes on to magical adventures. Maybe being different and creating excitement is a good thing.

### **Addison Mathes**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Pius X School,  
Moberly, MO

Educator: Christy Forte

Category: Short Story

## **IT WILL WORK OUT**

There once was a girl named Reese, she lived in a very nice house on the beach in Malibu, California. She was 10 years old at the time when she moved to California. Reese was originally from Florida but the reason she moved was

because her dad's job moved him, he is a construction worker. She was an only child and she lived with her father and grandma. Reese's mom had passed away when she was only 4, from lung cancer. She wasn't affected as much as her dad, because she was very little at the time of the incident. Her father's name is Chris and her grandmas' name is Mami. Mami was almost like Reese's fill-in mom, Reese is very blessed to have her, because if not she wouldn't have a mother figure in her life.

It was January 7th, Reese's birthday, she turned 12 and her dad got her a diary. In this diary, Reese wrote a lot of stuff, stuff like what normal teenagers would write. For example, if they had a bad day, good day, or about a little crush they have on this cute boy that is on the soccer team. One day while Reese was writing in her Diary...

1/10/19

I WONDER HOW MY DAD CAN DO ALL OF THIS I MEAN, HE HAS A PRE-TEEN AND NO WIFE AND WE ARE ALWAYS MOVING AROUND. I WONDER HOW IT ALL AFFECTS HIM. I JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW HE CAN DO IT ALL. I NEVER SEE HIM... IS HE HAPPY...SAD? WHEN I SEE HIM HE SEEMS USUALLY HAPPY, BUT HE'S JUST NOT THAT WAY HE USE TO BE. HE USED TO ALWAYS PLAY CARDS TOGETHER BEFORE WE MOVED HERE, BUT HE JUST DOESN'T SEEM HAPPY ANYMORE. WHEN I SAY, "I WONDER HOW MY DAD CAN DO ALL OF THIS" I'M JUST WONDERING HOW HE CAN JUST PICK UP AND MOVE ALL THE TIME, AND HAVE A DAUGHTER BUT STILL HAVE NO WIFE!! MAYBE HE IS JUST TRYING TO GET USED TO THE NEW LIFE WE HAVE UP HERE NOW... MAYBE HE WILL GO BACK TO HIS HAPPY WAYS ;)

The next day she went to school...

I woke up, got ready and my grandma took me to school. It was pretty normal at the beginning of the day. I went to my locker and got all the things I needed. I finally got into class and as soon as I sat down my teacher said "Reese, I need to see you outside."

I was nervous, I didn't understanding what was

going on. My teacher said frantically,  
"It's your dad, at work he got really hurt, he fell off of a ladder and he is in the hospital."  
It felt like a punch in the stomach, I just wanted to break down and cry. My teacher hugged me and said,  
"your grandma is here to pick you up, so please go grab your things" \*long pause\*  
"I'm sorry."  
I looked at my teacher and told her that I was okay... My grandma, with tears running down her face, looked at me and said,  
"let's go see your dad"  
I nodded my head and got in the car. It was quiet the whole ride to the hospital. We got to the hospital and I remember the nurses saying,  
"he is in critical condition."  
I looked up and she said, "would you like to see him?"  
With tears running down my face I followed the nurse to my dad. We had got to his hospital room #423. I opened the door and there my dad was lying down in his bed, I went and gave him a big hug! He was okay, he was a bit shaken by the look on his face, but he was okay. A couple of days later my dad was free to come home and lay in his own bed. I remember the day that I was walking into my house and we got my dad down to his bed, and Grandma said that dad isn't going to work for awhile, so we were going to be taking care of him. I was happy because I had my dad back, even if he was a bad condition... I still had him back. I new the days that he was at home were limited, so I was going to make an effort and try to be with him as long as possible. In the end it all worked out, because my dad got better and he was back to himself, and I was so happy. When he fell he hit his head and honestly him hitting his head on just the right spot... somehow, brought him back. I didn't feel alone anymore, I had my dad back.

1/20/19  
I AM A BIT HAPPY OF WHAT HAPPENED TO MY DAD BECAUSE WHEN HE HIT HIS HEAD IT'S LIKE I GOT MY DAD BACK BECAUSE NOW I COULD TELL HIM ANYTHING AND HE PLAY GAMES WITH

ME!!! EVEN THOUGH HE CAN'T GO BACK TO WORK FOR A LITTLE BIT HE WAS BACK TO HIS OLD HAPPY WAYS, I GUESS EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON.

**Alyssa McCue**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

## REDEMPTION

### Redemption

The dingy carpet was weathered by years, much like her soul.

The windows were all boarded up; large bifocals distorted her vision.

The crumbling church a reflection of her broken faith.

When she was young,  
she believed the walls of the church were held together by redemption.

Towering over her, they created a fortress,  
overgrown with secrets and stories.

She danced with the kaleidoscope sun  
beaming through stained glass windows.  
The sky was her confidante,  
a vessel where she would pour out her secrets  
and stories,  
ones she couldn't bear to admit aloud.  
Accompanied by tears, her sins and regrets  
cascaded  
into the blue valley of the sky.

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The remains of the window pane created sharp,  
jagged shadows against the crumbled walls.  
No longer did the kaleidoscope sun comfort her.  
The sky once filled her empty heart and gave it  
purpose,  
now she felt nothing,  
she was nothing.

The walls finally collapsed under the weight of  
every sinner's history.  
Broken glass clouded the past,  
pieces of sunlight lost in the wreckage.  
The sky had forgotten her name,  
along with her regrets.  
Like her they were lost forever, abandoned  
in the deep sapphire sky.

**Alyssa McCue**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High  
School, Olathe, KS  
Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

## RAIN

I remember the rain.  
The smell, the way it fell from leaf to leaf gaining  
size and speed  
until it hit the ground.  
When I was young,  
they told me raindrops were the tears of God.

But they were wrong, I thought, God can't cry.  
If raindrops were God-tears, what does that make  
thunder and lightning?  
A God footstomp or a God sneeze?

It's okay, I told myself.  
It wasn't the first time they had lied to me,  
and it would be far from the last.

I remember you said you would stay,  
quoting the old Ben E. King song we used to play  
in the car,  
you said you would stand by me.  
But these, among other lies lay  
with the broken promises you left behind.

The rain fell harder, striking against the roof.  
You promised to fight for me and protect me.  
But now, I know better.  
I remember to check the weather.

If raindrops are God-tears, then what is he crying  
for?  
Didn't he create the storm?  
I step outside to escape,  
every raindrop pounds against my skin,  
but gently, lightly.

The driveway was empty,  
your yellow tail lights already escaped down the  
street.  
I watched them shrink and blend into the falling  
rain  
until you turned the corner  
darkness swallowed up the last I ever saw of you.

Together, our tears hit the ground.  
I was wrong, when I was young.  
God can cry, and he does often because he  
knows  
nothing can grow without rain.

**Katie McSwain**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Kirkwood High School,  
Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Deanna Hempen

## Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

# TCOG

"Woah! Sorry, Miss!" Alex exclaimed as the small woman with a very large bag scurried away.

Alex took a few more steps toward the intersection when he noticed a sparkle on the ground. He bent down to pick it up, wondering if it had fallen out of the woman's bag.

Despite sitting on the dirty New York sidewalk, it was a clean, lightning shaped piece of glass. He turned it over in his hands, examining it. Abruptly, he had a realization that sent a chill down his spine. The glass was identical to the scar on his forearm.

Engraved in a messy cursive on the edge of the glass were the letters TCOG. The same letters as the note. They must be connected to Cora. Alex's sister, Cora, disappeared weeks ago. His head spun with these new possibilities washing over him.

Alex snapped back into focus, realizing that he needed to quickly find the small woman. As he looked around, he folded the glass carefully into the paper of the note and tucked it into his pocket. He had found the note on his bedside stand yesterday, pressed into his favorite book. It read:

MONSIEUR ALEXANDRE DAVID BARNETTE,  
THE COURT NEEDS TO RESOLVE AN URGENT  
MATTER. PLEASE MEET AN ATTENDANT AT THE  
INTERSECTION OF DITMARS BOULEVARD AND  
27TH AVENUE. COME ALONE, AND TELL NO ONE  
OF YOUR VISIT. WE WILL SEE YOU TOMORROW AT  
SUNDOWN.

TCOG

TCOG. He still wondered who that could be, but the sickening feeling in Alex's gut insisted that it had to do with Cora. He had been distraught since she had disappeared, worried that his parents would never cease their arguing to find her. Tears surfaced in Alex's eyes as he recalled the moment he found the note. He had nearly burst with excitement at the thought that he may be closer to finding Cora. The note, the glass, the small woman; they were all things that could get him there. He had read the note so many times that it was now memorized.

Alex quickened his pace trying to find the small woman. When he got to the corner of the next block, he paused before his breath snagged in his lungs. There she was again, turning into a small bakery. He sprinted after her trying to catch up, and slipped inside just as the door was about to swing shut.

Alex pretended to examine the beautiful French pastries, anxiously awaiting the woman's attention. After what felt like a century, he heard his name announced by an old woman with a very thick French accent.

"Monsieur Alexandre! Monsieur Alexandre Barnette! Are you in here?" She called his name as if the room was bustling full of people. He stepped forward.

"Bonjour," Alex said awkwardly. "I am Alex Barnette. How did you know my name?"

"Ah, yes. Come, Monsieur, come. Welcome to the court." Alex followed her back behind the counter, wondering why she sounded so distant. Did this small, frail woman leave him the note? Is she TCOG? They wandered into a back room of the bakery. A light flashed and Alex was suddenly blinded by the shining of what seemed to be a walkway of...glass?

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"Monsieur, welcome to the court. We have been awaiting your arrival. Why, monsieur, you are practically royalty here!"

"Merci, Madame," Alex responded tentatively.

"No, no, Monsieur. Merci to you! You are the one promised to save us!"

"I... I... am?" Alex stuttered. "By whom?"

"Follow through that doorway and you may find out. I do believe you will be pleased, Monsieur. Do not worry."

With these instructions, Alex shuffled forwards towards two giant, fogged-glass doors. With a light tap, the doors swung open to reveal a glorious throne room. The room was full of girl-like beings, some young and some old. All of them wore fragments of glass; some had it woven into their hair, others wore glass necklaces or shoes. He skimmed the room, amazed by the beautiful silver aura encompassing, what he decided to call, the glass fairies. As he continued to gawk in amazement, he heard a familiar voice call out.

"Alex."

His head shot forward. Sitting atop a glass throne, with a crown on her head, was his little sister.

"Cora," he breathed. "What is this place?" She, too, was encompassed by a beautiful silver aura, hers brighter than the rest.

"This is The Court of Glass. And I am the Reine, their queen. We have been waiting for you to find us, for we," Cora gestured elegantly around the room, "...could not seek you out ourselves. I have something I must tell you."

"Who are you? What are you?"

"Alex, we are royals, born to save the court. We have been called back." She rose slowly and

gracefully walked away from her throne towards Alex.

"What...why...how?" He stuttered, the wave of information crashing over him. "What does that mean?"

"Our parents were royals who ruled the court. Long ago there was, well, an accident. Their memories, and powers were wiped away and they became normal, mortal people."

"What powers?"

"They were able to manipulate glass."

A short laugh escaped Alex before he contained it and screwed up his face. "They could... move glass? That doesn't seem very impressive."

"They could do more than just move glass. They could bend the illusions that glass creates. Our parents could create portals through mirrors where they could travel, send messages, and in the most dangerous times, hide. They created portals large enough to hold our entire court. Alex, when their powers were taken away they were given to us." With that last comment, a silence crept across the room, only to be broken when a small fairy girl began to speak.

"Reine, I do not believe he has accessed his powers yet. Look." She gestured towards Alex's forearm.

"Why, I think you might be right, Miss Fayette." Cora gave the girl a smile, which made the young fairy blush madly.

"What is she talking about?" Alex interjected.

"Do you remember when you cut your arm from the window breaking when you were younger?"

"Yes, I still have the scar." Alex attempted to roll up his sleeve, but Cora reached over and pulled

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it back down.

"That is not what I asked. I asked if you remember the actual event, not just stories of it."

"Well, no. I don't. I just remember mom and dad telling me what happened."

"Exactly." She pulled her sleeve up and turned her wrist over revealing a scar almost identical to Alex's. Her's, however, had a window into it that showed sparkling silver-blue liquid running through it her arm. "I have the same scar, but not the same injury. Our parents never saw mine."

"What are the scars for? Why can I see through yours?"

"Show me your arm," Cora demanded. Alex raised his arm slowly, trying to steady the shaking. Holding it in front of him, he watched Cora clench her fist, then open it, revealing the TCOG note and piece of glass in her hand.

"Woah." The sound escaped his mouth before he could process it.

"Yes. In just a moment you will be able to do the same." As soon as she said that her expression hardened. She grabbed Alex's upward facing wrist, squeezing it tight. Carefully, she set the lightning shaped piece of glass perfectly aligned with his scar. She began to speak again with a voice of authority. "Alexandre David Barnette agrees to forever promise his life to The Court of Glass. May everything he does contribute to its benefit."

Cora pressed her finger down on the center of the glass. After a long moment, the glass began to melt into his skin. He began to sweat as a searing sensation ran up his arm. Then, all at once, it ceased. His mind felt sharper and more alert. He looked down to find that the sparkling silver-blue liquid now ran through his veins as well. Cora released Alex's arm, which fell to his side. He

looked down at the glass walkway to see his reflection. He now had a silver aura glowing around himself, as bright as Cora's.

The court of fairies knelt down and in unison spoke, "Chevalier."

Knight. Alex had become the knight of the court. Their defender and protector. A prideful smile spread across its face before it was interrupted by a concerned frown.

"What is it?" Cora inquired.

"What will our parents think happened to us?"

## **Abby Micke**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: South High School,  
Saint Peters, MO

Educator: Amanda Bramley

Category: Poetry

# FALLING INTO AUTUMN

October  
to November to  
December.

Vibrant orange, vintage yellow,  
faded oak brown, and burgundy slowly in the  
making of Autumn's leaves,  
like the metamorphosis of a butterfly.

Goosebumps flood my skin  
when kissed by the crisp and chilly air.  
My fuzzy maroon flannel pajama  
pants soak in the warm smoke smell  
from the red ardent fire,  
leaving the memories in the gentle cotton.

The ridiculous cartoon turkey mug  
earns a grin each time I gradually take  
a sip of the hot cocoa that acts as  
a fire inside me,  
heating my frigid heart.

What's not to love about October,  
November,  
and December?

## Harper Miller

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High  
School, Chesterfield, MO  
Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# NO PROMISES

"You're really leaving tomorrow?" Violet asked with wide, glassy eyes that begged me to answer in the negative.

I looked around us, where we sat atop our bikes at the side of the Lakes Market and Deli gas station. The air, which smelled of gasoline and Marlboros, served as a stark contrast to the freshness of the baby blue sky overhead. The sun beat down on the asphalt of the gas station parking lot, the heat creating a mirage across its surface. Clouds were few, and so were troubles

as we each enjoyed a different flavor of Ben and Jerry's ice cream, straight out of the carton. The Lakes Market and Deli was an isolated safe haven for us, unburdened by the obnoxious car horns and tire squeals that frequented the rest of the neighborhood; free of children's shrieks and adult's listless chatter; untouched by the urgency of the outside world. The gas station ambled on its own time, which aligned with ours perfectly as we passed each humid summer by in a peaceful, lazy, slumber.

As I peered at the secluded world before us, I began to feel the nostalgia setting in prematurely, as I prepared to miss what I hadn't even left yet. I turned to Violet, a grave expression of affirmation on my face, "Yes, the plane leaves at 10:00."

Violet's eyes sunk to her shoes, all hopes, however irrational, dashed. I watched reality dawn on her as her brow furrowed and her breathing became labored. I noticed that the ice cream carton I held in my hand had begun to sweat, and I followed a fat drop of sweet, chocolate liquid as it rolled sluggishly down the side. The ice cream hit the sidewalk with a splat, and simultaneously, I felt a drop of saltwater pat my thigh, which sat curled below my cheek on my bike seat.

I hurriedly set my ice cream on the ground below me and advanced to envelop my friend in a hug, burying my face, which had become a roadmap of rivers, in her shoulder. Soft sobs tore through the both of us, accelerating until they became rhythmic and thunderous like timpani.

Finally, our deafening cries subsided into burdened sniffles as we untangled ourselves from a fierce embrace. The both of us retreated into a state of reticence as we pondered the nearest future and absent mindedly shoveled the last of our ice cream into our mouths. We proceeded to dispose of our empty cartons and mounted our bikes. Our mood brightened as we rode out of our fortress of solitude and back into the wilderness of suburbia, the wind playfully nipping our faces and tossing our hair; as we stole glances at each other and giggled when the

other's bike would wobble from its rider's lack of concentration.

We arrived at our wide, open cul de sac, which sat under the same cerulean sky as the gas station, but could support no further similarities. Our neighborhood bubbled with life, dozens upon dozens of young children scurrying through the wide street that ran in a U shape between two curved rows of two story houses. Adults roamed the sidewalks and manned the porches, monitoring the gaggle of children that flew from yard to yard and through the streets, while also engaging in light hearted neighborhood gossip. Cars would race through the curve of the neighborhood in timed intervals, and with every rumble of an engine, came the warning shout of an adult, signaling all activity to clear the street.

Violet and I rode into our beloved chaos, dodging young toes that crossed our paths and basketballs that threatened to send us over our handlebars. Following the bend of the road, we neared our two duck-yellow houses, separated by one brown neighbor. We shouted our usual farewells as we rode into our separate lawns, barely stopping to hop off our bikes before throwing them on the grass. We each ran inside, storm doors slamming shut behind us.

#### Four Years Prior

I looked out from under my tower of bedsheets and duvets, tucked tightly under my mattress to seal me in a cozy prison until morning time, at my mom. Her finger leaned limp and heavy on my bedroom light switch, a look of exhaustion on her face as she dragged to the finish line of the bedtime routine of her stubborn and tireless first grade daughter. In the interest of prolonging the bedtime process, I hastened to stop her from flipping the switch by announcing, "Mom, did you know that Stephanie Singer moved today?"

"Is that so?" my mom answered in a voice

that did little to mask her exasperation.

"To California," I continued, unbothered by my mom's sleepy disinterest, "Her dad got a new job."

"Ah, I see."

"That's so sad, mom. She has to leave all her friends," I exclaimed in an innocent air of confusion and preposterous indignation.

My mom let forth a drawling sigh as she accepted defeat in our bedtime duel. She let her finger slip from the light switch and sulked across the room to perch herself on the edge of my bed, preparing a proverbial response that my young mind would be capable of considering, while also serving as a conversation closer.

"That's not such a bad thing," she began, tentatively and gently, "Stephanie doesn't really have to leave all her friends. She can still stay in touch with all of them if she wants. Now, she just gets to explore a new place and meet tons of wonderful new people. It's like she's starting a new chapter in a book; she can always revisit the old chapters, but now she gets to discover exciting new ones as well."

I contorted my brow into a furrowed position as I pondered her words and tried to make sense of the positivity she lended to a fate that seemed so horrendous. I spoke softly and slowly, notes of anxiety ringing clear in my voice, "Mom, I like living here. I don't ever want to move away. Promise we'll never move?"

My mom paused, gazing at her daughter's forehead, wrought with deep trenches filled to the brim with murky concerns; peering at her doe eyes, which pleaded for a merciful reassurance. She sighed at length once again before relenting to her daughter's incessant desperation, "I **PROMISE**, we'll never move."

Had I been wiser in my youth, I would've recognized the invalidity of such a promise; a promise that foresaw nothing of future possibilities, a promise that was unfair and unjust, as my mother was no prophet; it was a promise that would tarnish the significance of all further vows in my eyes when, inevitably, it would be

violated.

The morning of August 16th didn't explode into existence, killing all life and happiness in its wake immediately, as I had expected. Rather, the sun waxed gradually into sight, the stars dissipated one by one, the air warmed by singular degrees, and my eyelids opened slowly. There was no panic, no rush, no apocalypse. The morning took its time, stretching its limbs and unhinging its jaws to yawn deep, satisfactory yawns.

My mind rose to the tempo of the morning, enjoying the serene languidness of the dawn. Tranquility and vague optimism flowed through every sun ray that filtered through my bedroom window. Not one concern was capable of cohabitating the sweet environment that morning had created. At least, not immediately.

However, soon a fat, dense cloud passed in front of the sun and planted roots in front of the golden projector. My bedroom became grey and cool. The spirits of the sunrise wilted like old, cut flowers. I rose from my bed, hesitantly, and shuffled to my window, pulling one curtain aside. I peered out the glass and down at the street where a moving van sat on the curb beside my front lawn. A colossal beast, hulking, obnoxious, and ugly, it sat there, unmoving, unwavering; waiting to be fed the contents of my only home.

A thick haze descended on my eyes, my mind, and my heart as I let the curtain fall and marched dutifully to my bathroom to get ready. The haze proved a debilitating smog as it distorted the reality before me. The hallway to my bathroom stretched into a never ending, lightless corridor, and I struggled, to no avail, to scramble to the bathroom door where I felt the light would be. When finally I met the end of the corridor, I thrust open the bathroom door with frightful impatience to expose the light, and while I found it, I was surprised by what else lay

before me. A desert wasteland was spread out beyond the door, reaching as far as the eye could see in any direction. I stepped inside and felt the ground, riddled with cracks and scars, shriek and plead for water. I walked farther into the desert abyss, hoping against hope to find someone, anyone to help me. A tumbleweed bounced across my path and a vulture screamed above my head. I realized I was utterly alone in this desolate setting. I walked further still, finally happening upon something other than rock and dust. A towering metal pole stood in front of me, reaching heights of fifteen feet at least. I squinted to see the top of the pole where a traffic sign sat in gallant display. Written on the sign, I made out the words, "Welcome to Colorado!".

Downstairs, I met my family, clutching suitcases and carry ons, saying their final goodbyes to the house, each in a visible daze, as I was. My youngest brother approached me and threw his tiny arms around my waist in a hug, tears as small as he was streaming quickly down his cheeks. I felt my heart crack like the desert from my nightmares, and single tears blinked from both my eyes. Gone were the smiles and the giggles, the bike rides to The Lakes Market and Deli, the constant jovial squeals of one neighborhood child or another. Gone was the future I had planned, taking each challenge in stride with my best friend, Violet, at my side. Withered was the lush green grass and the electric blue sky I lived under, replaced with bare, dry earth and clouds that choked the sun.

We made our way to the car, loading the last of our luggage into the trunk, seeking for an excuse to stall our departure. We found it as we spotted our neighbors marching solemnly down the sidewalk towards our house. First came Violet, who squeezed me with enough force for the two of us, who sobbed in harmony with me for a private eternity. Next came my friend,

Gavin, from across the street, my partner in all things mischievous, and the first boy I ever liked. He hugged me quickly, as was all that could be expected of a boy his age, but I knew there was limitless affection in his action. Then came Kari, the woman who ran a home daycare at her house, which I attended from the age of three until third grade. This woman, who had seen me grow for so many years, sent me off with tears and a matronly embrace that both soothed my sobs and exacerbated the ache that throbbed inside of me.

Just like this, one by one, our neighbors filed in succession, pronouncing their farewells, each leaving tear stains on my clothes and I on theirs; each shattering my heart into one more piece.

Finally, time forced its hand and demanded we leave for the airport. Reluctantly, we piled into the car, and pulled out of the driveway. We stopped to give a final wave to the crowd of people gathered on our lawn. I looked out my window to see a sea of waving hands and heard a chorus of affectionate goodbyes. I felt harsh sobs rising in my throat, but I found that I could no longer cry, as an icy numbness had spread over my mind and body, freezing my reservoir of tears.

We sped away too quickly and in the blink of an eye, the mass of people was gone from view. I stared blankly out the window at the scenery rushing past, unthinking and mindless. My mom turned around from her seat at the front of the car, stealing a glance at a daughter she could barely recognize anymore; a daughter who wasn't chortling with laughter and singing with her eyes; a daughter who wasn't bouncing with life, but one who was sinking with grief. I suppose she was trying to comfort me when she said, "It's all going to be okay, Penny. You're going to make lots of new friends, your school is great, we're going to explore the mountains, and try lots of new things. It's going to be fun, you'll love it, I PROMISE."

I tore my gaze away from the window to meet her worried eyes, an expression not of anger on my face, but of deep hurt. The memory

of a promise she made to me four years prior floated to mind, and I shook my head in heart wrenching denial and disbelief. "No," I pleaded, my voice raspy and cracking with emotion, "please, no more promises."

## **(Yerin) April Moon**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## FLAME

Flame

Time stops for no one-- unless I steal a few seconds here and there. As a violinist, I constantly manipulate time to exhibit different characters and moods through my playing. I may stretch a phrase to express sinking lament, but later quicken my pace to illustrate a playful character. I wouldn't call myself a criminal, though, because I always give back as much as I take.

From a musical perspective, RUBATO is referred to as "robbing time". By employing this skill, musical notes loosen from its prison of emotionless rhythm into a living entity of song, enabling music to act as a storyteller. Using RUBATO, the music I play melts into an natural voice, mimicking that of a human as my violin speaks with organic nuances in its breath and tone. Without it, music lays flat and stiff, adhering to the rules of tempo and intonation, but missing the emotion and character. Similar to how people speak in their own nuances, pausing to breathe between different phrases and varying lilts in their tone, every musician has

their own interpretation of how to push and pull the tempo to transform the music into a unique story.

I love playing with musical time. Unfortunately, I tasted the bitter tang of my own medicine as time was stolen from me.

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The blazing summer sun began to sink on our final evening of camp as the last of our daily group meetings came to a close. For the past three weeks, I had attended a gifted academy alongside 330 other rising juniors selected from around the state. The camp loosely outlined a college lifestyle, offering major and minor classes alongside lectures and a vast assortment of activities throughout the day. Starting from awkward smiles and introductions, we grew to be each other's second family in merely three weeks. We recognized each other's love of unconventional thought and enthusiastically exchanged ideas that we had kept bottled up, for fear that no one could understand. I committed to make the most of every day by stepping out of my comfort zone to meet new campers or try a skill I had never heard of before, but at the same time, I couldn't help but regretfully count down the days we had left. As each day swept by, dread pooled in my mind, reminding me that I would have to eventually leave my friends here and face the realities of standardized testing and back-to-school preparation. I silently cursed the passage of time for stealing away the most enriching, inspiring three weeks of my life. The academy served as a one-time experience I could never relive, and it was screeching to a halt before my eyes. I could not turn back time or force it to slow down, and I believed that my safe haven would forever be destroyed. I forcefully shoved away these thoughts, hoping to savor my last night while it lasted. Mysteriously instructed to head outside in complete silence, I shuffled through the crowd of students, expecting to hear low whispers and confused giggles. Instead, I was only met with

the soothing sounds of crickets and footsteps on rustling grass. We were led around a expansive field, where a fresh wax candle propped inside a paper cup was handed to each of us. As we stood around the perimeter of the field, my heart pounded with expectant adrenaline. I had no idea what to expect, as the situation was extremely odd out of context--the complete silence, candles, circling an empty field-- we might as well have been summoning spirits on our last day.

Once everyone gathered into a large, lopsided circle around the field, the director of the academy, lovingly referred to as Prof K., walked to the center. After saying a few closing remarks, he lit his own white candle in the middle of the student circle, its small flame flickering in the sunset. The faculty and residential assistants surrounded him, where he lit their candles with his own. Like a bud blossoming into a flower, the faculty and RAs expanded outside of their tight circle and made their way to us with their flames, which we then passed on to our neighbors. As we passed our fire to each other, the dark field slowly became illuminated with hundreds of flickering candles. "We will now begin our farewells with one of many communities you have created here, your major class. Please find your class and professor at this time," Prof K. announced. The silence was shattered by the yells of students and faculty alike, attempting to find their classes among hundreds of people.

My eyes darted across the field, searching for any familiar faces in my major class amongst the blur of running teenagers. I spotted a close friend cluelessly roaming around and quickly caught up to them.

"Have you found anyone else in our class?" I asked, slightly breathless from sprinting.

"No, but I hear someone singing our song!"

I closed my eyes and attempted to drown out the chattering of all the other juniors trying to find their own classes, and I faintly made out someone singing "IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD

AS WE KNOW IT...”, coincidentally the name of our major course. Weaving my way through the other 330 people zigzagging across the field, I eventually found myself alongside our bright-eyed professor, who was booming out the lyrics in his vibrant Hawaiian shirt. Carefully maneuvering our candles so we didn't burn ourselves, we formed a small circle and expressed our final thoughts and goodbyes, thanking each other and our professor who inspired our creative outlets in every way possible. Tilting our heads towards the darkening sky, we scream-sang the chorus of “It's the End of the World as We Know It”, not caring if we sounded offkey or had no sense of rhythm.

Prof K.'s voice pierced the air, announcing, “Find your minor class!” The scramble to find our new groups began once more, and before we knew it, Prof K. had already called for us to find our housemates. Attempting to make ourselves heard over all the other houses, we continued to scream our house call, louder and louder, until our throats were scratchy from yelling. At this point, wax heavily dripped into my paper cup, melting my candle into a shorter and shorter length. I observed other candles slowly flickering out, but someone nearby would always offer their own flame to rekindle the fire, as if they were buying us a few more minutes of time to savor all together. By now, we were allowed to regroup with whichever group of people we liked. I constantly found myself in a new circle of friends everywhere I turned, from the group I always played cards with every night, the kids I would listen to classical music with and dance around to, lunch and dinner buddies, people I danced with at the weekly dances, and more. To my surprise, I found tears streaming down my face, realizing the sheer number of different groups of that we had all created in a mere three weeks. Though I was a crying mess on the outside, my sickening dread began to dissipate as I witnessed a single flame sparking hundreds of others, representative of

how our time together would last as we shared our fire of passion to the world. Not many students here were musicians like me, but I collaborated with so many unique people in such harmony that we were music to my ears. Each distinct group, whether it be through classes, housemates, or hobbies, represented a unique story, and every member within each group collaborated in such harmony that their shared bond was music to my ears.

As I packed my belongings, my last daily schedule slipped out of my folder and fluttered to the ground. “Week 4” was typed at the bottom, though the Academy lasted for only three weeks. I smiled, as it finally hit me. I didn't need to worry about my time and communities at camp ending at Week 3.

With RUBATO, time can never just be stolen—it must be returned. Though three weeks passed like milliseconds, the time of Week 4 is my compensation. Week 4 lasts forever, and it serves as the opportunity for the groups we made in the Academy to thrive. Time stops for no one, but it is flexible and full of possibility--and I strive to light the candles of society with the fire of passion, kindled by individual flames of my peers, to compose the melody of my story.

## **Ryan Morton**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educators: Jason Lovera, Laura Michael

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

# IT FLOATS

Present. Gravity's ash carries a fleeting precaution for the regrets constructed from light's absence. Tragedy buried It amongst the remains of Venus, swallowed by the mouth of the holy consumer. Each groove bitten out of it by a misshapen piece of steel; it devours a vastness. Each hole poked through by the raging teeth of a forgotten god summarized by Time. Each end of the lip torn into sharp angles, smiling in the face of peril. It is.

Yesterday. The vessel, weeping itself into a teardrop, sat just South, untouched and ruptured. Wires and electronics hovered, blown about by solar winds. The cleft between the two pieces of galactic machinery formed a crypt for the unholy participants of an impromptu organic mass. There were women and children and men suspended in Time by the bonds of what they could grab before a raging cataclysm brought their convergence with consequences. Metal twirled and clashed, fueling disarray amongst the stars. It sings.

Three years. Song from the Sun tells this most horrific truth, it strums the strings of a guitar most fatal. How grotesqueness festered in the bloody tears of the human soul, a fury reverberated with growing impatience through a vase-shaped ship. Lights flashed in and out. Soylent supplies went dry long ago. As did water. Hunger and thirst compounded into a surge, birthing a mutiny of a size it has never seen before. It knows.

Forty-five years. A malignant prophecy ticked with each second, fulfilled between the wrong sheets. Accidental moans heard by accidental ears pressed against a thin wall. The steel was driven home by glistening hands. Its spinal cord is somewhere out there amongst the stars, separated by in a single slice; its stomach vaporized by cool radiation. A man becoming it. It could not hear the airlocks open, and the feeling of space's gust was lost on its dying nerves. Its eyes rolled back for milliseconds. Soon they shot out of their sockets, the blood, frozen and sputtering, propelled it forward. It screams.

Sixty-eight years. They boarded for the rest of

their lives. Bright and youthful faces reflected in a hunk of steel that was supposed to sail them into the cosmos and beyond. Two of them make eye contact, their faces scarlet and hot. The experiment, a hundred years in the making, set to see the extent of man's vitality in the void. Every year they planned to call and run tests on the participants. They stopped contact after the fifteenth. It waits.

One hundred seventy-nine years. They sat on the copper sands of Mars with their necks bent like a razor blade twice used, gazing at the storm that rumbled towards them. The astronauts had lost signal with Houston three Earth hours ago. It took half that time for all of the colors to flee from their faces. Now, all they had was acceptance. They both had families back on Earth. Brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers. One of the astronauts, the one with blue eyes, struggled to look at his partner's gray eyes and, with his meandering lips, gave his final testament to the only other person on this rock. It comes.

Two hundred eighty-eight years. They were supposed to challenge the conventions of science within the public. Waiting for a takeoff that would take them through the atmosphere and into history, their hands were held together in a knot like those in their stomachs. A simple equation gone awry, sending the travelers nowhere. The engine started, but it quickly fell back to its podium. Smoke rose and a rumble of thunder erupted contained by the atmosphere alone. The collective jaws of scientists went slack as they fell to their knees and stared at the visceral nightmare falling apart before them. It breaks.

Three hundred seventeen years. Tail-wagging, she sat tall looking at the cocoon they'd woven for her from the steel of their tanks. A fat tongue hung from the lean dog's mouth, swaying as the rocket careened back and forth. The flashing lights and buzzing radio drowned out her howls at a moon unseeable. Her eyes drifted over the vehicle, looking for the food they didn't provide for her. A yelp escaped her mouth as she lays

down. They had said she was a very good girl when they shut the door and locked it without a key in mind. Slumber found the animal when a heat wave came over the chamber and eroded the dog's fur. "Goodnight Laika". It robs.

In perpetuity. The last transmission had played over the radio with the quiet collapse of the ship. The orbit departed, popping steel framework fell towards the Earth. Flames streaked the vehicle as the acceleration ripped it apart, and Laika was gone in seconds. The ship and the dog were nothing but swirling atmospheric particles when the Pacific was visible. These particles, her particles, rose into the sky, depositing into the universe over the centuries. Part of her was the beginnings of the Martian storm, part of her was in the knife lodged in its back, part of her was in the food the passengers of the vase-shaped ship scarfed down. Some of her lights the cigarettes of her assassins and some of her is the stardust that controls heavenly bodies. Some even sit upon it. And It floats.

## **Ryan Morton**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educators: Jason Lovera, Laura Michael

Category: Short Story

# LOST IN THE GRAY

A forlorn felt-tip pen stains my nails scarlet as Tiny Dancer plays in the background. Rough fingers dig into the buttery, a little-too-sweet popcorn. Slip, slip, slip. Phantom he said, evil they said. Phantom isn't such a nice word. Not that it isn't there, it's there. Promise. Still, not

much good for dancing. Still, my heart beats. Still, my daughter dances on the television he has given me, her feet pointed at a perfect attitude. She gets that from me.

I was something of a little star myself when I was in the seventh grade. Won all the awards, got myself called the primadonna. It was center stage after stage. From SWAN LAKE to SLEEPING BEAUTY, bright lights twinkled in my eyes wherever I went. Another life I guess. No, no. I gave that all up for the 'show biz' as we in the industry call it. Jeanette never will. She's too good a dancer to quit. Raul and I get to tour with her across the good old US of A. Makeup needs to be powdered, and dresses, oh how their frills and lace flow in dance, need to be fitted.

