

MISSOURI YOUTH WRITE



SILVER KEY WINNERS 2019

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

Editor: Jeff Dierking

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DRAMATIC SCRIPT

TERROR

Alex Archer

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Marina Ganter, Mallory Hilvitz

Category: Dramatic Script

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.

NEW YEARS EVE

Alex Archer

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO
Educators: Marina Ganter, Mallory Hilvitz

Category: Dramatic Script

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
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

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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
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

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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

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 Lupu 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**

INTOLERABLE PERJURY

Peyton Kidkul

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Jefferson High School,
Festus, MO

Educator: Nicole Boyer

Category: Dramatic Script

Characters:

Dr. Jacobson: A relatively young man in his late 30s with a noticeable amount of stubble and hair cut close to his scalp.

301-22b: A prisoner who appears to be only in his late 20s. His head is bald, with a scar running down the left side of his face.

Deb: The assistant to Dr. Jacobson. She is merely a voice behind a camera.

Intolerable Perjury

OPEN TO A MAN DRESSED IN A WHITE LAB COAT SITTING AT AN INTERROGATION TABLE IN A CRAMPED, GRAY, WINDOWLESS CINDER BLOCK ROOM WITH A SINGLE, STEEL DOOR CENTERED ON THE FAR SIDE. THE GRAINY FOOTAGE COMES FROM A SECURITY CAMERA MOUNTED AT AN ANGLE IN THE TOP LEFT CORNER OF THE ROOM. FROM THE ANGLE, ONE MAN'S FACE IS DIRECTLY VISIBLE. HE LOOKS IMPATIENT, AND HIS FOOT IS TAPPING RHYTHMICALLY ALTHOUGH THERE IS NO SOUND IN THE ROOM.

Dr. Jacobson: My name is Dr. Nathaniel D. Jacobson. I am a neurological scientist working with the National Center for the Study of Cognitive Functions or N.C.S.C.. The time is 18:00 hours on the 26th of March, 2042. In the following experiment, Subject 301-22b will be forced to

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answer questions regarding the events that led up to his death, and then be forced to go beyond. This is test number 3,538. Here, we are trying to accomplish the impossible: seeing what comes after death. The interrogation setting is designed to induce stress on the memory host's brain, thus creating the illusion that the host body is actually the owner of the implanted memories. For this trial, we have selected memory code 138-48c: the likes of which belonged to the 49th President of the United States.

DR. JACOBSON FLICKS HIS GAZE TO MAKE BRIEF EYE CONTACT WITH THE CAMERA.

Dr. Jacobson: The test will begin now.

A BUZZER SOUNDS AS THE DOOR OPENS AND TWO ARMED SECURITY GUARDS ENTER THE ROOM WITH A MAN WHOSE HEAD IS COVERED BY A BURLAP SACK. THE MAN IS DRESSED IN A LOOSE ORANGE JUMPSUIT AND WEARS NO SHOES. ONCE HE IS SECURED TO THE TABLE AS WELL AS HIS SEAT, THE SACK IS REMOVED AND BOTH GUARDS EXIT AS DR. JACOBSON PRODUCES A STACK OF PAPER FROM A BRIEFCASE BELOW HIS CHAIR.

Dr. Jacobson: Can you please give me your full legal name?

301-22b: Richard Tobias Fosse.

Dr. Jacobson: What is your current occupation?
THE SUBJECT IS GAZING DOWN AT HIS BOUND HANDS. A SMIRK CROSSES HIS FACE AS HE ANSWERS.

301-22b: You already know this. I'm the most famous man in the world: the Forty-ninth President of the United States.

Dr. Jacobson: Mr. President, I'm sure you know why you're here.

301-22b: No.

Dr. Jacobson: Perhaps it has something to do with you overstepping the bounds of your office?

301-22b: I would like my attorney to be present before I say anything else.

DR. JACOBSON SHAKES HIS HEAD. THERE IS A VISIBLE LOOK OF DISAPPOINTMENT ON HIS FACE.

Dr. Jacobson: There will be plenty of time for legalities after you have answered my questions.

THE SUBJECT APPEARS TO UTTER AN EXPLICIT PHRASE, BUT A HIGH PITCHED NOISE IS INPUT OVER THE RECORDING IN PLACE. A SMALL BLACK BAR IS PLACED OVER THE SUBJECT'S MOUTH FOR THE DURATION OF THE EXPLETIVE, MAKING IT IMPOSSIBLE TO TELL WHAT IT IS.

301-22b: [REDACTED]! I have a right to an att—
AN ELECTRIC SHOCK IS ADMINISTERED TO THE SUBJECT'S CHAIR. HIS HEAD FLIES BACK, EYES ROLLING INTO THE BACK OF HIS SKULL AS HIS SENTENCE IS REPLACED WITH A STRAINED SCREAM.

Dr. Jacobson: Answer the question, Mr. President. What did you do?

301-22b: Okay, okay. I met with the Cartel.

Dr. Jacobson: But that's not it, is it.

301-22b: Yes, that's i—
ANOTHER SHOCK IS DELIVERED TO THE SUBJECT'S CHAIR. THE SUBJECT CRIES OUT IN PAIN.

Dr. Jacobson: Must I remind you that there will be no lying tolerated during this interrogation, Mr. President.

301-22b: Murder! There was murder! I killed him! I did it!

Dr. Jacobson: Thank you for your honesty, Mr. President. If you continue to work with me, this will be over much sooner. Now, please recall the event from the beginning.

THE SUBJECT RESTS HIS FOREHEAD BETWEEN HIS THUMB AND INDEX FINGER.

301-22b: Where should I start?

Dr. Jacobson: Wherever you believe will provide me with the most useful information.

301-22b: Right, right. So we were at the bank, okay?

Dr. Jacobson: Which bank?

301-22b: The Federal Commerce Bank of D.C.

Dr. Jacobson: Who's we?

301-22b: Me and my wife, Martha.

Dr. Jacobson: Continue.

301-22b: So, we were at the bank on official business.

DR. JACOBSON RAISES HIS EYEBROWS TO INDICATE NEEDED ELABORATION.

301-22b: I can't tell you. It's classified information.

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THE SHOCK COMES AGAIN. THE SUBJECT GRITS HIS TEETH, BARRING A SCREAM FROM ESCAPING HIS MOUTH. HIS EYES AND VEINS ARE BULGING AS HE FIGHTS AGAINST THE RESTRAINTS BINDING HIM TO THE CHAIR.

301-22b: I swore an oath to this country, and I will gladly die to keep its secrets!

Dr. Jacobson: We would be glad to oblige, but sadly you will not be the only one to experience the consequences of your actions.

DR. JACOBSON STANDS AND SMACKS A SELECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHS DOWN ON THE TABLE IN FRONT OF THE SUBJECT. THE FIRST DEPICTS THE LATE FIRST LADY, MARTHA FOSSE. THE SECOND DEPICTS TWO YOUNG, TWIN GIRLS, THE LATE PRESIDENT'S CHILDREN. THE THIRD AND FINAL PHOTOGRAPH DEPICTS THE LATE PRESIDENT'S ELDERLY PARENTS.

Dr. Jacobson: You will answer my questions, or I might be forced to allow the unspeakable to happen.

301-22b: Fine, just don't hurt them! We were there to meet with the Cartel!

Dr. Jacobson: Which cartel, Mr.

President? Recalling these events in great detail is of utmost importance.

301-22b: That's all they're known as! I promise, the leader only goes by Montezuma; they have a complete monopoly on the drug market here in the States.

Dr. Jacobson: Did the First Lady have a part in this meeting?

301-22b: No. She stepped out to use the restroom. Let me guess, you're going to shock me if I don't tell you exactly what she was doing in there, right?

DR. JACOBSON LOOKS UNAMUSED. HIS FEATURES ARE ALL PULLED INTO A PROFESSIONAL POKER FACE.

Dr. Jacobson: What were you there to discuss?

301-22b: I promised the American people that the drug crisis would come to an end. It was obvious that several of the Cartel's assets had to be seized, and the criminals associated were imprisoned. They wanted a deal. They would give us dirt on the Commies mucking around in the

Mexican government, and in exchange we would release the prisoners and the assets. It was supposed to be simple, one meeting with a Cartel representative and everything would be done.

Dr. Jacobson: But it wasn't simple, was it?

301-22b: No.

Dr. Jacobson: What happened?

301-22b: What the [REDACTED] do you think happened? A shoot-out! I haven't the slightest idea who started it.

THE SUBJECT THROWS UP HIS HANDS IN FRUSTRATION. HIS TONE IS LACED WITH FRUSTRATION. THE SENTENCES COME QUICKLY WITH LITTLE PAUSE IN BETWEEN. DR. JACOBSON IS NOT PLEASED; HIS FROWN DEEPENS.

Dr. Jacobson: What did you see in the moments leading up to the first shot?

301-22b: It was just me and the Cartel rep talking an—

Dr. Jacobson: What did he say?

301-22b: He just shook my hand and gave me a super firm, "Hello." He wasn't a guy that you'd normally associate with the Cartel. He was in like a striped suit, and seemed stiff. Almost like a politi—

DR. JACOBSON INTERJECTS SHARPLY.

Dr. Jacobson: Get to the point.

301-22b: That was it. Just the hello. After that it was a bloodbath.

Dr. Jacobson: Give me all of the information you can remember from the shoot-out.

301-22b: I just remember seeing the guy's eyes move really fast to the right and then I heard the first shot. Ronnie, my right hand agent just ducked me under the desk and tried to shield me. I hid under his body while the rest of the agents did their jobs.

Dr. Jacobson: That's it then? What happened afterward. Do you remember who came out of the fight alive?

301-22b: Isn't it obvious since I'm sitting here in front of you?

Dr. Jacobson: Is it? So you think you made it out alive?

301-22b: Of course, I mean, how could I be here if not?

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Dr. Jacobson: Is that your sworn statement? Or are you committing perjury?

301-22b: You're [REDACTED] crazy! How could I have not made it if I'm the one sitting here talking to you right now?

Dr. Jacobson: What do you remember after Ronnie fell on you?

AN EERIE SILENCE FILLS THE ROOM. DR. JACOBSON AWAITS THE SUBJECT'S RESPONSE. THE SUBJECT HAS NO FACIAL EXPRESSION WHATSOEVER.

301-22b: ...

Dr. Jacobson: ...

THE SUBJECT KEEPS OPENING AND CLOSING HIS MOUTH, LIKE HE IS TRYING TO SPEAK. FINALLY, THE SILENCE IS BROKEN BY THE SUBJECT.

301-22b: I—

Dr. Jacobson: You what?

301-22b: He fell on me and I just—

Dr. Jacobson: You just what?

DR. JACOBSON FOLDS HIS HANDS IN HIS LAP, PATIENTLY AWAITING AN ANSWER, BUT THE SUBJECT IS SILENT.

301-22b: ...

Dr. Jacobson: Must I remind you what happens if I don't get an answer?

301-22b: ...

A SHOCK IS DELIVERED TO THE SUBJECT, NOTHING APPEARS TO HAPPEN. HE SITS STILL IN HIS CHAIR, APPARENTLY UNAFFECTED BY THE ELECTRICITY. HIS FACE IS BLANK AND HIS EYES GLAZED OVER.

Dr. Jacobson: Mr. President?

301-22b: ...

DR. JACOBSON CRANKS A DIAL ON THE REMOTE IN HIS HANDS. CRANKS IT ALL THE WAY UP TO TEN.

Dr. Jacobson: This one will be far more painful. Give me the answer I need. What happened after Ronnie fell on you?

301-22b: ...

DR. JACOBSON SHAKES HIS HEAD AND PRESSES THE BUTTON, DELIVERING MAXIMUM ELECTRICITY TO THE SUBJECT. THERE IS NO MOVEMENT. DROOL STARTS TO DRIP FROM THE SUBJECT'S OPEN MOUTH.

Dr. Jacobson: Mr. President?

THERE IS A SLIGHT TWITCH IN THE SUBJECT'S CHEEK.

Dr. Jacobson: Are you in there? Mr. President? THE SUBJECT BEGINS TO SEIZE VIOLENTLY. HIS BODY FOLDS INTO THE TABLE, PULLING VIOLENTLY AGAINST THE RESTRAINTS BUILT INTO HIS CHAIR. THERE IS NO AUDIBLE SOUND BESIDES THAT OF FLESH BANGING AGAINST METAL. HE BEGINS TO FOAM AT THE MOUTH.

Dr. Jacobson: Tell me what happened! I need to know Mr. President!

DR. JACOBSON THROWS BACK HIS CHAIR AND STANDS, BANGING HIS FIST ON THE TABLE AS HE SPEAKS.

301-22b: ...

ALL IS STILL IN THE ROOM AS THE SUBJECT SLUMPS TO THE GROUND. HIS BODY IS AWKWARDLY TWISTED AROUND THE RESTRAINTS, WITH THE CHAIR ATTACHED TO HIM. DR. JACOBSON FACES THE CAMERA.

Dr. Jacobson: Can we get a pulse on 301-22b? AFTER A BRIEF SILENCE, A PITCHY WOMAN'S VOICE BLARES OUT OF AN INTERCOM BY THE CAMERA.

Voice: No. Subject 301-22b is deceased. All attempts at remote resuscitation have failed. Subject 301-22b is to be disposed of immediately.

DR. JACOBSON SLUMPS DOWN INTO HIS CHAIR. HE CHECKS HIS WATCH HALF-HEARTEDLY.

Dr. Jacobson: [REDACTED]. We need to be able to breach that final moment. We need to know what happens. Bring in another subject. We will pierce the veil of death. This one's the one. I can feel it.

Voice: Yes, Dr. Jacobson.

A BUZZER SOUNDS AND TWO LARGE MEN IN BULKY HAZMAT SUITS ENTER THE ROOM THROUGH THE STEEL DOOR. THEY REMOVE THE SUBJECT AND WIPE DOWN THE TABLE AND CHAIR WITH BLEACH. THEY THEN GRAB THE SUBJECT AT THE HEAD AND FEET AND CARRY HIM OUT OF THE ROOM. THE DOOR SLAMS BEHIND THEM.

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Voice: When you're ready, subject 301-22c is prepared for interrogation. The memories are already implanted and he's ready to go.

DR. JACOBSON RUNS HIS FINGERS THROUGH HIS HAIR. HE LOOKS EXHAUSTED.

Dr. Jacobson: I think I'll take a coffee break, Deb.

Deb: Yes, Doctor. Coffee is on its way.

DREAMER

Kamala Madireddi

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs

School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Dramatic Script

FADE IN:

INT. SCHOOL AUDITORIUM - NIGHT

A high school orchestra, of a highly-esteemed (and expensive) college preparatory school in the suburban outskirts of a medium sized city, plays classical music. After the song ends, there is very polite and subdued applauding.

WIDE SHOT OF THE SEATS FOR THE AUDIENCE, WHICH ARE MOSTLY EMPTY.

The people in the audience look like they're forced to be there because they are the parents of the orchestra players. After the applause quickly wanes away, the conductor clumsily moves the music stands around. Two cellists sit by the music stands, which now face the audience. The third cellist gets up and sits by the piano. The three soloists start playing Vivaldi's

Cello Concerto, a very complex and impressive cello piece, while the other members of the orchestra lightly pluck their instruments. After a while, the whole orchestra starts to actually play.

FOLLOW THROUGH THE ORCHESTRA...

As we get further back to the last violin chairs, the orchestra music dims, and the last violin chairs' playing becomes more prominent. It is not horrible, just slightly creaky and out of tune. The last violin chair is occupied by SORAYA (16), an Indian American sophomore in high school with the complex personality of the stereotypical teenager, who knows that she could easily play better if she actually practiced. Her stand partner, MOLLY (16), a blonde, varsity soccer player, misses a note. SORAYA and MOLLY fail to hold back their giggles.

SLOWLY WIDE OUT AS THE ORCHESTRA'S PLAYING GETS LOUDER AND DROWNS OUT SORAYA'S PLAYING.

The song finishes, and the conductor proudly and extravagantly gestures at the soloists. He gives a more simple wave to the rest of the orchestra. He then bows and dismisses the orchestra. Even though they are at the very back, SORAYA and MOLLY are the first ones off the stage. As they leave, the conductor's voice bleeds into the hallway...

CONDUCTOR(O.S.)

No class on Friday, but if you are doing State for -

--

MOLLY

(cuts off the CONDUCTOR)

Yes! That means I have three frees on Friday.

SORAYA

(thinks out loud)

Ah, thank god. I don't have to do any homework

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Thursday night. And there's no way in hell I'm
doin' homework when I get home. So no
homework until Sunday night. Breaking Bad, here
I come.

They walk into the orchestra room, and they start
packing up their violins, as the other members of
the orchestra slowly trickle in.

MOLLY
You have a serious TV addiction.

SORAYA
Yeah, well, I've had one for a long time now, so...
And at least I'm over---

ED
(walks over to MOLLY and completely ignores
SORAYA)
Hey, Molly.

MOLLY
(talking more sweetly and with a higher pitched
voice)
Hey, Ed.

ED
Nice playing out there. You were amazing.

MOLLY
(blushes, nervously laughs, and tucks her hair
behind her ears)
Yeah? I doubt it. Thanks, though.

ED
(winks at her and leaves)
See ya!

The back of ED's bright red head disappears into
the crowd of orchestra players that has now
filled the orchestra room, and MOLLY gets out of
her trance.

MOLLY
(turns to SORAYA and loud whispers so she can

be heard over the chatter)
Oh my god. He is sooo hot. And was he like
hitting on me? 'cause it felt like he was.

SORAYA
(rolls her eyes when MOLLY isn't looking; and
quietly, almost to herself)

Everyone hits on you.

MOLLY doesn't hear SORAYA. She looks out into
the room for the bright red hair one last time. She
then starts packing up her violin. They both finish
packing and head out. The parents are all
gathered in the lobby. The soloists and other first
charis have roses in their hands. SORAYA turns to
say something snappy about the roses to MOLLY,
but MOLLY is long gone to a large group of
relatives. SORAYA rolls her eyes and walks by
them to get refreshments. She doesn't try to get
MOLLY's attention.

MOLLY
(almost muffled)
Yeah, I haven't been home, for like 10 hours. I
mean, I went home for like 30 minutes to
change,
but that doesn't count. So basically, I haven't
been home for 10 hours.

SORAYA grabs three cookies and puts a fourth in
her mouth, and she walks away after rolling her
eyes. The chatter of the lobby drowns out
MOLLY's voice.

SORAYA
(angrily mumbling to herself)
Oh, no. Poor, little Molly. Only went home for 30
minutes.
Yeah? Well, I think I win. I've been stuck here for
12 hours.

SORAYA scans the lobby for a family member.
Her shoulders sag in disappointment when she

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sees her mother, DEVI(41), a traditional Indian mother proud of her recent gain of an American citizenship. She then notices that her mom is talking to the cello soloist, ANDREA (16), the smartest and probably most talented girl in the whole school.

SORAYA

(rolls her eyes and sighs as she walks toward her mom; she mutters under her breath)
And the day keeps getting shittier.

ANDREA

(unknowingly condescendingly)
Soraya, great job. You're rocking the third violin section. You're third to last chair of the violins, right?

SORAYA

(with strained politeness and an obviously fake smile)
Ha ha. Yeah. How'd you know I was rockin' the thirds? You shouldn't be able to hear me.

ANDREA

(genuine laugh)
Yeah. You're lucky you didn't make state for Solo and Ensemble because we don't get a free on Friday. Well, have fun watching Breaking Bad. Wait 'til you get to season 5, it's the best one.

SORAYA awkwardly and fakely laughs, unsure of what to say ANDREA walks away, and SORAYA and DEVI walk towards the exit.

DEVI

(she speaks with a heavy Indian accent)
What does "Breaking Bad" mean?

SORAYA

I don't know. It's a TV show, but I have no idea

what she meant by having fun watching it. She must have me confused with someone else. Almost everyone's watching it now.

A beat. DEVI buys SORAYA's story. DEVI feels the need to fill up the empty space.

DEVI

(she's just trying to fill the silence in the beginning, but then she needs to let it all out, so she trails on and on)

Andrea plays the cello so well. Did you know she started playing only two years ago? That's amazing.

And she's going to play at the solo and ensemble thing. She's playing both cello and piano.

Isn't that amazing? She must be talented. Didn't you do the local solo and ensemble? For piano? Oh yeah, now I remember. You didn't practice earlier on, and then you tried to cram the weekend before.

Didn't that happen with the other competition last week? It seems to be happening a lot lately.

A beat. They get to a car that's parked right by the entrance.

SORAYA's dad, OM (49), a slightly short-tempered man with a big personality, is in the driver's seat, talking loudly into the phone even though his phone is connected to the car's Bluetooth. SORAYA can foresee the long car ride and sighs as she gets in the back seat. They drive off, and SORAYA and DEVI start looking at their phones. DEVI is checking her emails, while SORAYA is on BuzzFeed.

OM

(loudly into the phone, and slowly as if he were talking to a child;
he also has a prominent Indian accent, although his is a little harder to understand than DEVI's)
No, my friend, you can't do that. How does that even happen? I need the parts by tomorrow.

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Morning.

I need them in the MORNING, TOMORROW. The customer wants me to deliver the parts tomorrow morning.

Tomorrow. In the morning. Does that make sense? Morning. Tomorrow.

SUPPLIER(V.O.)

Ok, Om. I will deliver tomorrow morning.

OM sighs and hangs up without saying bye, just as the SUPPLIER on the other side of the call says thank you. OM shakes his head and sighs again.

OM

(comments to no one in particular)

That Angela girl played the solo well. What instrument was that?

SORAYA

(without looking up from her phone)

Cello.

OM

Cello... That's interesting. I've never heard of it. Is that even right? How do you spell it?

SORAYA

(rolls her eyes; still looking at her phone) C-E-L-L-O.

OM

What? Are you sure? What is it called again?

SORAYA

(sighs; this time her eye roll is present in her words)
Cello.

OM

(genuinely interested)

Huh. That's interesting. Remind me to check that spelling when I get home.

SORAYA

(doesn't care about this conversation at all)

Okay.

A beat. Similar to DEVI, OM feels the need to fill the silence.

OM

Why weren't you playing the piano?

SORAYA sighs at the question she knew was coming. But she doesn't answer because she knows that there is no right answer that will get her out of this impending conversation.

DEVI

Because she's not practicing.

OM

Why aren't you practicing?

SORAYA doesn't respond because, again, she knows there is no right answer. OM looks over his shoulder to find out the reason for SORAYA's lack of response. SORAYA immediately turns her phone off and flips it, but she knows it's too late.

OM (CONT.)

(now very mad and annoyed)

How many times do I need to tell you? Don't look at your phone in the car. Can't you not look at your phone for 5 minutes? It's like you try to do everything I tell you not to do.

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OM keeps talking, and DEVI adds to the lecture...
Or rant about SORAYA. Their voices slowly fade
away into indiscernible speech.

CLOSE ON SORAYA'S FACE AS SHE...

Stares out the window. SORAYA's breathing
slowly, but evenly. But she's still staring out the
window into the dark, starry sky...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. RED CARPET PREMIERE - NIGHT - DREAM

TRAVEL DOWN FROM SAME DARK SKY...

Camera lights are flashing as actors get out of
limos. It's the classic Hollywood Red Carpet
setting.

CLOSE ON A REPORTER WHO IS INTERVIEWING:

SORAYA (27), a successful writer and director
who is in the running for an Oscar. She is with her
boyfriend, James McSheer(28), whose face is on
the posters.

REPORTER

And Soraya! It's great to see you again. I know
you'll get asked this a lot at your own premiere
for you first ever action movie, but I'm going to
take the question out of everyone's mouth. How
is it working with James?

SORAYA

(laughs and looks at JAMES, who has a giant
smile on his face)

Um, yeah. It was actually pretty funny. So we,
um, moved in together before, a couple months
before he signed on.

And I didn't even know he was auditioning,
'cause his manager sent him into the auditions
without telling him what the part was for. So, it
was unexpected. Um, but yeah, I was scared

going in. I was convinced that I would be
spending way too much time with him, cause it
would be like 24/7. So, I, um, I moved into my loft
from before I "made it big" or whatever. So I
moved out, temporarily, you know for as long as
we were filming, so we wouldn't feel trapped or
anything. But it's funny 'cause he just ended up
moving in with me 'cause the loft's just closer to
the set. And we're both fine with being next to
each other. So yeah.

REPORTER

(turns to JAMES)

James? Anything to add?

JAMES

No. Soraya covered most of it. I just think that a
lot of people, including us,
were convinced that the long hours together on
the film would cause tensions between us,
but I think the movie just strengthened our love.

REPORTER

Aw, that is so sweet --

SORAYA

And cheesy.

They all laugh.

REPORTER

Okay, last question. This is your first action movie
since all the other movies you've done were
more softer dramas.

What were some of your more memorable
moments from filming this movie?

SORAYA

I think the most interesting thing was the
connection the actors had together. I didn't think
it was possible for action actors because they
would be holed up in their trailers getting
makeup on and everything. But they were
having fun. You know, at one point there was a

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full on BB war in the trailer park. And I had a lot of fun getting in on all the pranks, so this was a new kind of fun.

REPORTER

Well, thank you so much! Good luck with this movie, James.

And good luck with your next movie to the both of you. And Soraya, good luck at the Oscars!

SORAYA

(laughs)

Thanks! I'm gonna need it.

SORAYA walks away with her hand in JAMES's hand. As they walk toward the entrance of the premiere, they get intercepted by another reporter. It starts off a lot like the first interview, and it slowly fades out so we only see SORAYA's face as she talks. She's very different from the SORAYA from the earlier scenes in real life. She's more vibrant, and she seems a lot happier, more free, and almost carefree. She laughs at something JAMES says in the interview. They finally get done with the interview, and they make their way into the building, holding hands. As they walk in, they meet with other actors. Other people outside are yelling SORAYA's name, and she looks back and waves...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. HIGHWAY - NIGHT - PRESENT

SORAYA is still staring out the window. Her parents' voices fade back in and become audible, but still a little muffled. They take an exit and they stop at a stop light. OM looks back around his shoulder, and he notices SORAYA's not paying attention. He yells her name, and SORAYA blinks, sighs, and looks at OM. She can sense the extended lecture.

OM

Are you even paying attention? This is why you're

not like Andrea and Priya. They, unlike you, try and make an effort.

They actually want to listen to their parents and do well. What do you want? You never excel at anything.

You're just average. At everything.

A beat. After DEVI is convinced that OM doesn't have anything else to say, she adds to his lecture. SORAYA observes that her parents aren't looking at her, and she rolls her eyes and slouches back into her seat.

DEVI

And you would think that after all the money, time, and effort we put into you, you would actually feel a little bit of gratitude, and you would actually try to do well. Look at Andrea and Priya.

Their parents haven't put in at least half of the money and time I put into you. And they still look up to their parents, as if they were gods. And then there's you. I put in everything I have into you. All our money. We don't have a single penny in our retirement money because we put all of it into you, for this school we're sending you and for your college. We put in all of our time. Everything we do is for you.

And all you do in return is roll you eyes and disappoint us. You don't even feel the will to try to make us proud.

I wonder what I did in my past life to have a daughter like you.

OM pulls up onto a driveway, and DEVI presses the remote to make the garage open. SORAYA sits up straight, and gets ready to get out of the car as soon as the car stops in the garage. OM turns off the engine, and SORAYA is the first one out the car. She takes a deep breath in and walks to the door to wait for DEVI to unlock it. DEVI unlocks the door,

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goes in, and turns off the security alarm system.
As SORAYA goes upstairs, DEVI calls out to her...

DEVI (CONT.)

Make sure you wash your hair because it's
Dussera. And after you pray, bring the food from
the God's room. Did you hear me?

SORAYA
(yells)
Yes, Ma.

DEVI
(yells back)
No need to yell.
(to herself)

The moment I give her a little bit of advice, she
starts getting annoyed with me.
I don't know what's she's going do with her life.

DEVI puts food out onto the dining table.

TRAVEL UP TO SORAYA'S ROOM. SHE'S SITTING ON
HER BED...

She looks out to make sure her parents aren't
coming upstairs, and she opens Snapchat. After
she goes through everyone's stories, she looks out
again to see where her parents are. She gets
very still, and her parent's voices can barely be
heard coming from downstairs. She closes out of
Snapchat, and she goes into Instagram. She
quickly scrolls down, and after she doesn't find
anything that interesting, she throws her phone
onto her bed and goes into the bathroom...

JUMP CUT TO:

INT. SORAYA'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

SORAYA walks into the room in sweatpants and
a sweatshirt. She dries off her hair, and she goes
into her family's shrine for the Hindu gods. As she

walks in, she looks back out to make sure her
parents can't see her. But, she spots OM typing
at his computer. She quietly sighs, and she walks
into the room and picks up a packet. She sits on
the ground cross-legged, and she flips to a page
with a Hindu hymn in Sanskrit. She looks at the
page for a couple of seconds, as her eyes dart
down the page. She quickly flips the page and
again she quickly looks over the words. She puts
her hands together for a brief moment, and then
she gets up and grabs the food by the pictures
of the god. She goes into her room, and checks
her phone, and she throws her phone back into
the bed and leaves her room.

CLOSE ON A NOTEBOOK OPEN TO A
HANDWRITTEN SCREENPLAY, "Dreamer". THE
WRITING MATCHES THE WRITING ON A SPANISH
HANDOUT RIGHT NEXT TO IT.

VIOLETS

Paiton Stith

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High
School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre
Zongker

Category: Dramatic Script

(A LONE MAN, MIDDLE-AGED, STANDS BEFORE
A LONG TABLE OF MEN IN SUITS. THERE'S A
POWERPOINT PROJECTED BEHIND HIM. HE RE-
ORGANIZES HIS NOTECARDS, LOOKS UP ONCE AT
THE GATHERED MEN, AND HE TUCKS THEM INTO A
POCKET LINING THE INSIDE OF HIS SUIT)

I'm going to begin this presentation with a small

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anecdote. Yesterday I bought my wife flowers, the purple ones. You know. No occasion. Just thought I'd be nice and I saw this cute little place on my way home from work, so I stepped in and— (HE BREAKS OFF TO COMMAND THE GATHERED MEN TO SIT WITH A WAVE OF HIS HAND)

I know you're confused right now, but I'd like you all to sit till the end. (HE LOOKS OVER THEM AND NODS ONCE BEFORE CONTINUING WITH MORE HAND MOTIONS THAN BEFORE, BECOMING MORE THOUGHTFUL AND QUIETLY PASSIONATE)

The smell of flowers is.... Let me put it this way. Have you ever been going through your life and it's a real slog? Like everything's going in slow motion, but your heart's pounding a mile a minute and you're so out of sync with everything that you can feel the dissonance ringin' and ringin' in your chest like a goddamn bell. With every moment you wonder if you can feel it cracking. (HE ADJUSTS THE COLLAR OF HIS SHIRT AND NARROWS HIS EYES AT HIS AUDIENCE)

It's like all you've been seeing is gray all week and most times you go home and everything is warm and gold again, but this time you go home only to take your coat off and you find this thing on the back, gray and wrinkled and just clinging there like that's all it ever wants to do and it's never gonna let go. It's like a moment of terror 'cause you're like "God how could I ever let this thing find out where I live."

(HE PAUSES A MOMENT, UNSURE)

Maybe I'm losing you here, but everything's gray and you're so scared just wondering when the warm's gonna come back. Your dogs fall all over themselves to get to you because they love you so goddamn much, but you can't tell them apart even though one's chestnut brown and the other's red.

You think your wife's gonna be there smiling at

you, just got home from work herself, but she's gone. Out in the country somewhere, living with her parents because she can't stand this place anymore. She says the air is toxic and the people rushing around are all breaking themselves trying to get through the day. Says she can't pretend not to see it anymore. You had no idea what she was talking about at the time. Now, maybe you're thinking she was talking about herself. You're thinking maybe she was talking about you.

So the next day when your driving home and you see that cute little shop in the middle of so much cement and asphalt, the flowers in the window are so PURPLE. You stop the car and when you walk in the smell is thicker than water, slowing you down until the bells stop ringin' and your heart stops running from nothing. You laugh. You laugh right there in that empty shop with that empty counter and all the flowers swaying around you with their beautiful, colorful faces, singing songs you have to take in with your nose.

And that's what I'm saying. Sometimes things are so gray and slow and empty that you just need something beautiful to knock you on your ass. Make you realize what you've been missing.

Yesterday I bought my wife flowers, the purple ones. Or that's what I told the woman who came out of the back because there's something so small and open about buying yourself something beautiful just because you need it like you needed your teddy when you were young.

My wife wasn't there when I came in cradling the bundle like the baby we'd never had. Been too busy for. I gave my dogs a pat each now that I could tell them apart and I went into the bedroom I'd shared with her. I put them on the sill like we'd grown them there. And I sat on the edge of the bed and stared at them until the sun went down, thinking that what I really wanted most was for her to get to see these wonderful purple flowers.

(THE MAN STRAIGHTENS HIS SUIT AND HIS

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SHOULDERS. HIS EYES ARE PIERCING, LOOKING BEYOND HIS AUDIENCE AS IF HE'S SPEAKING TO SOMEONE ELSE)

Yesterday I bought my wife violets. Tomorrow I intend to give them to her.

(THE MAN TAKES A SINGLE, VIBRANT PETAL OUT OF HIS POCKET, HOLDING IT IN TWO FINGERS BEFORE DROPPING IT LIKE A CALLING CARD AND WALKING AWAY. HE SPEAKS AS HE WALKS OUT THE DOOR)

I hope this presentation was worth your time. Don't wait for me. I won't be coming back.

CRITICAL ESSAY

IS ANY MAN WHOLLY GOOD OR BAD?

Knowlton Beck

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School,
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Critical Essay

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *THE GREAT GATSBY* portrays men as complex, diverse characters that are neither entirely admirable nor wholly despicable. The characters interpreted as the "good guys" are flawed, and those depicted as the "bad guys" have positive qualities. For each character two opposing arguments can be made demonstrating whether they are a good person who is traditionally described as kind, sympathetic, and supportive, or a bad person who is typically thought of as selfish, caustic, and harmful. Fitzgerald challenges the readers to question the true character of each individual.

The narrator of the story is a complex, multidimensional character who has made some questionable decisions, but is still amiable at heart. Nick Carraway, a quiet, introspective, and complicated man, is Daisy's cousin and Gatsby's

next door neighbor, and he becomes the conduit in the relationship between the two. Nick's compassion for Gatsby's cause and sympathy for Daisy's marital situation compels him to assist in the rekindling of their relationship. Nick, recognizing Gatsby is at a low point informs him of an opportunity: "I am going to call up Daisy tomorrow and invite her over here to tea" (Fitzgerald 82). The question is, was this the right decision? Nick's suspicions of Gatsby's feelings are confirmed during their meeting: "I looked once more at them and they looked back at me, remotely, possessed by intense life" (Fitzgerald 96). Even though some may consider Nick Carraway's actions to be immoral, it can be argued that he is making the right decision. But this is not the case with Nick in all his affairs. Nick states "I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known" (Fitzgerald 59). This is a blatant falsehood, as Nick has been writing to a girl that he used to date, who he has no intention of seeing again. He signs his letters as **LOVE, NICK**, keeping the poor girl on the hook. Most would consider this to be a despicable and selfish act, as well as detrimental to another. Nick Carraway is an admirable person, but has not always made admirable decisions, proving that he is a complex character with flaws, just like everyone else.

While Nick is an admirable character with flaws, there are others who are detestable with certain laudable qualities. Tom Buchanan is an immensely wealthy man hailing from a family of high social status. He is described by Daisy as "a brute of a man, a great, big, hulking physical specimen" (Fitzgerald 12). Tom is an arrogant, racist, and sexist man with no discernable morals who has revealed his self-centeredness and barbarism on countless occasions throughout the story. During his own party he commits an act of rage against Myrtle that exemplifies his brutality and misogyny: "Making a short deft movement, Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand" (Fitzgerald 37). He does not seem to be all that intelligent either, as he has a library of books that he has not read, and the one book he has read

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which he is so proud of is a book supporting white supremacy. Tom is the prime example of the worst kind of person imaginable, and he has few redeeming qualities displayed that could prove otherwise. Not even Tom's wife, Daisy, can escape Tom's despicable behavior. Tom shows Daisy no respect as a wife and openly has an affair with a woman named Myrtle Wilson. Not only is it distasteful to cheat on one's spouse, but to not even attempt to hide it is almost cruel. Nevertheless, despite his transgressions, Tom still cares for Daisy. Evidence of this comes during the argument when Gatsby pronounces his love for Daisy to Tom. Gatsby demands that Daisy express to Tom her feelings for him, and looking at Tom "blindly", she says, "'How could I love him--- possibly?... I never loved him' she said with perceptible reluctance" (Fitzgerald 132). Tom asks Daisy "'Not that day I carried you down from the Punch Bowl to keep your shoes dry'? There was a husky tenderness in his tone... 'Daisy'?" (Fitzgerald 132). For the first time Tom reveals a softer side, showing true affection for his wife. Tom may seem like a one-sided character with no real depth for most of the story, but at the end Tom shows vulnerability, as he truly cares for Daisy.

Arguably, the most conglomerated of the characters, Jimmy Gatz can be described as a unripe watermelon. On the outside he always looks polished and sweet, but on the inside he may be sour, and not as delightful and desirable as he may seem. He purports to be something he is not for Daisy. He meets her when he is "a penniless young man without a past, and at any moment the invisible cloak of his uniform might slip from his shoulders" (Fitzgerald 149). They fall in love and for one month they are happy, but as a soldier, Gatsby is sent abroad to war. Gatsby is unable to return home, and Daisy "wanted her life shaped now, immediately---and the decision must be made by some force. That force took the shape in the middle of spring with the arrival of Tom Buchanan" (Fitzgerald 151). Gatsby never gives up his love for Daisy, and he models his life in order to be the man that Daisy could marry. Daisy is an

unhealthy influence in Gatsby's life, and his obsession with Daisy has driven him off the path of a honorable man and onto a destructive road. Gatsby is suspected to have illegally obtained his money, and the only reason he would have been so desperate for money is Daisy, which proves she is the cause of Gatsby's rule breaking. He sacrifices everything for a woman who does not share his feelings, and his idealism ends up being his downfall. Daisy is so influential in Gatsby's life that she has become more than a woman to Gatsby, she has become synonymous with a life of prosperity and happiness. Gatsby is a good person, having provided for his father and serving willingly in the military, but his obsession for Daisy results in him participating in an illicit affair, and attempting to end the marriage of Tom and Daisy.

F. Scott Fitzgerald in **THE GREAT GATSBY** introduces several complicated, flawed characters that vacillate between self-absorption and selflessness. Nick never approves of Gatsby, but he still assists him in his endeavors because he believes that by bringing Gatsby and Daisy together, they will be happy, revealing Nick's true selflessness. Tom, for all of his arrogant, barbaric, selfish behavior demonstrates a surprising amount of tenderness for Daisy, showing that even he, a terrible person, has the capacity to care for another. Gatsby is the classic "hopeless romantic" that changes himself, a warm honorable man, into something he is not in order to win over the unattainable Daisy. Fitzgerald's characters reflect reality, as they are multi-faceted beings, exhibiting strengths and weaknesses in their personalities.

MILLENNIALS IN THE WORKFORCE

Bailey Bryant

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School,
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Critical Essay

I was born in generation Z, and growing up with my peers has made me scared to see how the future of politics, corporations, and drug addictions will turn out. Not all parents see what their kids are truly doing, such as sneaking out and drug use. Some parents don't care or they don't see it. Teenagers could easily be doing well in school but parents would never know about their drug addictions, such as vaping and smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol. As a teenager, I see my peers true colors because of rumors around the school and older influences. The future for politics and corporations will be a disaster if we keep on this track of bad behavior. This detrimental behavior can be distributed into four different branches: parenting, technology, impatience, and environment.

To understand how this generation will be in the workforce, there has to be an understanding of why their behavior will determine their future. Parenting is the first explanation. Sinek described it as "bad parenting" because parents tell their children that they are special and that they can have whatever they want. Parents almost live through their children, and I say this because they get into honors classes because, as Sinek put it "not because they deserve it, but because their parents complained." Also, they didn't get A's because they deserved it, but because the "teachers didn't want to deal with the parents." Sinek accurately displays the truths of the education system. Teenagers will not learn how to work hard for good grades when their parents step in and get teachers to give their students advantages they don't deserve. Participation

medals are given out to kids in last place, producing a feeling of embarrassment or not being good enough. This will build a gap between kids who got the first place medals and the kids who got participation medals into teenagers who care about their future and their grades to teenagers who get into drugs and alcohol. A study by Monitoring the Future, suggested that 48%-50% of teenagers try illicit drugs before leaving high school. Illicit drugs is defined as unlawful or not permitted, by Webster's Dictionary. All of these factors have the chance to lead up to struggling in the workforce because teenagers don't know how to work hard for what they want. Teens grow up wanting to make an impact on the world but do adolescents know what that means? of course not, this generation hasn't had to work as hard as their parents did.

Instant gratification is another part of parenting but also a part of technology. Instant gratification is getting something as soon as an individual wants it. Generation Z is growing up in instant gratification because of technology and parents because their parents allow this generation to get on their phones using their parents credit cards to tap some buttons and order something they will get the next day. Teenagers not only get whatever they want from their parents, but they get it the next day if they order it from amazon. 77% of children own their first phone between the ages of 12-17 years old. So initially these 77% of kids have social media. Teenagers don't know how to balance the use of their phone with the use of life. Social media is not in anyway a bad thing, we just don't know how to use it. Naturally, users post the highlights of their life and the person behind the phone will ask questions like "Why isn't my life this good?" or "Why can't I look like that?" Ultimately leading to depression. This is a generation that has the lowest self esteem yet because of social media. The more time an individual spends on social media, the more likely they will suffer from depression. In particular, girls feel the need to be attractive in a certain way on social media and because of this it will cause anxiety for them. Imagine 77% of these teens that have cell phones

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dealing with depression and anxiety likely because of social media usage.

So, why do we use social media so much? When someone gets a text, a chemical called dopamine is released into the brain. This chemical is known as a “feel good” chemical. It's what makes us happy, and when we get happy, we want more of it. Same thing happens when we get likes on a post or we get a new follower on Instagram. We as a generation have no idea how to form deep meaning relationships because of social media. Parents would rather keep their kids inside and protect them from the outside world, which almost forces them to dissolve their time on social media to connect with friends. Clennett-Sirois claims that teens aren't attracted to social media itself, but to the opportunity to interact with friends because it is becoming less common to find chances to interact in person. Sinek describes this generation as getting a “bad hand” because it is not in any shape or form our fault for being this way, it was just the time that we were born. Of course there are other factors of technology being on the uprise, but we don't use it in the educational way, what it was meant for. Instead, we use it for temporary relief when we are down because we, as humans, we thrive for the dopamine release. Which is also why we use drugs and alcohol, it releases dopamine and makes us feel good about ourselves. When you struggle with anxiety and depression, the only thing a person really looks for is to feel good about themselves. Social isolation and the illnesses of anxiety and depression amplifies risky behaviors of substance abuse, sexual activity, and other self destructing behaviors.

Impatience is the third explanation of genZ having an issue in the workforce. It's from the parenting aspect, because parents give their kids what they want. There is an explanation for that though too. The parents for generation z is mainly baby boomers and generation X, which grew up in a time where money was a necessity, it was what people wanted the most. As generation Z's parents, they want to give their children what they didn't have growing up. Because of this, teenagers

don't know what it takes to make enough money to afford their phone bill or car insurance. They especially don't know how insurance and taxes work. Parents giving their kids instant gratification can lead to a long-term effect. When they grow up in a time of instant gratification, they won't know patience when it comes to working. Teenagers say they want to have an impact, or do something with purpose. Which is understandable, but not realistic, just cliché. They don't know what it takes to get to the top. They don't understand how a corporation works. As Sinek puts it, “they see the goal, but they don't see the mountain.” When teenagers say they want to make an impact, they want to start their job and immediately make an impact on something. They don't understand what they have to do in order to get where they want to be.

The last influence on teenagers behavior is their environment because drugs and alcohol is so heavy in this day of age that teenagers want to try these things. Add in the factors of anxiety and depression, teenagers have an even bigger risk of trying out drugs. Teenagers grow up in a time of technology. They bring their phones everywhere and in their minds, they can't like without their phones in their hands 24/7. This is what causes them to lose sleep, drop grades, and not focus, because their minds are on their phones all the time. When they don't have their phones around them, then they don't think about it. For example, my mother has always been one to take my phone at night to make sure I get enough sleep. I have always hated it because it's my phone, I want it. But in the end, I will be thanking her for it because it teaches me to step back from my phone at night. When teenagers grow into adults and land a job at a corporation they will have a hard time working their because they don't have the skill sets they need. They don't know how to form relationships with coworkers and what's appropriate at work and what's not.

What will happen if we don't help this situation and just leave it to be? There will be an increase in suicide, drop out, and drug overdosing rates. That is worst case scenario. And this is because of social

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media leading teens to these things. Social media leading to depression that leads to risky behavior. Parents take kids from the outside world because they know what it's like. All the bad things that could happen to their child if they let them out of the house. Which makes parents feel safer when they are at home just sitting on their phones. But, what parents don't understand is how dangerous social media can be to a teenager on their mental health. They don't see an issue with it because they didn't grow up with it. They don't know how many predators could be looking on their child's account, or taking their identity. It's not something the parents were taught to look for. Again, this is no one's fault, it's just the time we were all born in. In Sineks interview, he suggests that corporations learn leadership better to lead their employees to learn how the skill sets needed in their job. But, this is not a corporation type of situation. This goes beyond the employee and turns into an individual's responsibility. They need to learn the skill sets of how to form trust and a relationship and how to find happiness in your life without the usage of social media. At this point, there is no turning back on the social media, it's always going to be there. But, if we can help it maybe just a little bit by pushing for age limits on social media like there is for cigarettes and alcohol.

Parenting, technology, impatience, and teenagers environment will influence their future. Whether it's successful or not, it all depends on how you grow up in this time. If a child's parent surrounds them with social media and technology and don't pay enough attention to their children to know if they're on drugs, they most likely will have a rough time after high school. But, this is going to be the best generation yet because of the technology we have at the touch of our fingers. We just have to be able to use it in the right way, which could mean schools teaching technology differently. Starting programs for teachers to learn about the effects of technology and showing parents these things can make a huge difference in this generation. Schools focus mainly on children's depression and anxiety but they don't look at the scientific part behind it. Administrators

think it's because of the social environment, which yes that is a possibility, but take the social media out and just imagine how different our school like would be.

THE PURPOSE OF ART: A REVIEW OF THE FACULTY ART SHOW

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Category: Critical Essay

The 2018 Faculty Art Show showcased the various brainchildren of the Art Department. Various mediums, such as ceramics, photography, and printmaking were featured. While the creation processes clearly varied from artist to artist, the purpose of their creations were also unique. Some were more successful than others in achieving their stated goals.

First, Andrew Newman, photography teacher, presented a series of cloud photographs. What could be better than admiring natural beauty in its

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raw form without the pressure of imposing greater meaning on it? According to Newman (and myself), not much. Seeing clouds as “symbols of impermanence,” Newman believes them to be most beautiful when clouds “free themselves of subject matter and literal interpretation and fall completely in the realm of abstract,” citing Alfred Stieglitz’s *Equivalents* series as a source of inspiration. Like Stieglitz, Newman chose to make his cloud series black-and-white. This might seem like a missed opportunity, as Newman himself recognizes the “special role of color” in clouds at early morning or around sunset. However, the small black and white photographs are breathtaking. The contrast and texture of the clouds floating above different mountains is enough to take in in grayscale, especially when the softness of the clouds plays with the rougher textures of pine trees and rigid snow capped mountains. Each cloud of the series has its own personality: small but full, whimsical, majestic, and ponderous. Newman, in his decision to remain abstract, frees himself from the creation of a convoluted artist statement and simply calls for the appreciation of nature. He challenges viewers to escape the status quo of over-analysis. Newman sees art as a form of escapism. Donya Allison, painting and drawing teacher, delivers the opposite viewpoint.

I found myself partial to Allison’s four photographs inspired by the Dutch Masters. Allison’s artist statement explains that the work, “while...meant to appear sensual and beautiful, also reference[s] the ephemeral nature of life and contain clues surrounding issues of consumerism and consumption.” Honestly, these photos made me chuckle. The beautiful contrast and dynamic between the black background, white fragility of the lily, and strong silver plate with small ornamentation in *LILIUM LONGIFLORUM* is complemented with a dead chick laying with its feet glued in air. The Dutch Masters, to the best of my knowledge, played with one idea at a time. Either you had a still life of fruit and flowers, or a still life of rabbits hanging in a butcher shop. Either life or death was preserved in the moment of the

artist’s choosing. Allison mixing the two reminds us we can’t have life without death; each concept is defined by the other.

The other three photographs bring a modern take on still life. Takeout boxes, plastic produce bags, and produce stickers are all present next to more typical still life participants: beets, silk drapes, and other greenery. These details are subtle, but once you notice them, they are the only aspect of the photograph you see each time you return to it. Perhaps we will one day look back with hindsight to our current consumerist tendencies at the expense of the environment and view what we see now as subtle details in the same massive way. Allison’s work challenges viewers in a different way than that of Newman. Her art is a call to analyze and take action. For Allison, art allows us to reach societal truths that are seldom put into words and dares us to confront them. Jessica Hunt, sculpture teacher, also calls for confrontation.

In her artist statement, Hunt aims to explore “the interpersonal relationships we create” and “our desire to be vulnerable particularly within the home” through her series of four digital prints. The confrontation Hunt exposes is one of a person’s relationships and ability to introspect, contrasting Allison’s call for societal reflection. Each of Hunt’s prints encapsulates the relationships between loved ones. *THE PROTECTOR* pictures a father and son, wearing matching plain outfits (white t-shirts, grey sweatpants, black slides), in a plain setting. A single grey chair is in the corner of a grey room with pale hardwood floors. Yet this image, which would otherwise be cold, is made warm by these voluminous, bulbous masks that both the father and son are wearing. They vaguely resemble shrimps made of pink insulation. The masks present in all four prints give the work its desired sense of “conscious ambiguity,” where the viewer can become a part of the work.

Personally, the masks reminded me of Magritte’s *LOVERS* (1928), where two figures are kissing each other, each with white cloth over their

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heads. However, Hunt developed her work independently, without considering Magritte's work, and the two pieces of art carry separate meanings. While the masks in Hunt's work create ambiguity, they are also personalized. Each relationship's mask is unique, just as each relationship is unique and has a distinct intimacy. The masks serve to unify, while Magritte's seem to keep the lovers separated. The second print of four, [THE NEWLYWED SNUG](#), features a couple in all-white loungewear with their legs intertwined to the point they are indiscernible. The setting has far more details than [THE PROTECTOR](#)'s, yet focus remains solely on the couple. Last note on the digital prints: the models in the last print, [LATE NIGHT KITCHEN VIBES](#), are actually Hunt and her partner. While in the other three prints, the pairs have similar masks, the masks in [LNKV](#) seem unrelated. And while the other couples are embracing, the only physical contact in [LNKV](#) is a hand on a shoulder. Again, each situation is completely unique because each relationship defines intimacy in a unique way.

Like Hunt and Allison, Ashley Edgerton Oates, printmaking teacher, wanted to explore larger themes in her work. According to her artist statement, her work conveys "the duality of absence and presence—echoing the often-slippery relationship between strength and fragility; truth and fiction; protection and vulnerability." I tried to envision those dualities in Oates' mixed media charcoal drawing and print, [FOXHOLES TO BURROWS AND BACK](#). I was pleasantly surprised by the "tunnel system" comprised of the imprints from different wires and industrial materials over multiple sheets of black paper spread in a collage because the work had a surprisingly organic quality. The varying brightness and contrast of each sheet gave the work depth. I can even accept the idea that absence of subject matter equates to absence as a motif in the work. However, the extrapolation towards other juxtapositions seems unjustified, and leaves me slightly unsettled with the piece.

If any artist wants to build complex themes, they must create a substantive piece of art. Writers must build motifs over time; musicians must play with both outstanding emotion and technique. A visual artist, then, like Allison or Hunt have done, should create a piece both with a powerful idea behind it and impressive execution. Oates' execution lagged so far behind her ambitious goal of revealing juxtapositions that the piece as a whole never reached the finished line. While Hunt and Allison present an idea and leave room for the viewer's perspective, Oates forces an interpretation that otherwise wouldn't be reached. Mike Gesiakowski, ceramics teacher, had a similarly ambitious artist statement.

However, Gesiakowski supported his intentions of revealing the "correlations between architecture and our recollections, with the connection being the slow erosion of both over long periods of time" with beautifully crafted plates. He explains that the transformation of 3D architecture into 2-D art represents "the transformative aspects of our experiences from real world existence to the stored information in our minds." Additionally, the shiny, glazed surfaces of Gesiakowski's plates "offer a contradiction to this state of decline, as memories are altered and embellished through imprecise remembrance." For Gesiakowski, unlike Oates, the in-depth outlining of the artist's thought process is both understandable and helpful. Ceramics is a difficult medium to convey greater meaning given its decorative history. When a person examines a glazed plate, they might comment on its beauty, but usually they won't mention how it questions the construct of architecture and human's sense of place. If anything, an explanation of intent is a key that unlocks a new view of the work.

Specifically regarding Gesiakowski's set of four plates, the layering of multiple patterns stuck out to me. Some patterns are faded to the point they're almost unnoticeable, while each stencil of the top-most layer has its bottom half smudged and dragged down. The pattern, like memory, doesn't

disappear, but is degraded to a state that the original pattern would be unrecognizable given only the smudged bottom half. To be honest, the decorative arts wing of an art museum is usually not a must-see for me. However, I was extremely impressed by the time Gesiakowski spent both mastering the creative process (which he developed over six years) and crafting an understanding of memory through the unlikely sources of architecture and ceramics. That's what good art does. Even though I was predisposed to ignore it, the art nevertheless demanded my attention and analysis.

So, what is art? Is art a tool for escapism and appreciation of nature, a means of creating contrast in order to call for action, a way to introspect, or a platform for crafting unexpected connections? Clearly, the 2018 Faculty Art Show illustrates that defining the purpose of art is a daunting task placed in the hands of all sorts of artists. However, the exhibit also revealed that through a balance of intention and execution, there are many ways of successfully creating art and leaving a meaningful impact on the viewer.

LEARNING THROUGH LOVE: PILATE AS TRUE PROTAGONIST

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Educator: Steven Collier

Category: Critical Essay

Did you know that African men and women could fly? In her novel, *SONG OF SOLOMON*, Toni Morrison weaves this famous black mythology of African flight into a new and essential story of the magical power of love, family, and introspection as a means for achieving freedom. Written not long after the height of the Civil Rights Movement, *SONG OF SOLOMON* is just as relevant today as it was more than forty years ago. It exposes the degradation and persecution of African Americans during the time of the institution of slavery and Jim Crow laws, an ugly stain that endures and permeates virtually all aspects of modern society. In *SONG OF SOLOMON*, this harsh reality of the black experience is infused with liberating elements of myth, folk songs, and legends. These cultural traditions not only inform the communal possibilities of resisting and escaping white oppression and the trappings of white materialism, but also guide individuals on their quest for self-identity. Although set in a male-dominated black society in the North, the novel demands respect for the triumphs and thoughtful contributions of African-American women and acknowledgment of their deep, meaningful impact in the community. In *SONG OF SOLOMON*, Toni Morrison illustrates that Milkman's journey of self-discovery is only made possible through knowledge and understanding—the knowledge that cultivating a genuine connection to ancestral roots and community brings freedom, and the understanding that a rejuvenating peace and fulfillment stem from a life driven by selflessness, empathy, and the courage to be authentic, lessons that are all taught to him by the story's true protagonist, Pilate.

Pilate serves as an inspirational role model for Milkman as she leads him to reevaluate his view of family and community as a burden, and

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instead instills in him the importance of embracing family history and cultural heritage in defining one's identity. She acquaints Milkman with the significance of magic and the supernatural in slave culture and African-American history. In reflecting on Pilate bailing Guitar and him out of jail, Milkman recognizes Pilate's mysterious, physical transformation:

She even changed her voice . . . [s]he didn't even look the same. She looked short.

As she stood there in the receiving room of the jail, she didn't even come up to the

sergeant's shoulder—and the sergeant's head barely reached Milkman's own chin.

But Pilate was as tall as he was . . . and [as she drove him home] again there was a change. Pilate was tall again . . . the top of her head . . . almost touched the roof

of the car . . . and her own voice was back. (Morrison 206-207)

Milkman concludes from Pilate's metamorphosis that anything is possible, even his great-grandfather Solomon's mystical flight out of slavery through the liberating skies to Africa. This understanding inspires Milkman's decision at the end of the novel to embrace flight with his newly developed sense of himself as wings. According to Karla F. C. Holloway, Pilate's use of the "old blues song" (Morrison 300) as a medium for informing Milkman about the flight of his enslaved great-grandfather "make[s] certain that the loss that [those] of the West African diaspora experienced through the systems of slavery, colonialism and racism would not be the final measure of their experiences" (Holloway 153). Pilate uses the African-American cultural instrument of folk songs to shape Milkman's core identity by facilitating his discovery of where he came from, how he fits into his family, and his own potential as an African-American man. As he

physically and spiritually "follow[s] in her tracks" (Morrison 258) to Shalimar, the village from which his ancestors originate, Milkman realizes the true meaning of Pilate's song and emotionally connects to his past when he hears the children singing it. Holloway observes the impact of Milkman having explored his ancestral past in the South and its connection to Pilate: "an aged, weary, and dying Pilate grants Milkman her supreme gift—she gives him her voice and urges him to sing. His song, "Oh Sugargirl don't leave me here" that "he could not stop . . . from coming," is a passionate embrace of his lineage" (Holloway 152). Pilate's singing has taught Milkman that his voice is both a means of self-expression and a vehicle for nurturing, comforting, and loving himself. As a result of Pilate's encouragement of Milkman in connecting with his past, Milkman comes to recognize that "[i]f you surrendered to the air, you could RIDE it" (Morrison 337). He shares Pilate's understanding that becoming inextricably intertwined with his cultural roots renders it possible to transcend the physical world and fly to a spiritually superior, liberating existence.

Pilate inspires Milkman to confront and overcome his self-destructive and judgmental nature characterized by selfishness and greed, as she exposes and rejects the empty materialism of the white, American society in favor of authenticity and individualism. From the very beginning of the novel, Pilate presents as "[t]he singing woman [who] wore a knitted navy cap pulled far down over her forehead. She had wrapped herself up in an old quilt instead of a winter coat" (5-6). Sharply contrasting to the impeccably "well dressed" (5) and monied Ruth Foster with her "lemony skin" (14) in her proper "neat gray coat" (5), Pilate is a poor black woman, but one who is proud of her African-American roots and not embarrassed to loudly sing out her folk songs in the streets. Holloway observes: "[Pilate's] melody and its confusing lyrics haunt the story and eventually follow the grown Milkman's flight south to reclaim what he thinks will be material wealth. Instead, he finds the

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spiritual wealth of his legacy" (154). Milkman's desire to recover Pilate's elusive gold is a metaphor for his burning wish to escape what he perceives to be his stifling existence in the economic captivity of his father. He equates money with happiness and "the only real freedom there is" (Morrison 163), fantasizing that the gold "promised everything: the Risen Son and the heart's lone desire. Complete power, total freedom, and perfect justice" (185). As the simplicity and contentment inherent in Pilate's penniless life become clear to Milkman, he realizes that the materialism, betrayal, and selfishness that acquiring the gold brings is just another form of imprisonment leading to more layers of isolation and loneliness. As Milkman listens to the children of Shalimar sing Pilate's song about his great-grandfather Solomon and feels nostalgic regarding the family he left behind, he remarks on the genuineness and appealing plainness of Pilate's world built upon a foundation of character and integrity where loving, compassionate relationships flourish. Her "house—the only one he knew that achieved comfort without one article of comfort in it . . . [n]o napkins, no tablecloth . . . no fluted plates or flowered cups, [b]ut peace was there, energy, singing, and now his own remembrances" (301). This sharply contrasts to his own family's house, full of all the trappings of the wealthy white world, but brimming with unhappiness and hatred. Pilate moves Milkman to reject the slave-like chains of the white American Dream and to instead celebrate his African heritage that encompasses spirituality, creativity, and a sense of community.

In Pilate, Morrison creates an incredibly powerful female character who embodies an unwavering physical and emotional strength that serves to inspire courage in Milkman in his quest for self-knowledge. In naming Pilate, Morrison employs the literary device of a homonym to underscore Pilate's significance in Milkman's journey. The biblical character Pilate was "the name of the man that killed Jesus" (19). This "Christ-killing Pilate" (19) functions as a foil to the real Aunt Pilate, who serves as a homophonic

"pilot" for Milkman, morally guiding him to understanding during his voyage of self-discovery with her loving, protective and courageous nature. Milkman has much to learn from Pilate after he "disrespects the bonds of family and enters into a selfish and abusive relationship with Hagar that eventually leads to her death [and] a debt that extends not only to Hagar's mother and grandmother, but to his own spirit" (Holloway 156). Milkman's callous treatment of Hagar stems from having grown up in a dysfunctional household corrupted by greed, insecurity, and hatred, Milkman is detached from family and unable to form meaningful human connections. As he psychologically matures, he takes ownership for his callous mistreatment of Hagar and aligns himself with Pilate and the example she has set for him regarding what family means. Milkman learns and watches as Pilate takes domestic matters into her own hands after arriving home to find Reba in the process of being physically beaten by her new lover:

[Pilate] waited until the man felt the knife point before she jabbed it skillfully, about a quarter of an inch through his shirt into his skin. [The neighbors] knew right away the man was a newcomer. . . [o]therwise he would have known . . . not to fool with anything that belonged to Pilate, who was believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga—all on account of the fact that she had no navel. (Morrison 93-94)

After watching his Aunt Pilate demonstrate this unbridled fearlessness, Milkman strikes his father in reaction to his father violently hitting his mother at the dinner table. Seeing Pilate bravely confront Reba's lover sparks maturity and fortitude in Milkman who assumes personal responsibility for his mother's safety and no longer tolerates his

father's abuse. For Milkman, Pilate's courage in protecting her loved ones is contagious and transformative. He is heartbroken by her untimely death, and her parting words continue to provide Milkman with an education: "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (336). Milkman's "cupped hand" (336) that supports Pilate's neck in her final moments captures Pilate's selflessness and boundless generosity of spirit. By sharing her desire to have had the chance to love more people, Pilate passes to Milkman her gifts of compassion, warmth, inner beauty, and clarity. As a bird "dived into the new grave and scooped [up]" (336) in its beak Pilate's little brass snuff box earring, Milkman knows these priceless gifts would be dispersed far and wide to their people.

Pilate enables Milkman's journey of self-discovery by reshaping what began as a self-centered search for gold into a quest for virtue and consciousness. She models the importance of connecting with family roots and cultural heritage and nourishes Milkman's inner strength and capacity for goodness. From Pilate, Milkman learns that the white obsession with wealth and greed undermines family unity and weakens invaluable community bonds. Yet, in some disturbing ways, the dynamics of Pilate and Milkman's relationship reinforces stereotypical gender roles. Why do men constantly function as the barometer by which women's achievements are measured? Pilate's virtuousness as the heroine of the narrative becomes readily observable largely because it functions to propel forward to success Milkman Dead, a central male character, on his voyage of spiritual enlightenment. In this way, Pilate's pivotal role in the novel is defined by Milkman's progress. Is it possible that Pilate dies once she has served her male-centered purpose of educating Milkman? True freedom for women will be attained when a woman's value is not measured by what she can do for a man.

MARY SURRATT'S PROOF OF INNOCENCE

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Educator: Marilyn Yung

Category: Critical Essay

"I wish to say to the people that I am innocent." These are some of the famous last words spoken by a woman involved in the conspiracy to murder America's beloved President Abraham Lincoln. Most know the assassin John Wilkes Booth as THE murderer of President Lincoln. But many don't know about others charged. Many don't know about Mary Surratt, the single mother of three who on July 7, 1865 was hanged for a crime she may not have committed.

Don't you think when you have a choice of last words, they would be something meaningful? The trial was over; Mary Surratt had been judged guilty. Standing in her long black dress, with the scaffold below her scheduled to open in a matter of seconds, she would hang until she had completely suffocated or better yet, been one of the lucky few whose necks broke from the fall.

At that final moment, she truly had nothing left to lose. If she was guilty, why would her last words specifically claim her innocence? Wouldn't she say, "I am guilty and I have been since the

beginning," or for the sake of her children, wouldn't she have to be honest? If Mary Surratt was guilty, why didn't she just admit it at that final moment? Seconds before she would hang, Mary Surratt chose that line. Maybe in hopes that it would keep her from falling, OR maybe because she wanted everyone to know the truth. Choosing these words should have left generals in awe, it should have convinced everyone. But unfortunately, it wouldn't matter even if she had persuaded those counting down the seconds of revenge. Even with those extremely powerful last words, Surratt had already been convicted.

This one of the many signs that prove she was indeed not a murderer, nor a conspired one. Many more signs that show Mary Surratt's innocence, are unveiled in my claim. When President Lincoln was assassinated on April 15, 1865, the country was outraged! For background, General Robert E. Lee and his Confederates had surrendered. At this time the country should have been celebrating the win the four year battle between the North and the South, the Civil War. However, unfortunately an act of war had been committed by John Wilkes Booth's murder of Lincoln. Because the assassination was considered an act of war, the government thought having a military trial would be the correct way to handle Mary Surratt's conspiracy case, a case in which her death could be proven the adequate punishment for a crime that was proven she had committed. However, David Herold, George Atzerodt, Lewis Powell, and Michael O'Laughlen were tried at the same trial, convicted with the same crime, and proven guilty. They would later hang alongside Surratt. Mary Surratt did not engage nearly as much as the other men. But revenge was the only possible thought going through the military generals heads during the trial, even before they had the slightest bit of evidence to prove her guilty.

Everyone deserves an equal trial no matter what crime they have committed. Before Mary Surratt's attorney, Frederick Aiken, understood

who he would be defending, or what he would standing by, he knew to uphold the law no matter how HE felt.

You can't put revenge above the peoples' rights even in a time of war. But what rights did Surratt actually have? Isn't it true that even if she was guilty, it still wouldn't be a fair trial? Men enjoyed complete power over women. In a jury full of men, any woman who already felt powerless may have been even more vulnerable.

Nearly five years after President Abraham Lincoln's death, Susan B Anthony began campaigning for women's voting rights. She spoke for millions of women who felt that silenced by men. And while eventually the suffragists won the vote seventy years later, Mary Surratt never had enjoyed a world where a woman was equal to a man.

Whether you believe Mary Surratt was innocent or not, the truth behind the one-sided trial is so easily observed. In today's society, women live in what was once a man's world. But some things still remain the same. We can't change that some men will never treat women how they deserve. Some men still treat women poorly. Women are used, treated unfairly, or thought of as weak. Mary Surratt experienced this most utterly. Who knows what the generals did to her? Who knows if they used their power to silence her? Who knows if at the last second she chose "I am innocent" as her last words because it was the only time she could. As Aiken came to understand the truth about Mrs. Surratt's son, he knew he had to stand by her. John Surratt was involved in the original plan to kidnap the president, before plan B, the assassination, took place and John Wilkes Booth took matters into his own hands, shooting the president himself.