On the film, Jeanette wears her pale green leotard and tights. She is so small, her sixth birthday was just last Tuesday. Her dress hangs loosely on a doll's frame, but I am not there to help her with it. I wish I was. She is tripping over it now. I look at her, and there are tears in her eyes. I remember this one now. I was in the audience. I remember buying Jeanette her dress and shoes just a little too late, and they only had them in a few sizes up. I screwed up my mascara watching her fumble around the stage. I remember Raul roaring at her for messing up in front of the directors who would sit in the audience from time to time. There seems to be an issue. There is an issue. The television has flashed and my beloved's no longer present. Some person has wandered onto the stage. It is a woman. Gaudy, beat up dress, a grey robe turned brown with must and wear. Her back is a hook and a river flows down her face. She looks lost. The ballerinas keep dancing, the music is only rising in crescendo. Violins and drums pound my ears. The woman, no a girl really, is scratching her skin to the beat of the music. Strands of blood runs free with each rake of her fingers. Hands are clasped upon her ears. A violin sings. Then a drum. A violin. Drum. Violin. Drum. Violin. Drum. She cries

for it to end. Violin. Drum. Drum. Drum.Violin.  
Silence.

The screen turns back on.

Lab coat, straight jacket, rainbow windbreaker. No more popcorn. Home videotapes unwind around a black box under the screen. Jeanette is playing on the porch of our West County home in this one. She is eleven and smiling at the frogs hopping across our lawn. "Hello Mr. Froggy," says Jeanette as she crouches down to jump like one. It is a joy to see her grow up.

I remember shooting this film of her. It was a Spring day, but I couldn't feel it. I didn't dare to. My room's sole window had been bolted shut the day Jeanette started acting. Didn't make a difference in video quality. The entire room is spotless. I clean it three times a day every day. I was told not to leave the room when Raul was gone, so I don't. Sometimes, I didn't wake up until noon if I didn't have to. Now, there isn't ever a reason to get up unless it is to yell my goodbyes to Jeanette when she has an acting class. Now, she loves acting. Now, I have so much time. It's strange that I haven't gotten around to painting the room. I find myself just lying in bed. Raul had to drag me out of bed one day when the meal trays began piling up. That was not a good day.

Still. I watch my Jeanette with a smile from ear to ear on my face. Or at least there is one behind my lips. Maybe there isn't one. The camera isn't pointed at me for once. But I know I am smiling. Always am. You have to in this business.

A business unkind in every act. That was a pun, but it wasn't a good one. Raul always loved my humor. He says that he married me for my smile and the laughs I gave him. Or at least that's what he wrote in his vows. He must love me, for he built this room around my heart. But it's not like Raul spends much time at home. He's constantly looking for movies to direct. That's actually how we got to know each other, him directing a biopic about Billy Crystal and I

playing a young Janice Crystal. No one saw it.

Crossing paths on a cool August night in the alley behind the casting room, he grabbed my wrist. I now rub the scar his ruby ring left on my palm. His body fell into mine and he chewed my neck to a cool purple. He let me feel his two-inch thick biceps when I recognized him. I wanted to. There was alcohol on his breath. I wanted to. I was only fifteen back then; the embodiment of a teenager's dream to run from home and become a star in Hollywood. Raul was thirty-two. I wanted to. Of course, I let him have his way with me behind a dumpster. I wanted to. I needed to get this role or my agent said that she would leave me. I had to.

The screen is shifting. It is night and Jeanette is no longer there, but the time stamp shows that the camera has been recording all day. I am still holding it. Only, I'm outside. There is no memory in my mind of me ever leaving the house while Raul was gone. Maybe he got home early? No, he never did that. He always pulled late nights directing. Perhaps this is a lie, a fake engineered in some Hollywood basement. Yes. That is my answer. Yet those are my hands. Both of them reflected in a puddle as the camera pans across my street. None of the street lamps are on, and the darkness has absorbed the neighborhood. The only thing I can make out are the houses. House after house. Everywhere I look: houses. House. House. House. House. House.

The screen goes black.

The reflection on the monitor forms into the spitting image of the room I spent all those years in. It is finally painted that joyous yellow. And there I am. My hair done in stunningly tight curls, each strand having been meticulously dyed blond. The dress I wear, a dress that had been specially designed for me in Milan, flows across my body, illuminating my tight curves that could be mistaken for the Pacific Sea. Flowing ribbons and robust trophies rest on my bedside. I hold up the hand that I promise is still there, and it is. The me that is me, but on the screen, blows me,

the me that is not on the screen, a kiss with the hand that is there on the screen.

And then she is gone.

Through happy tears, I blow a kiss back. Confirmation of all that I was, all that I am sweeps over my body. It is relief. A laugh, one of satisfaction and glory, escapes my mouth. I am shaking with joy for what I have witnessed. A magnanimous thing! My eyes are open to an ever-expanding list of things I have done. I must have forgotten it all. How? This is my life. Nobody just forgets their life in its entirety. But I did. And now it's back.

The television flips on.

My eyes stick to it. I wait for more revelations. Nothing comes. It is static and white noise. Then there is sound. A lulling buzz that accompanies a small sign in the corner, simply labeled "rec". A balding woman sits on a simple stool, her fingers rolling and clasping and shaking and tapping and scratching and pulling and clawing and wiping. More tears fall.

A voice from my mouth, foreign from my own, screams again and again at the screen. At the grey walls that cradle me. At the police who called me a murderer. At my husband. At the doctors and nurses who only seldom visit. At the vast nothing.

## **Madysen Naeger**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Jefferson High

School, Festus, MO

Educator: Nicole Boyer

Category: Poetry

# A LETTER TO MY MOTHER

A Letter To My Mother  
Don't ask me how  
Don't ask me why  
Just tell me that you care.  
Tell me that you'll protect me from  
The people who point and stare.  
Don't shake, don't cry,  
Just look me in my watery eyes  
And tell me it's okay.  
Don't ask me to explain to you  
How I ended up this way.  
I know I'm scarred,  
I know I'm bruised,  
I know that it hurts you too  
But that's not what I need.  
Don't blame yourself,  
Don't offer to help,  
There's nothing you could do.  
Just hold me tight  
I don't want to fight.  
I'm sorry mom,  
I'm so sorry.  
I know you don't understand,  
And I know it hurts you so  
But promise me, promise me  
That you won't let go.  
Kiss me on the forehead  
Like you used to do  
Back before I got older  
Back before I grew.  
Back when the world was small  
And the stars were so pretty  
And the backyard could be  
Just like New York City  
Because anything was possible  
When everything wasn't so volatile.  
When I was still gonna marry Shannon  
Any chance I got,  
When I had no use  
For shoes or socks.  
When I begged for feathers  
To put in my hair  
Way back when  
The world was fair.  
Mom, I have a story to tell

And it's not one that you'll enjoy.  
How I always got hurt  
on the playground by those boys.  
But I'm grown up now, mom,  
And I learned to run away.  
Learned to stand my ground  
No matter what people say  
But when the night comes,  
I still feel little and small  
And every single mountain  
Is ten jillion miles tall.  
And back on the playground,  
The kids see the things I do  
They're spreading rumors about me,  
And the funny thing is-they're true.  
All my life I've been different  
This is just one of those things  
And they say the things that hold you down  
Are what also give you wings.  
Mom, I met a girl  
She was playing on the slide  
One night she got in my car  
And I held her while she cried.  
She kept my hand in hers,  
And she kissed me at green lights  
And somewhere in those moments,  
She showed me how to fight.  
I watched her running through the city,  
The wind dancing through her hair.  
Along the way she disappeared  
But her shadows are still there.  
I know it's not exactly what you imagined  
And the world has taught me  
Every fairytale has its dragons  
But I'm asking for your love.  
Because I'm still little,  
And I'm still scared.  
Mom please tell me,  
That you'll always be there.  
You seem so distant,  
You feel so cold  
And losing people  
Is getting really old.  
I don't want to run away  
So promise me

That you'll stay.  
Tuck me in at night  
Just like you used to do  
Remember what you used to say?  
"I love you."

**Anna Nastasi**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Notre Dame De Sion  
Prep School, Kansas City, MO  
Educator: Casey Engel

Category: Poetry

## TELL ME WHERE WHEN IT IS NO LONGER

And I wonder where the  
Words we speak roam  
After they cease to be heard,  
Do the vibrations of our heart  
Continue their journey  
Into the boundless air?

And is laughter all the same,  
Flowing in waves  
From behind my teeth  
To yours?

Or twisting itself  
In time to coexist  
Between us  
In a trail of light  
That occupies  
All the colors we know

So tell me,  
If I dare to speak,  
Where will it go?

## Isabella Neuman

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High  
School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# THE SWIM TEST

## The Swim Test

They trained us for many situations. We earned our certification in CPR and first-aid, we learned strategies to resolve conflicts, and practiced safety drills. We worked over fifty hours during staff week. Even with all of that training, nothing could have prepared me for Aaron.

When he started off, Aaron had to be dragged into the pool. At first I would have to carry him in down the stairs while he squirmed in my arms. Getting him in the pool was only the first of many problems. After I was finally able to convince him to get into the pool, he refused to let go of me. He threw his arms around my neck, holding on for dear life.

"Aaron!" I choked out, "I can't breathe you need to let go of me." I could feel his fingernails digging into my skin.

"I'm scared," he squealed.

I could understand that he was nervous at first, and I tried to stay even-tempered but once I discovered he could stand in the shallow end, I

quickly got irritated.

"Come on," I said shortly, rolling my eyes, "I know you are tall enough to keep your head out of the water. There's nothing to be scared of!"

Reasoning with him had no effect. He screamed at the top of his lungs when I let go of him, even though he was still gripping my arms hard enough to leave bruises. I only wanted him to be able to swim just a little bit without holding on to someone. I was sure he would never be able to get to that point.

"Aaron!" I struggled to be heard over his screams. "Aaron! You. Are. Okay." He was standing with his entire head out of the water and wailing that I was just a few inches out of his reach.

"I need you!" he screamed.

"You don't need me. You're fine." I shut my eyes and tried to collect my thoughts. "Look, take a deep breath. You will be all right, you aren't going anywhere!"

He clearly thought my logic had no place in this situation. He wailed that he was dying and had to hold onto me. I sighed loudly then picked him up. My ears were ringing, and my head was throbbing from him screaming so loudly too close to my ears. I could see that I wasn't getting anywhere, so I put him on the side of the pool and took a deep breath. It was going to be a long summer.

\* \* \*

Every Friday, the campers would have free swim for the entire swim period. Every camper needed to swim the length of the pool, without stopping or holding on to a counselor, in order to be allowed to swim in the shallow end of the

pool without a swim floaty. Aaron was still struggling to swim for longer than thirty seconds, but each week he was convinced he could pass the test. When he failed, he screamed and cried. He refused to use a floaty and had to sit on the side of the pool.

One week, I was intent on getting him to the other side of the pool. I knew that teaching him this skill would require patience and determination. "Today's the day Aaron, I know it," I said confidently.

Aaron jumped into the pool on his own and waited for the lifeguard to tell him to go. He made it a little bit less than halfway before sinking underwater. I grabbed him and took him to the wall. His lip began to quiver while he scrunched up his face, ready to cry.

"It's okay buddy," I soothed. "We can try again if you'd like."

He didn't answer. I patted his back a little and waited. He slowly nodded his head and got ready to go again. This time, he made it a little over halfway across the pool before stopping to put his feet down. He looked at me cautiously to see if I had seen his mistake.

"You have to start over," I calmly told him as I led him back to the wall. He pouted a little bit but said nothing. "Don't worry," I told him. "We can try as many times as you want."

I was determined to get him to pass the test. I was sure he was able to do it; he only needed a little bit of encouragement. The best teachers challenge their students to achieve more than they think they are capable of. I figured that if I moved him to an area that was slightly deeper so he wouldn't be able to put his feet down, it might force him to try harder. I knew he could do it; he was so close that time, so I figured it was worth a try.

"I can't stand here," he said nervously. He gripped the wall tightly and I knew that if I tried to get him to let go he would scream.

I tried to sound reassuring, "Don't worry, I promise I won't let you go under water."

He didn't seem to believe me. He reluctantly pushed off the wall and began to doggie paddle towards me. He looked like he wanted to stop, but I knew I couldn't let him. He reached out for me and whimpered a bit.

"Come on Aaron," I stood in front of him, slowly moving backwards so I was always just out of his reach. "You got this buddy. You're almost there!" I tried to sound enthusiastic.

His eyes were wide with great concern. I could tell that he wanted to grab onto me, so I let him get closer to me to shorten the distance between us and backed away slowly to coax him across the pool.

"Just a bit more," I smiled gently, hoping to sound encouraging. He kicked harder, put his face in the water, stretched his arms out in front of him, and gave one final push.

When he reached the wall, I squealed with delight, "Oh my goodness! Aaron, I'm so proud of you!"

He smiled triumphantly and said, "Does this mean I don't have to use a floaty?"

"Yup! No floaty for you," I smiled at him as he swam off to join his friends and quickly swam after him.

I was happy for him. I may have been more excited than he was that he was finally able to swim on his own. I couldn't stop smiling for the rest of swim time. We both worked very hard to be able to get him to the point where he was able to accomplish that. I felt immensely satisfied

that I had been a part of his education and it taught me just as much as it taught him. When his parents picked him up, I said “Aaron, do you want to tell your parents what you did today?”

“I swam all the way across the pool by myself!” He said excitedly.

His mom Laura smiled and said “That’s awesome, Aaron! And I know Aaron wouldn’t have been able to do it without you. Thank you so much for all you did, ”

\* \* \*

A few weeks after camp ended, I walked in through the garage door of my house and put my keys on the counter. I had just come home from babysitting Aaron all day while his parents worked. Prior to that summer, I could never imagine taking care of him all day with no one there to help me if something went wrong. Until now, I heavily relied on others to help me with taking care of anyone else. Through teaching Aaron to swim, I became the sole person responsible for his well being. I had to teach him to get over his fears and try something new.

My dad looked up at me from his spot on the couch as I walked into the living room. “We need to work on your college applications,” he said.

“I don’t even know what I want my major to be,” I said exasperatedly.

“Well, what are you passionate about? What are you good at?”

I thought for a second, and said “I just took care of Aaron for a whole day.”

“Huh,” he said.

His pulled up a website that proclaimed “Best

Colleges for Education Majors.” I sat down next to my dad and began filling out applications.

**Jillian Obermeyer**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Jefferson High School, Festus, MO

Educator: Nicole Boyer

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## PICTURE PERFECT

Social media creates a fake perfect life for people. The perfect engagement. Perfect wedding. Perfect new house. Perfect pregnancy announcement. Perfect twin baby boys are born. Perfect life. That was my cousin’s family. From their pinterest inspired parties to their many family photo shoots, they seemed perfect. They were the typical, happy, loving couple whose family brought joy to the faces of others. We would have Easter every year at their house because their last name is Easter, so we thought it was appropriate. The adults would scatter the eggs throughout the yard for all of the children to pick up. That house was full of laughter and happiness. I walked through that house many times for holidays, birthday parties, and going over to babysit the twins from time to time. I could have never imagined myself having to go back to that same house with the garage door crushed like a soda can. Blood splattered against the walls that just the year before held birthday signs for the boys. Bullet shells dispersed amid the bloody grass where Easter eggs used to lay. Red blood replaced

the stain of apple juice left in the carpet by his messy toddlers. Shards of glass covered the floor. That house was never meant to become a murder scene. Bad things aren't supposed to happen to good people. You see it on the news: shootings, murders, suicides. They happen every night to strangers, but never to the cousins that you care so much about. The old Steve was full of joy and love. He loved his boys so much and was a caring father. This wasn't supposed to happen to him, to his family. But drugs change people. They ruin lives. It's the evil that eventually sucks the life out of everyone around you. Drug users never think about how it affects other people around them. It's always about them, even if they don't want it to be. It's always about how can they get more fast enough to get through the pain they are in that day.

This was the same trap Steve fell into. At first, he was dealing prescription drugs. But he had an addictive personality that soon got him to start using the prescriptions for himself to relieve the pain. When that wasn't enough to stop the suffering, he mixed those drugs with other drugs like meth and heroin which in the end caused immense problems. Situations occurred that got too far out of hand to ever go back to the way it used to be. No restraining order would stop him from threatening with multiple phone calls and texts everyday to kill the woman he used to be in love with just so he could get in her head to abuse her mentally. No restraining order can stop a drug addict from trying to steal his little boys back multiple times which would shatter her life into little pieces. No restraining order has the power to stop the evil that had taken over Steve and morphed him into a person we no longer knew.

One day he went over to my Aunt's house where the boys were hiding. He showed up ready to fight to get them back. He barged in the doors and swooped up one of the twins under his arm. My aunt raced outside with the other twin to get to the safety of her car, where she then

called the cops. Steve wasn't leaving until he had both of his children. A full out brawl took place when cops arrived to the scene. He was throwing punches with his son still wrapped under his arm. Police managed to get both of the twins to safety unharmed, while they strangled Steve into the backseat until they could get him behind bars. But he didn't stay there for long since no one was hurt. He was determined to take his sons. The old Steve was no longer with us. We had to accept the everyday challenges that came with the new, aggressive, threatening Steve. There was nothing we could do to get him back. My cousins bounced around from house to house just to try to throw Steve off their track. It was the only way to keep him from knowing where they were. They feared for their lives everyday knowing that he could come at any moment and rip their lives away from them. Well, I should say his ex wife was more scared than the boys. My twin cousins are just five years old. They didn't understand what was happening really. They just thought their father which they loved and adored, was very sick. They asked if they could see him all the time. They just missed their dad. At that age, they shouldn't have to learn what the evil of drugs can do to a person and the people around them. They shouldn't have to understand what's going on. That's the part that makes this all so unfair.

A couple months ago, I woke up from my nap to see flashing red and blue lights drive down into my driveway. I heard the sound of little feet hitting the concrete floor in my garage. I open the door to find my cousin and the twins. Their blonde haired, little, crazy selves pushed their mother out of the way and came running after me with big smiles on their faces. One of them looked up and said to me, "Abby, the police officers are so nice. They gave us a ride all the way to your house for our sleepover!". My heart broke into a million little pieces and I froze. I could feel a lump forming in the back of my

throat. His big ocean eyes looked up at me full of that wonder only children seem to possess. I took a deep breath and choked out the only three words I could think of at that moment. I said, "That's so nice." I had to turn around to hide the tear that fell out of my eye and onto the cold tile beneath me. It was the hardest thing to witness. They had no clue that the policemen were there to make sure they could get to our house safely to hide from the dangers of their father. They just thought they were coming over to their cousin's to have a sleepover. They're so innocent. Untouched by the world's hatred that they will eventually learn of.

Situations like this happened frequently for a little more than a year. Until one day their world turned upside down. I was sitting at school when I saw on snapchat that Festus was on lockdown for a nearby shooting. I didn't think much of it at first. I went on about my day as usual and on the way home I started to think about it. Could it have been Steve? He had threatened so many times to hurt my cousins it would make sense. My mom called me when I got home and I couldn't make sense of the words that she was saying. Numbness consumed me and I sat on the stairs and felt tears flooding down my cheeks. The shooter was Steve. My mom explained to me that he shot at police officers and was chased by them until they eventually tracked him down back to his house. I asked her if the boys were okay and she said yes, then paused. My stomach sank as the words came out of her mouth. Steve was gone. I couldn't come up with anything to say. My mind was spinning in circles that I couldn't control. I never thought that I could feel so much emotion for someone that caused so much hurt in my families life. I was crying for the loss of the Steve we used to know, the relief that my cousins didn't have to hide in fear anymore, and the fact that the boys had lost their father. A few days later was the funeral. Poster boards aligned the walls, filled with the same family

pictures that used to be plastered across social media. Pictures of their blonde hair, blue eyed selves where all around me. There were pictures of when the four of them were happy. They were all pictures of the old Steve, before he changed. Family members and friends crowded the space. It was sad that something like this is what brought my whole family together again for the first time in a while. I stepped into the sea of black to find many grieving faces. Faces of the ones that I loved didn't look quite the same. It was like their souls had left their bodies and all I could see was the shells they used to inhabit. People were crying, blaming, and some felt guilty for what had happened. Mournful music could be heard behind the sounds of people weeping. I was squished in the pew between my sobbing sister and mother. I sat in silence as the man in charge of the funeral went on and on about Steve when he barely even knew him. I blocked out what he was saying and started to think about old memories. I thought about good memories of when everyone was happy, when Steve was happy. Then I snapped back to reality when his best friend stepped up to the podium to speak. He talked about good times when they were young, all the trouble they got in, and how excited Steve was when he was gonna become a father. But those good things were over now. At the end, the boys threw themselves over the box with his ashes in it and hugged it tightly to their chests. They gave their dad one last kiss goodbye before he had to be buried forever. Their father was gone and the drugs were to blame.

Family functions are really difficult to go to now. Last weekend I went to the boy's sixth birthday party. It was so heartbreaking to watch everybody try to fake the happiness. To watch his brother barely say a word. To watch his mother have a fake smile glued to her face. The picture taken at the party felt empty. He is a big hole missing in our lives that can't be replaced. Maybe everything we see is not as picture perfect as it seems.

**Isaac Ohrenstein**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs

School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Sara Jay

Category: Critical Essay

## THE EXPULSION OF THE JEWISH TRIBES OF MEDINA

My exposure to Israeli-Palestinian affairs has prompted my interest in Jewish-Muslim relations. From a young age, as I would enter the Old City of Jerusalem through the Jaffa Gate, my family would turn "right" from Omar Ben el-Khattab Street onto The Armenian Particharate Street, en route to the Western Wall. Had we continued straight onto David Street, a shorter and more direct way to go, it would significantly reduce our walking time. However, the prolonged, indirect route we take, for better or for worse, has a purpose: it bypasses the Arab Shuk (market). I have always been interested in understanding the origins of my family's right turn: how the Jewish-Muslim relationship developed and deteriorated. I believe that the first interaction between Muhammad and Jews provides a component of this answer.

In the disorganized socio-economic nature of Mecca, Muhammad developed the idea of an Umma that bound together his followers not by kinship ties, but by common monotheistic beliefs. Simultaneously, the regional transition from a

nomadic lifestyle to a more permanent one institutionalized broader social relationships that defied traditional religious standards. This shift paved the way for the establishment of Muhammad's Ummah. The Umma was not a tribe or a religious faction, rather a group of people who were bound together by their monotheistic beliefs and support for Allah's emissary: Muhammad.

When Muhammad arrived in Medina in 622, the city was in the midst of a civil war. The Banu Nadir and Banu Qurayza (Jewish tribes) were allied with the Banu Aws (Muslim tribe), while the Banu Qaynuqa (Jewish tribe) were aligned with the Banu Khazraj (Muslim tribe). Muhammad was invited to serve as a neutral arbitrator to settle the dispute and promote reconciliation. This invitation created a window of opportunity for Muhammad - whose teachings were based on unification and promoted inclusion - to expand the Umma.

The Jewish tribes of Medina were extremely powerful and influential. They occupied 59 strongholds and developed advanced methods of irrigation, cultivation, and financial dealing. According to historian Salo Baron, "In short, during the few generations of Jewish control, the focal northern areas were raised almost to the high level of the southern civilization...As soon as the Jews were all but eliminated from Northern Arabia by Muhammad's sword, the whole countryside relapsed into its former backwardness." The powerful status of the Jewish tribes, due to their advanced business methods, threatened Muhammad's ability to expand his religion. If he was able to incorporate the Jews into the Umma, Muhammad would reduce their influence.

Muhammad made a considerable effort to incorporate Jews into the Umma. He Arabized several Jewish holidays and traditions, including the Jewish fast on the 10th of Tishri, called Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement. He also instructed

his followers to pray towards Jerusalem. Given that they shared such similar beliefs, and Muhammad expected the Jews to validate him as the Islamic prophet, if not accept him as their own. Baron adds, "Mohammed's purported saying that, if ten Jews were to accept his mesh, all the Jews would too be converted." The Constitution of Medina was the next step in officially establishing this community.

Muhammad wrote the Constitution of Medina in 622 to proclaim the existence of the Umma, which he hoped would include the Jews and ultimately increase his influence over Arabia. The document did not distinguish between believers (mu'minun) and Muslims (muslimun), which implied that Muslims and Jews were considered a single group. Within this group, Jews and Muslims would be treated equally. According to the Constitution, "The Jews of the Banu 'Auf are one community with the Believers. The Jews have their laws and the Muslims have their laws." Furthermore, within the constitution, there was no classification for citizens of Medina who were not supporters of Muhammad. Muhammad organized the population into two groups. Medians who were supporters of Muhammad were referred to as helpers, while Muhammad's fellow emigrants from Medina were called emigrants. This indicated that all Medians were expected to serve as partners of Muhammad. Due to the Jew's inclusion in the constitution, they unintentionally identified with Muhammad's faith.

The Constitution examined battle alliances in depth because they were the practical commitment to being allied with Muhammed. Per the Constitution, "The Jews shall contribute (to the cost of war) so long as they are at war with a common enemy." The goal was to increase Muhammad's forces at hand.

The Jewish tribes of Medina, who looked down upon their Arab neighbors, were less interested in developing an alliance with Muhammad. They

simply asked non-jews to observe the Seven Commandments of the Sons of Noah: to refrain from idolatry, blasphemy, and murder. In addition to rejecting Muhammad's claim to prophesy, the Jews ridiculed and contradicted his teachings. In particular, they took issue with Muhammad's experimentation with Jewish holidays such as the fast of Yom Kippur.

Muhammad was furious after the Jews refused to fight with him at the Battle of Badr (in 624) because of a religious obligation. He finally accepted that the Jews would not serve as allies, and following an incident in the marketplace when a Muslim was killed, Mohammed took action; the first of three Jewish tribes, the Banu Qanqua, was expelled. According to French historian Maxime Rodinson, "Even before Badr he was apparently preparing for a split without actually bringing matters to a head. He decreed that there was to be no more turning to Jerusalem to pray. The Jews had drawn their own conclusions." Muhammad's tremendous victory over his Meccan enemies at the Battle of Badr was significant because it established Islam was a force in the Arabian Peninsula, but also because it allowed him to begin his fight against his enemies in Medina. It should be noted that none of the Jews volunteered to fight with Muhammad during the Battle of Badr and Muhammad was furious. Another incident that precipitated Muhammad's decision to expel the Banu Qaynuqa involved the working class. In early 624, a Bedouin girl went to the marketplace to sell her produce. While sitting by the goldsmith's stall, the goldsmith managed to expose the lower part of her body. A Muslim bystander then killed the Goldsmith, and the Jews killed the Muslim man. Following these events, the Jewish fast of Yom Kippur was no longer obligatory. Muhammed now wanted to distinguish his people from the Jews in every way possible, as he understood the partnership would not work. Muhammad expelled the Banu Qaynuqa later in 624.

After a proposed assassination plot and yet another battle in which the Jewish tribes were not of aid, Mohammed internalized that the powerful bystanders that threatened his rule could not remain in Medina, and he expelled the Banu Nadir. After Muhammad's henchmen murdered two men of the Banu Amir while they were sleeping peacefully, he approached the Banu Nadir to ask for funds to pay the blood money. Allegedly, as Muhammad sat outside for the decision, he learned of conspiracy taking place against him: the Jews were about to drop a boulder from the rooftop Muhammad's head. Thus, he quickly fled the scene. Furthermore, in the Battle of Uhud (in 625) between the Quaresh of Mecca and the Muslims of Medina, Muhammad's Jewish allies once again did not come to his aid because the battle took place over the Sabbath. Because the battle was a significant defeat for Muhammad that weakened his position, he expelled the powerful Banu Nadir in 627.

Prior the Battle of the Ditch in 627, the Banu Qurayza covertly assembled a force against Muhammad. Furthermore, during the battle, the supposed allies of Muhammed remained neutral. This event deteriorated relations between Jews and Muslims beyond repair. Before the battle, the Banu Qurayza persuaded several Bedouin tribes to support their cause and proceeded to Medina to speak to the Banu Quraysh. Anticipating a move by the coalition, Muhammad dug a large trench on the Northern side of the city. When the coalition advanced toward Medina in 627, the Banu Qurayza cooperated with Muhammad and supplied picks, baskets, and spades for helped dig the Northern defensive trench. However, during the actual siege, the Banu Qurayza remained neutral. They did not commit any aggressive acts, however, their loyalty was questionable as they allowed themselves to be approached by the enemy. As they took two sides in the battle, the Banu Qurayza remained in an uncomfortable neutral state. They did nothing in

the end, which Muhammad viewed as betrayal.

After he pardoned the Banu Qaynuqa and the Banu Nadir, Muhammad could not give the Banu Qurayza clemency. The day the besieging army left Medina, the Banu Qurayza were attacked by Muhammad. They held out for twenty-five days but ultimately surrendered. The men of the Band Qurayza - between 600 and 900 people - were beheaded the central marketplace. Remarkably, only three or four men chose to renounce their religion, which demonstrated their refusal to be Islamized. The punishment of the Band Qurayza proved to be a highly beneficial decision for Muhammad. According to Professor Norman Stillman, "The slaughter of so many men was an extremely impressive act that enhanced Muhammad's prestige throughout Arabia. Here was a man to be reckoned with. He was now absolute master in Medina."

Due to the refusal of the Jewish tribes of Medina to be part of the Umma, to be military allies of the Arabs, and to be Islamized, Muhammad expelled them. This resulted in the disappearance of Jewish communities across Arabia. When Muhammad arrived in Medina in 627, he expected the monotheistic Jewish tribes to join the Umma. Through the Constitution of Medina, Muhammad declared the existence of the Umma and insisted that Muslims and Jews would be allies in partnership. However, after multiple battles and several other instances where the Jews did not collaborate, Muhammad expelled the three major Jewish tribes. As the first encounter between Jews and Muslims, the events that transpired in Medina set the standard for convoluted relations between Jews and Muslims in the future.

In 2018 - more than a thousand years later - we cannot change history. However, we can learn from history to create a better tomorrow. Fundamentally, there needs to be a sense of understanding between Jews and Muslims,

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regardless of what is in the news or happening on a global scale. In Jerusalem, some people may decide to turn left, while others may choose to turn right. Everyone does not have to choose the same path. However, there must be respect and tolerance for each journey.

**Carlisle Palmer**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School,  
Smithville, MO  
Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

# APHRODISIACS IN THE DARK

Avocado is an aphrodisiac. It contains vitamin B9 which provides the body with energy. It also contains vitamin B6, which increases testosterone production.

There was avocado in the sushi.

The taste of fresh greens, the sea, and rice stuck to our lips.

We slid down the stairs to solitude.

The basement was dark.

The movie was loud.

We were quiet.

Salmon is an aphrodisiac. It is high in omega-3 fatty acids, which are good for your heart health

and libido. It also aids in the production of estrogen.

There was salmon in the sushi.

His kisses fluttered from my lips to my neck, making my insides flip.

All doors were closed.

No one was home.

Just us in the basement.

Our hands explored in the darkness, discovering strange new textures and rhythms.

Chili peppers are an aphrodisiac. Chili peppers contain capsaicin, a chemical that stimulates nerve endings in the tongue and releases adrenaline, which makes your heart race. There were chili peppers in the sushi.

"You're missing the movie," I whisper.

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"What did you say?"

I'm out of breath.

"I don't know."

I can't think straight.

Our heartbeats quicken with the tempo of our breath.

The aphrodisiacs consume us in the dark.

**Jonah Palmer**

Age: Unknown, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School,  
Smithville, MO  
Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Critical Essay

# THE EFFECT OF NEWS ON POLICE TACTICS

In modern society, police brutality has become a problem that has been blown completely out of proportion. This can be credited to the ever increasing influence of the media on the United States and its citizens which has led me to ask the question, what is the effect of publicized shootings and the media's influence on police tactics and perceptions? It is such an interesting topic because it has created a hysteria within the U.S. that giving millions the perception that police and law enforcement officials are negatively biased towards minority and racial groups. This is simply not the case. But unfortunately, many citizens do not feel the same. In an article published by American Journal of Public Health, they summed up what many citizens of the U.S. feel towards the police by saying, "Present-day policing echoes the role of patrollers who were paid to monitor and often harm Black people during the era of enslavement (Alang)." While this is a bit extreme, it still accurately depicts the perception of racial bias within the profession of policing in the United States.

Throughout my research, conducted by looking into some of the work and research of professors, scientists, and professionals within the areas of social issues, communication, and, of course, law enforcement. Interviews with several high ranking officials of the Smithville, MO Police Department, and a survey filled out by numerous law enforcement officials will also assist me with my argument. The overall goal is to help shine a light on the negative effect that media has on police training and tactics as well as their reputation.

To fully understand the threat the media has posed to the trust between police and citizens,

further research must be done into the potential threat that media coverage poses to law enforcement. In numerous cases, stories have been reported on, videos have been trimmed or edited, truths have been twisted and manipulated, all with the goal of creating a racial and threatening bias towards police. Take the case of Michael Brown for instance. Several well-known media networks such as CNN, NBC, and CBS reported on the Michael Brown shooting and very clearly were leaning one way. Take CNN for example, on August 15th, 2014, an article was published to their website in which they provided the public with the extremely limited information at their disposal (McLaughlin). Within the article, it sheds little light on the legal side of the argument, the side of the Ferguson Police Department and forensic evidence and more on the charismatic and "feely" side. They gathered more information from witnesses to the event, adding more of an incentive on their arguments, their points, and their feelings. For the citizens who looked to CNN and other popular but biased media networks for the full story of the Michael Brown shooting, they only got a snippet of the true story, limiting the readers full knowledge of that day's events while giving them a false perception that police brutality did take place and Michael Brown was killed in cold blood. This, however, is not the case. According to the official report sent out by the DOJ, Michael Brown had provoked the attack by assaulting Officer Wilson, reaching into his car first attempting to remove Officer Wilson's firearm from his possession (DOJ), which contradicts greatly with the CNN report. Firstly, CNN provided information with extreme gaps and missing data, data that is crucial to a full and in depth understanding of the events. Secondly, CNN reported information and used their influence to try to convince the reader that the reports that CNN collected were correct, reports stating that Wilson assaulted Brown, rather than the other way around.

As a result of this misreported information, this media bias has begun to negatively alter the

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perceptions of law enforcement and police officers within many Americans minds (Lockridge). This negative image of policing has greatly impacted how the community reacts to police officers, often regarding them with a sense of distrust and uneasiness. Captain Roetman, a captain with the Smithville Police Department (SPD) stated in a personal interview that during a routine traffic stop, which just so happened to be a young, black male, was "literally shaking with fear" as Captain Roetman pulled him over. It is this fear that threatens the legitimacy of all police, which the media still so falsely attacks. Many reporters and researchers on this subject of law enforcement fail to utilize one of the best sources to consult about the change in policing, police officers. This is the gap that I wanted to fill, as I felt that not enough research had been done from the officers point of view, only the views of the victims and outsiders looking in. In a survey that was distributed to the Smithville Police Department regarding the effect of media involvement and bias in regards to law enforcement as a whole, a staggering 80% of participants felt that the media had influenced the nations perceptions of police in a negative way with 20% feeling as if no change had come whatsoever and an embarrassing 0% of police officers, sergeants, captains, and chiefs feeling as if the media has helped the citizens of the U.S feel comfortable and safe while dealing with police officers.

We can see because of this, police have experienced much controversy and resentment because of the widespread media bias and falsified perceptions, specifically towards the way the police handle and train for hostile situations. Many people have called for better tactics than the methods that police have been using since the 1980's, tactics that didn't allow for as much leniency towards suspects. Even though communication has been an important part of policing that has always been stressed as an important part of their training and everyday policing skills, police are focusing even more on

the use of communication with the public and fellow officers, all with the hope of further preventing hostile situations in which aggressive or even lethal force would not have to be used to subdue or finally end that situation (Lockridge). Becoming more interactive within the community and using the community as an avenue to further enhance that communities law enforcement by getting the community more involved with local security as well as giving the residents of that area a safer and calmer feel when dealing with officers of the law. Any situation with a police officer is stressful, it usually means that something went wrong which makes an already stressful situation even more so so by taking away much of the stress that comes with dealing with the law in any way shape or form.