Frederick Aiken knew that he had to stand by a woman who was not guilty, but rather a mother who cared for her son in ways that all good mothers feel they should. Mary Surratt was not guilty, she was a caring mother willing to do what was needed to keep her son away from the death penalty. She was willing to take the

fall, even if the generals and American citizens believed she was a heartless murderer.

Mary Surratt was a Southerner with children she loved dearly when the Union military tried her. She was a widow trying to afford to support her family in any way she could. However, men didn't agree with women overstepping their occupations. Being the strong headed woman she was, Surratt opened a boarding house to do just that in Washington D.C. She minded her own business when men would pass in for a night or two, not because she was a criminal, because the money was needed to survive. The military was too blind with hatred to take notice or sympathize Mary's case, and her financial situation situation, which proved her innocence.

"On July 6, Surratt's Lawyers were sitting in their office awaiting the verdict when they heard a newsboy screaming, 'The execution of Mrs. Surratt!' The media learned about the verdict and sentencing before it was even officially announced and they printed special edition broadsides to spread the news. She and the other conspirators would be executed the following day." According to the National Women's History Museum in "Mary Surratt: the first woman executed by the US government." Mary Surratt's fate was indeed decided before her case even was played out. If she had a fair shot as someone being tried at a much less unfortunate trial, maybe she would have pleaded differently.

Mary Surratt was a Confederate woman living in the North, trying to survive by running a boarding house. If the military generals would have taken their minds off of revenge, or other personal feelings, they just might have seen that. They might have seen that Mary Surratt's last words "I am innocent" were the truth since the beginning.

ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY

Brianna Lewis

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Category: Critical Essay

In the speech Clare Boothe Luce gave to the Women's National Press Club in 1960, Luce is already seen as credible; hence her background of being an American journalist and politician. She also makes a claim that she is a credible source on the subject of writing while promoting growth and criticizing the American Press. Luce supports this claim by using rhetorical devices such as pathos to appeal to the audience immediately, a metaphor to intelligently explain what her purpose of the upcoming speech is, and epistrophe to bring emphasis to why she is there in the first place. She also uses juxtaposition to focus on the contrast of what the audience expected from her speech and what her speech is going to consist of, ethos to give credibility to herself which helps pull the audience in to listen, a rhetorical question to teach the main idea behind writing, and an allusion to give the audience a picture of who they deceive. She then includes another example of juxtaposition to describe who the American Press writes to, repetition to focus the reader on the importance of truth, and pathos to end the speech with a powerful emotional appeal. The purpose of the introduction to her speech is to convince the audience that she is credible and remind them that she was invited to analyze their reports and speak about her observations. Clare Boothe Luce speaks to the

Women's National Press Club in this epiphany speech.

Luce uses pathos to guide the audience to understand her undying passion for writing. Therefore, they recognize her wealth of knowledge stands on a foundation of passion. This is seen in line 3, "I am less happy than you might think and more challenged than you could know.". Saying this so early prepares the audience for her speech to not be utterly positive as they may first have expected. It also allows the audience to see that she has a passion for writing since she is physically caught in emotions from the audiences' reports. Luce then uses a metaphor to emphasize the reason she is at the Press Club which is to bring challenges for the journalists in the crowd. This is explained in line 5, "I stand here at this rostrum invited to throw rocks at you.". The meaning behind this metaphor is that Luce was invited to bring challenges and ratify the audience of all the objectives that they could improve on - foreshadowing her own speech. Because Luce used pathos and a metaphor to prepare the audience for what she was talking about, it gave her credibility as she approached the speech with such literary knowledge.

Luce uses the rhetorical device epistrophe to re-establish that she is there because she was invited. This is seen in line 5, "You have asked ME to tell YOU what's wrong with YOU-the American Press". Mentioning this brings a sense of ownership to the audience since it was their own doing by asking Luce to speak, reiterating credibility with the speaker because she was picked by writers to speak of the constructive criticism she thought was important. Then Luce uses juxtaposition to contribute to the outline of her upcoming speech by naming credible people who participate in giving an audience criticism. This is done in line 15, "The delicate art of giving an audience hell is always one best left to Billy Gramms and the Bishop Sheens". By contrasting "delicate" and "hell," Luce earns

credibility from the audience because of her knowledge of influential leaders who have given criticism towards others aiming for better results in the future. Being able to indicate why Luce is there and speaking to the audience allows her speech to be further taken into consideration since she took the time to establish credibility.

Luce also uses ethos to advance her credibility which raises her chances of the audience taking her seriously. Credibility is seen in line 23, "I ask you only to remember that I am not a volunteer for this subject tonight. You asked for it!". These sentences remind the audience that she is able to speak at the Women's National Press Club because she is over qualified with her background in journalism and politics. Luce uses a rhetorical question to teach a lesson to the audience what writing is meant to do. This is shown in line 26, "For what is good journalism all about?". By asking this question to the audience it allows them to think and reflect on what underlying rules writing reports consists of such as stripping away cant and contrast that with how they write in their own reports. This guides the audience to understanding her reason behind her point and giving her credibility for being able to identify it. Using ethos and a rhetorical question in Luce's speech heightens her complexity of the speech allowing the audience to believe she is a practiced journalist. Luce continues her usage of rhetorical devices by using an example of biblical allusion to bring pictures to the audience that are to be seen as trustworthy. In this case Luce uses a biblical allusion to compare the truth between the two writings. This is depicted in line 32, "It is the effort to explain everything from a summit conference to why the moon looks larger coming over the horizon than it does when it has fully risen in the heavens.". This statement allows the audience to put a picture behind the meaning of her statement which is to bring understanding that the American Presses reports should be based

on factual evidence and not exaggerated to get more people to want to read their stories, marking the start of criticism. Next, Luce uses the rhetorical device juxtaposition to develop her point of the spread of the intended audience of the American Press. This is done in line 35, "It is the effort, too, to describe the lives of men- and women- big and small, close at hand or thousands of miles away, familiar in their behavior or unfamiliar in their idiosyncrasies.". This message clarifies who the American Press speaks to and lets them picture all the people they have victimized by their improper writing habits. Providing Luce's audience with imagery and clarification, allows for her message to be depicted in a more physical way by the American Press, renewing her credibility as a writer. Using biblical allusion and juxtaposition gives the audience a better depiction of who they are deceiving which would help reinstate her claim about writers and how their writings affect the knowledge of their readers. Luce goes on to use repetition in her speech to enlighten the audience of the importance of truth in reports. This is shown in line 41, "No audience knows better than an audience of journalists that the pursuit of the truth, and the articulation of it, is the most delicate, hazardous, exacting, and inexact of tasks." The pursuit of truth is mentioned before and after this line which makes it memorable to the audience allowing them to take away some of the most important information that Luce wanted the reader to have, hoping to promote growth in their writing. Luce uses pathos to appeal to the American Press before she ends her introduction. This example of pathos is found in line 58, "For the plain fact is that the U.S. daily press today is not inspiringly good; it is just far and away the best press in the world.". Appealing to the press by stating a compliment with that much power behind it leaves the audience with a positive mindset towards Luce. This reaction was most likely Luce's intention in assisting her in gaining back any of the crowd

members that thought negatively of her when she was criticizing them, which proves how strategic she actually is in accomplishing control of her crowd. Using repetition and pathos in her last few moments of the introduction leaves the audience with a firm understanding of the meaning behind her speech (truth), and a good outlook on the speaker which Luce needs when she's going to continue her speech.

Clare Boothe Luce's claim that she is credible upon the subject of writing is supported by the rhetorical devices like pathos to appeal to the audience in a friendship connection to help them understand her overwhelmingly strong feelings about writing. Luce uses a metaphor to effectively explain, in a literary way, the purpose of her speech. Also, Luce uses epistrophe to re-establish the purpose of her speech to the audience especially since the audience invited Luce themselves. Then the claim is supported by Juxtaposition to enhance the audience's thoughts on Luce because she shared her knowledge on past inspirational leaders who were meant to bring constructive criticism just as she was doing in her speech. Next, Luce uses ethos to remind the audience that she is at the Press Club meeting because she earned it with her outstandingly advanced background on the subject. In addition, Luce uses a rhetorical question to remind the audience the importance of underlying rules to writing. Then Luce uses biblical allusion to help bring understanding of all intentions as a writer. Luce precedes her speech by using another example of juxtaposition that allows the audience to physically understand who the American Presses audience is. After, Luce uses repetition to focus the American Press on the importance of truth in writing. Luce uses Pathos to finish her introduction into her speech with a compliment resulting with the audience thinking positively of her. This acts as a credit to Luce because she wants to gain their confidence to be able to rely on them to retain from her information. Clare did a successful job on establishing

credibility since it is seen in multiple parts of her speech. Since she established credibility in the beginning of her speech, it buttered up her words making it easier for the audience to believe since they trusted her from her smooth, convincing, and thorough approach, which resulted in an effective rhetorical strategy.

WHEN THE BORDER CROSSES YOU: TOHONO O'ODHAM SOVEREIGNTY

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Category: Critical Essay

When the Border Crosses You: Tohono
O'odham Sovereignty

North American indigenous groups have been the victims of many injustices since the first settlements onto the continent. Specifically,

the Tohono O'odham, one of the largest groups of federally recognized indigenous peoples also known as "Desert People", have seen their culture, traditions, and sovereignty struggling to survive along the US-Mexican border. The Gadsden Purchase in 1854 by the United States drew an international border directly through their territory without prior consultation of the O'odham. Although this border is recognized globally, it has brought violence towards the O'odham by isolating traditional languages in México, which threaten cultural extinction, while also separating some from their families, barring access to healthcare, and criminalizing the people (Kilpatrick). The lack of acknowledgment of this historic group of people by U.S. and Mexican governments, along with recent discussions of the construction of a border wall, also poses a danger to native peoples. The land of the O'odham, which is presently the southwestern corner of Arizona and a small part of northwestern México, should be regulated through prior consultation with O'odham leaders, especially in matters of migration.

Cultural Preservation

The right to migrate has consistently inserted itself as an issue of human rights in conversations globally but is often ignored in the context of disputed land involving indigenous sovereignty. In his criticism of transhumanism, Francis Fukuyama implies some advancements of civil society allow us to cast aside culture and humanity in exchange for shallow technological development, which would undermine human rights and equality. His arguments for human essentialism aligns with the justification for why the right to migrate through the U.S.-México border should belong to the O'odham. Free movement is especially important to the O'odham, as their frequent migration is used to not only visit family members but to also access otherwise unattainable resources such as healthcare or

visiting some sacred sites (Marchbanks, Pacheco). As the Trump presidency continues to purport the vision of a heavily armed and enforced border for security purposes, the aforementioned dangers become especially true and further complicate the survival of the Tohono O'odham.

A turning point for border security was the period immediately following the September 11th terrorist attacks, to which Former President Bush responded with the immense militarization of the United States (Pacheco). Ruben Pacheco, an analyst of immigration policy and Native American affairs, indicates that the move to incorporate invasive surveillance tactics along the border such as deafening sirens, black hawk helicopters, and heavily armed guards erodes the sovereignty of nations along the U.S.-México border by disproportionately exposing them to militarization and high-power weaponry, especially the Tohono O'odham. Border and immigration policies constructed to adapt to the status quo often disregard these marginalized groups simply due to lack of prior consultations. The armored border also presents a large threat to the survival of some O'odham cultures, such as cultural traditions and native languages (Tonra). In his thesis on indigenous movement impacted by international borders, Syracuse immigration lawyer Joshua Tonra isolates where dialects are easily restricted from being exchanged, which has effectively threatened the extinction of these languages. Although this analysis occurred in 2007, the elements of the paper are still true, especially given current anxiety surrounding Mexican immigration has significantly increased, leading to increased border securitization, and in turn, little to no migratory freedom for the O'odham. Inclusion of some compromise with these indigenous peoples will ultimately set a precedent for respect towards indigenous peoples by recognizing indigenous sovereignty as well as

preserve cultural humanity.

Legal Implications

The inaction by the United States in addressing the border conflict for the O'odham people has many legal implications, specifically in regards to the American commitment to human rights in the context of United Nations doctrines and international law. In an ethical analysis by EMBO Reports of the ethical implications of CRISPR technology used to edit genes, the authors delineate a conflict between maintaining natural order and the extent to which medical professionals should intervene. On one hand, some believe that the natural life is beautiful and gene editing is a form of eugenics, but on the other hand, CRISPR can be used to permanently eradicate diseases. This dilemma parallels the legal and cultural conflict between O'odham sovereignty and the importance of maintaining the internationally recognized U.S.-México border. While discussions of territorial authority between governments and non-state groups lead many to believe that notions of justice will lead to chaos, devolution of immigration authority to indigenous groups would actually lead to bettering U.S. human rights records. Article 36 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) necessitates nations or peoples divided by borders have "the right to maintain" activities across borders with other members, mentioning at many points where federal facilitation of these activities must include consultation with those people (Caron). This Article is especially pertinent to the conflicts facing the O'odham, as following the aforementioned part of the Declaration would foster freedom of movement as well as reaffirm the United States' respect to international law. The way the border obstructs O'odham land also violates Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states that globally, the indigenous have the right to practice all relevant phenomena

across boundaries, including international borders. This translates to nearly total turnover in occupied land and resources to the affected native groups. However, the trajectory of American immigration policy, as suggested by growing pressures to build a border wall between the U.S. and México, will disproportionately harm not only the livelihoods of these centuries-old groups, as explained by Rachael Marchbanks, a Native American publisher for the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, but also create negative legal implications for the treatment of nations like the O'odham. Although there have yet to be tangible consequences for violating multiple international doctrines on human rights in regards to the free movement of indigenous peoples, default to using the principles set by the United Nations should be the baseline for how the U.S. approaches indigenous rights.

Crime

Often undercovered in discussions of immigration policy are the conditions of security and fear which foster increasing crime and instability along the border, which is especially true of the Tohono O'odham. Of all demographic groups in the United States, Native Americans have some of the highest poverty and unemployment rates, mostly due to previous legal action which systematically disenfranchised indigenous groups from keeping their land and resources (Leonard et al.). In an analytical research paper pulling data and historical trends from the Census and the history of indigenous movement across North American, authors Bryan Leonard, Dominis Parker, and Terry Anderson conclude impoverishment is directly causal to the lack of land ownership by Native Americans, referencing the Dawes Act and other methods used to suppress indigenous occupation of North American land. Because of these structures that impoverish groups like the Tohono O'odham, individuals often resort to

decisions where they receive a short-term profit needed to survive but ultimately harm themselves in the long term.

The severity of the poverty which indigenous people suffered often required that families sell their already meager amounts of reservation land to be privatized. Even if a family did not turn their land over to a non-native party, it was unlikely to be of significant use to anyone, as legislation such as the Indian Removal Act was enacted to strategically move native groups to nutrient-poor land (Marchbanks). Other individuals who struggled to survive in the face of poverty may have also turned to assist in illegal drug trafficking across the border. Some of the O'odham participated in these activities, paid by Mexican or American cartels to be used as drug mules, or as coyotes to assist immigrants in avoiding border patrol (Pacheco). As border wall talks elevate, militarization does as well, increasing the risk of loss of life on the border of O'odham people. Without addressing all aspects of the indigenous conflict that is grounded in the U.S.-Mexican border, we ignore crime and injustice that was aimed to be eliminated, to begin with.

Conclusion

U.S.-México immigration conflicts cannot be discussed without acknowledging their disproportionate effects on the populations that inhabit that border, especially the Tohono O'odham, who settled in that area long before the Gadsen purchase fractured that land. The prevailing inability to consult and recognize the O'odham people as a legitimate nation has led to repression of indigenous culture, growing violence, and international legal violations. The poverty that natives suffer is only exacerbated by severe and growing border policing as the O'odham are also barred from making cultural pilgrimages and uniting with their families. These consistent restrictions on the O'odham's freedom of movement violate both Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and

Political Rights and Article 36 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Only by fostering cooperative dialogue with the affected party can the United States effectively resolve these issues.

MISSOURI; THE INNOVATOR IN JUVENILE DETENTION

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Category: Critical Essay

When most people think of juvenile detention, they probably imagine jail-like conditions. Perhaps rows of iron cells containing angry teenagers in orange jumpsuits come to mind. Sadly, this traditional method of detaining juveniles is still prevalent in many juvenile detention systems throughout the country. Kids detained in this setting will not learn

anything about their mistake or themselves, and are destined to return as an adult. However, the state of Missouri has changed its juvenile justice system so it hardly resembles the original method at all. After this discovery, in order to realize just how different Missouri's system is from others, the question of "How does the juvenile detention system currently in place in Missouri differ from the traditional method of detaining juvenile delinquents?" was formed. Using this query, it was realized that this new and improved system is extremely beneficial, not only to the state of Missouri but also to the juveniles that work through the program.

According to Jennifer Dubin, the managing editor of the journal *American Educator*, prison-like correctional institutions, often referred to as reform or training schools, house 200-300 juveniles. In these facilities, the youth spend an allotted amount of time (several months and sometimes even years) in cellblocks or large barracks wearing prison-issued uniforms and spend several hours and potentially even days, in isolation if they act out. These juveniles have guards watching them who don't try to help the kids when they act out or misbehave, instead using punishments as their only tools for trying to correct behavior. Their "schooling" is only for a few hours each week which oftentimes only includes reviews of basic math and reading skills. There have been reports of abuse from fellow juveniles and staff, and oftentimes the youths learn nothing about how to improve their lives (Dubin, 2012).

Large prison-like institutions are also frequently dangerous, ineffective, unnecessary, obsolete, wasteful and inadequate Richard A. Mendel claims. To elaborate, Mendel argues that the large juvenile facilities in question are a harsh environment where inmates are subject to abuse, violence, and a future that is

bleaker than it could be with treatment that isn't a do-it-yourself plan. Recidivism rates are high with 26 to 62 percent of youth released from these conditions reincarcerated on new charges within three years. These facilities are also costly and take away from programs that are more cost-efficient and effective (Mendel, 2012).

For most of the 1900s, Missouri's system of juvenile justice was just like that of most other states. In fact, in 1938, the Missouri Reform School for Boys, which was located in Boonville and held as many as 650 youths, was labeled one of the worst juvenile correctional facilities in the nation. In addition, it received a federal report condemning it as extremely below average in its efforts to rehabilitate youth instead of just locking them up ("The Missouri Approach", n.d).

In the 1980s, Missouri eradicated this type of system for juveniles, finally closing both of its main training schools and opening up smaller regional facilities ("The Missouri Approach", n.d). The program that runs the juvenile detention system is the Missouri Division of Youth Services (DYS). In the opinion of a retired DYS director Mark Steward (1997), the goal of DYS is to successfully return youths to their families and communities as productive citizens. In order to achieve this goal, DYS initially gives each juvenile going through the system a comprehensive needs and risk assessment. This assessment helps determine the Individual Treatment Plan (ITP) for that individual. Because everyone comes from different backgrounds and has their own unique problems, there is a variety of treatment plans to best fit the needs of the juvenile in question (Steward, 1997).

The treatments received are different variations of therapy. In moderate and secure care facilities, kids are grouped into "teams"

of up to twelve, and in that group, they eat together, go to class together, and at the end of the day they participate in group sharing. The adolescents are encouraged to share their history including relationships with family and what led to them committing their crime. After the first steps are passed, they move into learning how to manage their emotions and talk through problems together. In this way, bonds are created and the juveniles learn from their mistakes as well as others. There is no set time for the juveniles to serve in detention. Instead, to phase out of the program, the juvenile has to work through their treatment plan and be deemed ready to move to the next step by staff (Dubin, 2012).

Many other states have looked to what has been dubbed the "Missouri Model" as a guiding light for reforming their own detention systems. Californian ex-offenders and parents of juvenile delinquents traveled to Missouri in 2004 to see the potential of the relatively new system. They hope to prevent more atrocities like the one a father of a deceased inmate had to suffer. After being locked up for 23 hours a day for two weeks, the son and his cellmate hung themselves. In order to stop more pain, they had to learn about every aspect of the program they could and bring back the insight and statistics they had learned to legislators in California in hopes of persuading them to overhaul the current juvenile justice system in place (Gonzales, 2004).

The Californians specifically visited the Northwest Regional Youth Center in Kansas City (Gonzales, 2004). On a personal tour through the same center, guided by Nichole Hodges, a Regional Family Specialist at the facility, many aspects that were reported of the center by Richard Gonzales were indeed extremely prevalent. There are homemade inspirational posters hung around the entire

center, encouraging the kids that made them to never give up hope and to keep persevering. As it was the month of October, the residents also created Halloween decorations to brighten up the facility. In truth, the detention facility was more festively decorated than most public high schools in the area. There were three classrooms, one for each team of up to 12 boys, that Hodges reported was where the boys spent most of their time during the day. She described the educational programs that the boys are able to receive, whether that be catching up and learning on grade level, earning their GED or even participating in online college classes. The only drawback, she confessed, was the lack of up-to-date technology the facility possesses. The boys also get an hour of gym time for their physical education credit every day, giving the chance for the youths to let off some steam from being stuck in a classroom for hours with a game such as a basketball and some friendly competition (N. Hodges, personal interview, October 9, 2018).

With all of the decorations, programs, and activities, the facility didn't feel like the secure care facility that it is. It didn't feel like juveniles who had committed the worst crimes lived there. The atmosphere in the facility felt more like a home than anything else. The only aspects of the facility that deterred from this home-like feeling were the ten-foot-tall chain link fence surrounding the facility and the front doors that were locked at all times (N. Hodges, personal interview, October 9, 2018).

All of the focus on rehabilitation has greatly given Missouri advantages over other states in many areas, including recidivism rates as well as annual costs. According to the Missouri Juveniles Offender Statewide Court Report from 2009, of the juvenile offenders in 2007 (15,910 youths), only 25.8 percent committed another felony or unlawful act to be placed in

detention at least once more. Out of the 11804 re-offenders, 3260 were males (28.5% of male total), and 846 were female (18.9% of female total). Even though this sample size is small as it only covers one year of offenders, the recidivism rate is extremely low compared to other states (Missouri. Supreme Court..., 2009).

In the year 2015, \$57.5 million was spent on DYS expenditures as stated by the DYS annual report for the fiscal year of 2015. A majority of that budget, 90.1%, was spent on treatment services provided to the adolescents. This includes all aspects of treatment, including educational, vocational and other rehabilitative services, clearly emphasizing the focus of rehabilitation over anything else in the DYS program. The last 9.9% of the budget went to central and regional offices (3.3%) for administrative costs as well as to juvenile court diversion (5.6%) for prevention efforts (Missouri. Department..., 2015). This equates to, on average, \$55,000 per child in Missouri which is about half the national average (Diaz, 2009).

Overall, it seems that Missouri's method of juvenile justice is tremendously different from the traditional method of detention. The first striking difference is the way the juveniles are detained. The traditional method uses cells, many times in the same building as adults, while the Missouri method uses significantly smaller facilities that feel much more like a home with no bars in sight. While many states are concerned with the rehabilitation of their youth, Missouri is directly focused on rehabilitation, providing group therapy to juveniles every night, and only allowing them to phase out of the system once they have completed their personalized treatment plan. This focus on rehabilitation allows for Missouri to have a much lower budget than the national average for their juvenile justice system without compromising the success of

their program, as seen by the extremely low recidivism rates compared to most other states in the nation.

Based on all of these factors, many are led to believe that the Missouri Model is far superior to many other state's juvenile detention systems. In the future, it is hoped that every state in the country follows a plan similar to Missouri's in order to lessen juvenile crime, and increase the quality of programs provided for the juveniles who do unfortunately have to go through the program.

HOLDEN CAULFIELD AND HIS RED HUNTING CAP

Isaac Ohrenstein

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs
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Educator: Jim Lewis

Category: Critical Essay

In *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE* by J.D. Salinger, Holden Caulfield is a nihilistic boy who seems to have an issue with almost everyone and everything around him. Following Holden's expulsion from Pencey Prep School, Salinger introduces us to Holden's distinct red hunting

cap. The hat represents Holden himself and his individuality, and it reveals his struggle between isolation and companionship. As the narrative develops, the hat evolves to symbolize Holden's decision to live as part of a community, which is achieved through renewed connection to his family (and specifically Phoebe).

The red hunting cap represents Holden himself and his character flaws. It is distinctive, unconventional, and frankly quite bizarre. Holden wears this hat in socially inappropriate situations, and he makes a specific point of doing so. The hat is unusual, and it is deliberately not the attire that a boy of his stature wears. This is because Holden does not want to fit the New York prep school boy mold. The bizarre red hunting cap illustrates that he is different from his peers and his family, which results in isolation.

The context in which Holden purchases his red hunting cap demonstrates his lack of commitment to others. Holden buys the hat in New York on a school excursion as manager of the fencing team. He tells us: "I put on this hat I had bought in New York that morning...I saw it in the window of this sports store when we got off the subway, just after I had noticed I lost all the goddam foils" (Page 21). By associating the purchase of his hat with losing the team's equipment, Holden reveals a lack of responsibility and commitment to others.

Holden's individuality and struggle to connect to others is not rooted in his unwillingness to do so, but rather by an inability. Holden and Sally Hayes are on a date in Manhattan. Holden likes Sally, but he seems to have mixed feelings about her through their time together. After seeing her, Holden mentions, "All of a sudden, I felt like I

was in love with her and wanted to marry her" (138). Interestingly, Holden then admits, "I swear to God I'm crazy. I admit it" (138). I think his self-evaluation is painfully correct. As the date progresses, Holden divulges, "I sort of hated Sally by the time we got into the cab" (142). Holden is emotionally immature. He cannot comprehend his feelings towards people. Sometimes he likes them, and sometimes he detests them. After ice-skating, Holden reveals his idea: "How would you like to get the hell out of here?...We could drive up to Massachusetts and Vermont...We'll stay in these cabin camps and stuff" (146).

Although Holden enthusiastically describes this notion of a getaway with Sally, I do not think he wants to live an alienated life. Holden's inability to build relationships in the world that he lives in contributes to his struggle to find a sense of community. In fact, by bringing Sally along with him on his escape from the sophisticated life he lives, Holden retains a part that is attractive to him: Sally. However, he struggles to build relationships in the real world. This leads Holden to an irrational response: living in isolation. He wants to flee to the west, which is vastly different than Manhattan. Holden's issue with New York is that he sees it to be dominated by categories, to the extent that he must flee from it. And while Holden detests many aspects of the cosmopolitan crowd he sees his parents belong to, he acknowledges some positives. Concerning Sally, Holden mentions, "She gave me a pain in the ass, but she was very good looking" (119). "Sally both dramatizes for us the appeal that social conformity has for Holden and shows us his weakness in failing to escape from it" (Trowbridge 685).

Holden's familial relationships are his channel to remove the isolation and build community. After revealing to Phoebe that he plans to go out west to work on a ranch, Holden calls Mr. Antonelli and admits that he almost hopes that his parents will catch him: "I figured if they caught me, they caught me. I almost wish they caught me" (199). This excerpt exemplifies that Holden does not truly desire to live an isolated life. He is looking to his family to build a sense of companionship and community. He is hunting for it (hence the "hunting" cap). "The catcher, wants to be caught" (Trowbridge 688).

By giving his red hunting cap to his sister Phoebe, Holden creates an opportunity to build relationships with his family, and ultimately find his place in the world. He tells us, "I took out my hunting hat out of my pocket and gave it to her. She didn't want to take it, but I made her" (180). The hat represents negative aspects of Holden's personality, and by revealing these problems to Phoebe, Holden creates an opportunity for Phoebe to assist him in fixing his issues. Holden opens a link to Phoebe to repair and recreate familial ties, which will draw him to community. However, Holden's intolerance of his own imperfections continues to power his contemplation of escaping.

There are numerous interactions with his family that demonstrate Holden's conflicting thoughts: Does he want to be alone, or does he want to be a part of a community? After communicating with Phoebe, Holden does not intend to see his family again. However, he suddenly feels a need to say goodbye to her one last time. Holden also plans to return the Christmas dough (money) he borrowed from Phoebe. I believe that Holden, who initially resisted taking the money, ultimately accepted it to maintain a connection with Phoebe. Once again, despite Holden's

intentions to leave his life and family behind, he mentions, "I'd let old Phoebe come out and visit me in the summertime and on Christmas and Easter vacation" (225). While Holden strives for external isolation, he is in fact internally isolated. Holden has deceived himself: internal isolation is not solved by external isolation, but by love and care through family.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Holden displays a rare emotion of happiness in the presence of his sister Phoebe and his red hat. Phoebe arrives in the park wearing Holden's hunting cap. Holden questions her possession of a massive suitcase, to which Phoebe responds that she intends to accompany Holden out west. Holden downright refuses: "You're not going. Now, shut up!" (227). Holden and a furious Phoebe go on a walk through the park, making their way to the carousel. Phoebe asks Holden to ride with her: "Aren't you gonna ride, too?" (232). Holden does not, but he finds enjoyment in watching Phoebe ride around the carousel. Happiness is an emotion Holden rarely displays, and when he does, it is in the presence of Phoebe.

Through his family, Holden recognizes that his individuality and character flaws are part of his identity. Suddenly, Phoebe kisses Holden and it starts to rain. Holden says, "Then what she did-it damn near killed me-she reached in my coat pocket and took out my red hunting hat and put it on my head" (233). This decisive action represents Phoebe's validation of Holden for who he is. Holden's cap has represented all that is wrong with him, such as his isolationism and bizarre personality. He sees these characteristics as flaws, however, by placing the hat on Holden's head, Phoebe signifies that she loves and accepts him for who he is.

Holden's hunting hat, initially representing his isolation, evolves to signify companionship. As Holden and Phoebe walk through the park, they switch roles. Holden becomes concerned with whether Phoebe has had lunch or will go back to school. He acts responsibly, while Phoebe voices her desire to accompany Holden into isolation. "This vision of himself, as well as his sudden realization of the extent to which he has endangered the very goodness and innocence of the person that he most wanted to protect so horrifies him that he immediately abandons his plans to go" (Trowbridge 691). Phoebe asks Holden, "Did you mean it, what you said? You really aren't going anywhere" (233). "Yeah, I said. I meant it, too." (233), replies Holden.

Holden's individuality leads to his detachment from society, and it is his family that draws him back to community. Interestingly, Holden's hat is also the color of Allie's and Phoebe's hair. It is through his family and symbolized by his red hunting cap that Holden acquires a better understanding of himself and the life he lives. This draws him to community (as opposed to isolation), and enables him to build stronger and loving relationships with the people he cares about. "When tested, Holden's love for Phoebe and his desire to save her innocence is far greater than his hatred for the world and his determination to abandon it" (Trowbridge 692).

RELIGION OR RELIGIONS?

Isaac Ohrenstein

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs
School, Saint Louis, MO
Educator: Jim Lewis

Category: Critical Essay

Throughout part one of *LIFE OF PI* by Yann Martel, Pi Patel struggles with the concept of religion. He is profoundly devoted to God, but Pi cannot seem to find his place within a single religion. He ultimately finds his way to not two, but three religions, and attempts to practice all three simultaneously. Pi believes all religions are valid, and that he just wants to love God. While Pi values several religions, including Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, I adhere to a single religion exclusively. I believe that religion is about practice and commitment and that it is impossible to be a member of more than one.

At a young age, Pi becomes fascinated with and then acquires a love for religion. He starts his spiritual journey with Hinduism (his religion of birth); however, at fourteen years old, Pi meets Father Martin who introduces him to Christianity and Jesus. Upon learning more about the religion, Pi questions God's protection of his servants: "Why make dirty what is beautiful," asks Pi. "Love." That was Father Martin's answer. Islam follows next: Upon meeting Mr. Kumar #2 and watching him pray, Pi becomes fascinated by the religion. Pi asks what Islam is about and Mr. Kumar replies "It's about the beloved."

This simple example distinguishes two opposite belief systems. Although Pi is practicing these three religions at once, he believes that at their core, all religion has the same underlying

principle: love of God. Perhaps this is why Pi has his name: like π , an infinite number, Pi Patel has an unending passion for religions.

Pi's actions do, however, alarm his many religious leaders, who ask his parents questions such as: "What is your son doing going to temple?" asked the priest. "Your son was seen in church crossing himself." said the Imam. The three religious leaders ultimately all meet Pi and his family in the Zoo. They all argue about Pi's religious identity, with each claiming Pi belonged to their religion. Pi concludes: "All religions are true. I just want to love God."

It is not surprising that Pi is then pressured by both his parents and his brother to select a single religion. "At the rate you're going, you'll go to the temple on Thursday, the mosque on Friday, the synagogue on Saturday, and the church on Sunday," says his brother Ravi. Pi believes all three religions are valid and that they can be practiced simultaneously. He claims "If there is one sky, shouldn't all passports be valid to it?" The truth is that three religions cannot be practiced simultaneously, although they can perhaps all be accepted.

Different religions have such contrasting concepts and perceptions of the world. A person can extract ideas from other religions and insert them into personal practice, but one's religion must be consistent.

For example, Pi mentions the story of Abraham and his sons Jacob and Ishmael as an example of the crossover between religions. Sure, Muslims, Christians, and Jews all believe in the tale. But if we look deeper, into specifics, the outcome of the famous son sacrificing story is not only controversial but contested. According to the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old Testament, Abraham is about to slaughter his son, Isaac, until an angel intervenes. The Quran (the Islamic

Bible), however, states that it is not Isaac, but Ishmael, that is about to be slaughtered. The story is significant because Judaism originates from Isaac. And, although Islam is not created until Mohammed is born, it is believed that the religion emerges from Ishmael. This story illustrates that you cannot fully devote yourself in your entirety to more than one religion: you have to select a version of the story to believe in, as each interpretation is at odds.

I was brought up in an Orthodox Jewish household and am fairly observant. I am personally a firm believer in Judaism, but I respect other religions a great deal. I see similarities between religion and others, but I cannot imagine myself practicing multiple religions. The beliefs of these three religions are strikingly different. The ideas about how to live our lives are different. Practice requires devotion, and you can't devote your life to more than one religion. Judaism did not play a role in Pi's religious journey due to the lack of a Jewish community in Pondicherry. However, if there was, I am certain Pi would be in the synagogue on a Saturday morning praying.

Pi understands all religion to be similar in a sense, but I firmly believe that it is impossible to dedicate yourself to more than one. While Pi claims to be wholly committed, he is, in fact, breaching a religion by practicing another two simultaneously. In the case of Islam, many Islamic scholars interpret the Quran not to accept other religions, never mind practicing them. Perhaps Pi's claim to be committed to three religions is challenging the reader to question his or her own religious beliefs. Can one adhere to multiple religions? And if not, perhaps this question encourages us, like Pi, to be more introspective about our own religious beliefs.

SAVING OUR DYING HOME

Rachel Zhang

Age: 17, Grade: 12

Home School, Leawood, KS
Educator: Minghua Zhang

Category: Critical Essay

Every single day, our planet is slowly but surely dying, and it is all our fault. It all started in the mid-1800s when a reward was offered to anyone who could invent an alternative to elephant ivory. This led John Wesley Hyatt to invent plastic, which soon boomed because of how easy and cheap it was to make. However, this boom soon began to exponentially increase the amount of waste in our landfills. After being invented in the late 1800s and becoming extremely popular in the 1950s, the US has produced 9.2 billion tons of plastic of which 6.9 billion tons became waste (Parker 44). This is a huge amount of plastic that is polluting our landfills and oceans instead of being recycled, resulting in various problems and attempted solutions. Many times, state legislators attempt to appear environmentally-conscious by "improving" the recycling rate. To them, this means adding more items to the list of recyclable materials. In reality, this only confuses citizens more, turning them away from recycling (Miller). Besides these problems, many people believe that they can recycle anything paper, cardboard, plastic, etc. when in reality things like pizza boxes are stained with grease and

contribute to our growing problem of mixed recycled materials. The US government should fund and implement mandatory recycling programs and technology on the grounds that it will benefit our ecosystem and economy due to sales of recycled materials.

The US has recently been forced to find new ways to recycle as a result of China's stricter recycling policy. Before 2013, one-third of US recyclables were exported to China. But, after shifting their policy, China has now banned 24 recyclable materials, including mixed plastics and paper along with a limit for 0.5 percent contamination, meaning that materials can have at most 0.5% of a different material mixed in with them. This is bad news for the US, whose most commonly recycled material is mixed plastics and paper (Moss and Smith). As China closes its doors to US recyclables, our landfills are filling up. This has forced recycling businesses to purchase more land and spend more money to ship materials to other countries. China's stricter policy contributes to one of the main problems in reducing waste and improving recycling which is the huge cost it will take to manage, sort, and analyze our current waste (Gambelin). The recycling market has fallen tremendously and as a result, companies are using high-tech sorting and screening devices which is only putting them into more debt (Moss and Smith). This ever-continuing cycle has caused our economy to go down. However, if our government implemented mandatory recycling programs, this would not only save costs, but it would also make new job opportunities available, thus further improving our economy.

Another contributing factor to the declining market is the low quality and small amount of data collected on recycling habits. Programs like RecyclA currently collect data twice a year. This insufficient data has led to spending more funds on data collection when other areas desperately need the funding as

well. Fortunately, IoT devices have been introduced to our world. IoT (which stands for the Internet of Things) devices are various devices such as sensors, cameras, or software that are used to record and analyze data. IoT devices would be collecting data 24/7, 365 days a year instead of the low number of twice a year (Gambelin). Unfortunately, even if we used the best technology available today, only around 50% of plastics would be recovered. This is still much better than our current number though. Since the 1950's when the use of plastics began to increase, only 9% has been recycled (Bailey). Waste sensors, specifically container-mounted sensors, can save costs and make it much more efficient to gather data on the way people recycle. This efficiency allows government officials to better work with businesses to implement more effective policies to improve our environment. In addition to its productivity, these devices can be accessed remotely, thus allowing more funds to be redirected towards other areas of recycling programs (Gambelin). Not only are IoT devices productive and cost-effective, but they may also provide a way to kick start the recycling revolution our country desperately needs.

The US' bad recycling habits has also had a huge effect on our oceans. By 2050, the weight of plastics in the ocean is predicted to outnumber the weight of fish. If citizens don't make a change now, our oceans will soon turn into its own landfill, killing numerous marine life and even humans. By 2038, the production of plastics is projected to double; by 2050, it is expected to quadruple (Bailey). This shows just how important it is to begin fixing our problem now. It is our responsibility to care for our environment, especially our oceans and the organisms that live in it. Yet, almost 700 marine species are affected by ocean plastic both visibly, such as being strangled or choked, or not as visibly, like

ingesting microplastics (Parker 51). Microplastics are plastics that have degraded into pieces so small they are not visible to the human eye. It is important to realize that the more plastic we produce, the worse our problem is going to get. As the amount of waste we produce continues to build, we will only get more accustomed to it. People also don't realize that although seemingly invisible, when we eat fish or other seafood that has ingested microplastics, the chemicals from them have the ability to pass into human tissue and organs (Parker 62). This is an extremely scary thought and one that not many people are aware of. The extent of our problem has spiraled out of control to the point that it is not just indirectly affecting us through the air we breathe or the world we live in, but also through the foods we eat. The first step towards fixing our addiction to waste is being aware of the problem. In most cases, people are unwilling to do their share of recycling because they do not know the full extent of the problem. They may believe that in the whole scheme of things, recycling one plastic bottle does not matter. However, they could not be farther from the truth. More than 300 million people live in the United States, and if every single person had that same thought, we would be turning more than 300 million recyclable bottles into waste. People need to be aware of the consequences that their actions have. In 2015, engineering professor Jenna Jambeck estimated that around 5.3 to 14 million tons of plastic waste is dumped into the ocean by coastal regions (Parker). If we know that the people need to be informed, the question then becomes whose responsibility is it to inform them. Some people believe that it is up to recycling businesses to inform citizens. According to an article by Moss and Smith, it is the citizens' responsibility to know what they can or can't recycle so that we can fix the huge problem of contamination. Therefore,

the recycling industry needs to make a bigger effort to inform them (Moss and Smith). However, others believe that the government should take on the responsibility. The middle ground to these two sides is that it is initially the government's responsibility because they have the financial resources and means to begin a movement, but then when it has a strong enough base to stand on its own, the government can hand the responsibility to the recycling industry to continue the effort. No matter who takes responsibility, the most important thing is to inform the public of the dire effects of their actions.

Some states have begun to implement recycling programs. After the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) published an article on how to manage sustainable materials, states have begun to reconsider their recycling strategy. Unfortunately, their efforts are not widespread or impactful enough. According to resource economist Ted Siegler, "This isn't a problem where we don't know what the solution is. We know how to pick up garbage. Anyone can do it. We know how to dispose of it. We know how to recycle. It's a matter of building the necessary institutions and systems before the ocean turns, irretrievably and for centuries to come, into a thin soup of plastic," (Quoted in Parker 53). Nonetheless, it shows that solving the recycling problem is not an impossible cause. Already states such as Maryland and Oregon have begun to work towards the best way to conserve materials, reduce pollution, and avoid waste (Miller). The barrier holding these states back is insufficient funds. States may come under scrutiny if they are spending tax-payers dollars on recycling programs or technology instead of things they may consider more important. Thus, it is imperative that our government play a role in funding and implementing recycling solutions.

Germany has proven to be successful in solving this problem. The country, along with

many other European countries, has one of the highest recycling rates in the world. Part of what makes Germany so successful at recycling is that they have different colored bins for each type of recycled material, and these collection bins are placed almost everywhere throughout the country. The various containers take away the confusion of what can or cannot be recycled. It also solves the problem of contaminated or mixed plastics/papers, which is a huge factor in the downfall of the recycling market. Aside from recycling, Germany also has a law requiring communities to collect compost which they use for biogas plants and organic fertilizer. Since 2015, Germany has produced 10 million tons of compost each year (Eddy A.7). Besides doing the right thing and caring for our environment, recycling has huge benefits as well. Recycling can save natural resources, improve the environment, save landfill space, and even create jobs (Miller). The benefits and reasons to recycle by far outweigh the very few downsides.

Recycling continues to be a huge problem in our nation that we are making little effort to address. If our country continues to behave this way, our ocean and environment will soon become filled with millions of tons of waste. Fortunately, if we act now, we can prevent this unfavorable future from occurring. Due to our past mistakes and bad recycling habits, our country is currently suffering from polluted air, global warming, dying marine life, and it has even gone so far as to directly harm human tissues and organs. To solve this problem, our country, and specifically our government, needs to put in the necessary resources to implement mandatory recycling programs and technology into our society. Then, and only then can we have peace of mind that we are not damaging our environment and the living things around us. Since humans are the ones who caused this problem in the first place, it is

our responsibility to care for and save our dying home.

FLASH FICTION

CAN WE REALLY ACHIEVE ANYTHING IF WE WORK HARD ENOUGH?

Knowlton Beck

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School,
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Anita Hagerman

Category: Flash Fiction

Can We Really Achieve Anything If We Work Hard
Enough?

Imagine you are a competitive runner, and the sport is both your passion and how you define yourself. One day, however, a blood clot induces severe trauma and your entire right leg is amputated. The doctors present you with a litany of alternative replacements for artificially assisted movements, while their highest hopes are that one

day you are able to attain a lessened level of existence in which running is no longer a viable option to maneuver. The doctors explicitly state competitive running will no longer be possible for you. But surely, if you just work hard, you will be able to achieve the impossible and defy all odds, as "You can do anything if you try hard enough and have a dream" right?

As wonderful as the world may be if this were a reality, the statement presented is specious, as the basis on which it is founded is a fallacy. The truism in itself, that one can achieve anything if they try hard enough, is inherently untrue, as we as human beings, have limitations, and some of these limitations simply cannot be overcome, no matter how much hard work one puts into it. If one wishes to prove this argument unsound, all they need accomplish is, to attempt, and successfully achieve, the ability of unassisted flight.

However irrefutable the fact of our limitations in the flight department, the truism holds a more complex, well-intentioned message, and the rationalism behind why it holds such meaning is not without merit. The reason it has been incorporated into societal vernacular is because there is a certain measure of truth, as hard, dedicated work performed in the pursuit of a singular idea, or dream, can yield excellent results. If one dreams of a perfect score on his or her ACT, depending on his or her level of ability, it can conceivably be achieved through hard work. However, there are also those who, no matter how hard they work can never, and will never, be able to attain a perfect score, as he or she may be burdened with certain limitations which their counterparts are not. The truism's message would be wholly rejected if it were always false, but since it holds a certain level of truth in a wide variety of scenarios; it inspires hope in those who have set their sights on a goal, and provides motivation to aspire towards their dreams.

This truism is not intended to provide false hope to those who are working to achieve an impossible

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dream, but simply provide incentive, and even meaning, to those who are chasing down an aspiration with an infinitesimally small chance of being successful. The premise on which the statement is built is a misleading falsehood, as there are times when people simply cannot achieve a certain goal, as their aspirations are impossible to achieve. However, the ideology behind the statement is that people who are willing to put in effort can achieve great things, and hard work can provide an opportunity of reaching a goal, as long as that goal is a realistically achievable one.

“You can do anything if you try hard enough and have a dream” is a statement that can provide the hopeless with hope. Whether that hope could be classified as naiveness, optimism, or even realism depends on the circumstances. The statement is factually inaccurate, however if one were to follow its basic philosophy that one might reach a reasonable, but far-off goal if they work for it, they could indeed successfully achieve their “dream”.

LOOKING

Haley Renee Born

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre Zongker

Category: Flash Fiction

Cold autumn air. A sky like broken glass. His back to the earth, his eyes held open.

“Have you seen the sky, Al?” he asks. Al is on his side.

“Yesterday, the day before, the day before that,” Al mutters. Al doesn’t want to open his eyes to look.

“Look again,” he says. Al forces his eyelids back, but he is very tired.

“Looks cold.” Al lets his eyes close.

“FEELS cold, looks clear. I’ve never seen this many stars.” He wishes he could open his eyes wider because he knows there’s more to see, just out of his reach. “My mate Sam, you know Sam, said he’d never really stopped to look. Not till I pointed the night sky out to him. Sometimes we just sit and stare at it. I wonder if Sam’s here. You think he’s here, Al?”

“Probably,” Al says, almost too quiet.

“Yeah, probably,” he says. “I think, if the sky was a paper and the stars were little holes, the paper would fall apart. It’d just be in shreds. What do you think Al?”

Al doesn’t respond.

“Asleep?” Still silent. “I’ll go soon, just want to watch the stars a little longer,” he says and

smiles.

Grey dawn turns bloodied ground black. A field full of soldiers, now just bodies.

WHO'S THERE?

Grace Burgett

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Category: Flash Fiction

There was nothing other than hatred hidden in the dark, empty space. It filled one with rage and caused their heart to pound so intensely that it could be heard through the deafening silence.

Man is terrible, but the creature that emerged from the dark was worse.

A murderer without a body count, a thief who never stole.

This creature was full of nothing.

A space as empty as the area around him. Dead black eyes and unfeeling eyes. Skin silky and alarmingly white which stood out against his black suit. He was a floating head and hands. Nothing more.

God had never made a mistake until now.

Where were the creature's wings?

He couldn't fly away.

Each step he took rippled on the glass floor, echoes never ending. He was surrounded by himself.

In the distance, a piano stood on top of a thick layer of ice. Light from above illuminated the black coating and reflected off the dozens of pipes winding around the piano. Sitting elegantly

on the pipes, were hundreds upon hundreds of eyes. They stared unblinkingly at the piano, then moved their gaze to the creature as he stepped onto the icy platform. Before he sat on the cushioned bench made for hours off sitting, he ran his long fingers over the keys.

These keys were not ivory, but something much worse.

The ice cracked and popped as the creature took his seat. His heart pounded, and the eyes began to blink to each beat.

That was the tempo that the creature began tapping the keys to. His hand fluttered up and down the piano gracefully, never making a wrong move. No sheet music was in front of him, he was playing from his heart.

Those who could hear might've died from it's beauty.

And on your final, dying breath, you would hear a bone-chilling chord. Something so elegant in composition, but ultimately beguiling.

This chord is the first thing you hear before you descend to hell.

No heaven for you.

That chord led the creature to a furious pattern. Sweat began to drip down his head although he was shivering. The eyes began to blink faster and faster as his heart raced. The tempo was no longer dictated by the eyes, instead the tempo was dictating them.

Tears were pouring from the creature's blank eyes.

A red arrow in his chest and the pain of a million suns.

His hands shook, but never faltered. What power did this piano hold?

He finally finished, sliding his hand down the keyboard and slamming his fist to the lowest keys after years of playing. Years or days or months- there was no time in this lawless place.

The ice cracked. A drop of sweat fell and erupted into a bright red, engulfing all of the surroundings before dying out as quickly as it fell.

All of the echoes died out, and the overwhelming silence returned.

The creature held his arms out wide in a grand

gesture, waiting for the applause of his grand audience to ensue.

No applause came, for eyes have no hands. Although the piece played was so perfectly haunting and equally as terrifying as the composer, the absence of sound was worse. Yet, the creature didn't reach out to the keys again.

He was completely, and utterly alone. Walking away, the piano crumbled and the ice melted. Eyes scattered across the floor, not taking their stare off of him.

The light that had previously illuminated the area disappeared, and the area was consumed by darkness again.

Welcome to the Godless wasteland.
Enjoy your stay.
You won't be leaving.

THE OFFICE

Megan Fort

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: South Valley Middle School, Liberty, MO

Educator: Staci Reichard

Category: Flash Fiction

I don't want to die here. I pressed myself deeper into the chair, resisting its urge to pop back up as cheap leather does. The lights above me buzzed softly, their menacing eyes glowered down at me as I sat helplessly in the grey chair. The walls and floor were a shiny white, and perfectly matched the dull skin of the seat. The clock on the wall ticked in an offbeat rhythm, missing the fourth note every time. This was it, my personal little prison. My eyes darted around the room, trying to break from the perfect asymmetry it possessed. My legs felt weighed down, and I couldn't stand up. A strange blue bib hung around my neck loosely, tickling my chin and getting caught in my long

brown hair. It made an awful crackling noise when I moved, like the tissue paper in a birthday gift. I ignored the bib, knowing I was in for much worse than mere paper. Though I couldn't move my head, I could see the outline of cabinets to my right. Long and white, almost like perfect teeth, only just overlapping to form a pearly smile. The longer I stared, the more upturned they seemed. As if they were laughing at me.

I don't know how long I was sat stuck in that chair, just staring at the cabinet's grin. I do know that time seemed to stop when I heard a loud... *CLICK*. The door to my left opened and the monster walked in. He was tall and looked almost human. I knew better though. He strode into the room, skipping right over me and arriving at a steady pace to the cabinets. I could smell something minty coming off of him. I couldn't see much of what happened next, but I could hear the dreaded noise of drawers, sliding in and out. The beast was arming himself. There was nothing I could do. I felt a burning sensation as tears clouded my vision. I didn't want to go this way, not now. The creature turned to me, rolling a small cart next to him. On top of the cart, I could see them. So many methods of torture. Shiny silver tools ready to stab me, slice me, all clean and perfectly placed. They mocked me, in their perfect order from largest to smallest. Even the tiny pick at the end sneered at my pitiful state. I watched as he pulled a blue mask over his mouth, and pressed a button on the side of my chair. Slowly, I began my descent into hell. I was now laying flat on my back, facing the perfectly white ceiling. He leaned over me, inspecting my face with an unblinking gaze. His eyes were pitch black, void of light, of sympathy, of any human emotion anyone could ever experience. Those eyes alone made my heart leap into my throat in fear.

The bizarre clock ticked on the wall, counting my final minutes. There was no escape, I couldn't get out. I wanted to kick and holler. My parents had brought me here. They'd executed their own daughter. The buzzing light flickered for a

moment; as if waving its own farewell. As the creature loomed over me, I could see a name on the jacket he wore. *Dr. Fynn Preston*. He wasn't a doctor. I swallowed down bile at the sour sound of the name. *Don't do it*. I pleaded silently, reaching out without a single movement in my body. He turned away, and I heard a soft *CLINK*. He'd chosen his first toy. I clenched my teeth at the sight of his weapon. A long, sharp silver hook sat in his hand. He stared down at me, slowly lifting the hook towards me. I tried to scream, to escape. My hands clenched the arms of the chair, my eyes widened. I dug my nails into the leather of the seat, letting out a low sob. I didn't want to go this way, this isn't what I wanted, to be destroyed by this monster.

Then suddenly, he spoke.

"What's wrong, Ms. Greene? I can't examine that cavity if your mouth is closed."

THE YC EXPRESS TRAIN

Katelyn Gillette

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High
School, Olathe, KS
Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Flash Fiction

YC Express train was scheduled to pull into the station at ten till noon; it always pulled into the station at exactly ten till noon every Monday. Rain

or shine, peace or war, its punctuality was always a guaranteed constant. Nothing could ever falter its course.

Bundled up ladies, clad in their finest furs, sat drinking tea and gossiping amongst the friends they made on the journey. Their young ones ran underfoot, playing games they knew by heart. Old men sat in silence as they read through their morning papers. The younger men sat in quiet thought, not enraptured by reports of war and weather on papers, simply watching out the windows as mountains and forests blurred together. Some passengers – their ranks compromised entirely by those that had never rode this particular train before - might even pull out their pocket watches to check if they were still on time; but of course they were, for the YC Express always pulled into the station at ten till noon, never being faltered by animals or debris on the track.

Up in the engine, the conductor gave orders and blew the horn, its yell echoing as they entered a long tunnel. The engineers paused in their jobs of shoveling coal into the blaze to stretch their hunched backs, their hands sore and stained as deep a pitch black as their dark surroundings. But their pause in work didn't slow the train down, for the YC Express always pulls into the station at ten till noon and is never faltered by human error.

Passengers in another train went about their trip: drinking, gossiping, playing, reading, thinking. Workers in another train's engine went about their jobs: directing, ordering, shoveling. But they never would reach their destination on time, for the YC Express **ALWAYS** pulls into the station at ten till noon and is never faltered by another train in its way.

The YC Express pulled into the station at exactly ten till noon on Monday morning, never being faltered by the difference in life and death.

PARALLEL UNIVERSE

Mariah Hirst

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School,
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Flash Fiction

Parallel universes are everywhere. Small as they may be, they will always be there, all around us. A parallel universe is made every time someone makes a choice, or something happens. There is a parallel universe where when I was four years old, I chose to wear a green shirt instead of a pink one. There is a parallel universe where I never wanted or decided to start skating. And here's the big one, there is a parallel universe where I almost died.

My family has terrible luck when it comes to getting lunch at skating competitions. This day was particularly unlucky for us. We were going to get lunch after I had done well in one of my events. We were driving, and happy, and everyone was talking. And I was thinking about how great my life is right now. But then....

"Micheal, look out!" I hear my mother scream from the passenger seat.

I am confused, for a second, because my mother never screams in the car. She always says that it distracts the driver. Then I see it. The big black threatening truck zoom across my vision. I see my dad frantically turning the steering wheel trying to get out of the way. Trying to get out of the way because the car is coming straight for me.

SCREECH!!!!

Time stops for a second and we all look at each other. The front of the car has been ripped completely off and is halfway down the road. The black truck is still driving. Still driving like nothing ever happened. Still driving until it cannot drive anymore because the tires have come off it. We all get out of our cars and everything is a blur. My mom almost gets in a fight with the men in the car, and then the police are here, and they are talking to my parents, and we are putting our stuff into the police car, and then I am sitting in the back of the police car, driving back to the rink, thinking about parallel universes.

Parallel universes are everywhere. There is a parallel universe for every event and decision that happens. There is a parallel universe where we didn't go to lunch, there is a parallel universe where we went to lunch and didn't get hit. There is a parallel universe where we went to lunch and we got hit. There is a parallel universe where my dad didn't turn. There is a universe somewhere out there where I died.

LEASH

Charley Lincoln

Age: Unknown, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School,
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Flash Fiction

My leash dragged across the dewy grass, it tugged and pulled, I willed it not to catch on any rocks or sticks, that would be the one thing to ruin my perfect day. With my new found

freedom I ran as fast as my small legs could carry me. The wind swept up chilly, musty air soaked with the scent of leaves and bark. Now red, orange, yellow and golden flakes of fall covered the ground and half-bare trees covered the sky, I was a long way from home. At my home, the only trees were small and neatly trimmed and evenly spaced, completely uniform. These looked like they were from another world, complete chaos compared to the trees that I had grown so familiar with. Some of the trees were taller than my house, others only saplings. I liked these trees they seemed more... real.

I ran around unrestricted for hours, the only thing holding me back my leash. It resisted and fought me but I would not let it ruin my fun. I felt joyful and free but, I also began to feel hungry, my belly rumbled and bit at me.

I searched for the path that I came from, I must return home before nightfall if I wish to be fed. The best day of my life was coming to an end but I am satisfied and ready to go home. I look at my surroundings, I pick a direction to go in and follow it. The sun was going down and the woods were scary at night. I began to get anxious. Where was home? I don't know where I am! So I panic, running faster and faster, the trees couldn't go forever. Leaves scuffled as I sprinted faster than the wind. Alarms went off in my head as I couldn't see anything besides trees. I saw a break in the trees, I ran for it, my paws ache and bleed from the harsh forest ground but I don't care, crimson prints make a long line behind me. I keep running but there is no ground beneath me, a cliff. My trail of blood soon to be my only legacy.

I fly off it but, my leash catches, a branch on a sturdy tree, with no place for my paws to sit, nothing to cling to, I fall, but not to the ground, my leash it catches me but not to save me, in a horrid realization I understood that it was not the fall that was going to hurt me.

A quick snap and I no longer feel my sore, blood-stained paws, or the brisk autumn wind, all I can see is the wonderful colors of the setting sun. As the colors fade, my thoughts do the

same. I feel a sense of relief, I don't feel lost anymore.

TWO STUDIES IN GRIEF

Gillis Lowry

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Kirkwood High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Simao Drew, Katie Meyers

Category: Flash Fiction

You cry on the day your father dies, but not because he's dead.

The phone call came at four AM; your aunt gave you the news that night. You cried then, but you only cried because he'd wanted to get to know you, because he'd been an aunt's brother, grandparents' son, because a life can be so miserable that it drives a person to destroy it.

You're supposed to take a test the next day. But you cry again in class, again for all the wrong reasons—the teacher doesn't have to know that. He doesn't have to know you saw your father once a year. He just needs to see your face and pull you into the hallway so you can tell him about the gunshot and the hospital and he can write you a pass for the counselor. You didn't think you'd want to talk about it, but once you start you can't stop, and soon you're telling your therapist and texting your friends

and writing it out for the world to see that you're anxious all the time because you don't want to die, that you'd loved your father, but only in the ways you'd had to, and that you're sad, but not in the ways you're supposed to be. The therapist says this is grieving. Oh, yes, you think, this is grieving, but you have been grieving for over sixteen years and it has not been for your father. You have been grieving for billions, each someone else's sibling, child, daughter; you've wept for every one of them, but mostly for yourself. You're sensitive—you only want the fear to end. It never does until it's your turn. Look at the coffin as it sinks into the earth. He will never see the sunrise again. But you do not cry for your father. You cry for the concept of nothingness; you cry when you want to feel sad for him and don't. You cry over fate. You feel selfish. You grieve your own death again.

...

On the day your father dies your aunt does not cry. Her children have never, in fact, even seen her cry. She tells them she's grieving on the inside. She tells her husband she's grieving on the inside. In reality, she's relieved. None of her worries matter anymore. And, she supposes, none of her brother's worries will ever matter anymore.

She never really knew him. He ran away when she was six and he was seventeen. He dropped out of high school and never came back. She didn't resent him for that; she resented the phone calls to her mother when he was in the hospital again; she resented the debt collectors, songless birthdays; she resented the drama he forced into her life until Monday morning when the phone rang at four and he'd been dead even before she woke up.

And the truth is that she'd loved him for those few years as a child; she's sad, but only because she remembers a time when he

was hopeful and kind. The truth is that she's relieved, and it's mostly on her own behalf; she's selfish she remembers a time when nothing was messy and everything was warm.

It is ninety degrees outside, and the jingle of the ice cream truck in the distance brings her running to her parents in the living room. Her father refuses like he always does, but her brother grins and pulls her aside. "Let's sneak out," he says, "and I'll buy you some."

They sit on the curb. The sky drips with red and pink clouds, and she licks her white popsicle down to the stick. There's a joke printed on the side. She reads it aloud—he laughs, bright and unselfconscious. The little girl smiles, proud of her accomplishment, and tells her brother she's ready to go home. She reaches for his hand as they stand to cross the street.

He will die in thirty-four years, five months, and two days.

But for now the whole world is alive

and death has no domain.

THE ECCENTRIC CLOUD

Caitlyn Marshall

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School,
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Flash Fiction

There's this boy that I notice during school. He stands out to me because he has a cloud above him. This cloud (cumulonimbus cloud I have noticed) brings tormenting rains upon the boy. The cloud thunders, and shudders, all day, drenching the poor boy.

Strangely enough, no one else notices the cloud. Improbable, yet true. I'm bewildered by this. How can't they see the cloud? The cloud that drenches the boy during the day? Instead, the gazes of students and teachers alike pass over the boy. In all senses, there shouldn't even be a cloud. Even so, why this boy?

After viewing the cloud for a week, I finally go up to the boy and ask him of his name. Nate, he says. Pleasure to meet you, Nate, I say in return. My plan was to ask him of his cloud. I needed to know how it came to rest above his head. Yet, just as I was going to question him, the cloud stops drenching him. In fact, it trickles to just a drizzle. A stratus cloud, I observe, unbelieving. Instead of asking of the cloud, I ask of his favorite color.

Every day, I visit Nate and talk to him. The cloud keeps shrinking, going from a stratus, to a nimbostratus, before finally settling on altostratus. It was fascinating to watch the cloud shrink.

One day, I got sick and had to stay at home. I didn't think about Nate and his cloud until I saw him the next day. For some reason, the cloud had progressed back to cumulonimbus. Its torrential rains lashed out at Nate as he sat slumped at the desk. I stood back, gazing on as a hypothesis pops into my head.

I called out to Nate, carefully analyzing his cloud as he registered my voice. Just as I expected, the cloud immediately shrank, fixating itself on an altostratus. This time though, I decided to forgo my usual conversation with him. Instead, I asked if he would like to go to the movies with me. We can just hang out, I elaborated. And, just like I thought would happen, Nate's cloud stopped its slight drizzle. His cloud shrank up, shrinking and

shrinking and shrinking. Until, finally, it was a brilliant cumulus.

REALM OF GUILT

Kira Nixon

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School,
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Flash Fiction

When my dad finds me standing in the yard, up to my knees in the cold of winter, the grey of my sleeves covered in dirt, he never meant for it to go this far. Even before he had the dream, he gave signs of being unsteady, but who could ever imagine this. Sometimes the dark of the night would make his skin crawl as he slid into a deep sleep, trying to take the pain away. Once, when he told me about the things he had done long ago, I couldn't bear to allow those stories to creep into my mind any longer-I never told anyone about that night. Now he waits up for me. He has done something terrible, and I'm the one who has to hide the evidence. But the sirens start to roar as the brisk air takes my breath away.

Arms straight to my side, I stand in the dead of winter, holding a brown rusted shovel in one hand, while the other holds the weight of my guilt. My body feels out of place, almost numb, as though my body is not my own. I wait for the sound of the sirens to flood over my thoughts, turning my mind into a realm of guilt, eventually making the fear fade into the dark night. Maybe this is for the best. He tells me this was a mistake.

What he doesn't know, is that they're not coming for me, they're coming for him.

DECEIVED

Brenna Novitski

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High

School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Flash Fiction

I was on my way to the market riding on the train, that is where I first looked into his eyes. So golden brown you would have thought they were made from melted honey. All other motion and noise seemed to fade as I was studying him, then suddenly his eyes met mine and I could see the joy and happiness within them and before I knew it he was standing in front of me. We talked about him, about me, and anything else we could think of. Our connection grew stronger and stronger as the time passed. We decided to grab a bite to eat at a small cafe, ordering the same thing, I thought we were made for each other. We spent the rest of the day together and I asked him to have dinner with me at my apartment later that night, he agreed with no questions asked. I was beyond ecstatic.

I went home to start making our meal for the night, but as I was cooking I realized that I needed a couple more ingredients that I had forgot to get at the market earlier that day, so I grabbed my coat and walked out the door headed to the closest grocery store. Eggs, milk, butter, I was planning on making my homemade sugar cookies. I smiled to myself as I

thought of how he would react when he tasted my cookies, I knew he would love them and I couldn't wait to see that happiness in his gorgeous, warm, mahogany colored eyes.

I decided to take the scenic route back home. Little did I know, that would be the worst decision I ever made.

The snow seems as if it is falling in slow motion, I stare up as it dances down to the ground, as I lower my gaze I find those beautiful brown eyes staring right back at me from the sidewalk, across the street and I smile instantly. However, the longer I stare at them the more my smile fades, for his eyes are not staring at me but at another girl. I watch, helplessly, as she runs to him and jumps, only for him to catch her in a hug. Then a kiss. He is looking at her the way he was looking at me only a few hours ago. My heart breaks.

The world stops.

Tears now trickle down my face, blurring my vision, yet I am still able to see his eyes finally meeting mine, seeing my pain. Something's changed, I can see it in his eyes. They are no longer the warm, sepia speckled orbs that I used to know so well. They are cold now. Grey and lifeless, no hope or happiness inside of them anymore. There is nothing inside of them. We hold our stare for what feels like years before a large group of pedestrians walks in front of him, blocking my view of his used to be, pools of honey he had for eyes. When the path finally clears I yearn for the warmth of his fawn eyes, but I'm left with nothing but an empty sidewalk and the cold, dark night.

MOLTEN

Riley Parman

Age: 15, Grade: 9

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

Category: Flash Fiction

The foul, burning scent of ash fills my nose and thus my lungs. My mother and my sisters are screaming, but I am still. People around me run. I stand my ground.

The wailing of the evacuation siren haunts my ears. I ignore it—because he told me to. I feel my world being altered with every sharp intake of breath.

IN AND OUT, IN AND OUT.

“Asha, it's time. He's not coming back,” my mother summons.

Her words burn me more than the molten rock ever could.

As I reflect back upon the last week, I never thought it would come to this. I knew that the explosion was bad. However, he told me I was safe. He told me the thick, hot, orange liquid would never reach our home.

He lied.

He ran.

Because we knew he lied.

He could not bear to see the rest of the story unfold.

Our fate was his doing.

But I could not be angry.

And I need him now more than ever.

It is then that I know what my next action should be. I know my mother needs me, I know my little sisters look up to me, I know I am the glue that holds us together. However, these thoughts do not stop me.

I turn, and run into the forest.

After all, this is where he went when he was seeking solidarity.

Solidarity is something you look for when your own home comes crashing down. ISN'T IT?

Solidarity is something you look for when you've prayed to every God and you've yelled at every star. ISN'T IT? Solidarity is something you run to when the inevitable occurs. ISN'T IT? Solidarity is what you yearn for when you feel your whole world melt away. ISN'T IT? Solidarity is what you look for when you tell your kids that it's going to be okay and then live through the sound of their piercing screams while their own dog is engulfed in the boiling, glowing rock.

IN AND OUT, IN AND OUT.

I know it is.

He was still wearing the pink bowtie I gave him when he ran from the house.

I run until I can feel the ache in my legs, begging me to stop. I won't. He has to be somewhere. He is not gone.

I can barely hear the shriek of my mother calling me back to her over the raging crackle of flames threatening to engulf me as I am pulled deeper into the woods.

I keep running.

I am shouting and I am screaming and my throat is burning and my feet are cramping and my hope is breaking and my heart is shattering and I am still running.