Due to hysteria caused by publicized shootings, the way police handle citizens and public relations isn't the only thing that has changed. The way police train for the unlikely encounters has also been shifted and molded from its original model into something that requires much more patience and community involvement to truly be successful. The Peace Officer Standards & Training (POST) Program sets certain guidelines for officers in the amount of training they must have each year, more specifically 24 hours, requiring officer to have 2 hours of training in legal studies, 2 hours of training in technical studies, 2 hours of training in interpersonal perspectives, and 2 hours of training in skill development - Firearms. This also includes 1 hour of racial profiling training (Peace Officer). This training clearly shows that officers do work on communication and interpersonal school with the community, as this was not the case in the past, except within small, rural towns, in which the community was vital for police as it provided a lot of information on local crime, drug movement (if any), gangs, etc. This now is being moved away from just rural communities and being implemented in large urban areas as well. On top of extensive training going into the further development of police training, police officers are continuing to learn through their required fields of training some of these lesser important

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but still crucial skills. Skills such as officer well-being, including mental health and/or physical health awareness; fair and impartial policing practices including implicit bias recognition; handling persons with mental health or cognitive impairment issues; or tactical training which must include one or more of the following areas: de-escalation techniques, crisis management, critical thinking or social intelligence. This much extensive and growth oriented training not only helps officers be better equipped to escape hostile situations without firing a shot through the use of communication and vocalization between officer and the community, fellow officers, and of course, the criminals themselves.

As law enforcement officers continue to grow and shape around a growing society in which many people have begun to fear and resent the police, it is important to take a critical look into what events truly shaped this ever increasing hysteria. Highly covered media shootings, one of the most popular being the shooting of Michael Brown, have greatly influenced and set in motion the changes many stations around the U.S. have had to make in an effort to deescalate hostile situations in an attempt to heal the ever increasing injury between police and the community serve to protect. In order to do this, they have changed the way they train, focusing more and more on communication and the process of preventing lethal situations from happening by noticing threats before they truly become a threat, mainly credited to the increased involvement within the community, and putting an extreme focus on de-escalation tactics of any situation, choosing to talk their way of the situation rather than have to shoot their way out. They are also beginning to make more of an effort to build strong community relationships which only serve to increase police legitimacy within communities and areas in which police provide protection from more severe threats, mainly in more urban areas. So to answer the long overdue question of whether or not media has played a role in the change of police perceptions

and training I would strongly argue yes, while taking a very negative stance on that argument as well as the media has not tried to honorize the efforts of thousands of police officers everyday, but would rather focus on the stories or leads that kill the legitimacy of officers, creating only a further divide between police and citizens.

### **Alexis Peterson**

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Central High School,  
Saint Joseph, MO

Educator: angela brown

Category: Poetry

## WEAVER

Have you ever seen a spider weave a web?  
Weave a web of gossamer silk/  
Over and under on spindly legs,  
Till mosaics of refracted light twinkle in the pale  
moonlight...

Dew drops drip and catch,  
Spherical and tantalizing,  
Turning the world on its end and over again;  
-Till it matches its circular universe-

Never ending those webs seem...  
Cascading over tree tops like the Niagara,  
Woven in pure harmony with the surrounding  
scenery.

They dance and spin across ice caked lakes.  
They grace the nooks and crannies  
of a world forgotten.

In the darkest dankest of holes you'll find, a  
spiders nest  
a hidden in gem in utter black.

It is those spiders, I do believe, that hold the  
secrets of world once lost.

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The spiders who sat on the edge of society;  
Scorned off by superstitious ravings.

The eyes that peered into every soul,  
The web to catch the truth in lies,  
The legs to carry when threat comes baring...

Spiders,  
Minuscule crushed under our boot.  
Hidden in shadow, black as soot.  
Hold wisdom we'd never imagine to find,  
Yet we dismiss them ,  
Time after Time.

**Annie Postlewait**

Age: Unknown, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School,  
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

**FRIENDSHIP,  
HEAVEN & HELL,  
PRETTY & UGLY**

Friendship

Friends catch you  
When you fall  
I don't believe  
Friends are replaceable.  
It is a lie  
Friendships last forever  
Some people say  
I'm lonely

That is a lie,  
At times I can't get away from them,  
I'm always by their side  
Friends are there for each other.  
Without them life has no meaning,  
Stop saying  
You can be happy without friends  
I believe  
Friendship is key  
To most

Now read from bottom to top!

Heaven & Hell

All I see are gates  
But now,  
I see angels.  
Everyday the lucky ones say  
Heaven is a beautiful place  
I believe  
There is a dark reality too  
I hope people know  
The white light was real  
I wish  
To see my family  
I hoped  
They would be here  
Everyone said  
We will reunite in death  
Even my own family said  
God knows the way  
I will keep searching  
For eternity

Now read from bottom to top!

Ugly & Pretty

I'm pretty  
So don't you dare say  
I'm ugly  
I know  
There's not much to me  
Some say  
Beauty is solely external.  
I believe  
It's what's on the inside that counts

No one says  
You're born beautiful  
It's a lie.  
People can choose to be beautiful  
I don't believe  
I'm ugly

Now read from the bottom up!

## Shamecia Pullem

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Metro Academic  
Classical High School, Saint Louis,  
MO

Educator: Elizabeth Chambers

Category: Short Story

# ALAMARASA

In a hypothetical land, somewhere in a dimension far from our own, lies an enchanted ground. On that sacred ground lives an ancient people, guardians of the treasure that the land holds. The people farm the land in the day and worship it at night. When the gift of the land is ready to harvest, the ancient people gather it's gems to create a nectar. Through long hours of churning and crushing the land's product, a yellowish-orange liquid, is revealed. The substance holds miracles that no other entity could possess. The liquid does not reproduce people from the dead or create life from nothing: it creates hope, it creates love. **ALAMARASA** is its name; **ALAMARA** is its growth place.

Tonight is the 15th of Colos and the kingdom is lit with excitement. The town square of the kingdom, normally decorated with mules and other cattle, are adorned with twinkling lights

and joyous laughter. Lines of civilians group together to engage in the traditional dance of the holiday. All is joyful and tranquil as it should be on any other harvest day, except in the farm land.

On land a few miles from the square, sits a cottage. The cottage is quaint, containing a small family of three. Although the night is an engaging one, the newly sixteen year old, Areus is spending his night on the land.

"Tonight is harvest day, Areus. You are of age to gather the harvest and gather the harvest you must." His father's voice had said earlier that morning.

So there he was now gathering the harvest, only if that meant sitting complacently on the ground floor awaiting for the gems to sprout.

"After the gems sprout, you shall bring them here for us to crush and send to the elders." His mother added, her soft voice calming in overwhelming boredom.

"What shall the elders do with it, mother?" He had asked after he cleared his breakfast.

"It is rumored that the elders cite the words of the great ancestors before adorning a goblet with the nectar of the gem." His mother whispered.

The excited twinkle in her eye ignited the boy's curiosity.

"Is that why we go to the plaza every year?" He questioned.

"Yes, my son. Everyone must drink from the goblet. That is why our kingdom is overwhelmed with love." She said.

She seemed overjoyed and from this morning, Areus had been looking forward to being in charge of the harvest.

Sadly, he was becoming to think harvesting was not as fun as his mother had made it sound.

He had been sitting and watching the ground for hours, and all it had seemed to sprout was boredom.

He looked to the ground under him and touched it. The soft ground seemed so plush in his hands.

Areus knew the harvest would take at least another hour to produce gems so he pressed his back against the soft soil with his head following suit and closed his eyes.

“What happens if we have a bad harvest, mother?” The boy wondered.

“We will have no love, son. This is why we need you be a strong boy and grow the harvest because without it, we will become nothing but heartless creatures.” His mother said wistfully.

Her expression had become one of sadness and he promised that he would do whatever it took to never see the hurt he saw on his mother's face.

Areus shifted in his sleep, something pricking him in his side. He rolled over, taking position on his other side, but the pricking feeling failed to go away.

The boy opened his eyes, rubbing his eyes as he did, and through his eyes was something that could not be unseen. Before him, under him, were the gems: hundreds of dozens of them. They were laid in endless rows like they normally were but they were not orange.

Areus shoot up at the realization and began running down the rows. Row upon row, gem after gem-every single gem was discolored. The bright yellowish-orange had revealed nothing

but a dull black.

The gems were useless. The harvest was ruined. The kingdom, filled with its jovial, cheer-stricken citizens would soon be deary and despaired. This parents would be devastated because he had now killed their one source of love.

## **Clara Rabbani**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Pembroke Hill School,  
Kansas City, MO

Educator: Ben Christian

Category: Poetry

# THE LIES WE SWEAR UPON

The earth  
is no  
Pretty  
Little  
Thing.

You bind her  
and you burn her  
and you poison her  
with things you cast away.

But when the time comes  
for her to cast  
YOU  
away,  
She will see you  
as you are.

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She is  
Resilient  
and she is proud.  
She will not deceive you.

And unlike you,  
she was made to last–  
to outlive you  
Until you have outlived yourself.

You say  
you live  
to unearth her secrets,  
But she readily  
Waits.

For,  
You cannot conquer  
what is already yours;  
Oblivious that  
you are just as much hers.

She is  
the heart of a butterfly.  
Delicate.  
Every earthquake.  
Every storm.  
Extraordinary.

She sings to you–  
To the beat of the  
Pounding  
in your chest.

As if you could ignore  
the very thing that gave you  
Life.

And when she speaks,  
She does not  
ONLY  
Speak.  
She roars.

And when she sings,  
The very earth you stand on,

Trembles to the rhythm of  
Her song.

Once,  
You took her whispers  
for inconvenience;  
Carved from it a mask.

And you forgot that  
there is inconvenience  
In the truth.

ONCE,  
She held you  
to her chest,  
And sang.  
She put your fingers  
to her lips,  
And wrapped them in her breathe.

You were hers  
just as much as  
She was yours.

But the time  
for whispers  
has passed,  
And now she  
Roars  
for the lions you  
Killed.

For the mother  
And fathers  
you bound in chains.

And for the children,  
Whose cries were silenced  
by no hand  
other than their own.  
For, there were no hands left  
to silence them  
when you came.

And while she trembles  
from the sickness that you gave,

To keep her weaker than yourself.  
To keep her impotent.  
She will not break.  
She was not made to break.

Only YOU  
were made that way,  
Dear, foolish ones.  
Only I was made that way.

So when the storm comes,  
And the only one  
that ever loved you  
more than you loved  
Yourself  
is gone—  
Betrayed.  
When she trembles  
from the pain,  
You will be the first to  
Fall.

And there,  
On your knees,  
You will stay,  
With no one left to  
Redeem you.

For,  
She knows what hides behind  
the masks we wear  
and the lies we  
Swear upon.

**Samiya Rasheed**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley North High  
School, Overland Park, KS  
Educator: Shelley Moran

Category: Poetry

**VIRGO, VIRGINIS**

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  
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

**jennifer reyes**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Paseo Academy  
Performing Arts, Kansas City, MO  
Educator: Jenifer Bell

Category: Poetry

# MI RAZA

We've tried to tell you, but you didn't understand  
That this whole country was built by immigrants  
You're whitewashing history  
While you put us through this misery  
You can't ban half of the country and call it history.

While you sleep soundly in your bed,  
My people are waking up at 4 so they can work and get ahead  
Cause they got families to feed and gotta provide  
So, they're going out and risking their lives  
So trust me were not taking a million jobs  
We're just doing the work no one else will take on

Do you get it now? We're the foundation keeping afloat this nation  
And if we stopped working, everything would fall  
Donald Trump is in his office, playing with Legos,  
Building his "futuristic" wall

You say we're weakening this country, but you couldn't be more wrong  
Cause the immigrants here have made America strong  
Were building better lives for our children so don't be a hater and do us a favor:  
Make America great again  
By bringing this presidency to an end.

Deja vu, World War II?  
What are we gonna do?  
You're separating families and locking babies in cages.  
So many people are living in fear that ain't a surprise to hear.  
You're a 21st-century Hitler, just without the 'stache.  
You have the flash and the cash,  
But what love do you have?

You may think we're just schemers,  
You may think we're just beaners.  
But let's make something clear here  
We stand with the Dreamers.

## Nathan Riley

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Republic High School,  
Republic, MO

Educator: Lisa Deckard

Category: Poetry

# VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS

FORGOTTEN

(to be read to your heartbeat. x3 is three times as fast. one beat of your heart is one count)

He lies

He runs

He's scared

He tosses

He turns

He screams

He weeps

He hides (pause for 2 counts)

The lances surround (x3)

The spears are thrown

The arrows let loose

The cannons fired

He falls (x1)

He wakes

The nightmare escaped

And yet another sleepless night ahead

He yearns to dream

He swears never to again

He gives up

He loses hope

He resents

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He falls  
He never wakes  
He dreams forevermore  
Because he lost sight  
Because others never offered

FUTILITY

Futile attempts at mending a torn family  
Futile hope for civil encounters  
Futile wanting of a quiet dinner  
Futile actions to diffuse high tension  
Futile tears when I finally manage to hide  
Futile is this cry for help when none will come  
Futile is the soft glimmer of hope for next year

CRUELTY CHANGED

This is to the victims that make victims, this is to the bully, the hater, and the cheat  
This is to those who would harm others just so they don't have to face their own wounds  
TO THE BULLY, who beats and abuses whether with words or with violence, hear me now! your suffering is shared by all, you are not alone.  
TO THE HATER who mocks and ridicules for things others can not control hear me now! do not fear the unknown embrace it, do not spread lies and deceit, instead spread kindness as you are the ones with the farthest reach.  
TO THE LIAR AND CHEAT who laugh when others are distraught by rumors or the realization of false love, hear me now! you are wanted, you do not need to lie to gain others approval.  
THEN TO ALL THOSE WHO SAT BY AND SAID NOTHING, you are just as guilty as the rest. To you, I say help those around you whether they are the guilty or the victims, help to raze society of violence of any kind.  
AND LASTLY, TO THE VICTIM, you who feel small and voiceless, weak and struggling in silence, hear me now! You have the most powerful voice of all, you hold the most sway against the rising tide of hate and grief, you are the strongest of us by far because of your hardships, your struggles are more than your own and when you struggle to make it just one more day YOU ARE HEARD,

though few in number there are those of us who want to listen, who want to lighten the load you carry on your shoulders because of the scum of the world ridiculing you for the very thing that makes you better than them, the light of hope and longing for a better world, take hold and fight to be heard among the throng of scum.

**Maggie Rosenstock**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# NARROW ROADS TO NARROW MINDSETS

My heart fell to the floor, I was frozen in time but all I wanted to do was fast forward. I sat in the back seat of the car trying to wrap my head around why such terrible things happen to me, I could not help in any way. Anything I would try to do would not impact our survival. My family was scurrying around the rental car trying to find anything that might help us; a spare tire, a number for a tow truck, anything. Things were not going our way.

My mom shouted out to my dad, "No spare here!"

"So all that is left to do is call the Avis number I guess, maybe they will bring us another car within a couple hours and we will be on our way," my dad said in a calm tone.

I knew they would not be there in a couple hours. We were not even within a couple hours of

any sign of civilization, I started to believe we were going to be stranded all night so why even bother trying. OF COURSE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN MY FAMILY TO GET STUCK IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MOUNTAINS IN NOWHERE NORTHERN SCOTLAND. I did not think our situation could get any worse than it already was.

My dad mumbled under his breath, “one more problem... I have no cell signal.”

I stood corrected it could have gotten worse, and it did. There was no way to contact anyone to tell them we were stranded in the cold wilderness. We did what we had to do, my dad and brother started walking while my sister, mom, and I stayed in the car.

“At least we got stranded in a place as beautiful as this,” said my mom.

“What are you talking about?” I did not acknowledge the beauty she had referenced, all I was aware of were the monstrous mountains and the frigid air swarming around us.

“Look at the sunset!” My mom exclaimed as she pointed toward the falling sun.

To my mom and sister, the sun may have been a calming sight but I was mortified. The sun setting meant one thing, it was on its way to complete darkness. No light meant no hope, HOW WOULD ANYONE FIND US IN THE DARK? As my mom and sister looked out the windows, taking in the view, I hunched over in my seat and stared at the clock waiting for the situation to pass.

Our savior, Luke, somehow arrived around midnight to tow us to his shop. The ride felt like a never-ending array of twisting and turning roads. When we arrived my family was very startled by the cleanliness, or lack thereof. He led us up to the “lounge,” which was located at the top of several creaky stairs in the back. The small room consisted of a couple dirty chairs, a dusty table, mounds of paperwork, and a chipped cupboard which held ancient metal mugs for the visitors to make tea in. Not even my high level of fatigue would convince me to sit and relax in one of the chairs provided.

The night kept hitting us in the gut harder and harder each time, we tried to fight back but

every tactic was blocked and returned. It was our chance to catch our breath. I had thought once Luke handed the car keys back over to my dad the fight had been settled and put to rest. NOTHING ELSE COULD HAPPEN TO MAKE THIS NIGHT ANY WORSE THAN IT ALREADY HAD BEEN.

Then the policewoman walked up beside the car. I sat there on the edge of tears, thinking about the disaster the night had transformed into. It began as a calm scenic drive and then continued to plummet further and further down a pit of luckless events. The police had a suspicion my dad was under the influence, but once she learned we were Americans she quickly dismissed the erratic driving she had witnessed and sent us on our way.

We arrived at our Airbnb with no further misfortunes, except for the unloving tone of everyone’s voices. But I could finally relax, which I had not been able to do since we drove over the small rock on the side of the road.

\* \* \*

The next morning our plan was to drive the complete perimeter of the Isle of Skye, but after the previous night, the last thing I wanted to do was set foot into the corrupted vehicle.

I slowly climbed into the car, sliding into my seat and taking hold of the cold seat belt. I hesitantly pulled it across my chest and waited for the assuring click of the locking metal. We apparently saw many astounding sites during our drive, however, I was not paying much attention because my eyes were glued on the sliver of the road ahead of us.

I was not the only one who was concerned about the journey ahead of us. My siblings both leaned into me, away from the perimeter of the car. I looked at my mom who had her hand clenched on the small handle placed directly above her head. Even my dad was white-knuckling the steering wheel and was turning with extreme care. Apparently the roads in rural Scotland are very narrow.

As we veered close to the edge of the road my family and I would shout, “edge!” My dad would

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follow this blunt command to redirect his driving with a deep sigh and a slight removal of his foot off the pedal.

We hiked mountains, sat by the shore, and took ferries out on the lakes. But nothing could compare to the final stop of the day, for me it was the first time my eyes were truly open and my mind was fully aware.

My family was hesitant about the visit because it was out of the way and involved a thirteen mile "single-track" road to reach it. We were not eager to test my dad's ability with driving on the Scottish roads for a longer time than necessary. But my sister insisted it was an excursion worth taking.

Therefore, we turned onto a small paved road, which was pushed right up against the side of the mountain. It was a fearsome sight, which caused us to all move toward the edge of our seats. I was clenching my fists, I also convinced myself that by leaning from side to side I could control the car as it inched toward the edge of the path. Holding my breath was getting tiring, I was near passing out, but I did not want to distract my dad in any way from the threatening task at hand.

After a lifetime, as we eventually arrived safely and pulled up to the Fairy Glen, my family had immediately all reached the same conclusion, that sight made every misfortune worth it. I got out of the car and the natural aroma filled my sinuses with bliss.

I whispered so I did not disturb the tranquility, "who knew those treacherous roads could ever lead us to this?" Everyone chuckled in response.

The abundant mounds of flowers and grass varied in size and shape which gave the feeling of a painting. It was a sight which I had only ever believed could belong in a fairytale.

I wanted to walk up one of the many hills to meet my brother so I could admire the scenery from a higher standpoint. "How did you get up there?" I called from the ground beneath. My brother shouted down to me, "You have to make your own path, pick a side and start running. But you are not supposed to follow my footsteps, you do not want to wear down a path that has already been taken. You must find your

own way."

It was true, my dad told me to always try and find a new path because if everyone went the same way then soon that would be the only way. That would cause the soil to wear down and break apart, leaving the nature disturbed. It took a couple tries but I found a trail which guided me all the way up the hill and left me standing beside my brother. We did not speak, we stood and appreciated the rare opportunity to see such an astonishing view.

Soon after, my brother left to climb a nearby hill to see the area from yet another perspective. I did not need it from any other angle, I could see everything I required from that one spot.

The soft grass coated the ground beneath my feet and gave me a warm feeling of delight. I looked down at all the details of the nature before me; the small ponds, plentiful patches of flowers, whimsical trees, and the steep green slope behind me which hid the real treasures of the location.

Looking out further in the distance, there were acres and acres of inhabited land. The sight led me to ponder how small I and all of my problems were. I started to imagine little fairies flurrying from one pond to another, soon I was transported into an alternate universe where the atmosphere was swarming with them. All nonchalant, without a care in the world. At that moment I blocked out everything which was causing me stress and only allowed my happy thoughts to enter my mind.

I was sitting on the hill for almost fifteen minutes in silent awe of what my eyes were witnessing, I knew I may never see anything that beautiful in my life again.

"Hey, you up there! It's time to head back for dinner!" my mom shouted in order to break my trance.

I requested one minute to absorb the nature one last time before I had to leave. Once the minute had ended I stood up and ran down the hill quickly and eagerly to hop in the car and start on our next adventure.

"Woah, why so eager to get into the death trap there?" my brother said to me in a sarcastic

voice.

"What death trap? We are alive aren't we?" I answered while buckling my seatbelt. My dad backed out of the dirt circle and headed down the same road we came back on.

I didn't speak to anyone, not in order to keep my dad focused, but because I was mesmerized by the visibility and clarity I had on the world. Why would I spend my day worrying when I have no control? All of the energy I was putting into my anxiety was causing me to miss the enjoyable parts of the trip, the elements around me.

I began relishing in my family's company and looking outside of the window at the large quantity of sheep, mountains, and hills that I had been oblivious to before. As I looked ahead of us I caught a glimpse of the stunning sun descending over the horizon.

For the remainder of the trip, I sat in the car with my hands placed in my lap, I had gained back my ability to breath freely as we made our way through calming highlands of Scotland.

## Jayden Rosser

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Ft Osage High School,  
Independence, MO  
Educator: Tim Dial-Scruggs

Category: Poetry

# BROTHER, GRANDMA, GRANDPA

## Brother

Just like every other day,  
He enters my room to talk.  
We sit together on my twin bed talking,  
Talking about the randomness of the day.  
"Do you like girls?" he asked.  
"Ah uhhhhhhh" was my response.  
"You know that no matter what that I'll love you,"  
"Yes, I know and yes I do but I also like boys."  
He hugged me without warning,  
I hugged back.  
We hugged for a while,  
salty tears were going down my face.  
He wiped them away.

## Grandma

"My mother warned me,  
said you knew."  
"I knew what?"  
"That I'm not fully straight.  
How did you find out?"  
"Grandpa mentioned that you posted,  
about it on facebook."  
"Yeah, I took it down because I was afraid  
that you wouldn't love me anymore."  
"We will always love you,  
we were just scared for you. "  
"I know but you don't need to be  
I can take care of myself."  
"Grandpa would have loved you  
no matter what."  
Tears sting my eyes,  
as she spoke

## Grandpa

There are so many things I wish,  
I could say. Many things.  
I would say I'm sorry that I never,  
told you myself that I'm pan.  
I also would say you were the best grandpa,  
that I have ever had.  
I wish you could have stayed longer,  
so I could have told you in person.  
I know you were ready to die,

you were tired of the all the medicine and  
doctors.

I will always love and miss you,  
no matter how old I get.

I will always miss the  
spicy smell of your spaghetti.

Not to mention the  
beautiful sound of your guitar playing

### **Natalie Rovello**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: St Teresa's Academy,  
Kansas City, MO  
Educator: Kelly Finn

Category: Poetry

## IODINE IN MY DRINK

Iodine in my drink  
like a bitter, lonesome friend  
an old one I hadn't seen  
since my skinned-knee days  
and I could smell it  
I could smell it  
it pierced my nose and stung my eyes  
no amount of other could hide it  
it wanted so bad to be noticed  
it struck me, elementally mean  
And of course I drank it  
Of course, I drank it  
a salve for my wound,  
my throat and mouth,  
gaping and unpretty,  
wholly inconvenient  
So of course, I drank it

### **Anju Sadasivam**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

Category: Senior Portfolio

## SENIOR PORTFOLIO

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Anita Hagerman

Category: Poetry

## "PROMPTED TO REVENGE BY HEAVEN AND HELL" (2.2.570)

Hamlet, his sword laid down his eyes aglow

Head lifted toward heaven feet pointing toward  
hell

Cried help! Alas, my soul. Revenge, heaven, hell,  
fate

His sealed actions determine the life worth saving.  
To give it all for the one who lies no longer,  
awakened to ruin

Or to abandon one's father to save she that  
sacrificed it all

To bring to this world that little baby boy, grown  
indecisive.

Coward, duty, sin, justified to avenge the death  
of one's father,

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As Orestes avenging Agamemnon, the ancient  
husband killed  
By wife and lover. Orestes ended both; justified by  
this name: revenge.  
The countries beyond life, the balance good evil  
and heaven hell  
Who to send away forever, the ghost or the man  
The murderer or the one begging for murder  
The fates align there's no choice.

Caught deciding what to do  
Mind spinning one way and then the other  
To act or to plan, to rush or to wait  
What happens when acting turns to sin  
But waiting turns to indecisiveness  
To act as Artemis turning Actaeon into a stag, to  
be hunted  
And killed by his own hounds because he saw her  
In her bath. Revenge was gained, but is that the  
goal?  
Can revenge bring satisfaction? Or only more  
pain and guilt.  
Carrying the sorrow caused forever, hurting more  
to hurt less  
Weighing right and wrong on the scale of life  
As unbalanced a scale as there ever will be.

**Anju Sadasivam**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Poetry

**SPRING**

**Wind**

Wind–  
tighten the sails  
watch as the Telltale

-GUST-

Joy: ephemeral as the sea breeze  
carrying you smoothly Before  
dropping off; causing you  
to capsize and fall behind-  
For a moment you believe  
life's not horrid  
Maybe, just maybe, you're deserving of  
happiness.  
But then the wind dies  
as it does each night.

**Practice**

I'm confused. Are you?  
No. you understand- you're perfect.  
But then it's your turn.  
You're confused. Am I?  
No. This time it's I who explains the drill.  
You, Me.  
Are we really that different?  
Maybe we are. But I hope–  
We can find something  
To bridge the gap and  
thus intertwine our lives.

**Anju Sadasivam**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Poetry

**WORDS**

**Speaking**

The words  
That used to roll off so easily  
Now lie stuck in my soul  
Impeded by worries of others' judgement.

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The words  
Which once used to be so kind and naive  
Now are filled with skepticism and hurt.  
The thoughts  
Struggling to become words  
That others will appreciate.

**The Journal**

Words pouring in a tempest  
As a rushing waterfall  
Each droplet racing and shoving to be the first  
down  
Pounding the clear lake below  
Frothing the waters.  
Lines scratched across a page  
As footsteps imprinted in the sand  
Remnants of a journey once taken.  
Emotions calmed by the torrent  
As rain clouds that  
Burst open when filled with  
More rain than they can hold  
And then cease to storm.

**Anju Sadasivam**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School,  
Saint Louis, MO  
Educators: Anita Hagerman, Megan  
Zmudczynski

Category: Poetry

**SUMMER**

Laughing, head thrown back, hair cascading  
She turns and smiles  
She smiles with the sea in her eyes and the wind in  
her ears  
She smells of croissants and chlorine, of chocolate

and adventure  
Her laugh washes away the pain of  
remembrance  
Surrounded by boats full of love and sails full of  
friends  
She is happy.  
In the silence, as conversation dims she turns to  
the sea  
You glimpse behind the sunshine,  
the salty sand that once stung still lingers in her  
heart  
She tries to hide behind the facade of a colorful  
spinnaker  
But below Clyde the Hippo, her salty tears  
threaten to mingle with mother ocean's  
as she peers into the dark blue depths, swimming  
through her woes  
instead of sailing above them as she pretends  
Her name is called and she turns toward the flag,  
replacing the carefree mask of joy as she tacks.  
Her bare feet filled with the warmth of earth track  
carefree sand  
across the deck as she walks. The ocean breeze  
inside her illuminates  
the living with the peace of summer. Waves  
crash, moving through her  
to pound the rhythm of love against the rocky  
shore. She is a vessel, carrying sunlit wind,  
filling the sky, raising the sails, and climbing to the  
shingled roof.

**Anju Sadasivam**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs  
School, Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Critical Essay

# LORD OF THE FLIES

## CLOSE READING

This passage shows that the island, like most everything has two sides. When Ralph first sees this new part of the island, it is described as being “utterly different” (110). The same goes for people, everyone has two sides, the inside and the outside. This passage is conveying that not everyone is who they seem to be at first glance. One side of the island is “swathed at midday with mirage, defended by the shield of the quiet lagoon” (111). On the outside, most people are similar, bound by cultural rules. They hide their personalities in order to fit in and conform to the standard. When Roger throws stones at Henry shortly after they have crashed on the island, “there [is] a space round Henry, perhaps six yards in diameter, into which he dare[s] not throw. Here, invisible yet strong, [is] the taboo of the old life...Roger’s arm [is] conditioned by a civilization that [knows] nothing of him and [is] in ruins” (62). Though the home he left is now destroyed, the morals of his society still linger with him. Roger’s personality is shielded by his own mirage of quiet respectfulness.

On the other side of the island, however, “The filmy enchantments of mirage [can] not endure the cold ocean water and the horizon [is] hard clipped blue” (110). Later, towards the end of the book Roger breaks free from the bonds of society and “with a sense of delirious abandonment lean[s] all his weight on the lever” (180), and kills Piggy. Roger is no longer held by society’s values. He has been away from civilization for so long that he has let his true want Sadasivam 2 pg. 110111 for power and lust to hurt show through. On the far side of the island, “The sea suck[s] down, making cascades and waterfalls of retreating water, sink[s] past the rocks and plaster[s] down the seaweed like shining hair: then, pausing, gather[s] and rise[s] with a roar, irresistibly swelling over point and

outcrop, climbing the little cliff, sending at last an arm of surf up a gully to end...in fingers of spray” (110). Up until now, Roger’s actions, for example whipping Henry, sucked people down. Now Roger is roaring and swelling, letting go and reaching high, releasing the lever that kills Piggy. “[The waves travel] the length of the island with an air of disregarding it and being set on other business” (110). The boys are no longer hidden by politeness and false interest, but are focusing on who they are. “Here, faced by the brute obtuseness of the ocean, the miles of division, one [is] clamped down, one [is] helpless, one [is] condemned, one [is]” (111) forced to discover their real self. There are no quiet lagoons to hide behind over here, the boys are all made to take another look at reality. Ralph reaches the other side of the island, all of the boys reach the other sides of themselves. The boys are no longer the well behaved, seenandnoheard, English boys that they were before the plane crash; they have transformed into who they truly were before they were constrained by society

**Anju Sadasivam**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs  
School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## A SAILOR

“I can’t steer!” Sonia yells frantically as I try to pump the kite over each wave, sitting as far back as possible to keep from bow plowing. We’re sailing over to Hyannis for the annual regatta; the wind is gusting 28 knots and the waves growing stronger. “The rudder fell out!” she yells again. We douse the kite and head into

the wind to fix the rudder, but it's too broken. Our coach tries to fix it, but is unable. So, he sticks a wrench in the rudder and e-tapes it. We start sailing again, and immediately capsize. The clouds are growing darker, the wind stronger, and Sonia starts freaking out. My coach pulls her out and my friend jumps in with me. "Get ready for rudderless sailing!" Charlie warns, realizing that the rudder is no longer functional. We work together using our body weight to steer the boat and pump the sails over waves. We finally make it to Hyannis harbor, and although the journey is not as successful as we hoped, it is even more rewarding because we had to work extra hard to get there; we had to quickly and creatively problem solve. Sailing teaches us sailors many lessons, one of them is learning how to make do with what you have and overcome disasters to be successful.

Sailing teaches us to work with nature; to observe it, and to understand it. To be successful, we need to read the wind and waves, and observe the shifts, puffs and lulls, and currents. We need to notice which side is favored and plan ahead but also be impulsive, ready to tack when the wind shifts or lee bow another boat when we see the opportunity. Sailing teaches us to work with others, and to help them. If we see someone lifting boats, we carry the boat with them; if someone is struggling to pull their dolly up the beach, we offer assistance; if we're done rigging early, we help everyone who's still working. Sailing teaches persistence. It took me a long time and many capsizes to learn to fly a spinnaker and wire-to-wire tack, but know that I have, they are my favorite parts of a racecourse. I love pumping over waves, quickly dousing, and flying across the boat in each tack. Gaining boat lengths is all the more satisfying because I remember when I was the boat being passed. Sailors don't let obstacles stop us; we simply right the boat, pull our partner back in, fix what is rigged incorrectly, and win our race. Sailing instills the importance of hard work by teaching us to give all of ourselves to what we love. We sail everyday, either at practice or a

regatta; we wake up before sunrise and sail all day before coming home for dinner. When we return to shore with our hands cramping from gripping sheets, our legs burning from being on the wire, and our teeth chattering from the cold water and unforgiving wind, our bodies beg for respite. Sailors want to improve, we work hard to learn new techniques and do everything to the best of our ability; that's why we dedicate our summers to this sport we love.

I have had many a disaster in my sailing career, but I'm grateful to them because I've grown so much as a sailor and a person because of them. It's helped me learn to overcome failure, taught me how essential a positive attitude is, and shown me the rewards of persistence and hard work. Sailing has made me a better person, and I've noticed it do the same to all my teammates and fellow sailors. We are far from being perfect sailors or humans, but we recognize that and constantly strive to better ourselves. Sailing shapes its participants making it more than a sport; it's a family and a home.

## **Anju Sadasivam**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs  
School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Poetry

## **ESCAPING**

### **Home**

Crying broken glass  
Shattered falls a vase  
thrown against the wall kids  
taken as pawns but  
he's their dad overhearing  
what happened he waited

outside the house in his car  
They're really young he's  
supposed to be the one he  
sent an email I don't  
even know anymore

### **To Sail**

To sail is to live, to laugh, to breathe  
To be filled with an ethereal life.  
To sail is to read the wind, the waves, the  
current  
To learn to work with nature.  
To sail is to trap, to hike, to spin  
To hang over the edge of the safe.  
To sail is to tack, to gybe, to roll  
To be one with the boat and each other.  
To sail is to reach freedom; the only attainable  
way.

### **Roma**

Walking the cobbled streets and admiring the  
architecture  
Modern building juxtaposed with ancient  
inscriptions  
Temples to Diana encroached by bus stops,  
The Largo Argentina filled with cats and  
surrounded by bustle,  
The Circus Maximus now reduced to a humble  
grass field,  
The Piazza Navona with its brilliant palace, now  
the Brazilian embassy,  
The Colosseum defaced by the traffic impeding  
the passing road.  
SPQR implanted on every passing bus, sewer,  
and sign,  
Ancient Rome relinquishing its classical elements  
to la dolce vita.

### **Anju Sadasivam**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs  
School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Anita Hagerman, Megan  
Zmudczynski

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## ONCE HEAVEN

You're focused on the race; on roll tacking well, spotting puffs and lulls, and describing the positions of the other boats to your skipper. Your team rounds the windward mark in 1, 3, 4 and you hope to maintain the winning combination through the downwind leg. As you jibe and your skipper begins to haul up the spinnaker, you fumble with the pole, trying to stay in third. Once you've safely rounded the pin, you gaze up at the blue and white spinnaker; below, waves crash against the hull and above, wind whips the clouds away making room for the sun to beat down on your illegal blue Zhik life jacket. You realize that this is what heaven must be like. This morning the regatta got off to a rough start; the wind was only blowing 2-3 knots yet the race committee attempted to start a race. Sadly, the wind shifted during the first race and suddenly the downwind leg became upwind; the race was abandoned and the postponement flag raised. Your team convened at the rib and everyone tied up their 420s to pile onto the coach boat. As you looked around, you realized that this was your last week of summer, your last week with these people who knew the real you and loved you as you were, your last week with the salty ocean breeze blowing through your hair, your last week with your sailing coach who knew you better than most of your friends in St Louis, your last week with a sunburnt nose, blistered hands, and bruised legs, your last week of feeling so happy to be alive. As you look up at the spinnaker you try to perfectly capture the beauty, smell, emotion, and sights of this moment. Suddenly an unfamiliar voice breaks through, disrupting your concentrated reverie.