And then.

I stop.

I feel myself fall.

I hear myself scream.

I taste blood in my mouth as a bite my cheek with all that I am.

I feel all of this. However, my mind is silent, unable to comprehend the unimaginable. All of my senses are heightened as my eyes take in the sight of a

Charred. Pink. Bowtie.

That once belonged to my father.

GOOD LUCK CHARM

Carter Pate

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Smithville High

School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Flash Fiction

I cut the engine before putting the car in park, panicked, restarted the car, and yanked the gearshift to the "P". I felt a twinge of shame at such a simple mistake, but quickly put it out of my mind. With the current situation, shame was a luxury I couldn't afford. I needed to focus.

I flung open the car door and jumped out. I clenched my teeth as the world spun around me. I closed my eyes and hit the "lock" button on my car exactly eleven times (eleven was my lucky number). As I sprinted down the long sidewalk to my house, the muscles in my neck began to hurt as I frantically scanned my surroundings for black cats and ladders, glancing down at regular intervals to check for cracks in the sidewalk and red beetles (I didn't know if killing red beetles was bad luck, but why should I take the risk?).

As I reached the steps of my front porch, I felt a wave of reassurance. My hand still shook as I slid the key into its lock, but I no longer felt as if the world was spinning. I opened the door to a whitewashed living room, shut the door and deadbolted it shut, turned to the kitchen, then spun back around to double-

check the lock. Satisfied, I strode into the kitchen and opened the cabinet next to the washing machine clearly marked "EMERGENCY SALT". I sprinkled a pile onto my hand and tossed it over my shoulder, then turned to watch the particles land on the counter behind me. I swept the salt up with my hands and brushed it back into the shaker, then neatly put the salt back in its cupboard. As I walked to my living room, double-checking the door lock one last time, I tried to push the events of the day out of my mind. I'd heard from an old friend (whose name now eludes me) that to think of something is to give it power. I wasn't about to take any chances, so I forced myself not to remember the vindictive, horrific, inhumane "prank" my co-workers had pulled on me. I instead opted to gaze at my glossy, white walls. My gaze travelled to the one decoration mounted on my wall, a display full of horseshoes, pennies I had found face up, and a single rabbit's foot on a shining, silver necklace. The necklace I had inherited was worth a hefty price, but the rabbit's foot was what made it invaluable to me. It was meant to go to my younger sister, and very well could have if she had managed to stay alive long enough to receive it. The car crash that took away her life came as a shock to everyone except me. She always made fun of my good luck charms, always insisted that she didn't believe in luck. Now she's in the ground, and I hold her inheritance. An estimated 3 million fatal car crashes take place every year. I have avoided being one of the 3 million by swaying the odds in my favor. My sister was a fool to take chances with her own life, but I am different. Such a thing could never happen to me.

As I scanned the display, I noticed an empty space in the display. "That's odd," I thought, "I never move my charms." I counted the trinkets, trying to sort out which one was out of place. I froze. The rabbit's foot necklace was

missing. **NOT MISSING, STOLEN.** I checked the display again in disbelief. How could this happen? I could never be a victim of something like this! My luck was purely good! Since the day I was born, I had done everything in my power to keep myself safe from harm. What could've caused this to happen?

I thought of the prank. That horrible prank. How they laughed and laughed at my expense. Couldn't they understand that the forces they were playing with were no laughing matter? Because of them, I lost my lucky rabbit's foot charm. How could I live without it? How could they do this to me? I hated them! I hated my work. I hated my sister. I hated the world. I hated it with all of my might! If they, the blind fools, were willing to damn themselves with bad luck, why did they have to drag me down with them? I picked up a horseshoe off the display and flung it furiously. The horseshoe flew through the open door to my bathroom, past its open window (not open, broken) and crashed into the bathroom mirror, shattering it.

AN ESTIMATED 3.7 MILLION BURGLARIES OCCUR EVERY YEAR.

FORSAKEN

Alexis Peterson

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Central High

School, Saint Joseph, MO

Educator: angela brown

Category: Flash Fiction

Silence swept through the pews, the only sound the shift of sleeping figures. We are strewn haphazardly across the sanctuary. Most huddled randomly about seeking warmth from one another, others shivering alone in the cold.

The Church gained an eerie sense of abandonment at this time of night. The last wisps of prayer still hanging in the darkened room, like falling stars in the midnight sky. Shadows loomed across stained glass windows. Figures twisted and entangled, all lines and sharp angles, clawing up the walls. The faint howl of a storm reverberates around us. Surrounded in this room full of people, but still I feel alone.

Lightning strikes, casting a rainbow of sorts across the worship hall. Painting a Picasso-esque mural over us. Here I lay, staring at the arched ceiling, pondering the path I so far have tread.

We've traveled far, my company and I, to places further then I'd ever imagined. Tonight we seek refuge in the holiest of sanctuaries. We've touched the hearts of many, and changed the ways of some. But, I fear, my faith is waning .

In the world today, hate and violence reign. In turbulent times like these, when war and famine knock on our doors and doubt crowds our every thought, you cannot blame us for turning to religion. Praying to a God on High for salvation. Yet it seems to me, that there is something sinister lying beneath this facade of glory.

I stand from my bundle of blankets marrying the floor and began to traverse the corridors of our current abode. I can not help but feel restless. These thoughts, stew and fester in my gut. Like fire, igniting an inferno of realization. I will heal, It was for the best, he has a plan, all cliches none with any merit.

I pass many miscellaneous rooms, but what catches my eye on this twilight

escaped is nothing other than a classroom. Void of child and teacher, utterly dead in the slumbering world. Cautiously I enter. The desk and chairs are still, the chalkboard still streaked with the remnants of a prior lesson. I've seen a place like this before, many life times ago.

From the walls around me, testaments old and new are told. In backwards letters and scribbled crayon I see the saints and sinners of the Bible reenacting the very stories I once wholeheartedly believed. I run my fingertips along the spines of books peeking out from the time worn shelves. I trace my hands across years of history. Life and freedom devoted to such a thing I can barely fathom. This other worldly belief, of miracles and magic, of God and Angels, all nothing more than words on paper. A fairytale we promise children.

I whirl around in misplaced anger. Was it all a lie then, everything. The salvation we were promised, the love that shall be shed on us. Tears brim in my eyes. Trembling and afraid in this empty room I pace and mutter aloud. Timid at first, then growing. It's a crescendo of pain and suffering. Of devotion and ridicule till I am screaming at the unfairness of it all.

"Is this what you want!" I cry, to God, to the world, "Is this what you've reverted me too". Sobs rack my body. Fumbling through the blur of tears, I fall to my knees too weak to stand in defiance any longer. "I begged, I pleaded, I prayed for you to spare him". My voice is cracked and weak. I'm pathetic, I realize it now. Blaming a figure I doubt even exists, yet the pain is easier with someone to pin it on. "Where is your mercy now. Where is your forgiveness, am I to be forsaken then. Am I to be forgotten!"

A child's laugh floats through my mind. A smile so tender and soft cracks through my haze of grief. I laugh in spite of myself. Memory's blurred and broken flash before

my eyes.

This is cruel. To torture me like this, to force me to relive those fading moments of bliss. His hand, the size of a doll, rests upon mine. He is safe and warm in my embrace. Brown locks tangled and curled shake as he laughs. Blue eyes, within them I see a soul so beautiful, so bright, you think it could never be dimmed. With mirth he looks at me and utters a simple "I love you, mama" and suddenly my heart melts away. I am entranced by him, so young and naive. So ignorant to the bitter hand of death.

"He was robbed! Robbed of a life you promised him, robbed of love and joy, robbed of a future!" In anguish I crane my neck screaming at the sky. Met only with deafening silence "You brought him into this world. You thrust him into life then ripped him out without a shred of guilt. How dare you play with such an innocent soul. How dare you break mine."

God is a fiend, a lying snake. He is petty and cruel. A dictator of fate, a tyrant of destiny. A wretch who drove my son from my arms like sand from the hourglass.

Thunder claps and lightning crashes. The storm whips on, time continues to pass, the world continues to turn. My suffering means nothing in the grand scheme things. At some point during my rant, dawn has come upon us. Yet still, I laid on that cold unforgiven tile for hours morning a life I never got to lead. I stood on shaky legs turning to the door, wiping stray tears out of my eyes.

Shouts I recognized as my name sounded down the hall. I squared my shoulders and began to leave. Pausing for just a moment to glance behind myself at the empty classroom. Funny, I think, how such an outburst can disturb almost nothing. In a broken whisper I say "Till next time." Once again I am met with deafening silence.

TOO LATE

Madison Sahl

Age: Unknown, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School,
Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Flash Fiction

When I was in 4th grade my mom would always tell me it was "too late" when I asked if I could watch tv at night. She told me I had to go to bed so I could get up in the morning so I could do ``good in school.

6th grade my mom would walk in my room and tell me that I need to turn off my phone and it was "too late."

8th grade every night she would come in my room and say its "too late" take my phone and tell me I needed to do better in school.

High school me and my mom never really talk anymore, once in a while when I come home from being out she says its "too late" and I just walk to my room without any other words. One day she came in and asked how I was doing and if I needed to tell her anything because she said she was there to listen, and I told her "mom it's too late."

THE BURROW

Carson Stumph

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Idean Bindel

Category: Flash Fiction

This man had the look—the look of fire behind mama's and old people's eyes. Ada taught me that, when they get the look, I need to hide. This man had been around for a month or so, but he was a cloud, same as the rest. Ada told me they're clouds 'cause they never stay. Sometimes, these clouds are a blessing on a hot summer day come to make it cool.

Others bring the storm and blow me and Ada around.

This one is a twister and he swept Ada away. I can't find Ada. Mama knows where this man took him, but she won't tell me. That's when I go to the Burrow. That's where Ada and me went when the men—or even sometimes Mama—got the look. The Burrow is a hole in the ground beneath the lonely apple tree where they can't hurt us.

Ada would never go alone without me. He always says, "I won't leave you behind."

Ada had a way of closing the Burrow up so it'd stay hidden and creatures wouldn't get in. I couldn't do that; Ada never showed me how. I went to the Burrow a couple days back looking for Ada. On the tree was carved "Stefon and Adam." He carved that with his eagle knife, back when mama would still read me bedtime stories and talked about—Pa? Was that what she called him?

The Burrow was empty. I called out for Ada still, but only the birds replied.

This man didn't like me going out, and neither did Mama. When they said bad words to me, Ada would always fight them.

But Ada isn't here. It is just me and I don't do so good on my own. Ada knows that, so why would he leave me!?

I DIDN'T MEAN TO—I SWEAR IT WAS AN ACCIDENT. THE POT WAS TOO HOT—I'M

SORRY! It flung out of my hand and the boiling water came flying onto this man. In a split second, I accepted the coming beating but that wasn't what happened. He pulled out a shiny knife with an eagle carved into the hilt.

THAT IS ADA'S! WHY'D HE HAVE IT?

It's cold out here now. I can't see through the fog on my glasses. **GOT TO GET IN THE BURROW. STAY SAFE. GET WARM. HIDE.**

The brush is thick and every thorn cut like razors. He hasn't chased me, but I can still hear his screaming: " You get the hell back here, boy!" Mama pleads to him, " Don't hurt him, too, Jeff! He doesn't know any better!"

PLEASE MAMA. HELP ME! I say I am sorry. **IT WAS TOO HOT AND IT SLIPPED, SORRY—SORRY.**

I finally reach the clearing to the apple tree. It is far too dark and the moon isn't in sight to help. I can't find the entrance until I am standing right on top of it and fall through.

Something wrestles in the dry leaves that form a bed in the Burrow. The fangs of a viper sink deep into my leg. Then others join in the frenzy.

Steffon rushed out of the Burrow, which had always been a place for him to feel safe. The venom worked its way up his body. Rushing and weaving through every tissue, muscle, and organ in his body. As he continued trudging through the brush, trying to reach some safety, his legs turned to jelly, falling from under him. He laid on the cold ground, panting. The air became less and less until he couldn't take much more. In the last effort to move, he swung his arm in front of him, taking hold of a hand—a cold one. Just before his sight left him, he looked up and saw the brown hair and pale eyes of his brother. The earth began to enclose around him. His face went blank.

In the woods—lifeless.

BLACK AND WHITE

Carrie Zhang

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Flash Fiction

The boy on the stage has just begun his piece when I slip into the auditorium and sit down in the back row with my mother. My clammy hands grasp at the slick and cool cover of my music. My right knee bounces up and down, and my black flats that I bought five years ago pinch relentlessly at my toes.

As I wait for the boy to finish his piece, I avoid looking at the judge who scribbles down notes on a scoresheet. I pop open my sheet music and lightly dance my fingers over the paper, closing my eyes and recalling parts of my piece. My teacher tells me that I should be able to think of the next note in my head, like memorizing scriptures for my Bible study class.

My eyes fly open when I realize the boy has finished. My mother nudges me as the judge calls my name, and I wipe my clammy hands on my black dress that is solely reserved for auditions and recitals. I hand the judge my music book and plaster a nervous smile on my face before tugging my sleeves down and making my way towards the stage. My black flats clack against the stone floors, echoing to the back of the auditorium where other students sit and wait with their parents.

Say hello. Say your piece. Say thank you.

I adjust the bench and set my right foot on the pedal.

Take a breath. Hands on the keys. Go.

Tapping on keys. My hands tremble violently as my fingers stumble against the piano. Just get through the piece.

PAUSE.

One second passes. Two. Then three.

2019 Scholastic Silver Key Award Winners – Missouri Writing Region

My piano teacher has always told me that I have to let the piece speak for itself. But as I stammer on the stage, I ignore her advice and slam my fingers against the keys, rushing forward desperately.

The white and black keys fuse together until all I see is a puddle of grey.

I clash into the last note, stopping suddenly like a car that had to brake to avoid a collision, and release the pedal. After I bow and clammer down the stage, the judge jots down her notes before handing me my sheet music, and I thank her. **HAVE A GOOD DAY.** I brush past the other musicians and fly out of the auditorium into the welcoming sunlight outside.

My mom smiles at me and says, "Good job. I heard a few mistakes, but it wasn't bad." I shrug and frown, scratching my arm. Those white and black keys. I sigh and follow my mom to the car.

The funny thing is that I've been playing piano for ten years, ever since I was five and heard Mary Woodrow play at my church's annual Christmas party. But, I can't play in front of more than five people without losing my focus.

Playing all the right notes and keeping the rhythm steady is important when it comes to auditions, but what makes a pianist stand out is how they play the piece. My judges have consistently instructed me to concentrate less on the notes and more on expressing myself. I need to play freely, without worry, without anxiety.

Maybe one day I'll figure it out. Maybe it'll be white and black instead of mixed grey.

I sigh in frustration. Those black and white keys.

HUMOR

BLOODLY BURKLYN

Norah Brozio

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: St Joan Of Arc School,
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Barb Ryan

Category: Humor

I'm the awkward sort. Not the, trip over yourself, mumble two words and run type-- OK. Sometimes (*cough, cough* ALL THE TIME), I'll resort to conservative nerd girl you'd expect from me, being that Asian girl, and only speak as a four year old would. But let's be real, that's eighty percent of us when we're forced to be around new folks for extended periods of time, well, at least that's how us bookworms feel. I'm more of the most-of-my-life-I'm-the-one-who-is-never-prepared-when-it-counts type. Like, I'll totally have all my vocabulary homework finished for the semester only to find we had to do a review after the first six weeks, which completely throws off my groove, not to mention I've wasted my time when I could've been reading *A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME*. All of which brings us to the time I had to at least try to be the most put together version of myself. All the way in the sweaty summer mountains of Vermont. I also love getting distracted; spewing all my unordered thoughts onto the nearest unfortunate person in the room whilst trying to go to the bathroom in a collective manner. Have fun reading this!

The second day into my summer dance

intensive at Burklyn Ballet Theater, I run in late to pointe class-- in flip-flops mind you, I know I'm a superstar-- tissue hanging out my nose, dance bag in my dorm room, roomkey locked in my room. Signed contract in a big file in the office saying I will be on time and prepared for class everyday (therefore respecting my peers, teachers, and feet). It seemed almost as bad as hitting my partner in the face and forgetting the combination, but that's a different personal narrative.

About ten minutes ago, so tragic that innocent things can be turned to the dark side so quickly, I was in a rush to pee. It was the only thing in the whole world that mattered. Me having to take off my jeans, leotard, tights, jacket, and long sleeve shirt (no idea why I was wearing that, I was in the fondue pot with cheese called unairconditioned summer camp with a hundred girls) so I could relieve myself. I got distracted, I heard my fan in my room. Oops. Mom said to always unplug it when it wasn't being used, so good citizen I was, I knew starting a fire would be worse than wetting myself. Yeah. I just Google searched. A few months ago in Vermont I didn't know the odds of a box fan committing arson was less likely than winning the lottery, but hey. I had good intentions. Looking back on it, if I hadn't worried about the stupid fan sending the dorms to flame, I probably wouldn't have been late. Whoops.

I went in my room, fully and acknowledging knowing my roommates fan was also running, I pulled the plug. Nope, I didn't shut my roommate Kailey's fan off. If a fire happened to start due to an irresponsible camper, it would be her fault, not mine. My silly name card that doubled as my roomkey still dangled on a long green strand around my neck. Where it should've stayed at all times. It bothered me, **AND** it wasn't even a good color! Uh! Sin. So I took the ugly, irksome lanyard off and set it on my desk. Where it would remain until I stumbled my way into pointe class in just a few more stress provoking minutes. Oh look! My comfy flip-flops. Maybe I'll just slip off my clunky tennis shoes I

didn't even want to buy off; just until I had to leave. Just for a minute while I peed. Burklyn had strict rules about what kind of shoes you wore, which I guess made sense it being a dance intensive. I didn't like wearing clearance rack Nikes my mom forced me to get. Waste of money since I was already planning on destroying my feet by balancing my toes on small boxes.

"I already have tennis shoes," I insisted.

"You need new ones."

"Why?" I asked, holding up a silver colored Nike with peachy swooshes, "It's for two weeks and I know you're going to want me to have MORE new ones for school."

"Because, I want you to have new ones for camp."

"Ug. Okay. I guess I'll have these?" I pulled a more or less foot shaped block of paper from the toe and laced them on. Ended up being great shoes, laces were a bit short and the color was flashier than a parking lot cone, but you come to love em'.

I slid the neon kicks off my pink ballet tight covered feet, and wiggled callused toes in between loved worn leather straps. And, just because why not leave more things in my room, I set my heavier than art thou dance bag down. I turned on my thinly sheltered heel, satisfied with my work, and proceeded to going to the bathroom, not realizing the door with my key behind was closed.

Ah! Fresh and new again I washed my hands, I'M WEARING MY Stranger Things SHIRT. NICE. UH, I WONDER WHY I DID THAT? IT'S LONG SLEEVED AND LIKE EIGHTY DEGREES OUTSIDE, NOT TO MENTION WE'RE ON A VERMONTIAN MOUNTAIN WHERE THEY DON'T BELIEVE IN AIR CONDITIONING. OK, SO IT'S NOT LIKE LONG LONG, JUST ELBOW LENGTH BUT THAT'S STILL SORTA WARM. OH WELL, I LIKE Stranger Things, Stranger Things IS COOL! It was the second time I'd worn this shirt and not a single comment of praise. I choose the most common Fandoms to represent my wardrobe because of weight limits in piling everything not

pre-shipped into my R2D2 suitcase. I put a STRANGER THINGS poster on the white pasty walls of my dorm room-- not hanging there to be recognized or anything-- and I was thinking I should've brought THE LAST JEDI one instead. Part of the reason why I choose the STRANGER THINGS one was how new it was, well I guess both were equally new and glorious, bought both out of greed at Target with no excuse to buy two twenty dollar items save for them both being awesome, both sealed and unopened beauties. I totally would've brought both and my Grumpy cat poster, and the Shen Yun 2015 edition, and the Cats in Art calendar, but no, I had to bring Mike, Dustin, and Lucas with me who apparently no one appreciates! I mean, I thought I'd be safe picking a new Fandom, I don't even have a HARRY POTTER poster that size but if did, I still would've gone with STRANGER THINGS because lik--

DRIP DRIP.

I stopped rubbing my already clean hands. WOW I WASHED THEM FOR LIKE TEN MINUTES, HOW DID THAT HAPPEN? OH MY GOSH, MY NOSE IS BLEEDING. After the initial shock of my brain catching up to what was happening, I thought the blood went well with my STRANGER THINGS shirt. For a few short seconds, it was the coolest things ever! I was beating every Eleven cosplay there has ever been or will be you know, even with the gelled bun and leotard. But after that, I couldn't get to the paper towel dispenser fast enough. It was at the door of the bathroom. Why it was nailed to a wall in China, I had no clue. Architects! I trust your intelligence, you can see the sink is HERE, why put the towels, THERE? As you can see it was not my fault the floor had red droplets as a new floor design. At least that gave it some color. The room was brown tiles and beige shower curtains. Ew. My parking lot orange sneakers were made (crafted) with more taste. (In mind)

I stood over the earth brown sink for what felt like forever; my pointe class started in fifteen minutes and I was going to be late if my stupid

nose didn't stop leaking soon. Grrrr. My dad said Vermont air was different. Luckily, Mom packed tissues and Aquaphor in my suitcase, I even remembered where she put it when we unpacked. Okay, when she unpacked. Perfect; once this tsunami slows, I'll put some tissues in my dance bag, pack my nose full of Aquaphor, and hope it doesn't start during class.

Only the last thing went well for me. My nose bleed was almost at a stop so I started to rinse the blood out of the sink and throw the rough paper towels away. In the trash can that was right next to the sink (I'm just sayin' whoever made this bathroom should've taken time to think the floor plan through). **THAT WASN'T SO BAD. THE TOWELS WERE REALLY SCRATCHY BUT OTHER THAN THAT I'LL MAKE IT TO CLASS ON TIME. THAT'S THE IMPORTANT THING.** I innocently went to open my room's door only to find it locked. My gosh the panic that was going through my head, my key was locked in the room with my dance bag, phone, and feet protecting shoes. Class started in, oh. I didn't know how long because my clock was also behind the door that wouldn't open.

And so, I sprinted, flip-flops flipping on hilly asphalt, rough paper towels streaming out my nose by the second, pointe shoes in dance bag, my roomkey still sitting idly on my desk I shared with Hailey who had a fan that was still running. Luckily no one saw me: a) running. A law enforced due to the many hilly slopes the campus had. I was surprised how curvy the distance to class was. I'd never noticed until now (we were on a mountain, what did I expect?). Or b) running up a hill with shoes flimsier than cardboard on. I hoped Hailey was already in the sticky hot gym where we danced stretching or something. Preferably with a roomkey I could borrow.

Once in the marley covered room, I found Kailey. Who was a responsible student, dance bag, tennis shoes, and all. Without her roomkey.

"Kailey, I really need to borrow your roomkey," I huffed and puffed like the Big Bad Wolf.

I didn't think I looked too shabby, having gone through a crisis, but her facial expression was confused. "I don't have it. Jenny needed it for some reason."

Why the heck did you give her your roomkey? She's not your roommate. "Oh. I, um, locked my key in my room and had a nosebleed," I said hopefully sounding more confident than I felt.

"Really? That must suck," She tied her pointe shoes and said helpfully.

I closed my eyes for a good five seconds. "Yep. And class starts soon?" It was an empty question. Mrs. Drull, unlike most teachers, started class on time.

She nodded and continued her pre-pointe warm-up. I sat pathetically on the green rustled tarp that protected the gym floor that wasn't being used as dance space. I rolled the ichty paper in my nose so it wouldn't move around, not big enough so I couldn't not breath and not small enough to be sucked into the depths of my nasal cavities, and prepared to explain why I would be sitting class out. Gosh, that would be the worst part. I was never good at talking to teachers, or anyone for that matter, and this was kind of an embarrassing reason to miss class.

The moment I was losing hope, a miracle happened-- Jenny-- quite possibly the best human on earth, suddenly ran in holding my zillion pounds of dance bag and two room keys.

"Oh my gosh you got my stuff!" I hugged her and quickly put on the tight satin contraptions.

"Yeah, I saw you lag behind when we were leaving and I didn't see your backpack in the sitting room."

"It's so heavy I can't believe you got this. Thank you so much."

Kailey and I got our name tags/keys back, I wasn't late at all, I was actually ten minutes early, and my nose didn't spill a drop. It wasn't until I was taking off my street clothes and Mrs. Drull came in that I heard someone say, "Nice

shirt."

It was the best day ever.

MIDNIGHT BURGLARY AND ACCIDENTALLY CREATING A New Religion

Abigail Caldwell

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Central High School,
Saint Joseph, MO
Educator: Kyla Ward

Category: Humor

The night was still as two burglars walked up the street towards their target house. Their master plan would be quickly put in action. Lights were off around the neighborhood, making both their entrance and exit much simpler. The houses surrounding their target were completely dark, not even a porchlight to be seen, though a few could have been motion triggered. Regardless, the burglars approached the house and the burlier of the two knelt down to begin picking the lock.

"Frank are you sure about this?" The lankier burglar whispered. "This is the biggest heist we've tried to pull, and the owners could be right upstairs! What if they wake up?"

As the lock clicked, Frank stood up and

whispered back, "Don't worry Kyle. As long as we stay quiet, which we will of course do, nothing bad can happen. There'll be no chance of anyone catching us."

Gloved hands and dark clothes passed through the threshold of the house, and their job truly began. "You go check the kitchen and I'll check out the TV," Frank proposed. They had gone over their plan many times before but hadn't seen the inside of the house.

"No way dude!" Kyle hissed. "Don't you know that's how everyone dies in horror movies!"

"Kyle, we already went over this! Just go find their fancy plates!" Frank whispered tersely

before turning to address the living room: it connected directly to a dining room, which

itself led to a doorway, presumably to the kitchen. The walls of the living room were

covered with picture frames of varying sizes, contents hidden by the darkness. Frank

considered the merits of lighting the room to check their contents, possibly hiding signed

posters, autographs, or just family photos.

He sighed and turned to address the TV: a wall mounted flat screen, which would require them both to take.

As Frank turned to continue his search of the rooms, a long and drawn out series of crashes reverberated from what Frank could only presume was the kitchen.

He ran through the dining room to the source of the crash, finding Kyle pinned to the floor under an obscene amount of tupperware, with a number of broken ceramic plates on the floor around him... also covered in tupperware.

"Kyle what the hell!" Frank shouted, abandoning all the advantages staying stealthy would have provided, though Kyle had already spoiled that.

"I-I-I'm sorry," Kyle stammered. "It-It attacked me! I opened the cabinet and-" Frank covered Kyle's mouth with his hand, silencing his incompetent accomplice. Listening carefully, he could hear the sound of voices upstairs, now accompanied by the creaking of floorboards.

Frank quickly helped Kyle out from under the mountain of tupperware, and the duo quickly hid under the dining room table.

The creaking of floorboards upstairs turned into creaking of the stairs, which suddenly stopped as the man of the house reached the ground floor.

"Who's there?" a booming, powerful voice called out into the darkness.

"Nothing!" Kyle called back reflexively. "Go back to bed... This was all a product of your imagination."

There was a pregnant pause where Frank thought Kyle may have actually convinced this man. That clearly would have been too good of an outcome.

"What kind of fool do you think I am?" The man boomed back. "Show yourself, you foul demon!"

Frank sat in stunned silence. Kyle turned to Frank and pointed to himself, mouthing "Me?"

Before Frank could chide Kyle, a smaller, much less intimidating voice called from upstairs, "Is everything alright dear? Do I need to come down?"

Kyle, voice cracking in an effort to lower his voice to imitate the man, cried out, "Everything is fine!"

Insulted, the man roared, "How **DARE** you break into **MY** house and insult my illustrious voice!"

"... I'm not, you are," Kyle answered, still pathetically imitating the man's voice. "Stop insulting **ME** with that... whatever you said."

Suddenly the world became blindingly bright, and the two burglars could see before them standing none other than famous world champion wrestler Wilber Blanc, and, presumably, his wife. Chancing a glance behind him, Frank could see dozens of posters and photos displaying the wrestler in his prime, being not long ago since he'd just retired the week prior.

Frantically trying to keep up his act, Kyle called out, "Hi honey."

There were several seconds of complete

deafening silence.

"Okay... I can explain," Frank said, bringing himself out from under the table. "We are two extremely lost pizza delivery boys."

Another speechless moment passed before Mr. Blanc responded, "I certainly have not ordered pizza tonight, and you two are clearly too inept to work at local two-star restaurant Pizza Shack."

"I told you we got lost."

"Silence hooligan!" Mr. Blanc boomed. "Your pathetic falsehoods will not save you here, as I am as sharp as a tack and as cunning as the fox upon my coat of arms!" It was not wrong, for there indeed was a depiction of the Blanc coat of arms hanging on the wall of that very dining room, which did indeed have both a very sharp tack and a very cunning fox.

"Excuse me sir," Kyle rebutted, "are you calling us liars? I swear on my mother's grave that I have been pizza boy of the month for the past two weeks."

"Kyle it's the 29th," Frank said, hoping that Kyle had any sort of plan.

Kyle gave a smile, "I was so good they dethroned the guy before me."

"Kyle..."

"Yes number 2 pizza boy?" Kyle said ignoring the increasingly visible anger on Mr. Blanc's face.

"Kyle..." Frank tried again, more exacerbated than before.

"Yes, it is I, number 1 pizza boy." Kyle said, looking Frank in the eyes.

"Dude, just stop embarrassing yourself. They know we're not pizza delivery boys."

"But..." Kyle began to show tears in his eyes.

"I'm-I'm number 1 pizza boy! How dare you take my greatest achievement away from me!"

"Just because you say something's true doesn't make it happen!" Frank shouted, frustrated at the defiance his accomplice had.

"Well, I don't think you scoundrels will be leaving as free men without a miracle," Mr. Blanc chided.

A light lit up in Kyle's eyes, and he fell to his knees, raised his arms to the sky and shouted, "Oh, Pizza Gods! Bless our escape with thy holy pepperoni. These heathens have besmirched your name and ours, bring your wrath upon them! With love, number 1 pizza boy." Everyone seemed to be incredibly confused by the sudden clerical turn Kyle took.

"What on earth are you doi-"

At that exact moment an earthquake registering 7.3 on the Richter scale struck the Blanc residence, which quickly began to crumble around them.

Amidst the shaking the earth, Kyle shouted, "Feel the wrath of the pizza gods!"

As the house collapsed around them, Frank and Kyle made their escape, fumbling for a minute, but taking the TV with them.

Frank eventually took up an office job, where he commanded a tight ship of accountants. The stolen TV was a fixture in his office for a while and was made useful, though the remote had been lost to the rubble of the Blanc house. None know exactly where Kyle ended up, but it is known that not long after the break-in and subsequent destruction of the Blanc residence that Kyle went on a spiritual journey, preaching the word of the pizza gods. It is believed that he may be living his best life as a true pizza delivery boy.

WHAT A TRAGEDY?

Sri Jaladi

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway West High School, Ballwin, MO
Educator: Erin Fluchel

Category: Humor

What a tragedy?

It's the end of the semester, and to get an A in my biology class, I, a well educated young man who would never wait until the last minute to study, needed 10/10 on the upcoming quiz. The pressure was on, but it shouldn't have been too bad right? After all, the quiz was only 10 points, how bad could it be if I actually spent a decent amount of time studying for it? Spoiler: really bad. So I proceeded to study day and night, only taking breaks for important things like six or seven straight hours of Fortnite on my iPhone. There were over 3000 points entered in the class making the quiz seemingly meaningless to everyone in the class, but for me.

The night before the quiz I crammed and crammed, and crammed some more, and then realized I was cramming for my government class instead of my biology class. That's when I made the genius decision to drink 3 cups of coffee. 2nd Spoiler: another really bad idea. Actually, I don't drink coffee, I just stayed up late to study for what was definitely the most important tiny quiz of my entire life.

As I woke up in the litter box covered with cat hair (don't ask) all the preparation I had done kicked in, and... I was anxious out of my mind, even without the coffee. It hit me then that the reason I had little to no confidence was because I had spent a majority of the time preparing for a government test that never existed, instead of a biology quiz. Actually, thinking back now, a majority of the time I spent "preparing" for a government test, I really just watched random Donald Trump meme videos which only made the situation worse.

The walk into the classroom was a dreadful experience, I honestly just wanted to turn

around, walk out of school, walk home, and go back to sleep and do the quiz another day. Or find a last minute government class that just happened to be having a quiz that day. The only problem was that it would have taken me an hour and a half to walk home. And also I would have gotten in huge trouble for skipping school, but the former is much larger. Unfortunately, due to the reasons, I had to continue to march, actually it was more of a whimper forward toward my class.

Once in the class, I vividly remember hearing the teacher announce, "Ok everyone, since it is the last quiz of the year, as a special treat, it is going to be a partner quiz with your lab partners!"

The entire class instantly erupted in cheers except for some grim looking faces of the students who were going to raise the grade of their lab partner significantly. Lucky for me, however, my lab partner was a scientific genius, at least she was a self-proclaimed scientific genius. But at least a self-proclaimed genius is still better than a normal partner... or is it? To this day I am actually not sure which is better.

My partner and I were whizzing through the quiz. Every question we both agreed upon the same answer and remembered the teacher talking about it too. But as it normally does when everything seemed fine, it went downhill. The last question was discussing the concentration of hydrogen atoms in two different pH values. We both agreed that one's concentration was 10^{-3} , and another's was 10^{-11} , but we disagreed on which value was larger. While it seems simple now, this was in 9th grade, so... it should have been obvious then too. On one hand, I was very advanced in math and was also very confident that 10^{-11} was smaller than 10^{-3} , but my partner, self-proclaimed scientific genius, wasn't. She was very stubborn that 10^{-3} was less than 10^{-11} because 3 was less than 11. The worst part about it all was scientific genius was so confident of her mathematical applications in biology despite her struggling efforts in the mathematical fields in real life. Nevertheless, I was not the one who was writing the answers, so

despite my protests at changing the answer, the scientific genius swept the quiz away and turned it in without even a blink of hesitation. No matter how much I knew I was right, I had this small hope that since my partner was a scientific genius, she knew what she was talking about, and maybe for some random reason, basic math did not apply here. Final Spoiler alert: boy was I wrong.

After everyone had finished the quiz, I went around talking to my friends about what answer they had put for the last question, dreaded question #10. And unfortunately for my grade, but fortunate for my sanity, everyone I knew put the fact that the value of 10^{-11} was less than the value of 10^{-3} . Unfortunately, even though my self-confidence in my mathematical abilities was slightly boosted, I did not get a 10/10 on that quiz. So what did this mean for me in the long run? Well, to put it simply, that test was, catastrophic.

Since I was unable to attain a 100% on that teeny tiny quiz, my overall grade in that biology class stayed at a B. This meant that my GPA at the end of high school was no longer a 4.00, but instead a 3.99. I know, what a tragedy. In fact, this was so detrimental that I got rejected from every college I applied to, which was none because I was so disheartened by my horrendous GPA I could not bring myself to show it to anyone. Thus I was forced to attend my nearest local community college and began my 2-month journey at a McDonald's degree, where I learned the ins and outs of flipping burgers and how long the chicken sandwich should stay in the Fry-O-Later. Unfortunately, the manager of the McDonalds I proceeded to work at the next 33 years of my life was not a big fan of my burger flipping because according to him, "I miss the correct flip by 5.4 degrees from the central flip angle." For this inexcusable reasons, I worked at one cent less than minimum wage at the same McDonalds flipping the same burger patties (yes by the end some of the patties spent 33 years in

the freezer) till now.

Epilogue (Written one year after the publishing of the original):

Tomorrow, before I go back to Apple Mac's Donald, I wanted to finish writing the epilogue to my story and give thanks to the vast success and attention I received after people heard about the one quiz that changed my life. In fact, since I have published it, I have actually already made \$10 in total revenue from all my book sales, with each book costing \$10 (I bought my own book to improve my self-confidence). So since no one is going to read the second version of my story with this epilogue except for me once I buy my book again, I will come out and say this; After losing \$10 buying my own book and paying fees for publishing, shipping, taxes, and retail fees, I netted a total loss of \$138.43. While that may not seem like much, it is.

A PIERROT IN MONGOLIA

Ryan Morton

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educators: Riley Johnson, Jason Lovera, Laura Michael

Category: Humor

His VW Beetle bumped up and down as it bounded down the road, threatening to unravel at every pebble. He had wanted the car shipped directly to the city he would be

living in, but there had been issues at the airport. The car was covered in the layers of red tape, blew a thick curtain of smoke when the parking brake was applied and had also been painted pastel yellow. Years ago, Ronald had funneled tens of thousands of dollars into a taxi business that would reinvent the taxi industry, so that taxis could be softer on the eyes. This was his profit.

The hill he traversed rose through dark clouds and was covered in a myriad of foul-smelling trees and towering shrubs. Someone had the stupendous idea to put an airport at the top. Soon, the Beetle's engine came to a lull after the Beetle ran through a bush, forcing Ronald to evacuate the now flaming vehicle. Enveloped in smoke, the flames left a leering rabbit with black feet and a patch of clovers shriveled. Dread set in when he was passed by galloping horses mounted by men and women with satchels overflowing with letters. He was tempted to ask for help, but he didn't want to be *THAT* guy.

He could not believe that his taxi from the airport had been late.

Tearing open cheese sandwich, Ronald pulled down the US NAVY hat he had brought to show off to the locals. He began to reconsider moving to a nation thousands of miles from his Jersey home for a bit under minimum wage.

When he received it in the mail, he had needed to reread the letter sent by The Hotel Poland aloud, a letter that had been scribbled in bent handwriting, to fully understand the details.

M-o -n- g-o-l- i-a.

Even now, it felt weird to say. It was a place that forced Ronald to find a globe to figure out anything more than the barbecue. The pamphlet he received described it as **A STATE NESTLED BETWEEN REDDEST RUSSIA AND MANGLED CHINA IN DESPERATE NEED OF HOTEL SERVICES.**

His meal finished, he wandered over to a bush of flowers where some ox played. The

blooming flowers reminded himself of the daisies and daffodils that he had once grown in his own garden. He picked the sweetest ones. Removing his shirt, he revealed the rolling mass of blubber that built the man. His hands combed the velvety flowers through the blond hair of his armpits, dispelling the smell of smoke and airplane food. He began to walk and itch his American posterior. With the flowers. Ronald then fell into a pit of poison ivy.

Having just pulled himself out of the hole and without his Beetle, Ronald had no means of ever getting to Altai in time to clock in for work. Ingenuity struck. He pulled it backward, allowing for the little luggage he saved from his car to remain stable. His feet rested easily on its sides as he prepared to pull himself up. He then climbed up, a rope in hand, and prepared to wait.

The ox then ran off the side of the cliff.

The wrinkled Russian man who stared at Ronald had yet to speak a word to him except for muttering a few words in Russian. He was staring at the cast that wrapped his arm, made by a USSR flag clipped by a soda tab. The faded PEPSI logo on his t-shirt made Ronald thirsty and a little sad for a reason he couldn't quite pinpoint. It also confused him. He did not realize that Soviets got shipments of branded clothing, or that they even knew what Pepsi was.

The old soviet had found him with a busted arm at the bottom of a net, swaying in the wind. Ronald thought it was for suicide prevention. However, the signs he saw on the drive out of the forest indicated that it was really for catching the ox that had fallen off the cliff. It had failed.

Ronald glumly drank Pepsi and ate Quaker Oats brand oatmeal in bed the next day. Eventually, the Old Man gestured to him and said "Syn, Syn! Ya hechv neriy syn! " to him. He remembered, and he only remembered because he had taken half a year of Russian in middle school, that it meant, "Leave." Which

was especially strange because he gestured with sweeping open arms and a picture frame with a young boy in it. Strange.

He packed his bags and stumbled past the man who now had tears welled his eyes. The cat that inhabited the home cuddled the aging Russian to no avail. Ronald gave the man a hug.

Patriotic music blared over the television set. Maybe he didn't need this job after all. Screw hotel desk work. Monotonous inconvenient convenience could kiss his ass. From this day on, he would only accept monotonous convenient inconvenience. He decided that he would stay.

That is, until he saw a red can on his shelf.

Ronald pulled himself from the man's embrace, running for the dunes. It was the fastest he'd run since the day his mother died. The old man chased and chased, but he had forgotten his cane on the way out. He only actually managed about three meters. And so Ronald stumbled across the Gobi, carrying only a change of pants, a few protein bars, and about sixty-three cans of Pepsi.

He eventually came to a bus stop. It lay along a winding road with the dashes painted blue. Like Pepsi. His eyes were brought to the river that hugged the road, providing fish to swim in the gravel sewers. He splashed the cool water onto his now boiled face and then fell onto the concrete platform.

The next bus arrived, but it took five and a half more hours of waiting. Ronald had to jump out of the way of the vehicle when it arrived. He landed in a cactus, causing everyone on the bus to laugh. Ronald stumbled up the steps in shame with thorns sticking out of his scalp.

The girl he sat down next to was missing her right hand. She also happened to be the most beautiful woman Ronald had seen in his entire life. Well, the second most. He hadn't said a word to her, but he loved the girl. Ever since the divorce, he simply wanted a rebound. It was a gross thought, yet Ronald still had it. Even then he had no idea how to seduce her. His ex had

been deaf.

The bus passed a car.

"S-s-so y-you have...those here" struggled Ronald, pointing at the car that was now in the distance.

"What?" said the girl

"C-cars...Mongolia...y-you...have c-cars?"

"We're in a bus?"

Ronald got off at the next stop.

Ronald folded his hat over his beet-red face, not sure if he should continue onwards to the hotel or back to the airport. He cried. Fifteen years since he had a "father". Three since he had a wife. And one since his mother's funeral. He remembered that day. How the flowers he picked from his garden smelled bittersweet on her casket. He thought about how he'd already lost her to prison after her dance with Desoxy on the dashboard when he was five. To be a child again. Horror. First, open mic nights to avoid his foster parents. Second successes in small clubs. Final performances for audiences of cretins and crusts. He could never do it professionally. There were a wife and a kid he needed to provide for. But most of all, he remembered the bells.

Bells?

He heard bells ringing atop a little steeple about two meters from his face. A monk stood in the doorway, a strobe of light fell behind him. His robe flowing in the wind as he sipped an ice cold Pepsi. He held a curved walking stick toward the sky. A bolt of lightning appeared. Wielding his staff, the monk gestured for Ronald to come in.

When Ronald sat down in a pew, the monk walked to the top of the red carpet that led to the front of the church, ending up at the pulpit. He put down his Pepsi. He both began and ended his sermon in a single, random statement from the book he clutched: "It's not a personality trait, for instance, to drive while drunk and kill a child on a crosswalk." The monk slammed the book, now clearly titled *DIANETICS*, close. He began to approach Ronald, but tripped on a projector labeled

"LIGHTNING". Ronald did not know whether he should clap out of respect or to remain silent. But the priest put Ronald's hands together nonetheless. "Have you had any...trouble lately?" said the priest as he stood up and unraveled a roll of film, "perhaps...trouble with women?"

"How did you know?"

"I have a particular set of skills...we call it auditing." The priest had removed a blank file from the bookcase and began scribbling notes.

"Well, I divorced my wife after she cheated on me with a man named Silvio on our third anniversary"

"And..."

"Well, Father - can I call you that? - I've been going through a *HMM* dry spot recently, and I keep having these, well, moments where I can't stop myself from obsessing over the women I meet. I always make a fool of myself"

"You can call me...Steve," said Steve to Ronald's immediate disappointment, "and I think you have a bad case of *Infortunatus-Pauperem Syndrome*. Yes, it says right here that inconvenient lewd thoughts are a clear symptom." He pointed quickly at a paper that he had yet to show Ronald. He took a sad swig from his Pepsi. Removing a jar filled with play-money from a shelf, he asked, "We don't charge for our services, but would you mind donating to the church so that we can continue to help lost men like you?"

"I'm sorry, but all I have is Pepsi. I lost all of my money in a car crash." Steve put a firm hand on the inside of Ronald's thigh, causing him to nearly jump out of his skin. He remembered his second foster father.

"Okay son, I'm going to ask you to study 'The Literature' really hard so that we can break down the barriers holding you back from eternal *LOVE*." Hand still on his thigh, Steve dropped various books with various titles on Ronald's lap. He picked up one, reading the title *HOW TO SUE A MAN TO DEATH AND OTHER STORIES OF RELIGIOUS DIPLOMACY*

“Well, it’s been nice, but I’d best be going.”
Steve tightened his grip on Ronald’s knee.

“You can’t go. We haven’t even begun to talk about our savior Xenu or Hubbard’s greatest truth: [BATTLEFIELD EARTH.](#)”

“I really must go, I have a plane that I must catch.”

“Since you can’t behave properly, I guess we will have to relocate you to one of our reform facilities. Another one just opened in South of the Gobi.” But then the unexpected occurred: Steve grabbed a rusting bat sitting in the corner and pulled the string of his robe.

Ronald had never run so fast in his entire life. Steve, now exposed, lingered only a few feet behind him once again. He sucked and blew puffs of air as he chased Ronald. Ronald descended into a state of feverish chill as he ran from the priest, but he would or more so he could not stop even if his feet froze off. It took an entire kilometer before a yelp came from behind Ronald. The man had tripped on a cactus buried beneath the snow.

Snow?

During the chase, he did not have the ability to observe the blizzard that had erupted. In the desert. Dunes turned to snow mounds, and a herd of camels had laid down and rolled in the Summer-Winter wonderland. The pure impossibility of the situation left Ronald dumbfounded. He chose not to question it. The man who once chased him still laid there, face down and butt-naked in the sandy snow, unmoving. Ronald also chose not to question this.

Walking along the barren road, he thought about the old Russian man who he once considered spending his life with. Then he considered the red can. Though it immediately seemed to be that the man just had a shaky brand allegiance, it *WAS* a can of Pepsi. A red can of Pepsi. However, it wasn’t entirely red, for the red had begun to drip down the blue exterior of the cola. His mind had only let him consider it a bit of paint, but no. The house was

blue. Like Pepsi.

Bottle after bottle, can after can, corporate branded item after item, Pepsi would not let Ronald go. It had been three years since he’d last seen any of the stuff, much more of a Coca-Cola fan himself. Pepsi bottles were a favorite of his second foster family, the same ones that had packed fifteen starving children into a smoky motel for a few cents off their taxes. It was funny really, how the beverage had followed him here, a specter of the past.

The image of the red can of Pepsi still made his stomach queasy. He had seen a human’s hand, severed from something small and dripping blood onto a single can of Pepsi. He thought the Russian had wanted to step into the picture where his father, stepfather, and foster parents had decidedly stepped out, but no. Ronald set his last cans of Pepsi on the ground, twisting them into the snow.

He continued looking for cars along the winding asphalt he walked upon. Eventually, he too tripped on a snow-coated cactus and onto a snow-blanketed frozen lake.

While on the ground, a car blaring opera music approached him. A short-haired woman got out of the car and walked towards the repeatedly falling man. When Ronald noticed the girl, he jabbed himself in the face trying to clear the snow. He fell again. The woman giggled.

“What’s so funny?”

“Your...your nose.” He immediately turned to the ice on the ground. It was true, Ronald saw that his nose had begun to bleed after the jab, completing his clownish appearance. He had no idea how to follow the comment, but the girl found his words. “Do you want a ride? It’s pretty cold out here.”

“Y-yes.” The shivering clown and the girl piled into the car, a brand new Fiat 124.

“I’m Augusta by the way”

“I’m Ron-... I mean Menander. It’s Menander.” said Menander, extending his arm to Augusta.

"So I take it your parents were fans of ancient Greek comedy?"

"No, but I am." There was a short silence.

"Very cool. Where you headed anyways?" asked Augusta as she received his hand as well as one can while driving a car. He handed her a sheet with the address, and the youthful woman drove into the darkness ahead.

"Are you from around here?"

"No, I'm from the Eastern bloc. Poland to be specific, but I don't know if I want to go back" said the woman. She then asked, "where are you from?"

"New Jersey. It's fine if you like the smell of trash. I don't really want to go back either," said Ronald faster than necessary. The woman chuckled at his little joke. Ronald smiled. "But I have to go back, it's where I belong," said Ronald sadly.

"I understand."

They passed cows and lamps, farmlands and cityscape. The hills they climbed rose in defiance of the valley that laid below them. The flurries outside his window added to Mongolia's majesty. A beauty untamed. He and Augusta continued to talk about everything and anything. About childhood. About the weirdness of Mongolia, a country that was neither soviet property nor free. About how his wife had abandoned him at a circus, only for him to arrive at their Trenton townhouse to discover her in bed with another man. About how the lamps of Newark just casually explode on a given day. About his child. This was the first time Menander cried in front of another human being since he had been ripped from his mother's arms, and his tears dripped off of Augusta's t-shirt for the rest of the ride. He told her how his son, a former sailor in the Navy, had died in a car accident during a vacation to Buford, Georgia. He had told him to be careful on the hills. But he ended up at the bottom of a ravine in the very same pastel yellow VW Beetle that now lays on the hill they were about to climb. His son was all he had after the divorce.

He was only twenty-four.

They arrived at Menander's destination: an airport at the top of a spire gilded by snow-crowned trees. Augusta told him about her own history while they waited to buy tickets. She told him how her family lost everything to the Soviets. Her own tears fell while she recounted a story about escaping Poland, only to giggle when she told him she went the wrong direction. She told Menander about her own first husband, a Mongolian man who would beat her with a Pepsi-brand bat. She talked about leaving the guy in a ditch beside a steeple after hitting him over the head with that very same bat. She said it wasn't actually too far from where she picked him up.

The ticket for a plane to Trenton was bought, and Menander had to go. It was a bittersweet parting of two friends who had appeared over the course of a few jokes. But Ronald knew he had to leave. He removed his US NAVY hat, now torn and covered in snow. Dusting it off, he handed it to Augusta. They embraced. And then he was gone.

EGGNOG ESCAPADE

Lane Schumann

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Pius X School,
Moberly, MO

Educator: Christy Forte

Category: Humor

EggNog Escapade

By: Lane Schumann

You may have heard the term, “soccer mom,” before. Well, there is also a term called, “eggnog mom.” You may be wondering what an, “eggnog mom,” is. An, “eggnog mom,” is a mom that spends a lot of time taking her kids to get eggnog or even going by herself all the time. They go shopping at places called, Walmart, ALDI, and Bratchers (another grocery store). They are there, 24/7, and they always end up getting eggnog. Prairie Farms, Darigold, and Central Dairy Eggnog are the brands they go for. There is a story of 3 very hardcore, “eggnog moms,” that fought their way to the back of Walmart, to get the last carton of eggnog- a half gallon of Darigold Eggnog. Let me tell you the story that is known as the great, “Eggnog Escapade.”

During the Christmas season, 3, “eggnog moms,” found themselves in a battle to the back of Walmart, for a half gallon of Darigold Eggnog. Now, this is a little extreme if you ask me, but I can kind of see their logic in this. I love eggnog myself, so I am not one to judge other people. I will give you some information on these moms before I start this story.

~

Name: Margaret

Birth: December 1, 1975

Reason for Love of Eggnog: Creaminess of eggnog, gets a Christmas feeling when she drinks it

Eggnog Mom Aggressiveness from a scale of 1-10: 8

~

Name: Nancy

Birth: November 22, 1974

Reason for Love of Eggnog: Nutmeg taste, gets a Christmas feeling when she drinks it

Eggnog Mom Aggressiveness from a scale of 1-10: 10 (Most aggressive)

~

Name: Laura

Birth: February 14, 1973

Reason for Love of Eggnog: Amazing flavor, texture, nutmeg taste, creaminess, and gets a Christmas feeling when she drinks it
Eggnog Mom Aggressiveness from a scale of 1-10: 9

~

It was just a normal, winter day on December 12, 2018 (11 days after Margaret's birthday). Margaret was on her way to Walmart, with her special, eggnog carrier. It could hold a total of 10 eggnog cartons. She pulled into the Walmart parking lot and got out. Who did she see there? It was none other than, Nancy, her best friend.

Margaret called out to her, “Hello Nancy. Back for more eggnog I see?”

Nancy looked in that direction, saw Margaret, and called back, “Why yes I am.” (While holding up an eggnog carrier that could hold 20 eggnog cartons.)

While they were talking, Laura was walking by and saw them. She was another one of Margaret's friends.

She shouted out to them, making fun of them, “You two arguing over eggnog over there?”

Margaret stopped talking, “No, we were just talking about how much we love eggnog more than you.”

Laura looked surprised, but still said, “Well, I don't know what you're talking about, because I'm the one with the eggnog carrier that can hold up to 30 eggnog cartons.”

Margaret and Nancy both dropped their jaws in awe, as Laura was standing there triumphantly, looking at the eggnog carrier.

~

Meanwhile, while they were all making jokes, a mom and her son, Billy, were walking into Walmart with a cart.

The mom, who's name was, Rita, asked her son, Billy, with excitement, “Are you ready to go shopping Billy?”

Billy replied, “Yes, mama.”

Then they walked into Walmart.

~

After Margaret, Nancy, and Laura were done talking, they walked into the store.

Margaret said, "Well, ladies you know the deal. We do our normal shopping, buy a few Christmas things, and get some eggnog."

Nancy and Laura replied, "Oh, yeah!"

Just as they were about to run off and do their things together, an announcement came on over the intercom.

"Ladies and gentlemen! There is a shortage on eggnog and there is only one carton left in the back. Thank you!"

Not one of the ladies moved. They had stopped cold. They looked from one to the other.

(Now, they were friends and all, but when it comes down to one carton of eggnog, it tears their friendship apart. It takes them a while to start talking to one another again, even if they offer eggnog to one another. Don't ask me about this. I don't understand it either, but they say, that it shows they are boasting about having eggnog, while the others don't.)

Before anyone knew it, they were off and running. They forgot all about shopping and Christmas shopping. It was a total free-for-all.

Laura went right, Margaret went left, and Nancy went straight. Laura was taking a lead, fast, Margaret and Nancy knew they both had taken the wrong way. (Now, you'd think they would team up and try to stop her, they didn't. They had their own plans.)

Laura was a quarter of the way there and as she looked behind her, she didn't see Margaret or Nancy. Satisfied, she slowed to a jog and then a walk, not worried at all.

Meanwhile, Margaret had just begged a lady into letting her ride in the lady's cart. The lady wasn't sure to let her, but Margaret told her it was an emergency, and the lady immediately asked, "Where to?"

Margaret said, happily and triumphantly, "Eggnog section and fast!"

The lady replied, "Yes, ma'am!!!"

Unexpectedly, she started pushing the cart at an amazing pace, gaining speed. Luckily, no one was in the aisle they were running through. Now, she was very close to Laura. But, just then, Nancy jumped out in front of the cart, scaring the lady pushing it, who let go, running away screaming. Nancy then got out of the way and Margaret, who was still in the cart, ran straight into a wooden shelf, holding clothes, flew out of the cart, screaming, and landed on a sweater holder.

Nancy then took advantage of the cart, grabbing it, to use as a weapon. She saw Laura, about 50 yards away, took the extra cart in both hands, and pushed it with all her might, at Laura. She watched it with eagerness and excitement. SMACK! It hit Laura's cart and Laura, causing her and the cart to go down, the cart landing on Laura's legs. Laura screamed in agony, while Nancy was cheering and running towards Laura at the same time. Nancy stopped in front of Laura, laughed, and walked towards the egg nog section. Laura, overcome with anger, grabbed Nancy's ankle just in time, tripped her, causing her to fall over, her face hitting the ground hard. While they were fighting, Margaret was trying to get up out of the sweaters, struggling.

~

While all of this was going on, Billy and his mother, Rita, were making their way to the milk section, getting everything on their list. They finally made it to the milk section, got their milk, and started to walk away. Just then, a Darigold carton of eggnog, caught Billy's eye.

He shouted joyfully, "Ooh, mom!!!"

Rita stopped the cart, and asked, "What is it Billy?"

Billy answered more excitedly, "Can we get the last carton of Darigold eggnog?"

Rita said, "I don't know. It's not just the last carton of Darigold eggnog. It's the last carton of eggnog, out of every brand. Don't you want someone else to have it?"

Billy replied, sadly, with still a little bit of

excitement, "But mom, we don't get egg nog a lot and I really want it. Besides, this is a one and a lifetime deal. There's never any Darigold eggnog cartons left. We're always left with the other brands, but Darigold's the best. Can we please get it? Please?"

Rita said, happily, "Why sure we can Billy! I had never even thought of that. Let's go ahead and get it."

Billy exhilarated, "Yay!"

He ran over to the fridge door, swung it wide open, grabbed the carton of eggnog, and put it in the cart carefully, trying not to let it fall.

They were then on their way.

~

After all this happened, Laura and Nancy were still fighting and Margaret had just gotten out of the sweater pile on the ground. She hung them on the holder, as quickly as possible, and right before she started running for the now gone eggnog, she had a genius idea. She remembered that Laura AND Nancy both love sweaters and that they could never resist not getting any when they saw one. She rolled it on over to them, and shouted, "Oh, ladies! I have a present for you!"

Laura and Nancy stopped fighting, looked at the sweaters and Margaret, and then shielded their eyes.

Laura yelled out loud to herself, "Don't give in to it Laura!"

Nancy did the same thing, "Come on Nancy, snap out of it, SNAP OUT OF IT!!"

Margaret finally did the trick, by tricking them, "Ah, I'm not going to mess with getting the egg nog. I'll just by some things I need and I'll be on my way."

Margaret walked off and Nancy and Laura immediately jumped up and started sorting through the sweaters.

Laura exclaimed, "Ooh, a rare leopard and cotton stitched sweater!! I have to get it!"

Nancy yelled with glee, "Oh yeah! Well I'm going to buy the one and only egg nog lover sweater! See?"

Laura looked up, saw the sweater, and grabbed it, dropping the other sweater. It was a full blown tug of war.

Laura yelled, "No! I deserve it more!"

Nancy shouted back, "No, I do!"

Then, the corner of Laura's eye caught something. She let go of the sweater, which set Nancy flying. Nancy hit the ground and said, in pain, "Whatever you see has to be more important than the eggnog lover sweater. What is it?"

Laura shouted with anger, "Margaret tricked us! I see her sneaking over there to get the eggnog!"

Nancy got up as quick as lightning and said, "The nerve of HER!"

They both started towards the eggnog section. Margaret saw them and started running, too. (They were all athletic, so running was not a problem at all to them.)

They all made it to the eggnog section at the same time and looked for the eggnog carton.

Margaret exclaimed, dumbfounded, "I can't believe it!"

Laura chimed in, "Yeah, I can't believe someone would go and take the last carton of Darigold eggnog!"

Nancy stepped in front of them and said, "This is all our fault. If we hadn't gotten into such a big battle for the eggnog, this never would've happened. Look at the mess we've made. I mean seriously. We can't let eggnog tear apart our friendship apart and the store apart. Christmas is the time of celebration for Jesus' birth, and it is the time of kindness, peace, joy, hope, and love. Let us enjoy the season like we should be doing, instead of spending our time shopping for eggnog. Let us all, do things with our families together and shop for eggnog in peace. Let us be kind to one another. Let us love one another as God has loved us. Let us hope everyone has a safe season. Let us be joyful of Jesus' birth. Let us celebrate Jesus' birth throughout the most

wonderful time of the year!"

Then they all walked off and cleaned up the mess they had made, Nancy and Laura, forgetting about the eggnog lover sweater and, them all, forgetting about what had just happened.

A SENIOR'S GUIDE TO GETTING REJECTED FROM COLLEGE

Alice Wu

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Kat Buchanan

Category: Humor

Not participating in enough activities

Many colleges are going to ask for resumés, so you'd better pad yours up. Make sure to join all the honor societies you can, where you can pay and then don't have to do anything for the rest of the year. Join STUCO. Run for class officer. Engage in fascinating debates about the color of the class t-shirt. Show up to a couple of the DECA[1] and FBLA[2] meetings and maybe go to nationals without any preparation. Later, you'll have tons of shiny accolades to regurgitate into all your essays. You won't struggle to fill up the minimum word count, so you won't have to include all that meaningless fluff about passion and growth. You'll be very well-rounded, for sure, and thus extra-ordinary.

Not taking enough AP classes

If you're not stressed and sleep-deprived, you're not working hard enough. Who cares about pursuing any of your passions in high school? Who cares if you actually enjoy any of your classes? Double up on science whether or not yet want to pursue STEM. Make sure to load up on all the AP classes you can, especially easy ones like AP Human Geography to AP Microeconomics. Also, make sure to take AP Government online because you'll earn an easy A that way.

Not having high enough test scores

Everyone knows that if you're shooting for schools like Harvard, you need to find a way to stand out, and what better way to do that than through your test scores? Obviously, a 35 or lower on the ACT just won't cut it. Make sure to save up thousands of dollars for a tutor because that's the only way to succeed. Forget about having a social life. Spend hours studying every week. Sure, test scores say nothing about your character or your work ethic. Sure, almost 3,000 people get 36's nationwide each year. But hey, you'll be one of them.

Forgetting to mention your most important awards

On the Coalition and Common Applications, you'll be told to list your five most important awards. If you followed my advice in the previous tips, you would have plenty to use already. As a National Merit Semifinalist and National AP Scholar, you'll certainly stand out among the tens of thousands of other students who also thought their test scores were good enough for top colleges. You may realize that there's already a testing section on college applications where colleges will be able to see your AP scores, but honestly? Colleges are academic institutions, and it won't hurt to make it very obvious to them that you're dedicated to your schooling and

not much else. I mean, if you have to spend all your time studying in high school, you'll only have to suffer a tiny bit more in college when your workload is even heavier. You'll already have experience shedding angry tears at 3 A.M. in the morning.

Not having enough people edit your essay

Don't believe all that garbage about conveying your own "voice" in your college essays. Admissions officers read thousands of essays year, and even if your personality hasn't been quashed by all the counselors, parents, teachers, and stressed-out peers who tried to give you advice all throughout high school, admissions officers would immediately forget your voice upon reading it. Honestly, you need all the help you can get, and if others want to write your essays for you, so be it. If you can throw in some sob story about death, drugs, or divorce, or even better, all three, then you're a shoo-in. If it's actually true, then great! If not, well, no one's going to know.

Failing to research "fit" for your colleges

Why would these admissions officers ask so many questions like "Why our school?" Let's be honest, every student out there is just after the prestige. We all want to end up at a school that's as high up on the U.S. News best college rankings as possible. Admissions officers know this, and they're just trying to weed out the students who procrastinate too much to finish answering all the college-specific questions. Apply to as many schools as you can, more than 20 even, if you can manage it.

Just don't write in your Princeton essay that you love their International Business major. They don't have one. And don't be afraid to copy paste your responses for other schools to save time. Just remember to tweak your essay accordingly. Don't tell Princeton that you

"can't wait to go to Yale." Show even an ounce of intelligence, and that's all colleges want with their "Why This School?" essays. Many high schoolers are dumb, and they need to be weeded out. I mean, it's not as if there are other factors besides prestige in the college decision process.

Not taking college applications seriously enough

Let's continue to assume that you want to go to Harvard. Don't forget to head over to Naviance[3] and compare your GPA and test scores to past accepted students. Your resulting feelings of incompetence will ensure you take this whole process seriously enough. Still not fazed? Check out College Confidential and read some "What Are My Chances?" forums! Eh, so there are some liars, but that can't be avoided. Oh, some kid in Colorado got a 1600 on the SAT and won nationals in fencing? Oh no, they got rejected?

Welp, there go your chances. You can't compare with that. But you know what, it's not as if you were ever going to get in anyway.

I mean, it's not as if high school is about more than just preparing for your future. It's not as if your life has already started and living in the moment is important too. Turns out you just blew everything, and it's time to go cry alone in the bathroom.

THE VIEWS AND OPINIONS EXPRESSED IN THIS ARTICLE DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THE POSITION OF THE NORTH STAR STAFF AS A WHOLE OR EVEN THE AUTHOR'S.

[1] A high school business organization

[2] Yet another high school business organization

[3] A career readiness software

JOURNALISM

JOHN BURROUGHS SCHOOL ALUMNA AND LAS VEGAS RESIDENT REFLECTS ON OCTOBER SHOOTING

Adina Cazacu-De Luca

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Maggie Ervin

Category: Journalism

On October 1, 2017, a shooter opened fire on concert goers at the Route 91 Harvest Music Festival on the Las Vegas Strip in Paradise, Nevada, leaving 58 people dead and 546 injured. In light of the recent shooting in Mandalay Bay, *THE WORLD* reached out to JBS alumna Ana Llewellyn '07 in Las Vegas to hear her account of the tragedy and its effect on the community.

Llewellyn lives in Summerlin, Nevada, about twenty minutes from the Las Vegas Strip. She is the Vice President of Look Style Society, a company that leases space in their 18,000 square feet facilities to over 450 estheticians, hair stylists, nail artists, and more. The Town Square location is two miles from Mandalay Bay, so close that Llewellyn says she

can see it through a window at her workplace.

Llewellyn was in her home, asleep, at the time of the shooting. She awoke at 3 AM to a text from a Burroughs classmate, asking her if she was all right. "My throat fell into my stomach and I knew, without having to turn on the TV that something terrible had happened," she later recounts.

Monday, October 2 came, and Llewellyn sent out a company-wide email, wanting to know if all of her employees were safe. She offered paid leave to anyone who needed to take the day off to be with family. "Trauma doesn't have to happen to you to have a direct effect on you," she says. To this end, Look Style Society will be holding a mobile blood drive in November as well as two fundraisers for first responders and their families.

Llewellyn stayed at the Town Square location on Monday. There were five to ten stylists in that day, and according to Llewellyn, "almost everyone that was in either was a spouse of a first responder or had friends at the concert. One of the stylists, her cousin got shot, [and] another knew three people that were shot."

She noticed a change in her daily interactions as well. On Monday, she went to pick up coffee and asked the cashier if everyone they knew was safe. Llewellyn remarked, "And these are total strangers. There's a sense of shellshock and quiet mixed with compassion. 'How are you doing today' is the same question you ask every day but now it has a totally different meaning."

Llewellyn visited the healing garden located under the "Welcome to the Fabulous Las Vegas" sign on Friday, October 6. She described seeing the 58 crosses for the deceased as "one of the most heartbreaking and breathtaking experiences I've ever had. There were rows and rows of people lighting candles and saying prayers and making a path [by the crosses] so we could read everyone's name and give those who lost their life in this tragedy a moment of respect."

As for her daily life, Llewellyn notes that “life goes on, you still get up, and you still have a business to run, and people whose livelihoods depend on this business running,” but continues, “you can’t unsee or unhear, but you integrate it into who you are in a way that makes you a better person and you have to take one step forward, after the other, after the other, after the other. You can’t pause time.”

While life returns to normal, Llewellyn believes the city “is forever changed,” adding that “It’s hard to drive by Mandalay Bay, and not feel something in the pit of my gut. Silence happens in the car; I turn the radio down. [The shooting] certainly is very present, just not so much in our faces.”

When asked if she believed mass shootings were becoming a part of modern American life, Llewellyn responds by saying that she hopes not, but that effective reform must take place. Political division is a “symptom of society as a whole,” she says. “When our differences are so stratifying that two parties in Congress can’t make meaningful reform, that we can’t see human beings that have different views from us, those divisions get reflected in these mass events... I don’t think [mass shootings are] the norm if we collectively take action and set differences aside to take steps towards the things that need to be shifted.”

Meanwhile, as Congress moves towards tax policy and continuing the health care debate, Mandalay Bay seems to fade away as past shootings have done. While the progress Llewellyn mentions is optimistic, it proves easier said than done.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BUBBLE

Lea Despotis

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Westminster Christian
Academy, Chesterfield, MO
Educator: Scott Vonder Bruegge

Category: Journalism

AS THE AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL MODEL FACES
LIMITATIONS, A REDESIGN OF THE SYSTEM MAY
POINT THE WAY FORWARD.

In a bold assertion in my previous article [THE OVER-COMMITTED, OVER-PRESSURED, ALMOST-COLLEGE](#) student, I claimed that students today are under siege. Plagued by the demands of excessive pressure and over-commitment, students edge closer to the precipice of disaster. As teens tirelessly pursue the narrow confines of success in the academic realm, a call for change in the system appears more imperative than ever.

But society faces a challenging question: How can learning institutions adequately develop competent students and inspire a generation of engaged and productive citizens? By analyzing the very core of the American educational model, it brings into question the narrow methods of evaluating and educating today’s students—and if these are truly the best strategies.

In the year 2000, students across the world participated in the first global assessment of the Program International Student Assessment (PISA). In contrast to traditional standardized tests, the PISA quantified preparedness for life by assessing a unique set of skills: critical thinking, communication, and application to real-life problems. With shocking results, the unsuspected nation of Finland emerged on top, surpassing the U.S., Germany, and Korea, who prided themselves on their educational systems. The results of the PISA garnered worldwide attention as a poignant example of what Finland was doing right and where other systems fell short. What had they done to nurture such high

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performing critical thinkers?

Finland's educational foundation incorporated a completely novel set of principles rejected by the majority of classrooms across the world. Based on practical and vocational programs, Finland avoided the push for standardization and restrictive curriculum. Instead, educators prioritized collaboration and a balanced circular cycle consisting of sharing, creating, innovating, and applying developmental skills to foster critical thinking. With relatively minimal amounts of homework and standardized testing, they valued the educational merit of free time as an opportunity to grow and learn organically and creatively. They sought to instill a **DEEPER** type of learning, and that's what revolutionized their classrooms and placed them number #1 in the world.

While Finnish students continue to excel academically under this philosophy, America's youth suffer at the hands of an amped-up, relentless achievement race. Yet exhausted and over-tested American students consistently underperform in comparison to their high-scoring counterparts in Finland. But why?

In the backdrop of the Common Core curriculum, the education in America centers around a very limited approach. Stressing only particular areas of knowledge, the system employs a regimented routine of lecture, homework, and exam with the emphasis on assessments and performance. In an era of extreme standardization, students are measured on their ability to regurgitate the memorized facts onto the scantron bubbles to demonstrate proficiency in a subject. This mindset essentially focuses on the **END RESULTS** rather than the **PROCESS** itself.

"Our educational system forces information and facts on students and often times doesn't allow them to understand the meaning behind the information. Students don't have a deep connection with their education and easily forget things that they have learned," said Hanna Ottosen, junior. "My problem with education is that I fail to see the relevance in everything I'm

learning."

By neglecting students' potential to make relevant connections, our system undermines the most fundamental principles of education.

"The goal of education cannot just be to impart knowledge, it has to make people who can learn and want to learn and are able to navigate through the world. If we care about personal transformation, we cannot accept the way education is now," said Robert Murphy, a junior math teacher.

Schools today foster a "spoon-fed" approach, where students lack the ability to think independently and to critically extrapolate from their learning. As achievement and results trump understanding, the one-dimensional measure of learning correlates with a narrow aspect of intelligence and fails to reward problem-solving skills achieved through ingenuity and creativity. Through the standardization and rigid curriculum, students disengage from productive thinking and application, plunging into a creativity and originality cycle of stagnation.

In fact, according to a study by William and Mary's Kyung Hee Kim, students are embroiled in a "creativity crisis" as Torrance Tests of Creativity scores have consistently declined since 1990.

However, the skills students lack today are exactly the skills needed to thrive in the modern world. In an IBM survey of 1,500 CEOs, employers ranked "creativity" as the top priority in their staff; yet, this quality was lacking in many of the otherwise qualified candidates.

And this is where education can stand to improve. In an era of what experts call an "educational crisis," we must look to a new approach where schools nurture students' drive to learn instead of destroying it, stimulate original thinking instead of stifling it, and promote application instead of omitting it.

In transforming schools, educational experts harken for reform and propose practical solutions. Using Finland as an example of success, a highly personalized, dynamic approach to education will engage students and instill a broader range of skills. By incorporating interdisciplinary ideas and

project-based practical learning, students learn to collaborate, communicate, and innovate.

With emphasis placed on these fundamental skills that go beyond the surface of superficial learning, students are equipped to flourish in an ever-changing 21st-century world. After all, progress and problem-solving is only ever made through innovation and creativity—and thinking “outside the bubble” is exactly what we need to teach our future generations.

TIME TO "SPILL THE TEA"

Lea Despotis

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Westminster Christian Academy, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Scott Vonder Bruegge

Category: Journalism

Dating back to ancient Chinese culture, the quintessential cup of tea has been a universal product touted for its medicinal and therapeutic properties. Laden with a medley of exotic spices and hints of floral extracts, the endless variety of teas remains a cross-cultural favorite. According to the [TEA ASSOCIATION OF THE US](#), Americans alone consumed 3.8 billion gallons of tea in 2017.

But buyer beware: there is something else lurking in your cup of tea linked to serious complications. In various experimental studies, researchers have discovered a staggering number of pesticides and other carcinogenic chemicals in popular name-brand teas.

The independent research company [CBC NEWS CANADA](#) used an accredited lab to

conduct a thorough investigation testing the levels of pesticide residue in a variety of teas. The results of the study were beyond shocking: Over half of popular tea brands tested contained extreme pesticide levels and other chemicals that exceed the legal limit. Ranging from 8 to 22 different chemicals, well-known tea brands like Lipton, Tetley, Twining's ranked among the highest in pesticide contamination.

And this study does not stand alone as numerous research organizations have discovered dangerously high levels of harmful pesticides. In an analytical pesticide residue study published in the 2014 [FOOD CHEMISTRY](#) journal, researchers detected traces of eight different pesticides in various teas. One particular pesticide, fenitrothion, was excessively high with an amount that was 35 times higher than the Environment Protection Agency's (EPA) recommendation for a “safe” pesticide level.

Organic teas are no exception. While “natural” and “pesticide free” labels appear enticingly healthy, various studies have proven certain labels to be extremely misleading. Of the teas tested in a study from [THE JOURNAL OF TOXICOLOGY](#), 70% of the teas tested, including organic, contained toxic contamination of lead and other metals as a result of the accumulation of fluorine from the soil.

These results are alarming, especially to the daily tea-enthusiast. In recent years, a growing concern has surfaced between the potential association between pesticide-laden tea and disease. The legitimate concerns of tea contamination are gaining traction among health forums and media outlets, with newspapers such as [THE ATLANTIC](#) reporting on tea-drinkers plagued by serious ailments. One story from [THE ATLANTIC](#) shared the harrowing story of a 56-year-old heavy tea-drinker suffering kidney failure from tea consumption. And unfortunately, research substantiates this worrisome connection.

According to several studies, certain pesticides discovered in tea samples pose serious health threats, ranging from minor

illnesses to potentially life-threatening conditions. For example, two specific pesticides, endosulfan and monocrotophos, and several other carcinogenic chemicals found in teas have been banned in other countries for their serious health implications.

Additional research uncovered a correlation between cancer incidence and pesticide exposure in tea. A published review article that investigated the cancer health effects of exposure to pesticide found a consistent association for brain and prostate cancer as well as kidney cancer in children. Another 2014 study discovered a shocking five-fold increase in risk of development of lung cancer related to tea consumption, while a higher exposure to pesticides in general, increased the risk of lung cancer.

The dangerous effects also extend to the traces of metals found in teas. Research has suggested that fluorine toxicity and other hard metals may be linked to health problems such as osteoporosis, joint pain, kidney problems, and even Alzheimer's disease.

But to truly understand the toxicity problem, we must look to the cause. The root of the pesticide issue emanates from the source: the foreign tea industries. For centuries, China and India have maintained their prominent role as purveyors of tea, with China harvesting about 1.2 million tons of tea each year.

Their food safety record is hardly perfect, however, tainted with a history of contamination, pollution, and insufficient oversight. For optimal tea cultivation, the leaves are routinely blanketed with harmful pesticides that are likely transferred into your cup of tea during the brewing process. However, tea companies are not the only culprit, as pollution and environmental factors emit contaminants, increasing the toxicity of tea. The issue with tea contamination is thus a much broader ecological issue that presents difficult impediments extending beyond a simple solution.

It is up to the United States government to

regulate and monitor the importation of dangerous chemicals and respond appropriately to the escalating risk. Proactive and diligent U.S. involvement is a critical step in developing a long-term solution to combat the presence of pesticides and other chemicals in tea.

However, despite the extensive research, knowledge of toxins in popular brands of tea remains widely unknown to most consumers. While data indicates a clear connection between pesticides in tea and debilitating health problems, the issue is not immune to controversy. Bold news headlines and class-action lawsuits have garnered governmental attention to the issue, forcing the tea industry to respond to claims and conduct further investigation. Some of the examinations have uncovered erroneous test results from third-party researchers, leaving the accuracy of studies difficult to discern.

But the sad reality is that many articles on this subject are limited in scope and skim the surface of a truly complicated, multi-variable issue. After thorough research drawing from primary sources and academic studies, my goal of this investigation was to present accurate facts consistently supported by studies published in reputable academic journals.

In my efforts to provide an extensive investigation, I conducted my own experiment to test the presence of pesticides in additional tea brands. Along with Lipton tea, my results revealed that Gold Peak, Teavana, and Tazo all contained one or more pesticides that exceed 1 mg/L. Compared to the EPA's standard, the pesticide level found in these teas surpasses the "safe" dose for at least 1/3 of the potential pesticides present in all varieties of teas. While my experiment does not analyze the potential health effects, the data does indicate the presence of high levels of dangerous pesticides that should warrant concern. With mounting evidence surrounding the toxic contamination of tea, utmost caution is advisable when considering even the most popular tea brands.

While it is important to expose the issue, my intent of this article is not to bash tea companies or the hard-working people who grow, export, import, and manufacture bags of tea that make their way to our supermarket shelves. Instead, my hope in this research is to provide a comprehensive overview of the issue and raise awareness of the potentially harmful chemicals that may be hidden in your cup of tea.

So whether you are willing to take the risk or not, that's entirely up to you. But as for me, I'd rather just "spill" that cup of tea.

SHAKING UP SPORTS

Hannah Loder

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Glendale High School,
Springfield, MO

Educators: Teena Mahoney, Teena
Mahoney

Category: Journalism

A hand reaches out to the opposition. With a firm but friendly grip, an athlete gives the opposing team respect. There will be no surprises because there is respect from both teams. There is no ego, only the drive to win. This is the premise of the Handshake Challenge.

John-Laffnie (JL) de Jager is a former professional tennis player, current coach of many professional players in the world and coach of the World Team Tennis Springfield Lasers tennis team. De Jager approaches coaching with the life of the player in mind. This mindset prompted de Jager to start the

Handshake Challenge in his home country of South Africa.

"First, the most important thing is to teach my players to be champions in life so to be a champion person," de Jager said. "For me it's about respect, always respecting your opponent."

To participate in the Handshake Challenge, teams of any sport shake hands before they begin their game or match. A pledge is read to share the importance of sportsmanship and how the challenge shows respect. Many sports shake hands after playing, but de Jager wants to see players establish respect before they play. De Jager compares it to shaking hands in everyday parts of life.

"When you go for lunch, when you go for dinner, when you go to visit people, everybody shakes hands and says hello beforehand, but we don't do it in sport. We do it afterwards," de Jager said.

De Jager believes that there are three main advantages to participating in the Handshake Challenge, and it is all about respect.

"If I have respect for you, ultimately I have respect for myself, and I'm never surprised when you play well when I respect you," de Jager said. "Secondly is that I want to challenge you to be at your best. I don't want to intimidate you when you're weak and then beat you. I want to beat you when you're at your best. And then thirdly is let's play tough and hard, but let's play fair."

The challenge started in South Africa with rugby because of the physicality of the sport. Now, de Jager's goal is to take the challenge all over the world and to every sport. Sherif Abohabaga, graduated college tennis player from Southwest Baptist University and highly ranked tennis player in Africa, was a substitute for the Lasers this past season. He knows the benefit of the challenge for more than only sports, and he hopes de Jager is able to carry out his goal.

"I would like JL [to] take this thing really as far as he can because I am pretty sure it is going to help a lot of people," Abohabaga said. "It's not only in tennis. Just in general, having a bad day, going and shaking hands with somebody, tell them everything will be great, you know it can change

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lives just by saying that.”

At the first assembly of the year, de Jager came to speak about the Handshake Challenge and overcoming obstacles in life. He challenged Glendale to become the first high school in the United States to pledge the Handshake Challenge. Mitch Pycior, Glendale Athletic Director, is optimistic about possible outcomes of de Jager’s visit at the school. Pycior is leaving the decision to participate in the Handshake Challenge up to the coaches of Glendale sports.

“Whether or not we ever become a school that is fully engaged in the Handshake Challenge throughout our programs, the attention that it brought to this topic was significant,” Pycior said.

Although there has yet to be an official pledge of the Handshake Challenge at Glendale, many sports have their captains shake hands with the opposing team captains before they play. Girls tennis put a focus on shaking hands before their matches with their individual opponents. According to Sydney Johnson, senior, the next step is to engage the entire team.

“Our coach, Penticuff, he kind of explained on our first match what the Handshake Challenge was to our team,” Johnson said. “He told us all to go out onto our courts and do the Handshake Challenge, but we would be open to explaining it to the other team. I think that would be a good step for our team as a whole.”

There are other ways Glendale puts a focus on sportsmanship. In wrestling, Coach Bud Donnell teaches his athletes how to be good sportsmen after competing.

“We really preach sportsmanship. You know, everyone loses, so we need to teach it’s okay to lose and how to respond to it,” Donnell said.

Coach Jeff Rogers of Glendale soccer agrees that it is very important to act appropriately after a game, especially a tough loss.

“To me, if you want true sportsmanship, it’s after a contest because it’s easy before a game because everybody’s happy before a game,” Rogers said.

“After a game, somebody’s not going to be happy, and that’s when your true character and your integrity is going to shine.”

In response to any opposition to the Handshake Challenge, de Jager stresses that sportsmen need to be the bigger people in order to play a fair game. When players shake hands, they are telling their opponents that they support them. Some people see this as a weakness, but de Jager says that the weakness comes from believing a handshake will influence the outcome of the event.

“What do you do on a daily basis to make people around you feel better? Yeah, you can make your opponent feel better, why not?” de Jager said. “You’re insecure if you don’t want to make him feel better because it means that you feel threatened. And what people don’t understand is when you shake somebody’s hand before a match and you make eye contact, that’s actually intimidating.”

At Glendale, sportsmanship will continue to be an important part of athletics. Pycior hopes that Glendale becomes known for developing great players with great attitudes.

“I just see it becoming more about who we are,” Pycior said. “I mean that would be my ultimate goal is that people, among being good athletic programs, people know us for our good sportsmanship.”

Be on the lookout for Glendale athletics supporting the Handshake Challenge. If any sports would like to participate, they can learn more about the challenge on the Respect in Sport facebook page. Information and example videos can also be accessed through de Jager’s various social media accounts under his full name: John-Laffnie de Jager. De Jager asks that participating programs in the Handshake Challenge create a video explaining who they are, why they participated and add in a clip of them shaking hands with their opponents. This video can be posted to any social media with #handshakechallenge and de Jager’s account tagged.

NOVEL WRITING

INTO THE UNKNOWN

Isobel Li

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: California Trail Middle School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Leslie Brown

Category: Novel Writing

BRIEF SUMMARY:

Ila was lucky to have support from her mother, or else she'd probably be dead by now, if caught by the mediator officials. She thought it had been impossible to have a defect that only affected her color mark, the method of being branded for identification by living regions. Ila was partly correct. Although it wasn't a defect, something other than her wrist had been impacted. Xing wasn't so lucky. Father gone and mother unwilling to show love to her only daughter, she had always been mostly independent. When her mother finally did something helpful and directed her on where to go, Xing boarded a plane to America to escape China and entered a whole new disaster. Ruhi maybe had the worst luck of all. With only her sister to rely on, they didn't know what to do until the international company their father had worked for provided them plane tickets. Ruhi had originally thought they were helpful and kind, but were they truly? The three of their lives had been intertwined long before they saw each other in person, and together, they needed to stop the company from doing the exact thing they had experienced again. Hope is scattered through the despair and with every passing day, the three of them strengthen their bond and harden their will. After all, you don't need luck to be successful.

EXCERPT:

25- XING

XING SERIOUSLY DID NOT TRUST THE ELAINE GIRL AFTER WHAT ILA AND RUHI TOLD HER. EVEN IF ELAINE IMPROVED HER ENGLISH, IT DIDN'T MEAN THAT SHE WAS TRUSTWORTHY.

AFTER THEIR SMALL CONGREGATION OF RUHI TELLING THEM ALL WHAT ELAINE WAS SAYING, IT WAS ALMOST TIME FOR DINNER AND CAYDEN SANDERS WANTED TO TALK TO THEM BEFORE IT.

"ALRIGHT, SO OUR RESEARCHERS—"

"THAT OUR ABILITIES ARE FROM THE OPERATION? AND THAT YOU WANT TO REPEAT THE OPERATION FOR CERTAIN PARENTS THAT ARE WILLING TO PAY FOR THEIR KIDS TO HAVE THESE ABILITIES?" ILA SAID IRRITATEDLY. "THANKS FOR THE UPDATE THOUGH."

MR. SANDERS SWALLOWED NERVOUSLY. "WE SERIOUSLY AREN'T PLANNING TO DO THAT, SO I'M NOT SURE WHAT YOU'RE COMING FROM. ANYWAYS, I GENUINELY DON'T SUPPORT THAT. I'M NOT A FAN OF REPEATING MISTAKES," HE SAID TRUTHFULLY.

XING RAISED AN EYEBROW. "SO WE ARE MISTAKES. ANYWAYS WHAT WERE YOU SAYING?"

"WELL, OUR RESEARCHERS HAVE DECIDED TO TELL YOU THAT THERE IS ANOTHER GIRL THAT THEY BROUGHT IN MUCH EARLIER THAN YOU THREE."

RUHI LAUGHED, PROBABLY JUST TO GET ON HIS NERVES. "WE ALREADY KNEW THAT."

HE BLINKED. "OKAY, YOU CAN GO TO DINNER NOW."

26- RUHI

"THAT WAS A LITTLE BIT RUDE OF YOU," SEJAL CHIDED HER SISTER.

"IT'S FINE, THEY CAN'T HURT US," RUHI REPLIED. "WELL, BESIDES DO MORE OF THOSE

WEIRD TESTS THAT MAKE ELAINE JEALOUS."

SEJAL SIGHED. "RUHI, I OVERHEARD THAT THERE WAS A CONFLICT BETWEEN THE RESEARCH TEAMS, AND THAT SOME PEOPLE WANT TO MAKE THIS A BUSINESS FOR DESIGNER BABIES THAT HAVE LOTS OF TALENTS. THEY SAY THAT YOU THREE, SORRY FOUR, CAN SIMPLY HELP THEM FIGURE OUT WHAT TO DO FOR CERTAIN ABILITIES."

RUHI WHIRLED AROUND. "SERIOUSLY?"

SEJAL NODDED GRIMLY. "I THINK THAT YOU'LL SEE SOON ENOUGH."

27- ILA

RUHI INFORMED ILA AND XING OF WHAT HER SISTER HAD HEARD. HOWEVER, THEY DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO THINK ABOUT IT, AS THEY WERE FINALLY GOING TO MEET THE OTHER GIRL.

"LEAH WILL JOIN YOU GUYS FOR DINNER. SHE'S BEEN HERE A LITTLE WHILE LONGER, SO SHE'LL EXPLAIN ANYTHING YOU NEED HER TO." MR. SANDERS TOLD THEM.

THEY STARTED THEIR MEAL, HARDLY EATING ANYTHING, WAITING ANXIOUSLY FOR LEAH. FINALLY, AFTER FIFTEEN MINUTES OF PICKING AT THEIR FOOD, LEAH ARRIVED. SHE WAS A SMALL REDHEAD GIRL THAT SEEMED TO FEEL MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE REST OF THEM AND WAS EAGER TO ANSWER ALL THEIR QUESTIONS.

"THIS INSTITUTE IS SO AMAZING!" LEAH LITERALLY SQUEALED, GUSHING ON ABOUT HOW FORTUNATE THEY ALL WERE. "THE RESEARCHERS ARE ALL SO KIND AND HELPFUL! I'LL LET YOU IN ON A SECRET," SHE SAID, WINKING. "OUR ABILITIES FROM THE OPERATION CAN BE TRAINED. ISN'T THAT SO COOL? WE ARE SO LUCKY."

ILA LOOKED SIDeways AT THE GIRL. "HOW ARE WE LUCKY?"

LEAH HOWEVER, DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT ILA MEANT. "I KNOW YOU MAY HAVE HEARD THAT THERE'S A CONFLICT BETWEEN

THE RESEARCHERS ABOUT WHAT TO DO. BUT DON'T WORRY, THE GROUP THAT DOESN'T WANT TO MAKE THIS A BUSINESS WILL FAIL AND BE FIRED."

"WHY WOULD YOU WANT THEM TO LOSE?" RUHI ASKED, IRRITATION LACING HER VOICE.

THE REDHEAD GASPED AS IF RUHI HAD JUST COMMITTED BLASPHEMY OF THE WORST KIND. "THEY'RE WRONG, AM I RIGHT? THESE ABILITIES ARE A GIFT, AND IT SHOULD BE ALLOWED FOR PARENTS TO BESTOW UPON THEIR CHILDREN."

XING SHOOK HER HEAD SLOWLY, BUT DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING.

LEAH SIGHED. "YOU GUYS OBVIOUSLY DON'T UNDERSTAND. THESE PEOPLE COULD MAKE A FORTUNE OFF OF THESE IMPROVED OPERATIONS. AND THE MONEY WOULD GO TO OUR BENEFIT!"

"I DON'T THINK SO," RUHI MUTTERED, STANDING UP AND PUSHING IN HER CHAIR. "NICE MEETING YOU LAYAH." SEJAL, ILA, AND XING FOLLOWED HER OUT THE DOOR.

"IT'S LEAH," THE GIRL CALLED AFTER THEM. "NICE MEETING YOU TOO!"

28- RUHI

"CAYDEN SANDERS TOLD US THAT SHE'S AN ANIMAL WHISPERER - SHE CAN TALK TO ANIMALS. BUT ANIMALS ARE PROBABLY THE ONLY LIVING THING THAT WOULD WILLINGLY SPEAK WITH HER." XING GRUMBLED TO RUHI AND ILA.

RUHI LAUGHED SHORTLY. "SO BOTH OF YOU GOT THAT ABILITY."

SHAKING HER HEAD, ILA SIGHED. "WHAT ARE WE GONNA DO? I'M NOT STAYING HERE IF IT MEANS BEING THEIR GUINEA PIG."

RUHI NODDED VIGOROUSLY. "NEITHER WILL I. SO BASICALLY WE'LL JUST HAVE TO LEAVE? I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO!" SHE JUMPED UP THEN SANK BACK DOWN INTO THE SOFA. "WE CAN'T TELL ELAINE ABOUT OUR FEELINGS BECAUSE I'M POSITIVE HER MOM'S ON THE

BUSINESS SIDE.”

“CAN WE TELL THE FAMILY?” XING ASKED. ILA LOOKED DOWN. “I FEEL LIKE I'D HAVE TO TELL MY MOM. AND SEJAL'S PRETTY TRUSTWORTHY, RIGHT?”

RUHI NODDED SLOWLY. “ARE WE ACTUALLY GOING TO DO THIS THOUGH?”

“I KINDA WANT TO.”

“ME TOO,” ADDED XING.

“ALRIGHT THEN,” RUHI SIGHED, MASKING THE ADRENALINE THAT'S BEGINNING TO PUMP THROUGH HER VEINS. “ARE WE JUST GOING TO LEAVE?”

“WOULDN'T IT BE BETTER TO WAIT? MAYBE THEY CAN FIX OUR WRISTS AND WE'LL LEARN HOW TO USE OUR ABILITIES DURING THAT TIME.” ILA MUMBLED THOUGHTFULLY. “I KNOW, I REALLY WANT TO LEAVE TOO. BUT MAYBE WE SHOULD WAIT.”

RUHI LOOKED AT XING. “I GUESS THAT'D BE OKAY.”

“OKAY,” XING AFFIRMED.

“SO HOW LONG SHOULD WE WAIT?”

RUHI SIGHED. “UNTIL WE'RE READY OR IT GETS BAD ENOUGH.”

29- ILA

TRUTHFULLY, IT WAS FUN FOR ILA TO SIT DOWN AND TALK WITH RUHI AND XING, BUT THE TOPICS OF DISCUSSION AND THEIR CURRENT SITUATION CANCELLED THE FUN FACTOR.

“SO I'VE BEEN TRAINING TO PREDICT THE WEATHER BETTER BY HOUR SEGMENTS,” ILA SAID, ROLLING HER EYES. “AND I'M SUPPOSED TO CONTROL THE WEATHER TOO? NOT SURE HOW THAT'S GOING TO WORK, BUT IT'S FINE.”

ILA HAD A BRIEF FLASHBACK OF BEING TAUGHT HOW TO READ THE SIGNS OF THE SKY, WHICH WAS COMPLETELY A NETWORK OF LIES.

RUHI SIGHED. “THAT SOUNDS PRETTY BAD, BUT I'M LEARNING TO CONTROL PEOPLE'S

EMOTIONS. HOW IS THAT A THING? AND IF IT DOES WORK, THEN WE CAN'T JUST LET THEM GIVE THESE ABILITIES TO KIDS JUST FOR THE MONEY.”

NODDING, XING SHOOK HER HEAD. “I'M TRAINING TO UNDERSTAND ANIMAL EMOTIONS BETTER, BUT THAT WON'T HELP US LEAVE BECAUSE I CAN'T TALK TO THEM VERY WELL.”

“DO WE JUST KEEP TRAINING AND HOPE THAT EVERYTHING GOES OUT OKAY?” RUHI MUTTERED.

“GUESS SO,” ILA ANSWERED.

30- ILA

ILA HAD A FEELING THAT NOW WAS BAD ENOUGH TO BE CONSIDERED 'BAD ENOUGH.'

THE ARGUMENTS BETWEEN THE BUSINESS AND THE NON-SUPPORTERS WERE GETTING WORSE BY THE DAY AND SHE HAD NO DOUBT THAT LEAH AND ELAINE WEREN'T ON THEIR SIDE.

“HEY ILA,” LEAH HAD ASKED HER, “WANNA GO TO THE TEST ROOMS WITH ME?”

ILA HAD BEEN VERY CONFUSED. “WHY?”

LEAH HAD SMILED PATRONIZINGLY, AND ANSWERED, “BECAUSE DON'T YOU WANT TO BE PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER THAN YOURSELF? WE'D HELP SO MANY PEOPLE WITH JUST ONE DAY OF TESTING.”

NOW, ILA AND RUHI WERE RELUCTANTLY FOLLOWING LEAH TO THE TESTING ROOMS. XING WASN'T NEEDED TO COME BECAUSE HER AND LEAH HAD THE SAME ABILITY, LUCKY FOR HER.

“SO,” LEAH SAID PERKILY, “WHAT KIND OF ABILITIES DID YOU TWO GET?”

RUHI SCOWLED AND VOICED ILA'S INNER THOUGHTS. “DOES IT SERIOUSLY MATTER?”

“NO NEED TO BE LIKE THAT,” LEAH ANSWERED, VOICE STILL TINTED WITH CHEERINESS. “I'LL FIND OUT ANYWAYS. BESIDES, I ALREADY KNOW XING'S. WHO DO YOU THINK CONFIRMED WHETHER SHE WAS RIGHT OR NOT?”

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RUHI FORGOT THE PROMISE SHE'D MADE TO NOT SPEAK TO THE OVERLY BUBBLY GIRL. "YOU CAN DO BOTH MY AND XING'S ABILITIES?"

LEAH BEAMED. "OH, IT'S NOT THAT SPECIAL - IT'S ONLY BECAUSE OF PRACTICE! SOON ALL OF YOU WILL BE ABLE TO SOMEWHAT DO OTHER THINGS AS WELL."

"NOT THAT SPECIAL?" ILA SIGHED. "ALRIGHT THEN."

"ANYWAYS, WHAT'S YOUR ABILITY?" LEAH ASKED AGAIN, NOT SEEMING TO HAVE LOST ANY OF HER PERKINESS.

31- ILA

APPARENTLY, ILA AND LEAH WERE NOW BEST FRIENDS. JUST FROM LEAH'S POINT OF VIEW THOUGH. ILA HAD NOW LEARNED MANY OF THE PLANS FOR THE COMPANY'S FUTURE, AND IT WAS CONCERNING TO SEE HOW FAST THEIR PROGRESS WAS GOING.

"WE HAVE TO LEAVE SOON," ILA WHISPERED TO RUHI IN THE MORNING. "THEY'RE GOING TO START TAKING ON WEALTHY CUSTOMERS IN A FEW WEEKS."

RUHI SIGHED. "SHOULDN'T WE SHUT DOWN THIS SYSTEM BEFORE IT OFFICIALLY HAPPENS? SO WE PREVENT MORE OF A SEGREGATION AND IMBALANCE IN POWER?"

THIS WAS TRUE. ILA HAD A FEELING THAT THEIR CONSCIENCES WOULDN'T ALLOW THEM TO LEAVE EVEN WHEN THE TIME WAS PERFECT TO DO SO. "SO HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO THAT?"

"I GUESS WE CAN JUST DO SOMETHING SMALL TO DELAY THE PROCESS, LIKE HIDING NECESSARY DOCUMENTS?" RUHI SIGHED. "I DON'T KNOW WHAT ELSE WE CAN DO. HAS LEAH EVER SHOWED YOU ANYTHING?"

ILA THOUGHT FOR A MOMENT, THEN BRIGHTENED. "YEAH SHE HAS! BUT," SHE SAID, SLUMPING BACK IN HER CHAIR AGAIN, "I'M NOT SURE HOW TO STOP THE MACHINE."

"OH, WELL I GUESS WE CAN THINK OF

SOMETHING ELSE. XING PROBABLY WILL HAVE A BETTER IDEA," RUHI SAID SLOWLY. "WAIT, SO WHEN IS THEIR FIRST TREATMENT HAPPENING?"

"IN TWO WEEKS."

"CAN WE WAIT THAT LONG?"

"I GUESS WE HAVE TO."

32- XING

"THERE ARE RICH PEOPLE INVOLVED, RIGHT?" WERE THE FIRST WORDS THAT CAME OUT OF XING'S MOUTH.

"YES," ILA ANSWERED.

"COULDN'T WE POSSIBLY GET LEAH TO MAKE THE RICH PATIENT PERSON UPSET? AND THEN THE RICH PARENTS OR THE PATIENTS THEMSELVES WILL BE ALL UPSET AND LEAVE AND TALK BAD ABOUT THIS ENTIRE COMPANY?"

RUHI NODDED SLOWLY. "BUT WHY WOULD LEAH HELP US?"

ILA SMILED DRYLY. "MAYBE YOU COULD INFLUENCE HER TO DO THAT, RIGHT? BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT YOU'VE BEEN GOING THROUGH IN TRAINING, CORRECT?"

"I DON'T KNOW IF I'LL BE ABLE TO," RUHI MUMBLED. "MAYBE I COULD TRY, BUT I FEEL LIKE LEAH KNOWS HOW TO BLOCK OUT THIS MIND INTERFERENCE IF SHE KNOWS HOW TO GIVE OTHERS MIND INTERFERENCE."

XING PATTED RUHI ON THE BACK. "WE'LL FIGURE IT OUT. BUT I THINK IF WE DO SOMETHING TO MAKE THE RICH MOTHER HATE THE SYSTEM, EVERYTHING WILL SORT ITSELF OUT. BUT WE NEED TO MAKE SURE THAT NOBODY GETS ANY ABILITIES OR SIDE EFFECTS."

"OKAY THEN," RUHI ANSWERED.

"I THINK THAT'S GOOD," ILA NODDED. "EVERYONE, PREPARE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN FOR THIS. IT MIGHT JUST BE OUR LAST CHANCE."

33- RUHI

“PRACTICE ON LEAH - TRY TO MAKE HER EAT SOME MORE DESSERT.” XING WHISPERED TO RUHI AT DINNER TIME.

“I’M TRYING, SERIOUSLY.” RUHI FOCUSED AND TRIED TO MAKE LEAH SHIFT HER GAZE TO THE PLENTIFUL AMOUNTS OF CAKE AND PIE SLICES. THE ONLY THING THAT LEAH DID WAS LOOK AROUND IN CONFUSION, THEN GO BACK TO TALKING TO CAYDEN.

ILA GRINNED. “THAT MEANT SHE FELT IT!”

“BUT THAT’S NOT ENOUGH,” RUHI GROANED. “I NEED TO MAKE HER ACTUALLY TAKE THE CAKE.”

SHRUGGING, XING SMILED REASSURINGLY AT HER. “WELL AT LEAST YOU’RE GOOD AT YOUR USEFUL ABILITY, RIGHT?”

RUHI NODDED SLOWLY. “I GUESS I’LL TRY AGAIN THEN.” SHE CLOSED HER EYES FOR A BRIEF MOMENT, THEN OPENED THEM AGAIN AND FOCUSED THEM ONTO LEAH’S FACE. XING AND ILA WERE SILENT AS THEY WATCHED LEAH SLOWLY TURN TOWARDS THE TRAYS OF DESSERTS AND REACH OUT TO GRAB ONE.

RIGHT BEFORE HER HAND MADE CONTACT WITH THE PASTRY, LEAH BLINKED AND SHOOK HER HEAD QUICKLY. SHE QUICKLY WITHDREW HER HAND, LOOKING EVEN MORE CONFUSED THAN EARLIER.

“I ALMOST GOT IT,” RUHI WHISPERED, FEELING LESS DISCOURAGED THAN PROUD. “IF I KEEP PRACTICING, MAYBE I’LL BE ABLE TO DO IT BY THE END OF TONIGHT!”

BUT SHE DIDN’T.

34- ILA

“DO YOU THINK YOU’RE READY?” ILA ASKED RUHI DURING BREAKFAST. “APPARENTLY THE FIRST WOMAN COMES IN AFTER LUNCH.” RAIN SPLASHED DOWN ON THE WINDOWS OUTSIDE AS THE THREE OF THEM ATE SLOWLY AND NERVOUSLY.

SUDDENLY, CAYDEN, WHO’D BEEN OUT OF THE PICTURE FOR A WHILE, BURST INTO THE ROOM, EYES FOCUSED ON THE SCIENTISTS’ TABLE. “SHE’S EARLY.”

WITH THOSE TWO WORDS, THE ROOM FLEW INTO A FRENZY OF EXCITEMENT AND NERVOUSNESS. THE OPERATORS AND RESEARCH TEAM HURRIED OUT THE DOOR.

“ALREADY?” XING MOANED AND LOOKED SIDeways AT RUHI. “DO YOU THINK YOU CAN DO IT?”

“ARE YOU JOKING? OF COURSE NOT,” RUHI MUMBLED, LOOKING AROUND FRANTICALLY. “WHAT ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO NOW?”

ILA MUSTERED A REASSURING SMILE AT HER FRIENDS, EVEN THOUGH ON THE INSIDE, SHE WAS ALSO PANICKING. “YOU’LL DO FINE. YOU ALMOST GOT HER TO DO IT YESTERDAY, YOU KNOW. YOU HAVE EXPERIENCE NOW! YOU GOT IT!”

RUHI LOOKED AT XING IN DISBELIEF. “THIS IS LEAH WE’RE TALKING ABOUT. IF I COULDN’T MAKE HER DO SOMETHING YESTERDAY, NOTHING’S GOING TO CHANGE TODAY.”

XING STOOD UP QUICKLY. “WE SHOULD FOLLOW THEM. AND MAYBE WE’LL THINK OF A NEW PLAN.”

“WHAT OTHER PLAN CAN WE THINK OF IN A FEW MINUTES?”

SIGHING, THE OTHER TWO STOOD UP. “IT’LL BE OKAY,” ILA SAID TO RUHI, “MAYBE LEAH WILL LET HER GUARD DOWN AT THIS TIME.”

“UNLIKELY,” RUHI ANSWERED.

THE THREE HURRIED AFTER THE SMALL STREAM OF SCIENTISTS GOING INTO THE LABS. XING THOUGHT HARD. “COULDN’T YOU JUST DIRECTLY MAKE THE PATIENT CRY OR GET UPSET?”

RUHI WRINKLED HER NOSE. “SO JUST THINK ANGRY AND PAINFUL THOUGHTS INTO ITS HEAD?”

ILA NODDED EAGERLY. “YOU CAN DO IT. I KNOW YOU CAN DO IT. BESIDES, YOU KINDA HAVE TO DO IT.” SHE STOPPED WALKING DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF THE OTHER TWO AND TURNED QUICKLY. “THIS IS OUR ONLY

CHANCE.”

“WE KNOW,” RUHI ANSWERED. “I’LL TRY. WE’LL SEE.”

“HERE, TRY TO MAKE ME DO SOMETHING,” XING QUICKLY OFFERED.

ILA SHOOK HER HEAD. “THERE’S NO TIME - WE’RE HERE.”

THE CHRONILLISTS

Kaylee Sorrell

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: East Middle School,
Joplin, MO

Educator: Nina English

Category: Novel Writing

BRIEF SUMMARY:

A girl that's a runaway, and a time-traveling Chronillist, needs to find a place to stay. When she comes across a kind farm girl, her life changes. She finds secrets about herself, and her new friends, while also being hunted by evil Chronillists.

EXCERPT:

Alyssa

Alyssa stomped through the field. Feet bare and cold, covered in mud and dead grass. The rain poured hard down onto her slick black hair. She stopped for a moment and glanced at a small stick. No, it wasn't a stick, but a **WEAPON**. She placed her shaking hand on it and closed her eyes. Flashes of possibilities showed through her eyes. One was that she would need it for attackers and food, others said she didn't need it at all. She opened her eyes and took her hand off of the abandoned spear. She

took a moment to think. She thought for a while, until she snatched it again and shoved it into the side of her backpack. She ran her fingers through her short hair and sighed. Glancing down, she lifted her foot up. There were scabs and mud all over her legs. Her baggy overalls had blood on them and her shirt was torn. Alyssa shook her head and began to slosh around the mud again.

Nothing. She had nothing to keep her warm, nothing to comfort her, nothing to take her back home. Her hands were frozen and she longed for warmth. Every time she came across a bar or a motel her visions petrified her. Usually being born a Chronillist is a gift, but in Alyssa's eyes, it's a curse. Sometimes she wondered how many people were Chronillists, how many of them were like her.

There were five types of Chronillists: green, blue, purple, and grey. Greens were time travelers. They could travel into any time but they could only travel once each year, for when they do so they leave the current timeline. When the year starts they resume to their normal timeline. Nobody uses that power if they had it, but still useful in case of a death or a war. Blue Chronillists are self agers. They can age themselves in any way, the only catch is that it only applies to the body, not the mind. Grey ones are agers of others, they can add years and years onto a person, even until they become so old they just turn to dust. They are treated like murderers, wild animals, and criminals. Many really do turn out to use it for evil, but most don't use it at all. Purple ones are like what Alyssa was. They can see different outcomes of something, a little bit like future vision. It is very useful, unless you're Alyssa.

Alyssa stopped to a painful halt. She looked at a figure walking up to her in awe. As he grew nearer, she saw it was a rusty old man. His hair was totally gone and replaced with dark splotches and wrinkles. He looked as if he was about ninety years old. His hands were shaking and his eyes were cold. They began to speak in a low raspy voice.

“Why are you on my daughters property?” They

said angrily. Alyssa froze, not knowing what to say to the old man approaching. "You heard me! Don't act like I don't know you stole her diamonds!" He shouted. He walked faster, one hobbily leg gave out and he almost fell. He reached out to grab Alyssa, but suddenly, as if it were an angel coming to save her, a younger girl came running. She had long red hair that was in a messy ponytail and baggy overalls covered in dirt with a black shirt under it. "Why did you take my ship to the harbor! You know I was making you breakfast first." The man began to weep as the girl finally reached him.

"Pa you can't come outside, you might frighten some of the folks again." The young girl scolded, pulling him to the house until she stopped dead in her tracks. Alyssa's heart dropped. She had the look of suspicion and confusion. What would she do? Would she call the cops and accuse her of murder. It's happened before, it doesn't need to happen again. Before Alyssa could run, the girl softly spoke to her.

"Would ya like to come inside? You look dreadful." the girl said kindly. Alyssa stared and thought for a moment, and held back tears. This was the first time anyone has ever even made an attempt to help her. She nodded her head yes. She tried not to think of herself as a burden, for she might pass the opportunity to make a friend that will help her. The girl grabber her grandfather's hand in one hand and Alyssa's in the other. Together they walked towards the small house aside the field. Alyssa, blinded by the care the girl was giving, didn't notice that her visions were about to burst. She glanced down that the girls and and froze

YOU ARE GOING TO STAY THERE FOREVER. YOU ARE GOING TO DIE WHEN YOU WALK IN. YOU WILL BE ATTACKED. YOU WILL BE HELPED. YOU WILL GO HOME. YOU WILL KILL THE GIRL BY ACCIDENT. THE OLD MAN WILL DIE. THE OLD MAN WILL LIVE. THE OLD MAN WILL LEAVE AGAIN. THE GIRL WILL ROB YOU. YOU WILL ROB THE GIRL. THINGS WILL BE GREAT. THINGS WILL BE HORRIBLE.

"Stop!" Alyssa shriked and fell to the ground,

submerging her knees in mud. Tears flowed down as all of her hope drained from her. She looked up at the young girl, who was staring, shocked and confused. After a few moments the girl sighed.

"Follow me, I know what to do. I'm not gunna to hurt you, I'm going to protect you like I've protected others, ya see." She said holding out her hand again. Alyssa looked up.

"What do you mean others?" she said suspiciously.

"The other Chronillists." the girl said. "My pa here was attacked by a grey type. He's my father, now everyone thinks he is my grandfather or summin. It petrified him it did. Most folks would hate em', and they do. So I protect 'em all. Make sure none of em' get hurt from angry people they didn't hurt." Alyssa admired the girls bravery. Taking in Chronillist runaways was an uncommon thing to do. It wasn't illegal or anything, as long as it isn't a murderer, but people still see all of them as monsters.

Alyssa, the girl, and her father approached the little house and slowly opened the wide, creaky door. As they walked in, a large black poodle strolled into the kitchen and nuzzled her snout on the man's muddy jeans.

"Millie get off 'im. I ain't givin' you another bath this week." The girl said, peeling the dog off of him. The girl put the man of the couch and laid a blanket over his shivering body. She looked over to Alyssa. Whatever your mind shows, just know it's the good one, okay?" The girl said again holding out her hand. Alyssa nodded and took it. Her mind began to flash.

DON'T GO YET, THEY DON'T KNOW IT'S HER THEY MIGHT BE ARMED. GO, IT IS SAFE. YOU WILL MEET SOMEONE WHO WILL KILL YOU. YOU WILL MEET SOMEONE WHO WILL HELP YOU. STOP. GO. STOP. GO. IF YOU GO YOU COULD DIE OR MEET SOMEONE. IF YOU DON'T YOU COULD DIE FROM THE WORLD OR ESCAPE SOMETHING DEADLY.

Alyssa shook where she stood as the girl tore off a small piece of loose wall, revealing a small hallway. Through it was a decent sized room,

maybe the size of an average living room. There were people of all ages inside. Three girls with deep mocha skin and long blonde hair, maybe triplets, a man and a woman that looked like they were never going to let go of each others hands, six children, one with brown eyes and short ginger hair, one with brown locks going down to her knees, two that were twins with medium length blonde hair, a little boy with no hair at all, and a girl with black hair and a buzz cut. They all had similar faces, sad ones. When they saw the girl walk in with Alyssa, their gloomy faces lit up. Four of the children ran up to her and hugged her while the three girls sitting on the stained couch waved at her. The little girl with the black buzz cut waddled over.

"Are you another one staying with us?" She asked hopefully.

"I guess so." She replied, smiling at the cheerful girl.

"Diane is going to take great care of you." Said the bald boy. "Look at me! She even bought me clothes when I arrived!" Everyone absolutely loved Diane, and Alyssa saw why.

Deciding to get to know everyone while Diane was out getting her clothes and food, Alyssa began to walk around the room and explore. First she talked to the children. The ginger haired kid's name was Elliot, the brown haired one was Violetta, the twin's names were Charlie and Casey, the bald one was Nick, and the black haired one was Mei. They all were kind children, a few shy, though. Then Alyssa began to talk to the triplet teens. They were called Alex, Ally, and Astrid. They didn't talk much about their past, Astrid stopped them before they could. They began to fall asleep so Alyssa went over to the couple.

"Hey, I'm Alyssa." she said nervously, not knowing what kind of people they were. The girl kept looking down, but the boy looked up kindly.

"Hi." He said quietly, trying not to wake the girl who was now slowly falling asleep. "Don't mind her. She never sleeps at night so I stick with her. I'm Ash." He said holding out his free hand. Alyssa and Ash shook hand and began to talk.

"When did you arrive? It's okay if you don't want to talk about it, the others didn't." Alyssa asked.

"Nah, it's okay. We arrived a few days ago. I was on a hike with my wife." He began, looking at the sleeping woman. "We we're walking for a while until we saw her parents across the trail. They never liked her when she was born a Chronillist... abuse as a child kind of hate. They even took our child and got rid of it. They began attacking us so we fled. They managed to get into their car and chase us out of town. My parents passed around ten years ago so we didn't have anywhere to go. We saw a little child walk into this house, so I thought we thought we could find shelter here. I accidentally had a vision when I grabbed a door handle to leave and she knew. Now we live here."

"That's quite a story." Alyssa said in awe.

"Do what about you?" said Ash.

"Well, I was told that I was adopted. I was really angry because they had lied to me. I mean, I kinda expected it, though. They never let me do a DNA test even though they had the money, I looked nothing like my brothers and sisters, and they always treated me differently. Like I was a guest or something. I ran away when I was twelve and I have been on the road since. I don't know my way back... I went too far. I walked into Diane's property and freaked out her dad. She found me and I started having visions, kinda like you." Alyssa replied. Her heart sank as she remembered her old family. They were always kind to her, but it still seemed wrong to Alyssa. How they lied all those years. They went so far they took her sisters birth tape and put Alyssa's name on it and said they had "lost" her sister's. They loved her, but lied about so much... too much. Now she longs to go back but she went too far and her visions can't help her much.

Ash watched Alyssa's eyes for a moment, glancing away to see his wife waking up. Their hands were still interlocked and showed no sign of letting go. His wife began to look around, as if she needed to find out were she was. She plopped

her head back down and tried to sleep again.

"I'll leave you guys. I gotta go help Diane with groceries anyways. I hear her upstairs." Alyssa sighed, getting up and heading for the door. She looked at her hand for a moment and as fast as lightning, she twisted the doorknob and pushed it open. It caused time for only one vision.

DON'T GO.

Diane set a few bags neatly on the kitchen counter. Her long ponytail was falling out by now and her overalls were baggier. Her eyes had bags under them. She probably had them when she picked Alyssa up, but she didn't notice.

"Hey!" Diane beamed. "Came to help wi' groceries?"

"If you need any, sure." Alyssa replied. Diane opened the door and Alyssa walked out and jogged over to the car. She closed her eyes and shoved the bags onto her arms.

**DON'T DO IT DO IT IT WILL HELP YOU STOP THERE MAYBE
A DEAD BODY IN THE TRUNK STOP GOSTOP GOSTOP
WAIT DIANE IS BADDIANE IS GOOD RUN STAY RUN STAY
Y RUN STAY.**

Diane closed her eyes and held back tears from the screeching visions in her eyes and ears. In the distance her heard Diane saying something. She ignored it and sprinted to the door. She burst in and set the bags of food onto the counter. She slid down and sat on the floor.

"Dear god. Is you alright? You need anythin'. G-Go on downstairs. I'll bring you some coffee or tea."

"I just need gloves!"

ONCE A PRINCE, NOW A BEAST

Amanda Vasquez

Age: 15, Grade: 10

Home School, Carthage, MO

Educator: Bobbie Vasquez

Category: Novel Writing

BRIEF SUMMARY:

Once a Prince, Now a Beast is a retelling of Beauty and the Beast. Prince Mark is hurt from past tragedies. On his brother's wedding day, Mark is cursed. He will become a beast for one year, in that time he must learn to love and a girl must love him. Mark lives in an old castle, where he's forced to live with his enchantress (Grandma V/Lydia), a bird (Prince Aris), a banshee (Antha), a huntress (Princess Briana), and a cursed rose (Princess Joana) with only a year left awake. Mark's falling for Briana, but she's only after his kingdom. They help Lydia get through a unexpected loss. After months together, Briana leaves to prepare for war. As she leaves, she tells Mark that she loves him. It doesn't work. Mark isolates himself for a month, but comes out when he realizes that Joana needs his help. They journey to a legendary kingdom, where they find a cure for Joana. They rush back to the castle so Lydia can save her. Joana is turned back into a human. Mark tells Joana to leave, but she's trying to confess her love for him. Briana returns and tries to kill Mark to claim his throne. They capture Briana. Joana confesses and Mark's curse is lifted. Briana's family is planning on taking over Joana's kingdom. They rush back, but they're outnumbered and Mark's father won't help. They're defeated and the citizens are welcomed into Aris's kingdom. Mark and Joana are married.

EXCERPT:

Prologue

Before we begin this story, I'd like to give a bit of background, and also introduce myself. Hi, I'm the story teller, I tell the story and make comments throughout.

I'm sure you've all heard the story about beauty and the beast, but have you heard it right?

In the land our story takes place in, there are nine kingdoms and the Shadowlands (the land that no one rules); I won't name all the kingdoms just the

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ones that matter most: Emmorium, Garlance, Bormimum, and Venoramell.

Our story starts with a prince named Mark, born to King Kroark and Queen Tania of Emmorium (who were very happy considering he was their fourth son).

Prince Mark was happy growing up, and taught to believe in Elieheem, the creator of this world, but when he was seven his world came crashing down on him.

Mark's brother, Alek, had become ill and their whole family prayed for Elieheem to heal him, but three months later Alek died.

Mark took it the hardest. Alek was only a year older and spent the most time with him, while the two oldest sons ignored them both. Queen Tania was devastated and wouldn't eat anything for a week, and as for the King? Well he no longer believed in Elieheem.

Since King Kroark lost faith he also lost his conscience, and began to rule with an iron fist, controlling all that went on in his kingdom. His people were hungry, but they knew no matter what Elieheem would be with them. The people began planning a rebellion, but the King found out about it from spies he had planted. Everyone involved were killed as examples. Faith became the King's worst enemy, it gave the people hope and something to fight for, but if they lost that hope they would be easier to control. Believing in Elieheem became illegal, anyone who was caught praying or doing anything involving him, were banished.

The people valued their lives more than they trusted their creator, they lost all hope and began to do whatever they could to keep themselves alive (even if it went against everything they were taught), and the kingdom became corrupt.

A few years later Mark's oldest brother, Kalev, left home for a couple weeks to go hunting with friends and when he came back, he told his brothers that he believed in Elieheem.

Mark was afraid and confused, but he didn't tell his parents.

A couple days later, King Kroark found out about

Kalev's belief and banished him despite the Queen's wishes. Losing two sons was really hard on her, she wasn't quite right after that.

Mark became bitter and angry towards everyone, he made the servants miserable, his friends hated him, and he never obeyed anyone unless it was his father.

This is the charming main character of our story. Please sit back and enjoy the show...

Chapter One: A Not so Pleasant Wedding Day

"Why do we have to go to the wedding? You know father will be angry," Mark said grumpily.

"Darling, you've been to Alek's and Kalev's, Brennan's is the last one other than your own," Queen Tania said, "I promise."

Mark could feel himself getting aggravated, Alek and Kalev hadn't had weddings, but his mum had been living in a fantasy ever since Kalev was banished.

Mark leaned out the window of the carriage and yelled for the driver to stop.

"What's the matter?" his mum asked.

"I need some air," Mark said, getting out.

"Don't take too long or we'll miss the wedding," his mum worried.

"I'll take however long I want," Mark said slamming the door shut.

Mark walked back to a lake they had just passed and sat down in the shade of a tree to avoid the afternoon heat. They had been traveling since four in the morning, leaving in only one carriage in the dark, so the King wouldn't know until it would be too late to stop them.

Mark's father wouldn't allow Brennan to get married in his kingdom because he didn't approve of Brennan's fiance, Cindy.

Cindy was a maid from the neighboring kingdom, Garlance, and was also a believer in Elieheem.

Before Alek had died, Mark's family would go visit the royal family of Garlance once a month hoping to form a relationship between their eldest children. The King and Queen of Garlance had two daughters, Joana and Siera, who were to be engaged to Kalev and Brennan, though Joana was five years younger than Kalev and Siera was

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five years younger than Brennan. Neither pairs showed interest in each other. Actually, Siera liked Kalev and followed him around (he found it annoying), while a maid named Cindy caught Brennan's interest. As for Joana, Mark liked to tease her and found it amusing that she couldn't talk. Alek just got bored.

Mark was never told what happened, but a year before Alek died, his family had stopped visiting Garlance.

Only this past year, Brennan snuck out and went to a ball in Garlance, where he met Cindy again. It was like destiny and soon they made engagement plans. When King Kroak found out he banished Brennan as well and forbid his family from going to the wedding.

I better head back to the carriage, Mark thought. An hour later, they made it to Garlance.

"Didn't they live in a different castle?" Mark asked. This wasn't the castle they had visited before.

"I believe so," his mum agreed.

Servants met them outside and took them to their own rooms so they could get some rest before the wedding.

I hate weddings, Mark thought sleepily.

Mark supposed himself lucky that it wasn't his own wedding, though it could have been. His mum had really wanted a double wedding, but he had refused, quite stubbornly.

The servants came to fetch them an hour later, for the wedding.

The pews were decorated with white flowers and pink lace, and Mark and his mum were lead to the front row on the left side. On the right side sat the King and Queen of Garlance, with a young lady.

"It's not too late to find you a girl," his mum whispered to him, "I'm sure that any of these young ladies would love to marry you. Take Princess Joana for example."

Queen Tania pointed out the young lady sitting beside the King and Queen.

Mark's eyes widened, that was Joana? She seemed almost to melt into the crowd and yet stand out as well. Her smile was brighter than all the rest, even though it was one of the hottest days of summer, but her dress and features were

nothing to gawk at. She was almost...lovely. "I'm pretty sure it's too late," Mark whispered, "Besides, her family believes in Elieheem."

"Oh, quite right. I couldn't lose you too," his mum said coming back to herself for a minute and looking terribly sad.

"I wouldn't want to steal Brennan's moment anyways," Mark said, "Could you imagine me proposing to someone in the middle of his marriage vows?"

Queen Tania chuckled. Sometimes Mark had a soft spot for her, even though she did get on his nerves.

The violinists began to play and everyone stood as Cindy started her walk down the aisle. There would be gossip about her old fashioned wedding dress, but Mark and his mum knew that it was her mother's. In any case, Cindy looked like she was the happiest girl in the world, and as if she couldn't get down the aisle fast enough.

Mark pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat off his forehead, in his opinion it was the worst day for a wedding. It was a hot day in summer and outside in the late afternoon.

Cindy and Brennan said their vows and placed a ring on each other's finger as they gazed lovingly into each other's eyes.

Mark briefly wondered if he would ever love someone as much as his brother seemed to love Cindy. No, he thought, I will marry someone of my father's choosing.

Even though he hated his father, he didn't want to be banished, living from day to day. A princess who had lots of land was preferred.

"You may kiss the bride," the Preacher announced. As he watched he was reminded of the story of one of his cousin Calipsa's first kiss.

When she was sixteen she found her prince charming when she kissed a frog. Now they were happily married with twin girls. The wedding was held in the castle's courtyard and they didn't have to walk far for the reception, because it was in the garden behind the castle and by the lake.

The garden was breathtaking. Tables were set up in the shape of a big heart around the wooden

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dance floor, and fresh flowers in a beautiful arrangement were placed in crystal vases on the tables. The scent of roses and honey suckle filled the air and lanterns were lit all around as the sun began to set. Diamond chimes hung from the surrounding trees, the sun hitting just so that they scattered little rainbows everywhere.

The musicians were playing in a small pavilion covered in ivy, by the lake.

There were five long tables filled with food and in the middle was an ice sculpture of Cindy and Brennan.

The joyful couple went first, next was the Garlance royal family, then Mark and his mum, and then everyone else in order of station. Mark piled his plate full of his favorite foods, not even thinking about how hungry everyone else was.

As he walked back to where his mum sat, he passed by Princess Joana and her family. He subtly bumped her as she took a drink, throwing her into a little coughing fit. Her parent's looked at her with concern, but she waved them away. When she turned to see who it was, their eyes met, he smirked at her and walked to his end of the table. The couple sat at the top of the heart, Mark and his mum on the left, and the Garlance royals on their right. Mark sat down, eating hungrily since he had skipped lunch, due to carriage sickness. "My don't you have a monstrous appetite and a monstrous attitude," said a girl with dark pink hair as she walked by. Mark was the only one who heard her, and he chose to be gracious and not have her thrown into the dungeon for life.

"When are you two planning on leaving for your honeymoon?" Queen Tania asked.

"We were hoping to leave after the reception," Brennan said holding Cindy's hand.

"But it's a five day journey. You should stay the night here and leave in the morning," Queen Tania declared, "traveling at night is dangerous."

"We want to leave tonight," Brennan said firmly.

"Very well, if you must," Queen Tania sniffed.

After they ate, Cindy and Brennan fed each other cake, Cindy threw the bouquet, and they danced the evening away.

Mark danced with several beautiful young ladies, but his eyes kept wandering to Princess Joana, who sat silently smiling with her parents until Cindy came over to her and asked her something. Princess Joana looked nervous for a moment, then nodded her head. Mark watched curiously as Cindy led Joana to the piano, which had been recently vacated by a tired musician. Joana sat, hesitated before placing her hands on the keys, and glancing around to make sure no one was watching. Everyone was either talking, eating, or dancing.

He watched as she took a deep breath and closed her eyes before she started to play.

As soon as she began to play, Mark was riveted, it felt as though the music was touching his soul. The song started out deep with echoes of pain, reminding him of the loss he felt when Alek died; the music became confused and angry, the very thing he felt every day. The dark chords became entwined with higher notes, like the sun was trying to come out after a storm, like his heart trying to find hope after Alek's death and Kalev's banishment. Somehow, heartfelt joy was evoked in the music and an almost whole feeling, but something was still sad in it's undertone, it was like it was saying that even though things seemed bad it still had hope. Mark felt his heart yearn for that joy, joy even when bad things happened. Hope, faith, things he hadn't thought of since he was young. The song ended and Mark was shocked to realize he had been crying.

He hated himself for wanting stupid things like hope and scared of how much the song made him feel.

Few had stopped what they were doing and listened, somehow that made him angry. If others ignored it, why couldn't he? Why had it felt like the feelings he had locked away long ago were being exposed. He stared at Joana in frustration. Her hands were slightly trembling as though she had put her soul into it. She stared down at her hands for a moment, then as though she felt his stare, she looked straight at him. His eyes widened as he noticed tears running down her own cheeks. She looked back down almost immediately.

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Cindy came over and thanked her for playing and asked her to play another, but Joana declined and sat back with her parent's. Mark and his mum had to leave soon after if they were going to get home before it was completely dark.

They congratulated the young couple, then Brennan pulled Mark aside.

"Take care of mum, okay?," Brennan said.

"Okay," Mark said, rolling his eyes.

Their carriage rolled away, carrying a sniffing mum and an irritable young man.

When they got home, King Kroak was furious. He locked his wife in her room and Mark in his.

Mark was in a terrible mood, knowing his mum would be locked in there for at least a week being served only bread and water until his father decided she had learned her lesson.

Mark himself had a way to escape his room without his father's knowledge. He wore a cloak and snuck out through a secret passage that let out outside the castle wall that had been built around the castle after the rebellion.

He walked through the kingdom utterly disgusted.

The houses were falling apart, homeless people were sleeping on the ground, and the saloon was a madhouse. An old man stumbled out of the saloon and bumped into the prince.

"Get away from me!" Mark gagged, smelling the man's stale breath.

"Listen here sonny, I can walk wherever I want," the man slurred, wagging a finger in Mark's face and stumbling down the road. Mark was passing a dark alley when he heard an old woman cry out from within. He glanced down the alley and saw a man stealing the old woman's purse, but he walked right by.

"You, young man! Please help me!" the old woman cried out to him as she beat her assailant with her staff. Mark ignored her cries and kept walking, but a few minutes later the thief came out with the purse and headed to the saloon.

"Hey, why didn't you try to stop him!" the old woman yelled as she hobbled out of the alley looking rather disheveled. Mark started walking faster.

"Hey you, stop!" the woman yelled, "Come back here!"

Mark had no intention of stopping, but his feet turned him around and took him back to her.

"What's going on!" Mark yelled.

"How dare you not help an old woman in her time of need? Now I know your true nature," the old woman cried stabbing her finger at him.

Somehow, this felt oddly familiar to Mark.

"I am Prince Mark, I order you to let me go!" Mark cried.

"I know who you are, and I've seen how you treat others. You are a beast and I will order you to do my bidding," the old woman said.

At that moment, all Mark felt was pain. He fell to the ground and started screaming and writhing in agony. His teeth grew sharp, his nails grew into claws, his arms and legs grew muscular and furry, and his face turned into that of a white tiger with horns in front of his ears.

"What have you done to me?" he howled.

"Oh relax. You have one year to fall in love with a girl who truly loves you back and tells you so, but if it's not true love in the year, you will stay a beast forever," the old woman explained, "Now come on, we've got to get going before someone sees you."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," the beast protested.

A man walked out of the saloon and immediately ran back in, screaming when he saw the beast. It's safe to say that everyone was outside in a flash, throwing torches and pitchforks, vastly off aim.

"Now look at what you've done," the old woman groaned. A crow landed on her shoulder and she handed it a white rose.

"This crow will take you to a place where you will be safe, I will be along shortly. After I clean up your mess," she added in a huff. The bird flew towards the outer gates, and the beast hobbled after it, muttering all sorts of curses under his breath.

The old woman turned on the crowd, saying, "Go back inside."

The people dropped their weapons and walked back inside as if nothing had

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happened. In the morning, they would all think that it was a dream occurring from their partying.

"I'm getting too old for this," the old woman groaned.

She walked into an alley, and a few minutes later, a girl with dark pink hair walked out.

PERSONAL
ESSAY/MEMOIR

A SNOWY BATTLEFIELD

Andy Bernatow

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Jefferson High School,
Festus, MO

Educator: Nicole Boyer

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

It was a lazy winter Saturday in January. Ice was on the ground, the sky was cloudy, and there was a general air of peace about the day. The homework my 6th grade teachers attempted to give me had been finished the past day at school, and I had contented myself to watching Big Hero 6 with my sister, the coziness of the house numbing my need to do much else. My phone buzzed then, and as I picked it up I saw my friend Garret's name. We began texting, talking about life and school. He then told me that he was bored and had nothing to do during the weekend. This kickstarted my inactive brain. I asked my parents if I could have Garret over since my brother was at a friend's house. An hour of cleaning later, they relented. Unbeknownst to them, I had looked at the weather radar. This informed me that the chances of a snow day on Monday were all but guaranteed. I made sure Garret was aware of this when packing, telling him to load his bag with microwave popcorn and Doritos. If all went as I had planned it, we should have enough food to feed a small village for a day at our disposal. This thought, along with the overwhelming excitement, are what raced through my head as we pulled out of my garage and began the short drive to his house.

We rounded the corner and saw Garret's house. Garret ran out the door before the car even stopped. I smiled and greeted him, and we spent the short car ride back to my house planning out the things we wanted to do. We had 2 nights as far as I was concerned, so there was a lot of fun to be had. Our plans went out the window as soon as we had an innocuous argument over whether or not Yoshi would beat Mario in a fight. I said yes, as Yoshi could just eat Mario like he eats Koopas, but Garret thought Mario's fire would incinerate Yoshi from the inside. This led us to Smash Bros, which devoured the rest of our time as we laughed like idiots while sending each other flying across the screen. We took a break for dinner, as pizza is irresistible to two preteen boys, then returned to Smash Brothers, which became Netflix, then Mario Kart, until finally sleep pulled us under.

I awoke hours later to a sweet, comfortable smell. I was in my basement with a cat purring softly beside me, the snow still visible through the glass doors of my basement. I fell off the couch in my rush to get up, and layed there until I glanced at the TV clock. It was Sunday. This small reminder kicked my brain into motion. I woke up Garret so we could continue our escapades. We ran upstairs to find that the smell was created by freshly baked cinnamon rolls. We greeted my mom, who handed us 2 plates loaded with soft cinnamon rolls covered in thick icing. The first thing we noticed when we sat down was the white on everything out the window. The trees were wearing a snowy jacket, the swings had a snowy hat, and the ground was being enveloped by a thick blanket of snow. I began smiling to myself, knowing I was right and that school would be cancelled. We turned on Mario Kart and devoted to speedkarting all the courses. Our excitement was palpable, so any time one of us beat a course record we popped off, showing our excitement with a dance and a cheer. We got bored of that and were playing air hockey when the phone started going off. My anticipation shot to dangerous levels as I sprinted over to the phone, at which point I received the announcement I had been waiting for. School was cancelled for the next day. I had

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had Garret ask his parents for permission to stay an extra night already, so we were already ready to go. I ran up the stairs to ask my dad, and my begging and pleading paid off. We were in for another night. To celebrate, we went to have a snowball fight in the magical powder that saved us from school. We wormed into our long johns, thick pants and shirts, and overcoats before finally putting our snow boots on and going outside. We set up on opposite ends of my large backyard and began scraping up snow from the 5 inch thick coating on the ground into the ammunition we would be using.

I was prepping my snowpower when I was bashed to the ground by a block of snow. I recovered quickly and saw Garret's goofy grin, which gave me all the information I needed. What followed was nothing short of warfare. He was too big for me to charge straight at, so I had to use speed. I ran around, grabbing snow without breaking stride, throwing it without making myself a target for him. This was a battle and I was determined to win. I finally saw him begin to get tired, he slowed down and his hits were striking with less force. I began to prepare for the final blow, gathering large fistfulls of snow together next to me while adding extra emphasis to my breaths. I downed him with a solid ball to the leg that hit him hard while he was clumsily running. I then grabbed my frozen nuke. I was about to send the snowy mass crashing onto him when I was hit in the back by an enormous frozen steamroller. I fell hard, the snow cushioning the fall into nothing. I stayed there for a little, my brain processing what happened. When I finally stood again, I saw my friend laughing himself into near suffocation and my dad standing behind me with a humored grin on his face. I grabbed a fistfull of snow and threw it at him in one quick motion. It never became anything solid, thus merely dusting him with snow. It was what I needed to get back into action.