It's a boy from Menahaunt, the yacht club hosting the regatta. At first you can't tell what he's saying, but then he repeats it. "Gypsy" he calls, and again, "gypsy", staring at you. Your skipper tells you to ignore him; focus on sailing, and you try. Then your friend sails over, "did they call you 'gypsy'? They called me one also" your skipper shakes his head; it doesn't even make sense. Oh well, you all agree to try even harder to beat them. Other Menahaunt boats sail over, trying to get to you and your skipper, but you ignore them and focus on sailing. You're confused and hurt, but you won't let your feelings out in the middle of a race so you stuff them down and try to direct your energy toward sailing better. Your determination pays off, and you end the day with a win. On the way home, your notice your brother is strangely quiet. "What's wrong?" you ask. "I was on the beach rolling my sails, when I heard some Menahaunt kids talking. They said that their yacht club is better because everyone there is white." You could handle an insult to yourself, but you won't allow anyone to hurt your brothers; you're filled with appalled rage. When your mom hears of this, she is furious. She calls your yacht club, asking your instructors to speak with Menahaunt. They, appalled by the racist remarks, agree to do so. However, Menahaunt is not so obliging. When confronted about the situation, instead of trying to make amends, they refuse to have any contact with your yacht club again. No more races, no more friendly water balloon attacks, no more games of man-hunt, all because they are unwilling to educate their sailors, to teach them to be welcoming to all people.

**Joseph Sanders**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School,  
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Novel Writing

# THE RANGER

BRIEF SUMMARY:

Plot Summary Garrick informs Lord Wolfwick that Ravougnier's army is planning to attack Wolfwick fortress. A battle begins and Ravougnier uses the fighting as a distraction to sneak in. Garrick discovers this and tries to stop him, however, his efforts fail as Ravougnier stages it to look like Garrick murdered Lord Wolfwick. Garrick escapes into the forest and a group of knights follows him. Sir Agmir realizes that Garrick is innocent, but he is too late to stop the knights from tracking him. Janner is sent to assist the knights in finding Garrick. Sir Agmir is captured by Ravougnier and placed in prison and is heavily injured. Garrick reveals himself to Janner, hoping to plead his case. Ravougnier studies Castle Gorlaron to attempt to devise a strategy for conquering it. Garrick and Janner have a sword fight. Sir Agmir escapes the prison. Janner leaves the knights to search for Garrick alone. Sir Agmir catches up to Garrick and Garrick tells him the whole story. Janner overhears this from the forest and joins the group, believing Garrick. The group travels to Castle Gorlaron. They then go to the castle walls and watch as Ravougnier has a man, dressed in a ranger cloak and pretending to be Garrick, kills the king's daughter. Ravougnier then attacks the castle using his new strategy. Gorlaron's drawbridge is lowered and Ravougnier sends his army in. Garrick and Janner kill the fake ranger. Agmir, Garrick, Janner, and Ravougnier then have a sword fight and Ravougnier is killed.

EXCERPT:

As I quickly crept across the snow-covered ground, I reached a boulder and slowly peeked

my head above the rock. The encampment was large, large enough to support thousands upon thousands of soldiers. Ravougnier was a master strategist. He wouldn't send this many troops to siege our fortress, Wolfwick, knowing that we could last months without leaving the walls and could easily take out the bulk of the army with arrows and our large bolt launchers. I hastily took a count of the siege weapons and crawled back to the forest. Once deep into the tree lines, I quickly found my horse and untethered him. I hopped on the saddle and he took off at a brisk gallop towards Wolfwick. I reached the small portcullis on the side.

"Lo, ranger," the guard greeted me. He cranked the winch and the portcullis opened. My horse galloped inside. I rode to the royal stables and gave the reins of my horse to the stable boy. Then, I set off at a quick sprint towards the main keep. I ran past the guardsmen who, upon seeing my ranger's uniform, did nothing to stop me. I flung open the main door and pushed open the grand doors into the throne room. Lord Aron Wolfwick, whom the small fortress was named for, sat, anxiously awaiting my return. He was tall, thin, had a short beard, and had a regal air about him.

"Ranger, you've returned. What have you discovered about Ravougnier's army?" he asked. "It's massive, enough to make even the strongest army quiver in their boots," I responded, "they have at least 7,000 fighters, 25 trebuchets, and at least 6 battering rams."

"Unfortunate news," Lord Wolfwick said, stroking his short beard thoughtfully. "Close the gates, raise the drawbridge, and alert the citizens. Wolfwick is officially under siege."

Ravougnier stood outside his tent, looking at Wolfwick. His army's encampment was slowly drawing closer to the fortress. He was colossal, had broad shoulders, and heavy muscles. The legends said he was half elf, half-ogre, explaining his immense size and speed. He was a fearsome thing to look at but was more intelligent than he was strong. He was clean-shaven and stood at

least a head taller than everyone in his army. He was about to launch a major attack against the castle, knowing that the odds were stacked heavily against him, but that wasn't the point. This was all a facade, a distraction. The truth was, that tomorrow, the Fortress of Wolfwick would fall.

I stood on the left tower. The silence of anticipation had slowly crept over the soldiers, causing the once bustling fortress to transform into an eerie state of noiselessness. Ravougnier's troops had been moving about all morning. They were preparing. A massive horn was blown, and the entirety of his army charged. Almost instantaneously there was a twang from the ramparts of Wolfwick. A massive plunge volley of arrows rained down on the advancing wave of enemies. Most of them were able to block the deadly projectiles, but the advancing army was hindered by the rain of arrows. I quickly took control of the bolt launcher and began to wreak havoc on the army below. The bolt launcher was like a large crossbow, with revolving barrels, and it shot six-foot-long metal bolts. They were loaded in the room below, in a small slot. The same mechanism that fired the bolt also rotated the barrel. It was a devastating weapon that could be fired fast to quickly stop an advance, or slowly while taking more time to aim, in order to hit more specific targets. This is what I was doing. I targeted the siege weapons and large groups of people. Something was amiss. I had faced Ravougnier before, he was never this careless. He was losing troops left and right. That's when I heard the alarm bells ring.

Ravougnier sloshed through the waist-high water, ten or so men following behind him. They each wore minimal armor, speed was key for his plan to work. A loud horn blast echoed through the tunnel, which signaled for the attack to begin. "No, we should have left the tunnels by now. Speed up," he said, his voice deep, commanding. All of the men emerged from the water tunnel and began running across the

courtyard. That's when the alarm bells began ringing. Seconds later, an arrow emerged out thin air and buried its tip deep in a man's heart. More arrows emerged, seemingly coming from nowhere. That's when Ravougnier spotted him, a ranger, hidden in the corner of a tower. "Quickly, there's a ranger here," he said. The group's speed increased, and they reached the main door. Ravougnier grabbed his curved broadsword. Most people would have struggled to move the massive blade, but he hefted it easily in one hand. He quickly killed the guards and smashed through the grand door. Several guards rushed forward and were quickly eliminated by Ravougnier's men. He then stepped forward and grabbed Lord Wolfwick around the neck. Three quick twangs interrupted him.

I tracked Ravougnier and his group across the courtyard, but they had an advantage. They were on the ground, I was on the towers. I had to climb up and down ladders to continue to follow them, and they were too fast to pick off with my arrows. I followed them to the keep when I realized what they were doing. They were going to kill Lord Wolfwick. I needed to get down there fast. I was about thirty feet up. I knew what I had to do. Without giving myself time to be afraid, I hurled myself off the tower. I fell quickly, and just before I hit the ground, I rolled. It diminished the amount of force that hit my feet but was still enough to for me to roll my ankle. I winced in pain but immediately stood up. I had to stop Ravougnier. I quickly drew an arrow from my quiver and nocked it to my bow. The arrows I had were my battle arrows, poison tipped. A poison strong enough to make even a man of Ravougnier's massive size, drop within three seconds of impact. I ran through the destroyed doors and saw Ravougnier hold Lord Wolfwick by the throat, his three remaining men stood around him. With blinding speed, I shot three arrows in rapid succession. Each of his men fell over instantly. I drew one more arrow and pointed the tip at Ravougnier. Even though he held Lord

Wolfwick in front of him, it would be an easy shot. I let the bowstring go. The arrow flew towards him. Then it stopped. With unnatural reflexes, Ravougnier had caught the arrow. Then, with a quick motion, he plunged my arrow into the heart of Lord Wolfwick. Ravougnier released the body. It crumpled to the ground, and I rushed toward him. Then, three knights, led by Sir Agmir, ran through the doors, weapons drawn. "That's a ranger's arrow!" one of them yelled, "the ranger killed Lord Wolfwick," he said pointing at me. I realized what this looked like. I turned quickly to point out Ravougnier, but he was gone. I quickly dashed between the knights, before they could react. I ran through the courtyard and went into the first building I came to, the church. I ran inside and slammed the large wooden doors, locking them. A few seconds later an ax blade slammed through the lock, breaking it. Sir Agmir, kicked open the doors and walked in flanked by two knights, one holding an ax.

"Stop," I said drawing an arrow, and pointing it at him. "I know all seven chinks in your armor, and could put an arrow in each one before you could draw your sword." I knew they wouldn't doubt me. There was so much legend surrounding the rangers, that most people feared us, even knights. I watched Sir Agmir closely. I saw his fingers slowly clench, and he quickly began to draw his sword from his sheath. I launched seven arrows with unnatural speed. Each one slammed into Sir Agmir's armor. He stumbled back with the impact. Using the small distraction, I grabbed a chair and threw as hard as I could toward the large stained glass window. It shattered, and I leaped through it, wrapping my thick cloak around my body to prevent myself from getting scratched by the glass. I landed on the ground and started toward the stables.

Sir Agmir stood up.

"Send a group of knights to find that ranger," one of the other knights to a courier. He ran off, and Agmir realized something. Each of the

arrows was exactly one centimeter above the  
chinks in his armor.  
“The ranger is with us,” Agmir said, but it was too  
late, as the knights had already left to kill the  
ranger.  
“What?” a knight questioned, “he just tried to kill  
you.”  
“No, he didn’t. He didn’t hit the chinks, he hit  
right above each one,” Agmir responded.  
“Well, maybe he missed,” the knight suggested.  
“No,” Agmir said, “rangers never miss.”

The sun set on the horizon. Ravougnier stood on  
the tower of Wolfwick. After Lord Wolfwick had  
died, the fortresses defenders were thrown into  
chaos, and with most of their knights and their  
ranger gone, Ravougnier’s forces were more  
than enough to defeat their defense. The  
biggest challenge had been beating Sir Agmir,  
but Ravougnier had easily bested him. Now that  
Wolfwick was taken, he could now move his  
forces on to a bigger task, destroying Castle  
Gorlaron, killing King Theodus, and becoming  
king of Voxxlur. As the orange sun dipped  
deeper below the snow-covered trees,  
Ravougnier smiled.

### **Kailey Schlink**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Olathe North High  
School, Olathe, KS  
Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

## RAIN

You were the Sky  
I was Rain.  
we mingled high above  
In the

atmosphere.  
I came to be so warm in your company.  
Always together  
always conversing in the cover of the clouds  
  
a new presence emerged  
Gravity, my kryptonite  
weighing  
me  
down  
toward earth.  
So enamored, I was.  
distracted.  
I left you.  
Rain.  
Then the high was gone.  
I became a puddle,  
trampled on, splashed in  
abandoned.  
  
you cleared the clouds, brought me the sun  
Then pulled me back home.

### **Regan Schmidt**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High  
School, Smithville, MO  
Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## FLIGHT TO FLORIDA

My Flight to Florida  
Several years ago, I flew 1,280.4 miles to

Tampa, Florida for the first time. I was about nine because I was in the fourth grade and my brother was in kindergarten. I had never been to the coast before, let alone anywhere out of the Midwest. I had never seen the ocean beside in pictures and movies. Most importantly, I have never flown on a plane. I can hear very well due to my horrible eyesight, so when the plane reached higher altitudes it was excruciatingly painful. Since the plane trip was torturous, I did different tasks the entire plane ride. I colored in my coloring book, I played on my Nintendo DSi, and I read a book until we finally arrived at the Tampa Airport. I was ecstatic to have my feet back on the ground even if I was a little disoriented.

My parents told my younger brother, Zack, and I that we would be going to Disney World. Everyone was excited even if it wasn't just our family of four going on the trip. My grandparents, my four cousins, and three aunts and uncles were coming too. I didn't mind my crowd of a family. They can get on my nerves, even today, but I still love them. Family is family.

The first day we unpacked and explored the resort in Siesta Key, Florida. We ran through the endless hallways and swam in the pool.

Afterward, we walked to the beach. The sand was a brilliant white as if it were sugar. The ocean water was warm and clear, unlike any murky lake or pond I had swum in. The beach was so perfect that it seemed to be stripped of all wildlife excluding pesky seagulls. Zack didn't have the same experience as I did. He was too little to understand, and he didn't listen to my mother's warnings. He drank the salty ocean water and threw it all up ruining the lustrous sand. Before we went back to the resort that night, we went out to eat. Most of us ordered fish tacos and they were delicious.

The next day everyone went to Disney World. I had heard other kids telling stories about this magical haven at school and I was curious to see for myself. I outgrew some of the

rides because I was the oldest cousin. My parents thought this might be a problem so we rode roller coasters instead of the teacups and water rides. My favorite ride was called Mt. Everest because it scared my mom and we have the horrid picture to prove it. To be honest, it was scary for Disney because no one expects a giant stuffed animal resembling a yeti fall out of the ceiling and the ride to go in reverse. While my other two girl cousins ate lunch with princesses, we ate lunch with Winnie the Pooh. They had to wait an hour to eat so we traveled on to even more rides while they ate. At the end of the day, we watched the light parade and firework show. It was amazing! My favorite was the little ladybug cars that zipped around in circles.

The morning after, we went to the Animal Kingdom. It was much less exciting than Disney World. We walked around the zoo for hours and rode a few rides. One of these rides I will never forget. It scared me to death. I don't remember the name of the underground roller coaster and I doubt they still have it, but it was full of animatronic dinosaurs that jump out at you. The ride ends when you get eaten by a giant robotic T-Rex. I wailed, "Where's the manager? Where's the manager? There was no warning!" and cried the whole time. I was overjoyed to get off of that ride. The gardens at the zoo were beautiful, but the smells were not. The area around the flamingos smelled so horrible that it made our eyes water. We left immediately and fled to the humongous tree of life in the middle of the park. It had every single animal carved into its bark. When we got back to the resort, we were all relieved that we could soothe our aching feet.

Finally, on the second to last day of our trip, we went deep sea fishing. My family loves to catch big fish, especially catfish, so I knew this fishing trip was going to be fun. Six of us went on the trip, I was the only kid because I was old enough to go. The rest of my family spent their day on the beach. We went to the docks and

found the fisherman that we had called in advance. The boat was small, but we all managed to fit. We were fishing for Red Grouper and Gray Snapper because they were in season at the time. It took half an hour to drive out to the fishing spots.

The bait we used was thawed squid. The fishing rods were taller than me and took a lot of strength to hold. My Dad and two uncles caught a few big Red Grouper, but I was having trouble catching anything. At least I was doing better than my mom, she caught a rock! I caught a few Gray Snapper that were much smaller than the Red Grouper. The fisherman moved the boat to a different fishing spot. It was getting hot. I could feel the sweat dripping down my neck under the blazing gulf sun. I felt a tug on the other end of the line, but it was unlike the bites from the Gray Snapper. I reeled up the strange looking fish. It was green with stripes like a watermelon and it had a white belly. I immediately realized that it was a puffer fish when the fisherman took it off the hook because it inflated like a balloon. It looked like a spiky baseball. The other strange fish I caught was called a Morrel. They are black and white striped fish that stick themselves onto sharks. Not long after, my uncle caught a shark. It wasn't very big, only two or three feet long. It had been at least a four-hour fishing trip and it was finally time to return home.

When we got back to the docks, the fisherman cleaned the Grouper and Snapper we caught. While he was doing that, I explored the docks and chased pelicans with my cousins who came to pick us up. We took the fish home and fried it. It was the best fish I've ever had. There's a big difference between fresh and frozen. We only had one more day left on our vacation. The next day, we all went to the beach and enjoyed the hot sun and salty water one last time before we had to get on the plane again. I have never been that tan before, and, surprisingly, I didn't get burnt,

unlike my Uncle Mark who looked like a tomato. That night I didn't get much sleep because we had to wake up super early to catch the plane.

The next morning, we threw all our luggage into the trunks of the cars we rented and rushed to the airport. On the plane, it seemed like I had fewer things to do to occupy the time than I did on the way there. I watched the map on my dad's phone to see how close we were from home. I liked being on the beach, but there truly is no place like home. I got a little homesick on vacation, I hadn't noticed until the flight home. I missed my room, my bed, my cat, and my own bathroom. After the frantic packing and the painful plane ride, I was ready to crash on my bed. I didn't even unpack my bag, I put my pajamas on and fell asleep.

After this vacation, we went to Florida three more times. I might go back to that same beach again, I might not. I had great experiences in Florida and I don't want to go back. I'd rather go somewhere else and make new memories. I'm glad I got to go on these vacations because some people have never been to Florida or Disney World. Memories are not made by money or fancy pictures, they are created with the people you love. Someday in the future, I will retell this story and I will start with "Several years ago..."

## **Alex Schmitz**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Category: Short Story

# THE VISIONS

Alex Schmitz

Mrs. Bindel

Enriched ELA-3, Block 1

14 September 2018

The Visions

"Sonny Martin, number twenty-three, is up to bat. The state title is on the line, folks! The Cyclones are down to their last out, their last strike. It's the bottom of the seventh—let's see if Sonny can bring the rings home for his team."

Sonny Martin nervously walks to the plate. He is the star player; the team is on his back, and he has to come clutch. The Cyclones have runners on second and third.

The pitcher digs his foot into the rubber.

"Sandy winds up for the pitch, and lets it fly," the announcer states as Sandy throws the pitch as hard as he can.

All Sonny can see is an 85-mile-per-hour fastball hurling at his head.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sonny Martin is a two-sport, D1 athlete recruit, having received offers from the biggest baseball and football programs in America—Alabama, Clemson, and Georgia for football; Oregon State, Arkansas, and Florida for baseball. To settle on one will be the hardest decision he will have to make to date. His parents are influencing him to go to the best academic schools, but his coaches, on the other hand, want him to go to the best athletic schools. Wherever Sonny decides to go on signing day, at least some of the people he admires and loves will be upset no matter what his reasons are.

Sonny is on the path to success as long as his level of play stays constant. Shining on and off the field, Sonny will have a guaranteed career in front of him. All that matters is the state championship game.

He wakes up, gets dressed, and goes to school just like any other day. Unfortunately for Sonny, this is only the biggest baseball game of his high school career.

If he does as expected, he will have a full ride to whatever college he wants to attend.

If he fails, Sonny could be losing thousands of dollars. As everyone knows, a full ride is a big deal for high school student-athletes.

The game is approaching. He is mentally ready. He is prepared to shine.

He is Sonny Martin.

He goes through his pregame rituals—tightening his cleats and putting seeds in his pocket. As the game starts to roll around, time begins to slow down for Sonny.

TICK. TOCK. TICK. TOCK.

He walks out of the school and is hit in the face with all sorts of aromas. The Nachos. The Popcorn. The Hot Dogs. He begins his slow journey to the field step by step, licking his lips with his stomach rumbling. Sonny's metal cleats are scraping the concrete. CLICK. CLACK.

CLICK. CLACK.

"PLAY BALL," The umpire shouts.

The innings fly by and the game is picking up pace when—all of a sudden—time stops, the game on the line. Sonny walks up to the plate very slowly, dust kicking up in his path. Sonny steps into the box, kicks the dirt around, and stares down the pitcher.

He takes a deep breath.

The pitch is delivered low and outside.

"Strike one!" the umpire shouts.

Sonny spits as the pitcher grins in relief, knowing it's a bad call. Sonny steps back into the box, slowly, anticipating the next pitch. BREATHE IN. BREATHE OUT. SMELL THE SCENTS OF THE FIELD; SMELL THE FRESH CUT GRASS; SMELL THE MUSTY STENCH OF THE DIRT.

Finally, he smells the fresh pine tar that is coated layer after layer after layer on his bat. Sandy goes into his windup and delivers the pitch. The pitcher throws a curveball, a pitch that can easily fool a batter, Sonny reacts to the pitch out of his hand. Sonny locks in on the 108 seams of the ball as they rotate forward around and around slowly. Sonny guesses where the pitch is going to be and swings out of his shoes—only for Sonny, this was a big mistake...

“Sonny Martin has somehow swung and missed the pitch!” the announcer reports.  
“Strike Two!” the umpire exclaims.  
“The count is now 0-2, the Cyclones are down to their last life. Their last strike,” the announcer reports.  
With signing day approaching in a couple of weeks, this last pitch could be the last moment the scouts have to see him play live in a game. If Sonny does not make it count, the results could be detrimental. This single pitch can determine what his future holds.  
The pitcher grins as he begins to deliver the last pitch the scouts could see...

\*\*\*\*

Sonny tries to wake up but can not. He tries again and again but to no avail. He is trapped in his own head.  
All of a sudden, there are two visions etching into his mind. Each vision seems to be different scenarios in the future on signing day.  
The images begin to clarify piece by piece— like pieces fitting into a puzzle. The vision on the right shows him wearing an Oregon State hat signing a letter of intent to play baseball. After this, everyone in the room begins to clap and shout, even his parents. They are joyful he decided not to play football in college. On the contrary, his football coaches are all staring him down in anger. It is as if Sonny is dead to them after all he did for them and his team.  
Sonny's mind then flashes to the other vision. The setting is the same. Sonny is in the middle of the table. Six hats. Behind this table and at his side are his family members, peers, and coaches. Sonny begins to reach for the Clemson hat and put it on. The vision is then disturbed by a loud sound.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

The vision continued as he began to place the hat atop of his head; Sonny notices that the direct opposite happened from his first vision.  
BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

All of his football coaches are huddled up together yelling and screaming in joy. This time, his parents have a look of sheer disappointment

and betrayal struck across their faces. Sonny began to do was look around the room to see all of the emotions being expressed on everybody's faces. As time stood still he began to see the true horror of having to make a decision. It is like he is in a maze full of mirrors and every step he takes forward is like a step taken backwards. It gets to the point where he has no idea where he wants to go. This is detrimental to his confidence that he had before.

BEEP. BEEP.

The worst possible timing for him. Better yet he was beginning to wake up from the coma he was in for two weeks.

BEEP.

He wakes up—but instead of in a bed at a hospital, he is on stage—in front of everyone. He begins to announce where he will be attending, then freezes and just stares.

All sorts of thoughts are racing through his head. He reaches out. Puts his hand on a hat. The hat he chooses is filled with betrayal.

## Caycee Schwartz

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Danby Rush Tower  
Middle School, Festus, MO  
Educator: Morgan Grither

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

# ARCHIE SMITH, BOY WONDER

It started off as a normal day when I was five years old. Before I died. I wake up to the sound of rain. I look out the window and sigh; it is a

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depressing day. I drag myself out of bed and get ready. My mom looks at me and says, "You ready?" I nod and get into the car. I start to drift off just as I see the stop light. My body jerks, and my mom screams. My head gets pounded against the window then everything goes black. My chest heaves, and I take a huge breath. I can't see; everything is black. I blink, but I still cannot see.

"He's coming back," I hear a voice say. I wake up to blinding lights. I flinch and cover my eyes.

"Oh he's awake!" my mom says smothering me with a hug. Tears are streaming down her face. "I couldn't bear for this to happen again," my mother whispers.

"You were dead honey; the doctors brought you back," my dad says going to stand next to my mom. He leans down and kisses my forehead. My mom smiles and hugs the doctor through tears.

She looks down at me again, "I'm so glad you're ok. This is all my fault!" I take her hand and squeeze it. Everything was going to be fine.

Now, I am 12. When I'm with my parents, I feel normal, but when I met my friend Cole, I got this weird feeling, like a tingle. I get the tingle feeling only once in a while. Last night, Cole stayed the night at my house; today we are taking him to school. "You can put your bag in the trunk," I tell him.

"What?" my mom says.

"Nothing, I was just telling Cole," I reply. My mom doesn't hear me; she shakes her head and gets in the driver's seat. I frown at her, then look at Cole.

"Ready?" I ask. Cole nods his head, and we both get in the car. We finally pull into the parking lot. Cole and I get out of the car, and I give my

mom a kiss.

"Have a good day at school," she says.

"We will," I say waving goodbye. Cole and I have a seat in the gym. My stomach growls.

"Want to go get some breakfast?" I ask him.

"Sure," he says getting up. We get in the line, and I see Dean in front of me. Please don't turn around I think to myself. Dean and I used to be best friends until I got into the accident; now all he does is make fun of me. We continue in the line until finally, we get our food. I turn to Cole to ask him something, but before I could say anything I fall, and my food goes in my face. Dean. He tripped me. I look up and see his icy blue eyes. Suddenly this rage burns in me. I get up with my fists clenched. I march up to Dean and punch him square in the nose.

I hear Cole, "No, Archie!" Then, the teacher grabs Dean and I and drags us to the hallway. Cole is still by me, as always. I look at Dean again. He shoots me a mean look. It adds to my rage.

The teacher throws me into a room and says, "You are staying in here until your mom comes, then we will tell her what you have done." He shuts the door and I kick the chair and let out a sigh. Cole slumps by me. He pulls out a picture of me and him. I was only a baby though.

"What's that?" I ask.

"It's you and me," Cole says. I look at the picture confused.

"How can-" The teacher opens the door interrupting me and Cole.

"Your mom is here," he says opening the door. I meet my mom in the office. She looks at me worried. I give her a hard look.

"Your son has assaulted another student," the teacher says to my mom.

"He tripped me and made me spill my breakfast," I say looking down.

"Your son will get a write-up and have ISS for his actions," the teacher continues. My mom nods and looks at me once again.

I look at Cole and say, "I've always wanted to punch that jerk."

The teacher looks at me, "What was that, Archie?"

"Nothing," I say looking away from Cole. I then frown; why isn't the teacher saying anything about Cole being here?

My mom gets up and shakes the teacher's hand.

"Thank you," she says. My mom and I sit in silence the whole ride home. When we get in the house, my mom tells me to sit on the couch.

"What happened between you and Dean? You used to be best friends."

"Ever since the accident all he does is make fun of me," I tell her. "He even calls me names like Zombie."

My mom shakes her head, "You shouldn't have punched him. You need to control your anger. I'm worried about you, Archie."

"Well you should be more worried about Dean," I say getting up and running to my room. I slam the door and slam my head in my pillow. Why did I come back to life only to be miserable? I dig in my closet and grab my yearbook. I flip through the pages till I find Dean's ugly face. I grab my scissors and cut him out. Then with one slash, I cut his head off. I might not have died, but you will. I hear my dad walk in the front door. After a few minutes, I hear him and my mom talking.

"I'm worried about him," she says.

"He needs to socialize," my dad replies. I shake my head and frown. I have a best friend. Cole is the only one that understands me. I walk over and open my window. I realize I am sweating from fuming about Dean.

I lay in my bed and just as I'm about to doze off I hear a tiny voice say, "IS HE THE ONE?" I lift my head and look out the window. Nothing. I feel a tingle in my spine, but drift away before thinking too much about it. I wake to the dreaded sound of rain. I shiver and walk over to my window and close it. I pause and think about last night, about what I heard. I shake my head and continue to get ready for the day. Soon, I am ready to leave for school. Today I will show Dean he will never mess with me again.

As I get in the car, my mom looks at me, "Honey, please stay out of trouble and try and talk to someone."

I look at her with a confused look, "I have Cole." My mom looks at me with a shocked face.

"Who's that?" she asks.

"Really, mom? He's my friend; you know the one older than me?" I ask her. I see her eyes start to water and her hands start to shake.

"HOW DO YOU KNOW COLE?" she screams. I shake my head. She's gone crazy.

"He's dead," she says so quietly I almost didn't hear. She reaches in her purse and pulls out a picture. The same picture Cole showed me. One of me when I was a little baby and Cole, was about five.

"I miss him so much," she says.

I shake my head and say, "You'll see him soon."

She looks at me with sad eyes, "Not for a long time."

I try and think about what she means and why she is so upset. I guess she used to be friends with Cole's family, but Cole was just at my house. Nothing made sense. Before I knew it, we were pulling into the school parking lot. Now the only thing I had on my mind was Dean.

I walk into school, but I don't see Cole. He never misses. I walk into the office and sit in a chair and look up to the sound of the door opening. Dean. Rage fills me. Everything he's ever done to me fills my brain. All the nicknames, the pranks, the embarrassment. The teacher leads Dean and me to a small room.

"You two will sit here all day and do your school work as punishment for fighting." I roll my eyes at Dean. I look him up and down. He has these big black leather boots on. Something catches my eye as we enter the room. A glint of light coming from Dean's boot.

"So me and you, Zombie?" he says giving me a smirk.

"Don't try me today or you will get hurt," I tell him clenching my fists.

He walks up to me. "Oh really?" he says with an evil smile. I straighten up to him. He pulls something out of his boot. A knife. I freeze in terror. He holds it to me.

"See this?" Dean says waving it closer to me. I back into the table and hold my hands up. "The world doesn't need freaks like you in it. We don't need your imaginary friends. You may have got lucky and lived once, but I will make sure you never come back from this," Dean says taking a step towards me.

"NO!" but my last words were cut short. Dean

dives his knife into my chest tearing my skin. I look down with my eyes wide in shock. I see a knife sticking out from me as blood runs down my shirt. My last look before I fell into a black abyss was the stare of Dean's icy blue eyes.

My mind flashes. I see myself.

"You can put your bag in the trunk," I say.

"What?" my mom asks. My mind flashes again. I am at school sitting alone.

"Wanna go get some breakfast?" I ask. I'm talking to no one. Cole? He's missing. My mind flashes once again. I'm walking with the teacher after I punched Dean. Cole is not there. He was never there. Then I'm in my bedroom, and when I open the window, all these people are there whispering about me.

A white light pierces my vision. I groan. A warm hand holds mine. It's Cole.

"Hello, brother," he says with a smile. I suddenly remember what happened with Dean. I gasp and put my hand where the knife was.

"Where's the-" I look at Cole, "Where am I?"

"You, brother, are on the other side."

"I'm dead! I'm dead!"

"Our mother has lost us both," Cole says. He pulls out the picture of him and me. "When I was five, mother got in a car accident with me in the car, unfortunately, I didn't survive like you." I look at him in shock.

"You're my brother?" I say finally putting everything together.

"Before you died, no one could see me, but when you died then came back to life, you

could!" he says.

"You weren't real the whole time," I say so quietly I don't know if Cole heard me. "I could see dead people," I say not believing my own words. Suddenly my whole life comes crashing in. I see everyone I thought was real; people that passed me on the streets. The tingles. They were never alive. Cole was never real. They were all dead people.

## Cathryne Sheridan

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO  
Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# LOST

Anonymous  
Mr. Lovera  
AP Literature and Composition  
November 22 2018

## Lost

"Please, Jane?" My little sister looked up at me with her big puppy dog eyes, trying to convince me to take her up the road to see the horses. Every summer, we would walk up to the nearby barn and feed the horses carrots, but today I just wasn't feeling it. I guiltlessly plopped myself down on the couch, folded my legs, and started watching *RIVERDALE* on Netflix. Apparently Jill didn't get the hint, because she wouldn't stop bugging me about the stupid horses. Over, and over, and over. And over.

"Can you please take me to see the horses? I just wanna pet em and feed em carrot sticks."

She begged for the billionth time.

"No."

"Pretty please?"

"Can't you see I'm in the middle of something?" I gestured to the TV.

"Pretty please with a cherry on top?" Again, with those big green eyes.

"Jill, that's enough. We can do it tomorrow."

"But that's what you said yesterday!" Finally, she stomped up the stairs in defeat.

IT'S ABOUT TIME. I thought to myself.

As the responsibility was lifted off my shoulders, I felt myself sink deeper into the cozy couch. Slowly, my eyelids grew heavy and the scratchy sound of my snore filled the room.

\*\*\*

"Jane! WAKE UP!" My dad shook me awake, and as my eyelids peeked open I stole a glance at his face. His forehead was creased with wrinkled lines, and underneath his furrowed brows his eyes were wide open. Both of his lips were parted and I could faintly see them quivering. Finally, I noticed the beads of sweat dripping down his cheek--or maybe they were tears.

As I continued to look around, I saw everyone tearing through the house like wild animals. The sound of my sister's name echoed through my ears. I stood up recognizing the seriousness of the situation, with the sudden realization in my mind: *JILL IS MISSING*.

My palms grew clammy and started to tremble, finding myself unaware of the next move. Quickly, we started by slamming all the doors open, diligently searching through every room. We threw toys, books, shoes, and other random objects left and right trying to reveal anything at all. Then, we checked behind all the crevices that she used to hide in, and even looked in the cabinets and drawers where we knew she couldn't fit--but we were desperate.

Before I could start having a panic-attack, my dad grabbed my arm hastily and barked at me to get in the car. By the time I jumped in the front

seat and jammed my seatbelt on, we were already flying out of the driveway. I held on to the car door and stuck my head out of the window, frantically screaming her name with every ounce of breath I had left in my lungs. We drove in circles around our small neighborhood, asking anyone if they saw anything of our little girl. The answer was always the same: No.

My body began to break out in an excessive sweat, and every single bone in my body shook with dread. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck as if I was watching a horror movie, except this horror movie became more real by the minute. The pure dread and terror of losing her overcame me like nothing I've ever experienced before.

Silently, I started to make prayers to God, begging him to show me just a tiny sliver of her beautiful blond hair, her bright green eyes, or that glowing smile that none of us can resist. How I wouldn't give my whole life just to know that my sweet little girl is home safe, and not drowning at the bottom of a lake or in the hands of a criminal.

After tirelessly searching the neighborhood for what felt like centuries, my dad and I headed back to the lake house to decide what our next plan of action would be. Distraught, I stumbled my way back into the living room and fell on my knees. Grabbing at the carpet, I sank my face into the ground and begin to sob uncontrollably. THIS IS ALL MY FAULT. IF ONLY I WAS A BETTER SISTER THIS MIGHT NOT HAVE EVEN HAPPENED. Guilt made me sick to my stomach. I was wrong, so very wrong. Jill is the one person who is always there to make me laugh when I'm down, to make me feel proud of expressing myself, and to bring joy to my life on a daily basis. Abusing her was a mistake, and imagining life without this beaming ball of sunshine is impossible.

My dad sat beside me, taking me into his arms. We sat on the carpet there, just holding each other in our shared sorrow. I squeezed him tight and tried to think of all the places she could have disappeared to. I wiped the tears from my

eyes and opened them. Then, I suddenly caught sight of two tiny fingers peeking out from the pillow on the couch to the right. My body soared with hope as I ripped myself away from my dad and lunged for the couch. Unable to wait any longer, I yanked the giant pillow off the couch, and there she laid. Her delicate body rested peacefully underneath a few more pillows, fast asleep. I picked her up and held her close, confident that I would never let her go.

"Precious girl," I whispered. "Don't you ever leave me again." I lovingly kissed her on the cheek, hoping that this moment would never end.

Then her high pitched voice piped up, "Can we go feed the horses now?" She asked one last time.

Suddenly, the biggest smile spread across my face. "I'll go get the carrots!"

## **Emma Smith**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Southern Boone  
Middle School, Ashland, MO  
Educator: Stephanie Regier

Category: Poetry

# A BROKEN HEART

## **A Broken Clock**

My heart is a broken clock.

It waits to tick its time again

Waiting to have the capability to capture cheer  
and charm

A thing that counts the seconds

Counts the minutes

Counts the days  
That will lead up to its correction  
Why isn't it correct?  
Its had too many aches  
Too many breaks  
Too many burned out sparks that burned a hole  
of hate and lonely  
I long to be loved as I love them  
I try  
Try to put a bandaid on it  
Sew the stitches of love into it  
Wrench the genial gears into place once again  
If only...but the marks  
The breaks  
The scars will always be there to remind you that  
there was a time  
A time when bitterness consumed you and  
burned you in a fire of solemn  
It rusted the gears so the hands of care can't  
tick at the right time  
Now the pendulum that once swung with joy  
Is now hanging by a thread  
The glass is cracked  
The face is stained with tears  
Always and forever will you remember this  
How I long to have my heart filled  
It is a broken clock  
A cavity  
One thing is out of place and it all crumbles  
I crumble  
The world ends  
Time itself goes blank  
My mind troubles to think of the troubles of my  
mind  
Time is shattered  
My heart is shattered  
Will it be fixed?  
Can it be fixed?

**Elliott Smith**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

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

Educator: Idean Bindel

Category: Humor

## HOME ON THE ROAD

Two hours.

That's all this dang car ride was supposed to last. And that is on top of the two hours on the plane, and that is on top of the ten hours of school and getting ready for this wedding.

I pop my headphones back in and hear the not-so-subtle "shake it off, shake it off" of Taylor Swift that I know will be stuck in my head for the rest of the weekend. But even with the trumpets blaring, I hear the drone of something even worse, something that I wouldn't wish upon my worst nightmare: my aunt and Grandma having a conversation.

THIS is that story.

\* \* \* \* \*

A wedding is supposed to be a happy occasion filled with special moments shared between all involved. Not a "backyard bash" as quite a few in my family put it. Colorado, the setting of the exciting adventure (home to the radiant Rockies, giant brown bears, and lax cannabis laws), is already the butt of many jokes months before we have even bought our tickets—which, of course, are too expensive for everyone's liking.

As we—two aunts, two cousins, brother, mom, and I—arrive at the airport with bags, snacks,

and grandmother in tow, we got our first omen. My aunt is wearing precisely the same outfit as my mother, from their QVC jackets to their black shoes. Their “comfy clothes” as they are calling them. With my family’s fashion statements and weeks-worth of luggage, all eight of us start walking to the gate.

Instead of a friendly greeting and a wave onboard the plane, we were met with a dragged-out flight delay, because things cannot go smoothly at an airport, ever.

As we went from the airport to the car rental facility in the dead of night, I could feel the energy in the group already draining. I tell myself, **ONLY 100 MILES MORE**, to no avail. Mom went up to the counter to get our car. Oh wait, now the others are with her. Nevermind, they just left. Sorry, they’re back—wh—wait what are they doing? Back and forth, back and forth, I’m getting dizzy just watching them. I go outside with my brother and we sit in the cold. Now it’s too cold and this won’t do. Back inside it is!

“No, sir, all I want is two cars,” my mom said for probably the tenth time tonight shaking her head. It’s always interesting to see either of my parents renting out cars. I remember vividly getting our car in England. I lost my iPod that day. I shiver, recalling the horror.

This never-ending cycle of in-and-out-and-in-again kept turning until Mom got done at the counter. So, just like back home, we got all of our stuff and trekked along to the giant, Earth-killing SUV that my dad is always telling me never to step foot in. We did anyway, for about thirty seconds, which was when we learned that we had no room! Fun times, don’t you think? My grandma sure thought so.

“If only we had a man here to help us with these crazy cars, he could get it all to work

out,” the eighty-five-year-old says in front of three of her six daughters and politically minded granddaughter.

“Exactly, because us damsels in distress are so helpless. I could never have thought of that!” my cousin muttered just loud enough for me to hear.

As it turns out, we didn’t need a strong man to help us (although I was totally prepared to be called to action); we just needed a different car. We hopped back up out of the car and went back to the heated building where we all felt as relaxed as we could be. The adults got our keys and we all headed back out to yet another behemoth of an ozone-depleting monster. This time, it was one that wouldn’t even open! Not caring if I got frostbite, I led my younger family members in a protest by staying put and not moving one inch until we got a new acceptable car, which we received promptly—third time’s the charm, am I right?

So here we are. A giant SUV. Bored children. Tired adults. New and very dangerous roads. It’s almost as if I could hear some sort of voice coming from the distance...

**I FEEL IT’S ONLY FAIR TO GIVE YOU SOME WARNING BEFORE WE COMMENCE. WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO ENCOUNTER IS THE MOST SMALL, RURAL MISSOURI TOWN THING THAT CAN HAPPEN. BRACE YOURSELF, JAMES, BECAUSE EVEN THE CATCHIEST OF POP SONGS CAN’T HELP YOU...**

This ubiquitous voice was making me uneasy, something that I figured would be hard to do seeing as I was already smushed in the car seat with my twelve foot long legs.

Then it came from behind. Subtle, at first, but increasingly more noticeable. There, again. **WHAT IS THIS? THE VOICE COULDN’T**

### HAVE BEEN REAL, RIGHT? RIGHT?

Oh, but it was. Like arrows of sound, the harrowing talk came zipping past my naïve ears:

“Oh, you know Robert?” Grandma asked the poor soul next to her. Grandma didn’t know what she was about to start, bless her.

“Which one?”

“Oh, you know, the one at church.”

“Jean’s husband?”

“No! Claire’s.”

“Is that the son or the grandson of William?”

“The one who works at the soup kitchen. Or is it the post office?”

Whatever she was about to say about Jean’s husband, Robert, I lost track of. You see, most of my family is from a Missouri town where practically everyone knows everyone, and moreover, everyone’s friends know everyone else’s friends. A blessing and a curse, if you will.

It was a good hour into that particular conversation that we finally got into the mountain range. Up, up, up we go and up, up, up the moon went—and down, down, down went our spirits. To give us an even more enjoyable car ride all felt altitude sickness, especially my brother, who was attempting to not throw up.

My aunt kept driving and driving until it was so dark that we couldn’t see things even five feet in front of us. When our phones (plural, because apparently, my grandma didn’t trust my aunt’s phone with the exact same directions) went off telling us, “Turn right and

your destination will be on the left”, it was almost a miracle from heaven. We arrived at the house (one of my aunt’s friend’s rental house) at 1 a.m. The next day consisted of ski lifts, getting stranded after being on a ski lift, and almost being late for the wedding entirely, but I’ll save that for another story...

And so, the wedding weekend had come to an end. The ceremony was complete. From my family came smiles, and from me came dance moves that I am sure blew everyone away. When the same song that started this very interesting weekend came on, it was clear that when all is said and done, it doesn’t matter if something is too far away or too expensive; you just need to “shake it off” and be with the people you love and it will all be worth it.

### **Neha Sridhar**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS  
Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

## TOWER TALL AND MIGHTY

At the top of the tower,  
a perch above the rest,  
there stood a duo at the edge as  
city stretched far below.  
Bitter breeze, choppy and cold, nipped at their  
cheeks,  
grinning widely.  
Sounds of streets crescendoed from below,

background track to the day.  
Clouds from above covered the sky,  
grays muting any possible light,  
yet their eyes shone brighter than the sun,  
spilling over with joy.  
The girl with inky hair and caramel skin nestled  
into the  
crook of her father's shoulder,  
vying for evasive warmth.  
Her father held out one arm far in front of the  
pair,  
snapping a memory and pausing the moment.  
While both were tired from their long day of  
adventures,  
from trekking up stairs,  
from exploring the city,  
their hearts were full with excite and content.

## Divya Srihari

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs  
School, Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: John Pierson

Category: Critical Essay

# HEART OF DARKNESS

Upon examination of its dehumanizing metaphors, explicitly undermining language, and lack of resolve to end any further perpetuation of these beliefs, author Chinua Achebe asserts that Joseph Conrad's HEART OF DARKNESS is not in fact a portrayal of Marlow's internalized racism, but rather an illustration of

the fact that Conrad himself trusts the biases and prejudice displayed. HEART OF DARKNESS is not an affirmation of Marlow's racism; instead, Conrad uses the character of Marlow as a vehicle to manifest his voice and perpetuate his OWN predisposed beliefs without having to face repercussion or scrutiny for this racist pattern of thought.

Under the cloak of Marlow's voice, Conrad leads the reader to initially believe the sarcasm and condescension presented are Marlow's. Conrad is able to use this as a tool to distance himself from the opinions he presents. However, Conrad's failure to utilize the voice of the anonymous narrator, or even himself, in mitigating Marlow's starkly dehumanizing, racist assertions clearly show that this openly prejudiced narration DOES in fact align with his OWN views. However, other choices he makes reveal the inherent racism present in other aspects of the novel.

Achebe argues that from the beginning, Conrad establishes a clear divide between light and darkness, the norm and the other. This serves as both a referral to race as well as "civilization" being superior. This juxtaposition has nothing to do with Marlow, revealing Conrad's perpetuation of the novel's racism. For example, Africa is portrayed as a place where man's "vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (Achebe 2). This emphasizes the concept of idealizing civilization, or "lightness." Those who are "civilized" - in this case, white man - ironically enough, are the ones who rape and pillage other societies. The deification of white man continues as Conrad describes Marlow's first encounter on the subcontinent: "The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us - who could tell?" (Conrad 97). Conrad's condescension is evident here - his voice inseparable from Marlow's. His ignorance to the Africans' customs and egotistical assumption of their awe and allegiance prove this.

Furthermore, Conrad sees the African subcontinent as the region on the map which is

“unexplored” and “undiscovered” - his definition based on only discovery by white man. He establishes a clear juxtaposition of “light” and “dark,” creating an overarching negative portrayal of the African continent and its people. Although this portion of the map remains blank, once colonized, it becomes “dark,” stained by greed and technology. Marlow sees the African people as “baggage” that come as part of the land, but not the rightfully presiding over it, his Eurocentrism causing him to see HIM and HIS crew as the rightful “discoverers” of the land, purely because they are White. He writes, “We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore an aspect of an unknown planet” (Conrad 97).

Later, on the most dehumanizing passages remain where his inherently condescending descriptions of the people of the African continent are. He describes one African man, “He was an improved specimen...He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat walking on his hind legs” (Achebe 2). Such blatantly degrading descriptions remain testament to the racism in the novel. Achebe states, “For Conrad things being in their place is of the utmost importance,” (Achebe 3) and this is undoubtedly conveyed through the use of such descriptions.

Additionally, Conrad’s heightened self awareness is periodically reflected through the voice of another character, but this only adds to the novel’s inherent racism. He occasionally breaks the barrier of narration from Marlow’s standpoint - Marlow is interrupted in the middle of his story on the ship; “Try to be civil, Marlow, growled a voice” (Conrad 95). He does not use this interruption, however, to rectify his racism. He also stresses the importance of efficiency to maintaining productivity and avoiding confrontation with one’s truths. Kurtz is deified and described as a “prodigy ... an emissary of pity and science and progress, and devil knows what else” (Conrad 59). This illustrates how Kurtz’s work ethic and ability to constantly produce

ivory is simultaneously praised and feared by all in the company. Work is the thing which hollowed him out, enabling him to mindlessly continue producing ivory. Conversely, working so hard made him hollow - blind to the truth about himself and destruction caused by the company he works for. This can be seen as synonymous with his own avoidance of his deep-seated racism. Thus, Conrad effectively describes mankind’s tendency to avoid his “creepy thoughts,” effectively revealing his own faults in doing so. Thus, Conrad’s HEART OF DARKNESS is not in fact a portrayal of Marlow’s internalized racism, but rather, a racist novel in itself due to the stark metaphors, dehumanizing language, and inability to rectify both of these.

## Sydney Stahlschmidt

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# JUST FOR A MOMENT

I lie sprawled across my red-and-blue-patterned bed spread, gazing up into the ceiling, listening to my music on shuffle over and over again. I concentrate on the rhythms continuously thumping through my head, and attempt to escape from the truth the plays in the real world. I hear the laughter outside my window from the joyous kids laughing with their friends and picture the parties, sleepover, and exhilarating memories my friends are making together, with my only person to turn to being

my mom. My saliva gets thicker making it hard to swallow, as I scroll past photos of my friends on social media having the best summers of their lives. My record skids in the background, letting me forget about the taste of salt that dissolves on my tongue and the tears trickling down my face.

My playlist reaches the last song for the third time of the night, only 8:00, nothing to do for the rest of my night. Shortly after, I hear the light thumping of footsteps up my stairs and my mom creaks open my bedroom door.

"Dinner's ready honey. What's wrong? I made your favorite meal again, my homemade spaghetti sauce," my mom chirps with concern.

"Nothing Mom. It's just the usual again," I say trying to hide my red splotchy face and wiping away the final drops of water that coats my cheeks.

"My friends excluding me. Why doesn't anyone like me? What do I do wrong? This always happens to me. I mean first I only make swing player for soccer after working all year for varsity, and this constantly. I can never get a break."

My mom sits on the bed next to me, rubbing circles on my back, just like she always has whenever I'm upset. She continues to comfort me, which is the thing she has always been best at.

"Sydney. Why do you always look at the negative side of every situation? You are such a lucky girl and so many people would be lucky to be as beautiful, smart, and have the same opportunities you have," she says with a smile on her face but I can see in her eyes, the pain and guilt that she feels looking at me dismayed. She then continues, "Uncle Dan is in the hospital. We should go visit him before he gets out tomorrow. Papa said we should come visit. It's his birthday in a week and it's the right thing to do."

"I kind of feel like just staying home tonight and doing something."

I lightly sigh as I brush my fingers through my hair, just like I always do when I'm anxious. As my mom agrees to simply stay home and relax, we decide the perfect way to enjoy a girl's night is

to make my favorite homemade spaghetti, bake cookies, and watch a movie.

I feel light already rushing back through my system. As she helps me off the bed and we walk downstairs, a small grin appears on my face. I feel so lucky to have a mom that wants to be here for me even when I don't always appreciate it. I am so happy and thankful, even if just for a moment.

After a bowl of spaghetti and three snickerdoodles, I am stuffed to the brim. I try to paint on a bright face as one of my favorite movies, *Grown Ups*, buzzes in the background. I zone off into my own world. All I can seem to envision is how I wish things could be different. I love my mom more than anything, but sometimes I desire a true friend to make me happy. I kiss my mom goodnight on the cheek and the next thing I know my eyelids are floating closed and I drift off to sleep.

"SYDNEY WAKE UP," my mom bursts through my door yelling with streams of tears thrashing down her face. "It's Uncle Dan," she continues while choking on her words. "Papa just called and even though the doctors said he was fine and he was supposed to get out of the hospital tomorrow morning they were wrong. He had a heart attack in the middle of the night and they weren't able to revive him."

I stare blinking at my mom, speechless. I can't seem to find any words. It's 1:35 AM, June 6th, just nine days before my Uncle Dan's 54th birthday. My mom curls into a ball next to me, patting me on the back again, for comfort. I sit in awe, trying to process what I had just heard. The words run on repeat in my mind; he was just so young. My head starts to pound, and I feel like my heart may need to be revived too.

My Papa calls and my mom leaps to the phone. While she tries to conduct a happy voice as she nods her head, I hear the cracking of the voice on the other side of the phone. I know that everything is not going to be okay. After five minutes of complete silence and comprehension, my mom hangs up the phone and slowly sits back down.

She tells me how she could hear the devastation in my grandpa's voice as he talks about the funeral ceremony and wake that would be taking place the next day. The place where he would be seeing his youngest brother being abducted of life. I sit on my bed while contemplating the tragedy I just received, and doze off into a deep sleep, where all my worries seemed to drown away. All the calamitous events disappear, even if just for a moment. BEEP BEEP BEEP. I spring to life as my alarm rings in my ear. I reach for my phone to check the time, everything is okay until I read the date. June 6th, 6:00 AM. All my memories rush through my brain, of the treachery I had experienced, just a few hours earlier.

I can hear my mom's shower pattering through the walls. I throw on the only black dress I can find and wipe on some makeup in an attempt to look presentable and happy for my family. I know my Papa will be grieving and experiencing pain worse than any of us, so I try to put on a brave face.

I sit and wait for my mom to finish, just running all the thoughts of life through my head like a marathon. I'm trying to catch my breath and anxiously tapping my feet, forcing my body to walk out the door.

I mosey into my mom's car and the whole world is silent during the thirty-minute drive that seemed to last an eternity. When we arrive, a gut-wrenching feeling fills my stomach and I grasp my mom's hand harder than ever. As we make our way into the wake, we know nothing will be easy, not even putting on a happy face.

I scan my eyes along all of the people in the room, everyone in a seat to themselves. All the familiar faces I am used to seeming to fade away as sorrow is diffused through the air. I try to keep strong as I see the suffering, even of the people who usually deliver the happiest light to the world. As I decide to finally break away from my mom, I discover the memory boards. Photos from childhood, growing up, family, happy faces, and so much more, soothes the uneasiness that surges through my veins.

I spot my Papa sitting in the corner of the room, all alone. Trying to hide the cold, soft tears that rolled down his face. After fifteen years of life, I had never seen my Papa cry. The man who was always the one to solve everyone's problems, and help no matter the cost, looked weak. For the first time ever I saw that even the strongest people struggled sometimes. As I brushed my fingers through my hair, I walked towards my Papa and sat down. And even if just for a moment, I saw him smile and a little hope warmed both of us.

I find a pamphlet with a Saint and my uncle's name displayed across the front, on the small, auburn table that sits to the side of us. I read about my uncle's 53 plentiful years of life, and how he was always doing things for others and the loving messages from the people he affected around him. I continue to read the prayers and quickly wipe away the small droplets of tears that glide down my cheeks, while I try to keep a strong face for the people around me.

A smile grows across my face and I walk up to my uncle's casket and decide to pray. I thank him for everything he gave to me and God for the blessed life that I have. I feel a soft pair of hands stroking across my back with a small quiver, I continue to keep my eyes closed, and I know my mom is sitting there next to me. At this moment, I am happier more than ever that she is here with me, and that even though she is struggling herself she wanted to be with me, to make sure I am okay.

Later that night my mom and I cozied up with some hot chocolate, being sure to add extra marshmallows, and watched a comedy movie because we both needed to laugh a little bit. We continued to watch throughout the night and I clicked past the cheerful photos and videos of my friends together, and I turned and smiled at my mom and thought to myself, "I am so happy to have such a caring and supporting mom in my life." Just watching the smile crawl onto her face from a small bit of happiness, made me happy too. After a day of misfortune and so much suffering for everyone around me, I

was relieved to be able to relax with the people I love. I spent the rest of that night with my mom and everything felt complete again. I sipped my cocoa, smiled, and felt jubilant that I could do anything. I knew the day was going to pass and imperfect events were going to occur again. The future was nonexistent. I was happy and didn't think of the negative things in life, although they would always be there. My heart is filled with hope again; I was grateful for what I had but anticipating the good to come. Despite the fact nothing will ever be perfect, I was gratified simply celebrating life with my mom. Cuddled up with blankets and joy in the air, that's all that mattered, even if just for a moment.

## Alex Steffes

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Pius X School,  
Moberly, MO

Educator: Christy Forte

Category: Humor

# CHILDREN SHOWS

CHILDREN'S SHOWS... Yes, I'm talking about THOSE little people, 0-5-year-old shows. You know, the shows that you will turn on for your kid when they are whining about nothing. It always happens this way. We all think they are all really dumb and that a little child could be the

only one to watch them. Just to make sure your child doesn't burn the house down while you are not looking you sit down on the couch and decide to play on your phone. You look up from your screen to look at the T.V. show.

'This show is so weird how could anyone like it,' you think to yourself.

"Which way is the FARM!" you hear a whole ten-second pause and your child says nothing and neither does any of the characters on the screen.

"YOU'RE RIGHT, It is over on the left," the character seemingly screams at nothing. You roll your eyes at the fact your child loves these shows. The commercials turn on and you finally get a break from the show. It seems as if the commercials lasted just a few seconds. The show is on and they repeat the last line they said before the commercial. I cannot think any show other than children shows that would do that. I don't understand the people that make these shows. It seems like they don't put any work into these. You find yourself watching the show mindlessly.

"UGHhhhhh," you say out loud. The child looks at you. You look back at them and then they look away.

You get up and you grab some clothes out of the dryer so SOMEONE can do something productive. You start to fold and you look back at the T.V. It has changed shows but now it is sort of something educational. You finish folding and sit back down. You tell the child to play with some toys. They run out of the room and sprint to the toys. You're about to change the channel but you start watching their show before you can change it. This might not be a bad thing. I just don't want to get sucked in. These are childish shows, and I am watching them. You are able to say "I am over 10 years old and I am watching this little show with a little child. This was my meaning in life." We all may think that they are dumb shows but we all watch them anyways. If you say that you do not, DON'T LIE TO US AND YOURSELF. These shows ARE dumb and they ARE weird and they ARE childish, but

that doesn't stop adults and teens from watching them with their younger siblings or children.

Isn't it just wonderful? It's so annoying that they can pull you in. You sit there and the stupid characters and all the bright colors pull you in. They don't have creative storylines they just have bright colors and just good enough problems that a child would understand. Isn't it just GREAT? But that is how it happens and it is perfect. Your life is going great and then a children show comes on. The one problem in this world is...

### Children Shows

#### **Ben Stettin**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs

School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

## MY JOURNEY

Golden rays of light came streaming through the mountains; the snow capped peaks gently kissed the clear blue sky. The sound of my horses' tired hooves pounding the dirt road filled my ears as I rode on, taking in my surroundings. Sweat dripped down my neck, my hands weakly grabbing the burning pommel. Mud huts dotted the landscape. A sneer formed across cracking lips as I thought about the uncivilized beings who lived in this primitive village. My horse was completely drained from our exhausting four day journey from Carthage: his neck bowed down before his staggering body. I dismounted, tied him to a tree and ambled towards the largest of the big huts, a thick-

walled earthy dwelling, hoping to find food and water. Dumfounded, I stared at the flat wooden door blocking my path; there was no handle; I desperately needed food and water. My knuckles smacked the wood... knock... knock... knock! Three seconds passed. No response. I knocked again, this time louder, KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK! One second passed. No response. I NEEDED food! I NEEDED water! They HAD to give me what I needed! After all, I'm a soldier of Rome and who are they? Thirty seconds passed and the door was still sealed. That's it! I stood square with the door, pulled my right leg up and kicked the door with all my might. The door splintered beneath my foot and I entered.

The smell of mildew struck me as I stepped through the fragmented entrance. I glanced left and right, searching for someone, anyone, but no, there was nobody in sight. My caligae clicked along the hard dirt floor as I paced the room. From behind the primitive wooden furniture shadows slowly emerged. I demanded they bring me food and water as I pointed in the direction of my horse, but all I got in return were upward shrugs. I tried again, this time using Greek, this time louder, only to be met with more confusion: they glanced at each other, emitting abhorrent sounds that Mercury should not have allowed to exist. More and more shadows began appearing- three... four... five... I chuckled as I realized they wanted to fight. But slowly, more and more appeared- ten... fifteen... twenty of them. The smile vanished from my face as I studied the area more closely: the shadows, dozens of them, crowded the room, standing tall, watching me. I was outnumbered! Minutes elapsed and they maintained their distance. An elderly beast, certainly the eldest around, stepped through the splintered passageway and slowly approached me with his arms at his side. The man could barely walk, stumbling over his dreary feet. Wrinkles ran down his body, enveloping his face, his hands, his legs. Maybe

they didn't want to fight. As he came near, I made myself as tall as I could and met him in the center of the room, his small, decrepit body dwindling beneath my tall nature. I demanded (less forcefully) that he bring me food and water, but he did not respond. After minutes passed, the savage looked at me, turned and gradually left the hut. How dare he ignore a me! As I moved to stop him from leaving, to press him for food and water, the shadows had their hands raised and their figures pointed at me. Their battle cries reverberating across the room, pouring into my ears, preventing me from thinking. I became enraged and stomped around. How dare they point at me like I was some sort of beast. Had they not looked at themselves? Little by little, their pointing ceased, but their stares continued. Two men slowly stepped towards me, raising their arms and smirking. They were beginning their attack! I stepped away from them, my eyes darting from one creature to the next. They had me trapped, swarmed. So many of them against me, I didn't stand a chance. I had to escape! I slowly put one leg behind the other, my right hand clasp my sword, and retreated towards the exit. I stepped over the splintered door, quickly turned and dashed for my horse. I untied him, threw my left leg over the saddle and swung my body around. My legs kicked at his ribs and dust shot up behind us.

We were maybe two stadia from the village when my horse gasped for air, stumbled and crashed to the ground. I flew through the air, hitting my head with a loud THUD!

A ringing noise reverberated through my ears. Dazed, I slowly brought myself to my feet. My horse was dead and I was badly bruised. I needed food and water; I needed help. The only place nearby- the village, but I had left that dreadful place. They had tried to kill me! But then again, who are they compared to me? I am a Roman, no, a soldier of Rome! They are savages! Beasts! With my newfound confidence, I limped back to the village to take

what was rightfully mine: their food and water.

When I reached the village, young shirtless men were gathered around the large hut. They saw me and came sprinting, gathering around me, surrounding me, gawking at me. How dare they mock me! My knees sunk into the fleshy ground as I peered up at them. My legs ached with pain, refusing my orders to stand and fight. My head throbbed and my throat was closed. I gasped for air.

Soon, more creatures approached; they were young and old, and scrawny beings. The elderly beast, the same one who had walked away from me in the hut, dipped a small wooden stick with a rounded end into a mysterious bucket and walked toward me. He slowly raised the stick up, blocking his face, preparing to fight. He turned his head, looked back at his fellow savages, looking to see if he should continue with my execution and proceeded towards me. I desperately wanted to jump to my feet but I couldn't. I drew my sword and a clearish liquid splashed from his stick as he stepped away and rejoined the people in the crowd.

Oh Zeus and Mars why do you let these foolish savages mock me? I am Roman!

They are watching you... They will kill you... They want you!

You have not abandoned me! Please, do not curse me, do not leave me in the wretched place. Give me means of escape from these savages!

Give us a sacrifice!

I scanned my surroundings: only the savages stood around me. I was alone, left here with these despicable creatures, awaiting to die a lonely, shameful death by their hand. They were beginning their next wave of attacks, grabbing each others hands and quietly whispering.

No! I cannot let them take away my glory. I cannot let them send me to live with Pluto in the depths of tartarus! NO!

I pulled out my pugio and clenched its wooden handgrip in my right palm. I brought my left hand up, clasping the handle between the



was fine by me because they were too chaotic anyway. Gathering my things, I strolled out of the stall, plunked my stuff down once again, and examined myself in the small, rusted mirror.

My hair was pulled up in a tight bun, a foreign feeling to me since I always wore my hair down. Heavy show makeup adored my face, reflecting a confident young woman, something I was not. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

**SHOWTIME. I CAN DO THIS.**

With that, I grabbed my things and left to join the others without looking back. It was the state championships, the most important and the last performance of the winter guard season. I followed my team swiftly, urging my legs to move faster. I was out of breath by the time I reached them.

I accidentally made eye contact with Cara, our co-captain, who chirped, "It's totally okay to be nervous Dagmar, I'm a little bit nervous myself, but I know that we can do it. Is there anything I can do to help with your unease?"

Oh! My rising anxiety must've shown on my face.

"I'm fine, I'm not nervous," I simply replied relaxing my facial features.

"Well, if you need anything, just call me over. I'm going to join Patricia and help her retape flags, do you want to join?"

I shook my head no. When Cara saw, she gave me a bright smile, squeezed my arm, and ran off to catch up to Patricia.

I allowed myself to lag behind the team for I needed to gather my thoughts to myself. The team wouldn't understand how I'm feeling. Why did I say that I wasn't nervous when I was? What was I trying to prove? What would I achieve? I could no longer deny it, I was nervous. My limbs trembled and I forced myself to gulp.

Despite how I was feeling though, I held my head high as I walked into the gym. I

could hear the roar of the audience as we entered. I walked stiffly as if I were a Barbie doll, my legs refused to bend properly. My heart beat increased with every step I took. It was getting louder and louder, faster and faster; it was getting harder to breathe. Forcing myself to relax, I focused on my strides, putting a mask of calmness on my face as I set my equipment down.

I did not smile.

Kneeling in my designated spot, I closed my eyes, blocking out the noisy crowd. The tarp felt sticky under my hands, the material was oddly soothing.

I could do this.

It didn't matter if my team messed up, what mattered was that I wasn't going to mess up.

**IT WAS SHOW TIME.**

The music began, soft at first, almost too soft to hear with the obnoxious audience. But it grew louder and louder, and faster and faster. I stood up slowly, sculpting my face into a cold gaze. As I glided to my equipment, one single thought pulsed through my mind.

**DO NOT DROP.**

Those three words, drilled into my mind by my coach again and again and again. They rang in my head as I picked my flag up and tossed it high in the air.

**DO NOT DROP.**

The flag rotated in the air once, twice, before landing smoothly in my trembling hands. I kept moving, urging my body to move fluidly like a dancer. I leapt to the skies, lifting my chest the best I could as I stared at the audience.

I could do this.

Bringing my flag down, I twisted it behind my back and spun around, careful not to trip over my flag. I could already feel my strength beginning to fade.

I will not fail now. I'VE come too far. I will not let myself down.

I broke into a sprint, running the length of

the tarp I was on, sucking air into my oxygen deprived lungs as I ran to Phoenix. She saw my panicked look and managed to smile at me despite her strength failing as well.

"You got this Dagmar," she whispered.

She was gone in an instant, and I continued on my path. The show was coming to an end; the ending flag feature was the most important part, the team could not afford to mess up now. As it drew nearer, I felt uneasiness creep back into my stomach. The ending was the hardest part of the performance.

I was almost done, we were almost done, my team was almost done. After this performance, we weren't ever going to perform again. It was now or never, this had to be our best performance. Every little thing mattered.

The final and last toss was coming up. While it was relatively simple, it was difficult to release on the right count. I dug into my mind, trying to remember the choreography that was lost somewhere in my jumbled mind. What was the next move? Oh right! Turn, carve, scoop, run.

I barreled across the floor, passing my teammates one by one as I struggled to reach my designated spot for the closing flag feature. And then I heard it- everyone heard it: the sharp thud. The entire guard winced as the sound rang out, the sound of a pole hitting the ground.

Someone had dropped.

The flag began to slip from my grasp as sweat and nervousness overtook my body. I could be next. Breathe in, breath out. I could do this. I allowed my eyes to glance across the floor, to the team pushing and fighting with their last breath to keep their flags in their hands. We could do this.

Let's finish this TOGETHER.

Gathering strength I didn't even know I had, I threw final toss in the show, and with it, I threw my pain, my worry, my selfishness, and I

allowed my self to just be. I allowed myself to be one with the music, be one with the show. I allowed myself to be one with the team.

THIS IS FOR YOU TEAM, LET'S FINISH THIS TOGETHER.

The flag landed soundly in my hands just as the crowd erupted in cheers.

I couldn't believe it, the show, the season, it was all over. My breaths came out in short pants as I struggled to get air in my lungs. We were done. And despite the nerves that still clung to my belly, despite the pain in my labored breathing, I found myself smiling. Smiling with the team.

Proudly, the team, my team, strolled off the stage, away from the cheering crowd. Once we were off stage and in the hallway, Phoenix burst into tears. Immediately, I was surprised that I went to comfort her.

"What's wrong Phoenix? We did it! We performed our best," I said trying to soothe her.

"I," Phoenix hiccuped between her sobs, "I dropped my flag!"

Without thinking, I wrapped my arms around her, "Shhh, it's okay. You did amazing!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cara's concerned face as she put a hand on Phoenix's shoulder and hugged us both. Over time, I felt more teammates joining the group hug, almost to the point where I thought I was suffocating, but Phoenix was smiling, and I couldn't have felt happier.

I don't know how long we stood there, still sweating and still out of breath, all I know is that we were a family, every single member of the team, myself included.

**RuiZhen Su**

Age: 19, Grade: 12

School Name: St Joseph Christian School, Saint Joseph, MO

Educators: Karen Crutchfield,  
Gillian Evans

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## ADDING FLAVOR TO LIFE

"Thanks for your noodle soup, my son. I feel better now." My Mom smiled at me weakly with tears in her eyes. I was nine years old, and this was my first attempt at cooking. My mom was having a serious fever that day. I was the only one left to take care of her because my father was away on business. I walked into the kitchen and began to recall the steps in which my parents cooked the noodle soup. I cut tomatoes and green onions into pieces dramatically and carefully because I never had used such a big knives before. Mysteriously, as I put the oil into the wok and turned on the flame, everything was on the track. I was not being silly any more. At that moment, I felt like a very experienced chef, frying the tomatoes and green onions, putting water into wok, throwing noodles into water when water was boiled, cracking an egg in and adding some salt. The noodle soup was done. I was so happy and proud when I my mom was eating the noodle soup cooked by me.

Actually, I had already fallen in love with cooking before that moment. I enjoyed watching my parents cooking in the kitchen. With the sound of knives hitting the cutting board and the dance of flames, I could not take my eyes off my parents. They seemed quite happy when they focused on their cooking but I could not tell why. Therefore, cooking became like a seed growing in my

heart. Until that day, the tears from Mom made me realize why. Cooking is like a relational tie connecting us to others. People can feel love from the meals cooked by friend or family member. I think that is why my mother could feel cured when she ate my noodle soup. This experience makes me develop a positive attitude and love the life. Since then, I often cooked for my family when I was available.

As I grew older, I learned to cook more delicious food: Fried beef with onions, Mapo beancurd and so on. I got to know the meaning of sharing and living as I shared the food with other people besides my family. The food I cooked gives me opportunities to share this joy with others. As a result, I meet a lot of friends from different countries. As an old Chinese proverb says, "There's nothing you can't do with one meal." My friends like not only the taste of my cooking but also the attitude and culture behind it. All the effort I put in the cooking is worthwhile when I see the smile on people's faces when they taste my food that I cooked from my heart.

As I studied abroad alone, I often cooked hometown food like steamed fish, fried rice and tomato omelettes. This remedied my homesickness. Meanwhile, I made many good friends by sharing food. Food can impact people's lives in a variety of ways. I cook nutritional food to comfort the sick. I provide colorful food to comfort who are mourning. I deliver enthusiastic food to encourage successful people. I use my heart to cook emotional meals. I share my joy with others from the bottom of my heart. The love and attitude I put in my food makes people love it. This is my devotion.

One of my foreign friends, an American student in my school, said: "I'll be honest with you; I was not a fan of Chinese food before.

However, I became a fan of Chinese food after I tried your food." With praise and encouragements from others, I try my best to make my cooking perfect. Food tastes best when the different flavors are in perfect harmony and balance. This is the perfect state that chefs constantly seek, just as the ideal state in marriage, friendship and even politics occurs when people prioritize getting along with others.

It has nearly been ten years since the first time cooked for my mom. I always loved cooking but I even more enjoy passing love to family and friends, and sharing my happiness with them. Caring more about others and living harmoniously with others can contribute to a better world. Without blessing of sharing food, our world would have less peace and harmony today. We should be thankful and grateful for this. We should not only try our best to love this world but also devote ourselves to this world. True happiness arises from seeing people benefit from your devotion to them. That is the life I want.

### **Caleb Teachout**

Age: Unknown, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High

School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Flash Fiction

## **HALLOWEEN**

Halloween

When SHE finds me SHE won't escape.

When SHE finds me I will find my inner peace.

When SHE finds me, SHE will know the true Spirit of Halloween. This night, this blackened night, full of lit pumpkins and children masquerading as beasts and beings they don't understand. This night I have envisioned for decades. The mental hospital, never speaking, never interacting, just watching, waiting. They never knew, for years I watched them, learning, waiting. They never knew when I watched them drive, they never knew, when I listened to them speak of the inner workings and subtle rules of the world. I know that they wondered, why I sat in an endless trance, staring at the blank wall of my cell. But I know, I visualized the night, October 31st, every little detail of my home, Haddonfield, reconstructed stores, houses, trees, all the way down to the individual blades of grass. Most of all, I saw HER, LAURIE her name is now, blonde, sensible, teenager, still in school. All of this as I watched, and listened, staring at the wall. Fifteen years, until that night came, and I walked out of the hospital, and drove away, finally going home. I took what I envisioned would be there, the engineer, his outfit, and car. The mask, and the knife. Especially the knife, just like the one I had years ago, the one that fell my sister, and the blissful peace came. This peace, far greater than any other, intoxicating, powerful yet calm. They took me and the peace was withheld from me, only SHE can it back, but away they took me. But now I've returned home, Haddonfield, and found HER. All this time and SHE never knew, they never knew. Even when SHE saw me, behind the car, behind the bush, behind the line of clothes, watching, SHE never knew, they never knew, SHE never knew...