I ran away, balling up ammo as I trudged through the snow. I ended up next to my friend, who was now on his feet, though still idle. I gave him a look, he nodded back at me. It was 2v1, and my dad was on the losing team. We came up with a

genius strategy accidentally. He ran at my dad and got in his face, distracting him and giving me an opening. I realised my opportunity. I grabbed snow, ran behind my dad, threw it at his head. He froze immediately. This inaction allowed the snow to drip down the back of his shirt, which caused him to freeze again. This time, my friend used the opportunity to knock him over. Luckily for my dad, it was trapped in his undershirt and never touched his skin. Me and Garret popped off at that point, celebrating our victory against adults and forgetting about my dad for a second. This cost us, as in the middle of our celebration my dad pegged me with a ball in the face. The rest of the fight was a free for all that ended with me and my friend laying in the snow laughing like maniacs. We went inside, spent the night playing smash, pool and eating popcorn. The next day we awoke and went sledding down the hill in my backyard, farther back from our snowball arena. This was not meant to be as an unseen slope and a loss of sled control ended up with me catching a tree between the legs. This was the end of our outside escapades, and we played around until he had to go home at 6 p.m. that night. While it was sad to see him leave, I knew that the memories of the fun we had had would last a lifetime.

THE ROCK JUMP

Ariel Berwald

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Standing in the middle of the Deschutes River, the frigid water tried to push me over. My

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mind reeled with everything that could go wrong, as my heart beat faster and faster. Over the sound of a rushing river, I still heard noises coming from shore. Looking back, I saw eight other people about my age cheering me on. Before yesterday, they were complete strangers, but today they were my only support. With them watching, I knew I could not hesitate any longer. Despite my paralyzing fear, I took a deeper breath and started swimming straight into the current.

The hot, dry air still felt uncomfortable, as it was only the second day of my Outward Bound course. Deciding to take part in this trip felt like a risk. I did not know anyone, nor had I ever done anything quite like it. It was ten days away from civilization, spending our time rafting, hiking, and camping. Every part of the expedition involved hard work and persistence. Between making our own food and setting up and cleaning camp, jobs were plentiful. Beyond the more monotonous tasks, the days were filled with lessons on guiding rafts, learning water skills, and other exciting activities. Today, our adventure was tagged “rock jump.” I was not sure what that entailed, but looking out to the lone rock in the middle of the powerful river, I knew it was not going to be easy.

Our group, bundled up in our bright orange life jackets, stood nervously on shore, waiting for instruction. “All right everyone, time for the rock jump! Get excited!” our guide said with a bit too much enthusiasm. She proceeded to provide a comprehensive explanation of the task. We were to make our way as far out as possible into the river. Once the current was about to overcome us, we had to start swimming. Not just a passive doggy paddle, but rather an intense freestyle. A few seconds later, we would hit the eddy, a small whirlpool caused by the rock disrupting the flow of the river. The edges of the eddy formed a forceful current, while the inside was calm. We had to swim as strenuously as we could through the rapids. If we made it into the tranquil center, we then, despite weariness, needed to climb on top of the rock.

Finally, we were to jump off, float down the river, and swim to shore.

The silence lingered after our guide finished the explanation. No one, especially me, knew what to say in response to this seemingly impossible task.

Our eyes were glued to the guide as she demonstrated the formidable task with surprising ease. Despite her success, I was consumed by agonizing fear. Standing there under the blazing sun, surrounded by people I barely knew, I felt small. I closed my eyes and imagined myself slowly sinking into the ground letting the earth protect me. Discreetly, I made my way to the rear of the group, hoping to prolong my time on solid ground. Although we moved as a team to the starting point, there was no connection among us. Having to do something so daunting without a sense of support filled me with fear. Desperately, I wanted to voice my apprehension and receive help, yet I only stood there, staring at the ground.

Fortunately, one of the more outspoken boys volunteered to go first. Carefully, he moved through the water and started to swim. From the shore, we tensely held our breaths as he fought his way into the eddy. After what felt like an eternity, he made it into the calm water and pulled himself onto the slippery rock. With one final effort, he stood up, hands in the air.

“King of the rock!” he yelled with delight.

Immediately, we erupted in cheers. In the midst of our celebration, I looked around, noticing people’s smiles. Everyone was thrilled to celebrate his achievement. After a moment’s hesitation, I joined in, my voice becoming part of the noise, as my mind and body relaxed.

One by one, people left the safety of land to accomplish the task. With each person’s success, the group became louder and louder. Now, as soon as someone stepped into the water, we were shouting their name. When they were grappling with the rapids, we felt fear and excitement for them. When they finally made it into the eddy and on top of the rock, we were

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filled with an overwhelming feeling of victories, even from the shore. Each of these moments helped to unite us. Although I lost some of my apprehension, something was missing. Standing in the midst of everyone, I could hide. I was still dubious about standing out and being myself.

It was during this reflection that I heard from behind me, "You're up, Ariel!"

All I could do was faintly reply, "Okay."

It was in this distressed state that I waded into the frigid water, wishing I was anywhere else but there.

As soon as I entered the river, the cold knocked the breath out of me. The water turned my legs numb and made me feel as if I was merely dragging them. When I reached the point that I was to begin swimming, my eyes welled with tears. I felt so alone in my fear. Frozen in place, my head was filling with worst-case scenarios.

As my mind reeled, I heard from shore, "Go, Ariel! You can do it!" they shouted along with many other cheers.

With a small smile, I turned back around and knew that I could hesitate no longer. Failure was possible, but I had to believe that cruel judgment was not. So, with one final breath, I started to swim.

As the water gained intensity, I struggled to keep moving forward. Although my arms felt weak, I knew I had no choice but to keep pushing. The river threw me around while my opportunity to make it into the eddy was slipping past. Hopelessness was beginning to creep in, as I felt myself giving up. Then I remembered everyone supporting me from land. I no longer wanted to succeed solely for myself, but also for them. With my newfound energy, I mustered up the strength to make it into the eddy.

I looked up, as I became acutely aware of my sensations. I was disoriented and breathing rapidly as my arms felt like lead. The second I stepped onto the rock, a new sense of energy pulsed throughout my body. I made it! Once my feet found solid footing, I stood up straight. My sopping wet clothes hung onto my body like rags

as I shivered from the cool breeze. I heard the whistling of the wind, but what was louder was the cheering coming from shore. Although I was physically alone, they were all there for me. All my previous fear and apprehension toward my peers seemed ridiculous as I stood like a queen on the rock. Although the risk was physical, the battle was mental. All it took was letting myself lean on others for support. Once I did that, I accomplished something great. I did the rock jump. With one final smile, I jumped off the rock and floated down to shore, back to my friends.

Later that night, under the light of a full moon, we sat in a circle and discussed our day. Our laughing and talking made it feel like we had known each other for years. In this blissful moment, I truly looked at everyone's face. In doing so, I felt a sense of comfort. These people were no longer strangers, but true friends. Within the span of only two days, eight new relationships had been created. I, despite my previous fear, was a part of a close, supportive group. Closing my eyes for a moment, I allowed the laughter and chatter to fill my mind, trying to savor this feeling. With a deep breath I opened my eyes, and with surprising ease, once again became a part of the animated conversation.

Our trip transitioned from the river to the mountains, and soon the days were filled with strenuous hikes and heavy backpacks. Rather than hanging out quietly in the back, I worked my way to the front of the group. As we walked, I could see the tall mountains and enjoy the fresh air. This sense of freedom, combined with all the other experiences of the trip, changed my perspective. I did not have to follow another body up a steep slope, but I could lead them to the summit. Stepping outside of my comfort zone, into the current of a literal river, swept away my previous unease and hesitation. I learned to become and embrace my role as an important part of the group. Yet, when my legs felt heavy and my body weak, I did not mind falling back. I did not have to prove anything, I only had to be myself. In the end, it was not fighting my way into the eddy and on top of the rock that proved

most difficult, but rather, opening myself up to change.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Nicole Bi

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The iridescent flashes of gold and orange caught my eye, and I traced their origins to the gleaming body of a goldfish. I was infatuated with its brilliance, caused by the moonbeams drifting in through the opening in the ceiling window. The marble ledge glistened with water that distorted the gray streaks underneath. Standing on the balls of my feet, I stood by the shallow pool and leaned as far as I could over the edge, my stubby fingers reaching for the fish as they darted out of my grasp. Splashing the water, I laughed with a joviality only children have, oblivious to the very real possibility of stumbling headfirst into the pool.

It was the summer of 2009, the year I was six and had just gained a self-seeking attitude rivaled by no other. My parents and I were visiting my aunt and uncle in Beijing where I was gratefully deposited for the rest of our trip while my parents travelled to places that “kids simply wouldn’t understand.” My poor Chinese resulted in many awkward conversations with my relatives, and I was left feeling alone and misunderstood. I spent the entirety of that summer drowning in mosquitos and my own sweat.

Self-proclaimed food connoisseurs, my aunt and uncle enjoyed indulging in various restaurants in Beijing. This particular night, we were at an upscale restaurant close to the center of the city. Glowing lanterns floated above me, and blinking lights covered the apricot trees that decorated the entrance to the restaurant. The light breeze carried a tantalizing aroma to our noses, underscored by faint music that seemed to come from far away. Like a moth to a flame, my attention was drawn to a small round pond close to the opening of the restaurant. As I walked closer, I noticed the dozens of schools of goldfish glittering like diamonds illuminated by the moonlight. I was entranced and watched them swim around in circles for what seemed like hours.

A sign printed in Chinese read, “Goldfish: ¥5.” A small fishing net was soaked in a puddle of water on the ledge, its handle bent from hundreds of uses before. In this instant, I had made it my goal to catch a single goldfish and would not stop until one sat in my net. I seized the net with urgency and immediately thrust it towards the water. I repelled the fish, and they swam away in frenzy, shimmering tails tracing waves in the water. Being the goal-oriented six-year-old I was, I didn’t let this initial failure deter me and continued in my quest. At this time, my thought process was relatively simple; if I saw something I liked, I needed to have it. I didn’t possess the complexity that develops with the human mind as time goes on, and I became so fixated on the goldfish that it seemed as if there was nothing else in the world I wanted more.

A throng of people gradually began to surround the small pond, all eager to catch and bring home their own goldfish. All around me, people scooped and emptied their nets into plastic bags filled with water. The fish seemed to be orange accolades of achievement, and I wanted one badly. The thrum of the crowd grew in volume until I felt suffocated by the mass of

people. I had been pushed to the back of the throng. As my efforts to edge my way to the front were thwarted, I remained in the midst of strangers who seemed as tall and intimidating as giants. I saw a young boy about my age sweep his glowing, orange prize up into the air, water cascading off it and falling back into the pond below where fish were diminishing at an alarmingly rapid pace.

Seeing the fruition of the people around me, my resolve was renewed, and once again, I attempted to push my way to the edge of the pond. This time, I was rewarded in my efforts. I triumphantly snatched up the small fishing net and carved it through the water. My reaction was too slow, and the goldfish swam away easily. Being so small, I was limited in both my capabilities and my available vicinity. What I lacked in ability, I made up for in tenacity; there was no one else in the entire world who wanted a goldfish more than I. So I kept trying, persisting until I was thoroughly exhausted.

Wiping the sweat from my forehead, I became dismayed. After an hour, my arm had become sore, and the soles of my feet hurt from standing for so long. I could feel the tears creeping to the surface, blurring my vision and stinging my eyes. The laughter and success from other people seemed to mock and ridicule me. My aunt and uncle were nowhere to be found, and the language barrier prevented me from asking somebody for help. Besides, my pride refused to allow me to admit my failure, but that was the reality; I had failed.

I returned my net to its initial resting spot, a symbol of defeat. Just as I turned around to leave, I saw a man pick my fishing net back up. He was middle-aged, with black hair tinged gray that ran down to his shoulders. His wire glasses balanced precariously on the bridge of his nose and looked as if they had been taped back together multiple times. His clothes were disheveled and gave me the sense that they

hadn't been changed for a few days.

The stranger caught a goldfish in my net with an ease that I envied. I watched him gently empty it into a clear bag and tie it securely in a knot. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a few wadded up yuan. He handed the money to the salesperson who counted it and added it to a growing pile. Then, the man bent down slowly and held the bag in front of my face until I reached up and took it with a shaking hand.

"For you," the man said in a quiet voice.

"Thank you," I responded in broken Chinese.

The stranger stood back up and turned around, walking away from the crowd, the goldfish pond and me. I never saw him again. I remained frozen, clutching my little goldfish bag in my hand. My aunt suddenly materialized next to me, and I turned towards her. She smiled at me, her eyes on the bag in my hand.

"Did you catch a goldfish?" she asked.

I shook my head with a delighted smile on my face, failing to see the significance of this moment. As a child, I simply recognized this as a time when I got something I wanted, and everything worked out in my favor.

* * *

I walked down the sidewalk adjacent to my school with my head bent, eyes glued to a phone. Hearing the crying of a little boy, I looked up. He stood with his brother who clutched a dollar bill in a tight grasp. I noticed the smaller boy point to the snow cone truck down the street, and I saw tears running down his face. The noise began to draw attention from bystanders. His brother consoled and tried to quiet him but to no avail. The boy began to cry harder.

I stared for a minute, and then abruptly changed

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my course to intersect with the two brothers. As I approached, the older brother hurriedly shushed the crying boy. I bent down so I was eye-level with them and asked the younger child what happened. His long, dark eyelashes were wet with tears, and his innocent, blue eyes met mine. He pointed at the snow cone truck with a single, defiant gesture and continued to bawl. The older boy tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned around. He showed me the measly dollar bill in his hand, and I understood.

I ran down the street in an awkward gallop, as my heavy backpack bounced up and down with every movement. Pebbles sprayed up around me, and my shoes slapped the ground in a rhythmic CLOP CLOP. The snow cone truck began to move, and I lunged into a sprint. My side started to ache, and my lungs forget what air feels like.

I shouted, "STOP!"

The snow cone truck froze, and I rushed to the window.

"Just in time," the man laughed.

I smiled and nodded along with him, even though my insides screamed in pain. I quickly paid for a small snow cone with all the money I had on me walked back to the two boys, sweat dripping from my face and into my eyes. The younger boy, having forgotten his previous woe smiled gleefully up at me. His brother thanked me gratefully.

"For you," I said to the small boy handing him the snow cone. The memory of the stranger flitted to my mind. His broken glasses. His dirty clothes. When I was six years old, I did not know pain. I did not know hunger, and I did not know suffering. I can only assume that my stranger had experienced life with all its thorns. If his appearance was any indication, he was dealt an unfair set of cards compared to me. After all these years, I could truly appreciate the

stranger's selfless act. I could understand that we were now forever joined by his generosity towards me. His impact reached as far as the boy standing in front of me, the way a goldfish in water causes a ripple that extends far beyond itself.

"Thank you," the little boy beamed.

I remember the goldfish man.

STRONG

Tina Chen

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

"I grow up surrounded by strong women." Those are words that we hear often. But when I say strong, I don't mean that these women are company CEOs and CFOs, give fiery speeches, wear pant suits and debate with men over wine with Gucci handbags dangling over the seat back. They are women who wash the dishes in the school cafeteria, who work in Chinese take-out restaurants. They cook and they work and they give the whole time, with their accents and their wrinkly knobby disfigured hands from washing too many dishes, and they love.

They dig twenty bucks out from their minimum wage paycheck to buy lunch for a college student colleague who has literally nothing in their bank account and nothing in their wallets. They wake up at four in the morning to pray

and chant for hours on end, and they strive to love the people who disregard them, who condescend upon them, who brush them off, who insult them and ignore them. They walk laps around the track at the YMCA, massaging their tired shoulders and legs. They scrounge up money and favors so that a friend's child can be buried. They volunteer to make lunch for everyone and anyone every Sunday, even though that means baking and cooking at 5 AM, and they push hands holding money away because "it's just some leftover ingredients" even if maybe their refrigerators are empty now and retirement money is all that is left. They smile politely to hide their confusion when they don't understand the question the first time, and they don't let that smile slip when you can't understand what they're saying because maybe they're missing the question or maybe they don't understand the words you used or maybe you spoke too quickly or maybe they can't hear. And maybe you don't understand that English is their second, their third, their fifth, their tenth language, that they raised kids and grandkids from their blood, their sweat, their tears, that they give everything they have, every last cent to their community, that they never see their brothers, their sisters, their parents, that they never see their homes. That they are beautiful. That they are strong.

My mom is a psychiatrist. That means she is a physician, a doctor. She works from day to night, hunched over her computer writing research proposals and grants about addiction, or in her office, talking with her patients about their depression, their schizophrenia, their bipolar disorder.

People call her a psychologist a lot. They call her Missus, and not Doctor. It's a fair mistake, right? Until the age of ten, I didn't know the difference between a psychiatrist and a psychologist either.

But sometimes, I wonder. Why can they never get it right? Why can't they acknowledge that my mom, a woman of color, an immigrant with an accent who mixes up plural and singular verb endings, has a degree? That she has two degrees. That her work is saving lives, that this nation needs her, that she studied for years and years and years and toiled through residency and training, driving three hours each day from work to home, where she cares for her young children.

Maybe there is no explanation. Maybe it's a genuine mistake, all nine hundred and ninety-nine times. But maybe, the one time, it's because they look at her, and assume they know her. They assume they know everything about her, that she could never be educated. In the words of Dr. Rodney Glasgow, maybe it is because they simply cannot stand to see her achieve.

LOSS

Alexis Cornett

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Freshman Center,
Blue Springs, MO

Educator: Kimberly Blevins

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

I don't know what to expect as I walk toward the church. I've never seen a dead body before, especially not that of my father. I take a deep breath before opening the wooden church doors and entering the building.

My stepmom is standing there in the entryway, smoking a cigarette right there in the church as if God would forgive her for a small sin on this day. She hugs me, and I brace myself as I walk toward the casket.

My grandmother meets me in tears, denying the fact that her child has passed on. She was the one who waited at the hospital and gave me the call that shattered my reality. She also gives me a hug and apologizes for my loss. I am too afraid to even glance at the body that is only meters in front of me.

Slowly I walk up to the casket. The fabric backdrop that is propped up behind it is painted with green ducks and the kind of knee-high grass that we used to wade through on our way to the river. It makes me smile. This is exactly how he would have planned his own funeral. And though I can't stand country music, I make an exception for his funeral as it whispers through the speakers.

I finally make it to the dark, wooden casket and stare down at him. The moment I see his pale face and blue lips my stomach sinks and tears begin to leave streaks down my face. I can hardly believe this harsh reality, despite the fact that it is right in front of my face. I want to walk away, I want to leave. But I know I can't.

I sit down on a pew and sob to myself. Many people stop by and tell me that they are sorry. Friends of my father and family members that I haven't seen in years give me their condolences. What a sad truth that we are all brought together by this horrible fate. The words of sorrow suffocate me, and I begin to despise the word "sorry". An older woman I don't recognize gives me a kiss on the cheek and says she hasn't seen me in forever. I try to smile and pretend I know her, but I cannot stop the tears from flowing.

I take another tissue from the box on my lap and press it against my nose. I take it away and see an ugly splotch of crimson decorating it. I hold the tissue to my nose and try to make the bleeding stop. Tears are mixing with blood as I cry even harder. I sit there alone, without a father or a friend in the world. I look up to the stained-glass depiction of God on the wall as if to ask Him why me?

A short priest with gray hair stumbles up to the podium and reads an obituary. It mentions me one time, at the very beginning, just to say that I outlived my father.

After this short session everyone stands up and leaves for lunch, as if forgetting my dad's death altogether in favor for a sandwich. I stay there, paralyzed in agony. After everyone is gone, I sit there alone and mourn the death of my only father.

SUPERIOR

Skylar Droege

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central
High School, Chesterfield, MO
Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The lotion was sticky and smelled a little funny, and it pooled thickly in my palm when I squeezed the bottle too hard, but my hands were itching for something to do. I rubbed it in, my eyes rooted to the backs of the judges' heads. Two girls were performing a scene at the front of the room, and in the quiet

between their lines the judges' pencils scratched the paper.

My school filled up nearly two rows of chairs - an unusual picture, if the small, scattered clumps of kids from other schools were anything to go by. Typically, the only people in the audience for individual event competitions were those competing and perhaps a few of their closest friends. Most kids would rather attend workshops and games than spend an hour in a cold, tense room just to see someone from their troupe perform a three minute piece.

Half the troupe had come to see me.

That made me feel a little guilty. Jordyn Kendrick was performing at the same time in the musical theatre room, but I only knew of two people going to see her. The rest were here. For me.

I regretted the lotion now. There was no way I was rubbing it all in anytime soon, and my hands were now sticky on top of shaking. My stomach tickled, and I'd forgotten how to breathe normally.

O EGLAMOUR, THOU ART A GENTLEMAN /
THINK NOT I FLATTER, FOR I SWEAR I DO
NOT...

Everytime I caught the Shakespeare running on loop through my head, I thrust it from my thoughts. I would jinx it, I knew I would, if I let the words play all the way through now. I'd get up there and forget who Glamour was and why I was talking to him.

The trickle of applause bled through my thoughts. I clapped half-heartedly; I hadn't been paying attention. I held my breath, but the name they called up next was not mine.

BUT YOU WERE WRONG THE OTHER DAY.
THAT'S NOT WHAT A TRAIN DOES TO YOU.
THIS TRAIN, SHE'S A KNIFE...

Too quickly, the monologues were over and applause bled through the room again and then they were calling my name and the pit in my stomach boiled over and I squeezed my hands into fists, clammy palms and white

knuckles. I stood up. Next to me, Liv grabbed my arm and I flinched.

"Your nametag," she mouthed.

I took it off and handed it to her, hoping she couldn't see how it shook in my fingers. She flashed me a smile and nudged me toward the front of the room.

I counted my steps as I passed each row of chairs, focusing on my breath. IN FOR FOUR, HOLD, OUT FOR FOUR, HOLD...

Then I was in front of the judges, watching them finish their notes on the girl before me. I wiped my hands on my skirt.

They looked up, one by one. I smiled. I told them my name, my troupe, my pieces. I took a breath, let the room melt away, and started.

And finished. Over in a heartbeat. I walked back to my seat, the world spinning slightly like I was kid fresh off a carousel.

Liv stood up to press me in a quick hug. Others reached out, passing me excited smiles and quick, quiet congratulations.

I settled back beside Liv, peering over her shoulder. "Is Mercedes crying?"

She rolled her eyes fondly. "It's Mercedes. Of course she's crying."

"I made Mercedes cry?"

"With your second monologue, yeah. I think Anthony cried a little, too."

I showed her my hands, still quivering.

"I still don't believe they didn't give you a superior rating for that," Liv said.

I was sitting cross legged on the hotel bed, shuffling through the judges' score sheets. "They took points off for how I transitioned between the pieces."

"That's stupid," Liv said as she plopped her suitcase on the bed. "That's not even acting. The monologues themselves were great."

"I was crying," Mercedes volunteered from across the room.

"I made you cry," I said, and stuck out my tongue at her.

In response, she threw a sock at me.

I stared down at the score sheets as they bustled about the room, packing. The criticism scribbled across the rubric wasn't harsh, but it still stung - I'd worked on those pieces for months, writing pages and pages of character analysis and drilling the lines for hours at a time. It was frustrating to think it hadn't shown up to the judge's standards.

But then I remembered how the entire room melted away. And how, halfway through my second monologue, something twisted in my gut - something real and raw, that pressed my throat until my voice broke over the words and my eyes stung. How, for one moment, I knew so clearly who I was and where I was, and I was not simply performing a monologue at a state conference.

It's like chasing a high, in a way - chasing how it feels to be driven out of yourself and into someone else. Acting isn't the replication of emotion; it's exploration - gouging truth out of fiction and laying your humanity bare, ugly or fickle or coarse as it may be.

So maybe I didn't get a perfect rating. So maybe my performance wasn't what the judges wanted to see; maybe it wasn't polished to perfection or locked into place. But for those three minutes, I was raw, I was alive, and I was telling a story that moved the people in the room - that connected us, however briefly.

PUZZLED

Audrey Griswold

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West
Middle School, Chesterfield, MO
Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

"Ouch," I said and winced.

Everyone else was probably thinking the same thing. I really did not know how she was walking or even standing. She stumbled while running, tripped and fell flat her face, her pole crashing down on top of her. While nothing was bleeding, I think her dignity levels had lowered. Her face scolded me as I got up ready to take my turn vaulting over the bungee cord. You could still see the place in the grass where she fell. I felt like it was my fault; after giving me the stare I thought everything was over.

It was Monday, June 11, 2018. I was standing in a semicircle on the hot asphalt with other people that looked very athletic. Some actually scared me with their strong arms and their Nike track spike shoes. They were gigantic compared to me. The founder of Pole Vault St. Louis, Chris, called us over to start warm ups. I was nervous because I had never pole-vaulted before, so I had no idea what was going to happen or what to expect.

WOULD WARM UPS BE CHALLENGING?
WOULD I BE ABLE TO GET OVER THE POLE?
WOULD PEOPLE BE NICE?

So we started warm ups and I felt comfortable because I had done them weeks before in track and cross country. But just as we ended warm ups, a girl with blonde hair walked in late with her dad, blaming her tardiness on the rush hour traffic. I couldn't tell if she was angry, rude, or just having a bad day. Even though her hair was

gold and her eyes were sparkly blue like the Atlantic Ocean, she still terrified me. Her eyes squinted at the bright, hot sun and with her fists clenched she looked like she had just knocked someone out. A huge, nasty, black and blue bruise sat on top of her left knee, which made her look like she had just won her last fight.

I immediately thought, **THERE'S NO WAY THAT SHE'S GOING TO BE NICE, I DON'T KNOW IF I EVEN WANT TO TALK TO HER.** She kind of reminded me of, Regina George, from Mean Girls. They could be twins. Her name was Olivia. Put them together, and it's Olivia and Regina.

So we get started with learning how to hold a pole, how to run, and all the other basics. Honestly, I wasn't so confident about Chris giving Olivia a 10-foot long fiberglass pole. I was kind of afraid that if I ran into her I'd be getting decapitated. So learning how to hold a 10-foot pole and making sure I wasn't going to get murdered is harder than most people think.

After all the rookies learned how to hold the pole, we started running and placing the pole on the ground to just get a feel for everything. We had to line up do the drills across the straight part of the track. You'll never guess who chose to be in my line...Olivia. I thought if I ever crossed her, I'd never hear the end of it.

The group of girls I was with were all very athletic and caught on to vaulting very quickly. Chris saw that and moved all of us onto the real deal, the box in front of the big soft mat. It was sort of intimidating. Olivia was in front of me this time to vault. I thought if anything happened, she would most likely blame me. I mean, that's what I would assume to happen. All the evidence points to

that.

We had just gotten our steps and Olivia was up next to try them out for the first time. I was (again) standing right behind her trying not to breathe or mess her up. I moved all the rocks off the track that were behind her, I made my pole super tall so she had enough room to step back with her pole, and I even whispered,

"You can do it, Olivia." Whispered being the key word.

She stepped back, looked down at her number on the tape measure and started to run. Faster and faster she planted her pole and tripped over herself while running and went face first onto the ground. Any farther she would've landed in the ditch. I had no idea how that happened!

I DID EVERYTHING RIGHT; I EVEN CHEERED FOR HER! HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN? I thought to myself.

Chris talked to her for a quick minute and then she started walking back to the end of the line to try again. As she walked, a dark presence poured over me. I felt like I was in an old Disney movie when the villain comes and takes the princess from the castle. I heard the dramatic music and everything. As Olivia got closer, her face got more vivid. Her eyes were staring straight at me, while her feet were walking toward the end of the line. And her face.....oh my her face was red, and her forehead dripped with sweat. She looked really mad....and she stared right at me! Her face scolded me as I got up ready to take my turn vaulting over the bungee cord. I had never been this scared by a person before. She walked back to the end of the line and stopped. I thought I could hear her breathing four people away! I knew my life was for sure

over.

Later on, Chris wanted to get to know us more as people. So he asked us how did we got interested in pole vaulting, what school did we go to and what other sports we played. Mason, Lilly and Gabby had all spoke and now it was Olivia's turn. I had never actually heard her voice before now. I wondered what it would sound like. She started with her name; her voice was so different from what I had imagined. Then she said she goes to school in the Parkway district and mentioned she had been a competitive gymnast for Planet Gymnastics. Now that really caught my attention. I was a competitive gymnast for another club that had competed against Planet earlier in the season! I couldn't remember competing against Olivia personally, but I remembered the team like the back of my hand. We had so much in common! I had no idea that we were so similar.

Later during water break, I told her how she looked so scary all the time and that she scared me. She laughed and said it's the RBF, or otherwise known as the Resting B_____ Face. It's an expression on your face that makes you look mad all the time even when you are not mad. I knew exactly what that meant, and I screamed,

"Oh my gosh! My mom says that to me all the time!" Olivia looked really surprised I even knew what RBF was!

From there on we started talking all things gymnastics and all the different faces we make doing gymnastics and other athletic activities. RBF came up at least one time in each sentence! Once we started talking, her whole face lit up because we were talking about things that really interested us. We found a common ground.

Olivia wasn't so scary anymore. I guess she was never actually scary. I was so focused on the unimportant things I didn't see what was beyond the surface. I was just too quick to judge her. I was so used to looking on the outside of people and not seeing their light or their deep thoughts that really made them who they are. A week later I met her again at another week of pole vaulting. We were still great friends that enjoyed talking to each other. I grew more in that one week than I'd grown in a single year.

THE PAIN OF SUMMER SCHOOL

Chloe Groner

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central
High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

The summer before my junior year I got a job at my local pool. I was ecstatic to have a break from the school's endless amount of work and was eager to start being independent with my own money. However, to my disappointment, my plan was interrupted by something I thought I didn't have to worry about - school. I had signed up to volunteer at an elementary school to

complete my community service hours for the A+ program. At the moment I signed up I was excited, but when the time came, I dreaded the idea of having to go to school for another three weeks. But the worst of all? I couldn't work while I was volunteering. The only shifts that I was able to take were in the morning during school hours. Frustrated on my missed paychecks, I started to go to the school.

On the first day, I dragged my way through the doors of the school. My eyelids felt like lead, and I thought of how all of my friends were sleeping as I sat in the front hallway waiting for the starting bell to ring. I looked at the group of kids pressing their face onto the front door and pictured a scene from the Walking Dead, when the zombies are trying to attack the people trapped in the building. When the bell finally rang, the kids trampled over each other trying to get into the school quickly to see their friends. I had forgotten how annoying young children could be when I signed up to volunteer. While they were running and screaming, it was my job to help see if anyone needed help to get to their classes; however, my limbs were as heavy as my eyelids. Feeling defeated by my exhaustion, I slouched in a big chair in the front office until I had to get to my first class. My first class was "jumpstart to first grade," where I had to help a teacher teach incoming first graders. The first day seemed to go relatively well. I helped kids color, broke up arguments about whose mom was better, and daydreamed about going home. After two hours of boredom, the bell for the second class rang. With the sound of the bell, I felt a small smile creep onto my face and grew excited to help a choir teacher with third through fifth graders. I was excited to see what teaching a music class would be like

since I enjoy taking choir in high school. The second class seemed to go by faster than the first. I enjoyed teaching the kids the letters of the music staff, playing name games, and singing some warm-up songs. However, the most beautiful sound I heard that day was the end of the day bell.

After a couple days of the same routine, I was called to help the principal cut up paper for a project. At the end of the school day, I trudged to the principal's office when a little girl from my choir class came in. I eavesdropped into their conversation while the teacher explained that the girl had been sent on the wrong bus and she wasn't sure how to get home. I ignored the situation and continued doing my work, checking the clock to see when I would be able to leave. I gradually heard the secretary in the office getting louder towards the little girl. Confused, I looked up and saw the little girl frantically speaking Spanish towards the secretary who had a red face and an annoyed expression on her face. Ignoring the work that the principal asked me to do, I walked over to the little girl who was almost in tears and pulled her back to the table I was at. I instantly regretted my decision because I had no plan on how to make her feel better. She knew absolutely no english, and I knew absolutely no spanish. The girl was heavily breathing trying to keep back tears, and I had no idea how to help her. Her name wasn't in the system, and the school had no way to contact her mother. While the principal tried to find her mom, I stayed with the girl and attempted to calm her down. I pulled out my phone and let her play some games, we drew pictures, and while we were playing tic-tac-toe, I had an idea. I pulled out my phone - but not to check the time - and I opened Google Translate. It

wasn't perfect, and I knew that my words would not be translated well, but it was the only idea that I had. I typed "We're trying to find your mom," into the box and handed her my phone. She took a second to read it and then looked up to me and gave me a big hug. She said "thank you" in a thick accent, and we continued to play games until her mom came. When her mom rushed into the office, she looked nervously around trying to find her daughter. When the little girl saw her mother, she threw her drawing aside and jumped into her mom's arms, crying tears of joy. The relief on her face made me so happy I didn't even realize that my dad had been sitting in the parking lot for fifteen minutes.

At dinner, I would find myself telling my family about how the girl I helped in the principal's office had introduced me to her friend who also did not speak English. I would rave about them to anyone who would listen over the next week or so, while I would follow them around during recess and help them. Gradually, the girls did not need me to talk to their classmates. I was sad when I sat at the table alone, but when I saw them playing, laughing, and participating in activities, all my feelings of discontent disappeared. I knew that a week prior, the girls would have been sitting with me, using my phone to make conversation through the English to Spanish app I had downloaded for them. I smiled watching them play and felt a ball of pride swell in my stomach as they would introduce themselves to people using the words I had taught them. My pride only grew with every word they learned.

One day, while watching the girls climb over a play structure, I saw one of the older girls push one of the girls over. Instantly enraged,

I stood up from my table and watched as the second girl helped her up and they continued to play. I slowly sat back down keeping a close eye on Gabby and the older girl. As I sat there watching my class play, I realized how the two scared little girls I had taken under my wing had transformed into capable children. The girl I had met in the principal's office, who was once frightened she would never go home, was now running around and laughing with Gabby and her classmates.

Every once and a while, one of the girls would come to me in class to show me a new word they had learned. Their faces would beam as they said a broken "hello" and laughed when I would praise them. Watching their growth became my motivation to go to summer school, and I found myself bringing items from home to give to them the next day. I would bring little packets of fruit snacks, would take pictures of my dogs to show them the next day, and even brought a Spanish to English dictionary that I found at my house. When I would show the girls my pictures and gave them some food, their faces would brighten up as they tried to tell me about their day in the little English they knew.

On the last day of school, my choir class put together a concert for the school. I calmed the bubbly kids down while they stressed about the performance. As we walked to the gym to set up the risers, Gabby tugged on my shirt and asked for my phone. I gave her my phone, already opened to the English to Spanish translator, and waited for an answer. As she typed, I helped the anxious kids calm down and started to get the kids to warm up their voices. When Gabby gave me my phone back, I read "will I see you after the performance?". As I

read this, I felt a lump in my throat grow as I realized this was the last day I would ever see them. I typed back that I could come back to the choir concerts during the school year and acted happily, but in reality, I knew that I would most likely never see them again. Pushing aside my own feelings, I focused on the kids' concert. I finished warming them up, and we sat waiting for our audience to fill in.

When the concert finally started, I was shocked at how good the kids sounded. I couldn't tell if it was my own pride for the children or if it was that they really sang well. After the performance ended, the entire school stood up to applaud my class. I looked at the girls, and from their smiles, I could tell that they were as proud of themselves as I was of them. They ran up to me, and they both gave me a big hug when two women approached me. In choppy English, the girl's Mothers asked for a picture with me. Shocked by the request, I smiled awkwardly as their Mom's took our picture. As we continued to talk, I was told how they moved from Mexico in the middle of the prior school year and how they had trouble getting acclimated with the culture. I couldn't imagine how hard emigrating countries would be and my heart ached for them. One Mom mentioned how much she had heard of me and the other Mom jumped in to agree. I felt the pride swell back into my stomach knowing that I impacted the girl's lives so much.

The conversation with the girl's mother's shortly ended after it started. I gave the teary-eyed girls a hug and watched them walk away. After they left, I looked back at the empty risers and remembered the concert. I remembered the kids who would welcome me every morning with a smile

and how easy it was to make them laugh. Feeling sentimental, I walked back to the music room to get my things. I looked around the music room and at the places where we would play games and sing. I even walked back towards my first class to say goodbye to the teacher I helped in that class. I got a text from my dad saying that he was there and the feeling of nostalgia only grew. I slowly walked through the bright school one more time as I walked to the front office to sign out. I said goodbye to the secretary and walked out of the school doors one more time, longing to be returning the following Monday.

I could never imagine that I would walk out of summer school wanting it to continue. For weeks after school ended I would think about the girls and how they were doing. Even when I started my job, I would tell stories about summer school and explain to my coworkers the girls I had met. They taught me more than they will ever realize. One day at my job, I found myself waiting patiently for a young boy to pay attention rather than getting angry when he didn't listen to me the first time. Instead of being annoyed, I was happy to watch children solve their problems alone even though it took longer. I enjoyed my time around the kids and looked forward to coming back the next day. Children were not just children anymore, they were people too with real emotions and real problems that I could help fix. The future never works out the way you think it will. I thought I would be spending my summer making money, but instead, I spent three weeks with kids helping them realize their full potential. Even though I missed out on a paycheck, I realized the benefits of going to summer school outweighed the money. Without them, I don't know how starting my job

would have been. The girls showed me how much joy kids can bring someone instead of frustration, and for that, I can never repay them.

NOMINALIST'S DILEMMA

Jamie Hill

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Platte County
High School, Platte City, MO
Educators: Marnie Jenkins ,
James Miscavish

Category: Personal
Essay/Memoir

'TIS BUT THY NAME THAT IS MY ENEMY;
THOU ART THYSELF, THOUGH NOT A
MONTAGUE.
WHAT'S MONTAGUE? IT IS NOR HAND,
NOR FOOT,
NOR ARM, NOR FACE, NOR ANY OTHER
PART
BELONGING TO A MAN.

If you'd ask me why I changed my name I'd tell you it was a bunch of little things, but that's only partially true. To be honest, I don't have a definitive reason. Sometimes, I wonder why I did it, too. I wonder what good it does me.

I believe names are what tie us to our bodies. It's ironic that if we encounter someone with a very weird, unique name that we've never heard before, we'll judge their parents for it. We do this when the entire point of a name is to have something individual that people use to refer to you specifically. Common names have never been in my favor. If you give your child a name that someone else has on the first day of kindergarten, you've failed at naming your child. Dani is an even more common name than Lynn. I think the universe has a sense of humor.

O, BE SOME OTHER NAME!
WHAT'S IN A NAME? THAT WHICH WE
CALL A ROSE
BY ANY OTHER WORD WOULD SMELL AS
SWEET;

It was the summer before sophomore year. I hadn't liked my name for a while. I liked that it was short. I liked not having to listen to teachers use my last name to clarify which Lynn they were talking to. But I didn't want it anymore. I wasn't the person I had always been, and it felt like a leash my past had on me. If anyone asked I would tell them it was because there was someone else in band with that name and I was tired of thinking people were talking to me when they weren't. A lazy reason. I just didn't want it anymore.

Names are a gift your parents give to you at birth, like a pair of shoes. Most people keep those shoes and wear them their entire life. Lots of people will temporarily try

on others that their friends and family give them. We feel required to be grateful for every gift we get. But not everyone likes the shoes they get. I didn't like mine. They had served me well for 13 years, but they didn't quite fit anymore. They were a bit too tight and the laces were scratchy and they felt garish when combined with the rest of me. So I took them off.

I used to fill the empty space between my thoughts by making lists of gender neutral names. Jesse. Cameron. Alex. Jo. Sam. Chris. Really, any name is gender neutral. A name belongs to the person who uses it, and if I'm not a girl, my name is not a girl's name. I wish I had put more thought into the name I chose. Even if I had ended up at the same place, I think my name would feel like it belonged to me more if I had worked harder to pick it.

"SO, WHY DID YOU PICK THE NAME DANI?"

"I JUST - THOUGHT IT SOUNDED COOL."

Sometimes, I detach. My thoughts cluster around my ears and my hips go lopsided and my consciousness floats in front of my sternum. When this happens, I question myself. Current Me doesn't have a great relationship with Past Me and Existential Me wonders how I ended up like this. Why I've done the things I did. What good it does me. Sometimes, I wonder if it's weird how I think of Past Me, Current Me and Future Me as three different people. I feel like goddamn Ebenezer Scrooge. Future Me is my favorite. Future Me has my life figured

out while Current Me is still stuck here in Purgatory doing circus tricks to try and knock years off of my eternal damnation. Past Me doesn't have very much sympathy for Current Me. We don't even talk about Past Me.

Sometimes, I wonder if it's unhealthy to hate a past version of myself so much. Does it count as self hatred even if I love who I am now? Maybe I don't even hate it that much, maybe I just do it for comic relief. Humor is my coping mechanism.

My body doesn't feel like its mine sometimes. I didn't pick it. I didn't pick my birth name either. That's definitely part of it. One of the little things that isn't such a little thing that I don't tell people when they ask why. I don't always feel settled into my chosen name, but I'm not okay with my birth name. I don't call it my deadname very often. It's hard to feel like its dead when my parents dance the corpse across the kitchen table every day. They pretend it's still alive. They DO think it's still alive. I don't have the heart to tell them differently.

Sometimes I think I need to lighten up on the angsty macabre metaphors.

I didn't plan on my parents finding out about the new name for a while. That plan went to shit on the second day of school when my mom saw it on the top of my math homework. I think she was worried I was doing someone else's homework. I made up a story about how it was a nickname gotten out of hand.

The truth is that I woke up one morning and I stopped asking who would let me. I

started asking who's gonna stop me. I walked into school and told my teachers to call me Dani and they did. I asked my friends to call me Dani and they did. My thoughts were nestled into their proper nooks in my head and my consciousness pulsed in my chest in time with my heartbeat and I wasn't worried about the shape of my hips. I felt Together for the first time in a long time. I couldn't remember what it felt like to be alone. I made a choice and I was happy to experience the consequences.

Sometimes, I still worry that I'll change my mind. I'm not Stargirl. If I change my name again no one will take me seriously. Dani is a dimensional plane and a quarter away from Lynn. It feels weird sometimes. But my name is only one part of me. And what's in a name anyway?

SO ROMEO WOULD, WERE HE NOT
ROMEO CALL'D,
RETAIN THAT DEAR PERFECTION WHICH HE
OWES
WITHOUT THAT TITLE. ROMEO, DOFF THY
NAME,
AND FOR THAT NAME WHICH IS NO PART
OF THEE
TAKE ALL MYSELF.

Not every situation will let me be Dani. There are still substitute teachers and legal documents and grandparents. I was Lynn for 14 years and Dani for about 1.

Sometimes, my name is still Lynn.

But all the time, I am Dani.

Nominalism - doctrine that the naming of things defines reality

I TAKE THEE AT THY WORD:
CALL ME BUT LOVE, AND I'LL BE NEW
BAPTIZED;
HENCEFORTH I NEVER WILL BE ROMEO.

THE IN BETWEEN

Jamie Hill

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Platte County
High School, Platte City, MO
Educators: Marnie Jenkins ,
James Miscavish

Category: Personal
Essay/Memoir

I get stuck on in-betweens. Born the middle child, stuck in between two sisters; a supposed genius child who skipped a year, between two grades; a queer, in between straight and gay, between boy and girl. There are a lot of things I'm almost good at. Then so many things I almost care about. A plethora of attributes that contradict themselves at my core. I get stuck in the spaces between reality, where no one has the

authority to decide what's true and what isn't. My natural state is some fluid abomination refusing to settle into any of the factions society likes to file everyone into for mass convenience. I have no place. At my core, I am a maybe, a sort of, an interpolated idea of a person, begging for a definition, and yet, defying words.

And, well, if I'm so determined to exist on the in between, doesn't it make sense for me to love on the in-between too?

The first clue probably should've been my self proclaimed 'Threesome Phase' during sophomore year. At some point I found myself enthralled by the idea and couldn't help but indulge in the fantasy of being with two people at once. I got through Chemistry every day by thinking about biology and anatomy. Science is science, right? There is no good excuse for those deranged, hormone-driven delusions.

It started before then though. The beginning started somewhere in the middle, when it was dangerously sunny and everyone was wearing clothes just a little too revealing for someone with my lack of willpower. Our band was going on a trip to Orlando, to blonde beaches and rollercoasters bigger than my hopes and dreams. The kind of atmosphere cultured by a distinct lack of adult supervision too great a temptation for dirty minded, nerdy teenagers silently captivated by their athletic friends.

It was Marie and Sam in the beginning. When we spent three infinite crumbs of

days wading through crowds and making dumb dirty jokes just loud enough for the three of us to hear over the distant screams of theme park-goers. There was Sam, lithe and lean, with the dark curls and toned shoulders and eyes so dark you couldn't see where the pupil ended and the iris began. Then there was Marie, all velvety and clear, with the creamy laugh and killer legs, the kind of eyes that made you understand that inexplicable pressure behind your sternum and above your navel. And then, there was me, all 100 pounds, gangly and stuttery and pale, with the oversized backpack and self-doubt and overactive imagination.

It was inevitable, I think, that my thoughts would fall to them. Late at night when I showered last in the hotel room so I could take as long as I wanted and the next morning when Marie would call me out on it and we'd all laugh because they didn't know I was doing it as a cover. My sanity was but a concept when we would play the kind of game stupid teenagers do where we'd make obnoxious over the top moans and groans at any slight provocation whether that be bumping shoulders or jerking on a rollercoaster or trying to shove all our bags into one box before getting on a ride. Those noises stuck in my mind more than theirs, I think. I should've known. But I didn't. And it's only looking back that it becomes clear to me how much of a bumbling idiot I was.

My truth settled over my head like ash when I watched Jo and Max together. The identity I was denying slunk over my shoulders like the Cheshire cat and bared its wicked teeth, amused at my despair.

Part of me knew it was coming, knew that the universe had it in for me and no amount of terror or turbulence would ever be enough for the fates that took pleasure in dragging their frigid scissors down my spine.

At first, it was calculated, a simple deduction of the pros and cons of polyamory. I'd heard the word before, bits and pieces and misconceptions. I've always had a bad habit of letting my thoughts wander. Investigation led to discovery turned to resignation. What was once an odd topic had possessed my bones, turned my lungs to sand and had placed an odd and heavy sense of **RIGHTNESS** under my tongue. The more I wondered if it was possible, the more I wondered if I was capable of it, the more I would rock myself to sleep at night with the phantom feeling of being wrapped up in the arms and adoration of not just one, but multiple people.

So it was Jo and Max, following not my second, not third, but **FOURTH** identity crisis, who spoon fed me the reality of my yearning. I watched them from afar, watched Jo bury her head in Max's chest, watched them glitter and glow together, and pictured two sets of eclipsing hands roaming over my body. The two of them were test subjects as I traipsed new terrain. The ideas I had of them in my mind were my only guide when I swam through possibilities of the future. It was wishful thinking. But I indulged. What else is there to do when you are naught but dust and cluttered thoughts and they are the gods you worship? I look to the sky. I pray. I receive no answer.

It started to hurt when Marie and Joshua started dating. I didn't think much of it when they cuddled incessantly all throughout the Science Olympiad state competition trip. That was back when Marie was nothing more than my friend, a companion and a pretty face and entirely too much for me to consider handling in a romantic setting. If she was happy with him, I was happy. But it got worse.

Band camp leached the sweat and patience and sense out of our bodies, leaving us sore and uninhibited. We would pile into Marie's shitty minivan with the air conditioning that didn't work at the end of the day and I would laugh in the passenger seat while the two of them bickered over whether or not Josh was allowed to roll his window down. We'd twist our legs to avoid the sunspots leaking in through the windows and cackle over nasty jokes until we felt like our lungs would melt out of our bodies. That was when my attention would catch on the line of Marie's calf and the curve of Josh's bicep and the sound of their laughs would fuse in the muggy air of the car.

But when we were out of the car, restraint was gone. We'd run wild through Target and without the physical limit of a seatbelt they'd draw in like magnets, picking and poking and play wrestling in the home decor section until the rest of the world disappeared. I'd wander into the cereal aisle waiting for them to find me, pretending that Cap'n Crunch and Tony the Tiger were better company anyway. I'd pretend I didn't want to barrel into the both of them and wrap my arms around Joshua's waist to peer over his shoulder at Marie. I'd pretend I didn't wish I could

drown in the cloud of their infatuation.

It got worse, somehow, after they broke up. Both of them curled into me, declaring their love and their loss and how every memory was filled with longing. I comforted the best I could, twisting my empathy into sympathy, trying to seem supportive instead of relative. They were already dealing with so many emotions, they didn't need mine, too.

I got mixed up though, I think, when I would bend into an emotional filter for them and my feelings would get mixed up with theirs. At times, I forgot which aches belonged to who. I suffered from the phantom limb pains of memories that weren't mine and poeticism was my medicine of choice. Our sadness whirlpooled around me, sucking me into this void of hybrid words, losing myself in them, in their loss, in their love. What was theirs became mine for a moment, but by then it had spoiled, and I choked on the scraps of love that could never have been mine.

In my quest for more love, I lose it all. Perhaps that is the penance I pay for being greedy. Perhaps I ask too much. Perhaps, anything at all is too much for the world to spare. Everything has a place to go and someone to go to. Everything except for me, I guess. So here I stay, on the in between, in the nowhere, in the nothing.

THE ART OF SAYING JUST THE RIGHT THING AT JUST THE RIGHT TIME

Teresa Jiang

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs
School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Personal
Essay/Memoir

The Art of Saying Just the Right Thing at Just the Right Time

It was raining outside.

Such a statement is an observation, simple as that. It isn't a brilliant thematic device. It isn't symbolism for transparency or inner turmoil. It isn't setting the scene for an intense, deep conversation soon to follow. Rather, the rain at that moment lacked drama or elegance. Droplets battered at the windows with enough consistency to be annoying but not enough to induce fear. The glass panes

fogged with humidity, rivulets carving across the clouded surface and leaving behind their stories.

I see words in a different way since my English teachers started singing praises to every science-fiction or dystopian author. I'm thoroughly convinced that Ray Bradbury is an unspoken deity amongst the language arts department. Now, a bird emblazoned in lackluster skies means freedom, defiance, high spirits. Stars twinkling cheekily under the moon's domain suddenly foster many different interpretations. Hidden meanings make themselves acutely present in ways I had never foreseen. Their writing mourns the happenstances of the past and the future, poets and philosophers in their own right.

I've come to find that storytellers emerge in all kinds of people. My dad runs his own company and works as an IT consultant; feet away from where we lounge is his home office. Tangled wires hide behind two monitors, both emitting a pale blue light. Sometimes, it seems like he lives in the basement, if the stained ringlets on the rim of his coffee mug are anything to go by.

Before my dad was introduced to the stark realm of technology, he was a thinker, a writer. He spins tales faster than he runs programming codes, each one made of honest simplicity and wrapped in a gauze of sincerity. His stories are mostly of his childhood in lakeside China. Memories of rowing dragon boats under low hanging bridges, peeking through the neighbor's window to catch a glimpse of the morning cartoons, sharing

sugared candy artfully molded into a monkey with his brother. Many times, he's lamented that the hot dogs in America could never measure up to street dumplings from his hometown, much less to the warmth of grandma's fish soup trickling down your throat—a delight I've only experienced a handful of times.

Today, I ask Dad to tell the story of how he and Mom fell in love. It takes me a couple minutes to convince him that this question is born purely out of curiosity and **NO, I DON'T WANT TO CHASE AFTER SOME BOY**. Though he still looks like he has oppositions, he begins telling me how they'd grown up as classmates for six years. He jests that his love story likely started before Mom's—he'd chased after her until they became friends and later fell in love. The rain and the clattering of plates in the upstairs sink act as background music, accompanying the smooth lilt of his words. He plucks each golden word from the stars and weaves it into a blanket, its warmth draping over the slopes of my shoulders.

"I never saw fireworks," he quips. "I didn't feel butterflies, or taste rainbows. But I felt struck with such fortune, that my feelings were returned. I knew our love would last forever, and now our family is born from and built on that love, and that won't ever change."

—

It wasn't raining outside.

In hindsight, it feels like it should have been. A tumult of ink spilling, unfurling, howling would have masked the screams

that rage through the halls. From where I am curled up atop the stairwell, tendons stretched taut over my knuckles and fingernails tattooing crescent-moon indents in my palm, I can clearly make out the voices of my mom and brother. They fight like ivory serpents, striking and jabbing and thrusting poisoned words relentlessly.

I don't know what caused the argument, nor do I dare ask. It seems like arguments are common in our household these days; Mom thinks that Dad doesn't help around the house enough, Dad thinks that I lack motivation, I think that my brother spares no thought for others, my brother thinks Mom sets her expectations too high. The disputes sprout like weeds, and they tangle and wound and leech the color from within the household. I want it to stop.

Normally, it is my dad that resolves these conflicts. He unravels the knot of emotions and frustrations with patient, practiced hands and gentle, warm words and his uncanny ability to say just the right thing at just the right time. However, he isn't home at this moment; out on a business trip to his home country. Which means I'm the one that walks down each step on quivering legs.

A book lies at the base of the wall. If someone were to examine closely, they could spot the fresh dip among years of wear and tear. The creases on the spine and haphazard folding of the pages scream out in agony. I could carefully select my words as if they were small, precious gemstones. I could string them up, and preen them, and polish them,

and present them nestled within ebony velvet, a well-sculpted alluring speech. But I don't, because now all I care about is maintaining the love that binds us together.

It's hard for me to remember the exact words that spill from my lips. Static hums through my ears, and my heart rattles in its bony cage like a frightened animal in the claws of an unforgiving trap. My eyes remain locked on my hands, trembling with the fear of a broken family. I am afraid, and I am hurt. I say as much. My gaze doesn't leave the ground until I am finished speaking and my fingers grip at my jeans tightly, not wanting to see a frown carved into my mother's usually soft face. Instead, what I am faced with sends waves of shock through me. My mom looks like she's on the verge of tears—her eyelids bloom red and swell with clear droplets, wavering on the edge of her lashes—and my brother's head is bowed with shame.

Life isn't like my dad's stories, nor is like a fairytale. It isn't always a happily ever after or a group hug under the sunset. It certainly isn't kissing frogs or hacking off seventy feet of hair to save your true love. It's tears and pain and bloodshed. But it's also the faint ache of hearts stitching themselves back together and intertwining with others. Life is full of love.

My words may never be able to touch others. They may never be able to reach deep into one's heart and twist at it, nor may it smooth the furls in ones' eyebrows or ease the knots in one's stomach. But if someday, I can learn the art of saying just

the right thing at just the right time, that'll be enough for me.

FREE FLYING

Hannah Li

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central
High School, Chesterfield, MO
Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Free Flying

A small-winged, baby blue jay is perched delicately on a skinny twig just a few feet from my face. From its tiny beak a few notes fall out, and the chirps sound crisp and clear right next to my ear. Then it flutters away, gliding across the surface of the blue, Canadian lake in front of me.

"Aren't you getting in the water?" my mom asks.

"No," I say.

The rest of my family swims in the lake, enjoying their time as if they weren't immersing themselves into a freezing ice bath under the burning sun of a July's summer day. It feels like two different seasons inside and outside of the water.

I squint through the sunlight at the small cliff head on the other end of the lake. A little boy watches as his older brother gets ready to launch himself off the cliff using the rope. He gets a running start, and then holds tight to the rope and swings. He swings back to the ground area but never lets go of the

rope. The drop from the rope to the lake looks at least 25 feet high, so I don't blame him. At least I know I would never do this, not in a million years. I refuse to even touch the water.

"You see that drop over there?" my dad says, pointing to the rope and the cliff area. "You could break your neck at a height like that, so don't do it."

My dad's warning is simple and clear. I shrug. I'm not going to try anyway. Some time passes and one of my sisters gets tired and swims towards me and the shore. My sister is interested in the rope. At first my dad objects, but after making it clear we're walking over there just to spectate, we go on our way. We take the short hiking trail tracing around the lake over to the rope area. With every step, I feel like I'm walking inside a painting or piece of artwork. The sparkling blue lake water, tucked under the towering mountains and thick green trees paint a surreal, picture-perfect kind of scenery.

"The cliff jump actually seems kind of fun," my sister says.

I look at her incredulously. "You're kidding, right?"

"No," she replies, "Besides, you know how to swim. What are you afraid of?"

WHAT AM I AFRAID OF? WELL, FOR STARTERS, LETTING GO OF THE ROPE AT THE WRONG TIME AND FALLING TO AN IMMEDIATE DEATH BY TWISTING MY NECK, OR MAYBE JUST FALLING TOO DEEP IN THE WATER AND NEVER COMING BACK UP.

"I'm not afraid, it just doesn't seem like a good idea, especially with how high the drop is," I say, feeling uneasy.

We're walking with our shoes off, and every step we feel the dirt road and rocks prick the bottom of our feet. Now I'm starting to sweat profusely from my forehead to my neck. There's a rattling in my stomach, the

kind that comes right before getting into a cold pool for the first time. If my sister jumps off successfully and I can't even get the courage to try, I'll seem like the biggest coward in front of her. The thought is even more unsettling, as I listen and nod to her raving enthusiasm to jump off this cliff. Luckily, all my sweat drops from my anxiousness blends in with those from the heat.

"Let's just go check it out," I say to my sister. She happily obliges.

"Have you guys ever swung far enough to let go of the rope?" I ask the brothers.

"Nope," the older brother replies, pointing to a wooden platform just 10 feet above the trail. "You have to climb up the hill onto that platform to get high enough so you can swing out and not fall into the shallow water. Just make sure you let go at the right time, so you fall into deep enough water."

We make our way over to the platform. I stand there, glued to the spot. My sister is just as hesitant as I am. Although she wants to do it, I can tell she shares my uncertainty that something might go wrong. She decides to go first but stalls on the platform for almost 10 minutes before jumping off. Her hesitancy makes me hesitate even more. My sister, who is younger than me, finishes her jump, so I can't back out now.

I'm standing on the platform with the rope in my hand. All my adrenaline passes through the entirety of my body like a huge ocean wave. Believing that I will let go of the rope at the right time is the only way that I actually will, yet I feel like the baby bird with wings flying for the first time. I don't waste time like my sister. I let my feet fall off the platform with a quick jump and hold tight to the rope. I can feel my weight propelling me forward as I reach the full length of the end that the rope can swing. I hold on to the rope as tightly as if I were

bound to a chain hanging from it. The highest point of the swing. It's time to let go. I break free from my tight grasp of attachment to the chain. As I do, I know I am actually flying for the first time as my body launches straight up into the open air. Now I'm free falling and all my weight feels lifted from my body as it makes its long fall into the lake. I look down and now the water is fast approaching. I hit the crisp water and plunge deep, submerged in the iciness before I kick back to the surface. I take a huge gasp of air, an indulgence as satisfying as quenching thirst, and yell with pure joy.

Now I start to swim all the way back to shore. With every stroke, my body slowly warms up. I turn over with my black floating on the surface of the shivering water and look up at the sky. I'm staring at a magnificent, huge movie screen. The sky is a striking, flawless blue, and the white, fluffy clouds are the vivid characters of the movie. A huge bald eagle soars above me as if it belongs on the screen, a small detail of the plot adding to the vivacity and movement of the characters. I sigh with a heavy relief, and the part of my mind filled with all the doubts and hesitations come flooding out, unleashing themselves like water out of a bursting water balloon finally popped open. Now I've reached the shore, and my family is looking at me with admiration. Even my dad is shaking his head with a smile and I can almost hear him thinking, **WELL, MAYBE I SHOULDN'T HAVE DISCOURAGED THEM.**

The next week, we walk in a park and plan to visit a different lake with a higher cliff and platform to jump. It's a cool summer evening and the descending sun is just about to set itself into a soft, orange bed of clouds. I look up at two birds perching on a tree branch. The smaller of the two flutters

over to the next tree. The other, larger bird flies off the branch and up, up and away, into the horizon. Then I think back to last week at the lake when at first I was afraid to fly but found courage and relief after I let go of the chain holding me back. We're leaving for the next lake tomorrow. This time I'm jumping off first.

MENTALLY KNOCKED OUT

Campbell Marino

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central
High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal
Essay/Memoir

The bright, fluorescent lights of the high school gym were shining down on the slick, chic floor, casting a mirror image to the crowd, who was standing above.

"Let's go, Colts!" Coach yelled, as I scored a lay up to tie the game. It was 8-8, in the middle of the first quarter, with a little over five minutes left on the clock. Our strategy was simple, keep a "cherry picker" --(a teammate that gives up their defending position to remain near the opponents basket) on the back court, so when a break away occurred, it would be an easy two points. But that simple break away strategy cost us. Fortunately,

the team didn't suffer; it was me who ended up suffering the most.

We had been dreading this day for weeks. The basketball game was nearly forty-five minutes from school, and the cold, wispy air outside made the bus ride a lot longer and substantially colder. We were more quiet than usual, not because it was a Monday, but because we were tired of losing. My teammates and I were discouraged that our short lived season was only comprised of one win, which was based upon the forfeit of the other team. By the time we arrived at the foreign high school, the frantic students were just now leaving for the buses and headed to their after school activities. While most students stood in the atrium area, the others stood staring at us, looking at our dejected faces and vengeful eyes. We had never played this school before, and because we were all freshman, we had no idea where to go. Bewilderment came upon us all because our head coach had not yet arrived.

Once the game eventually started, I could tell our team was carrying heavy weights on their shoulders. My teammates were slow to the ball, we were not in the correct mindset to play. The pressure of starting second semester of school and the daily workload of homework was enough to put us in a bad mood. Our coach only provoked our anger.

"COME ON GIRLS! Pick up the pace! We're trailing by four points, lets go!" Coach yelled.

Sophie looked in my direction and dramatically rolled her eyes, whispering, "How did I know Coach would say that? I'm honestly surprised we scored a few points anyway."

In my mind, these four points between us would be easy to achieve. **POSITIVE THOUGHTS**, I reiterated to myself. **POSITIVE**

THOUGHTS.

Coach called a quick timeout and my teammates slowly wobbled to the bench, completely exasperated from the daily back and forth action of running on the court.

"Girls, I know school is hard right now, and that you're extremely tired, but please, for me, try to push through. All of you girls are strong, but you mentally need your head in the game."

"Yes girls!" shouted Jayla. "ON THREE... 1, 2, 3, LET'S GO COLTS!"

With a little over five minutes left, the game was nearly even. Sammie went to shoot and missed, the ball effortlessly was rebounded by the other team. Number 42 from R-1 Northwest went to shoot from inside the paint, missing the shot by inches. The ball bounced in my direction, landing at the tips of my feet. I bent down to get it, and amnesia passed through my system. I turned around uncontrollably, bashing my head into the other opponent, instantly feeling as if I collided into a median. Similar to the impact of a car crash, my head cocked backwards, completely taken aback by the forceful motion into the other girls head . I fell to my knees while the play continued and held the steady stream of blood gushing from my nose. The reflection of the crowd, who was casted on the gym floor, took me by surprise, and I eventually walked off the court in shock of what had happened. I felt extremely claustrophobic, which was unusual because I was in a wide open room. My body tensed up. It felt off, as if my mind was floating around, bouncing from side to side like a ping pong ball in a tournament. The trainer examined my nose and stuck a tampon up it, quickly sending me back to the bench, as she went to attend the other sporting activities

required that day. With tears stuck at the corners of my eyes, it made my vision blurry and hard to see. I downed a drink of water, and Coach impulsively put me back in the game because we were now trailing by ten. That action of impulsivity was what increased the danger of my injury. The "get up and go" and the "you're fine" factor was wrong on the coach's part, and on me for agreeing to put myself back into the exposure of what other risks could have followed.

The end of the game came quicker than expected and I ran out to meet my dad in the stands.

"Why do you have a piece of gauze stuck up your nose?" My dad asked in a joking manner.

I nearly cried as I mumbled that I hit heads with someone else and got an immediate nose bleed. He gave me a hug and walked me to the car, driving me home so I could begin my enormous workload of homework.

"How was your game?!" My mom exclaimed as I sluggishly walked through the laundry room door.

I didn't answer.

"Woah, woah, woah, don't walk away from me, Campbell. Come here."

I turned around lackadaisically and instantly saw her jaw drop to the floor.

"What's in your nose?" She questioned with a worried remark on her face.

"It's a tampon, mom," I said wearing a smirk on my face. "I hit heads with the opponent and got an immediate nosebleed. I'm fine I just need to go do my homework."

"Okay, but dinner will be ready in five minutes. Come down soon, please."

I stumbled up the stairs and made my way to my sister's room and face planted on

the base of her bed. My head felt like it was a hundred pounds, as if I was carrying a brick mounted on the face of my forehead. The sharp pain and strain on my temples required hard mental focus to even understand the words that had been coming from my sister's mouth.

"Um, are you okay? You seem way out of it today. What's going on with you?" Riley asked in a concerned manner.

"I hit heads with somebody, and my head really hurts, like it's never felt this way before. The pressure building up, not in my forehead, but in my temple area hurts so extremely bad that I can't bear the pain. I'm going to go talk to mom."

As I swerved around, there my mom was, staring at me intently, face to face.

"Campbell, I have no doubt that you have a concussion."

"No, but mom---"

"Campbell, it's obvious, you're squinting at me when the lights are dimly lit. We need to go see a doctor tomorrow morning; I will make a call to him right now."

"But mom, I have two tests tomorrow. I can't miss it. It's fine, I'm fine. I honestly just need some Advil, it's nothing major," I responded in a serious tone.

"But look at you, you seem miserable. You're cocking your head at me, and you are slow to respond. Go take a cold bath and go to bed. I want to make sure you are rested for tomorrow."

"But mom---"

"No but's, just go."

I awoke the next morning with an immense amount of pressure which was nearly unbearable for me to handle. I arrived at the doctor and he diagnosed me with a major concussion, forcefully telling me I was prohibited from playing basketball--or any sport for that matter, until I were to get better.

After the appointment, I came to school in a good mood, looking forward to the normal day ahead of me. I didn't think that this concussion would hold me back, **IN FACT IT WAS JUST SPORTS I WAS EXEMPT FROM, RIGHT?** With my backpack and all, my mom took me straight into the nurse's office.

"Good morning, honey, how are you?" Mrs. Hunt expressed to me.

"Hi, my daughter, Campbell Marino, just got diagnosed with a concussion, and we were required to let you know," as she handed over a considerable amount of papers that my physician printed out which exemplified the severity of my injury.

"Okay, thank you for letting me know. The question for you, Campbell, is are you able to continue going to school?"

I looked at her with a perplexed face, very distracted by the question.

"Campbell, on a scale of one to ten, how much does your head hurt right now; not from last night or even this morning, but right at this moment?"

"Um, a seven." I utterly enunciated with confused, droopy eyes.

Both the nurse and my mom looked at me with big, wild eyes. In the few seconds it took for them to contain their thoughts, Mrs. Hunt blurted out,

"You're going home now. Mrs. Marino you can take her, no questions asked. Just go and get rest, try to stay strong. Concussions are the worst injury because while everyone looks at you normally, you internally feel different. You don't feel like yourself."

I quietly expressed my gratitude and managed to walk out with tears in my eyes, with the full understanding of it all finally kicking in. I was battling a mental injury that puts a strain on my health, stamina, and normal, daily activities. Yes, concussions

are common, but the journey and battle is different for everyone. People live different lives, they go through different things. Not only was the information of no school hard for me to handle, but the time alone made me reflect on the impulsive actions that had occurred throughout the game, one's that were so obvious to me now than it was in the moment. These realizations come with experience, most of the time those experiences are one's that put your body through mental and physical strain. This concussion was for a purpose, and something that taught me more than the simple idea of being strong.

THE PEACH COLORED DRESS

Madison Michajliczenko

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West
Middle School, Chesterfield, MO
Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Looking into the mirror I felt like I could no longer see myself separated from my character. Of course I knew it was me but I didn't see anything that I would do in this character as a "Silly Girl." In place of the messy bun I had tight sausage curls; in place of my oversized comfy clothes I had a tight, form fitting dress. My usually makeup-less face was now ridden with foundation,

eyeshadow and blush. This outfit was so different and I could barely see a glimpse of how I would act. I was a different person with almost no trace of the normal me left. What happened to me?

When I started the **BEAUTY AND THE BEAST** play I didn't think I would be rushing into the dark University auditorium in plaid, blue pajama pants carrying a McDonald's bag in one hand and a Walmart bag in the other. But as I walked in to this auditorium it felt right, there was so much nervous excitement you could almost see it resonating from every 6th, 7th and 8th grader. We had been working on this play for months, put hours into memorizing blocking, lines and songs. And as I walked down the aisles I could still see people quietly reciting their lines in small groups or performing their scenes on a much smaller scale.

I could see my friends walking in backstage so I continued to walk down the aisle in my wet, snow covered boots. I see them waving to me and pointing to the backstage door. I knew that they were trying to tell me to come backstage with them. So I did. When I finally got there I hear, "Hey you finally made it! We thought that you were going to be super late!" The voice came from a giggling and smiling Riley, "And what the heck happened to your hair?" I reach up to feel the unnatural curls in my hair.

"I curled it."

"It looks good!" Riley says while touching the curls that I felt were one of the worst things that had happened to me. I reached into my bag of McDonalds, hoping that the

grease slathered, salted fries would comfort my pure anxiety.

“Hey Anna can I have some too?” I turn my head to see Riley pointing to the fries I had in my hand.

“I didn’t eat lunch earlier,” Riley says while I take a second handful out of the bag and place it into her extended arm. While we continued walking to the dressing room I hear, “Anna you’re finally here!” shortly followed by, “Woah. Your hair is curly.” I then see Jess already in her costume walking out of the dressing room.

“Yeah it is, however curling it was extremely annoying.”

Walking into the dressing room I look around and see a locker with my name on it. I walk over to place my bags in the locker. I then grab a pair of white tights and black flats out of the plastic Walmart bag and begin walking toward the extensive costume rack. Browsing through the costume rack I see the label “Silly Girls” in all capital letters. I look through the dresses, I see a few other girl’s dresses before I finally get to mine. I take it off the rack and stare at it for a few moments. When I got this dress tailored a few days earlier I knew what it looked like but it seemed to have gotten even uglier. I was to wear this for the three hours that the performance would take in the cold backstage area with off the shoulder frill sleeves.

I forgot how much I despised wearing dresses. I had never been a girly girl even when I was forced to wear them when I was younger. ‘Little girls that wear dresses to church look so pretty, so you should

too.’ That lie had been told to me for so many years by my grandma who had always wanted a girly daughter. She had always bought matching dresses for myself and my sister and wanted us to wear them to any fancy occasion. Everyone had said ‘You look so much like your sister!’ and I **HATED** that. In the fourth grade I had vowed **NEVER** to wear anything I didn’t want to again and here I was breaking that vow. I threw the dress over my shoulder holding its hanger in my right hand and my shoes and tights in the other. I knocked on the door and open it to enter the empty bathroom. I then close the door behind me and began to transition into this character that had been so awkwardly chosen for me.

Once I had finished I could no longer comfortably breathe. My tight, fluffy, peach colored monstrosity of a dress prohibited my lungs to take full breaths. Walking over to the mirror that had been littered with small fractures I fix my curled hair and realize that I looked different. The costume had forced me to not slouch because of the pain that it caused when the fabric contracted in on my stomach. Not only that but you couldn’t see my legs that usually had visible black leggings covering them but now had white tights. My usual school sweatshirt was gone and in its place was an uncomfortable dress without the long sleeves I would usually wear, I realized that in trying to be this character I missed the way that I would act and dress. I looked strange. Suddenly I realized, **WHAT IF SOMEONE IS IN THE CROWD THAT RECOGNIZES ME? WHAT IF PEOPLE START MAKING FUN OF ME FOR THIS? THEY ALREADY SAW ME IN SCHOOL YESTERDAY WITH MY HAIR, WHAT IF THEY ARE ALREADY MAKING FUN OF ME!**

I sighed, closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths, SNAP OUT OF IT, YOU ONLY HAVE TO DEAL WITH THIS DRESS FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS AND YOU'LL BE FINE, NO ONE WILL MAKE FUN OF YOU AND IF THEY DO IT DOESN' T MATTER. YOU'RE DOING SOMETHING YOU LOVE DOING AND THEY SHOULDN' T JUDGE YOU FOR IT . I swallowed my pride and stood up tall. When I looked in the mirror again I saw my crazy brown hair, even though it was in curls, and my pale skin. I remembered that I was playing the character. Just because I had to change my appearance and the way I acted didn't mean that I wasn't still me. Looking at myself for a little while longer I chuckle. YOU LOOK LIKE A 4 YEAR OLD THAT WANTED TO PLAY DRESS UP. I laugh quietly at my own joke and then smirk as I grab my cream colored apron and tie it loosely around my waist. Then grabbing my things I headed out.

Once outside wearing the uncomfortable and annoying dress I saw Jess and Riley talking so, with goosebumps from the cold dressing room, I walked over to them.

"Anna! What are you wearing?" Riley asked as she turned just in time to see me walking over.

"Unfortunately my costume," I say picking up the elaborate tulle covered hem of the dress so I didn't accidentally step on it (again).

"I never thought in a million years that I was going to see YOU in a dress," Jess said while motioning toward my bothersome dress.

"Well here I am," I say sliding back and

spinning around ending with a comical curtsy so that both of them could see it completely.

"However, it is extremely painful to breath in this.," I say clutching my abdomen and taking a small breath as I stood up, crossed my arms and started beaming. And with that we laughed and left to continue preparing for the play.

When we had finished the final song we all got into lines to take bows. Standing there looking out into the applauding crowd I finally realized what theatre was really about. Looking at everyone onstage I saw people in boxes, hoop skirts and even wearing candle hats. Everyone on this stage had sacrificed something in my case it was my pride. I realized what my drama teacher meant when he said that we were a family, a family of people who had devoted blood, sweat and tears to this performance.

As I looked out in the crowd once again I could see people from my school, popular people, and I didn't care. I didn't care! For the first time I didn't care about what people thought, about how they would've treated me. I felt free from the shackle of self-consciousness that would've usually stopped my from doing things like this. I felt good. With one last swoop I leaned down and then standing up I threw my hands above my head, with the biggest smile on my face. And the dress? Honestly it was growing on me.

WHAT IS TRUE SUCCESS?

Zahva Naeem

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central
High School, Chesterfield, MO
Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Drops of sweat roll down my temple as I make my way to my house. For a moment, I forget what day it is and simply take in the warmth and splendor that every summer day seems to bring. My ears perk up and listen into the birdsongs from overhead and the rapid barks of my neighbors' dog. I wave quickly at them and smile to myself as I cross over my lawn and punch in my garage code.

Walking inside, my head again begins to fill with the thoughts that had been plaguing me all week. Today is the last day of my junior year. This semester is the last chance I have to redeem myself in the eyes of innumerable universities that will only see me as a transcript in a stack of thousands. This transcript holds detached numbers that summarize my immense struggles throughout the first two years of high school. It seems odd to me that, in a way, this transcript reduces me and my character to just a few black numbers on a white screen, yet I know that this is the reality of the current education system. Regardless, this

transcript is my key to success.

Over the past two years, I didn't strive to improve myself even as I watched my grades slip because I thought I had so much time. I never thought to ask for help from my teachers because in the past I had always been self-sufficient. This year as a whole was infinitely more difficult for me in terms of course load and rigor, but I truly feel like I handled it better. At the beginning of August last year, I made a promise to myself to succeed. Success is different for everyone, and for me it means to accomplish my goals. My main goal for this year? To bring up my weighted GPA to the coveted 4.000. For me, my GPA is one tangible way I can see if I am accomplishing what I have set out to do.

Over the past ten months I spent every minute either studying or working on homework for my AP classes. I took a total of six this year, as well as the AP exams for all but one. The amount of energy and dedication it required me to embody was insane. Over the course of the past few months, I spent countless hours working with my teachers and completing extra work in an effort to attain my goal. However, I think that I am quite lucky in that this year I found a newfound love for many of my classes which made it so much easier to put in my all.

I reach for the doorknob and open the door with a squeak. Immediately, I am bombarded by the aromas of spices and chicken that are so characteristic of South Asian foods. I walk into the kitchen and see my mom at the stove, sleeves pulled up and hair clipped back.

"Hey, how were your finals?" she questions.

My younger brother is quick to answer and starts to go in depth about the difficulty of his finals. I swear, he had to have been

talking for at least twenty minutes by the time I finally had a chance to get a word in, but I was grateful for it.

Trudging up the stairs, I head to my room and flop into the sea of pillows on my bed. I quickly settle in and open Infinite Campus. To my dismay, the only grades that have been finalized for me so far are AP Calculus and AP Chemistry, and neither of those are classes I excel in. Suffice to say, I could definitely have done a better job working to grasp the material in there.

I am in the middle of recycling old papers and assignments when I hear my phone ding. I drop the papers and rush to my desk to grab my phone. My hands are sweaty, so it takes me a few swipes before I can finally get into the app. The few seconds I spend waiting for my phone to load feel like hours, as my mind is running a mile a minute. **WHICH CLASS'S GRADE IS FINALIZED? WHAT IS THE GRADE? IS IT ONE OF MY HARD CLASSES? WHAT IF I DID HORR**-then the screen pops up.

Spanish IV grade finalized: A

Physical Concepts grade finalized: A

"Yes!" I whoop in excitement and almost roll off my bed.

Four down, three to go.

I spend the next few hours tangled in my comforter, watching F.R.I.E.N.D.S. with my phone in my lap. It has been quite an uneventful evening, save for me finding out my grades in two of my classes. My other teachers have yet to finalize my grades, so I am starting to get a little anxious about it. All of a sudden, I feel my legs vibrating. I look down to see my phone's screen flashing and quickly go to unlock it. My hands are slightly shaking as I swipe onto the app and see my grades:

AP Psychology grade finalized: H

AP Language grade finalized: A

AP Comparative Politics grade finalized: H

Oh. My. God. All my grades are in...which means I can now check to see what my final GPA is. I exit out of my grades and go to my unofficial transcript. Before I click it, I stop for some reason. I don't know why but I can't seem to press on the link. The entirety of these past nine months, especially this last semester, I spent hundreds of hours poring over my textbooks and notes with an equal amount of time spent in study groups. This single transcript holds the evidence of either my success or my failure in fulfilling my goals.

My leg is bobbing up and down, and I can feel the blood rushing in my ears. I breathe in slowly and hold my breath as I press the link. Loading...Loading...Loading. Growing impatient, I click the refresh button which has yet to change from an "x" to the arrow. Finally, the top of the transcript begins to load. All I can currently see is the name of my school, which isn't of much use to me at all. Then I see it.

Cumulative

GPA (Weighted) 4.000

I laugh hysterically and jump off my bed with a yelp to tell my mom the incredible news.

"Zahva, calm down. Why are you running?" my mom asks with a furrowed brow.

"Guess what? Guess what? Guess what?" I'm talking so fast that I start to trip over my own words.

"What?"

"I did it! I finally did it! Look!" I pull out my phone and stick it into my mother's face as she struggles to make out what it says.

"I can't read it, what are you talking about? I don't understand what's going on."

"Mama, **LOOK**," I point to the GPA and my mom breaks into a beaming smile.

"Good job! I'm so proud of you, Zahva."

"Me too! I can't believe I actually did it!" I

gape.

All the work I had put in over the course of the past year had been worth it. I had achieved my goal. My hands shake as I keep scrolling through my transcript to make sure that the 4.000 hasn't disappeared. This feels like a dream to me.

After the struggles I had my first two years of school, I became convinced that I was not capable of improving as a student. I put myself in a position of complacency and I had essentially given up. I was eventually so afraid to fail that I became afraid to try. The worst feeling in the world to me is when I put in all of my time and energy into completing a task or goal only to fail. It makes me feel like everything I did was not worth the time nor the energy I spent on it.

Right now, with my cheeks hurting from the incessant smiling I have been doing over the past few minutes, I feel so ecstatic that I forgot why I used to be so afraid to try harder. The rush of succeeding and knowing that all the work I put in is worth it is more fulfilling than anything else I could do for myself. I proved myself wrong today. I set a goal for myself all those months ago, I put in the work to succeed, and I convinced myself I could achieve this milestone for myself. I became a self-fulfilling prophecy. By telling myself repeatedly that I am capable of becoming successful, even when it felt like I could never do so, I gave myself the freedom to try.

Sitting down, I begin to wonder if I would feel the same if my GPA had not reached my goal value. I look down at the small, bright screen with my GPA splayed across the top and furrow my brows. That's when I realize my answer.

The most important thing about my experience is not the fact that my goal is fulfilled but rather that I let myself put in all that effort not knowing whether I would

succeed. There was no guarantee that I was going to feel the sense of accomplishment that I feel now nor that I would be so overjoyed with the result that I physically would not stop smiling. Yet, I know for a fact that the swell of pride that is making me sit up a little straighter and hold my chin a little higher is not because of my success in terms of my results, but rather in terms of my effort. I used my past failures to create opportunities for success, and in doing so, I have finally opened myself to the possibility of working unabashedly to achieve my dreams. Whether or not I succeed in reaching my goals, I will always fulfill a new expectation I have for myself: to try my hardest no matter what.

HITTING THE WALL

Fiona Richards

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Julia Hansen

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

One Saturday morning a little over a year ago, I hit a wall. Literally. As a high school student, athlete, and writer, I am very familiar with the figurative wall; the moment when you can barely roll out of bed after your third alarm, that point in a cross-

country race when you feel the hammer fully come down, and that horrible, paralyzing writer's block that we all feel when we sit down at the computer preparing to write that first sentence. In all these figurative examples through hard work (and a bit of luck) you can push through and reach the other side, but on that chilly morning in Jefferson City, Missouri, I didn't push through, I simply bounced off...

Being an athlete comes with inherent risk, but as someone who had never broken a bone or even been to the ER, I thought that I was pretty much invincible. In the end, though, I wasn't, losing my battle with the "wall." In this case, it happened to be an actual wall, the 6-inch-thick piece of metal and plexiglass on the side of an ice rink. When I arrived at Missouri's capital for my first speed skating meet of the 2017-2018 season, I expected to stay on my feet, and hopefully win a race or two. I didn't expect to slip in a last-ditch attempt to pass my main opponent who had been beating me all day. Going into the final race of the day, the 1000 meters, I was optimistic about my chances of winning, being more of an endurance athlete. I don't really remember hitting the wall, I just remember accelerating to pass him and losing my edge on a turn in the last lap of the last race of the day, and penguin sliding across the cold, wet ice, feet first towards the outside of the rink. But mostly, I remember the after.

I remember not feeling anything, but also the most primal reaches of my brain alerting me that something was very wrong. That self-preservation instinct knew what I didn't yet: that I had snapped both my tibia and my fibula. I remember confusion, the on-ice referee skating over asking me if I was okay and if I could "get back up" and "put some

weight on it". Even though I had yet to feel pain, I somehow knew that standing up was not a possibility. As much as I wanted to avoid the dreaded ride on the pad to the exit of the rink, which happened to be the furthest point from the turn where I had gone down; soaking wet, shivering, and in shock, I knew that it was inevitable. I don't really recall being gently helped onto the pad, my coach wrapping my trembling body in her red team sweatshirt, or even being dragged slowly off the ice, but I remember that a thick silence hung in the air—anticipation, confusion, surprise. Despite speed skating's reputation as an extreme sport populated by people whizzing around the ice on twenty-inch blades, serious injuries are no more common than in any other sport, particularly if that sport involves contact, such as soccer, football, or hockey. Thus, my graceless penguin slide into the wall came as a bit of a shock to the underprepared meet organizers and spectators, most members of the small skating community themselves.

What came next is a bit of a blur, a crowd of people surrounds me, a woman yells "I'm a nurse" rushing over to offer her expertise, my coach asks me to describe how I feel. Several times I am asked the questions, "what do you think is wrong?" and "where on your ankle does it hurt?" and my simple responses every time: "I have no idea" and "everywhere." Next, a man whose face I can no longer remember uses a Swiss army knife to cut the laces on my left skate, an attempt to get me out of the hard carbon fiber and leather boot before my foot swelled up to the size of a cantaloupe. A bag of ice is handed to me, cold in my wet hand, before being placed onto my leg, doing very little to quell the pain that seeps past the protection of my now fading

adrenaline, like the feeling of the icy water seeping into my skinsuit. One woman says hopefully: "Maybe its just a bad twist," and as much as everyone in the rink wanted to believe her (myself included), I knew deep in the pit of my stomach that this was not the case. Foolishly optimistic, but with tears streaming down my flushed face, I was wheeled in a maroon office chair towards the backseat of our car.

One bumpy and excruciatingly painful car ride later, we arrived at the Capital Region Medical Center, which to say the least, is not known for its Emergency Services Department. It seemed like forever in the waiting room, as I sat, cold and soaking wet, wearing my coach's sweatshirt in a random wheelchair that a nurse had found folded up in the corner. After the longest 15 minutes of my life, I was taken back to an examination room and asked a series of questions, before it was concluded that I needed to head to imaging. Before I could go, I needed to get out of my tight-fitting spandex skin suit and leggings. While this may seem easy on paper, it is surprisingly difficult when your ankle is three times its normal size, and, I was NOT going to let the nurse practitioner cut me out of my expensive and treasured uniform. A few painful minutes later, I had been successfully extricated from both layers. While I was thankful to have avoided the dreaded scissors, I now found myself sitting in the cold bed wearing nothing but a t-shirt, my coach's sweatshirt, and a pair of pink floral print underwear. After being taken to the radiology department for an x-ray and being asked whether I was doing roller derby several times, I was taken back to the exam room where I anxiously awaited any news. At this point, I was not expecting to have more than a minor fracture, as despite

the excruciating pain, I was in denial, thinking that I would be back to my usual activities in a matter of weeks. Initially misdiagnosed by the on-call orthopedist (who they eventually reached by phone), I was told that I had broken my ankle in three places. I was in shock.

A few hours later, drowsy from pain medication, frustrated, and exhausted, we left Jefferson City and embarked on the two-hour drive back to St. Louis. The worst part about the drive back was that after removing my leggings pre-x-ray, I was splinted in a giant plaster, gauze, and ace wrap cast that went from my toes to just below my knee. Therefore, there was no way that those leggings were going back on. So, instead of driving home pants-less, I was forced to wear a giant pair of hospital pants that were designed for use with a bedpan; i.e. no crotch! A few days later, after an appointment with my orthopedist, several more x-rays, and even a CT scan, I was correctly diagnosed as having broken my tibia and fibula straight through at the ankle and told that I would need to have surgery. Since I was still slightly in denial and had never experienced an injury more serious than a scraped knee, I had no concept going into the appointment of what my recovery would look like. Thus, the description given by my doctor of the weeks and months of different types of casting, bracing, surgery, and physical therapy required to make it back to baseline was simply put, overwhelming.

At seven o'clock on the morning of the eighth of December, six days after my initial accident, I headed into surgery. I was terrified. I had never been under the knife before, had anesthesia, or even gotten an IV, meaning that all of this was new and

very scary. After changing into a humongous purple gown, a matching purple compression sock and peeing in a cup, I was taken to a bed, given an IV, and told to wait for my surgeon and anesthesiologist to come to speak with me. After he began listing the different pieces of metal he may or may not insert into my leg depending on the extent of the injury he could see once I was open on the table, I stopped listening, instead choosing to simply force a smile and nod. About half an hour later, drowsy from the initial pre-op sedatives I had been given, my bed was wheeled into the operating room. This is the moment where my memory gets extremely foggy. However, I do recall bright lights, several doctors crowded around me, and the last glimpse of the mask coming down on my face. Weirdly, I remember thinking that the breathing mask filled with general anesthetic smelled like a beach ball. A few hours later, the surgery was complete, and I was taken into recovery. I was now the not-so-proud owner of three screws in my tibia, a 6-inch long plate screwed onto my fibula, a stabilizing Teflon rope that stretched from one side of my ankle to the other, and 24 stitches.

Even though the actual surgery was complete, I still had the massive hurdle of recovery left looming before me. Unlike in surgery, where all the work was done by others, I now had to pull my own weight. And I had a lot of healing to do. While the surgery itself went very well, we soon realized that a complication had arisen. Somehow, I had lost feeling and surface nerve function on my entire leg from the mid-thigh down. Weirdly, even though the skin and tissue in my leg felt numb, I was still able to feel intense bone pain. We had no answers. My doctor, an experienced

orthopedist, had only seen this happen once before. In that case, feeling had returned after about a week and a half, so he thought that the same would happen to me. However, he was not sure, and the uncertainty was terrifying. I was incredibly afraid that it would never go back to normal. Thankfully, it did, but to make matters worse, as sensation returned bit by bit, I began feeling horrible burning sensations and nerve pain, which was even worse than the bone pain I was still feeling simultaneously. Despite the high doses of pain medication, I was in agony. It turns out that the tourniquet used on my upper thigh during surgery to prevent me from bleeding out on the table had pinched, smushed, or crushed the nerve on my inner thigh. After this whole debacle, I was still in a cast for six weeks, on crutches for eight weeks, in a boot for four weeks, and had to do fourteen weeks of physical therapy. I also missed the two and a half weeks of school just before winter break, meaning that I had a lot to catch up on once I came back in January.

From the minute that I first looked at my x-ray, I was incredibly angry. I didn't understand why this had happened to me. While in the grand scheme of things, I was alive and would make a full recovery, I was still frustrated, searching for someone, anyone to blame. This was no one's fault, and just simply a fluke accident. However, I was angry that I had to have surgery, a procedure that permanently gave me several new titanium and Teflon "accessories," that I would miss out on the rest of the skating season, and that I wouldn't be able to go to school and see my friends for the next two weeks. I was angry that little tasks such as showering took all my energy, that I was in pain, horrible pain that the brain-clouding opioids I was

prescribed did very little to suppress and that my crutches would be a constant companion for the next eight weeks.

I'm not going to stand here and pretend that there was some fabulous silver lining, or that I found Jesus or whatever, but I did realize that I could be stronger than what tried to break me. Even though all I wanted was to give up, to go back to the before, to just lie there and forget everything, in the end, getting up, moving on, and facing the world was my only option. Rather than just throwing a pity party for myself (of which I did throw plenty), I strove for the milestones, the little accomplishments, and pieces I could get back. Although it felt like an eternity, and these moments frustrated me in their seeming frivolity, even something as simple as going back to school, or taking a few steps was movement in the right direction.

I've learned through this experience that hitting a "wall", whether figurative or literal is extremely difficult, and that even though it might be hard to see the other side from where you are now, through persistence, you might just be able to push through it. Whether you burst through it all at once, or simply take a brick off every day, progress is always possible, and you are stronger than you know. It's okay and expected to be angry, sad, or in pain, but eventually, bit by bit, that can fade, leaving you open to exploring new opportunities.

Now, a year later, I'm in a much better place both mentally and physically. I've recently finished my second season of high school cross country, and even recently went to a skating practice to test the waters. Even though simply skating (albeit badly and with dodgy balance) in circles for

an hour may not seem like much, it's a big step in the right direction, particularly for someone who was unable to even face thinking about the sport at all until a few months ago.

THE STUTTERING DEMON

Kimberley Tran

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Clayton High
School, Clayton, MO
Educator: John Ryan

Category: Personal
Essay/Memoir

The microphone ices my grip. To search for familiar faces, I hone in on the audience, but the shadows mask them from me. I continue to sit alone on my wooden stool, the stage awash with white light. Setting my poems on the stand, I trace between the stanzas and then choose one. "TALK / CHATTER LIKE THE MIDNIGHT CICADAS AS THEY THRUM THEIR WINGS," I chant via crescendo. "BABBLE GOSSIP WITH THE BEAVERS IN STA-STA-STA..."

Although my blood chills, my cheeks burn. My tongue trips over itself like a broken record for another thirty seconds. I cover my mouth in a pathetic attempt to muffle its sadistic stammers. When this

sudden relapse ceases, the audience murmurs out of pity.

*

Somehow, I survived middle school embarrassment. My uncontrollable stuttering would raise its dragon head during simple conversations, provoking derisive laughter from classmates. Hoping to banish this curse, my parents brought me to a speech therapist when I was in seventh grade. Although she taught me correct tongue placement and proper enunciation, the stuttering demon still breathed its fire.

Because I feared revealing this impediment to new would-be friends by talking, I spoke to them through poetry. Poetry sang music that I couldn't hear as clearly within prose. It hummed when I squeezed "a's" and "o's" closer together, but clicked when successive words began with "k's". I controlled its tempo just by tweaking syllable length, line breaks, and word placement.

Writing poetry was an individual pastime at first. Even after I grew out of stuttering, poetry followed me to high school. I found myself frequently wandering down to Forest Park, where I would watch water ripple in a pond as I jotted down phrases and images that came to me. I fell asleep with Rosebud Ben-Oni's *SOLECISM* sprawled across my stomach. After my opponent teased me for stumbling over my pronunciation of "utilitarianism" during a debate round, I cut out words from my poems and created a mosaic depicting inner melancholy.

But, I soon craved a community to belong to. I wanted to peer inside the hearts of other teenage poets and feel their joy and hurt erupt from their words. After sophomore year, I rushed to find

those beautiful thinkers. I was accepted to the Iowa Young Writers' Studio's creative writing course with fifteen other poets. Together, we practiced self-hypnosis to alter our notions of reality while writing. We challenged each other's analyses of "Projective Verse" by Charles Olson, debating poems' ability to possess kinetics through sounds and rhythm. We lucid dreamed to capture feelings that escape easy language.

Most importantly, we loved hearing each other's stories. Each week, three volunteers would submit pieces, and we left voice and text feedback all over their poems. Reading their work opened my mind. Adam lamented still having to surrender to monsters under the bed as an adolescent. He taught me that vulnerability liberates true art. Cali compared her identity to the Earth's core, dashing out her existentialist crisis in prose-like paragraphs. She taught me how to break the constraints of thought through stream-of-conscious commentary. Language became a common currency that united us.

I've found more of my people in other communities: [BLUESHIFT JOURNAL's](#) Speakeasy Project online, [RIVER STYX](#) literary magazine in St. Louis, and [THE WORKS](#) writing magazine at school. My comrades crush social constructs and howl about forgotten heroes with their words. That power gives me both the courage to deliver my own poetry aloud in order to change others' perception of the world.

*

So, there I am in the theater, flushed and terrified after my stuttering fiasco. To calm down, I have to relive why I'm there today. I close my eyes briefly and remember Adam's hope and Cali's heart. I set my

poems back on the stand, face the shadows on the other end of the stage, and begin again: "...STACCATO BURSTS AKIN TO BENT VIOLIN STRINGS..."

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

Kaitlyn Tran

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Jennifer Sellenriek

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

I was thirteen years old and standing in a graveyard when I first truly understood the meaning of regret. I am a girl of meaningless words, and society is the haven of empty promises. My juvenile mind assumed that over a decade of life's experience equipped me to feel varying degrees of overwhelming emotions, among these being regret. An impulsive, whispered "I HATE YOU" directed to my older sister, a precious piece of porcelain china shattered against the hardwood floor from my slippery grasp, my fingers stumbling over the silver-plated key of a flute during an especially tense audition; these represented regret, didn't they? But as the cool California breeze flushed goosebumps across my tanned skin and I

viciously wiped the tears off my damp face, I felt a sharp dagger stabbed ruthlessly into my shielded heart at the realization of true regret. I twisted the stem of the red rose between my warm palms, before dropping both the plush petals and the innocence of my youth into an embellished, glossy casket six feet underground.

Every poem I once scrutinized regarding the depths of emotions felt while contemplating death, filled with fluttering descriptions and sympathetic analogies, never resonated with me. Words could provide me with no closure, as I felt no burning rage, bitter sadness, or thirst for revenge. While I suffocated back tears listening through gentle recountances of my grandmother's life and traditional prayers murmured towards a peaceful afterlife, the sadistic demon of icy regret latched its claws and laid claim to my heart and mind. The beast submerged my soul into an ocean of memories that overwhelmed my endlessly aching pain, and like an antique VCR rolling back a wind of film, I relived the source of my regret.

Hushed tones of Vietnamese echoed in my ears from the moment I stepped into the graceful interior of my grandmother's cottage. Her words were tinged with a sweet lilt from living in the South Vietnam countryside, softening her voice into smooth, velvety tones. Despite this, she never spoke in vain, learning to silence her opinions from an early age. Along with her delicate mannerisms, she seemed like a porcelain china doll: cared for and easily breakable. But my grandmother was a captivating storyteller. Serenading my elder sister and I with stories of ourselves and our past mischievous antics, she loved lulling us to sleep with vivid descriptions and

enhanced narratives. However, in all her tales weaving back memories of my sister devouring chapter books while serenely perched in a shopping cart, she never even uttered a whisper of her life in Vietnam. In contrast, my mother recounted dauntless legends of her adventures and my father spun an antique globe while describing his weeks on a rugged ship sailing through the Pacific Ocean towards the Land of Dreams. Both stories contained the euphoria of nostalgia blended with the immense hardship of living in a country during a time of bloody war. But none struck me with so much pain as when I heard my grandmother's history, recounted in a vast living room after her death, siblings quietly murmuring details. This secretive story, kept tightly wrapped up, never revealed until the day it was too late.

I find myself quickly enraptured in the history of my grandmother after the funeral service, hanging on to every word of her memory for consolation. My aunt's eyes sparkle with the challenge of piecing slivers of memory together, as she recites her recollection of the subject. Living in the lush countryside of Vietnam, in a small village where the taste of summer's heat lay lazily year-long, seemed like a lyrical daydream. Yet, in a country teetering on the edge of civil war, my grandmother's parents sent her to live with members of extended family in hopes of safety, attempting to escape the rural, perilous lands. Her life represented not one of peace and tranquility of the carefree countryside, but of a young girl, endlessly running, barely evading the steel clasps of the enemy. At nineteen, her family selected a suitor, and she instantly found herself whisked off to live in Saigon, the metropolitan of the South. But crowds of strangers and striking, kaleidoscopic city lights failed to ease her

homesickness, and she sorrowfully dwelled in a city completely foreign to her childhood. Her relationship eventually grew dark, shards of smashed plates covering the bamboo floors and fierce, lashing insults directed at her, with the chilling threat of her toddler son ripped away from her clutches when she spoke a word out of turn. The victim of multiple affairs and emotional abuse, pressure slowly suffocated her voice until it ceased to exist completely. I never knew much about her life, and so I realized then that my grandmother was strong, enduring; her silent voice was not a sign of her weakness, but a symbol of her persistence. The jade bracelet that always circled her thin wrist was not a trivial Asian fortune for luck, but it represented her eternal struggle, the stone which remains resilient and steadfast in the face of danger.

I should have asked. I should have appreciated. But instead of learning to communicate with my grandmother, to indulge in her heritage and history, I selfishly chose to spend my days rejecting my culture. Her scarce remarks recalling magical summers in Vietnam fell on my apathetic ears, while I occupied myself instead with cutting the strings of heritage that bound me to my parents' native country. Although in a much more minor way, my voice also grew silent out of fear.

I have always felt in between two worlds, an enigma from another dimension. Although I was American born and raised, my parents hailed from the dragon festivals and golden beaches of Vietnam. Growing up in a small Midwestern town, where my peers all similarly grinned with pale skin and large eyes, my distinctly foreign features thrust me into the wolves' den and subjected me to years of ignorant commentary. I believed that the worst

flaws were the ones that could not be changed. And, to my dismay, my cultural background would eternally force me to sorely remain isolated from the crowd. I spent my hours longing for the quintessentially American traits that my classmates possessed, with golden blonde hair and bright blue eyes which I would have instantly traded the slight upward tilt of my dark eyes and slick-straight inky pigtails for. Desperately, I did everything possible to change myself, to have a different face without my Asian features. I longed to completely eradicate my heritage and BE American, because if I did not, I felt that I could never be good enough.

My desire for change failed to end here. I abandoned my culture, detaching my past from my present, and fully secluding it from my future. I feared reliving the isolating and humiliating experiences garnered from my childhood. I never again wanted to pack fresh spring rolls into my pale pink lunchbox, *gỏi cuốn*, a translucent rice wrap stuffed with crisp vegetables and slippery noodles with a side of fish sauce. No, I would perform any elusive task in order to never see the eyes of my peers again, taunting the exotic sight until my face shined with tears. If I simply ignored the ignorant remarks, I hoped they would eventually disappear. When a stranger at Rockefeller Center greeted me with a hearty *nǐ hǎo*, and followed by proudly telling me that they were practicing their Chinese, I turn a blind eye and strain a smile. When middle school teachers stumble on their words at the sight of dark hair and dark eyes, puzzled at whether the student standing before them was me or the other Asian girl in class, I never correct them. When a classmate shows off her polished manicure while joking that “my

people do her nails,” I have no response. I am left shocked and struggling, my mouth securely sealed with a strip of duct tape, preventing me from standing up for myself. I wasted all my lucky coin tosses in glimmering fountains and birthday wishes blown on illuminated candles trying impossibly to change myself, when I should have embraced my culture instead. I should have connected with my grandmother. When she spoke in her lyrical native tongue asking me gentle questions about my day, my lack of bilingual abilities created an unwanted barrier. A divide which felt like peering into a glass cage, as I was present, but not TRULY there. I should have poured over the language learning textbooks my relatives gifted me, and even when I grew flustered stumbling over my vowels, at least I would have relished in the satisfaction of trying. In fear of shame, I chose to cower. I stayed silent, like always, hammering another nail into the wooden box that trapped me further into conforming to a stereotype.

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was a girl whose features stuck out a little too much, ripping her emotions into a tattered battleground. But unlike a child's fairytale with a happy ending, she could never find the notes of her voice. And so the quiet Asian girl submitted once again. She waited until the day that fate forced her to drop a red rose into the casket where her grandmother's body lie before she realized that she must have the strength of an emerald jade stone. She must speak her voice and stay unyielding when met with the cruelty of society. But that day she vowed to honor her grandmother's memory. And she will try.

OF GORGING AND GUILT

Alice Wu

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley North
High School, Overland Park, KS
Educator: Kat Buchanan

Category: Personal
Essay/Memoir

I've never liked bread.

They say children want what they can't have, but growing up, my father frequently bought home Costco-sized plastic boxes of croissants or bags teeming with bread rolls.

"Come on, it'll make dinners easier," he'd say to my mother while they were grocery shopping.

Once his purchases were crowding the dinner table and he'd torn away at a croissant or two, he'd falter, as if he'd suddenly remembered that he was a diabetic. Then, he'd turn to me and grin. "Try some bread," he'd say. "It's so good!"

"I don't want it," I'd answer.

"It's so good. Just try some!"

Grimacing, I'd take a croissant and drop it onto my plate. After staring at it for a long moment, I'd nibble on the bland, thick pastry, swallowing slowly.

For years, I've watched my father's endless swinging between gorging and

guilt. So many times, he's simply swallowed his better judgment only for it to come back and eat at him later. I've seen him dive into a sandwich and in five minutes come up with melted cheese coating his lips and crumbs scattered across his shirt. Other times, he'd chomp down nearly a pound of nuts after dinner. I'm hungry, he'd say. This is healthy food, and I haven't eaten that much.

However, sweets were one thing my father never tried to justify, and though he cut them out almost entirely, that didn't stop him from wanting to treat me. One time, while we were taking a walk in the middle of winter, we made an impulsive detour for the ice cream shop. Moments after taking off my woolen mittens and bobble hat, I sank my teeth into a heaping scoop of rocky road before remembering that my father was still standing next to me.

"Do you want a lick?" I asked with a sheepish smile.

He snuck one lick, and after the flavor had dissipated, he snuck another. "If I didn't have my disease, I wouldn't give you time to ask," he said, smacking his lips. "Growing up, this is what I could have only dreamed of."

My father grew up as one of four children in northern China during Mao Zedong's communist regime. He never went hungry, but there was never anything left over. Most meals consisted of coarse rice and pickled vegetables, and my dad learned to lick each plate clean. Even having an egg to himself was a rare holiday treat. Food was comfort. It was celebration. It was love, and I could only give my father a lick.

"When I was out of college and just started working," he continued, "I had enough money for the first time in my life.

That's when I bought all the sodas and chocolates I could want." He laughed. "I could finish off a pound of chocolate in three days. Sometimes, that's all I had for breakfast."

I stared at his thin face, from the puffy skin under his eyes to his sunken cheeks and his pronounced cheekbones. My stomach twisted itself into a knot.

Since I started high school, my father has increasingly struggled with spiking blood sugar levels. I watched as insulin pills were no longer potent enough and he was forced to inject his side, the only remaining flabby part of his body, with insulin before every meal. When his stomach growled, he could merely sit and wait for the next meal or risk punishment from what was supposed to be nourishment.

The family tried switching to eating brown rice, but when that wasn't enough, my father started making his own bread with white flour yet no added sugar. The results were crumbly loaves that barely rose with crusts that scratched the insides of my mouth.

"Why don't you use whole wheat flour?" I asked him one day, tapping his back.

He kept pouring wheat flour into the bread machine as if he hadn't heard me. I tapped him again.

"Ba, isn't whole wheat flour better for you?"

"Whole wheat flour is too expensive. Besides, this bread is fine."

"Ba, it's not just about sugar. Diabetics have to watch out for carbs in general." As he washed his hands with a lowered head, I kept going: "Ba, I have classmates who are diabetics too, and they count out all the carbs they eat, including crackers and fruit."

"How sick would I have to be to count every carb?" he shouted. "People who are at that point won't live much longer." His voice broke, after locking his flashing eyes with mine, he disappeared into his room.

I stood before his closed door, brimming with steam and yearning to scream. Like a kettle taken off the heat, though, I soon came to a hush. I could do nothing to help. I could do nothing, though I would continue to try.

This Christmas, when my father bought a package of over forty dinner rolls from Costco and claimed they were for my mother and me, I narrowed my eyes at him. "Why would you do that?" I asked. "Neither mom nor me likes bread."

"Your father was shopping hungry," my mother said pointedly. "He wasn't thinking."

After the three of us finished a quiet dinner of noodles, my stomach felt tight and bulging, but my father stuck his hand in the bag of rolls and put one on his plate. I glared at him.

"I'm still hungry," he protested loudly.

In his rounded eyes, I saw a poor boy from a coal-mining town fighting for the last apple with his siblings. How could I tell him that he had to stay hungry when there was finally plenty of food? How could I tell him that hunger had to last the rest of his life? My hand twitched, but in an instant, I'd snatched the roll off his plate and placed it on the other side of the table.

"If I'm hungry, my blood sugar goes up even more" he tried.

"You've eaten way too many today. These things are full of carbs," I exclaimed. "How many did you have for lunch?"

"Three." He eyed the roll.

“You’ve had four of these today?” I
blinked twice.

“And there was breakfast too.”

“You’re crazy.” I willed him to tell me
it wasn’t true. When he didn’t flinch, I
glanced at the roll, where it still wasn’t
safe. Without even thinking, I stuffed it in
my mouth, chewing the slightly sweet,
glutinous mass before gulping it all down.

Then, I caught his eye again.

Gorged and guilty, I took another roll from
the bag and handed it to him.

POETRY

ME; THROUGH SHINY PLASTIC AND ROSE COLORED GLASSES

beguine beauchamp

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Park Hill High School,
Kansas City, MO
Educator: Melanie Farber

Category: Poetry

my crafted words
and inked up pages
didn't capture
your attention
for you saw my mask
of sparkle and shine
curves and an unwavering stare
but when i took it off
you ran from me
i am not the girl i wish to be
so the girl you want
isn't me
i know
i am not enough
to be the one
all you boys dream of
and it isn't she
i even wish
to become

perhaps someday i'll grow into myself

THE ORDER OF ALL THINGS

beguine beauchamp

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Park Hill High School,
Kansas City, MO
Educator: Melanie Farber

Category: Poetry

it is in
the nature
of living things
to borrow
steal
and prey
i practically gave myself away
the sun lends her light to the moon most nights
while she gets some shut eye
when something is for free
you're apprehensive; don't always take it
i was a giveaway on a weaker day
as vulnerable as prey
you came
you saw
you took advantage
you swear that you never planned it
so my soul got full
and my heart warmed
I felt I was home
and not alone
real love is sweet
but denial is sweeter
now i see everything clearer
i am not broken
because i am not glass
you know what you've stolen

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when you knock on heaven's door
I know the Gods will even the score.

will always remain
broken.

-YOU'LL NEVER UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU
CHANGED IN ME

Do words just
pop out
like shooting a gun
she didn't know she had,
or do the emotions
fester,
allowing her time to aim?

THE WEIGHT OF WORDS

Sarah Beetner

Age: 14, Grade: 8

What was the last straw?
What invisible force
pushed the words into the light?

School Name: St Patrick School, Rolla,
MO

Educator: Rosalia Meusch

Did she mean to hurt me?
Words can never be taken back,

but does she even want to?

Category: Poetry

Does she know
I hear those words
every time she speaks?
Does she know how many tears
rest under
her name?

What increases the weight of a word?

Tone?
Sincerity?
Healing?
Pain?

Predator and prey
she dumps the words
that weigh her down
unaware
of the casualties.

Who gives us permission
to hurt others,
to tear down

what little self respect
the world gave them?

Who whispered the strength of words
in our ear?

Who holds the scale,
that says one is less
and one is more?

Who lifts the words from the broken
and helps them piece their hearts together?
One part of them

A SERIES OF PAINFUL, BEAUTIFUL THINGS

Haley Renee Born

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Category: Poetry

Lighthouse

The waves whisper secrets in my ear,
brushing my subconscious like the legs of silverfish.
If only I spoke their language.
I live in a spiral
of teal tile and smooth stone stairs.
My lighthouse had been abandoned by all but
ghosts
when I made it my home.

Still, I light the lantern
just to watch the gold glitter on dark water
as it bends and breaks to the will of the rocky
shore,

guiding imaginary ships to me.

Sometimes I think about leaving.

Then the sun sets

and the glass at the top of my tower catches the
shades of the sky

as it dies, I remember why I chose to be alone.

In my nightmares I stray too far from removed
safety.

The salty waves fill my lungs and dash my head
against the rocks,

bloody sea foam washing me away.

Isolation is easier than uncertainty.

So I stay,

alongside the long dead, walking day after day,
up and down my spiral staircase,

safe to watch the world glitter through the glass.

I am at peace at last, though not for free.

Peace can be so very lonely.

The Danger of Sirens

A song as sweet as candy, saltwater
taffy twisting into words,
calling me to dip my toes in the waves
and when they wash away, I see her,
starlight clutching her curves,
hips and bow of lips, parted

just for me

a melody spun from seaweed,
spiraling around my ankles, drawn away
by gravity, pulling me to follow,
out, out,
only SIRENS ARE FOR SAILING MEN,

NOT YOUNG MAIDENS

but saying that won't take from my ears
the sound of her lullaby, an invitation
that can't be left unanswered,
though sound alone could not draw me
from the shore, no,
I want to be lost at sea.

A Feeling Like Hunger

I want to be bruised.
I want the universe to pin me to a board and light
me up,
next to butterflies but without the glass.
To take a blind step in the dark sky
and fall,
wheeling wildly down through stars and broken
where I land.
I want the world to pour her majesty in my eyes
and ears until I'm full
and it starts to spill out my mouth.
Swaths of paint and secrets
on my tongue, the taste of madness.

I want to peel back the membrane between me
and everything,
bursts of citrus as my skin separates from my body,
leaving me raw and red to feel what
I want life to be; purpled skin and bee stings,
a series of painful, beautiful things.

Trees Instead of Gravestones

It looks like you. At least, I think it does. Maybe
it's my imagination but that seed they planted in
your chest cavity grew into a tree that feels
familiar. It has a way of swaying with steady
footing that reminds me of you, always moving.

I swear its branches are twisted to the tune of
the song you used to hum as you fell asleep. The
birds that nest in its new canopy hear the melody
whispered by the leaves and sing it back to me. As
if to say WE'RE SORRY. SHE MAKES A BEAUTIFUL
HOME. I know.

When I visit in the spring I smile at the flowers, a
dash of bitter lemon and buttercream between its
roots. I imagine those roots deep beneath my feet
burrowing into your brain and soaking up your soul.
Turning our memories to leaves.

Sometimes I have dreams about forgetting.
About burying those memories in ashes. I burn the
trees and all their branches. Not quite nightmares.

In the waking world, I walk along the neat rows
of souls nourished by the earth. I listen to their
creaks and groans and know that's the sound this
ache would make if it could be heard. I think

about all the people they used to be. I think about
all the trees that will have been me.

I loved and am loving you. When I see you in
this tree that tells me where your empty body
is buried I miss you. And I love you. Time heals all
wounds but it leaves scars. Time heals all wounds
but, if you're lucky, it grows trees too.

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.

L'DOR VADOR

Rafi Brent

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School,
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Poetry

Note to the reader: This poem contains two phrases written in Hebrew letters. The title, pronounced "L'dor Vador", is an expression from Jewish liturgy whose literal translation is "to generation and generation", meaning forever. The second phrase, pronounced "Tekiah Gedolah", is the traditional call for a long blast of the shofar, an ancient instrument made of a ram or antelope horn.

ידור לדור

Ancient, well-worn words flow over me,
Pitched at the resonant frequency of the soul.

The reverberations create ripples
In the dusty waters of my consciousness,
And I see my ancestors in the swirling particles.
They too are singing.

I leap towards them, headfirst,
But the now-turbulent waters blur their features,
And only their singing mouths remain discernible.

The colliding sets of waves form an interference
pattern
As I retreat, soaked, back to the present.

The water dripping into my brain
Distracts me from the ebbing of my strength.

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So I sing, and occasionally the light illuminates
The infinite ethereal dust motes projected with
each word.

Then

גדולה תקיעה!

In some primal, uncharted depths,
This piercing cry shakes the ocean floor.
A tsunami rushes through my psyche,
And my soul overflows through my eyes.

ADDICTING

Tina Chen

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Category: Poetry

He didn't like the road and the cars.
Didn't like the way it tended
to trail flattened squirrels and smears of blood.
Didn't like the way snow turned to melting coal
on the crackling roadside.
Didn't like the smell of exhaust exhaling
into his face, sputtering and coughing and
hacking.

But someone told him that cars and the open
road
were quintessentially American.
Quintessential?

Maybe there is something about driving.
About sitting in the front seat at night,
the dashboard lit up in blues and reds

like a spaceship counsel might look.
Something about passing under deserted
streetlights,
whooshing past silent billboards.
Maybe there's something about your favorite CD
blasting,
a bag of chips by your side (even though the
crumbs
slip through into every crevice).
Maybe there's something about the power trip,
with the wheel in your hands, leaning into each
turn,
high on the knowledge that you can
go anywhere tonight--
as far as the last star glittering on the horizon.
Maybe further.
Maybe there's something about sliding past silent
rows of corn,
darkened houses where people are sleeping,
while you
drive on.

ONLY ONCE A BLUE SUN

Catherine Cho

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Blue Valley Northwest
High School, Overland Park, KS
Educator: Lindsay Gulbranson

Category: Poetry

We let our hooded eyes fall blind on the
blue sun rising from the wreaths of black lotus
wilting. The hints of citrus lilacs blossom

at the beckon of the cerulean sky-

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our vision turns into an azure haze.
We speak with our fingertips, painting

each other's body while fumbling with
the buttons of our starch white collared shirts-
stained blue. Desperation grasps at our nails

whispering through our sweating palms,
screaching as they trace my spine. Cracked lips,
inked by navy tongues, tremble to meet-

Before the citrus lilacs wither into ashes, before
sour milk moonlight bleaches our blue sun,
before black lotuses wreath the sky once again.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR MY FUNERAL

Catherine Cho

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Blue Valley Northwest
High School, Overland Park, KS
Educator: Lindsay Gulbranson

Category: Poetry

AFTER JAVIER ZAMORA

Don't forget to preserve
my body in an ivory coffin
then weave chains tightly around the casket
and secure it with a lock, that can only be
opened by
a key on a chain clasped around the cold neck
of my corpse.
At my wake,
make sure to clothe yourself
from head to toe in only white, and perfume

the air with Rose & Patchouli & Tobacco.
Bury me for three nights,
under a black granite headstone with
my full name carved in silver lettering.
On the fourth day,
weed out the marbled onyx gravestone
and take a pick axe to abolish the meaningless
boulder
into palm sized fragments and skip the crippled
pieces
as far you can on Lake Malawi so I can drown,
cloaked
in the heavy embrace of shining emerald waters.
Pry my body from the roots of the earth
and send me to the moon so I can suffocate
in the isolation that festers in the empty craters of
a world of nothingness.
Then deliver me to the sun,
so I can burn and be the brightest star
in your eyes, until the ivory and chains melt away
to reveal sparking ashes that evanesce into the
licking flames.
Do remember my cracked name,
the calm scent of musky roses that leaked
from my skin, and my atrocious laugh that you
both hate
and adore, as the dreary sun rises and the yellow
moon hides
from the blinding light.

CELESTIAL INFERNAL

Molly Duke

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Category: Poetry

The Sun hangs faithfully in the white sky.
The Moon, suffers, bearing its counterweight.
The Sun blisters the red skin on my thigh,
the Moon's own comfort tries to compensate.

Stars coo, planets weep, the universe cracks
under the weight of the thigh burning sun.
Unwanted geocentric parallax.
The meteor undoes; it's measure spun.

The Sun explodes, heat dividing again,
slicing the interstellar connections.
The Milky Way is merely a bloodstain.
The thigh has no clear source of protection.

The sun's string snaps, unbalancing the moon.
The satellite whirrs, landing in a dune.

LIES

Haneefah Fajri

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Paseo Academy
Performing Arts, Kansas City, MO
Educator: Jenifer Bell

Category: Poetry

I know where my lies are
They are in the lake filled with piranhas
They're on land, hunting in packs--they're tigers
I know where my lovelies
They're in the arms of a man

They're a diamond--on my finger
I know where the beauty lies
On a cheek of another woman
A cheek my husband cherishes
A cheek that is not mine
A cheek my husband kisses
I form the cries while he holds the knife
I kiss the knife while he cuts my lips
I knew the signs while he ignores-
while he ignores my existence
I didn't know what love was until I was cut
I didn't know what loyalty meant to a man, I
found out it meant nothing unless it was
hidden behind closed doors
But my husband didn't hide it too well
Instead, he hid it underneath her blankets
He hid his loyalty, a word that meant nothing to
him, underneath his lies
He kissed my feet for forgiveness
But I didn't want his lies
I want real loyalty in the shape of a flower
in shape of lips
in the shape of a man
who knows what real loyalty is

A COLLECTION OF PROSE

Travis Franco

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Republic High
School, Republic, MO
Educator: Lisa Deckard

Category: Poetry

LETTERS TO YOU

Divya Gupta

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Category: Poetry

Under the "K-L" bookshelf in the library
is where I found letters addressed to you.
The cream paper was wrinkled but new,
and enticed me more than any other book
on the shelf.
He loved you very much,
or "as much as the smell of freshly bloomed
peonies" as he put it.
I was a peony,
once.
I wondered why you never received the letters,
or if you were even meant to find them.
I was destined to read them,
though,
to ignite what was lost in me.
He understands why I'm different
and truly believes I'm "the color in a
television set of black and white."
His name isn't on the letters,
nor his signature.
I need you to take me to him.
He loves me like a prince in a fairy tale.
These papers were not for you,
they were letters to me.

THE INK ON MY HANDS

Divya Gupta

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Category: Poetry

The slick and polished pen slipped through my
fingers,
like water in the shower.
Glistening in the lamp light.
Red and wet
like the blood of my neighbors.
Roaring crowds shook the ink
into waves.
Outside,
a fire burned through the trees and behind.
A crash of ocean water
rose up slowly on the shores.
Approaching each other.
Haltingly coming closer together,
like magnets.
In the center,
hands sweaty,
face dripping,
I looked at both powers.
The world spun,
faster than the train.
Like opposite magnets,
they stayed away.
Staring at each other with heat and water.
And I was stuck in the middle,
staring up at the sky for a signal of help from the

passing clouds.

THE ELECTRICIAN

Divya Gupta

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Category: Poetry

Her eyes were plastered onto the
dead screen in front of her.
 Allowing herself to be
sucked into its black hole.
The red leather of the couch pulled her down,
 further into a pit.
Clouds surrounded her window like a swirling
hurricane,
 and from a distance they looked like
peaceful pillows.
Below was a snake river with irregular bumps like
her seat in the air.
The water was cool when it pecked her skin.
 Almost like a drop of iced lemonade given
on a flight.
The water splashed in her ear with static.
 She was floating through the air,
 like a bird,
 endless distances.
Travel anywhere,
 but she wanted to go back.
 To him,
in the small,
 twenty square foot room they were in for
the last time for a while.
Or the basement they watched movies in.
The T.V. would not turn on.

It was stuck in the darkness and needed to be
fixed.

DOG EARED

Divya Gupta

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Category: Poetry

Harsh words screamed from the pages,
 Bending blended syllables within
 A ripping crease.
 On the coffee table,
 Laying like expired roadkill,
Bent and choking final words until silence,
 Filled the space
between the ferns.
A creaky staircase, followed by miniature squeaks,
 Allowed for a drenched, dripping
with drool pant leg.
Seven pounds, unpredictable, excitingly scary,
 Kevin.
Whispers for me to return down.
Driving me crazy with intensity and worry.
I follow,
 Hands in pockets,
 While he jumps on the
couch, testing.
 He was unpredictable,
 An unread story,
 A plot twist with no spoiler alert.

MOLE LIFE

Divya Gupta

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Category: Poetry

The sun glared into my eyes,
forcing me to put on my never used sunglasses.
Father would be furious if he knew where I was
I couldn't help myself, I was so curious
His hole of a mouth would be bigger than ever,
Yelling at me with no stopping.
I could not dare to see him upset with me.
I was far too lovely of a child to cause such a feeling
to an old man like my father.
But I so desperately wanted to stay outside.
In the burning air
Tanning my sunless hands
I wanted to enjoy the company of the swirling
dresses around me
The glossy black shoes twirling around them.
That world is what I wanted for myself
But I could not have it because of my dear old
father.
He was very old fashioned that way.
Made me stay home and feed the ants.
Mother would have wanted me to breakout of
that cold hole.

LIFE OF A MINORITY

Ra'Shede Harrigan

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Paseo Academy
Performing Arts, Kansas City, MO
Educator: Jenifer Bell

Category: Poetry

I'm 17 now so I know that my coffin is already
made
My body supposed to be in the street in my blood
where it lay
Mothers sheltering best they can but we still can't
be safe
Moms Hispanic, pops Haitian, they created
another race
They're keeping my people in a hole tied to the
chains
They steal our culture and won't stop until we are
all slain
To them we're just a waste of creation because
the color of our skin
Government, treat us like our skin color is a sin
Rather than judging our characters by the
content
We're all in the same lane blindly as they're
leading us
My people's time is running out, it's going fast and
I'm furious
Let me be serious, you're all my brothers but you'
delirious

In all seriousness
I wanna empty the clip and
Take my own life to not deal with all this

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Aggressiveness, we need to abandon this, idea of
foolishness
Ruthlessness, we all need to stop killing each other
They want us dead we need to just come
together
Because ones soul don't die they just live on
forever
They tell us lies and feed us excuses to keep us
under
Anybody can take ya spirits but ya soul they can
never
Death or bondage, well to be honest, neither is
coo but death is better

God damn this world is cold I swear we need
some sweaters
We don't need heaters, because ironically heat
just makes it colder
Thoughts so deep I can't do anything while I'm
sober
Open your eyes Patrick we don't belong down
here
We belong on the top but they're scared to put
us there

I'm writing with pain listen.
Nobody saw my point of view, in my age group
so I stayed distant
But I realized I couldn't let your deaths rest on my
conscience
They got all of the black children all just wanting
menages
Instead of trying to get our black children to get
to that college
We need to not just pray but take action and stop
the violence
We can't change them cuz we don't make
changing ourselves urgent

They make us think being behind is something
we're cursed with
But the good book tell us that we were the
chosen ones in its verses
They want us to grow up asleep, eyes closed, it's
up to you to open
We've always been black and had a voice but it

wasn't used with reason
It's been used to tell lies because if we tell the
truth we risk treason

While the white man sits at his chess board just
watching it happen
As he kicks his feet up on his desk and leans back
in his chair laughing
Because his plan is being completed, and he
thinks he's got us trapped in
It's tragic, that we are letting them take our minds
and hold them captive
But us as the minorities can't see it cuz we've
have been too blinded

Stay out them streets, our lives only end with the
ground or the gavel
Mothers can't raise us but fathers aren't around
so they give us the paddle
Where by the age 7 if ya Pops gone, you learned
how to flip a pack
Nothing has changed still the only way to make it
out is to hoop or rap
But hear me out young brothers don't you ever
fall for the trap
Can't even call my Mother because the feds got
the phone tapped

The country follows the same ways in which we
were started
Which is all negativity is the minority's fault
regardless
Just to make sure my people are making no
advancements
This tradition is the very thing that fuels their
satisfaction
But if we seek change we are gonna need a plan
of action
Use the brain as the weapon and it's thoughts as
attachments

YOU IN APRIL

Hilary Heidger

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Clare Of Assisi
Elementary School, Ellisville, MO
Educator: Henry Heidger

Category: Poetry

Your hands still sunburned
from our last walk
together, we walk again
until our shoes are sleeved in dirt--
red as two pairs of lips.
The vines have no end,
no beginning, just existence--
mesh to hold this all in place.
Where is the band we hear
in the distance?
I could glimpse the hyacinths
in full bloom; I see only you.

LAYERS OF PAINT

Hilary Heidger

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Clare Of Assisi
Elementary School, Ellisville, MO
Educator: Henry Heidger

Category: Poetry

Dim lights hang over her.
Chipped green paint enshrouds her.

Beneath the green, yellow gleams out
Like dandelion splotches

Or shards of sunlight.
The day never ends here.

It has only just begun now.
It doesn't fade after you do

Or after I've gone, either.
It wants to be felt, remembered--

Even by the paint, by her
Closed tight eyelids.

THE MOTHER LAND

Dacia Hindsman

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Paseo Academy
Performing Arts, Kansas City, MO
Educator: Jenifer Bell

Category: Poetry

Throughout time,
Races have carried abomination.
Going across the world like a nimbus cloud
That pours its undying emotions of hatred,
For endless periods.
Our races have chosen to flow their poison
Into the continuous river that runs in the ocean
Roughly between the cracks of rocks
From small flows of water
To waves that roar with millions of racial wars.

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The water's hands creep onto most lands
Making the grounds sink lower
Then the ancient souls
Who thrives to let it drown
As the pure souls tombstones their way into the
unknown.

The angry waves work to try to dissolve the dirt
That sets before them
But the dirt already holds pureness
In the part of its heart.
So it goes through the lost souls
That endlessly swarms around them
Like a family of sharks
That is starving for misery and chaos because
they're so lost.
When the world attends its end
The sun will vaporize all the evil
That once flowed so snakely onto lands
And now disappear into the air
Giving the earth what it has always deserved;
It's original motherland.

TRIALS OF THE FEMALE

Ashley Honey

Age: 17, Grade: 10

School Name: Olathe North High

School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

The moment I was conceived
And my egg was fertilized to have xx
chromosomes

Instead of xy
My body was taken away from me
And placed in the hands of men
The hands of men that control dress codes
The fingers that will slap my ass as I walk down the
street
The nails that will scratch my skin and I shout
No
I am undressed by his claws
And my psyche is torn to shreds

When I was a child
I was always told to tell an adult
When I was being bullied
When I was being mistreated
When I was afraid
So when he undressed me
Against my will
And touched my body
Without permission
I told an adult
And all they did was make excuses
"He was drunk."
"Did you say no?"
"What were you wearing?"
And when my trial went to court
He got away with everything
Because there is no physical proof
Of what he did

But if you stared into my soul
You would see the proof
Of a broken woman
Who is afraid to fall asleep in her room
(What if he comes through my window?)
Who cannot walk alone at night
(What if he takes me when nobody is around?)
Who cannot go to school because
He is there
He is everywhere
Praised for his
Achievements in sports
"This prison sentence will ruin his life!"
Screams his mother
But what about my life?
Hasn't it been ruined too?

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He made a choice that night
While mine was taken away
Where is my justice?
Where is the justice for the women of the world?

My body was taken away from me
When male lawmakers thought it was their job to
to make laws
Governing my body
Telling me what I can and cannot do with it

They say abortion is murder
But what about the murder of my soul
When I was impregnated by a monster
Given a child I do not want
Where is my justice?
Oh, in that case, I can have my abortion
See?
They will only give me my rights back
On their own accord
Reminding me that they are above
And I am below

But I will gather all the women of the world
And we will pound our fists on their doors
And shout so loud
They won't be able to ignore us anymore

BEFORE

Leyla Fern King

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School,
Saint Louis, MO
Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Poetry

"shattering glass in my stomach"

i can feel the ugly thing growing inside of me
wrapping it's claws around my pumping heart
squeezing the love out; turning it to ruins.

because she's prettier than me. her smile
is the reason that the moon reflects the sun
at night and why shooting stars fly across
skies. and you love her and it makes this ugly
thing materialize in the form of shattering glass
in my stomach and a tornado in my eyes. makes
this
feeling into something disastrous, dangerous, life
ending.

because the pretty girl that you love
that isn't me makes me want to destroy our town
in a hurricane and have you begging for mercy
saying: i love you, baby. PLEASE COME BACK TO
ME.
there's NO NEED for all this jealousy.

"herself"

there was a girl with mason jars growing in her
stomach
roses from her eyelids, empires in her nail beds.
nothing more than just the whole universe living
inside of her.

she had solar systems living in her fingers, earth was
nothing less
than a freckle on her left cheek, yet she shared it,
spoke stars into words,
light bursting from her seams and pooling at her
feet.

she was beautiful exactly in a way that no one
cared to notice,
with dull shining in her hair and FORGETTABLE lining
her smile
she never tried to fit in, never became anything
other than herself

as she lit the world on fire by doing nothing but
exist as a girl

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who loved the world and everything in it, but
could feel
it's distaste growing; rotting her from the inside
out.

because even for the girl that loved loving people
and things and universes
it got tiring fast trying to love a thing that would
never love her back.
trying to love a world that could never find the
courage
to love an ugly girl with a pretty heart.

"new galaxies"

the boy in my science class has pretty eyes
that open doors into new galaxies and sometimes
he's not very good at math and sometimes
he smiles from his heart and sometimes
i think that i might love him right [HERE](#):

where my fingers meet my palms
because i can feel it growing so much that
my hands start shaking while i do my homework
and my eyes start watering when i think about him,
working on algebra problems and getting
frustrated
because he can't get it right. because maybe i
love him
a little too much, but maybe, sometimes he loves
me too,
thinks my eyes are the galaxies that his eyes open
up to
that i'm good at math in the way he wants

to be, sees my hands start shaking during class
and wants to hold them until they stop, so much
that his eyes start watering, and he thinks that i'll
never
love him, even though he's the boy with the pretty
eyes
in my algebra class, the one who has eyes that
opens doors
into new galaxies and windows into my heart.

NEVER BEGAN TO START PEELING

Leyla Fern King

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School,
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Poetry

SESTINA

she knew the mirror would break the moment she
looked into its peeling
reflection of a girl that once loved the sun and
hula hoops
now with self-loathing clenched between her
teeth
and a broken sense of self and wavering sense of
gravity
she watched her clothes turn into hungry hungry
demons breaking open her skull reaching into the
sky

through her cracked heart they touched one
finger to the stars and one to the sky
and let darkness tarnish the peeling
tile floor in her bedroom where her whole life fell
apart because of one hungry hungry
little teenage girl that just wanted to love the sun
again and to stop wearing hoops
for earrings and climb back onto the playground
where gravity
didn't exist and where she still smiled with more
than just her teeth

and she knows that there must of been a time
when her teeth
were not demon shaped and that the sky
that she loved didn't hold so much darkness and
her gravity
defying smile gave her joy and did not make her
feel like she was peeling
make her jump into hoops
over black holes and disappear so that she
stopped feeling so hungry

she knew that little girl who was hungry
for goodness and love was still in there who was
missing two front teeth
and who liked to make her dog jump through
hula hoops
for treats a dog that could jump so high she
touched the sky
and an owner that wanted to touch it too that
didn't know what peeling
was yet didn't know anything other than no
gravity

but when she drew a few years in and gravity
started to fall and she started to get hungry
hungry
for everything she didn't know she didn't have like
carpet that wasn't peeling
it would be nice just once to have teeth
that weren't crooked that didn't make the sky
open a new dead star in the form of two brand
new hoops

for earrings one of those hoops
that didn't have a dog to jump into to make sure
that gravity
never started working a girl that still wanted to
touch the sky
and that got hungry hungry
for justice just by breathing so much that her teeth
started clattering and her brain constantly finding
a new way to start peeling

and with a sky that still had stars and a girl that
was still hungry hungry
for hula hoops that she watched spin round her

hips and gravity
never came back for her and she was missing two
teeth and she never began to start peeling

AN APOLOGY TO GRANDMA

Sydney Lawson

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Sturgeon High School,
Sturgeon, MO

Educator: Jennifer Campbell

Category: Poetry

This is just to say I am sorry.
I am sorry for not listening.
You told me not to run,
But I scurried anyway.

I didn't know it would
Crash.
I didn't know it would
Break.

I immediately knew
I was in trouble.
The glass owl
Shattered.

At first I didn't know
What I should do.
I quickly decided to tell you.

I tried to hold back my tears,
Flowing like Niagara Falls,
But the water kept rushing.
I apologized as I cried.

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At first you didn't say a thing,
Then you told me it's all okay.

POLITICAL DIVIDE

Hannah Loder

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Glendale High School,
Springfield, MO

Educator: Teena Mahoney

Category: Poetry

Hate
Bigotry
Pain
War
Ignorance

Repeat

Repeat

No listening
No learning
No communicating effectively

We bicker
We raise our voices
To reiterate the fact that we are right
And you are wrong

There is no gray area
I hate you because you don't believe what I
believe
I will not listen to your experience
I will not try to understand why you believe what
you do

Instead

I will complain
I will yell
I will cry
I will scream
That it's not fair
That people are crazy
That our country is doomed

I will feel helpless
Hopeless
All fight gone
All drive gone
Limp
And lifeless

I will continue the cycle

Hate
Bigotry
Pain
War
Ignorance

I will live in my bubble
I will not listen to you
I will not love you
I will not do anything

But wait

Wait for the time when I do not have to feel angry
For a time when all of those around me believe
like me
For a time when we can all agree
For a time when I do not have to raise my voice
just to try to be heard

I will wait

And nothing will get done

BEAUTY

Lily Long

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS
Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

A goddess, lounging upon her throne,
beauty in human form.
Hair of stary night,
a petite form doting on her loyal apostles.
Short legs covered,
freckled arms sheltered,
a chill in the air.