They know now though, they know now. I watched silently as her friend, Annie her name is, hurried across the road to HER. They I must isolate HER, cut HER off from any source of help, just as I silenced the dog, I

must silence Annie. Loomis might come, I know he is here as well, outside the store with the police, but, he cannot find me. In his terror of me, he will think I will return home, but I already have, he will search in vain for me, but I will be too late for HER. I walked silently across the lawn, knife in hand, toward the garage, toward the car. The children might be a threat, but they will run, scream, and hide as children do, maybe people will come, maybe not, but it will be too late for HER. I opened the car door, and slid into the back seat, lying down silently, waiting. She will come, worrying about teenager worries, but she will never know what she should be worrying about. I longed to cross the street, into the house, to HER.

But, SHE must remember, SHE must see true Halloween, the inner peace must be earned. Silently, patiently I waited, thinking of HER, across the street, almost time, almost time for HER to see. The babysitter's shadow danced across the garage, opening the door, singing. "But first" I echoed silently, sitting up...

### **Kaitlyn Tran**

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO  
Educator: Jennifer Sellenriek

Category: Flash Fiction

## **REIGN OF TERROR**

I.

Blood pours down the streets of Paris in slick rivers, staining the smooth concrete a dark crimson shade. The stench odor of dried blood melts into the once fresh air, floating over industrial buildings in cool summer breezes. Looking up skyward, a glowing beam of sunshine deceptively hiding behind the charcoal skies stuns my sight, a radiating sliver of hope in a world of darkness. My vision flashes and I see her then, kneeling on the wooden planks, her delicate, pianist hands splayed out in front of her face. She slowly raises her head, her striking ocean-blue eyes meeting mine. I read her emotions like I have every day for my entire life. She, my sister, who I once gossiped with about the scandalous drama of the Versailles Palace, who I sobbed with when our family was stripped of their estate, who serenaded me to sleep with lovely French lullabies of elegant mermaids and lustrous fairies. And yet, the emotion washing over her features is one foreign to my instincts. She seems to register only genuine shock, her rosy lips curved sideways in surprise, blonde eyelashes fluttering as she blinks, as if awakening from a blurry dream. Behind her turned back, I notice a line, nearly indistinguishable: a shift between dimensions of light and dark, and I feel the dismal shadow of his cloak. Cries of warning tear out from my throat; sharp, ripping chords, but the sound only echoes back to my ears, as if imprisoned within the confines of a glass prism. He grips a scythe firmly between his palms, the silver blade reflecting the light of the sun, and then presses the jagged curve of steel against the soft skin of my sister's neck. He pulls down the hood of his ebony cloak and warns me to be silent, as if we are allies sharing a deadly secret. With his face in full view, I recognize

him now. The Fallen Angel. Lucifer, with his shredded wings painted an inky black, its curled edges sizzling in eternal infernal flame. His expression is inflamed with a vicious fury, eyes twinkling with a strange blend of amusement and a thirst for unquenchable revenge. He strikes her. She falls.

Before the shards of regret and anger can assail the iron shields of my mind, she appears next to me, face soaked with shimmering tears, a deep red imprinted over her natural island-blue irises. Her rags are replaced with a white silk nightgown, withholding the purity and innocence of an ivory dove. She is not my same sister, however. A deep, maroon scar coats her throat, black stitches weaving in and out of her neck like an embroidered antique dolly, a lasting scar emphasizing her brutal end. I speak breathlessly, suppressing my tears lest they pain her, and whisper: "How can I live while you die?" She smiles a golden smile, and I recognize that, even in the afterlife, her poise and grace remains constant. The prized daughter of France's nobility, they called her, with a heart as selfless as her fair beauty.

When her impression falters, however, I feel her fading away from me. Her red-rimmed eyes reflect the pure desperation in her words as she tightens her grip around my slim wrist and begs, "Don't let them take me. I need you. Save me."

Breathing heavily, I find myself underneath layers of plush cotton sheets, freshly washed and overpowering with the familiar scent of lavender soap. I survive this nightmare each and every time the sun falls from the heavens and darkness emerges, starting from the date my sister met with the guillotine. She awakens beside me in the living, a wandering spirit who solemnly watches over me, waiting, waiting for the day I avenge her.

II.

I wish to tell a story. One that tells of my fury and explains my future actions. First, speak this word. REVOLUTION. The slippery vowels and harsh consonants form three resounding syllables that resemble a strike of lightning. From my youth, I heard this precious word spoken, both in hushed whispers of secrecy or thundering announcements of action. To some, this word encapsulates their entire purpose, symbolizing the epitome of freedom that they wept for, bled for, KILLED for. But to me, this word lit a match in the churning minds of my enemies, a flame which ignited under these declarations of hearsay and transformed into a prison trapping everyone I ever loved. And where did it get them? Instead of setting them free, the peasants' foolish REVOLUTION only paved an effortless path for one man, who so easily made them waver under loose promises of equality, liberty, and brotherhood, articulating speeches so carefully delivered until the population hung on the taut strings of a master puppeteer. He thieved his way to my ancestors' throne and shattered all his vows to the preposterously naïve peasants. But most importantly, he stabbed his vile dagger into the hearts of my loved ones, forcing their bodies to bleed and bleed until the beats of their hearts slowed into nothingness. The man is called Robespierre. I live in the midst of the Reign of Terror. And I will seek my revenge.

III.

I have been waiting for the perfect moment since the date of her death. But as I creep through the depths of the velvety, starlit night, I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror. Pale gray, colorless eyes with a heart-shaped face framed by tangled, ashy brunette locks of hair. I see HER in the mirror

also, a faint shadow behind my shoulder, her beautiful mortality now corrupted by the scims of betrayal. I savor this moment to take out a sapphire bow from the pocket of my nightgown, and I clip it around a loose braid in my hair. The only remaining piece of my childhood innocence. Then, I tuck the blade softly into my pocket. I open the door. I will save you now, my dear sister.

## **Aanjaneyaa Venkataraman**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: David Doherty

Category: Flash Fiction

# THE MAGIC TRICK

I walk along the sidewalk, kicking up stray pebbles and watching them skitter away. The streetlights are placed along the streets and cast a faint shimmer. Stifling a yawn, I cover my mouth as it subsides. Looking around, I see families walking along the street, laughing and talking, and I see loners like me, hands in pockets, looking at phones or just walking. Looking down at my feet, I do the same. My hands are in my pockets, playing with the inner seams, as I contemplate the stones embedded within the sidewalk. The constant chirp of crickets is a continuous pattern and is seemingly endless. But strangely, I find it soothing, as I find all this. This monotonous structure that I

have come to love as part of my life. People often get tired of repeated patterns in daily life, but I do love it. That is why I am here, walking my daily walk on a summer's night, enjoying the monotony of it all.

As I continue walking, I hear music. Looking up, I see a group of people gathering together around a person on the lawn set out for performers. There were chairs set out for the audience to sit.

A magician, I thought, how novel.

This is an interesting change of pace.

Walking over, I could hear the magician holler, "Welcome, welcome! Are you ready to see the unbelievable? Witness the fantastical?"

There is polite clapping, as the audience gets comfortable.

I pull up a chair and sit. I smile at the person sitting next to me, an older woman. She smiles back, a slight dimple in her cheeks.

I ask, "This seems quite interesting. Who is the magician?"

She looks at me, and says, "I don't know. It just seemed interesting, and there were a lot of people, and I wanted to see what the commotion was about." She shrugged. "My information is the same as yours."

She then frowns at me. She then looks at the magician, and back at me. She opens her mouth to say something then closes it audibly. Shaking her head slightly, she looks forward again, stealing slight glances in my direction.

I remember her. Sweet woman. My thoughts were disturbed by loud music and a megaphone as the magician said, "Now to begin, I have a traditional card trick! Oldie but a goodie!"

I wince. I do not remember it being this brazen. The megaphone is a bit much.

He displays a deck of cards, and I immediately predict what he is going to do. First, he will have a person "pick a card, any card!", and unfortunately, due to the light sheen of sweat on his forehead, and what is his first performance in front of a crowd, he will make a mistake. He will flub and change the card in his head without watching carefully. Clucking softly to myself, I sit back, watching the scene unfold before me.

The magician calls on the audience.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen! Who wants to help me with this card trick?" I see some tentative hands raise up.

"Yes, you! Get up here! Don't be shy!" The magician calls on a man sitting in front of me. The man stands up, waves as the audience claps, and makes his way to the magician. The magician smiles at him and fans the deck out before him.

The magician says, "Pick a card, any card sir!"

The man picks out a card and looks at it.

I think a Jack of Hearts.

The magician continues, "Please! I do not want to see it. Put it in the deck."

The man puts it in the deck, and the

magician shoves it in.

The magician smiles at the man and the audience again, and says, "Now, with my powers of mind reading, I can pick the correct card out of the deck. Just watch and see!"

No, I think, this is what will happen: You think the man put the card on top of the bottom card. He did, but you misread the card. You think the bottom card is a six of spades, while in reality, it is a six of clubs. Simple mistake, really, but one you will remember. Now, as you flourish the cards around, you are about to announce that the card the man picked is an eight of diamonds. And to think you had so many more tricks ahead of you.

The magician clears his throat, "Ladies and gentlemen, the card that this man" the magician gestures to the man, "picked is the eight of diamonds!" He whips out the card and grins, looking at the man. The man coughs slightly.

The man says, "Umm, no. It was not. It was--"

The magician interrupts him, and trying to save face says, "Wait! Wait! I know your card! Give me one second!"

I sigh. King of diamonds.

"King of diamonds!"

Two of hearts.

"Two of hearts!"

Five of spades.

"Five of spades!"

The man keeps shaking his head. Then the magician asks the question that everybody knows is a death stroke.

“Well... what was your card?”

The man looks at the magician in pity, and says quietly, “It was the Jack of Hearts.”

The man walks back to his seat in dead silence. While there might be a jerk in the audience who would start booing, that did not seem to be the case today. Today, it is the awkward crowd, those who do not know whether to get up and leave. The magician is furiously wiping the tears from his eyes, so as nobody to see.

Reliving that moment was as bad as the first time around.

Thomas Greggs, fifteen, and an aspiring magician. He will move past these pursuits and will be instrumental in the exploration of time travel. And to think that I will have a front row seat for it all.

### **Aanjaneyaa Venkataraman**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: David Doherty

Category: Poetry

## THE GROUP CHAT

It first starts with rumors  
Snippets here and there  
Your curiosity aroused  
But not wanting to break the delicate  
social balance  
You keep quiet  
Hoping somebody will tell you  
A new group chat  
Started by one of your friends  
It has the majority of your friends in it  
You not being in it  
A worm builds up inside you, wondering if  
This was intentional  
Or if it was a simple mistake  
But again  
Not wanting to break the delicate social  
balance within you  
It would be rude to ask  
Would it?  
Just a simple mistake  
Was it?  
You hang out with them every day  
Do you?  
Emotions tumbling inside your head  
If you asked them  
Would they include you?  
Of course, they would  
Would they?  
Your anxiety at a breaking point  
Wanting to ask  
Would it make you look bad?  
No, they would understand  
Would they?  
Looking at your friend's shoulder  
Them talking to others  
Laughing  
Wanting to include yourself  
But not wanting to feel like an intruder

What are they thinking?  
I am their friend  
Am I their friend?  
Of course  
Reaching out to tap your friend's shoulder  
He turns around and smiles  
Smiles, a charade or truth to you?  
Smiling back, you debate  
Clearing your throat you ask  
"So about this group chat"  
As soon as you say it  
You regret it  
His face changing  
Warping  
Shifting  
He says  
"What about it?"  
You clear your throat  
"Can I be in it?"  
What was that?  
Is it really that important to you?  
Just one group chat  
Not the end of the world  
Come on  
"I thought you were already in it"  
You smile and you say  
"No not this one"  
He says  
"Oh I will add you"  
He turns back around  
Your stomach drops  
Yes it was that important to you  
Yes it was just one group chat  
Yes it is the end of the world  
Because you know the truth  
Or do you?  
Maybe he will add you  
Probably not  
But still  
That worm inside you disappears  
Now replaced by a snake  
Eating more ferociously than ever

**Kedar Venkatesh**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Clayton High  
School, Clayton, MO  
Educator: Deana Tennil

Category: Personal  
Essay/Memoir

## CREASED BY TOUCH

It was a sight that would cause the printing presses of Hallmark to stutter, if not short circuit for a moment. The rich, beige sheet of cardstock on my desk had been desecrated by an imbalanced fold that travelled the ends of the sheet in a diagonal path. Just moments before, I had lined the ends of the cardstock together, edge to edge, corner to corner. In resistance, the thick paper lifted into a curve. I took in a deep breath, blew on my clammy hands, and prepared my thumb for the momentous task awaiting it. Slowly, I hovered over the curving paper and dropped-in for the crease. But in that instant, my thumb slipped and jammed into the dense paper below--a cardmaker's nightmare. I figured that I had no other choice but to abandon this sheet and start over. I'LL GET BACK TO IT AFTER MY TRIP TO INDIA.

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"Chachink! Look, ANNA, I got a nice photo of you." But I wasn't so easily fooled this time. Omprakash didn't have any

photo; the camera he held up to his eye was made of paper. Admittedly, the first time I'd witnessed this act I was shocked to see one of my 5th grade students holding what I thought was a digital camera in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Bangalore, India. To be fair, Omprakash was quite convincing; his sound effects matched the movement of the paper "flash" he created, and his smile reflected the genuine joy that I'd envision after a successful photograph. Admiring his conviction, I secretly wished he'd found a way to capture that moment in the paper.

Omprakash and 27 of his 5th grade classmates packed the classroom floor at the Parikrma School. There, resourcefulness was compulsory, where upside-down backpacks had to stand in for desks, and where a threadbare carpet sufficed as seating. So, after having guided my class through how we'd make paper helicopters for an experiment the next day, it was no surprise that these students were able to create so much more. I'd brought a stack of 200 sheets of paper to class that day, by the end of class they had all disappeared.

Eventually, my summer workshop ended, still on my last day Omprakash persisted in his attempts to record a moment of my week-long visit in his paper camera. As I said a final goodbye to my classes, he and his 27 classmates decided to return one of the 200 sheets to me in the form of a card. It certainly wasn't perfect. In fact, it was defiantly imperfect. The edges were crumpled, the fold uneven, and the smudges prevalent. While the drawings and notes decorating the card were beautiful, the imperfections were evidence that the card was crafted by 28 sets of hands coming together. It

made me smile. In these mistakes, the paper became a canvas for grit and for memory.

I was so wrong about Omprakash's camera. While it surely didn't spit out a glossy Polaroid, it certainly captured a moment. His craft transcended technique. It was about connection. As he folded and unfolded the paper for his artistic act, he embedded memories and meaning into what had just been an ordinary sheet of paper before.

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After returning home, I fished the "desecrated" cardstock out of the recycling bin. I thanked Omprakash and his class for what they showed me and realized how self-centered my perfectionism had been. Hallmark machines can shudder in horror all they they want at my card. This card for my mother was more than an artistic exercise, rather it represented our meaningful relationship. I could never truly tell the story of our relationship, like any deep relationship, without the imperfections and human touch that make it so meaningful.

### **Kedar Venkatesh**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Deana Tennil

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

# FLORIDA FEELINGS

A year ago, my family took a trip to Florida, and I must admit: I was not a willing passenger. Right from the start, I held that all vacations were wastes of time and money. Only the insecure feel badly enough about their lives to try to escape from them -- at least, so I thought. As it turned out, Florida did little to defend itself from this characterization. I perceived of it as a repugnant place.

For example, nowhere in the civilized world is the caste system so blatant as in the immoral thievery we call the airline industry. Where else can someone be told that they can't use certain bathrooms because they're not good enough? Where else are certain individuals told that they are not valued customers by the actions of the airline? This hierarchy hasn't been commonplace in this country for half a century. This is how I felt about the whole affair.

Airlines aside, Florida, more specifically Orlando, I found to be a land of shameless consumerism. There, the laborer goes to "unwind." And there, the laborer is made to feel insignificant, its possessions, obsolescent. What stood out to me as particularly interesting was something I saw in Universal Studios. There, they have a "Harry Potter" themed park. This place is terraformed for the accommodation of HOMO CONSUMENS, complete with a gigantic fake Hogwarts. Ironically, this near scale model of a school existed only as an impediment to learning. I couldn't imagine what would happen if the millions of dollars spent on the "Wizards World of

Harry Potter™" were to be spent on, say, an ACTUAL school.

This was the attitude I had entering Key West, Florida: a repulsed distaste. In Key West, I saw another tacky vacation place waiting to be dissected. Indeed, it seemed as if this would once again be the case. While the grunge and stench of downtown Key West paled in comparison to the unromantic putrid municipal dumps of the worse parts of Bangalore, they still mocked me. Each mote of dust jeered at me, reminding me of the opportunity costs of being there. I deplored the city, and the city did its best to deplore back.

Night fell, and the city of Key West had yet to demonstrate any semblance of "beauty." Instead, a bunch of night performers came out flaunting a number of useless skills. Someone had trained his cats to jump through rings of fire. Someone else actually lit rings on fire and jumped through them herself. While the crowd and my family were enjoying the ruined lives of these street performers, I grew even more disenchanting with this place.

Soon, my family decided to walk around the city streets. For what reason, I did not know. To me, to window-shop was to covet. It seemed pointlessly masochistic, like physical exercise. Back and forth, we wandered through the streets, without any purpose that I could see. Now, I have said very little of the fauna of Key West, and by this, I mean the people milling about -- not the manatees and alligators. They, the fauna, were diverse, yet similar in a way. The place was full of raucous, hurried, distant people- on vacation. It was as if you had wandered into one of those rich neighborhoods where well-being seems to correlate inversely with amiability, except not as

clean.

It was then, while I was lagging behind my family that it happened. As I was about to round a corner, I saw, among a bunch of greyed faces, one that was lit with fear. It belonged to a child. While I didn't notice all the details then, some parts remained with me. She had dark hair, olive skin and wore a frock with some sort of flower print. But none of those facts were outstanding. Then it occurred to me: SHE WAS ALONE. A child of her age, I guess it was 8-9 based on her height, SHOULDN'T be alone. I soon saw that the girl was in tears and screaming "Mama! Mama!" Since that means "mother" in about 50 languages, I couldn't tell if the girl even spoke English. And then, I rounded the corner and caught up to my family. The whole affair took all of five to ten seconds. One moment she was running in my direction, the next moment she was behind, still no mother in sight, and the crowd engulfed her.

First came the process of rationalization. I couldn't have possibly known the girl was lost, could I? She might have just been throwing a tantrum. And then, how would I have looked to the mother, a teenage boy approaching a young girl? What's more, it is not the responsibility of teenage boys to help lost children; that worthy is the granny or the mother of small children. Therefore, if I were to have helped, I would have been impeding the natural order of things, no less!

Then came projection: my family should have gone back as soon as I told them about the incident. It was all their fault! But even then, there was still the troubling thought of why I had waited with the information, of why I decided to do nothing about it.

Eventually, the defense mechanisms dried up, and what was left was the ugly, sickening truth: everyone there thought everyone else was responsible for that child's plight. Later, I would think about things like how I would never, ever learn the fate of that child. What would the grimy town, and the callous crowd do to a little girl? I didn't think about how I wouldn't get an answer to that question. What intrigued me was that I was subject to the same moral repugnance of which I had accused others.

Reflecting on the incident, I realized that it wasn't too much of a break from the rest of my vacation. It was not at all if I had been morally above it all, and then sullied myself by not doing the right thing here. No, the same aloofness that I thought put me square above the masses was what led me astray. By wanting not to dirty my hands, I had done just that, like in some sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Just as the vacationer escapes from his work, I fled from the responsibility of helping the girl. Just like the airlines give preferred treatment, I put myself before the one in need. And just like every other person in sight on that Key West avenue, I ignored the little girl.

In the universal quest for self-fulfillment, I hadn't found an answer. Big surprise, right? But I after that experience, I did form a conclusion: we must not prioritize the avoidance of physical uncleanness lest we fall prey to deeper moral wrongdoing. For example, though Universal Studios was very, very clean for a theme park that size, it still reeked of consumerism. The terraformation was convincing, but the price tags were not. The bystanders like me saw the girl in distress, and yet did nothing to help her. And why? -- For no reason more than that

it would mean “dirtying our hands.”

I am in what is widely considered by society (possibly erroneously, possibly not) to be the vacation stage of life. The directive is to cram as much fun as possible into life until responsibility catches up. Nihilism, hedonism are great worldviews for this. I hope that I have gained more than I have lost in rejecting these, but the possibility of having gotten it completely wrong remains. For now, I find solace in the fact that I still have a bit of time to figure it out.

## **Kylie Volavongsa**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North  
High School, Olathe, KS  
Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre  
Zongker

Category: Science  
Fiction/Fantasy

# DESTINATION UNKNOWN

### **Inbox (4)**

4 UNREAD VIDEO MESSAGES FROM YUNA  
KANG  
OPEN?

...

### **One**

Er-Hello.

I'm not quite sure where to begin, but I suppose I can start with this: I'm well aware of the recent lack of transmissions, and for that I can only apologize. We haven't had much... opportunity since Barrett resigned, and again, I have to apologize.

Oh, and I almost forgot to explain the cracks in the webcam. Niko's fault, but I'll get to that. I apologize.

Everything really seemed fine at first. Even since takeoff, where our only real hitch was Barrett getting sick (though we all know that's tradition by now). The shuttle was in decent condition, no shortages or forgotten supplies, no stowaways or runaways. And by the time we'd exited the atmosphere, all five of us were able to recover quickly enough.

Do you remember that transmission from the Kuiper Belt by the way?

If my hunch is correct, I believe that marks the beginning of it all, or at least somewhere very near. Nothing strange takes place in the video per se, but it's what happened almost immediately after that leaves me unsettled.

I'd just finished recording the log. The others were dispersed throughout the ship, albeit somewhere nearby since we're traveling in one of our smaller models. If I remember correctly, Niko was examining our coordinates while Rina was prepping the samples we'd collected from the stray debris that morning. Barrett, I think, was taking a nap in the cabins, but I don't

remember where Seta was. And I don't intend to make it seem as if I doubt anyone here, but... you can never really be sure, can you?

I'm getting off track.

I was able to save the transmission and signal it back to Control just before the ship sparked with an outage lasting about a day. We had only the emergency lights, and our regulators were on the verge of dropping out. It grew incredibly cold.

Now I'm unsure if it was only my imagination, but I still wonder if something grew out of that cold. Like a certain type of quiet that fell over us and couldn't be shaken until the lights and the heating came back. But these types of things can happen sometimes.

Our only real loss was a decent webcam. I wasn't there when it happened, but I know it did (which may not be enough for you, but it is for me). We were past most of the outage; some of us were sitting in the kitchen while the rest were sleeping. And I thought Niko was sleeping too, but as I headed back to the switchboard for the umpteenth attempt at getting the power back, I saw him. He was a vague figure in the corner of my eye, hidden mostly by the dim of the emergency lights. But it was tall, lanky, a little slow, things that could only fit one person onboard. I didn't think too much of it then, we were getting antsy and bored and the cold was near unbearable. But I heard him slip into transmission room behind me, and only few moments passed before a sharp crash made me jump in the hall. And it was quiet again.

I hadn't made it to the switchboard yet, so I ran back to check what happened. As soon as I opened the door, the lights came back, along with the rest of the power. And the first things I saw were fragments of glass scattered all around the floor, and they sparkled more than I thought they would. The surface of the camera, meanwhile, was webbed with cracks. But somehow, no Niko. I shouldn't have done it, but I let it pass. I couldn't really prove it was him, and it's never good to start problems all the way out here. Regardless, it took awhile for us to restore the equipment, hence one of the reasons why I haven't logged much lately. Along with the cracks, we've been seeing some memory issues as well.

And we still don't know what exactly caused the outage.

## Two

I apologize for how sporadic I've been with the reports.

Another one of us resigned today. Rina. I never thought she'd be the one to go next. Still, I suppose that people CAN grow unhappy with their occupations, and it is what it is. Nothing I can do, but the rest of us are proceeding adequately as three. Everything is still fine.

Regardless, there was more I wished to discuss but couldn't get to. As I last mentioned, our technology is still on the unreliable side, but that's not the point. The outage wasn't the only thing that had shaken us. More aberrations occurred, but in hindsight, they remind me of the incident with Niko in that they were mostly peripheral. Almost out of reach, but

enough to stick in the backs of our heads for a while.

We get cold far more often than expected, almost as if the chill from the outage hasn't actually left us. Though it's never at the same time—I'll be adjusting the regulators only to find the rest of the crew sweating, or if I used to look closely enough, I could see goosebumps prickling from Rina's arms. The regulators always appear to be fine, so I can only wonder.

The shuttle is also dirtier. Much dirtier, which would be surprising if you knew how particular Seta is about that sort of thing. It's not that we've suddenly become slob, as he'd beat anyone "who dares stoop to that level of garbage." It's just that... Things smear on the walls and gather in corners. I don't know what they are, and of course, Rina isn't around to take and test samples anymore.

I'd manage fine if I had the time, but I'm still trying to make sense of Barrett's resignation as well. If I had to make a solely qualitative observation, however, I'd say the substance is an ashy black, and it reminds me of a rapidly spreading mold. I've had Seta quarantine the infected rooms, and Niko's doing what he can about whatever we have left. Admittedly, I have my doubts about assigning him the task, as there are times when I can hear him wandering where he shouldn't. But again, I'm trying to keep this crew together.

Our hands may seem tied out here, but we will continue.

### **Three**

I wish I'd said more. I'm not sure how much it would've done for us, or if the messages would even arrive in time, but at least I would've put it out there.

Seta's looking paler lately, and I fear his motivation's dropping and that I'll have to see another resignation. We only have a few rooms left that haven't been lost to our so-called mold. Maybe if we'd known better about it...

Yet another thing that can't be helped here.

And I know I let it go earlier, but I trust Niko less and less these days. I've been spending more time in the transmission room (despite the lack of reports, I know), and the cracks in this camera only serve to make me think and remember, but I'm not sure how much of that I'd like to be doing anymore.

It had to have been the Kuiper Belt, right? After all, it IS our usual turnaround point. But once we crossed that threshold, did something get in? Or was it just us? All I want is to know EXACTLY where and how everything went wrong.

I have to go now. I think I heard Seta getting sick next door. My apologies if I've left out anything significant thus far.

### **Four**

It's been a while, but I'm the last one. They all resigned. All of them except Niko, but I'll get there. Funnily enough, this is the last safe room too. I still refuse to come into anymore contact with the mold, but it'll arrive sooner or later. There are cracks everywhere on this ship.

I'm glad it was Barrett that went first. She was always a little more fragile, so she didn't have to see everything reduce to this. Blackened rooms. Spontaneous cold, then quiet. But at the same time, I wished I noticed her will to resign before it happened. And maybe then I could've kept her from stepping out of the airlock. But she was always sick somehow, and it was nothing that could've been helped. We were still able to continue then.

I'm a little unsure about Rina. (I apologize, by the way, for how my hands won't stop shaking). Her resignation definitely threw a wrench in our system for a bit, but it's always a little jarring to find one of your closer crewmates entangled in the net we leave out for the debris. Maybe I should've put a security code on that airlock.

I fully pity Seta, who stumbled across another means of quitting. And it might've been my fault. He actually resigned just as I was closing my previous transmission, but I won't go into detail. I don't think you'd want to hear much more about it, but I blame the mold.

And that leaves us with Niko. Always doing something I knew but couldn't prove. But the last time I caught him, I really did. The transmission room again. This time, he was going for the computer itself. Why he would've wanted to cut off our only point of contact with you and Control and home is beyond me, so I had no choice but to fire him. Don't worry—I won't go into much detail about that either. I didn't enjoy it.

I haven't been sure of what to do

anymore. There isn't anything very rewarding left for a captain without a crew. I could open up the doors and resign right here, but that isn't what I want after seeing all the others. So I guess you could say I'm continuing, and I'll be trying for as long as I can last. Don't worry about sending me any help. In fact, I'd say avoid the Kuiper Belt entirely. I really think there's something there now, and whatever it is, it will take advantage of any crack within your crew and ship but I can't say what might happen to them. Something's just out there.

...Oh, and would you look at that: now there's something in here too.

### **Nevin Voth**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO  
Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Flash Fiction

## **AUGUST TREE**

### The August Tree

I felt the leaves brush pass me in my hand. The great tree in august in the field, alone but strong. The trees leaves show many colors. Oranges and yellows sprinkle throughout the tree as the wind warns of a winter soon to come. **THE TIME IS RIGHT.** I walk back toward the house, as a droplet hits my nose. The clouds look unhappy, as it suddenly it starts to

rain. NO ONE WILL CRY FOR ME.

I walk in side, Mom and Dad are still out on a business trip. Brothers out to college. Sisters out with her boyfriend. Our dog wasn't seen by the driver that night. NO ONE WILL NOTICE ME GONE. Walk up to my room and walk into the jail I've made myself. I close the bars and sit in the shell of what I once was. I pull my chair from its desk and set it up. NO ONE WILL EVER LOOK FOR ME. I pull the rope from my closet. NO ONE LOVED ME. I tie, I prepare, I leave the note. NO ONE WILL EVER READ IT. I stand, I prepare, and like a quick as sleep I fall. YOU WILL DISAPPEAR. One breath in, but none come out.

Its damp, dark. Have I messed up? Did I mean it? NO! I didn't mom and dad and brother and sister. I know you care and I know you did too. I need to push. I break through, it looks like sky. Need to reach the light, need to reach the light. I get closer and closer. The rain, wind, snow, and hail try to stop me but I won't quit. I'm stronger now, for them, for my family. I only stop for a moment, however, for it feels still so far away. Right then, I feel a hand brush past my branches. I look to see a teen, like me, looking back at me. Then I realise. LOOK WHAT YOU'VE BECOME.

### **Antonio Waltermate**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Cheryl Edmondson

Category: Novel Writing

## FLESH AND STEEL

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### BRIEF SUMMARY:

Flesh and Steel is set in a near-future scenario where Africa is the new battleground for the various world powers. Militant groups are causing disorder in weakly established democracies to control natural resources needed for weapons of mass destruction. The efforts of the United States and her allies are focused in Chad where the last stronghold of democracy in the North is surrounded and under siege, too far for any hope of immediate assistance from South Africa. An international team of special forces is secretly convened for an urgent, epic black-op. The soldiers are put through a secret project that enhances them with experimental neuroprosthetics. Time is of the essence, so the team is dropped into the thick of the war and are quickly enveloped by the true political nature of the mission. In a fast-paced journey to locate and cut off supplies for the militant rebels, the team uncovers secrets that could expose – or coalesce – unthinkable consequences being pushed in the shadows by shady nations who are using highly questionable avenues of influence. Can the team can deliver the evidence. alive and in time?

EXCERPT:

PROLOGUE

The plane shuddered and convulsed as the wheels rammed into the ground, a rough landing with a newbie no doubt. Noah unstrapped himself from his seat, and walked stiffly to the now descending cargo ramp located at the rear of the Hercules transport vessel. He hadn't been able to sleep during the one day journey, still seeing their faces every time he closed his eyes.

He remembered the pain, the yells while they held together the roof above them, bullets pounding the walls around them. The clink of mortars bombarding overhead sent the building's ceiling another meter downward against their combined straight. Noah now stepped down the long ramp way and stopped before a Marine in uniform. Three stars on his shoulder indicated his rank.

The general began to express regret but Noah stopped him with a raised hand in a stiff salute. "I'm done, sir. No more CIA ops. Not until the intel is proven and we know what the hell we are dropping into." He uttered each word slowly, deliberately before walking out of the large hangar and to the tarmac outside, letting the sun gleam over his skin as he cleared his mind.

He muttered to himself, "I need a break from all of this or I'll go crazy." After a minute of silence, he walked back into the hanger, as draped caskets were carried out, each covered by the flag they had so loved. Noah saluted the caskets, ignoring the general. The general walked over eyeing Noah cautiously. "Look, Duns, you're good.

We need you back in action."

Noah turned, shook his head and crossed his arms. "Six months, sir, or I walk off this base and don't come back. I'm up for re-enlistment." The general sighed. "Take your leave, Duns, but bet your ass, if you're late we will use force."

Noah saluted, spun around, and called over his shoulder, "I've survived worse, sir."

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THE SUIT

The first thing they saw when they entered the briefing room was a man in a black suit. Noah immediately knew things were going to get shady. The only kinds of people in a military complex in suits were spooks and top brass, neither a good sight. They all stood in the entrance, their personal mistrust pushed aside in the hopes of answers.

The man in the suit began to speak. "Well, good, you're all up, you want answers I assume. The procedure you underwent was something utterly incredible; we have augmented your bodies with biotechnology capable of enhancing your strength, and your speed, while also multiplying your processing power."

He paused letting the subjects work through the explanation before continuing. "Your bodies have been bonding with the foreign materials for the last day, and thankfully they didn't give any violent reactions or rejections. If our chemical agents hadn't been able to fool them it is likely you all would be dead, but that matters little now. You have been promised a mission, and I will

deliver. Chad has been fighting rebellions for years now, ever since their leader was assassinated but we now have reason to believe this group intends to attack and capture the capital altogether. We cannot allow this. Even now they gather their forces and prepare to destroy everything in their path on their way to controlling the materials to make nuclear weapons. Your mission will be to halt their attack and destroy them and their chain of command and get any hard intel."

Noah interjected, "Why are we assisting from the shadows? Shouldn't the UN get in on this?"

"I was getting to that. There are those in the UN who believe this is Chad's problem and assisting would undermine the leader's control. They think he's useful. But there are others willing to assist unofficially. If you look among yourselves, surely you notice your differences; your respective countries have chosen you all for this project under the table, so to speak. This leads to my next point. Defeat is not an option and capture is out of the question. If you are taken or discovered, be advised, we don't know you and have never heard of you. Do you understand?"

The shorter man mumbled, again in German, "Why of course. They want Black Ops."

The suit replied, "Yes Aldo, it's a black op. Speaking of names, perhaps it's time for introductions. Oh, and since this is a black op, we do not need any egos getting in the way so detailed backgrounds, full names, rank do not matter. Okay. You already know Aldo, our subject from Germany. He'll assist

you with any of your engineering endeavors."

The Suit then pointed to the biggest, and youngest, of the men. "This is Lewis, the UK's offer from Her Majesty's 22 Special Air Services Regiment. Tell us Lewis, after assisting in the second downfall of Tripoli in 2019, what do you do best?"

Lewis chuckled, "Well Sir, I break shit pretty good. I'm good with anything you slap into my hands."

The Suit ignored him and pointed to the so-far silent one in the group. "Kennedy, Australia's finest, a heavy weapons expert and most recently a attached to the Australian Secret Intelligence Service."

The man nodded his approval and listened carefully as The Suit continued. "I'm sure you've all met Vickers here. Telling by the bruises on you, I'll say you've figured out she's a martial arts expert. She's Canada's volunteer from their SAS counterterrorism unit. Anything you wanna add, Vickers?"

"You all need to brush up on your hand to hand combat skills. I beat half of you before you even reacted."

Lewis replied, "Hey, now, I got you pretty easy, not all of us are rusty as hell."

The suit waved a hand and the two went silent. He continued, "And, finally, your field commander, Noah Duns from the United States Naval Special Warfare Development Group." "Anything else, sir?" Noah asked. "Take today, use the training room, and look through the rest of the facility. Our time is short so you'll need to work fast. Once you finish, head to the workshop and prepare your load outs for your

mission. You leave in three days, understand? Any questions?"  
The group filed out. . .

\*\*\*\*\*

### DRINK UP, MY FRIEND

. . . Beside the door, Aldo sat in a ragged chair, a bottle of alcohol beside the rear legs. Aldo spoke quietly without looking away. "It's Andechser Weissbier, a Hell Beer. It's an old tradition of mine to drink it the night before battle, while watching the moon make its way around." Aldo poured himself a small drink and held it as he continued to peer above at the glowing moon.

Noah sat on the ground beside him. "Someone at home doing the same?" A sad smile touched Aldo's lips. "Not anymore. The missus said it was the army or her. My men were in the middle of a deployment. I couldn't leave them on their own to fend for themselves out there. The war in Iraq was heating up. I understand why she couldn't stand it anymore so I let her go."

"Any regrets?"

"Only that I couldn't make it work out. She was a nice girl and I loved her with all my heart, but I could tell by her voice on the phone that the long nights alone were tearing her up. The nights are hard when the only company you have is fear. She couldn't know if I died until the next phone call, so it could be weeks before she found out."