Poison fills the room,
a pungent scar upon the scene.
The goddess holds cotton in delicate fingers,
wiping the varnish from her long nails.
The smell like frustrated tears,
a sensation similar to biting your own cheek,
flesh trapped between two firm surfaces.
The goddess continues on, unbothered
by the poison.

The woman, lounging on her bed,
the most beautiful person in the world.
Salt and pepper hair,
her petite body warmed by dogs.
Short legs under blankets,
freckled arms in warm sleeves,
a chill in the air.

ETERNAL RETURN

Gillis Lowry

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Kirkwood High School, Saint Louis, MO
Educators: Simao Drew, Katie Meyers

Category: Poetry

The cosmos runs on cycled time.
In versions with the Earth you'll find
if humans live they quickly die
and leave their world a husk behind.

One hundred years before the end
they gather greetings up to send
on rippled light and broadcast bands
and probes that brave the solar sands
but dreams engraved in golden songs
don't serve to stop a species' wrongs.
They turn their children still to slaves
and force them each to mark their graves
with crayon words on colored page;
to take up arms and come of age
and watch as U-two-thirty-five
engulfs a hundred billion lives.

So
let
eons pass
with humans gone
the moon will dip and morning dawn
the universe moves surely on
without them

the moon will crumble, Earth erode
the series loop and time reload

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and in each world they call their home
they'll burn their books and topple Rome

unless they learn to love their own—
they'll leave behind
a couple stones
and waves
that cross the vast unknown.

THE DEFINITION

Maddy Pass

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: John Burroughs School,
Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Poetry

In first grade, we fought over who could burp the
loudest

(it was a tie, he told me).

In second grade, he was the only one who would
sit next to me at lunch

(we traded animal crackers).

In third grade, I was his only friend

(we played catch and chased each other on the
playground).

In fourth grade, I told him I'm Jewish, even though
only my father's side is

(I just wanted him to think I was special).

In fifth grade, I imagined his arm around me at a
baseball game

(we were both Cardinals fans).

In sixth grade, we grew apart

(but I still loved the sound of him reading aloud in
English class).

In seventh grade, I had a crush on his best friend

(even though I still would've gone to that baseball
game with him).

But in eighth grade,
he told me
he wished that
Hitler had gassed my family.

I remember he used to play the saxophone behind
me in band.

I would turn around to see his light blue eyes
staring, switching
from just above to just below, to the left or right of
my face and back again.

I remember our cross country practices on the
asphalt parking lot.

He was much, much faster.

He said about me, "She **TRIES** hard, but. . ."

I remember that
he never brushed his hair;
it stood up in unruly dark brown tufts.

We were on a school trip
when he whispered it to his friend,
who said, "That's **REALLY** bad."

So I asked until he told me:

"I won't get mad. Promise."

I thought maybe he **LIKED** me.

I was so excited, I was giggling!

Half an hour later

he asked if we could switch our seats on the plane
so he could sit with his friend.

Look, look away, look above, below, left, right.

OKAY.

Back home by two a.m.,

I looked outside our car window, parked in the
driveway,

at far-away stars and the full moon illuminating our
garden.

I told my mother what he'd said

and she was silent,

and our tears stained the gray car upholstery;

later I fell asleep, forgetting for a moment.

And that's why I smiled

when you asked me if I knew
what ANTI-SEMITISM meant.

ANTI-SEMITISM (n):

What destroyed my first crush,
what embarrassed me in front of all my friends,
on that New York Friday morning
standing in LaGuardia
when he punched me in the stomach with his
words.

I've only seen him once since.
He walked past my seat and stared at me, and
I SMILED at him.

Yes, I think I know the definition.

ANTI-SEMITISM (n):

When he pushes you down so far
that you're left doing him favors.

After Pittsburgh,
an image appeared in my mind
of him and gun
in my grandparents' temple.
And that was when I realized I can't trust myself
to decide who to trust.

ANTI-SEMITISM (n):

Having to remind yourself
over and over
to try
to forgive.

ST. LOUIS, SOMETIME

Bridget Pegg

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Incarnate Word
Academy, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Claire LaMarche

Category: Poetry

I. KINLOCH

The fire truck was sold by the last firefighter
At a fair price, most would say, since the buyer
had a fondness for old, rusted things
The macabre, the decrepit, the sickly joy of the
slow or sudden beautiful rot but despite this he
refused
To go into the town, didn't think it was safe
So the two traded keys and a rubber-band
bound stack of cash
Away, at an abandoned McDonald's

Afterward, the remaining few and the news were
furious, demanding to know
Why it took so long for somebody to come, why
they let the city burn, why the truck was sold off
But I knew it was just parked in the empty station,
unused except for the homeless, probably useless
There hadn't been money for years, anyway,
since one corporation or the next bought up our
people and The surrounding land, leaving us
forgotten, simple as that
Buffeted by woods from warehouse wastelands
and broken-mirror suburbs, so that when it first
started,
Either from someone's cigarette or a teenager's
prank or just from the sun baring down on the dry
grass
It took a while for anyone to take notice the
burning - flames
In fits in starts, until a large roar
Left everything marked by the eerie glow

We stood circled, clutching one another, all
A little way back, shocked that somehow after all
this time, after all the attempts and
Years of cuts, we were finally being destroyed
Watching the fire give way to blackened town,
and I thanked God I had that cash still

II. UNIVERSITY CITY

I spent a lot of time walking along the packed streets
Contemplating ducking into one of the theaters and not-quite-bars
Staying outside to glory in the sweet, smooth scent of St. Louis barbeque, heaven itself, intermingled with
Blues heard from street performers and

The distant call of performers on the hill, joyfully reciting Shakespeare for kids running through Sprinklers and fountains, gazing longingly at the way towards the zoo, towards the gold-trimmed trolley
Which ran past Victorian homes with olympic races, riots, religious figures, epidemics and museums
At their feet, memorializing the endless churn that had left them there to spite the times
Unlike all the other neighborhoods and corners, lost through the decades

I walked alongside laughing college students pleasantly disoriented in a new city
Wishing to bottle up that feeling of home and possibility, which rooted itself despite
The place they grew up in, other states and towns, who couldn't hope to compete with the honeyed
Stubborn, and twisted charm of days here, steeped in culture and love

III. ST. ANN

The house was like the rest
A four room baby boomer set turned into a maze of additions and decks
Pastel-colored lawn decorations left out past each holiday and gardens carefully tended by Bent-over women and men who thought they were hip, being on Facebook and all
Offering instead of a casserole to friend me when I first moved in

These neighbors conducted low-level political

and religious warfare
Through Blessed Mother statues, pride flags, and obscure congressional candidates
Proudly displayed on the lawn and muttered comments about decency
Something, they felt, was going terribly wrong, despite their best efforts
To warn all the new children about the scourges of lost cursive and the familiar hatred seeping back into
The city, offending their sense of good and sending some west,
The ones who didn't like the younger neighbors and masses in spanish, though most agreed
They wanted those who left gone anyway, tacky and crass, debt-ridden and distasteful to those
Still carrying their parents' admonitions from the Great Depression, cutting coupons and wasting little

Though, they admitted to me once, the houses were bigger, even if it was all the way out **THERE**

IV. FLIGHT

I have always told my kids
To get to St. Charles
There is a river
And a bridge
And traffic snarls for miles
Commuters caffeine-addled
Crammed into SUVs
Fleeing the city in the evening
Past the Confederate flags
That sometimes fly
From the first overpass -
A welcome

SUMMER SUNDAY

Alexis Peterson

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Central High School,
Saint Joseph, MO

Educator: angela brown

Category: Poetry

Summer Sunday

Sun warmed Lemonade trickles down my throat,
sweeter than any honeysuckle could ever be.
Condensation sprinkled across my palms mimics
the beads of sweat trailing across my forehead.

We lay in the grass tangled over one another.
Her legs on mine,
My hand in Her's,
A web woven with strands of fate...

In this moment, this blissful moment
Time pause's,
It slows to a stop, If only for us.
A shy grin crooks up the corner of Her lips,
Desperately, I wish for the world never to start
again.

Our breaths sync as we slip into a peaceful
silence,
 Inhaling the scent of hearth and home.
 Basking in the golden rays of midwestern
June
A sigh, sudden, silent, slips into the wind
 - A song for only us to hear -
And I swear the mocking bird echos that
beautiful melody.

She turns to me,
Lacksidical, Her eyes drunken in love.
Warm breath tickles my ears ever so slightly,
 Faintly, I hear a stolen kiss...
With a voice smoother than silk She whispers

" What do you see in the clouds..."

A chuckle escapes my lips...

Only Her, so innocent and wise,
Could make me ponder such a trivial thing.

" I see cumulus,
puffy and pure, like cottonballs, floating in the
atmosphere. "

A squeeze of my hand lets me know I've
answered queerly,
A pregnant pause expands between us, after
mere seconds I ask,

"What do you see... "

" I see a story,
my love,
I see OUR story. "

Preposterous I think,
A query has never been responded to so
strangely
But, in the oddest light of things, I nod slowly in
agreement.

If the clouds were ever to tell a story,
Then it should be none other than our own.

" And how does our story end? "
I ask without thinking, simultaneously I fear and
yearn for her response.
In Love? In Hate?
Life...
Death...

Leaning close so our noses touch...
Scalding breath mingles with my own,
I taste more than hear the next words.
Like strawberries on a summer sunday,
Fire in the evening burn,
The answer reaches me through the closing gap,

" Like all stories...
it is still unfinished; "

THE OBJECT OF MY AFFECTION

Vivianne Purvis

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Central High School,
Saint Joseph, MO
Educator: Kyla Ward

Category: Poetry

Her smile is soft and tender,
Although it's a bit flat.
Her hair is of a cranberry,
The reminder of a bat.
The way she moves is like no other,
She tosses and she turns.
When the day is over,
Home is the place I'm eager to return.

For when I lay beside her,
My heart is filled with glee,
She can tend to be two-sided,
But I need her here with me.
She feels like cotton in my arms,
It renders me unable to breathe.

She can show me a side which is fierce and fiery,
It sets my heart ablaze.
Another side, she softly smiles.
I have frozen due to her gaze.

I've carried her everywhere in the world,
From Tokyo to the beach of Dover.
Others often tend to pass glances,
I know their judging isn't over.

When I carry her down the road,

A look of disgust follows as we walk.
But I know those people are just jealous,
I refuse to listen to their talk.

My friends give me a reaction I cannot bear,
They say she cannot even bleed.
But in the end I know for sure,
My pillow is all I need.

SEARCHING IN THE MIRROR

Ananya Radhakrishnan

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Category: Poetry

Still a Child

My 6+ years long obsession with fantasy began
with
The Magic Tree House gifted by an obscure uncle
Forced upon me by my mom's supreme power -
nagging

My 5+ year obsession with mythology began
with
The Red Pyramid, my mom somehow convinced
herself was the key to all my problems
Recommended by my girl scout troop leader

My 4+ year venture into being a field hockey
goalie began
with
My mom, believing I was unathletic not due to

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dislike but because I needed something "special"
Signing me up for a camp recommended by a
colleague

Somehow she always tells me I never
listen
She forces me And I fall
in love

This cycle has repeated

So much

When will I learn from my mistakes?
Will I ever?
When will I be able to find these things for myself?
Will I then be truly independent?

Reminisce

Hey, past me from so close yet seeming so long
ago...

A knot from my sweater's bow I regret tying
despite how unkempt the ribbons look hanging
by my sides because now it's digging into my
back

Fluffy mane of hair I can't decide if I want out
where it's pretty and makes me look less like a
generic nerd yet gets in my face and food and
life

The jeans I insist upon wearing without a belt even
though their slipping down my butt may actually
outweigh the pain of loosening the belt

These seemingly fine yet worn with age tennis
shoes I'm too attached to give up that emit a
constant squeak, squeak, squeaking through the
hallways whether it's caused by residual rain from
outside or not

Glasses, fond of slipping down my nose at
frequent intervals, covered in smudges I rarely
notice till they get out of hand

The phone whose screen happened to crack at
the most inopportune moment and takes forever
to read my fingerprint

A should-be-highlighter-blue jacket that presents
itself rather as a canvas of the week's tomato
stains

The speckled face, home to seemingly endless -
acne

The stomach's poor substitute for muscle - fat
The arms, flopping fishes, or more like - noodles
The legs, home to who knows what, forests of -
hair

I've always acknowledged that perfection is not
possible Yet, I have to at least
try to strive

I think, as I sit at my desk, fingers typing
fragmented sentences, attempting to convey
thoughts speeding

too
fast

to grasp

Yet, just a simple poem of reflection brings to light
these numerous deficiencies, many of which I
Could fix were it not for the invisible fiend upon
whom I stamp the label-

Laziness

With it's tottering servants

Procrastination

Short term pleasure

Rebelliousness

Insecurity

A list within

Us all

Yet, seemingly in me more than others
Or perhaps that's how we all feel?

Or maybe some,

Wave the white flag before the battle even
begins...

I Can't

I can't be one of them

I've known I can't, I need to find something, some
identity, some way out of my seemingly

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impossible
to
escape
label of
above average"

"just

What is the point if you get plenty of losses and
plenty of "fine" but no victories?

After so many years

Piano rating

Stagnant

GPA

Stagnant

JV Hockey

Stagnant

Debate Level

Unchanging

It's something about me though, somehow, I
believe, subconsciously, I'm impeding myself. I'm
holding myself back.

Or...

Am I looking through a lens, half empty?

From C team to JV squash

From B's to A's in science

From doodles to proper shading in art

Improvements are there...

Which begs the question

A little girl lies on her belly,

Legs splayed, feet twitching

One pigtail bouncing about while the other, the

victim of some ferocious chewing

But she doesn't seem to realize,

She doesn't seem to care

All attention focused on the pencil, paper, and

the to be

Marvelous masterpiece

Encased in a hurricane of thoughts and ideas her

eyes suddenly alight and she begins to scribble

Without a single worry in the world

Who Am I

It's a funny feeling,

to have a conversation with a field hockey ball

It wasn't even a conversation,

really

Mostly I just gave it a baleful glare for being hit

straight towards the cage and stopping

Right before it

It truly didn't affect me in any way,

simply my inner angst at my poor performance

being taken out on this innocent round piece of

plastic

Mostly, for eluding me

Yet, still stopping,

Not by my efforts but by the lack of force applied

to it

It could have gone in

Or,

It could have been blocked

Instead,

it chose to rest just before the finish line

taunting me,

Proving to me that my effort is completely

unnecessary

That,

even an invisible entity known as air resistance +

friction

can do my job for me

Oh,

By now you're probably wondering who I am in

this scenario

Considering,

If I was an offender, attempting to shoot

I'd desire the ball to cross and I'd push it in

rather than subject it to my resentment

You see, I am

the Goalie

EULOGY FOR ANCIENT CITIES AND HUMANKIND

Samiya Rasheed

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Category: Poetry

Start on the path to Babylon,
the desert city. Paved in Koine Greek
wrought in time gone— she stood
in sandstone sands like dried flesh flaked:
mother earth's own. The same dust we will
leave, tracing cracked soil off the skin
crumbling empires each our own

I draw it from you—
sick sweet saccharine swan songs
gnawing at your peeling heels, splinters
from a bedrock that remembers
that cold stone truth stained into the clay of our
hue
we will return, I ask of you
For the problem is

Babylon resounds
in our minds— hammer on ivory bone
a skull: a bell to call those thousand miles
to a valley we cannot place.
the Sound is holy and old, but wonder
the things lost in translation.
You will return from which you came:
a symmetry, from your first blood-soaked wails,
face pinched, to the silence in silt spilled over,

buried back in the soil hide of our first Mother
unfettered
not ascending
we are twins to a city Biblical and spent
time forgets all but your silhouette— the hanging
gardens
you did not have. There is a honeyed ringing when
I relive you— effaced by lye and repeated
machine wash
In absentia, we will accept consequence
of crying out and disappearing
It has been heavy millennia

THE THREADS OF TIME

Colton Roach

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Category: Poetry

Home

Seconds to liftoff, then, ignition.
Cast from the hearth unto perdition.
A life unfulfilled; hypocritical.
Oxygen status: critical.
Night, with her splendid hands
Coerces men from troubled lands.
I have not much time to spare.
The Queen of Stars has cast her snare.

The past is but a blink.
Isn't it so quaint to think?

A mere shift in degrees
Flung me to her arms to freeze.

The planets with their puny grace
So minute from Earth's embrace.
Now they stand regally near,
Far from man's jeering austere.

With my son, I watched the Gods,
On their thrones with stellar rods.
His face would glow if I could report
That I stood in that King's High Court.

But, these things are only dreams
The void is filling with silent screams.
Despite knowing I will perish,
I have never felt more cherished.

So as long as I wander and gaze
And God's mighty furnaces continue to blaze,
I can face the abyss with aplomb
For in the black night, I am finally home.

Ouranos

Father of Skies upon his perch
Clothed in robes as white as birch.
On his head a veil of clouds
From mankind it surely shrouds.

Why must you defy the gods
And strip them of their lying lauds?
Of your gall I must applaud,
The yet unflawed, King of Frauds.

Ouranos, the wise magician,
Universe's great musician,
Play your lyre, I entreat;
Worthy lamb, begin to bleat.

Why do you escond from mortal eyes?
To hide them from your chortle cries?
My heart knows this can't be true,
O, heir of voids, with hair dark blue.

When morning drums begin their beat,

Where does your black veil retreat?
When we lie in sore defeat,
Why does your touch feel so sweet?

Ouranos, with eyes like skies,
Where will you be when I die?
Your forebear has never lied,
For I will be there at your side.

Pendulum

I've been to the mountains,
And the depths of the seas;
To heaven's great fountains
And bit by hell's fleas.

I eat stars for breakfast
While I beat up my dentist,
Then I'm an apprentice
For a chemist in Venice.

Under the highs are unspeakable devils,
Who stamp on my heart in fiery revels.
I can scarcely describe what's really there;
I guarantee nothing but wretched despair.

Then I fall through the sky
Into the great void to sigh.
Where am I going? When will it end?
To answer these questions, heaven pretends.

Then I rise again,
As swiftly as I descend
As king of the skies;
It's nothing but lies.

If you could simply understand
My racing thoughts will not disband.
I admit it, stop your riot band.
Your aid is all that I demand.

SISYPHOS

We wake up every day at dawn
To be forgotten by our spawn.

We break our backs until the dusk
Just to die as grizzled husks.

The sun scolds us from his chair,
While we lose our strength and hair.
While we toil to demise,
Does he see us just like flies?

What's it like to be that star?
To see the death of every tsar,
To watch the trips of every car,
To witness our exploits from afar?

In that black, he must be lonely,
To be a god in false name only.
To wait as all that time flies by;
Surely, a fate to be despised.

So, the next time you can't sit still,
Remember this, I'm sure you will:
Taking down time brings you tears,
But the sun's done this for billions of years.

Leviathan

Prince of chaos, hail'd from deep,
Return thee to thy wretched sleep.
Lay your scepter to its rest;
My knife crouches in your chest.

Stormy seas shall roil no more.
Their king is dead forevermore.
There is no war, anymore.
The heir approaches from still shores.

Leviathan, your days are done.
We, the heroes, swiftly won.
Call me traitor all you can;
In threads of time; a dead man.

You betrayed us, filthy boar.
Now you rot forevermore.
You built a city on our bone?
Now you mold; all alone.

Leviathan, it's finished now.
We revoke your chattel plough.
We cast you to the depths at last
With great hope your pain is vast.

LIFE: A COLLECTION

Kerigan Roth

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Sturgeon High School,
Sturgeon, MO

Educator: Jennifer Campbell

Category: Poetry

"An Apology to Stacey"

This is just to say,
I'm truly sorry
For many of the things
I have done.

I'm sorry for all the times
I ask "silly" questions,
Like if pepper spray is edible.
But in all honesty
It was better I asked than tried it.

I'm sorry for all the times
I eat your tasty snacks like a rabid dog.
But if you truly didn't want them eaten,
Maybe you should have hidden them better.

I'm sorry for all the times
I take your favorite flip flops
And wear them outside.

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I would suggest hiding them in your closet.

I'm sorry Stacey
For all the delicious eaten snacks,
Stolen shoes, and silly questions.
The moral of this apology
Is to hide your stuff better, and not give me crazy
looks.

"Existential Crisis"

Jammed hallway, slowly walking
Feeling empty like an old can, life
Just a black, dark void. Twenty
Torturous days progress, it feels
Like life is just going
And I am simply nothing.

I feel nothing,
Just painfully numb, walking
To the end of nowhere, going
Absolutely nowhere. What is the meaning of life
If when all feels
Like pushing through a rowdy crowd of
thousands.

The three or four
Who seem to care, do little to nothing
To ease the numbness that sinks into feels.
Aching, emptiness walking
All over my frail body. Life
Is just, at this point without me, going.

The world is going
On whether I do ten
adoring things for myself or if I do none at all. Life
Will roll on if I simply do nothing.
Everyone and everything walking
Right over me as if I don't exist, it feels.

Instead of the black void, it feels
Now like bitter coldness going
Into my soul. No amount of walking

Can ease the two
Opposing voices spewing nothing
But nastiness about life.

Everyone experiences life
Differently than others. The feels
They have are varying than yours. Nothing
Is the exact same for everyone. When going
About your day, hundreds
Of things can happen to make it better. They say
try walking,

It may help the void of nothing, black, dark
coldness fills life.
With people walking over you, horrendous it feels,
And not even going with it, can make it ten times
better.

"Am I Perfect Yet?"

Apple sitting on the table,
Anxiety coursing through her veins.
96 calories
YOU CAN'T EAT THAT, YOU DON'T WANT TO GET
FAT NOW, DO YOU?
The little voice nagged annoyingly.
Frail, weak body shaking, she grasped the small
apple and threw it away.

I MUST BE PERFECT.

She got stares as she ate
Ribs jutting out,
Cheeks sunken in.
LOOK AT ALL THESE PEOPLE STARING
EVEN THEY CAN SEE HOW DISGUSTING AND
PATHETIC YOU ARE
The menacing voice whispered quietly.
Head held low, she went to the bathroom
And stuck the familiar, friendly fingers down her
throat.

I MUST BE PERFECT.

JUST DO IT, NOBODY WOULD CARE

The unforgiving voice hissed.
An empty pill bottle, once full, grasped in hand,
She collapses to the cold bathroom floor.
The drugs flow through her system
As she slowly loses consciousness, world turning
black.

I MUST BE PERFECT.

UNFINISHED POEM OF TRIUMPH

Natalie Rovello

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: St Teresa's Academy,
Kansas City, MO
Educator: Kelly Finn

Category: Poetry

I cut apart my stitches
after fiddling with them
to the point of blisters
and complaining only to myself

I refused to take up my shears at first
and hid behind
banana leaves
wide and fresh-smelling forever

I never spoke my own words
when I decided to speak
only those
of saints and prophets, in the beginning

I believe it was a kind of
verbal insurance, for who could argue against
the God of their teachers?
that was my only transcription for a long, long
time.

THOUGHTS ON LIVING IN THE SUBURBS

Natalie Rovello

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: St Teresa's Academy,
Kansas City, MO
Educator: Kelly Finn

Category: Poetry

I wish to wall myself up
in a place of firelight -
the maw
of some old dead poet
hidden deep in some old dead acreage
I want to know this decrepit head
suck the roots from its teeth
carve the tongue into rags
devour the brain,
Indiana-Jones style.

I wish to kick
at civility's headboard
in the thick of a cold winter.
For my transgressions, he will find punishment!

But when I awake
to civility's broad dagger in my heart
I will laugh,
for he's killed the only worthy adversary he had
left.
For the poet's mouth is dry,
the acreage set aflame.

DIVE

Kailey Schlink

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Olathe North High
School, Olathe, KS
Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Paper on my fingertips
Pages that flow seamlessly
like the wings of a dove.

Smelling new or old
Then smelling like you.

a stone fortress, a world unknown

you dive
Into a story
Filled with spies, thieves, pixies,
monsters of all types.

Begin to taste, touch, feel,
experience
their world.

when the journey ends
the book is snapped shut

then placed on the shelf
And reality continues.

WOMEN OF WATER

Andrea Shehi

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Olathe East High
School, Olathe, KS
Educator: Tish Varraveto

Category: Poetry

OCEAN IN A BOX – A SONNET

still, still water in the early morning
peacefully I wade in thee, unafraid
swelling waves and frenzied breaths in evening
I tire and draw strength from thy worlds of jade.
Us women of water, in thee we thrive-
suspend me in time with my arms outstretched.
To be a true creature of you I strive,
though for the dry earth was I created.
Flight underwater, a skill so divine
but still conditional; you steal from me
fees of weakness and a face of harsh line.
All I will ever want is to be free,
so let me rise and cast away the locks-
let me have thee, my ocean in a box.

SAND PERSON, SAND PEOPLE

We are people made of sand.
The ocean courses through my blood
eroding every granule of my being
My heart, a pulsating cavity
of wishful waves and
drowned dreams

Tell me, love, are we all crumbling? Will a whisper
of wind scatter us
like ashes?

Pretend that I'm lovable
for both our sakes
Pretend that I'm deserving
as you stare hollowly at me with eyes
of swirling dust

My sand castle bones and bleached
sand skin collide and collapse
like rocks from white cliffs rushing, plunging,
drowning
in a foaming sea

We're sand people, lying buried among our kin
as waves drag themselves over us
we're sand people,
staring up at a translucent sky
We're sand people,
desperately weaving dreams while we erode
from the
thrashing,
crashing,
inside.

CHEERS

cheers to you,
Light of a thousand suns
land of the scorching heat
that left its children
blinded and burned

Breathe, breathe
As the clouds of Shostakovich
blister and bloom,
shroud and shriek

Breathe, breathe
as the black rains
cry tears for those enshrined
in the flame of martyrdom

Have you tasted the guilt in the blood
of innocents, holy ones?
Do you slumber, breathless,
in beds like coffins?

Will you protect me as faithfully
as you betrayed the
children of the sun?

Your memory no longer lingers,
so I must declare,
cheers to you.

PASTORAL DREAMGAZING - A SONNET

scurrying along in this red wagon
my head is filled with empty thoughts of you
I can't recall, it's hard to imagine
we once belonged to each other- a moo
From a lone cow in hilly west kansas,
do cows dream of love at night?- we are tied
to this earth through our feet, the sun pulls us
upwards by our roots to its warmth, please hide
from it all and grow with me for a while.
I dream of a boy who sleeps in the dark
with no other life under the moon's smile.
Where does he go, when his mind is so stark?
I surface to breathe, to question myself.
He remains, a stone on the ocean's shelf.

ON AND ON HE WALKED

Emily Snodderly

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Category: Poetry

A traveler strode along a path,
A learned man was he.
His purpose was to see the world,
And learn from what he would see.

And on and on he walked,
And never stopped.

Along his path he saw a child,
A weak, pathetic thing.
The man could hear him loud and clear,
As the child began to sing:

"Please, kind Sir, come near to me,
And hear my simple plea.
For I am lost and have not food,
This is the death of me."

"Of course," the man called back to the child,
"Of course, you must have food.
But I am in search of enlightenment,
And can give none to you."

And on and on he walked,
And never stopped.

He came upon a young man then,
A paper in his hand.
The young man called, "Sir, join our cause,
And help us free our land!"

"Of course," again the traveller sang,
"Of course, you must be free.
But I simply cannot spare the time,
For this walk is important to me."

And on and on he walked,
And never stopped.

Again he found a wandering man,

Who whispered, "Sir, if you please.
I've lost my job and can't find work,
And I have a family to feed."

"Of course," the traveller answered the man,
"Of course, your family must be fed.
But my money is mine to fund my walk,
So you must find a job instead."

And on and on he walked,
And never stopped.

Later, a woman sat on the path,
Aged was she, and ill.
She coughed, "Young Sir, come to me now,
And help me if you will."

"Of course," the traveller wearily replied,
"Of course, you clearly need help.
But who am I to heal the sick?
How could I make you well?"

And on and on he walked,
And never stopped.

At last, the traveller saw from afar,
A beautiful, great, white tree.
"This," he thought, "is what I sought,
It was clearly meant for me."

So then, to it he walked,
And finally stopped.

The tree, now, spoke in an earthy tone,
Powerful, ancient, and wise.
It shimmered and swayed as it said to him,
"Come, let me see your eyes."

The man had scarcely heard the words,
Before he began to shout.
"Oh tree, listen to what I have learned,
When I was out and about!"

The man stopped short as the tree leaned
down,
Leaves whistling in the wind.

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The branches glowed, the trunk stood firm,
The tree, then, spoke again.

"You've travelled far in search of fact,
Of knowledge, of truth, of life.
I can see that you do think you have learned,
What I say may cause you strife.

"You have met along your journey,
Many whom you could call friends.
But stop to help them you did not,
So now your journey ends.

"For helping those along your way,
Makes your life worthwhile.
Instead you've taken what you could,
Become selfish, vain, and vile.

"So to all who hear my words today,
Ponder what I say.
In this world your travels mean nothing,
If you don't help along your way."

A.M.

Oviya Srihari

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School,
Saint Louis, MO
Educator: Michael Dee

Category: Poetry

dull eyes and pillow
creases.
the sky outside
is india
ink, spangled with pollution-mangled
stars.

bite cracked
lips. sit up, fall back.
savor silence and wrap yourself
in a blanket
of still
air.
don't delude yourself,
you aren't going back
to sleep. sweet
dreams.

MILKY WAY

Oviya Srihari

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs
School, Saint Louis, MO
Educator: Michael Dee

Category: Poetry

stardust in suspen-
sion and nighttime
light frozen in mid-
air. in pre-k you used to say that
you wanted to see every corner of outer
space. at recess, play pretend
astronauts by the rusted
swing-set.
looking back, you don't know WHY
you volunteered for such a lonely
mission, only that
your inner child was hoping for
more-sparkle-less-dark.
now it's just you out
here, and you stare at the swirl of
light in the
gaping black
folds. somewhere down there,

in the speckles and
smoke, seven
billion people are Living Their
Lives. but you're Up
Here. you tell them you miss
it all, you take it
BACK,
but the words get lost in
those elliptical
orbits and newborn
stars.

CITYSCAPE

Paiton Stith

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High
School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Molly Runde, Deirdre
Zongker

Category: Poetry

Bluebill

No one ever saw the birds,
but me.
They called me Bluebill,
taunted me, haunted me,
told me to come back
down to the bowels
of the city
where the smog was thinner,
where I might piece together
my thoughts,
pare my dreams.

But I had the birds,
real or not,

and what did they have?
The soupy sheen in the sky
that smothered the sun?
The stars they could never see,
never touch?
Or maybe they knew they had nothing.
And nothing was theirs
because they hadn't set out
to find the feather.
They hadn't set out to care.

Alone in the neverending dark,
I thought I might find answer
and so imagined
them come to ask,
"What do they look like?"

I'd tell them, or ignore and talk
of a little bird's story of plains,
deserts full of desperate life,
savannahs of wild, wild
triumph.

Now, the concrete goes on.
On.
On.

Man-made

We did.
We built the city
just like everyone knew we would.
We made it foul and cruel and corrupt
and we spread its spores across the whole earth
until it was just as black, just as sick
as our hearts.

We made something horrible.
And we rigged it.
There's nowhere
to escape to.
We created twisted environments
because we were lazy,
because we were apathetic.
We hated

and forgot the name of love
and with every day we bred disaster.

We took flashing neon light,
so proud, so bright,
and we shorted it.
Man can make anything.
Man made despair.

King of Crows

Black feathers,
slick from his forehead
pulled to a soft curve
that dives down the slope
of head and into glittering
onyx back, wings tucked tight.

Oversized, gawky, perched
on a wet iron rail
that scrapes grime
onto his sharp little bird feet,
his beady eyes watch her,
perfect stones call to her,
an unyielding concentration of dark
but for the single star
of reflected light.

The city is neon behind him.
She brings her face close,
where the smell of him is
pine and earth and evergreen
and her hand is a tremble-feathered
dove reaching for his
as he unfurls his body
to put booted human legs on balcony,
to look into inhuman features
with whole black eyes.

He buttons his coat,
takes a step over the pocked holes while
city stretches on forever,
for centuries,
but he shakes out
his wings

and tells her,

"I know how to find the sun."

RETROSPECT

Darian Tatum

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Paseo Academy
Performing Arts, Kansas City, MO
Educator: Jenifer Bell

Category: Poetry

I watched as the blood ran down the blade
It formed drops as it fell off the tip
With the first drop
I saw the end of my lies drip away
Or was it the end of my innocence?
The end of enslavement?

The man I had known as uncle
The man I was taught to trust
The man with the light brown eyes
Big nose and lips
The man with the crooked teeth and braces

He had brutally violated me
Took away my childhood
He must die.
I want him to feel how I felt

Sleepless nights due to the pain my little body
was enduring
Constant beating at the flesh
Dried up blood stuck onto my skin
The limp in my walk
Fractured arm
And bruised face

He has already killed me:
I had been his slave for 2 weeks
Even though my mind
And tiny 10-year-old body
Had been enslaved for years

I was defined as an unwanted baby
Just as my mother and grandmother was
And so it went through unknown generations
after generation

My mother had been candy in my uncle's eyes
Yet, everything that she wanted had to be
bought
And paid for with her body
He was the card and she became the ATM

I was born such a product of sexual assault
The second I was born I was taken away
And placed with others, in the care
Of women that had no feelings whatsoever

Their wombs had long ceased to produce any
fruit
After passing through the same situation as my
mother
Constant violation
The features of these women were stone
Nothing got through to them

And their eyes told stories
That only those who have suffered
Or only those who share the same fate
Can understand
Complete enslaved zombies

LOOKING BACK

Tobie Toynton

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Ft Osage High School,
Independence, MO

Educator: Tim Dial-Scruggs

Category: Poetry

I remember one year ago
I was sixteen
Shaky hands turned on the razor.

INHALE.

BZZT. Clumps of hair fell,
Barely making a noise.

EXHALE.

Glancing up, I peered in the mirror.
A pale face, dead eyes
Peered back at me.
Down the center of my head,
Short, bristled hair makes a statement.

"I am not who you think I am," it screams.
"I am not Eleanor."
"I am ORION."
"No looking back," I mutter
In the silent room
Alone with my thoughts.

I remember my thoughts,
The hurt and pain they gave me
When they found out that day.
NO
"I can't believe this!"
STOP
"Why are you doing this to our family!?"

NO MORE, PLEASE

"Is it because we never gave you girly toys?"

I want to scream,
To tell them all.
So I do.

"SHUT UP!"

The dam breaks, and I can't stop the words
Escaping my mouth,
Prisoners of my mind becoming free.
I rant for ten minutes,
Explaining
Blabbering
Finally, crying.
As I recover, I don't see it coming until it hits.

SMACK!

I gasp, falling back as my mother stands over
me,
A tyrannical ruler, in a land where everyone must
be
Picture perfect, dolls for her to arrange and dress
and control.
And just like that, with hatred and abuse,
I'm silenced.

It's been a year since the incident
And things haven't become better,
As people say they do.
I'm seventeen, but I feel so much older.
The people who raised me
(Who I no longer consider my parents)
Wait for me at the door,
All my things packed in my friend's car.
My mother, through her tears, is relieved
As my father stands, cold and silent.
"Anything to say to us?"
I scoff, and she glares.

"SOMETHING TO SAY?"

MAYBE A THANK YOU, OR GRATEFUL WORDS.
IS THAT WHAT YOU EXPECT?
AFTER THE ABUSE, THE TRAUMA, THE HURT,

YOU WANT MY THANKS?"

She turns away as I walk to the door.
As I open it, I turn around
I hope my face is as stoic as my father's,
Unyielding and unafraid
As I always wished I was.
"ACTUALLY, I HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY."
I stare them dead in the eyes, backing out of the
house.
"SEE YOU IN HELL."
I take off, running for the car as they stand there
Silent as a cemetery.

We drive away, my chest heaving and my hands
shaking.

I DON'T LOOK BACK.

FOSTER TEEN

Anahi Vazquez-Ramirez

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Summit Trail Middle
School, Olathe, KS

Educators: Jennifer Frier, Erika Short

Category: Poetry

Foster Teen

I'm a disgrace, coward, a freak is what the
voices say
But they just can't notice that I'm already in grey
The world around me falls dark
And my eyes are hollow without a spark
People tell me it's all lies in my head
"Don't believe them, you're special." they said
People see me and think that my life is normal
I put on make-up and dress-up to hide the pain

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so I dress really formal
I go to bed thinking
The nightmares are still there no matter how
much I'm blinking
I go to the bathroom to hide the tears
Because people ask and I see my fears
I go to my room and I see a shelf
I see there is a blade all by itself
I stare at my wrists in disbelief
The scars are signs of so much grief
I look in the mirror and ask myself "why?"
And tower up tears up in my eyes
Though I have to live with all these lies
While on the inside I slowly die
I'm lost, I'm helpless, I'm all alone
Nowhere to turn, nowhere to call home
All my possessions in one black bag by the door
"A new home you're going." I've heard it before
So I refuse to let my hopes soar
The white car pulls up to take me away
Will this be the home where they'll want me to
stay?
The driver is quiet and leaves me alone with my
thoughts
I think of all the pain this last home brought
I was always the outcast the odd man out
They sure weren't my family without a doubt
The time would pass by
The only thing I could do was cry
Will this new home bring a sister a brother a
father a mother?
Will I ever learn to trust another?
Just thinking about it makes me shudder
As we drove farther away from the parents I love
and life I once knew
The anxiety within me grew and grew
Could I ever find happiness? Could I ever find
joy?
I'm not just a rag doll or someone's toy
They pass me around when they get tired of me
My scars are too deep for them to see
The driver announces, "Here's your new house"
My thoughts become silent as quiet as a mouse
The door opens and I see a light
And I see that it is so, so bright
A ray of hope in my darkest night

That causes all my fears to take flight
I try to get away from my fears
But they keep coming back no matter how hard
I try to fight
It's the gentle smile on a rainy day
Lighting my path and showing the way
I go into the light to get away from the grey
And see that I've been keeping joy at bay
Six months later my heart is full
But you see not only do I love my house, but I
also love my school
My friend's list is endless I see smiles everywhere
It's honestly something everyone can share
So now when I see hurt in someone's eyes
I see myself and I sympathize
I want my story to offer hope to those in need
that cannot cope
We are all so different but yet the same
Because sooner or later we experience some
kind of pain
And so you see we all try to flee
From that one little thing that won't let us be
So you see I'm not scared of saying "I am a
foster teen" anymore
"I'm not scared to be seen I make no apologies
this is me"

ODE TO JUNIOR YEAR

Kylie Volavongsa

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High
School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Questioning Over Questioning

why am i sitting here,
drawing dicey deductions in my head,
and filling bubbles with
just the right dosages
of no. 2 lead?

i miss my gel pens
and it's quiet
and Specific Aquatic Creatures swim over my
mind
along with Genetically Modified Organisms
and a dusty anecdote drier than the back of my
throat

but i digress, as usual

why does this have to be so important?
why can't i ever concentrate here?
and since when did i learn to listen for everything
other?

i draw my lead across the answer sheet.

someone suddenly snuffles, snorts, sneezes and
i remember the time limit but
my hands, they inhibit
my ability to think and write thanks to an intense,
caffeine-induced
s H a k i N g

so i break my no. 2 lead
(on accident, as usual)
and as it rolls and meets the floor,
i ask myself, this time,
whether or not i should join it.

Belvita

it's kind of a mystery to me,
these little brown ovals
of crumbs and cracker
and meal replacement.

not that i've ever had one before, but
THE BELVITA BREAKFAST BISCUIT
SOMETIMES WRITTEN BELVITA OR BELVITA

IS THE PERFECT SOURCE OF STEADY NUTRITION
SPECIALLY BAKED TO RELEASE
FOUR HEALTHY HOURS OF
SUSTAINED ENERGY,
according to wikipedia.

and i think i'd like that,
to choose substance over sleep and
convert cracker to convenience.
i'd like that a lot,
because if i'm lacking in something, anything
i'd say there's a definite deficit in
that SUSTAINED ENERGY and
MOTIVATION and

i don't take care of myself like i should
but i think i'd like to

HOUR GLASS

Jayveona Whitley

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Paseo Academy
Performing Arts, Kansas City, MO
Educator: Jenifer Bell

Category: Poetry

To me an hourglass is a symbol of life

But to others it's just a piece of a game that lets
you know when you've run out of time

The thing is life is a gamble, cuz it can be great,
than a struggle at times

But I had to learn not to go all in or i'll be left
without a dime

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You see my parents used to love me
unconditionally

Then out of nowhere they started acting
differently

Somedays I go without food and water and they
even take away my bed

Other days they scream i'm worthless and they
wish that I was dead

And there's no point of telling because
information is like a boomerang

Cuz once you throw it out, it comes back to
where it came

And it hurts me to look my mother in her face

And no longer see a women who carries herself
with beauty and grace

My mom beats me before I go to school

And before I walk out the door, she's like you
know what to do

So I can an excuse for every bruise I got

So I either fell, ran into something, or I got into a
fight

My dad does something far, far worse

He feels on places that should not be touched

And when I make a sound, he punches me to
put me in my place

And then he smiles at the tears rolling down my
face

When it gets real bad, I pray to god for a sign

A sign of hope that I will survive

And when it's on its last drop and I can no longer
smile

I just pick the hourglass up and turn it around

SHARP EDGES

Lillian Yanagimoto

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: John Burroughs

School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Poetry

You smile and it's
curved like a rib,
teeth claustrophobic,
up-and-down straight
together

(looking to me like PRISON BARS)

Your words
you forge them
(JUST FOR ME)
& they sear
into my
skin, blister
across the darkest
parts of me, they
gnaw, they tear,
they
BITE! and
BITE! and
BITE! and

your teeth—nice

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& white, as if to
say NOTHING BAD GOES
ON IN HERE!

(if only I didn't have the scars
that prove you wrong)

SCIENCE
FICTION/FANTASY

SECTOR E

Alex Archer

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School,
Kansas City, MO
Educators: Marina Ganter, Mallory
Hilvitz

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

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.

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 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 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 her a minute before she recognized her. Her hair was blond now and her face pulled taut 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."

THE SCULPTURE

Haley Renee Born

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

"Laura, what are you doing?"

"Leaving."

"You've gotta work."

"Doesn't matter, it's almost over," she said.

"Your shift's not up for another four hours." Her coworker stamped a customer's order code into the pad next to the screen. Its preparation began with a whirl.

"Not my shift, everything. Everything's almost over," she added. Her coworker hesitated, fingers hovering over the handle to open the food dispenser.

Laura left, shrugging off the greasy radiation of the food she served. Her feet beat the hull of the ship christened *NEW WORLD*, hers and all the human feet left in the universe. Such a weight to place on something so hastily constructed and so long ago. She barely saw it, barely cared.

She arrived in the observatory. Its dark cavern of thick glass used to be full all the time, in the early days when humanity was still enamored with the universe. Before they realized the stars are just old light. Dark and dark and dark and light. That's all.

Laura turned to the sculpture sitting at the center of the lightless dome. Its six steel arms raised in imitation of a god they had long grown out of. The only gods left were constellations, and they all eventually passed in the wake of toxic gas and the hum of engines.

"When will the world end?" Laura asked the sculpture. Its eyes shimmered, two marbles set deep in a metal face, focusing on something very far away. She studied the shiny convex

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surfaces, trying to catch what it could see.
What she could only feel.

"The world ended on March 15, 2019." Its voice
was water dripping in a cave.

"I mean, when will the **NEW WORLD** end?"

"Not for many years," it said.

"Why are you lying?"

Its eyes didn't slide to see her, its finger joints
didn't bend. The only movement in the
neglected room was the fish. The fish in the
torso-shaped tank of the sculpture. Red koi
swirled in the dark water. Water that looked like
the sea at night, only no one who had seen
Earth's oceans was alive to recognize them.

"I am incapable of lying," it said.

"I don't think so. They made you right, they
made it so you would know. I bet they forgot to
make sure you'd tell us. But I know. I know the
end is tonight, not long now,"

The fish stilled, for half a moment they floated,
their round eyes like tens of tiny observatories,
observing her. Then back to swimming, slow
flashes of ruby, fins pulling at the small starlight.

"Why not tell us? Why not be honest? That's
what they made you for, so we would know
when we were out of time."

The fish moved out as one, approaching the
glass, then back to the center. Just like a sigh.

"The New World will live for many years to
come."

"No it won't. It dies tonight. I already know, I
can feel it." She watched the koi. If it were to
tell the truth, to admit the end was near, a silver
stream of mercury would slip from its steel skull
and fall into the tank. Designed as a warning,
but designed. She imagined the fish shimmering
and dead like the stars, belly up.

"I wonder who feeds them."

"I do." Those eyes like wells, the whole universe
swimming in their glassy shadows. Still water
silence filled the observatory.

"They are alive, a part of me, and yet, I am
empty. Nothing but space and mercury." The
darkness rippled.

"You don't want to hurt them." She saw the flick
and sway of their long tails and knew they were
beautiful. The sculpture was large and seated
upon a raised platform, but she could still reach
it. She placed a hand against the glass. The fish
flinched away, but slowly they returned to study
the pale starfish of her fingers on the edge of
their cold, dark world.

2019 Scholastic Silver Key Award Winners – Missouri Writing Region

"They trust me," it said. "The world will live on," it said.

"We'll all be dead and together soon enough, what does it matter?"

With a sudden and startling creak of metal, the statue turned, bending so its large plated face was just near Laura's.

"Yes, what DOES it matter?" Up close its eyes seemed impossibly deep, stardust sealed in an endless, reflective darkness. She drew away.

"It matters to us. Well, to others. I already know it's ending, so soon, so soon."

It moved back so that you'd never know it had done anything but just sit there.

"If you knew, you wouldn't need me."

She thought on that.

"Perhaps not," she thought some more. "Do you wish we had never wanted you? Do wish we had never wanted to know?"

"They never did. They only thought they did. They thought and thought and didn't feel. Like me." It let its three sets of arms down, at last

creaking stiff joints to rest at the tank's sides. The clinking of metal on glass scattered the koi.

"No, not like you. You won't hurt them. You must feel, or you'd just tell us and the fish would die and it would be over."

"How could I? They trust me, they don't know or understand. They think they know what they want from me but they don't. They can't see anything outside their cold, dark, little world. Not like I can." It stared past the stars.

"I know, I know, but it doesn't matter. Soon nothing will."

"Perhaps not," it paused. "but then why don't you tell them?"

"They wouldn't believe me"

"You barely believe you. Because you can't see either."

She moved right to the edge of the room, until her nose almost touched the barrier between her and all that old light. Just pinpricks in the dark.

"You can only feel, blind and feeling is what you are. You don't know, so you want me to tell you what I see, what I know. Or maybe you do know, but you wish you didn't."

Silence settled over them again. Laura watched the stars and tried to imagine their planets, warmed by fresh light. She couldn't see anything but dust.

"And so I don't tell them." A star caught her eye, its frosted white light flickering, growing.

"Will it be fast?"

"No."

"Will it hurt?"

The single star stretched, fingers of light splayed like a starfish.

"No, nothing but your eyes, if you don't close them."

Laura became aware that she was no longer alone. She didn't turn but she knew that her coworker, and her dentist, and her mother were there. And others too, people she wouldn't be able to place or never knew. The observatory was once again full of people, faces turned to the glimmering membrane. Beyond it, the light was huge and brand new.

"I suppose it really doesn't matter," the sculpture said. A silver koi drifted to the top of

the dark water, scales pressing against the glass.

MR. LINDEN'S LIBRARY

Allison Campbell

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Danby Rush Tower
Middle School, Festus, MO
Educator: Morgan Grither

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

As Braxton comes in Bella's room, he looks mortified and screams, "Oh my god, Bella! What's happening?"

Bella and Braxton stand there, stunned at the events taking place in Bella's room. They have no idea what they can do to make this stop.

"I don't know! Go get mom and dad. Now!" Bella yells, terrified and confused. They had warned her about the book. Bella should have listened. Now it was too late.

Earlier that day...

Bella was the new girl in her town, and she was beyond terrified to start at her new school. Her family just moved into their new house, and they lived out in a field, far out from anyone else. Bella was starting her freshman year, and her little brother Braxton was starting 7th grade. She definitely did not think she would make any friends at this new school, but her brother

definitely would. Braxton is the type of kid who loved sports and playing outside; however, Bella is the exact opposite. She loved to read and hated playing sports. The only thing they have in common is that they love their dog. Marley, a chocolate lab, is Braxton and Bella's best friend.

Bella and her family had just moved in and got everything unpacked. They were all settled into their new house. Bella sat in her room reading a book when her mom walked in.

"Do you want to go to the library and check out some books?" Bella's mom asked.

Bella nodded her head. Her mom gave her some money just in case she needed to buy something.

Bella got out of her bed, grabbed her phone, and put on her shoes. She walked down the stairs and bent down to give Marley a kiss on her way out the door and said goodbye to her brother.

As she walked to the library, Bella saw a lot of abandoned and run-down buildings around town. She started to wonder what those buildings are and what used to happen in them. As Bella got closer to the library, she saw more creepy buildings and dark, frightening alleys. Once Bella got to the library, she looked around for some interesting books. After 10 minutes, Bella had three books and looked through one more shelf. She went to look at the last row on the shelf before going to the front desk. When she found a book that is about the town she is living in, Bella thought it was a good idea to read about it. She had no idea what would be in the book, but Bella was interested in it. Mr. Linden, the librarian, was sitting at the front desk and saw Bella holding the book. "I'm going to have to warn you. That book is dangerous," Mr. Linden said to Bella.

"I'm sure it's not as bad as you say," Bella

replied.

"Okay. Whatever you say, ma'am," Mr. Linden said as he checked out the book for Bella. He had a terrified look on his face, but Bella didn't seem to notice. She was happy she was getting new books.

As Bella started her walk home, a lot of weird things happened to her. People saw the book Bella was holding, and they stopped and stared. Parents kept their kids as far away from her as they could. Bella thought this was very weird, and people continued to do this her whole walk home. As soon as she got home, she told her parents what happened, but they didn't seem to care.

It was about 5:10 when Bella got home, and she started to read the first book. Bella finished the book in three hours.

Then, Bella decided she was going to read the book she had been warned about. She opened it up and instantly became scared. The first page was handwritten and it read, "You have probably been warned, but I will be warning you again. This book is filled with stories only psychopaths could think of. If you think you will be scared, I would close the book and throw it out. Now."

"This stupid note isn't gonna stop me from reading this book," Bella said with a chuckle.

As she read more, the book talked about all the people who died from mental illnesses and what they saw and felt. One entry from a man in 1956 described what he saw when he was living. It stated that he could feel the presence of ghosts at all times of the day and not once did he not feel the spirits with him. Another entry from a woman said that everywhere she went she saw zombies, and they followed her everywhere until she got home. Then, when she was inside, they would sit in her yard and waited for her to come back outside. Other entries described how people saw vampires, and one even said that someone died from a vampire

sucking all the person's blood out of their body. Bella instantly became terrified. Those were only a few of the stories.

"I wonder how much scarier these get," Bella thought. "All these people lived in this town?" She said quietly to herself.

The more she read, the more tired she got and soon fell asleep with the book laying by her side. Wide open.

Then, something bizarre started to happen. Vines started to grow out of the book and as Bella woke up things were being thrown around her room. She started to scream, thinking it would stop spinning, and in all the commotion, all the monsters described in the book started to come out! People held knives and chainsaws and axes. These weren't normal people. These were the scariest looking creatures Bella had ever seen. Bella was terrified at the events occurring in her room. She had no idea what to do!

As Braxton came in her room, he looked mortified and screamed, "Oh my god, Bella! What's happening?"

Bella and Braxton stood there, stunned at the events taking place in Bella's room. They had no idea what they could do to make this stop. More people were coming out of the book. With every person, Bella and Braxton became more and more terrified.

"I don't know! Go get mom and dad," Bella yelled, petrified and confused. They had warned her about the book. Bella should have listened. Now it was too late.

Braxton ran downstairs to get their parents and when they came up, they couldn't see the objects that were being thrown. They couldn't see the crazy monsters that were torturing Bella and her little brother in Bella's room.

"You kids have such crazy imaginations!" Bella

and Braxton's mom said through laughter.

"Mom, we aren't lying! This is real!" Bella yelled as the ghosts started to come to her.

Bella's parents laughed some more and walked out of her room. The monsters kept throwing things around, and Braxton ran out of her room.

"Braxton! Come back and help me!" Bella yelled as she ran after him.

Braxton kept running away, not listening to his big sister. Bella was terrified and had no idea why this was happening. She went back to her room, and all the monsters were sitting, waiting for her return. Then, Bella walked over and closed the book, but nothing happened. She had no idea what to do, because no one would believe her, and her brother is too terrified to help her get rid of these eerie monsters that were in her room.

These monsters continued to haunt Bella for the next few weeks. She was petrified by the events that have happened to her since she moved to this spine-chilling town. Her family still doesn't believe her. Braxton was afraid to go anywhere near Bella's room.

One night as Bella was lying in bed, the ghosts, zombies, and all other scary demons were sitting watching her. Bella's eyelids started to get heavy and soon she was fast asleep. The demons decided that tonight is the night. Bella dies tonight. They all surrounded her bed and were standing over her, watching her. They gave each other a blood-curdling, bone-chilling look.

They all stood there, watching over her for hours and hours. Bella's mom and dad came in to check on her and saw she was sleeping. Then, Braxton comes around the corner.

"Is she okay? What happened?" Braxton exclaimed, trying to run in her room.

"Son, stop. Your sister is trying to sleep. Leave her be," their father said, pulling Braxton away from Bella's room. When Braxton got away, he ran back to her room. When he got there and opened the door, he was terrified at the sight.

All the monsters watched Braxton come in and stop in fear. Braxton ran out to warn his parents and the ghosts heard them say there is nothing there and instantly became relieved. They continued with their actions to kill Bella.

Braxton ran to his parents. He tried to explain. They wouldn't listen to him. He was terrified! What would happen to her if they don't listen to him?

"Just listen to me! Please! Bella needs help!" He's screaming now. Once again, he was ignored. Braxton was hysterically crying. He just wanted to help his sister.

Braxton started to feel guilty. He should have helped Bella. Now, there was nothing he could do to save her. He slowly walked away from Bella's room crying, screaming, knowing what was going to happen.

The monsters stood around her even longer to make sure she did not wake up. They had to kill her tonight; it had to be tonight. Then, all of a sudden, one by one, they hit her with their axes. They cut her with their chainsaws. They wanted her to die an extensive, bitter death. There was blood going everywhere. Her fingers, toes, arms, and legs were hacked off! The monsters made sure that Bella would never wake up from this sleep.

After Bella was finally dead, the ghosts, zombies, vampires, and all other monsters opened the book back up. Everything that had flown around Bella's room flew back inside the book. And there, they wait. Waiting for the next

person who dared to open the book. Waiting to strike. Waiting to torture. Waiting to kill again.

MR. LINDEN'S LIBRARY

Eva Carrow

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Danby Rush Tower
Middle School, Festus, MO
Educator: Morgan Grither

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

October 31, 2017

Chloe Bliss was excited to go to school today for a change. She, as part of the newspaper club, gets to interview the teachers that were present when John attended school. Everyone has heard the stories of the Book; some are so far fetched it's laughable. There had been no credible leads in all these years. Chloe was interested only in the facts and eager to investigate the night John disappeared.

Class by class, Chloe automatically went through the motions of her day anticipating the bell for her last class. Her first interview would be with Mrs. Swyers. She was one of the few teachers left that was there that night. She entered her class, and Mrs. Swyers seemed nervous and uneasy. Chloe's questions were standard. "Had you seen John that day?" Chloe asked Mrs. Swyers.

Mrs. Swyers awkwardly smiled, tilting her head a bit to the right, she answered, "Of course I

did." Chloe ran down the list of questions and was left disappointed Mrs. Swyers gave no information that would indicate anything unusual.

She moved on to the next teacher, Mr. Hawks. He taught shop and only gave her a few head nods and grunts. He was not eager to help in her cause. Feeling disappointed once again, Chloe moved on to the last teacher, who was the librarian at the time. Mr. Linden was the last person to see John before his disappearance. Since then, he has become a hermit, almost never speaks to the students anymore. In his mid 60's, everyone had wondered why he has not retired yet and seems to get more bothered by the students presence in his library year after year. The years seem to have weighed him down like he's been carrying a heavy load of books for 30 years. She sat down hoping that she would finally get some answers. Mr. Linden looked at her with eyes that were so grateful it startled her. Before Chloe could begin her list of questions, Mr. Linden began speaking.

"John was always in the library back then. I would have to force him to go home at the end of the day, and he never would go easily. John had read almost every book we had. He was always the first to check out the newest books and would bring them back sometimes the same day to get more. I have to admit, I enjoyed his enthusiasm for a good story and tried to help him find new, challenging stories to keep him interested. I would go to book sales on the weekends with John in mind hoping to keep him excited about reading." Mr. Linden had a look of sadness and was obviously defeated as he told his story. Chloe kept quiet, not wanting to interrupt Mr. Linden, as this has been the most he has said to anyone that Chloe knew about.

It was Halloween, and all the kids were rushing

home to put on their costumes and have the usual fun, but John was still here with his nose in a book. He didn't seem to care about candy or costumes or trick or treating. I joked with him that he must go, that the school was closing the doors, and he would be stuck here all night.

"After a bit, John left, and I continued to work. The library was dark, and I only had one lamp on my desk. I heard the door open, and John came through. I asked John why he came back or if he forgot something. John had a distant look on his face as he walked to the back of the library. He wouldn't even look at me. He picked up a book; it was a huge book, completely unlike his type. He liked more short stories but this book was about 1,000 pages, and nobody had ever checked it out before. I had picked it up at a book sale the weekend before. This seemed very odd, but John loved books, and I thought he was trying something different."

"John walked up to my desk like it was any other day and asked to check the book out. I told John that he already had five books checked out and should bring one of those back first. John went to the table and sat down to read it."

Chloe had heard the stories about the Book. She had laughed at the kids who believed these stories. They had warned her about the Book, and now it was too late as she got an uneasy feeling that this was not what she bargained for.

Mr. Linden continued to tell his story like Chloe wasn't there. Chloe started to feel very uncomfortable as he became more detached while talking. "John just wouldn't listen to what I was saying. I kept telling him it's time to go home; I just kept saying it over and over. John wouldn't go. I was trying to warn him!"

Chloe notices Mr. Linden was clutching a book in his lap. It was a thick, leather-bound book like you would see in a Harry Potter movie. Mr. Linden kept looking out the window nervously. The sun was setting and the sky had that pinkish glow that it gets right before the sun goes down. Not wanting Mr. Linden to stop telling his story, she pressed on.

Mr. Linden looked to have aged 20 years in 10 minutes. Frantically saying, "I tried to warn him!" over and over all the while sobbing. Chloe not knowing what to do, reached out to steady Mr. Linden and grabbed the book. He looked shocked and scared and tried to grab it back, knocking it out of her hands. This caused the book to fly into the air and land on them with a loud thud and open face up.

Mr. Linden looked nervous. They both just stood suddenly still, staring at each other. Mr. Linden let out a horrific scream and turned to run. He growled, "Get out of my library!" Chloe couldn't move. She stood in terrified shock as she saw Mr. Linden appear to start to shed his skin and a demon stood where he was. The monster was looming over her growling and snarling his long pointed teeth at Chloe. Chloe finally found her legs and turned to run away.

November 1, 2017.

Mrs. Swyers walked into the school and saw police questioning Mr. Linden. Everyone was asking where Chloe was.

DEAD SAND

Porter Schoen

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Platte City Middle School, Platte City, MO
Educator: Laura Hoefling

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

The following is from the field journal of Captain L. D. Ablo, recovered from his person after his death to enemy action. The journal currently resides in the New French War Institute.

October 5

The dust storm is coming. We can see it behind us on the horizon, slowly rolling closer. My party had been in the desert for three days, trying to get back to base camp before it overtook us. A windy desert plain was no place to wait out something like this. Tiny, abrasive granules could get in everything. The engines of our Humvees would seize up, and we would have to wait for rescue. The chances of that would be slim, due to the fact that our radio equipment is fragile. Water and gas are running short, and the storm will be on us in a few days.

We are a scouting party sent to the Wasteland by the Republic of Amerika, to investigate signs of possible habitation. Nothing was supposed to live out here for long, and the Republic is nearly all-encompassing. We started out as a party of forty. Ten people were left on a remote spot to set up a base camp and send a signal to headquarters.

Commander Kavenko leads us through a narrow valley. Not physically imposing, he is short and wiry, and has the **FEELING** of occupying space. No one knows where he came from, he just showed up and took command of our unit. He always picks out routes for our vehicles so they don't get bogged down in the sand.

Our equipment is beat up and rusted, due to the amount of care we can give our weapons.

Many of us are carrying older AK-74s. We are mounted on vehicles of all sorts, mainly pre-War jeeps and Russian BMPs- armored, tracked transports from the 1980's. They loom like dinosaurs in the desert, their green paint contrasting sharply against the sand. My driver laughs grimly. Klaus, a pudgy man who barely fits into his uniform, has always had an interesting sense of humor.

"If there's anyone in this general area, they'll certainly spot us. We might as well be sending up a flare." he apprehensively states as we stop for a moment. He's right, of course. There must be massive dust clouds following our column everywhere. I shrug, unwilling to shout over the noise of the engine. My helmet microphone has been broken for ages.

I will never know how I was assigned to a motorized infantry division. My height won't help me getting out of a vehicle if there's an attack. If I get stuck, everyone behind me also gets stuck, and we will all be killed if the vehicle explodes. I have grown my already thick beard out, but now I regret it as it bunches up inside my balaclava, providing extra insulation that I really don't need in the sweltering temperatures.

We decide to spend the night on a small knoll, with the vehicles circled up around our temporary camp like American cowboys defending from natives. I take my sidearm and shoot several desert gophers. We cook them on spits and sit around the campfire, making small talk and eating little fuzzy things. According to Ivan, who was born in Ukraine and sits next to me in the BMP, it 'tastes like chicken'.

"How would you know?" I ask, "You've never even had chicken."

It's true. None of us have ever had chicken. Or beef, or pork, or rice. Many animals and plants died out completely after the radiation that created the Wasteland spread over the world. Either they couldn't take the stress of living in bunkers, eating the 'fake' substitute food, or they were left behind. All the plants our great-grandparents had found when they came

above ground for the first time in fifty years had mutated, but many were still edible.

"Just a guess."

"Stop guessing. You're making me hungry again," I say.

We settle down for the night. I wake up sometime after midnight to hear soft rustling coming from the center of camp. I unzip the flap of my four-man tent and look around. Nothing moves. Klaus pulls me away from the flap and zips it back up. "Some of us are trying to sleep in here," he complains, "You don't want your driver to kick you out of the car, ja?"

October 6

We pack up and set out early this morning, with Kavenko leading the column on foot as usual. Suddenly, there's an explosion near the end of the column. I can smell the acrid smoke of gunpowder, even over the stench of the sputtering transmission and sweaty men. "Scheisse! RPG!" someone shouts, and then we're all bailing out. Immediately, I'm looking for the threat. This is what I trained for, in boot camp. Some of the men are deploying bipods, others are trying to burrow into the sand like the gophers we ate the day before.

On the hill, a lone man can be seen holding a reinforced metal tube. Dressed in desert fatigues under a ghillie suit, he blends in almost perfectly. As he stands up to reload the rocket launcher, the Humvees to my left open fire with their Browning .50 caliber machine guns. The man lurches, falls, and a group from my transport rushes him. I see him reach into a pocket, and pull the pin on something circular and green. "Down!" I scream, "Everyone get down!" Before the grenade explodes the man says one thing:

"Vive la nouvelle France!"

LONG LIVE NEW FRANCE, I have time to think, and then the grenade goes off. Three of my men are hit by shrapnel, though none badly. As the medics see to them, I wander over to Kavenko, standing on a dune. He seems lost. This is new to me.

"Never fought in a desert before," he explains

"That lunatic came out of nowhere."

"Apparently, someone's living here," I observe.

"But calling it New France? That seems interesting."

"I think our army missed a spot."

He wanders off to get casualty reports from the rest of the squad leaders. From what I see, one BMP has shed a track and another's burning. They're not going anywhere soon. Perhaps we can request replacements when we get to Base Camp. Klaus is sitting in the transport with his head hanging out of the hatch.

"What happened?" he asks wearily.

"We were attacked." I fill him in. He would have come running, but it might be considered deserting by some, an offense punishable by firing squad.

"Scheisse," he says, "D'you think it was just the one? No one's supposed to be able to survive out here! It's too hostile!"

"You're right. No one's **SUPPOSED** to be able to."

Kavenko comes along the line, shouting orders.

"Button up," he tells Klaus, "We're moving. About two hundred more miles until camp." Then he's off, taking up the lead, searching for mines and other ambushes. He's tenser now, and so is everyone else. I can see it in the way the men jump at the sound of a rock being crushed, or something hitting the armored hull.

The column must stop four times and wait for the route to be cleared of improvised explosives and debris. Mostly this is an annoyance, as they are easy to spot, but there are many of them and it tires the men. Every time we are called forward, we groan and curse, knowing it means more labor in the hot, dry outdoors. It's hot inside the car too, but at least there's a place to sit. Every time I get out, I look behind us and the dust storm is closer.

THIS IS TAKING TOO MUCH TIME, I think. WE NEED TO GO FASTER. This knowledge is written on the faces of the people. That thing is as

inevitable as death, and it **WILL** be death if we are caught in it. That fact keeps us going. We are thirsty, but the water is being rationed. There was a suspicious leak found in three of our jugs that had developed during the night, and they were completely empty by morning. Ivan said it looked like they had been stabbed. I have a hunch that those were the noises I heard. Finally, we make it to the camp. Something is wrong, though. Some sandbags look hastily thrown, as if the former occupants had to erect defenses quickly and hadn't had time to do it properly. There was blood everywhere, though it looked as if someone had tried to wipe it off or cover it up. We saw a hand peeking out from under a tarp.

"Go check it out," Kavenko ordered two soldiers. We hear their exclamations of surprise and know what happened immediately. There's a body under there. I jog over to take a look. "Looks like it came to a melee," I tell them, "The body has several bullet wounds, but ultimately the knives were fatal." It was true. The body still had several makeshift blades sticking up out of it.

The base is arranged circularly around the headquarters, in this case just a hole with a tarp forming walls and a roof. From there radiate several trench lines, connected to the headquarters by eight 'spoke' trenches. If enemies breach the spokes, they can go straight for the HQ, but it's easier for us to counterattack. In all of these trenches, we found bodies, both ours and theirs.

The last two of the ten-man stay-behind unit were found in the central pit. Around them were the bodies of men in assorted desert camouflage with a mix of civilian and military weapons. "Clear the base of the dead," Kavenko ordered sternly, "Strip the guns and toss those over, too. Someone needs to check on the radio equipment. Call for evac."

We all knew that evac may not come in time. All we could do is wait and hope. Hope that the people out there didn't counter-attack. Hope was all we had, and we were going to milk it for

all it was worth.

October 7

Nothing happened. We have set to planting mines, strengthening out emplacements, stringing barbed wire, and setting perimeter charges to blow the place sky-high if we are overrun. About a quarter of the men have dug spider holes outside of the perimeter. We will defend this place to the last man.

I have been assigned to a machine gun, and so have a better dugout than the other riflemen. Because the machine-gun is more valuable and can wreak havoc if the enemy captures it, we also have more C4 charges in my pit, and I have it wired to a detonator in my pocket. Klaus is my assistant, as the vehicles have been stripped and left in the desert. He looks doubtful that the World War II-vintage weapon will even work. "If this thing jams, we'll be in it waist-deep," he says.