Aldo poured into a second cup and handed it to Noah. "Drink up my friend. Let the times of our lives live peacefully in our past where we cannot hurt ourselves."

They both took the shot and silently

returned to their bunks, Aldo falling asleep quickly, leaving Noah to himself. Noah let his eyes close and felt sleep coming to him. He fell into his sleep with a single question in his mind. WHO HAVE I HURT?

### Bella Wasson

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS  
Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Flash Fiction

## PERSISTENCE

It's a Tuesday afternoon. The sky is clear and bright, yet no sun shines. It's 3:27 p.m., and raindrops from the mist lay scattered on the windshield, painting a small picture, though almost no one cares enough to take notice.

Pulling into the parking spot (terribly, of course), she feels a familiar tug in her stomach. She is lost.

Of course she isn't lost, she knows exactly where she is. She's on Santa Fe, and rush hour traffic meanders by in front of her. Yet, the feeling persists.

Attempting to ground herself, she shifts restlessly, and takes a long breath. Not a steady one, but a long one. And she caresses the steering wheel, up and down, up and down. And she runs her hand through her hair, and over her

face, blinking hard, telling herself to snap out of it.

Once she eats, surely she'll feel fine. But even after walking inside by putting one foot in front of the other on the steady, real ground, everything still feels a little off.

She gets back to her car, gladly welcoming the warm embrace of the heating vents. She takes another long, unsteady breath.

It's 3:45 p.m. as her car becomes one with the flow of traffic on the dark asphalt. Tiny raindrops decorate the windshield. The sky is clear and bright. Yet, the feeling persists.

### **Alexis Weatherman**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Republic High School, Republic, MO  
Educator: Lisa Deckard

Category: Poetry

## 18 MILLION ROSES

The Damask Rose is dying  
Our hope is dying  
And if our hope dies  
It will die in a fit of bombs  
Littering our homes

Our hope will not die until  
All the child-shaped coffins

Are in the ground  
Row upon row  
The headstones  
Will read like stacked dominos

Our hope will not die until  
All our mothers are dressed in black  
Shouting curses to their Gods

Our hope will not die until  
It is stolen from us just like our freedoms

Our hope will not die until  
The Damask rose is milked of all her color  
Wilting on the ground  
Like our brothers  
Our sisters  
And all who have fallen

Our hope will not die  
Until we do

Our hope  
How it shakes from  
The arrogant wind that tries to tear us down  
As it struggles to breathe  
As it takes its last breath  
It uses it to fuel the flag

But the flag only shows of our despair  
The colors  
They are supposed to show of pride  
The colors scream  
Believe  
Hope  
Overcome  
But it casts a spell of death upon my people

We have green

For our dying forests  
Once thriving  
Now being torn apart like our families  
One by one  
They are limbs  
Being torn from our bodies  
Our family  
An extension of ourselves  
Pulled one by one breaking

We have red  
For our crimson boiling blood  
Rage filled from the oppression  
Like the wax seal of our fate on an  
envelope  
Our blood was once cut from that  
paper  
Now our blood is shed  
From the bullets  
The bombs  
The knives  
Kicking at our throats  
Striving to strangle us  
Scrambling to tie up our vocal cords  
Until we merely let out a shriek  
Protesting the injustice  
Red  
It craves to see the life drain from our  
bodies  
Letting the tyrant win

We have black  
We are being suffocated by the ash  
Surrounding us like perfume  
From the smoke asking us for a favor  
The wind creates hand  
To dig us our own grave  
To bury us alive  
To drag our bodies into the ground

We have white  
For our broken picket fences

The barrier is broken  
But we are still divided  
White shows of our children's  
innocence  
Being tainted by the reality  
Craving to be heard  
Craving a voice  
Praying to live another day  
That their God will spare them  
Praying  
To live in a country that still has  
Their freedom

Do we not see them  
Can we not see the  
Tear-filled flooded eyes  
Shiny as the knife  
Used to heal their wounds

Do we not acknowledge them  
Do we ignore the masses of bodies  
lying  
In a pile on the pavement  
Like a landfill of broken dreams

Do we compare  
Innocent human beings to  
Pieces of littered trash on the ground  
Noticed  
But we refuse to pick them up

Can we not hear the deafening cries  
Of mother split from child  
Repeating the steady chorus of  
No, take me instead

Do we not care  
About the lives of the innocent

Do we fear them  
Do we fear the majority  
Because of a minority actions

The travel ban has hit home to so  
many  
Syria  
So many won't be able to come home  
Iran  
So many are stuck  
Libya  
Waiting for their turn  
Somalia  
In some twisted game  
Yemen  
And we are only encouraging  
That game to be played  
Chad

Putting a ban on predominantly  
Muslim countries  
Is taking away the quill and spilling the  
ink  
It is sewing lips together with ribbons  
To compress the pleas inside to stay  
silent  
Until the poetry  
That once flowed out so rhythmically  
Is now the silent murmurs at the wake

It is the dissection of one's heart  
Being shocked  
Burned  
Stabbed  
Shot  
Bombed  
Until the beating stops  
And the mutilation has concluded

It is letting the last Damask Rose  
Shrivel and evaporate

It is watching the hundreds of  
Child shaped coffins being  
Delivered to their graves

And doing nothing  
To stop  
The mass murder

It is watching the last petal  
The last limb  
Being covered by the forgiving soil  
Ready to take them home

Privilege  
It is a word that we must all know well  
It rolls off our tongue  
The venom dripping off our lips  
Providing us with the sweet taste of  
victory  
But it's a sight of pure horror  
Privilege is the sustenance of life  
And we eat privilege  
More than three times a day

Terrorist  
It is a word that we must all know well  
It is the weight on our chest  
The lump in our throats  
Of us choking out our assumptions of  
Who we think the attacker is  
It is by definition  
A person who uses violence  
Against civilians  
We fear terrorists  
We do not fear Muslims  
We need to disband  
Our weapons  
That our dividing us  
Swallow back our assumptions  
Just like we do the mainstream media  
And extend our hands  
To band together

The Damask Rose is  
Dying in Syria  
As the grounds crack and crumble

From the family that has  
Forgotten to water it today  
Because giving the rose the sweet drip  
of serenity  
Means that the children's throats get  
dry and heavy  
And they too will crack and crumble

The Damask Rose is  
Thriving in The United States of America  
Hope will not die  
For the rose is still living  
And so are we  
We must stand for our family  
That is 6,677 Miles away  
There are 18 Million Roses in Syria  
And there are 327 Million roses in  
The United States of America  
The Damask Rose is dying  
But It is not dead yet

**Ryleigh Webb**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: South Valley  
Middle School, Liberty, MO  
Educator: Staci Reichard

Category: Journalism

GOING  
BACKWARDS  
INSTEAD OF

FORWARD  
WITH  
FEMINISM

Going Backwards Instead of Forward  
with Feminism

Today many people, mostly women and girls are questioning themselves. Some questions they're asking themselves are like, "Am I pretty?", "What am I supposed to do in this world?", or the most common "How can I change?" These questions pop into their minds because of the way men and boys are treating them. Also, these thoughts start running through their minds when they hear about women's rights. But women and girls aren't the only ones who are upset about feminism-men and boys are too. Some reasons women and girls are having to fight for equality are from events that have happened in the past, differences between females and males, causes for women and girls to get involved, and influences and ways that are helping. Feminism is about women's rights on the basis of equality of sexes/gender. Feminism has been occurring ever since the beginning of the 15th century. Even though it improved, there were still chances of history being repeated. In this case, society is moving backwards instead of forward with women's rights. Some might disagree with this statement, but most

agree. Examples from history of inequality are: women's right to vote, lack of rights in general, little independence from husbands, military services, and many more. Feminism has been close to fixed for awhile but eventually came back. Although some of the women's rights have been fixed. Everyday women and girls try to find a way to solve feminism or make life better for themselves. Women and girls from every time period have fought and put a lot into finding a way to end feminism. There have been acts throughout history trying to help in finding a cause.

There are differences between girls, women, men, and boys. They have many differences between each other. They look different, sound different, and are different emotionally and mentally. But just because females are different doesn't mean we shouldn't have equality. For example, in the Declaration of Independence, it states "All men are created equal." Some people don't know exactly what they meant, but there are assumptions to what they were trying to tell. Most people believe they were just talking about men and not women and slaves, but some believe that they meant it to describe everyone. Women and some girls are trying to find a way to create equality between males and females. Women and men should be equal and not treated differently. Women deserve the empowerment to do so. There are many causes for women

and girls to join. They have there reasoning to why they become a feminist. Most the time it is because of the way they're treated with inequality. Women and girls feel bad about themselves when men and boys make fun of them. They get labels, bullied, and go through things that boys and men sometimes don't completely understand. Yes, women and girls go through a lot more than men and boys. They are made fun of when they go through it, and it doesn't make it any easier on them. When that occurs it rubs off on them, they tend to make bad decisions. Some women and girls believe that they should try and change into the type of person men and boys want them to be. But the truth is, that woman or girl that had someone come up to them is perfect the way she is. "Being different isn't a bad thing. It means you're brave enough to be yourself " ~Tumblr. Not everybody can be the same. Today, women and girls are underestimated. Some countries still have voting and payment against women and girls. The way women and girls are trying to change feminism have become seen from others. With these influences from other women and girls, such as Rosie the Riveter. She did a man's job and was confident in herself. These influences have helped the growth of knowledge of feminism. Some ways that are helping feminism is that some schools are helping by having groups where girls can talk about their problems and being able to express themselves. Another way that has

been helping ever since the start of feminism has been marches and rallies. With marches and rallies, there came more progress in changing women and girls' lives. Feminism has become more knowing and taken into the everyday life of women and girls. It has taken affect into showing that women and girls do have a voice and should stand up for themselves. "It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent " ~Madeleine Albright.

In conclusion, It would be important to bring this to everyone's attention. Feminism has changed women and girls views on life. Women and girls can do anything men and boys can do. They should be able to do those things and not get made fun of or worse. Women need to feel more confident and powerful about themselves. In schools, we could try and find ways to help the problem like having a club. Sometimes it just is too hard for a woman or a girl to go through this alone. This is why they're apart of marches and rallies. Women and girls can do amazing things if they can join together and become somewhat like heroes.

**Ashley Williams**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Kirbyville  
Middle School, Kirbyville,  
MO

Educator: Marilyn Yung

Category: Humor

## SKINNY GIRL PROBLEMS

Have you ever eaten until your full, but don't want to stop eating because the food's really good, but then you get really sick afterwards and yet, you regret nothing? Maybe it happens to some more then others, maybe it's just me. I don't really know, but what I do know is that it happens way too often. Actually when my mom makes extra spaghetti for no reason at all and I'm left with a huge, blue bowl of my favorite dinner food.

Once, it was just me, my mom and dad at the house and my mom was cooking dinner, then for some reason she thought it would be a good idea to make more spaghetti than needed. Usually when we have spaghetti, it's only half of the big, blue bowl. My mom only eats half a bowl, I have at least two bowls and my dad, being the biggish dude he is, has about three and a half. This time, the bowl is full. My mom still has half a bowl, my dad has four bowls and that leaves me with the rest of the spaghetti to myself, which is a little more than half of it; and of which I eat every bit of...

Afterwards I lie on my back, starfish style, on my living room floor

because that's as far as I get before I gave up on the idea of walking and collapse onto the floor. I just lie there, sighing unnecessarily loud, to make sure my parents know that this is 100% their fault.

"I regret nothing." I tell them from my position on the floor. After around thirty minutes of complete agony, I rise and go make myself something else to eat because complaining works up an appetite. I usually end up making a bowl of Beef Ramen and eat that. Once that's done, I soon remember that my stomach is about to explode from eating too much, but I already made the food so I go ahead and eat it. Then it's back to the floor I go, but this time I'm on the kitchen floor because I couldn't even make it a step. And I'm stuck there wondering why I did that, but STILL, I regret nothing.

Even though I eat a lot, I'm still confused on one simple fact: why aren't I fat yet? I can eat so much at once, and yet I'm the skinniest one in my family! And it's not because I exercise or something stupid like that; I'm too lazy to do that. It doesn't really matter what I'm doing, I'm most likely eating something sugar related, heck! I'm eating Strawberry Laffy Taffy right now, and yet, I'M NOT FAT! Don't get me wrong, I'm perfectly fine with it, but IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE!!! My body makes no sense. My sister is very careful with that she eats. She can gain weight very easily. I, however, am the total opposite and

it doesn't make sense. Again, my body makes no sense.

## **Jamila Williams**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Lee's Summit North High School, Lees Summit, MO  
Educator: Matt Bolch

Category: Poetry

## WORDS

### Matthew

I look to the stars and I see your face.  
I promise you, your sacrifice, was not a waste.  
Every night I think about joining you.  
Just to see you again.  
But I don't want to hear those words, not you too.  
I want you to know, you are loved.  
Only now, you see that from above.  
I wish you were still here.  
I know you're always near.  
I will never forget you.  
Tell me, what color is the sun?

### Words

On my skin, I write the words you call me.  
Whore. Ugly.  
Theses word seep into my skin, burning me as I breathe.  
Mistake. Unloveable.  
They burrow deep into my mind, making me

believe them.  
Undesired. Unwanted.  
Killing me inside, making me hate myself.  
Fake. Slut.  
You say they're just words they can't hurt.  
Screw-up. Hated.  
You say just shut them out.  
Rude. Liar.  
I can't, I try my hardest but I can't. Those  
words have become my truth.  
I long for a different truth but I cannot find  
one. So for now, those words have become  
who I am.

**Samantha Wilson**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Sturgeon High  
School, Sturgeon, MO  
Educator: Jennifer Campbell

Category: Poetry

## THE CLOUDS

The Clouds

Watching the clouds,  
Slowly covering the sky.  
How a blanket  
Covers a sick child.

I feel the wind  
Blowing my hair in all directions.  
Making the leaves  
Dance in the swaying trees.

The rain...  
Coming  
Down

Slowly  
Making everything wet.

Thunder starts to roll,  
Lightning strikes,  
Making dark things  
Once again  
Visible  
At night.

**Elaine Yoo**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Wydown Middle  
School, Clayton, MO  
Educator: Victoria Jones

Category: Novel Writing

## OF ASTERS AND DAISIES

.....  
BRIEF SUMMARY:

In this story, you follow Daisy, and her life one week before she dies in a bus crash. Her father receives the chance to to back in time 1 week before her death, but is warned that he will not be able to change the future. All he has is the chance to spend more time with her. Throughout the week, Daisy prepares to enter auditions for a musical, learn about her friend's struggles in life, and tries to come to terms with her mother's death. Tuesday: The musical audition is introduced, and Daisy and all of her friends plan to join Wednesday: Daisy's father begins making breakfast-a tradition that was abandoned after Daisy's mother's

death. After her odd behavior at lunch, Daisy confronts Audrey and learns about her relationship with her mother. Thursday: Daisy meets Emma and tries to comfort her, as they both share their experiences of grief over the death of a loved one. Friday: Daisy and her friends go to Natalie's house to practice for the audition. Saturday: Daisy's father takes Daisy to an amusement park, and tries to convince her to drop out of the competition. Sunday: Daisy's father shows her the last letter that her mother wrote to them. Monday: Daisy sees her father crying while clutching a family photo containing Daisy and her mother. Tuesday: Daisy visits a park that her mother used to go to and compares it to before. Then, she gets on a bus on the way to the musical auditions. The bus crashes.

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EXCERPT:

**Of Asters and Daisies**

"PLEASE, PLEASE," HE BEGGED, "I NEED MORE TIME!" SMOKE MADE HIS EYES STING, AND TEARS RAN DOWN HIS FACE.

6:48 a.m.

This is, without a doubt, the most important performance of my life. Okay, maybe I'm over-exaggerating here, but it sure feels like it. The velvet curtains are far grander than the cheap, unkempt ones at school, and the eyes of the three judges stare into me a hundred --no A MILLION times more than a gymful of students ever could. As I grab the mic in front of me it screeches like a bad cliché, but I try to ignore it. And I sing. My voice is soaring, perfectly hitting each note, nailing that octave I practiced so hard on, and life couldn't be better -- until it stops. My melody is swallowed and silenced by the air, cutting off abruptly. How could it go so wrong? How could I have failed so badly?

Suddenly I'm falling and -- BEEP BEEP. My alarm jolts me awake, back to life. A robin finishes its song with one last dying note, and winter has muffled out whatever sunlight there would usually be, making it feel like 3 am. What I would give for it to be Friday already.

I drag myself out of my bed and slowly go downstairs to eat --trying my best to ignore my house's frigid wooden floors. I step over a gum wrapper on the floor and open the fridge. Almost nothing to eat for breakfast except a slightly bruised apple. Good enough. As I begin rinsing it in the kitchen sink, I hear the stairs groan and creak. I glance up.

"Well, look who's an early riser today! Want some breakfast?" I tease.

Dad just stares at me dumbfoundedly. I wish I had a camera, his expression was almost comical. "Come on, you can't deny that you hate mornings just as much as I do." More silence. "Hello? Earth to Dad?" He suddenly snaps back to reality.

"Oh yeah...good morning Daisy."

"Good morning. So do you want breakfast or not?"

"I'm okay," he says. After a couple seconds of awkward silence, he carefully asks, "Daisy, what day is it?" There is a note of hesitation in his voice.

"It's Tuesday," I answer. He just looks even more confused and disoriented.

"W-what day of the month?"

"January 12." Where did Dad, confident speaker and presenter go? He's acting like he

used to, like all of his words had withered away before he had the chance to speak them. My dad's voice cuts through my thoughts. "So it's Tuesday...January 12th, right?"

"Of course it is! You scared that it'll become Saturday before you know it?"

Dad just laughs nervously. "Yeah, just pre-presentation jitters."

"You'll be fine! You've given hundreds of presentations like this. What's one more?" I meant this to be reassuring, but he just looks more nervous-less comical, more worrying. "Dad, really. You'll be okay."

11:37 a.m.

I know you'll hear this from almost every student, but how, just how does time only decide to go at a sluggish pace when you're bored out of your mind? The second hand on the scratched clock on my classroom wall is becoming slower and slower, as if it's wading through syrup. Not to mention that it's around a thousand minutes late. I bet that eventually, that clock will be a day behind. Then a week. I wish I could just go into hibernation like a bear, and sleep through the rest of the school day. I slowly tune out my teacher's drone about trigonometry and parabolas, my ears beginning to filter out all words except for 'test,' 'quiz,' and 'homework. Until my teacher, who for once decides to say something remotely interesting.

"Also, for all of the budding actors and singers in this class, there are auditions for ALLEGRO the musical coming up in one week. This includes today. It's all throughout the district as well as Riverview and Springfield. Information and audition material are on the stool next to the door." The following homework that he gave us was less exciting.

12:47 p.m.

The school lunches here are not anywhere near as nutritious as they advertise. It's like a bad commercial: "Buy for only \$2.99! This gives you 30% of your daily needed protein and grain!

Sideeffectsinclude theridiculousamountsofsugarandthefactthatthechickenisgrayisdefinitelynothealthy." But here I am, getting what has to be sawdust disguised as food. Emma gives me a sympathetic look as I sit down next to her. A slight note about my friends: they either act like they have drank 20 gallons of coffee, or like they haven't gotten sleep in weeks. Today, with the power of "Auditions! Singing! Acting!" filling their musical-loving hearts, they are talking a mile a minute.

"Okay, I'm assuming everyone has heard about the auditions...?" Emma asks tentatively.

"Heard about the auditions? OF COURSE we've heard about the auditions!" says Audrey. She munches on another oreo and begins tapping her foot. "But seriously, one week is NOT enough time to prepare." "Yeah of course not," Natalie replies, "But it's best to get started, I guess. Here, I searched up the ALLEGRO Soundtrack-the song with the 2nd excerpt. It's not bad, actually." The tinny music from her phone can barely be heard over the cacophony of our school's cafeteria, so we all crowd around her. It is then, when the song is swept into a sudden jarring chord that makes us all wince.

"Well, at least it's better than last time?" I try to be optimistic. "Hey, one of us might even get a main role this time!"

Emma sighs. "Well maybe we can. But probably not."

"Yeah but we can try!" Audrey's words were now beginning to string together. Uh oh. Time to confiscate the oreos. "One week, that's enough time to memorize the entire musical right? I mean the audition excerpts, not the musical, the excerpts." I stealthily try to snatch the container of oreos and fail.

The song ends, and Natalie frowns, scrolling through the video to

find the spot with the excerpt. I glance at the time. 12:59 p.m., lunch is slowly coming to an end. There's still enough time to listen to another song as well, right?

"Hey, shouldn't we begin the next?"

Emma cuts me off. "Quick! Mrs. Davis is coming this way."

Natalie frantically shoves her phone into her pocket and tries to look casual. She instead opts for pretending to eat the school's sawdust lunch instead. Mrs. Davis walks by and doesn't give us a second glance, the clacking of her high heels ringing throughout the cafeteria. Crisis averted. Three quarters of a song, two more failed attempts to confiscate the oreos, and three minutes later, the class bell rings. Each one of my friends is slowly swallowed by the flood of students rushing towards their next class.

6:57 p.m.

Dinner is a matched set of microwavable stringy spaghetti coated in chunky tomato sauce. Neither me nor my dad look particularly thrilled, but we both did not have enough time to cook an actual meal for once. We eat in somewhat awkward silence, with me this time not knowing what to say. The half-closed eyes on my dad's face indicates complete and utter exhaustion.

I try to start a conversation. "So, um...how was your day?"

Dad just half heartedly mixes around his spaghetti. "Tiring," he says, "Conference in 4 days, way too much work, and not-so-helpful coworkers. You?"

"Ok, I guess. There's an audition for a musical coming up soon. Can I play the soundtrack?" I say.

Dad looks way too tired to even comprehend what I just said, much less answer. "Sure," he replies.

I search up and play **AN ENTRANCE**, from *Allegro*, but the song drifting out of my phone's hushed speaker is interrupted by the beeping of texts. I look at my dad, and he nods. This is a normal evening eating microwave meals, not a dinner at a fine five-star restaurant. I excuse myself and check messages: 1 wrong number text, 2 advertisements, and 84 (and counting!) texts from my friends. I scroll through the last few of them:

Today, 6:59 PM

**Audrey:** So, are we all going to hang out to practice after school tmrw? I checked with my mom, we should be free until 7:00.

**Natalie:** I can, but I'll have to leave early for my choir rehearsal

**Emma:** I am. We'll be walking to your house, right?

**Audrey:** Awesome! Daisy, what about u? My phone screen turns pitch black. Mashing and pressing the power button doesn't help. I sigh and plug it into a charger.

**Me:** I'm in. Let's do this.

**Wednesday**

Today, 9:02 PM

"WHY? YOU WERE GIVEN AN ENTIRE LIFETIME AFTER ALL." THE MAN DIDN'T RESPOND. HE COULDN'T RESPOND. NOT YET.

6:37 a.m.

I wake up to sounds coming from downstairs, and a light turned on in the hallway. Through the blinds, I can see that the sky was dreary, like it too just wanted to go to sleep. It will be sunnier when it feels more awake. The world could all use a couple more minutes of downtime, but when suspicious activity is brewing in my

house, it was probably best not to set a timer for ten minutes and crawl back into bed. I begin to creep downstairs, my phone in my hand to call the cops at a split second's notice.

The odd sounds seem to be coming from the kitchen, a series of clanks and clatters, and...humming? I peek around the corner to see my dad, a frying pan in his hands, humming a melody--a slow, almost forlorn version of the MEADOW OF ASTERS theme song. He is making scrambled eggs with ketchup, and blueberry pancakes with chocolate syrup. It's just the way my entire family had liked it, as a Christmas morning special, or even as courses for a Thanksgiving dinner. Was it someone's birthday today? No. Gran and Grampa's birthdays were in the spring, Dad's had already passed, and mine wasn't for another 5 weeks. Maybe it was a birthday of some obscure relative, the type I'll see at the family gatherings during the holidays. All of the festive holidays have ended until February, unless Dad really wanted to celebrate "Make your dreams come true" day, or Valentine's, which I doubt. What if Dad got a promotion? It sure didn't look like Dad was in a happy mood last night, and if he'd gotten an email during the night, surely he would woken me up with his celebrating. Not holidays, birthdays or special achievements, it's something else...wedding anniversary?

No point in pretending to know what special day it was. "Good morning, Dad. What's the special occasion? You've barely made these since..." My words are caught in my throat. Maybe Dad won't notice.

"Morning, Daisy. I made breakfast. I hope you like it." Dad attempts to give me a tired smile. His eyes are red. How much sleep did he even get last night? And yet he still got up at what, 5:45? to make me breakfast.

"Thanks Dad. You didn't have to do this, you know." I realize too late how rude that sounded. "I mean the getting up really early part. I'm still really grateful for you making me breakfast."

"It's no big deal! Besides, I knew that if I didn't, I would regret it and-" Dad cuts himself off, but still, ack. He had gotten up early to make me a full breakfast for this day. The least I could do is remember why this day was special. Or at least, pretend like I do.

I walk to the cupboard, the tile floor as cold as ice, and get a plate. Dad flips a pancake onto it, and I grab a couple of spoonfuls of egg. The smell of pancakes brings me back to kindergarten days of drawing chocolate syrup smiley faces and food art contests around the table with Mom and Dad.

12:43 p.m.

Today's lunch is gruel of the tasteless variety, which is a slight downgrade from the sawdust sandwiches that we had yesterday. As I sit down with Emma, I notice an empty seat next to Natalie. Audrey still hasn't come to lunch.

"Oh hi. Audrey's at one of the classrooms. Said that she needed to finish her literacy and social sciences homework." Natalie yawns and rubs her eyes. "Anyway, what's up?"

"Nothing much. Surprisingly, I didn't get a stack of papers for homework. You?"

"Hah, lucky. I had to stay up till 1:00. Mr. Bell's a jerk. What about you, Emma?" Emma didn't look all too awake either.

"Same. I only had to stay up till 11:00 for math homework, but Mrs. Jones gave me an entire essay to do in 2 days."

"The price of being in honors." Natalie manages an exhausted laugh.

"But Mrs. Davis didn't give that much

homework. Why does Audrey have to finish it today?" I say.

"Probably got a bunch of social studies homework," Emma replies.

"Yeah." A silence hangs over our table despite the din and chatter of the rest of our school. I start answering problems on my math work, and Natalie quietly finishes her celery sticks and packs up her lunch bag. Emma simply pulls out a book from her stack of binders. Our conversation has withered away. When the class bell rings, we mutter our goodbyes and join our respective crowds of people heading for their next class. I realize too late that neither literacy nor social science teachers had assigned homework last night.

3:21 p.m.

The most recent set of messages from my phone:

Today, 3:13 PM

**Audrey:** I'm so sorry this is last minute, but we can't practice @ my house. Apparently my mom

was planning to have a guest over.

**Emma:** It's fine! I'll have someone pick me up. **Natalie:** Ok, I'll start walking home.

Well, that's disappointing. But understandable. I sidestep to dodge a 7th grader chasing his friend to get his pencil bag, and call Dad. He picks up the first time I call him instead of the second time or the third.

"Hello?"

"Hi Dad, this is Daisy."

"What is it? Did something happen?" Worry was edging into Dad's voice.

"What? No! It's just that the practice got cancelled today. Can you pick me up early?"

Sorry."

"Sure, no problem. I'll pack up my things. Love you."

"I love you too." I hang up. For the next 30 or so minutes, I am alone amongst the swarm of students leaving school. I get out my science homework, find a comfortable spot next to a wall, and sit down. "It's fine," I text, "Let me know if you want to talk."

9:31 p.m.

The sun has disappeared from the sky. I guess when it comes to winter, it's early to bed, late to rise. My brain is fried. I close my computer and recline in my chair for a break. I'm almost done with my homework anyway. I mindlessly scroll through my phone's chat history out of boredom until I find a pair of texts from Audrey: "So, are we all going to hang out to practice after school tmrw? I checked with my mom, we should be free until 7:00," and "Apparently my mom was planning to have a guest over." Maybe a meeting with a guest was planned last minute, but then again, at lunch...

Today, 9:35 PM

**Me:** Hey Audrey, do you want to talk?

**Audrey:** Sure.

**Me:** Facetime?

**Audrey:** No, I look like a mess right now.

**Me:** Ok, I'll call you.

When Audrey answers my call, her voice is flat, lifeless. "What is it?"

"Where were you at lunch today?"

"I thought Natalie told you, I was working on my math homework." Audrey's voice is unsteady.

"You meant social sciences and literacy, not math. And while Natalie and Emma don't have Mr. Johnson or Mrs. Davis, I sure do. You can't exactly work on homework that doesn't exist. What's going on?"

There is an scarily long pause after that.

What if I made her uncomfortable or upset?

"If you don't want to say anything, you

don't have to. I'll respect that."

"No, it's fine," says Audrey. She sighs. "It's just that...can you first promise not to tell Natalie and Emma yet? I'll tell them when I'm ready."

"I promise."

"I was outside of school."

"What? Why?"

"I just didn't want to run into anyone at that moment. They would ask why some random girl would be crying in a bathroom stall. So, outside." "Wait, you were crying?"

"Yeah." Audrey takes a big breath. "It's about my mom." She hesitates again, then begins speaking in almost a whisper, as if she was afraid someone else would hear. "I don't really have the best relationship with her right now, and...we had an argument last night." Her voice broke and shattered like shards of broken glass were lodged in her throat. "I just...needed some alone time, okay?"

"I understand. Just know, if you want to talk, I'll be there." "Thanks, Daisy."

"Any time. Good night."

"Good night."

## **Ann Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Maggie Ervin, John Pierson

Category: Dramatic Script

# IN UTERO

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

Tabitha: Negative two hours old (played around 12). Dressed casually.

Mama: 20. Wants Fred to propose to her. Prioritizes Tabitha's well-being over everything.

Fred: 19. Tabitha's biological dad. A man of few words — lost in his head, silently dwelling on his past with Mama.

Swordfish: Played by a guy dressed as a swordfish, preferably with sunglasses.

Avocado: Played by a guy dressed as half an avocado.

## TIME AND PLACE

Present day. Mama's uterus / a fancy restaurant.

\*\*\*

AT THE CORNER OF THE STAGE, WARM-COLORED SPOTLIGHTS CONFINE TABITHA TO A CUPBOARD-SIZED CIRCLE OF SPACE — WE ARE IN MAMA'S UTERUS. WE CAN HEAR MUFFLED VOICES INVADING FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD. TABITHA SITS ON A TALL CHAIR PUSHED UP AGAINST A PLAIN, CIRCULAR DESK.

A NOTIFICATION SOUNDS — DING! — AS A NEW EMAIL ARRIVES TO TABITHA'S LAPTOP. TABITHA SCRUNCHES UP HER FACE AS SHE NAVIGATES HER INBOX, CLICKING ON THE EMAIL, AND THEN BEGINS TO READ — LABORIOUSLY, HESITANTLY AT FIRST; SHE LEANS FORWARD AND SQUINTS AT THE LAPTOP SCREEN, HER HANDS FOLDED.

TABITHA

“Dear Tabitha.” Well, that’s a good start, isn’t it? I can’t imagine a better way to begin a letter myself. Except maybe... Dearest Tabitha. Or Mademoiselle Tabitha. Tabitha, my unborn daughter who has already surpassed all my hopes and dreams...

SHE CLEARS HER THROAT, TRIES AGAIN.

TABITHA (cont.)

“Dear Tabitha. As we all know, nine months is very a long wait and I am impatient to meet you. For now, I trust that you will seize this opportunity to educate yourself, here in the comfort of my uterine lining. I am attaching several video tutorials to direct you down the path to success. You must have faith in my instructions, for the sake of your own future happiness, and mine. Preschool applications are rapidly approaching, and afterwards you shall labor through high school, and college, and then afterwards... well, I’m haven’t quite gotten there myself, so we’ll have find out together.

BEAT. SHE READS WITH INCREASING MELODRAMA.

TABITHA (cont.)

“The world you will soon inhabit is an ocean, and I don’t mean like an ocean of warm, amniotic fluid, but a sea of deep, and dark, and shadows slipping in and out of focus, and not knowing which way is up or down, but still swimming and swimming. But somewhere at the surface, Tabitha, there’s the sun. I haven’t found it myself, but my friend Miranda from middle school found it when a big-shot producer liked her singing of ‘The High Road’ at the

coffeehouse, and now she’s out there making it big, holding her guitar like a baby all over the billboards. Or even your proud father, my dearest Fred — he’s so busy studying nowadays, things like stocks and startups and all that, that I just know he’ll get into business school, even if no one else thinks so...

BEAT.

TABITHA (cont.)

“But I digress. The point, dear Tabitha, is that you’re going to end up right next to those golden kids; I’ll make sure of it. I’ll feed you so much knowledge and talent that all the producers and universities will welcome you with open arms, and you’ll have so, so many ways to move up, and soak in the sweet sunshine.

BEAT.

TABITHA (cont.)

(As sincerely as always)

“Sent from my iPhone.”

TABITHA VENTURES TO CLICK ONE OF MAMA’S ATTACHMENTS.

TABITHA (cont.)

Hm. Couldn’t hurt to learn a little something...

WE HEAR THE EVER-ANNOYING QUADRATIC FORMULA SONG — SET TO THE TUNE OF “POP GOES THE WEASEL”. TABITHA GROANS, QUICKLY FLIPPING THE LAPTOP SHUT. THE MUSIC STOPS; LIGHTS DOWN ON A DEFEATED TABITHA.

ON THE OTHER HALF OF THE STAGE, SOMEONE LIGHTS THE CANDLES AT A TABLE FOR TWO, WHERE MAMA, WITH A

COMICALLY LARGE BABY BUMP, IS SITTING ACROSS FROM FRED. FRED HAS A CAN OF BUDWEISER; MAMA, A GLASS OF WATER. EACH IS ALSO WORKING ON AN ENTREE: MAMA TENTATIVELY POKES HER DISH WITH A FORK WHILE FRED SAWS AWAY AT SOME REDDISH-LOOKING MEAT. HE'S ALMOST FINISHED.

FRED

Your food ain't gonna finish itself, you know.

MAMA PUSHES HER DISH TO FRED.

MAMA

Then you can eat it.

FRED RESISTS THE URGE TO ACCEPT MAMA'S OFFER. PUSHES THE DISH BACK TO HER.

FRED

Looks perfectly delicious to me.

MAMA

It's a fish.

FRED

Only like a tiny piece of a fish, I think.

MAMA

I thought it was chicken! It tasted like chicken for the first bite, and the second, and... and it looked like chicken in the photos...

FRED

The photos.

MAMA

The ones I had to look up, remember? Because the whole frickin' menu just has to be in French. As if anyone in suburban Saint

Louis knows more than BONJOUR, CROISSANT, OOH LA LA!

FRED

Seafood twice a week is okay, babe. Remember?

MAMA TAKES A DEEP BREATH.

MAMA

You know what, Fred? For once, you're right. I can finish this. No problem.

SLOWLY, SHE RAISES ONE TINY BITE OF FISH TO HER LIPS, CHEWS... THEN SPITS IT RIGHT BACK OUT.

MAMA

But this isn't just seafood. This is a swordfish — it's worth like, five seafoods. Prowling the ocean and eating all the grubby little mercury-infected mackerel. And then eating the mercury-infected squids that eat the mercury-infected mackerel. And stabbing all those innocent fish with its swordy nose!

SHE AGGRESSIVELY STABS HER FISH WITH A FORK.

MAMA (cont.)

Stab! Stab! Stab!

FRED

Babe-

MAMA

Easy for you to say!

FRED

(Genuinely confused)  
What did I say?!

MAMA

Of course you don't care if she gets contaminated by this fish. You're not going to be the one changing her diapers and walking her to the bus stop and showing her teachers who's boss at the parent-teacher conferences. What if she's a kinesthetic learner but the school system doesn't provide her with any hands-on activities? Who's gonna fix that? Who's gonna volunteer to sanitize the classroom abacus, huh?

FRED

Hey, just 'cause we ain't lawfully wedded don't mean I can't take care of her.

HE SIGHS.

FRED (cont.)

Look, if it means so much to you, I'll eat the rest of the damn swordfish.

MAMA

Thank you.

MAMA PUSHES THE PLATE TO FRED. HE ACCEPTS. STABS, CHEWS.

LIGHTS BACK UP IN THE UTERUS. (MEANWHILE AT THE DINNER TABLE, MAMA AND FRED MIME A PEACEFUL CONVERSATION. WE SHOULDN'T PAY THEM MUCH ATTENTION.)

TABITHA HAS HER HEAD ON THE DESK, HER LAPTOP OPEN IN FRONT OF HER. SHE CLOSES HER EYES AND TRIES TO SING THE QUADRATIC FORMULA SONG FROM MEMORY:

TABITHA

$X$  equals negative  $B$ , plus or minus square root,  $B$  squared minus four  $AC$ , all over...

SWORDFISH STROLLS INTO THE WOMB. HIS STEPS, LOUD AND CLUNKING, STARTLE TABITHA.

TABITHA

Who are you?

SWORDFISH

Just your average mercury-contaminated swordfish.

TABITHA SQUINTS AT HIM.

TABITHA

Aren't you supposed to be in the small intestine?

SWORDFISH

Well... I thought I'd make a quick pit stop, first. Pay a visit to my favorite fetus.

TABITHA

(Flattered)

Oh!

SWORDFISH

Wait a second. Are you... studying?

TABITHA

Yup! My mama's been sending me all these educational videos. You know, to "direct me down the path to success."

SWORDFISH

And in what direction would that be?

TABITHA

I dunno. Out?

SWORDFISH

You're never going to get these nine months back, you know.

HE WALKS AROUND THE DESK AS HE

SPEAKS.

SWORDFISH (cont.)

Now is your time to live a little! Make friends! Throw some wild par-tays!

TABITHA

I don't have any friends.

SWORDFISH GESTURES TO HER LAPTOP.

SWORDFISH

The internet exists for a reason.

TABITHA

But... if I don't prepare now, I won't be ready for the real world.

SWORDFISH

Pshaw! You're not gonna remember any of it anyway, once you get your head out there. All you gotta do in "the real world" is take things in and send them out the other way. Just breathe, nice and smooth. Nobody expects much from a baby.

TABITHA

What's breathing?

SWORDFISH PATS HER SHOULDER.

SWORDFISH

All in good time, my friend. All in good time.

SWORDFISH LOOKS DREAMILY INTO THE DISTANCE. TABITHA TRIES TO FOLLOW HIS GAZE, NOT REALLY SURE WHAT SHE'S LOOKING AT. LIGHTS DOWN IN THE WOMB.

AT THE DINNER SCENE, FRED WATCHES MAMA TURN A WHOLE AVOCADO IN HER HANDS.

FRED

You're really gonna eat that? At a restaurant that refills the pretzel bread for free?

MAMA

It's good for me, Fred.

FRED

So's low amounts of stress.

MAMA

And you have quite the knack for contributing to my stressful environment.

FRED

Hey, if I've learned one thing from our 'lationship, it's that stress comes from within.

MAMA

You know what else comes from within? Babies! And you've got to feed them right, otherwise they won't turn out right, alright? They'll turn out like us. Sorry. Like me.

SHE ANGRILY BITES INTO HER AVOCADO LIKE AN APPLE, PEEL AND ALL. CHEWS. FRED OBSERVES WITH CURIOSITY. AFTER A MOMENT, MAMA ADMITS DEFEAT — SPITS OUT THE MOUTHFUL, TRYING TO PICK THE BITS OF PEEL OFF HER TONGUE.

MAMA

I just love her so much already.

FRED

I know.

A SILENCE. MAMA TAKES A SIP OF HER WATER.

MAMA

Fred... There doesn't happen to be an engagement ring at the bottom of this

glass, does there?

FRED

No. Just... water.

FRED REACHES FOR HIS DRINK. MAMA BEGINS TO SCOOP HER AVOCADO WITH A SPOON. THEY EAT IN SILENCE.

LIGHTS UP IN THE WOMB. TABITHA AND SWORDFISH ARE GATHERED AROUND THE LAPTOP. SWORDFISH EAGERLY TAPS THE SCREEN.

SWORDFISH

This one. With the blond hair. She looks cute.

TABITHA TAKES A DEEP BREATH. CLICKS THE MOUSEPAD.

TABITHA

Okay. Friend request sent.

NEITHER NOTICES WHEN AVOCADO ENTERS THE STAGE, FROM THE SAME PLACE AS SWORDFISH.

AVOCADO

Hey, friends!

TABITHA JUMPS.

SWORDFISH

(To Avocado)

You don't look like @melissahendricks2036.

AVOCADO

Tabitha, you're hanging out with him?

TABITHA

How do you know my name?

AVOCADO

He's a bad fish. A very bad fish.

SWORDFISH

(Hurt)

Hey!

AVOCADO BEGINS TO PACE.

AVOCADO

You know what kind of fish is good for you? Salmon, fully cooked. It's especially rich in omega-3 fatty acids. Make sure to eat plenty when you have your own baby, Tabitha.

TABITHA

What do you mean, my own baby? I'm not even a baby yet!

AVOCADO

Well, to be precise, beginning from the inception of meiosis...

SWORDFISH

We can call her a baby when she's ready.

AVOCADO

So that makes nine months, two days, and fourteen hours now.

SWORDFISH

Shall I call you an avocado tree, then?

AVOCADO, NO LONGER LISTENING, NOTICES WHAT'S GOING ON WITH THE LAPTOP.

AVOCADO

A social medium? You're kidding me! What a waste of time! Gimme this.

HE TURNS THE LAPTOP TO FACE HIMSELF. SCROLLS.

AVOCADO (cont.)

Solving inequalities... Polynomial functions... Aha! Now that's more like it.

AVOCADO CLICKS THE MOUSEPAD. THE QUADRATIC FORMULA SONG BEGINS TO JINGLE OVER THE SPEAKERS. SWORDFISH CRIES OUT LIKE HE'S BEEN SHOT; TABITHA'S HEAD SINKS TO THE TABLE.

SUDDENLY, THERE'S A RUMBLING SOUND. THE UTERUS LIGHTS BEGIN TO TREMBLE. TABITHA AND SWORDFISH LOOK AROUND IN FEAR; AVOCADO DETERMINEDLY CLUTCHES THE LAPTOP.

AT THE SAME TIME, MAMA DOUBLES OVER AT THE DINNER TABLE.

MAMA

Aaaah...

TABITHA

What was that?

SWORDFISH

I'm out of here, kid.

HE RUNS OFFSTAGE THE WAY HE CAME.

MAMA

My water...

FRED EXAMINES THE GLASS OF WATER ON THE TABLE WITH CONFUSION.

FRED

You wanna refill?

MAMA

My other water, Sherlock!

FRED

Oh. Oh!

HE LEAPS FROM HIS SEAT. THROWS HIS JACKET OVER MAMA'S SHOULDERS AND WRAPS AN ARM AROUND HER TO STEADY HER.

FRED

Come on, let's get going.

THE CANDLES ARE BLOWN OUT. WE CAN STILL HEAR FRED AND MAMA'S VOICES, BUT ON THEIR HALF OF THE STAGE, WE SEE ONLY BLACKNESS.

WE HEAR THE GROWL OF AN ENGINE. A CAR PULLING OUT.

FRED (O.S.)

St. John's, St. John's.... Which exit? This exit?

TABITHA

(To Avocado)

What's going on? I'm not ready.

AVOCADO

Come on Tabitha, let's not talk over the music.

HE TAPS THE KEYBOARD SEVERAL TIMES. THE SONG GROWS LOUDER. TABITHA COVERS HER EARS. SPEAKERS HAVE TO YELL TO BE HEARD.

SLAMMING OF CAR DOORS.

FRED (O.S.)

Let's go, babe. Come on, you can hold onto my arm. Right here.

SHOES CLUNKING. MEDICAL SOUNDS — BEEPING OF A HEART RATE MONITOR, MAMA TAKING DEEP BREATHS....

THE SHAKING IN THE UTERUS INTENSIFIES.

TABITHA WRAPS HER ARMS AROUND HER DESK.

TABITHA  
I won't let go. I won't.

FRED (O.S.)  
Keep goin'. You've got this, babe.

MAMA (O.S.)  
Goddamnit Fred, I know that already!

AVOCADO  
You have to let go.

AVOCADO TRIES TO PRY TABITHA'S ARMS FROM THE TABLE.

TABITHA  
But I like it here! I like the uterine lining. I like my desk. I like my laptop. I even like this stupid song!

SHE SINGS AGAIN, NOISILY AND OFF-KEY.

TABITHA  
X equals negative B-

AVOCADO  
Well, you'll like it even more out there. I promise.

TABITHA  
What if I don't?

AVOCADO FINALLY MANAGES TO PULL TABITHA FROM THE TABLE. SHE GRABS FOR HIM, EYES WIDE, AS SHE TUMBLES OVER. THE MUSIC STOPS; COMPLETE BLACKOUT.

FRED (O.S.)  
Almost-!

A SHUDDERING GASP OF RELIEF FROM MAMA. THEN FOR A MOMENT, ALL WE HEAR IS JOY — A BABY'S CRYING.

MAMA (O.S.)  
Mademoiselle Tabitha...

A PAUSE. MORE CRYING.

FRED (O.S.)  
Tabitha, huh? How long you got that one picked out for?

MAMA (O.S.)  
A while now.

FRED (O.S.)  
I'll believe it.

A BEAT.

MAMA (O.S.)  
She's lovely, isn't she? Like an angel. Like the sun. Like a...

FRED CLEARS HIS THROAT.

FRED (O.S.)  
Baby?

MAMA (O.S.)  
Yeah. That's what she is.

A BEAT.

MAMA (O.S., cont.)  
My baby.

THE END.

**Ann Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs  
School, Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Journalism

## PEOPLE WATCHING AT THE CORNER OF 20TH AND OLIVE

On January 1st, 2019, a corner of downtown St. Louis falls quiet for the holiday. Only a handful of cars, led by a white police cruiser, inch forward at the four-way traffic light where Olive Street meets 20th Street — the site of the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department, a sturdy, beige fortress.

At this intersection, a woman is crossing 20th Street, parallel to the traffic. She is young, tall, and black, with loose curls and rimless glasses. As she walks, a miniature backpack bounces against her hip.

"Stephanie!" calls a woman in a crimson headscarf, from the opposite side of 20th. "We're going this way!" She motions for Stephanie to come back.

Stephanie shakes her head and points across Olive. "We'll meet up over there!"

Together, they wait for the pedestrian light to change.

In this moment, St. Louis vaguely resembles its

depiction on the police department's official website, which features an especially saturated photo of the Arch's familiar silhouette, set against a sunset sky melding bright orange, purple, and blue (1). This image is downtown from a romantic distance.

Up close, St. Louis is not always so beautiful.

Back in the fall of 2017, the city's streets erupted with riots after a Missouri court acquitted officer Jason Stockley on the charge of first-degree murder. The trial took place almost six years after Stockley fatally shot Anthony Smith, a 24-year-old black man.

On September 15, 2017, when Stockley's verdict was announced, police forces disbanded throughout the city to control the riots, exposing the "sadism" — as penned by *THE ATLANTIC* — of certain officers (2).

One police sergeant texted to his team, "Are we meeting at 20th and Olive?" — here.

Officer Christopher Myers' response: "Yes I guess so, let's whoop some ass."

The ferocity only escalated as officer Dustin Boone continued, "The more the merrier!!! It's gonna get IGNORANT tonight!! But it's gonna be a lot of fun beating the hell out of these [expletive] once the sun goes down and nobody can tell us apart!!!!"

These texts are sourced from the official indictment of Boone, Myers, and fellow officer Randy Hayes on November 29, 2018, for beating a man referred to as "L.H" (3). According to the document, L.H. "was compliant and not posing a physical threat to anyone" during protests that night. Also, unbeknownst to the officers, L.H. was an undercover member of their same police

force.

The heroic unmasking of L.H.'s identity, while applaudable, raises an uglier question: How many ordinary civilians suffered abuse from these officers, left unaddressed?

Seemingly, St. Louis' history of police brutality contradicts the present serenity at the corner of 20th and Olive, on New Year's Day. Stephanie and her friend are reuniting on the other side of the street. Another police car rolls by, silently.

Nonetheless, St. Louis' troubling past is undeniably entangled with these very streets and everyone who traverses them — by car, by bus, or by foot. The city reflects its people.

Along Olive Street, less than one block east of the police station, sits Loan Express, a squat, grey building surrounded by abandoned businesses with darkened windows. Two blocks to the west, Checks Cashed advertises "money orders."

However, this area is not a complete, incriminable cycle of poverty, just as it is not a technicolor photo of the Arch.

Its infrastructure also boasts history, determination, and hope.

Next to Checks Cashed, a brick wall features a huge poster in black and white: "Site of the first official World Chess Championship match, 1886." There is a sandwich shop adorned in red, white, yellow, and blue, whose window is laminated with "God bless America" alongside the country's flag.

St. Louis is not only a list of names and numbers. It is too simple and too dangerous, from a distance, to focus on the headlines and dismiss downtown as trapped in its own

cycle of problems. Rather, read the headlines, but also observe the humans all around the city. Talk to people. Do not contribute to the cycle of ignorance.

The world is crossing another street into 2019. Boone, Myers, and Hayes — who are pleading not guilty to charges regarding the assault — expect to undergo further procedurals around January 21, according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch (4).

Within this city and beyond, the people will be watching.

**Ann Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs

School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Short Story

## NO TEARS

1.

I cry when I poop. It's a thing.

2.

"Man, it's been such a crappy year, Jessie," whispers Mariana. She's sitting next to me, of course, and squeezing my hand. I squeeze back. I know we're both thinking the same thing: **FINALLY, HIGH SCHOOL IS OVER.**

All that's left to do is endure this unnecessarily long ceremony, preferably without falling asleep or having our legs get so numb that by the time everyone else

leaves the room, we'll still be stuck to our bony folding chairs, trapped in this cold auditorium forever. Right now I'm on the brink of succumbing to either of those fates while the "successful kids" from our class — the ones that the administration trusts not to cuss or say anything too stupid — keep rambling on and on about "opportunities for growth"... "memories to treasure forever and always"... BARF. If I had to write a speech, I'd keep it short and sweet, like "Good evening everyone, and have a nice evening everyone." I'd let the poor kids just go home already, where many of us will have to face even crummier graduation labors — like hugging weird-smelling relatives, eating healthy to impress those aforementioned relatives, and then finally, once your house is free of half-strangers... stuffing your face with desserts, like, since you can't take the family fridge to college, you might as well clean the whole thing out.

That last part's pretty fun, although my fridge at home is almost empty already. I figured I might not be able to find some of my favorite foods after leaving St. Louis, so maybe if I ate myself sick of them now, I wouldn't miss them later — or at least, I'd postpone the withdrawal. Yesterday I ate eight whole-moon wedges of Babybel cheese, and let me tell you, those things seem innocent at first, in their cheery red wrappers, but ever since I woke up this morning I've sensed a raging war in my digestive system, which I'm certain those sly cheeses started. I think there's a significant chance that I'm lactose-intolerant — in ninth grade, my biology teacher said something about all Asian people lacking lactase, an important enzyme that helps break down the sugar in milk, and I'm one-quarter Chinese. I mean, I've always consumed dairy on a regular basis, but right then is when I started to worry that I've been poisoning myself all along.

3.

When I admitted the whole crying-while-pooing thing to my mom, she demanded that I meet with the school counselor about my sensitivity issues, like maybe verbally expressing my emotions would pacify whatever sick bodily function links my tear ducts to my anus. I had to explain to her that I wasn't sad or anything; my problem — if she insisted on labeling it as such — was chemical, not mental. Self-Credited Dr. Mom was relieved to learn that I don't ASK the tears to flow out. And when they do, I hardly notice them.

4.

Yes, it's over, truly over now, speeches and all. I throw my crap in the air when the people around me throw their crap in the air. When my iconic graduation-hat-thing hits this blond kid in the head — I can't recognize him from behind with everyone wearing identical robes — I laugh, and I'll bet that in that moment my parents snap a burst of CANDID pictures, so that they can post them on Facebook and trick all their friends into believing that I'm CANDIDLY thrilled about throwing my crap in the air.

I guess that I feel just a TINY bit like celebrating aloud, perhaps whooping and hollering with the noisy kids, but I can't bring myself to scream, not even when Mariana's high voice joins the chorus and she turns to me, grinning expectantly. The only time I can scream the way my classmates are screaming — like shrieking, like little kids — is on a roller coaster, a really scary one. When I try to scream without a life-or-death reason, my voice just comes out weak, or worse, it cracks. Nobody else looks at me, or asks me to join in the fun.

FLUBBGRRRRRSHWAHH. My thoughts are interrupted by my stomach, which lets out this hideous gurgling sound. Luckily, I don't

think anyone notices amid the celebration — well, except for Mariana, who notices everything, and shoots me a glance like **JESSIE, ARE YOU ABOUT TO EXPLODE?**

I shrug. Then whatever's inside me begins to blossom. I peel away from the celebration, my forehead slick with sweat, and sprint — for the first time since ninth grade PE class, when I nearly passed out from effort during the last lap of the mile, and never tried my best again — searching for a quiet place. There are very few quiet places around this school, but I know all of them by now.

5.

One last disclaimer about my pooping problem — it's not that I'm trying so hard to squeeze the crap out that it hurts, which is what my dad guessed when I finally articulated the ordeal to him. But no, dear Actual-Dr. Dad — though your PhD is in philosophy, so I guess it's not really relevant in this situation — in the physical sense, pooping's easy enough for me. If I were in a lot of pain, I would have said something, you know?

6.

I'll spare you the details of my bathroom expenditure. I'm sure you can infer that it wasn't pretty. But also, it was way worse than usual because it actually hurt. Like, I almost start to sob, but I try my best to choke it down, to hold in the hideous wailing sounds my vocal cords are longing to make, just in case someone happens to be passing by the ladies' room. Yeah, instead I scrunch up my face and hope it doesn't give me wrinkles.

I'm not sure how much of my outpouring is the usual pooping tears, and how much of it might be something different. I'm just grateful for the never-ending graduation ceremony because it means that everyone is still busy chatting and taking pretty pictures with their friends and family, so the bathroom is

momentarily empty. I'll admit that throughout those four minutes or so, I'd made a whole soundtrack of unappetizing noises, and presently, a pungent scent drifts from my stall, possessing the room — the disgruntled ghost of my Babybel cheese.

I'm washing my grubby face at the sink when I hear my mom's voice coming closer: "Of course I have to; she might be **DOING DRUGS**, for heaven's sake." Then the door to the bathroom creaks open and she's calling my name and cooing — so sweetly that I am instantly annoyed — "Are you alright, dear?"

"I'm perfectly **FINE**, mom." I grab a paper towel and wipe the sinkwater off my face.

In the mirror, my mom's face appears behind me. "I don't think somebody who's **FINE** would run away from their best friends during one of the most important memory-making opportunities of her life."

"I don't talk to most of those kids. They think I'm psycho."

"Honey, is this about Mariana?"

"What? No! Mariana and I are perfectly fine."

My mom smiles in a factual kind of way. "Yes, of course, sweetie. You two have always worked great together. Well, except for that whole eighth-grade debacle... but that's ancient history, right?"

I squint at my mom's reflection. "I never told you about that." In the spring of eighth grade, Mariana thought I was flirting with a boy she'd told me she liked, and she was pissed at me until I found the guts to tell her that I had about as much interest in that dude — in fact, in dudes in general — as I did in **PSYCHROLUTES MARCIDUS**, also known as the blobfish. Then Mariana laughed and wrapped her arms around me, and we were instantly picture-perfect again.

And how long before that perfection starts to fade? When is the last time we'll snap pictures together, Mariana grinning with all her teeth, pointing her phone too close to

our faces, and me, rolling my eyes because it makes them look brighter?

“Don’t you remember? You woke me up in the middle of the night because you’d been dreaming that Mariana was eaten by — what was it, a giant fish? — and you never got the chance to apologize.” My mom’s eyes are glistening. “I thought you were so sweet. You hadn’t talked to me about your feelings in such a long time...”

“MOM, stop it.” I’m blushing, but I remember what she’s saying now. I know the fish-eating dream sounds ridiculous in hindsight, but it was absolutely terrifying while I was experiencing it, and in the hazy moments after I woke up, I still believed it was the truth — the kind of terror that can turn an eighth-grader into an eight-year-old.

“I know; I’m sorry. Is it FEELINGS? I shouldn’t say that word around you, right?” My mom shakes her head and laughs; it sounds like a cough. “But Livvy, when I asked about Mariana, I meant to ask about... your FUTURES.”

Like most adults, she means “college” — as if that’s as far as my future could possibly extend — and how Mariana got into her first choice, Wash U, and I didn’t, and how we’ve had the same first choice since middle school and planned to be roommates and all that jazz. Was I hurt? Maybe a little bit, especially since Mariana and I earned identical report cards all throughout high school. But Mariana plays varsity field hockey and she’s captain of the debate team, and all I do outside of studying is worry about studying. So I guess she deserved it, and I didn’t. I can deal with that.

I sigh. I’m trying to think of something to tell my mom, something about how my life is so much more than college, when I realize that I’ve been rubbing my hands together in the sink, who knows for how long, with the water turned as hot as it will go, and they’re starting to turn unnaturally pink. And I’d

already finished rinsing and drying and all, the first time around, before my mom even showed up.

“Honey. You know you can still talk to me.”

“Yeah.”

“I know you’ll miss her.” My mom means Mariana. “And... I hope I’m not flattering myself too much when I say that you’ll miss your dad and me, too. You might even miss those teachers and classmates you claim to despise. And you should know, that’s perfectly normal. Maybe even good.”

“Normal kinda sucks.”

Now it’s my mom’s turn to mimic my TEENAGE ANGST, as she likes to call it: “YEAH, YEAH.”

It sucks that I can’t help it, but I have to laugh — her impression is spot on. Then I quickly recollect myself, cutting my involuntary laughter short. My body doesn’t really feel like laughing; my body feels like if I open my mouth, it’ll let go of all the things I’ve been holding in, like a verbal translation of FLUBBGRRRRRSHWAHH.

But now, when I speak, I try to sound like the daughter she tries so hard to remember: “It’s just... I’d rather not talk right now, but...” My mom walks closer to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders in a way that would normally cause me to flinch or jerk away, but this time I let it go and say, in a voice as quiet as a gurgle of the digestive system, “Maybe later? Whenever we finally go home.”

“Later, then,” says my mom. “And you can tell me everything.” We walk out of the bathroom together, and my dad almost falls over when he sees us, huddled together like penguins, and my mom drags him into the textbook embrace, completing our balance so quickly that there’s almost no time to begin to cry.

**Carrie Zhang**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs  
School, Saint Louis, MO  
Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Poetry

## FADING WINTER

**Fading Winter**

Winter frosts our quarreling lips  
Cold creeps behind us  
latching onto our shadows  
like leeches  
and when we stomp our feet  
against the bittered ground  
its splintered cries sound like ours.

Our footprints  
soften the ground  
yet your blade  
tempered in icy fire,  
hardens,  
burning against my bruised skin.

Further down,  
the moody river that divides us  
desiccates into  
fractured unbreakable ice —  
Even Moses  
could not separate these seas.

By the tree  
with a decaying trunk  
and blossoming leaves  
there is  
one  
howling bird  
of massive magnitude

resting behind you,  
wings matted with red  
and eyes dripping with cracked tears  
onto the fresh green sprigs below.

And then,  
the snow melts.

An ice cube in the sun,  
and there are a hundred birds  
instead of one,  
singing a tune of amber and gold  
resting upon the fading ice  
on victorious branches.

And they envelop me  
in their healed wings  
raising me up  
until the sun's feathery rays brush my neck,  
and all I can see is  
the sweet blue of the sky.

And you  
are  
faded.

**Eric Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High  
School, Chesterfield, MO  
Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

## MIND GAMES

The frigid winter air filled my lungs as I stepped out of the car and waved goodbye to my mom, who lingered under the faint, yellow glow of the street lamps until I entered the Gym A Commons. The chilly air seeped through the seams of my

jacket and sweatpants and brought life to my weary limbs. Inside, my friends and coaches greeted me, but all I heard were the thoughts of concern echoing in my head.

"This is your first race, are you really up for this challenge? 13 miles is a long way..."

"How are you going to race in this weather? What about your knee?"

"What if something goes wrong..."

I pushed these thoughts out of my mind.

Worrying about the race is possibly the worst thing you can do, and I knew this. I needed to focus if I wanted to do well in this race. I

withdrew to the bathroom and stared myself down in the mirror. "You've gone so far in so little time," I thought. "All of this training through the cold, snow, and rain has lead up to this point.

You've done all the training you need, you've got nothing to worry about now. Just prove yourself now." My pep talk sent my doubts scattering like a shark swimming through a school of fish. "It looks like your mind finally figured out what it's up against." I smiled and walked out of the bathroom, with high spirits.

My running partner, \_\_\_\_, and my friend \_\_\_\_ were talking to each other when I came out.

"Look who actually got up on time" teased \_\_\_\_.  
"I'm just happy that the school is open, it's freezing outside," I said.

\_\_\_\_ pulled up the course on his phone, pointing out hills that would be challenging, places we could take it easy, and other general tips as \_\_\_\_ and I impatiently waited for our bus to pick us up.

Overall, the race seemed pretty straightforward. Just 13.1 miles on relatively flat terrain stood between us and the finish line. As the bus pulled into the dimly light parking lot, up my friends and I were feeling pretty confident we got this half-marathon in the bag.

Our bus rattled into the dark parking lot as all the Students on the Go racers clambered in. \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_ and I sat in the back to try and think of anything we might've forgotten to mention.

After a while, we all popped our earbuds in and stared out the window, trying to relax before the race began.

We arrived at the start line as the sun was cresting the horizon. Rays of soft sunlight burst through the air as we carried our bags towards the murky Mississippi River. Steam billowed up from our mouths and the frigid air numbed my face. Our trainers crunched against the gravel path as we neared the tavern where all the Students on the Go members met. The still treetops indicated that there was no wind to compound the cold, a stroke of good luck before the race began. "Can't get much worse than this" I thought as we turned onto the cobblestone parking lot of the tavern.

The warm air was the first thing I felt when we went through the door. Relief flooded my freezing cheeks as I slowly became aware of the chatter of other students. The tavern was packed with runners from schools all over St.Louis. They all were having a blast, laughing, shouting, not worrying a single bit about the race. Their joy was contagious and I felt my mood elevate as most of my concerns vanished into thin air.

My friends and I found a corner towards the front to set our stuff down and started to stretch. My legs felt ready. But my mind still housed the tiny voice in the back of my head. "What if you don't finish?" It said. I tried to push the voice away.

"You're going to do fine," I thought. There's nothing you can do now but give it your best shot." I continued to stretch, then made sure my phone was charged and took a sip of water before heading off to the corrals.

The cold air greeted me with open arms, sapping the warmth from my cheeks. \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_ and I slowly ambled down the cobblestone street to murky Mississippi River, and into our gate. Overcast skies blanketed the skies, yet the mood was gladsome. Upbeat pop songs played on the loudspeaker and echoed off of the nearby buildings. Racers fought to be heard over the roaring chatter. Overhead, the Metrolink was bringing last minute runners to the start. People were smiling, taking selfies, and just having a great time. \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_ and I took in the scene for a while. Then we broke the silence.

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"How you guys feeling?" asked \_\_\_\_.

"At this point, I'll just be happy if I finish. It's so cold" said \_\_\_\_.

"I'm just a little nervous," I answered. It should be fine though. Also, how are we gonna get through all these people?"

"Just run right through," said \_\_\_\_\_. It'll be fun!"

"Yeah and leave me behind like you always do, so much fun," said \_\_\_\_ sarcastically.

"Yep," said \_\_\_\_\_. "Have fun with that."

The music suddenly stopped and a voice filled the air. "Thirty minutes until the race begins! Runners, make your way to your corrals at this time."

Our conversation died off, and we all gawked at the scene, taking in our surroundings as the start drew closer. Thirty minutes turned into twenty, then ten, then five, until the start gun for the first coral was fired. Cheers erupted from the crowd as the first runners bolted over the start line. Two minutes later, the second coral was released. Then the third. By the time our coral was next, we could see people running over the Martin Luther King Bridge, into Illinois.

As we approached the start line, the race announcer revealed the Students on the Go to the crowd. "And if you take a look you may see some purple shirts out there. These are the Students on the Go! These students have been training for months, some of them are running their first race, and some I'm sure will fight their way to the top." The crowd cheered as our coral gathered at the start line.

"We have to get out of the crowd as soon as possible," said \_\_\_\_\_. Don't want to get caught behind people."

I nodded. "Thirty seconds till the coral is released!" My breathing sped up as my doubts resurfaced and the voice returned. "You should've stayed home today," it said. "There are too many people, this race is too long, you just aren't-"

The pop of the start gun brought me back to the present. Cheers erupted from the crowd, and cowbells loudly chimed. Runners swarmed over the start line and I felt myself being swept along.

"Just get through this crowd," I thought. "Then its straightforward from there." I scanned for the gaps between the runners but came up empty-handed. In the distance, I saw \_\_\_\_ weaving through the crowd with ease. I caught a glimpse of \_\_\_\_ to my right, being pushed away by the crowd. "What a great start," echoed the voice in my head. I searched desperately for another gap until I spotted an opening to my left. "Go!" I surged through the opening, then scanned for another. "To the right!" A new voice, charged with the desire to finish, emerged in my head. "You're doing great", it said. Keep on moving up through this crowd." I spotted another opening and dashed for it, then another, until I found a rhythm. It wasn't long until I was directly behind \_\_\_\_\_.

The course veered left away from The Mississippi and up a hill towards downtown St.Louis. Pockets of cheering spectators hid from the bitter wind as a couple of racers surged up the hill. The crowd thinned out and I found \_\_\_\_\_. "I'm glad that's over," I said.

"Yeah, me too," replied \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ and I steadily climbed the hill and continued into the City. Cowbells clanged and crowds applauded as we ran through the city. The buildings provided for some decent cover from the wind, but the cold was persistent, slowly seeping through my gloves and jacket. The crowd almost dissipated entirely as \_\_\_\_ and I passed the first mile marker. "Only 12 more to go," I thought as we ran up the Martin Luther King Jr. Bridge.

As we ran up the bridge, I could hear cheers from the start line down below as we crossed into Illinois. The sounds loudspeakers and cowbells shook the air and reverberated off of the surrounding buildings. We could see the last corals were being released as we weaved through the stragglers from the group ahead of us. There was no better feeling; like you were at the start of something wonderful, with a sea of unknown waiting for you.

Soon that feeling was replaced with dread and accompanied with a wicked voice. At the top of

the MLK bridge we saw the course twist and turn onto another bridge, and with that, the sea of people in our way. A barrage of doubts crashed into my mind “This mob is a mile long! You’re never getting through this, its impossible.” Shouted the evil voice. “Why did you even bother in the first place?” I could see the hammer crashing down onto the brakes when another voice popped into my head. “You went through the first crowd easily, there’s no reason to worry. It said, “You aren’t even tired yet.” A barrier rose up and blocked the crushing blow. The hammer shattered while the barrier stood strong. I continued to run as \_\_\_\_ split away from me to catch an opening. I pursued another and quickly found my footing, slipping between cracks among other racers for the next mile.

The crowds didn’t end until we hit the seventh mile marker. While the absence of crowds was a miracle, I had other problems to contend with. My legs finally felt a tingle of fatigue, which grew with each step. The bitter cold had fully leaked through my gloves, my mind was numbing up. Confrontations between the two voices in my head became more consistent.

“You need to stop to warm your hands, the voice demanded. Remember what happened last year?” The voice equipped a sword and charged.

“You’re just looking for an excuse, were already halfway! The other voice countered. It conjured a shield and parried the attack.

“There’s no way we’re going to finish, look at this hill! It’s too much. And you haven’t even hit your wall yet.” The voice swung its sword again.

“You know how much we’ve trained, I’ve run up hills five times as hard. We’ve got this.” The other voice deflected the attack, disarming its opponent.

\_\_\_\_ and I ran past the eight mile marker. I could tell that he wasn’t enjoying the run anymore. His stride was significantly shorter than when he started the race, his arms swing in a way that threw him off balance, and his breathing became more labored with each passing mile. We pushed on, not willing to give

up yet. But I could tell we were slowing down. We were approaching another hill when I felt like I was being held back.

“I’m gonna ditch you once we get up this hill,” I regretfully told \_\_\_\_.

“That’s fine,” he answered, gasping for air.

We were almost at the mile 9 marker when I started to leave \_\_\_\_\_. I felt like a horrible person. I just left the person that supported me throughout all of my training. I got through my first double digit long run with him. He had my back for all the cold, cramps, blisters, sweat and tears, and I left him at his lowest. Yet, I didn’t look back. Suddenly I found myself with just my thoughts. These confrontations between the two voices turned into a war of attrition. My hands were frozen. Every step was agony. Every second was spent listening to the two voices in my head. “You’re failing, just walk the rest of the way, it’ll be so much easier” the voice beckoned me. “You walk, and you won’t start running again. Don’t listen to him, Keep pushing,” The other voice answered.

“There’s no way you have the strength.” For the first time this race, I felt my body give in to the temptation of walking. I slowed down and turned a corner, when I saw mile ten marker. “You’ve got a 5k left!” cheered a spectator. You’ve done hundreds of 5k’s by now! Dig deep, and do this for yourself! You’ve got this!” “This is gonna be one hell of a 5k” I thought to myself. “But I’m almost there. Just a little longer until I can walk.” I looked up and saw the course turn east towards the Mississippi. “Just put your head down and run. You’re almost there” My mind became fixated on one goal; finishing the race. The two voices had finished their battle in my mind. The sinister voice won. It was just him vs my willpower. I lengthened my stride as the voice unleashed a hail of arrows, his last effort to stop me. The twelve mile marker passed as the agony set in. My legs felt like stiff splints, my hands were numb and unresponsive, my breathing was heavy and uneven. The only thing I heard was the voice beckoning me to stop, to fall and never get up. Yet I was so close. I looked

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down at my phone. 12.8 miles. 0.3 miles stood between me and the finish. The course turned towards the Mississippi River. Pop songs echoed from the loudspeaker as I crossed the thirteen mile marker. My vision went dark as I went under the Eads Bridge. The voice begged me to stop, but I kept running. Soon the finish line was in sight. "I'm gonna do make" I thought. I summoned the last of my energy and sprinted. I heard the roar of the crowd in front of the arch as I approached the finish. 100 meters left, 50 meters, 20. I crossed the finish line and almost collapsed as I slowed myself down. My legs were shot and my hands frozen. But in the end, I finished what I set out to do. I smiled as my doubts were sent scattering into the corners of my mind. I did it. I finished my first race. I faced my demons head on. I beat the mind game. "It's finally over," I thought. I walked down the road to receive my medal. A single thought remained in my head after the chaos. "Whats next?"

**Kailin Zhang**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Judy Yang

Category: Poetry

**TEA FOR TWO**

**THE BOILING**

in the hot steam of late chinese august

she holds a brimming cup of jasmine green tea splashing frothy puddles over the delicate rim

glistening like a resplendent green jade as elders and expecting parents alike bask in hopeful promise of a exuberant baby boy

tangerine sunlight radiates from the village a myriad of bustling chinese marketplaces cascade through dreamy hazy skies

plum blossom and incense lines streets where lanterns are illuminated red the color of luck - of hope itself

**THE POURING**

goats' milk in pungent oolong tea curdled alongside bitter goodnight lullabies  
A GIRL. A BURDEN.

no girl can shoulder the weight of the family name to embrace generations of dignity and honor for elders when waving farewell to join her husband's pride

time passed as the sapphire dawn faded to black with the distant shrill heavy in backroads shunned daily by deceript villages clawing for luck

soft embers and flickering candlelight guided dusty paths taking away the sweet final breath of a innocent baby girl - no last kiss, no goodbye

**THE DRINKING**

evanescent warmth gone within a moment the cup of chrysanthemum tea scorching hot wilted into ice reminiscent of repulsive shock

taboo in daily chatterings of the village yet  
committed daily under constraining shackles  
where an idealistic mask excuses the  
inexcusable

it took three and a half lunar revolutions  
to welcome the dulcet arrival of a lucky infant  
boy  
yet through the citrus haze of quiescent  
anticipation

all she could see was agonizing red - the child  
she lost