"We'll be fine!" I say, with a little too much force to be convincing.

The 20-millimeter cannons are still mounted to the BMPs, which are dug in just outside the perimeter. They are our heaviest firepower, but they, too are fairly old. Every weapon here has a great possibility of suddenly becoming useless. Any number of things can happen in the second or two it takes to clear a blockage and chamber a new round.

Kavenko sidles nonchalantly over to our dugout. "Good news, everyone!" he says, sounding like the Professor from Futurama, "Evac should be here tomorrow morning. Be ready to go, because we are going to have to haul it."

Three days. That's how long it will have been since we first saw the storm. It's still there, on the horizon. Tomorrow, it will be on us. Tonight, I will pray. So should everyone else. If there is some sort of God, some ethereal entity up in the sky, we are going to need whatever help they can give.

Below is an excerpt from the after-action report of Commander Kavenko, concerning October 8th.

... AT 0600 HOURS, VISIBILITY WAS LOW DUE TO THE DUST STORM ON THE HORIZON. THE FULL EFFECTS OF THE STORM WERE EXPECTED TO BE FELT AT 1200 HOURS. THE RESCUE HELICOPTERS WERE EXPECTED AT AROUND THE SAME TIME. EVERYONE WAS AT BATTLE STATIONS.

AT 0800 HOURS, MOVEMENT WAS SIGHTED 2 MILES BEYOND THE PERIMETER. THERE WERE SEVERAL LARGE EXPLOSIONS, ATTRIBUTED TO HOSTILES TRIGGERING MINES. THE BMPS WERE ORDERED TO FIRE SEVERAL SHOTS IN THAT DIRECTION, TO NO EFFECT. AT 0810, MORE EXPLOSIONS WERE HEARD AND DELTA 2, AN APC EMLACED ABOUT 1.5 MILES NORTH OF OUR POSITION, REPORTED HOSTILES. WHEN ASKED TO GIVE A ROUGH HEAD COUNT, HE REPLIED "TOO MANY." THIS WAS THE LAST TRANSMISSION REPORTED FROM DELTA 2. SHOTS AND MORE EXPLOSIONS WERE HEARD, ONE DISTINCTLY DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHERS, DETERMINED TO BE MEDIUM-CALIBER SHELLS EXPLODING IN QUICK SUCCESSION. DELTA 2 IS SUSPECTED KIA. AT 0900 HOURS, A SNIPER REPORTED SEEING A LARGE PARTY OF ARMED HOSTILES ABOUT 1 MILE TO THE NORTH. THEY CONTINUED ADVANCING TOWARD US. THE ORDER WAS GIVEN TO FIRE WHEN IN RANGE. THE ENEMY CLOSED THE DISTANCE TO ¼ OF A MILE AND OPENED FIRE AT 0945 WITH MORTARS AND ARTILLERY. WE RETURNED FIRE, WITH FEW CONFIRMED HITS. HOSTILES CONTINUED TO POUND US WITH ROCKET-PROPELLED GRENADES AND MORTARS. DURING THIS TIME, WE LOST 6 MEN AND HAD A NUMBER OF LIGHT WOUNDED. THE BOMBARDMENT PERIOD LASTED ABOUT 10 MINUTES.

HOSTILES CLOSED TO ABOUT 50 YARDS AND OPENED UP WITH SMALL ARMS. OUR MACHINE GUN EMLACEMENTS WREAKED HAVOC, BUT THEY WERE TARGETED FIRST AND SOON FELL. THE LAST TO FALL WAS CPT. ABLO'S POSITION, AT 1010. IT WAS BAYONET CHARGED AND QUICKLY OVERRUN BY HOSTILES. ABLO MANAGED TO DESTROY HIS POSITION, TAKING 30-40 HOSTILES WITH HIM. SEVERAL REPUBLIC

COMBAT AND TRANSPORT HELICOPTERS WERE REPORTED AT THIS TIME. BY THIS POINT, THE COMBAT WAS HAND-TO HAND WITH ABOUT 7 TROOPS REMAINING. WE WITHDREW TO THE HELIPAD AND SENT UP A FLARE. SIX SOLDIERS WERE SUCCESSFULLY EVACUATED, WITH THE SEVENTH BLEEDING OUT IN THE HELICOPTER. THE MASSIVE SANDY WIND ANOMALY HAD MOVED QUICKLY, AND COMPLETELY ENGULFED THE CAMP BEHIND THE HELICOPTER...

Though the Republic's government attempted to keep the incident quiet, it was soon leaked to the press by individuals unknown. The Republic, already made unstable by its failing economy and social unrest, quickly crumbled into multiple factions. During this time, the political entity encountered in the desert known as 'New France' made itself known to the world, as well as its hostile intentions. Immediately, alliances were forged and the world went to war. It was ended when New France and its allies created a superweapon, an Orbital Nuclear Laser Delivery System (ONLDS). This weapon destroyed two cities utterly, leaving the ground there uninhabitable for generations. The French Coalition then called for a ceasefire, and the immediate surrender of all hostiles. Reluctantly, the other side agreed. This brings our story to a close.

THE CURSE OF LIFE

Alecia Taylor

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Sumner Academy Of Arts & Science, Kansas City, KS

Educator: Mark Hennessey

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

I remember the life I lived before like it was yesterday. Although I wasn't free I wasn't physically running away. Now I'm physically and mentally running away from my past. Before I killed them all, Mama told me to do IT. To use IT. I knew it was serious because Mama always told me never show them my magic for it will be the death of us all.

When I was little, my favorite thing in the whole world was when all the slaves would sneak out at night. We'd all go to a nearby stream and just sit down, sing songs, dance, laugh and joke freely without the chores of the white men. Of course we'd have to be quiet, making sure no one heard us. The gathering was not just slaves from one plantation. Slaves from close by would come and enjoy the taste of freedom. Neighboring slaves would travel to the stream to join, risking their lives just for this, just to enjoy life even if it was for an hour or so. I loved it all. Little ole me just could never wait for nightfall. This was the only time I was allowed to practice "my gift" without upsetting my mama. I'd close my eyes super tight and conjure up that inner tingly feel that brought me comfort and excitement. I'd hum a sweet tone, and then I'd feel a rush of energy surging through my veins. The energy would tingle every inch of my body, head to toe with a sensational feeling that's indescribable. Every hair would stand straight up, as the magic poured from my fingertips and into the air. My magic made me one with everything around me. The magic was like a rechargeable extension from my soul. I could touch and manipulate anything without even moving a muscle. The earth would obey my unspoken commands like an obedient slave, here to serve my needs willingly. If I wanted the water to move, it moved. I always would start by

moving the stream. The current would quicken, echoing the pounding beat of my heart. As the current quickened, I'd command it to rise as high as I want. I'd reach my hand and move it slowly from side to side. The water would follow my hands like there were invisible strings attached, but the only string was the manipulation from my magic to the water. "Hey Dalila!" The other slaves would call, "Why don't you give us a little show." These Shows? This is what I lived for, with all eyes on me and the praise I'd receive for performing effortless shows. I'd giggle and pretend like I didn't know if I had the strength. After all the calls of encouragements, I'd pretend like they really boosted my confidence but in reality, I knew I could do it all along. I'd close my eyes and take in a long, deep breath. Then, I'd snap my fingers. The fire would blaze alive in mid air, one on each side of the stream. Next, comes the water. I'd raise my palms to the sky and I'd feel that breeze you get when you're close by moving water. The chills always excited the source of my power causing me to go to the next level of power, the winds. You'd think that the winds would knock down the water or blow the fire out, but I had it under control. My body told it not to interfere with my other substances, so it didn't. I'd hold these in position for a while. Standing there, eyes closed, palms raised and humming, continuing to increase the show playing around me. I didn't have to have my eyes open to see the shock on the slaves' face. After all, I've done this many times before. Slowly, I'd open my eyes. I'd be in the eye of my own hurricane. Fire blazing bright, water raised in mid air, and the cold wind swirling around it's creator, me. The winds would pick me up swiftly off my feet, and like air I'd rise. With a drop of my hands, the water drops with a loud splash, the fire would disappear and the winds would unwind. I'd feel my feet land back on the Earth. My eyes would snap open, and

there'd be no trace of what took place seconds before. I'd turn to my audience and give a deep, whole hearted curtsy as they cheered and complimented me and my power.

"Thank you, thank you!" I teased, soaking in all this appreciation, all this love. Once I left that place, there was no love. Only hatred. Of course, outside of our gatherings, I wasn't allowed to use magic. Mama insisted that I keep it under wraps and only use it when she says so. But being the little girl I was, I'd ALWAYS, used my magic. When we'd go out into the field to pick our cotton, I'd pick 3 times as much as everyone else. I'm sure the masters noticed but they could never figure how I did it. But one day, they saw something. I was in the fields picking cotton from its truff. It was a blazing hot summer day and I just wanted to get done faster. I wanted to end the pain of the constant little pricking. So I did what anyone with my powers would do, I used my magic.

"Rise to the sun, rise to my lord, free me from the suffering so my work would be done." I chant through gritted teeth. I attempted to hide my chanting but obviously not well. I motioned for the cotton to rise, and like any other time, my powers did not fail me. The cotton shook and wiggled but it rose from the truff and into my hand. Smiling to myself, I did it again, and again, and again. I just knew no one was looking, but I was wrong. One of the other slaves went to go tell our master, and he brought some of the other masters along with him. They'd watched me from a little ways away in the fields.

"WITCH! She's a demon, a spawn of satan!" One of them called. My head snapped towards his direction as I dropped my bag full of cotton. I hiked up my cloth dress and began to run, but my steps were nothing compared to theirs. I was caught almost immediately. A tingling sensation ran all throughout my body as I kicked and screamed willing my powers to

reveal themselves.

“GET OFF OF ME!” I cried while a strong man carried me through the field. That strong man was Dale, one of the people who owned me. My eyes were closed shut as I tried to fight the man to let me down. But his arms were wrapped around my waist like chains, preventing me to move. I lashed back at my captor and hit him in his face. He let out a groan and his grip barely loosened.

“You little ONYX !” He spat through gritted teeth before slapping me. I let out a scream and fought harder. Then it happened, the earth who I thought abandoned me seemed to come to life. The wind blew visibly and the world around us darkened. The dark storm clouds hovered above blocking out the blazing light from the sun. All of a sudden, a harsh wind blew through the fields shaking the tall grass and crops. My breath started to pick up. I could hear the blood rushing through my ears, my heart pumping furiously and the familiar buzz all at once.

“DALILA!” Someone screamed from ahead. The voice sounded like my mama, but I could no longer see for the winds started blowing branches, cotton and trash all around. The man’s death grip on me didn’t help either. Everytime I strained to see what who called my name, his grip would tighten. Now, it cut off my breathing with his rock hard muscled arms. “MAMA?” I shouted over the winds, seeking for indication that it was my mom. Here to rescue me from the white men we always feared. If anybody could save me from this, it was her. Sure enough, her figure pushed through the field, the wind blowing her dress back. When she saw me in this monster’s arms, she broke into a sprint towards me. She didn’t get to far because another white man came into view and snatched her by her ponytail. She let out a yelp filled with pain and fear.

“STOP IT!” I pleaded to the man with my mama. But all he did was smile and tighten his grip around her hair, yanking her neck towards

him. I thought my mama, my brave my mama, would fight back like she always told me to. But she didn’t. She didn’t say one word or even protest. All she did was yelp. She didn’t plead him to stop and he didn’t. “PLEASE!” I cried out. “She’s getting hanged,” He shouted to me, “Just. Like. You.”

Like mine, Mama’s eyes widened with fear and she began to shake her head in his tight grip from her hair. I couldn’t make out anything she was saying, but it looks like she was repeating “No, No, No,” over and over again. Then she mouthed to me, DO IT. Her facial expression told me to end them all, use my powers like I’ve never done before. And I was more than happy to, but I needed to be careful because my mother’s life was literally in this white man’s hands. The man began to drag her towards me, his fist is filled with her thick brown hair as he resist the strong wind pushing him back. “If you don’t let go of my mama,” I warned him, “So help me God, I will RUIN you!” I no longer fought the man holding. Instead, I lay against his chest with hot tears rolling down my face. His grip was not as suffocating as it once was, but I didn’t even notice, my attention was all on the approaching man with my mama. “You ought to call for him, alright,” He says with a sinister grin. The next few seconds were the worst seconds of my life. They were the last seconds my mother had on this Earth. I’d always thought her last would be spent with me holding her hand as she passed away, peacefully in her sleep. I’d never thought her death would be because of me, because of my threats.

The man stopped about 20 feet away and pressed Mama against him. For a second I’d thought he’d rip down her pants or caress her cheek just to anger me. Instead, he does something worse. Something that haunts me in my nightmares to this day. He snaps her neck in one swift motion. So swift that I barely have to break free from my captor.

“NOOOOO!” I scream as her body falls lifelessly

on the ground. Her eyes still open and staring obliviously to the sky. I drop from the man's arms. My knees hit the hard ground but the adrenaline doesn't allow me to feel physical pain right now. The only thing I feel is sadness, pain, anger and grief all at once.

My cries began to call on something I've never done before. I've called on to the air, but never to weather. That was beyond my abilities, or so I thought. As I rise to my feet, small rain drops fall on my face and hair. At first I think it has nothing to do with me, but as I advance toward my mother's murder, my tears come fast, and the rain becomes heavier. They're no longer droplets but an endless shower of water washing away all my sadness and grief replacing it with the power of revenge.

My eyes are trained on him and I feel like a bull zoning in on it's target. My finger stretch out at my sides as if to stretch for the upcoming foreign power. The man tried to hide his fear, but I can hear, no, FEEL his heart beating. His fear grew with each one of steps. His fear is fueled my power, fueled the energy of the storm coming his way. The sky lit up with blinding lightning and his head snapped to gape at them in awe.

I stop barely 3 feet away from him and fight the urge to look down at my mother's lifeless body. My hands rise like they always do, and the wind becomes so strong, it makes a visible cyclone around us, moving everything but him, my mama's body and me. He tried to back away, but a fire appears from thin air behind him and he staggers forward.

I focus my mind on the heat of the fire, burning and blazing hot against my skin. I close my eyes and invision me standing inside the fire, untouched and unharmed by it, but simply becoming the fire. The beautiful and dangerous fire burning bright in the darkened world. I snap my eyes open and sure enough, I'm standing in shelter of blazing red and yellow flames. I walk forward towards my prey

and this time he doesn't move. Instead, he's paralyzed with fear and wickedly enough, this excites me and the fire grows bigger and wider. I'm in his face now, but he's not in the fire with me. We're so close that his skin is turning red from the heat. His eyebrows are raised and his eyes are squinted like they can protect him from the blazing heat, but nothing can help him from what's about to come next. I reach my hands out and place one on the top of his head, and the other on his chin. He let out an ear piercing sound between a scream and a cry. My hands were glowing red against his skin like coals on fire. I pressed my hands harder on his skin making sure I left my mark on his body. Then I twisted my hands, hard to one side ending the screaming and crying. Ending his life like he did my mother's, swiftly, quick and meaningless. Unlike my mother's death, his was not as quick for I wanted him to feel the anger I felt through my coal like hands.

His body dropped lifelessly next to my mother's corpse. My hand prints welled up where I snapped his neck. Big and puffy, red against his pale, lifeless skin.

As I stood over his body, I let tears fall down my cheeks thinking of life without my mother. My mother who taught me how to control my magic, whose laughter brought me joy, who was always there for me. But now I have nobody and nothing but my powers. My powers which I am bonded with for life.

I gazed down at my mother's body, her eyes still open staring blankly at the sky. I took in a deep breath to gather my thoughts and calm my anger so I could gain control back over my powers. The fire around me dies down, and the rain stops immediately. The winds slow and quiet down with quiet whistles, but they never stop completely. I bend down and caress my mother's cheek the way she did when I lay sick in bed. I kiss her forehead the way she would do to every night. Then I close her eyes. I rise to my feet and take a few step back and the

wind takes over with a mind of its own. It raises my mother's body, her arms hanging purposelessly. She continued to rise, pass the treeline, towards the sea. When I close my eyes, I see her body still floating over the Earth. I see her body finally catching the waves of the sea, sinking down to the bottom to her final resting place. This image keeps me sane at night. It reminds me that my gift is no gift, despite whatever Mama said. This dark spell that I have been gifted is my curse of life.

MAIDEN OF THE SUNRISE

Amanda Vasquez

Age: 15, Grade: 10

Home School, Carthage, MO

Educator: Bobbie Vasquez

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

The Maiden of the Sunrise

"Girls, it's the first day of spring, let's enjoy it," I said letting my nieces play in the park.

I set out our picnic blanket and the basket of food. My sister and brother-in-law had asked me to watch their kids while they had a much needed afternoon out. I watched as the three girls pretended they were princesses being chased by a dragon or something and it brought back fond memories of when their mother and I would play.

"Time for lunch girls," I called when they looked worn out.

"Yay! Lunch!" cried Lizzie, the youngest, as she

ran over. Karen and Bea, the twins, took their time coming over, stopping to look at flowers or bugs.

"Hurry up, I'm hungry!" Lizzie wailed flopping back on the blanket. Once we were all seated, I handed out the sandwiches and cups of lemonade.

"Aunt Felicity, tell us a story," Karen said.

"What story do you want me to tell you?" I asked.

"One you haven't told us before," Bea said excitedly.

"Let me see, I don't think there's one that I haven't already told you," I said, tapping my finger on my chin.

"Aw, Aunt Felicity, you must have a story," Lizzie said, tugging on my sleeve.

"Hmm, I think I just might have one more. My aunt told it to me when I was young, but I think I remember it," I said, "It's called the Maiden of the Sunrise."

Along time ago, there was a young woman who loved the sun, her name was Diana. She spent all the time she could outside, washing clothes, gathering berries, swimming, and other things.

The Sun became enamored with her. He made sure that no clouds blocked his rays from shining on her. The Moon became aware of the Sun's feelings for the human, but thought it would pass. The Sun began taking a human form and visiting her in the evenings, leaving his most trusted servant in charge. The Moon didn't notice at first, but one day the Sun started leaving his servant in charge in the daytime too. During one sunset the Moon came to talk to the Sun, hoping to bring him back to his senses.

"Sun, you know you can never be with that woman. Only you can give light strong enough and warm enough to keep things in balance. Or have you forgotten your promise to my brother, your best friend?" the Moon asked with an edge in his voice.

"I have not forgotten my promise to your

brother, his dying wish was that I would take his place as the Sun until I die, and I will keep that promise," the Sun said with determination. The Moon thought that everything would go back to normal, and it did for a little, but two weeks later the Sun married the woman. The Moon was furious, the Sun broke his promise to his best friend. It was obvious that the servant could not take his master's place. The Moon would not only have to light up the night, but the daytime also.

The Moon was angry at how much the woman praised the Sun, not even knowing that he broke a promise to a dead friend. He wanted to get revenge on both of them. One night, he stepped down from the heavens to go see them, knowing exactly how he was going to take his revenge. The Moon knocked on their door, but didn't wait for anyone to answer, he just walked in. He stood by the door and waited until they came out, groggy from sleeping.

"So this is the lovely woman who captured your heart and made you break your promise," the Moon said stepping close to her. "Stay away from her," the Sun said, stepping in between his wife and the Moon.

"Who is this?" Diana asked.

"I'm the Moon of course," the Moon said.

Diana gasped and clutched her husband's arm, knowing full well what that meant.

"I thought you said he would leave us be," she whispered.

"I will leave you alone, on one condition," the Moon said.

"Anything," the Sun said.

"One of your children shall take your place as the Sun, willingly. If the child does not, then you will have to be the Sun again," the Moon said. With that, the Moon left, knowing that he would be the Sun again.

A year later, the Sun and Diana had their first child, a daughter whom they named Luna. A year after that, they had another daughter whom they named Fennel. Of course a year

later, they had their last daughter whom they named Rose.

The girls all had golden hair that glittered in the sunshine like their father's, but their eyes were all different colors. Luna had green eyes, like her mother's. Fennel had blue eyes, like her father's. And Rose had grey eyes like no one in the family. As Luna grew up, she became aware of how she was treated compared to her sisters. Her parents spent most of their time with Fennel and Rose, and treated her like a stranger. When Luna was thirteen, her father took her out to their garden and told her that the Moon was going to come and take her up to be the Sun.

"But why do I have to be the Sun? Why can't one of my sisters be the Sun?" Luna asked.

"I was the Sun before, and the Moon has said that one of my children shall take my place," her father said.

Luna was dismissed and took a walk in the lavender field, thinking that her sisters would be told the same thing.

As the sun set, a man walked down from the moon in a cloud of mist to stand in front of her. His hair was long and looked like liquid silver, his eyes were like storm clouds, and his robes the color of the sky at midnight.

"Who are you?" Luna asked in fear, already knowing who it was.

"I am the Moon," the Moon said, "but don't worry, I'm not here to take you yet."

"Then why are you here?" Luna asked.

"Merely to answer some questions," the Moon said. "Like what?" Luna asked.

"Well for instance, your father isn't going to tell your sisters," the Moon said.

"Why not?" Luna asked, but it suddenly came to her.

She remembered the words her father had used, "the Moon has said that one of my children shall take my place," and realized that her parents had picked her from the moment she was born. Her name was Luna as a reminder of the Moon's demand. They

neglected her because they had known what they had chosen her to do.

"What happens if I don't become the Sun?" she asked.

"Your father will become the Sun again," the Moon said.

"I don't understand," Luna said.

"The only reason you'll be the Sun is because your father doesn't want to, even though he made a promise to my brother, he wants to stay with his family. Excluding you of course," the Moon spat.

"What!" Luna cried, stumbling back.

"Don't get too attached to anyone," the Moon said, and with that he was gone. Luna fell to her knees, this was all too much for her. "Luna! Luna!" Rose and Fennel called. They ran over to their sister and crouched beside her.

"Are you okay?" Rose asked when Luna didn't respond, "We heard what father told you."

"Leave me alone!" Luna yelled smacking their hands away, "Stop pretending like you care! You're just glad that father didn't pick you!"

Luna ran off into the woods and didn't return until two days later. When she came back there was something different about her. She smiled more than she ever had, but she was bitter and angry.

"Are you okay Luna?" Rose asked the morning Luna returned.

"I'm better than ever," Luna said, honey dripping from every word. Luna separated herself from everyone and lived in a small hut in the forest when she turned fifteen (her idea). Rose came to visit her everyday, bringing bread rolls and other pastry.

"When you grow up, what do you plan on doing?" Luna asked one day as they sat watching the sunset.

"I haven't given it much thought," Rose admitted.

"Of course, you're young still," Luna said, "I would've had my own flower shop, but that's not going to happen."

"Sorry," Rose said, "Would you have gotten

married and had kids?"

"Probably, there was a boy I liked, but that was several years ago," Luna said.

"Are you scared? I mean, that Moon could come for you any day," Rose said.

"No, I'm ready any day," Luna spat, "but this doesn't concern you, now does it?"

Rose felt sorry for her sister as she headed home that night, she also felt sorry for the Moon. It wasn't right for her father to leave his work for the Moon to take care of, then leave Luna to pay for it, but she also knew that her father loved her mother dearly. Most of all, she wished Luna had a chance to experience life without fear and hatred.

Three years later, on Luna's eighteenth birthday, the Moon came for the new Sun. The whole family gathered in the field before sunrise, somehow knowing that it was time. The Moon came down in a chariot of starlight, pulled by a horse of midnight with blazing white eyes. "I see you've all been waiting for me," the Moon chuckled.

"I never imagined the Moon would be so beautiful," Rose gasped.

"Oh, well. . . thank you," the Moon said, completely caught off guard. Rose nodded eyes full of awe.

"Who will take your place, Sun?" the Moon asked, "Or have you changed your mind?"

Luna waited, hoping her father had changed his mind, but he remained silent.

"Then I believe it's Luna who has been born for this very purpose," the Moon said, "but is she willing?"

Luna took a step forward, eyes burning with hatred, "I will NEV-"

"I will take my father's place as the Sun."

Everyone turned around in shock and stared at the speaker, Rose.

"What did you say?" the Moon asked.

"I will be the Sun," Rose said, stepping forward. Luna sank to her knees, sobbing tears of joy and regret, realizing Rose had always meant to do this. That was why she had never made

plans for her life.

"Rose you can't, you weren't born for this," her mother cried.

"Neither was Luna," Rose said softly, "but this is my decision."

"Why would you do this, your father was willing to give up your sister," the Moon said intrigued.

"Father has a life here and Luna deserves a life here," Rose said, "she deserves to love and to be loved."

The Moon was amazed at what love Rose held for her family, "And what about you?"

"You'll be up there with me, right?" Rose asked. The Moon nodded, "Now it's time to say good-bye, the Sun will rise soon."

Rose nodded and said good-bye to her parents and Fennel, hugging each of them in a tight embrace.

Then she knelt down beside Luna and they hugged each other for several minutes.

"How can I live knowing that you sacrificed your life here for me?" Luna asked tearfully.

"I'm happy knowing that you get a chance, besides I can come and visit you sometimes, right?" Rose asked, looking over her shoulder at the Moon. He nodded, realizing it would be hard to tell her no about anything she asked for. Rose smiled wiping away some tears.

"He seems like a nice guy anyways," she whispered to Luna.

Luna nodded, saying at last, "Thankyou." As the Moon led her up in the sky, Rose looked back once more.

"My heart will warm the earth every day with the love I have for all of you," Rose said, and with that, they were gone.

They stood in the field watching as the Sun rose and warmed their faces. Luna lived every day with a grateful heart for what her sister had done. A couple years later the Moon and Rose got married on earth so all her family could be there.

I smiled as I got to my favorite part, "And they

lived happily ever after."

The End

THE INCIDENT

Aanjaneyaa Venkataraman

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: David Doherty

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

An hour ago:

Edwin sits at the counter of his favorite diner, his fingers tapping the table. Checking the clock, Edwin does not want to miss when The Incident happens. Looking around, the diner is just as Edwin remembers it. 24 hours, and the smell of pancakes and bacon wafting through the kitchen doors. Wondering if he should order something, he decides against it, not wanting to feel sick when The Incident happens. Checking the clock one more time, Edwin waits.

Ten years ago:

Edwin sits in the car, his back slouched in the backseat, his eyes glued to his phone. The pinging of electronic bullets rings in the car, as Edwin kills zombies left and right. He could barely hear his sister whine that "Edwin wasn't giving her a chance to play!". Ignoring her, Edwin shoots down another zombie, and finally! A level up! Edwin sits up straight in his seat as coins and experience points flood his

account. He grins, but the grin vanishes as a hand grabs his phone out of his hands. Edwin looks up startled, to see his mom's face in the driver's seat staring back at him. He shrinks back, and he watches as his mom gives the phone to his sister. Edwin sighs, and turning to face the window, he watches as the streetlights wiz by.

They were going to see his grandparents for his winter break. He wonders what they will do. Most likely sit around while his mom catches up with them. He used to complain all the time, but he stopped when he realized that his mom would not budge on the matter.

The darkness of the night seems to be all around and enclosing on him... suddenly Edwin feels glad that he is in his car with his mom and his sister. Turning back, his heart pounding as he faces the front seat. Trying to distract himself, he watches his sister playing her game of dress up. Suddenly the car slows down. Edwin looks up and sees his mom staring forward. He looks where she is looking at and sees a man in a pinstripe suit. The man's face is totally unrecognizable, with no face. Just black. Wondering who he is, Edwin is about to open his mouth when he sees the man walking towards them.

His mom, without turning around, says to Edwin and his sister, "Stay back. Stay in the car. If something happens, I want you both to run, run as fast as you can."

Edwin, now thoroughly alarmed, whispers, "Mom?" Just as the man approaches their window. His mom rolls it down a bit.

She asks, "May I help you, sir?"

The man doesn't answer. He just stands there.

She asks again, "Sir if you- "

Her sentence is cut off abruptly, as the man suddenly reaches through the window and grabs her neck. The movement is so fast, that for a second, no one seems to react. But then chaos breaks through as Edwin's sister starts screaming, and Edwin watches horrified, as his mom tries to close the window, but the man's arm is too strong, the window unable close in on his arm. With a sudden jerk, he breaks her neck and throws her aside like a rag doll. Moving on, he breaks the passenger glass and reaches for Edwin's sister. His sister continues to scream as the glass rains down on top of her, and kicks as the man reaches in and grabs her head. Startled into action by the glass, Edwin throws himself across the passenger side and grabs the man's hands. He tries pulling them away, surprised by how cold they are, but the hands stick. Struggling, Edwin grunts as he tries to pry the man's fingers off his sister's head. The man waits for a second longer as Edwin continues, then twists. The cracking sound is chilling. Edwin sees his sister fall lifelessly to the seat, her neck crooked. Fighting the urge to vomit, Edwin scrambles back and manages to open his passenger side. The man does not move, just watches as he runs blindly and afraid away across the deserted highway.

Two hours ago:

Edwin sits at his desk, contemplating whether to do it. He looks at the wall and wonders. He looks at the box in front of him and thinks. He lives in a crummy apartment where the heat breaks out, and he sleeps on a mattress that feels like ice, with a blanket that feels completely inadequate. The summers are okay, but when the heat wave comes in, the AC conks out, making him wish he could die. His job? Funny joke. Working part time for any job he could find in the newspaper clippings. Or maybe his therapist? Once a week deal. A man who sits there, listening to Edwin recount

The Incident. Being paid little to nothing, because Edwin is a “special case”, the therapist is more similar to a mannequin than to a human. With the occasional “Uh-huh” or “How does it make you feel?”, the therapist sits there in his wrinkly shirt smelling of burnt coffee and vodka, (how the two go together, Edwin will never know) and listens as Edwin talks about how he stood out in the cold, on the side of the highway. A kid, hitchhiking. Eventually, a car stops by, and Edwin crying, babbling about a man and his family. The kind old soul who picked up Edwin, (Edwin never learned his name), dropped him off at the closest police station, like dropping off trash, leaving as fast as possible. Edwin remembers telling the police what happened, but they looked at him as a little kid, lost and confused. But sure enough, the next day, when Edwin managed to convince them to even look for his family, they find the car, with his mom and his sister hunched over, glass sprinkled all over the car seats. But the amazing thing? No fingerprints! Nada! Zero! Edwin does not remember the man wearing gloves but does not remember much from that night anyway. Since then, people have treated Edwin like a specimen, a kid in a glass cage, that people can look at in awe. Therapist, psychiatrist, specialist. Edwin has endured them all. The new therapist that Edwin has had for a couple months now, sits there, pretending to take notes, as Edwin recounts The Incident for the umpteenth time. As soon as the time is up, the therapist stands up, pats Edwin on his shoulder and sends him on his way.

All this, Edwin thinks as he sits here at his desk. He looks at the wall where he kept all news clippings of any sightings of the man. The man was unlike anything Edwin had seen. He kept track of anything in the news or rumors. But nothing substantial. The closest thing he could find was time apparitions. The introduction of time machines by the

company WHIRLWIND set a complete field apart from the rest. People by the millions were coming to see if this was the real deal. If this was what humanity has been waiting for. It was, but what came with it was a whole host of problems. The main one among them was time apparitions. These were people whose tickets were not working when they tried to come back to their timeline. They became lost in time. They became ghosts, forgotten by history and living in the shadows, not truly existing. The only problem between time apparitions and the man was that time apparitions, after a certain time, could not do anything. They became literal ghosts. But the man, Edwin remembers with a shudder, was more than capable of killing his mother and his sister.

The heat completely gone, and a jacket that he sits in, barely enough. He wraps it around him for any additional comfort that it may provide. The box that sits in front of him contains his life earnings. More than enough to gain a two-way ticket to any time period he wants in the time machine. Of course, he signed the legalese: ‘Not supposed to kill any historical figures, not supposed to disrupt any historical events or else the Centurions will come after you’ blah blah blah. Coming to a decision, Edwin stands up, tucking the box under his arm, and walks out the door.

Now:

Edwin sits on the curb of the same highway, a little before The Incident happened. To anyone else, he looks like a hobo, a nobody. Edwin doesn't care, he never cared. All he cared about was The Incident. Sitting in the cold, Edwin barely feels it, waiting until the man appears. Making sure he was equipped, he had bought a simple revolver. He knows how dangerous the man is and wants to make sure he is prepared.

Breathing in and out slowly, Edwin watches the steam from his mouth float lazily upwards and disappearing in to the clouds above. Edwin does not know what makes him sense it, but when Edwin looks down, he sees the man appear. One second gone, the next second here. He is just as Edwin remembers. His pinstripe suit, and his face as indistinguishable as the night. He stands facing away from Edwin, seemingly unaware that he is there.

Edwin hardens his resolve and gets the revolver ready. Getting up slowly, Edwin quietly walks over to a couple steps to behind the man and raises the gun. He quietly aims, and just as he pulls the trigger, the man turns around. The bullet hits him square in his face. The man falls, raising his arms to cover his face. No sounds came from him, just the sound of the thud as he falls to the ground. Edwin feels his pulse raising, and revels in what has just happened. For the first time in his life since The Incident happened, Edwin feels happy. Such a strange feeling. Trapped for so long, it bursts through.

Edwin yells, "Yes! Yes! Thank you! I did it!"

Edwin raises his arms in the air and laughs. He then looks down at the man, and curiosity comes over him. Who is he? Edwin walks over, bends down, and is about to turn the man's face when suddenly the man's hand grabs his wrist. Fear envelopes Edwin's senses completely as he tries removing the man's grip. But the man's grip is like iron and as cold as Edwin remembers it to be. Then suddenly the man speaks, "Now it's your turn." The man's voice is rough and gravelly. But strangely seems to be multiple voices, coming from multiple throats. Like a chorus of people talking in unison. Edwin looks down at the man to see him start to disappear. Slowly, but picking up speed. The man's body just disappears like a ghost.

Edwin gets up, and strangely he feels nothing. He does not feel the man's grip on his wrist anymore. He looks down at the revolver he dropped and feels no need for it. Edwin just stands there, waiting, in his pinstripe suit.

SHORT STORY

1945

Draiden Chilcoat

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Platte City Middle School, Platte City, MO
Educator: Laura Hoefling

Category: Short Story

I Muchi Muchano could feel the blood rushing through my veins as I scrambled to my feet. My arm hurt so bad, but there was no time to look at it. I was running faster than the bullets piercing through the air. They want me dead. The bullets zipped through the air so close I could almost feel them. I see a blob of commotion in front of me. My eyes focus on a smooth moving convoy. It was the Americans. I'm saved. I speed up toward the commotion. I feel a sharp pain in my leg, I fall to the rocky soil. I feel another pain in my back this time. I look down and see the gruesome liquid pouring from my body. I lay on my back, feeling defeated. Much time has gone on before I hear another voice. This time it was American. I was fading in and out of consciousness. All I see is the back of my eyelids.

I open my eyes. It is cold, my skin feels tight. I sit up in a hurry to see a gorgeous nurse in front of me. I say to her, "Where am I?"

She responds with her luscious voice, "Sir, are you alright? Get an IV stat."

I see a bright light shining in my eye. A guy with a cord in his hand was rushing toward me. I put my hands up to stop him from rushing at me. I put my left hand up, but I could not lift my right. I look down to see my right hand was

gone, I could feel my hand close, but it was not there. The surrounding people were not speaking English, but German. Was I back at camp Auschwitz? Would I have to go back to the mines? I hear something above us. Holy crap, we are underground, that's a train. That train above us was probably holding hundreds of other Jewish children. What's new with those nazi pigs. The surrounding people did not appear Nazi's. I screamed, "GET ME OUT OF HERE!"

The surrounding people, were shushing me. These people treated me like they were friendly's. They were. A man came in the room and said, "Don't talk just listen. We are escapees from Camp Belsen. We are here to help. We have uncovered some German nurses, and one doctor."

I stare at him with disbelief. We exchange looks for about thirty seconds. The nurse said to the man, "Sir he is here ."

The man said, "Well I am busy with a patient from the battlefield, please allow him to come in and get comfortable while I am with a patient."

She nodded and left the room. I fell asleep again, and was awoken by the beautiful faced women again. She looked into my eyes and waved. I waved back, and she giggled then started off. The man came in and said, "Justice you cannot flirt with the other patients."

She smiled, then left again. The man walked over to me and sat down. He lifted a gleaming white cup. I must have looked horrified because he said, "Do you need a massage? You look a little tense."

I said, "How do you know how to speak German if you are Jewish. Did you go to school illegally?"

"No, I did not go to school. I actually taught myself, when I was at the camps. I migrated allot to different harder camps because they heard I was above average in health."

There was an explosion. The man looked at me with a scared face, then the lady came in

with a MP-40 full automatic sub-machine gun to the back of her head. The man was a Nazi. He said," Englisch oder deutsch?"

The doctor said," Some are english and some are german, remain English so you do not scare the patient."

The Nazi man exclaimed," Everybody get in the truck. NOW!"

We all abided, what he said. We jumped in the truck. The man looked at my missing hand. He said," What happened to your hand outlander?"

I ignored him because he called me an outlander. Then I gave him a dirty look. He saw my look then he said, "Okay I see somebody does not want to abide by the rules."

Then he hit me, with the stock of his MP-40. "Okay, Okay, you pigs blew it off with your black magic you call punishment." I told him angrily

"If you thought that punishment was rough, you are in for a hell of a ride then."

"Where are we going," the doctor said.

He screamed," You will see be patient!"

About thirty minutes we arrived at a sign that said BERLIN. I thought to myself, why are we here. I saw bodies with signs on them hanging from thorn wire, blood pouring from their bodies. Rain started coming down making the dirt road muddy so the truck wheels started spinning out. I instantly thought how could we walk through this treacherous mud. He hopped out of the truck and ran over to us. He asked," Should we walk or should we call for help?"

We all just looked around at each other. He said," Looks like we are walking, man you guys are just a giant ball of spirit aren't you."

We all just shrugged. I looked at the weak looking doctor, then I said," Can we eat soon."

"No, we cannot eat until we get to the hideout." Mr. Nazi man said

"We are going to a hideout?" the doctor said.

"Yes, and there will be plenty of food there."

We walked what seems like 100 Kilometers,

but there was a house with a sign out front that said HO37FJU18. We walked to the front door with muddy feet. The man knocked on the door with a specific beat. A woman opened the door and gasped. She left then came back with 5 towels. We wiped off then entered the giant hideout. He took us to the basement, then put us all in our own strap down chairs. The demon nazi man took out a red case filled with dental supplies. "What are you going to do with that?" the doctor asked

The man ignored him. He pulled out a dental pick. He looked at me and started toward me. The doctor screamed," No, he is just a kid."

The man all of a sudden looked at him, then paused. We heard a scuffle upstairs. The man started then stopped. I heard yelling upstairs. A couple of bloody nazi men were thrown down the stairs. Oh no, I thought to myself, it's probably their general. A man with camo, came down the stairs and shot the nazi pig right in the head. The man in camo said," Why are you here."

All of us stared at the hero and we all said simultaneously, but a little off," Thank you.'" The man in camo unfasten us and said," Come with me if you want to live, or stay and die. They are on their way. "

We all rushed to the door, as soon as we got to the entrance door there was about 40 troops outside. "It's all over kid." the man said.

DARKNESS

Seraphina Corbo

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Wydown Middle School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Victoria Jones

Category: Short Story

Christina took slow steps through the old house that her family once lived in, and with each step she drew in a deep breath, the dusty wood floor creaking beneath her feet. She had always wanted to explore the house. She knew very little about her parents, and hoped she might discover something interesting. Christina managed to sneak out of the orphanage her father had left her at right after she was born. In the orphanage, if it wasn't feeling the sharp smack of a ruler against her knuckles or an angry scolding, it was having only a piece of bread to eat for the entire day. The mere thought of looking into Sister Mary's cold eyes was enough to make her shudder. Christina considered her absence to be a favor. The nuns had utterly despised her for as long as she could remember, and one less mouth to feed would undoubtedly be appreciated.

She looked up at the paintings on the walls and the once beautiful furniture that had been beaten hard while on the verge of tears. A table, with legs struggling to hold it up, had a wooden bowl sitting on top of it, holding a dark brown mush. Flies danced around the bowl. The small chandelier above the table hung thick white spiderwebs on its arms, and a rusty safe perched precariously on top of an out-of-tune piano. The paintings of her mother and father were on ripped canvas --- as if a horrible burglary had taken place. Although she had never seen her in person, they made Christina think of her mother, which saddened her greatly. The year was 1934, nearly 15 years after her mother's death. She had never thought much of her life or old belongings

after her life had been claimed by the influenza outbreak of 1918 moments after Christina's birth. They were always kept in the eerie attic of what was once her parent's house -- painful memories locked away as if to pretend she never existed.

Christina had been haunted by the fact that she never had a relationship with her mother. Although it wasn't her fault, the guilt that she felt hung on every inch of her body. It constantly weighed her down and took over her mind until she couldn't think. She walked up the stairs, and they moaned under her weight, threatening to give in. Christina opened the triangular shaped door that led into the small attic where many of her mother's belongings were kept. The attic was cluttered with old books and children's toys that were hardly ever used. Beyond the debris and a dusty bookshelf stood a large wooden chest, adorned with stunning swirling golden designs that stretched over the top and went far out on both sides. There was one small window near the chest that let in more light than one might think it could, which illuminated the entire room. The chest seemed to have an internal glow. Intrigued, Christina walked over to it, careful not to hit her head on the low ceiling. She crouched down to the chest's level, and ran her fingers over its majestic exterior. Her long, black hair fell over her shoulders like a waterfall, and her emerald eyes gleamed with amazement.

To her surprise, the chest was not locked, and she lifted it open with little effort. The light she had noticed before was suddenly gone, and she coughed as massive patches of dust fell off the top and dispersed all around. Dozens of papers flew out and formed a tornado around her, creating an unnaturally strong breeze before settling on the floor. The shutters shut and the entire room darkened. The candles that stood all around the room simultaneously lit aflame. The walls

seemed to close in. With lightning speed she slammed the chest closed. All at once the candles went out. Now she was absolutely sure something about this chest was odd, and maybe even magical. How could shutters close by themselves if there wasn't even any wind? Last time she knew, candles couldn't light themselves, either.

Christina grabbed one of the candles and peered into the chest again, scanning for anything that looked strange or magical. Everything looked pretty plain and dark, so she directed her attention to the countless documents scattered all over the floor. As she picked one up, she noticed her mother's name written at the top **"Dear Isabella"**, indicating that it was a letter. Setting it down, she noticed that every piece of paper was a letter, either with her mother or father's name written at the top. Christina examined each letter carefully, being gentle so as not to tear the delicate paper. They were all from the time before her birth, and she noticed liquid stains on a few. Her parents had written all of these letters to each other when her father was far away on his travels, which he went on quite often for work. Her mother would be left alone for several months at a time, and it was clear through their writing that they really loved each other.

Christina was told at the orphanage that her father packed his bags, dopped Christina off at the doorstep, and fled to an unknown destination, leaving her dead mother behind. Christina was surprised reading how fondly he spoke of her mother in the letters.

Many of her mother's old clothes were in the box as well and Christina marveled at how the fashion had changed. She also found a couple paintings of her parents together, and her heart hurt. One in particular caught her eye. In it her father's lips were angled slightly upwards, almost in a smile. His eyes looked

sad as he stared longingly at her mother, whose soft pale hands rest in his lap. She wore a single piece of jewelry - a gold locket. Christina continued to dig until she came upon a dainty red box. She hastily opened it, leaving her eyes wide open and her breathing stopped instantly.

A gorgeous diamond inside a gold heart-shaped locket gleamed and shimmered so brightly that its light filled the entire room. It was precisely the same locket as in the painting. There was a red liquid inside the diamond. A soft, airy voice drifted from the locket.

"Go on, put it on. You know you want to. Do it. This was your mother's locket. Put it on. Now!"

"What? That's crazy! Who are you, where did you come from?" she begged. "Hello?! Answer me!"

The locket seemed to grow heavier by the second. She was sure this was magical. She couldn't imagine what the voice meant. Why should she put it on? If it was magical, was it good or bad magic? What would happen to her, if anything?

Slowly, she took the chain between both of her shaking hands, holding the mesmerizing jewel up to her face as beads of sweat accumulated on her forehead. As she held it up to her neck, it was ripped out of her hands and clasped on its own, transporting Christina into a world of neon colors before going black.

Christina grabbed her locket with her sweaty palms so forcefully that she nearly ripped it from her neck. Where could she be? Where had the locket taken her? She lifted her head and realized she was laying in the dead, yellow, straw-like grass that lead up to the same house she had been in seconds earlier. She was utterly confused. Why was she here? Then she saw that the house looked different.

All of the lights that were broken were now on, and the furniture seemed to be in pristine condition. The chandelier glittered with beauty, and the windows appeared to be freshly cleaned.

Christina thought she saw someone walking in the house for a moment and she jumped. Nobody had been inside the house before. She crawled all the way up to the back door and snuck in, stealthily. Luckily, the floors didn't creak the way they had, so she knew she might not be heard. She crept up to the doorway to the dining room, and turned her head to look in for a fraction of a second. Her eyes widened as she saw a woman walk into the room from the kitchen, carrying two steaming plates of pasta. She was the same woman as in the painting. One plate was for her and one for the man who was in the painting. Christina was baffled; how could her mother be [HERE](#)? Christina **KNEW** her mother had died right after giving birth to her. It was strange enough that the house had been returned to its former glory, but her mother and father's presence was even more startling.

She watched as her mother poured water into tall crystal glasses generously, and her father contemplated the latest newspaper. Her mother asked her father to set it down so she could talk to him as they ate. He obliged and stared into her emerald eyes, the same ones Christina had, with the most loving smile she had ever seen.

"Darling, I am pregnant!" she said happily.

"What?!"

"Yes! 8 months!"

"I'm confused, why did you tell me so late?"

My goodness how did I not see? I was away on my trip for so long... Why didn't you send me a letter?" He asked, shocked.

"I tried to, but somehow the post lost them every time I sent one!"

Once again, Christina's mouth was agape. This time it was not because she was surprised, but because she realized an extremely important detail. If her mother is pregnant with her right now, that means the year is 1918, the year of the great influenza outbreak!

Christina shoved her hand over her mouth to keep herself from screaming. How on earth would she save her mother in time and transport them both back to the present? She needed a plan, and fast.

'But wait' she thought. 'How will I explain myself if I try to take her with me? She will surely be very confused if a random girl takes her and time travels back to the present. Even if I try to convince her that I am her future daughter, why would she believe me?'

These thoughts raced through Christina's head until she felt dizzy. She climbed up the shiny new stairs that didn't creak, up to an empty room. She took a few deep breaths and cleared her mind, carefully thinking through possible plans that would help her achieve her goals.

"I need to find a way to talk to her, take her with me. I need to find a time to explain everything to her. But how will that work? If she is still pregnant with me, there will be a copy of me in the present," she said harshly to herself.

Day had transitioned into night in what seemed like an instant. The gloomy clouds were replaced by a clear night sky, and a full moon shone brightly overhead. Christina's eyelids were so greatly weighed down that she felt she needed to use all her strength to keep them even slightly open. Her eyes eventually shut after hours of laying on the floor, staring at the ceiling blankly.

That next morning, Christina sat up slowly, the bags under her eyes threatening to pull her back to her dreams. She had concluded that her plan ought to be simple. She had decided she would find a time when her mother was alone and explain everything to

her the best that she could. She would probably think Christina was insane, but it was the best she could come up with.

After she heard her parents leave the house, Christina slid downstairs and opened the stuffed pantry. As she went to grab a piece of bread, the door flew open. Her father was standing there. Eyes wide open. A gun in his hand. "Intruder!" he screamed. She felt a warm sensation in her head, and everything went black.

THE BRIGHTER SIDE OF LIFE

Avery Daniels

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: South Valley
Middle School, Liberty, MO
Educator: Staci Reichard

Category: Short Story

"Autumn!" my mom's voice pierced through my bedroom door forcing me to awake from a deep and peaceful sleep. "We're gonna be late for your doctor appointment," she added.

"I'm almost ready!" I called back, lying of course. In a rush, I hopped out of bed and threw on an old t-shirt, a pair of jeans, and tennis shoes. Then I ran to the bathroom, tripping over my shoelaces with every stride I took. I pulled my hair up into a messy ponytail and brushed my teeth. I sprinted down the

stairs clinging to the banister and praying that I wouldn't fall and land on my face. "Okay, let's go," I said to my mom, completely out of breath. I grabbed a bagel and skipped innocently to the car.

Once we arrived at the doctor's office, we were welcomed by the receptionist and a stack of paperwork to fill out. My knee had been throbbing in pain for a couple months now. At first, my mom just said the classic 'it's just growing pains, you're fine'. But then, my knee started swelling up more and more over the course of the last month and she finally decided that it was probably time to get it checked out.

"Autumn Charleson," the nurse called.

My mom and I stood up and we followed the nurse down a narrow hallway and into to a brightly lit room with colorful drawings hanging on the walls. She introduced herself as Rachel Stine. Then she measured my weight and height, and asked my mom a series of the usual questions. "That's all. The doctor will be in shortly," she assured us.

My mom and I sat there patiently waiting for awhile until we heard three knocks and then the door creaked open and we were cheerfully greeted by Dr. Elizabeth James. "What seems to be the problem?" she asked.

I explained my symptoms to the doc and she told us they would have to run some tests. Minutes later, this silent room turned into a zoo of doctors and nurses, performing a variety of tests. I was overwhelmed by the constant movement with my blood being drawn and then getting an x-ray, and other tests that I can't even pronounce. I could tell by my mom's face that she thought this was a bit excessive and her eyes told me not to worry about everything going on around me. Soon enough, the chaos ended and Nurse Rachel warmly smiled and told us that Dr. James would be back soon with the results.

Over an hour later, Dr. James appeared in the door frame once again, walked in slowly,

and gently shut the door behind her. Her eyes were dull and her face was expressionless, the kind of face you see only when you're about to hear bad news. "I'm very sorry," she started. She sat down next to my mom with a sympathetic look on her face and continued, "-Autumn has an aggressive form of bone cancer called Osteosarcoma," she finished.

Cancer. One word, six letters. Over 100 different forms- deadly and treatable, but no cure. Cancer. Sounds like a simple, meaningless word but it's not. Thousands. That's how many people die everyday from this life stealing disease. Cancer. I repeated the word to myself multiple times, letting it torment my mind every time I heard it. My vision started to blur. Cancer. So many good people get the unlucky news everyday that they *MIGHT* die, and today, that was me.

Millions of thoughts continued racing through my mind. Things like *IS MY HAIR GOING TO FALL OUT?* Or *WILL MY MOM HANDLE THIS NEWS OKAY EVEN THOUGH I'M HER ONLY CHILD?* And even, *WHY DOES THIS HAVE TO HAPPEN TO ME?* But the only question that actually escaped my mouth was "Am I going to die?"

In the chair next to me, I looked desperately over at my mom, waiting for her to reassure me that I'd be okay. Instead, all I saw was her eyes filling with tears and her face pale like she had just seen a ghost.

Vaguely, but honestly, the doctor replied, "Since your cancer has been rapidly developing for over a year now, it has already taken over your entire right knee. We are already starting to see small signs that the cancer has traveled to a part of your right lung as well. At this point, considering that you're only 11, your body would most likely react negatively to chemo."

Hopelessly, my mom looked up at the doctor, eyes red, tears streaming down her face. "How long does she have?" she asked,

only wanting to know the truth.

"I don't know for sure, but my best guess, without chemotherapy, would be anywhere from eight months to two years, depending on how much Autumn's body is willing to fight. With chemo, she could live up to six years but the cancer would never completely disappear and the side effects are extremely intense."

The car ride home was silent, my mom and I didn't speak and that is how it was for the next week. I felt alone and my world felt dark. I barely ate and only came out of my room to use the bathroom or to get something to drink. I was scared to fall asleep every night, knowing that there is a possibility that I won't wake up again. Dr. James had told us that I had at least eight months, but that didn't make me feel any better.

I woke up before the crack of dawn one morning and finally worked up the slightest bit of energy and forced myself to take a shower and put on some clean clothes. Refreshed, I walked back to my room, and slumped onto my bed, preparing myself for another week of isolation. I was about to drift off to sleep again, but a small beam of light crept through the curtains of my window and demanded for me to keep my eyes open. For some reason, I felt intrigued by the light and pushed myself out of bed again. I tiptoed over to the window and drew back the curtains. Behind it was the most beautiful sunrise I have ever seen. It motivated me to give myself a little pep talk, "*AUTUMN, TODAY IS A NEW DAY AND YOU NEED TO STOP FEELING SORRY FOR YOURSELF AND ENJOY WHAT TIME YOU HAVE LEFT.*" I dwelled on that idea for a while and thought to myself, "*YOU'RE RIGHT, I MAY NOT HAVE MUCH TIME LEFT SO I NEED TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF EVERY SECOND THAT I DO.*"

Feeling inspired, I left my room immediately

and ran down the hall to my mom's room. I frantically woke her up and spilled all of the thoughts running through my head and out my mouth at once. "Slow down," she groaned, still very tired.

"Mom," I said in all seriousness. "I don't want to start chemo. I want to enjoy every last minute I have with you."

She sat up looking kind of confused. "Why not?" she simply asked.

"Because...well, you heard the doctor and even though I **MIGHT** live longer, the side effects will be hard for me to handle and I really don't want to be in a lot of pain from the treatment or even lose my hair," I said almost choking on the mouthful of words I just let out. To my surprise, my mom didn't object, she just ever so slightly nodded her head and gave me a half smile, as a symbol of pride and acceptance to my brave decision.

It was now mid fall, and a little over a month ago, I had received the heart-breaking news that would change the course of my life. The decision had been up to me if I let it change my life for better or for worse. Yesterday, my mom and I went back to the doctor for a follow up appointment. We were informed that my cancer was now at a level three of four and was spreading fast. Dr. James explained it to me like this: "It's kinda like mixing food coloring in different substances. At level one, imagine the food coloring being dropped onto a piece of aluminum foil, where the food coloring can easily be wiped off. At level two, picture food coloring being dropped onto a washcloth. Most of the time it can be washed out, but it's a little harder than just wiping it off. Then at level three, which is what you have, the food coloring is being dropped into a pitcher of water. The water turns that color very quickly and if someone tried really, really hard to separate the dye and water, they **POSSIBLY** could, but it would take time and might damage the water.

Finally at level four, it's as if someone just handed you a bottle of food coloring and you can't give it back." She told me the decision was up to us if we wanted to try to get the food coloring out or not and we still had until the next appointment to decide. My mom was still unsure of what to do, but I had clearly already made up my mind- no chemo.

Over the last couple weeks, a lot had happened. For the first time in two months, my mom and I returned to my school to explain my absence. We decided that I was going to be homeschooled from now on so that we could spend as much time together as possible. Truthfully, I would miss my friends but I didn't want my mom to feel the loneliness that I once felt. You see, I've never met my biological father before. He died instantly in a car crash six weeks before my mom's due date with me. I was all that my mom had left.

Another month had passed, and it was time for my next appointment with Dr. James. We entered the gray brick building that became more and more familiar to me with every visit. As usual, we were greeted by Nurse Rachel with a friendly smile and were led to my examining room.

Dr. James walked in and asked right away, "Have you made your final decision yet to start chemo or not?" The urgent, but respectfully excited tone in her voice sounded as if she had finished our last visit on a cliffhanger and had been dying to hear our decision.

My mom started to answer for me, but I interrupted, "I don't want to start chemo. And yes, I know that soon, like you said, my body will be full of nothing but food coloring, but it's gonna be a beautiful color. I can imagine an orangey reddish color. The color of my name, Autumn." I repeated the name a couple times in my head, "**AUTUMN, AUTUMN.**" A smile grew on my face and a

memory played out in front of me from a couple of years ago.

"AUTUMN, COME HERE FOR A SECOND," MY MOM CALLED ME OVER TO THE WINDOW IN OUR LIVING ROOM. "SEE THAT TREE OVER THERE?" MY MOM ASKED WHILE POINTING TO THE BIGGEST OAK IN OUR BACK YARD- I NODDED." NOTICE HOW THE LEAVES ARE TURNING INTO A BEAUTIFUL COLOR? DO YOU KNOW WHAT SEASON THAT MEANS IT IS?" SHE PAUSED, LOOKING FOR THE RIGHT WORDS TO SAY. "IT MEANS THAT IT'S FALL, WHICH IS ALSO CALLED AUTUMN. I GAVE YOU YOUR NAME BECAUSE I KNEW THAT YOU WOULD BE SO BEAUTIFUL- AND YOU ARE," SHE ADDED. "REMEMBER THAT I'LL ALWAYS LOVE YOU PUMPKIN." Her words were like a record constantly replaying in my brain and they never seized to make me smile.

"Mrs. Charleson, is that the final decision?" Dr. James asked, snapping me back into the present.

My mom nodded in confirmation to decline the chemo invitation, then turned her head to me and gave a quick wink. Dr. James smiled at me, reminding me that my journey without chemo would be a much more enjoyable experience. She told us that by not going through with chemo, we wouldn't have to come in and visit her every month. Our next appointment would be four months from now.

The next couple weeks were the most hectic, but amazing days of my life. My mom took a long, paid break from work. My birthday was in a few days. My mom came into my room before the crack of dawn on a Thursday morning. We went outside and sat on the porch to see the sun rise like we had been doing for a while now. As the darkness faded into the beauty of the morning, my mom peacefully asked, "What do you want to do for your birthday?"

"Let's go skydiving," I said excitedly. "Or to

a concert, no, actually, a football game." I let my mind travel wherever it wanted to go and listed off everything I have dreamed of doing, allowing myself to forget about our financial situation just for a minute.

My mom stopped me, "Sounds fun....but remember, we can't afford that right now." It was then that the perfect idea popped into my head. "What if we go camping this weekend?" I suggested in high hope.

"Let's do it," she said with a grin.

My birthday was perfect. I was happy that we were able to get away from our apartment for a couple days and my mom was happy that she didn't have to buy anything overly expensive. The following weekend, we visited my great-grandparents in the nursing home. The weekend after that I hung out with some friends. I was at peace with the fact that I could die any day, so I treated everyday as if it was my last. I'll be honest, some days were hard and I wanted my life to be over, but then other days were so painless and wonderful that I forgot I even had cancer. Those days are what kept me going. My mom stood by my side no matter what. She was my support system and I couldn't have gotten luckier in the mom department.

Faster than I could blink, days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months. It was time for my next follow up with Dr. James. I went back to the same old gray brick building, and sat in the same old chair in my usual room, with the same old kid drawings taped to the walls. Except now I had hung up a drawing of my own. In my picture, the sun was just barely starting to be seen on the edge of the horizon but the whole sky was lit up with a bright golden color. My drawing gives me hope for tomorrow. For I may be dying, but for every morning that I get to see the sun rise, I thank God for giving me a heart to see the brighter side of this little thing we call life.

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THE ELOQUENCE OF REMINISCING

Avery Fulkerson

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Kirbyville Middle School, Kirbyville, MO
Educator: Marilyn Yung

Category: Short Story

Known as the bird of knowledge, the crow, my kind, is proven to be the uttermost smartest bird on Earth with the ability to identify human faces and recognize them as threats. It was but the Crow people, native peoples of the Montana area, that first discovered this and decidingly looked at our lives with a sort of admiration. Of course, not all crows such as I have as much knowledge about life and death, but I owe it to one particular boy and his chief father who made

it their priority to bring me back to a life in which I could continue living- for eternity.

...

We had the world. The fiery flowers, the riverine plains, the moist caves. We were placed on the Earth for a specific reason. We kept it the way that we had found it- rich and eccentric with life.

Then fire flew up from the cracks of the Earth and all hell raised on up. My kind was killed in the cold blood of the white man. One by one we were diminished. We were considered a waste of space, an obnoxious feathered creature. That was the time that I had been shot down from a tree by a powdered gun. Then, death. It came to me in a fire. I was stuck between universes- life and death- power and weakness. The world had stopped.

There was a perpetual silence. Darkness. I remember nothing beyond that truth. It was as though there was an endless dark hole, and I kept falling. My wings had been clipped. My feathers had disintegrated in the absent Earth, my heart away with it. From then, there was a light. Deep in the cracks of the Earth, a burning inferno hungered for my heart. I saw the Devil, and I feared in my own absence of coming close to him. His eyes were longing for my long lost soul. His hoof-like hands came closer to me. He caught my flesh in his hands reeking of death.

"You shall be my servant," He stroked my rotting flesh with great intention of death. His teeth were far beyond rotten and his eyes burned holes into my vulnerable skin. "Bring me knowledge,"

"Let him go," a young woman's voice called to his malicious desires. Her hair was like the fire in which she had walked on. Her skin was like the moonlight which shows one's path and her lips were contorted into a perfect rosy pout.

The world around me changed. I flew into the darkness unaware of my direction, unaware of what had passed. I felt like nothing, yet I was left the impression that I'm significant. The Earth began spinning, faster, faster. The darkness became even darker, and gravity seemed of no sense. I opened my eyes. A boy appeared, cradling me in his arms. His fingers were spotted with dirt and the deep crimson color of blood. His eyes were dark like the night sky, and his hair whoosed behind him, freely. He looked at me with such fascination that I can still feel the captivation between his soul and mine. He laid on his stomach observing my every new feather in the plains of the green. All around us, tents of buffalo hide leaked steady streams of gray smoke. Young tanned children chased each other in circles screaming in jubilation. Women sewed beads to fabric and mixed berries for the men's war paint. I moved to get a better look at my surroundings.

"Papa!" The boy raced out into the village calling for his father. His long hair looked as though the darkness has a scintilla of light. "Papa!"

The village grew silent. The children stopped running. The women stop mixing and sewing. The men were nowhere to be seen. He ran into the largest teepee, his feet peppered with blood. "He's alive!" The boy screamed. I imagine the boy and his father. I imagined the warmth inside the tent. I imagine the men of the village.

And Suddenly, I could feel it all. I could smell the smoke, but it didn't burn my lungs. I could touch the men's headdresses, but they never knew that I was there, watching them, longing for their desires. It was the Devil in me. He had made me his servant. He wanted me to bring him knowledge. I died and he brought me to him so that my insight was his and his was mine. I am now alive, clearly in the presence of humans- Earth.

Earth, indeed. I was killed in cold blood, brought to Hell, and here I am, made a servant to the Devil himself with the ability to make all who doubt me pay.

"Son," The chief addressed to his young son. He gave his peace pipe to the man to his right. "We men are in a meeting,"

"He's alive, Pa," A smile spread across his face. "The bird of knowledge is alive,"

"Well done, son," The chief breathed out the white smoke, inhaling the incense of the tent's sage grass. "You must promise to keep him safe."

"Yes, Father," The boy bowed his head with respect. "I promise," The chief revealed a half-smile.

"Shall anything happen to him, Snowwolf,"

The next man breathed out the smoke from the peace pipe. "Our tribe will be endangered,"

...

Kept me safe, the boy did, but no matter what, with the Devil's servant in their hands, endangered they were. Now, living two-hundred years later, the boy, the chief, and their legacy no longer live on. It is but the Devil inside the men in the blue uniforms, which you have to blame for this. But that's another story to be told... As of now, you can find me, the Bird of Knowledge endangering you-for eternity.

BEHIND THE MASK

Addie Gleason

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West

Middle School, Chesterfield, MO
Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Short Story

I wake up to an annoying beeping noise. Quickly, I press the stop button on my alarm clock. I glance at the time, and see it's 5:45. My parents have already left for work. Sleepily, I walk to the bathroom. The clean white tiles gleam at me, temporarily blinding my tired self. Makeup wipes fill about half of the trash can, and a large marble vanity is placed in front of me. Glancing at myself in the mirror, I see the hideous bags under my eyes, and my rumpled hair.

GROSS.

FAT.

UGLY.

My plain brown eyes stared back at me. I WISH THEY WERE BLUE.

Quickly, I grab my makeup bag from my drawer, and get to work on my makeup. I go through the many steps of my routine, smearing on everything from concealer to mascara, putting on a mask to disguise what's really underneath. After an hour, I'm finally satisfied with my look.

With all my blemishes covered, I begin to braid my hair. SHOULD I GO BLONDE?

I glance at the clock. I have time. Quickly, I dial my mom's phone number. It rings one, twice, three times.

"Hello?" I hear my mom's voice on the other side of the phone.

"Hey mom, can you call the hair place? I want to get an appointment by the end of the week. Tell them I want to dye my hair blonde."

"Are you going through one of those teenager phases? Should I be worried? You shouldn't change yourself for other people," my mom says.

"Mom I'm fine, I just want to try something new."

"Okay, I'll call them when I have time, have a good day at school," she says.

"Okay thanks, bye!" I hang up and continue with my morning routine.

Once I'm done, I examine myself in the mirror. I look like I'm a new person. My eyelashes are thicker, and my skin smoother. My brown hair is no longer knotted, but sleek in two dutch braids that reach the middle of my back. My eyes were still plain brown, but they seemed to glow like the sun with all of the eyeshadow surrounding them. MAYBE I SHOULD GET BLUE CONTACTS. Resolving to talk to my parents about it later, I walk back into my bedroom.

The white carpet squishes down under my feet as I walk past my desk, and my lavender colored bed towards my closet. I throw back the doors and search through every shirt I own to find the perfect one. I settle on a plain white crop top with black leggings. I pull on my white Converse. I almost put on two diamond studs into each ear, a prized possession from my grandmother, until I hear my best friend Lea's voice ringing in my head.

"GOD, SYDNEY, WHY DO YOU ALWAYS WEAR THOSE HORRID EARRINGS? WE'RE NOT IN THE MEDIEVAL AGES, YOU KNOW."

I toss the earrings aside without hesitation. Looking back at my clock, I realize it's already six fifty. Thirty minutes till school starts. I rush downstairs to grab breakfast.

Observing my options, I view yogurt, apples, granola bars, and waffles. I settle for yogurt and an apple, thinking back to what I witnessed in the halls yesterday.

I WALK THROUGH THE CORRIDOR, SHOULDERS BACK, WHITE TEETH GLEAMING UNDER THE FLUORESCENT LIGHTS. IF ACTING A LITTLE FAKE IS WHAT IT TAKES TO BE POPULAR, HOW BAD CAN IT BE? LAUGHTER DRIFTS TOWARDS ME FROM DOWN THE HALLWAY, AND I TURN TO WATCH THE SCENE IN FRONT OF ME. LEA JOHNSON, MY BEST FRIEND, THE MOST POPULAR GIRL IN TENTH GRADE, WAS ADVANCING TO CARRIE.

LEA HAD GORGEOUS BLONDE HAIR, FLOWING DOWN TO HER LOWER BACK. HER EYES WERE A CRYSTAL BLUE SKY, AND HER FACE WAS PERFECTLY PROPORTIONATE. HER TANNED SKIN SEEMED TO GLOW AS IF IT WERE MADE OF THE ENTIRE NIGHT SKY. HER SLIM FIGURE WAS ENVIED BY ALL OF THE GIRLS IN THE SCHOOL. I HAD ALWAYS WISHED I COULD LOOK LIKE HER.

CARRIE WAS THE POLAR OPPOSITE OF LEA. SHE SPORTED SHORT, CHOPPY, BLACK HAIR THAT WAS NEVER TAMED, AND BROWN EYES THAT WERE THE COLOR OF A MUD PUDDLE. SHE WASN'T THE SKINNIEST GIRL IN THE GRADE, BUT SHE WAS STILL AVERAGE. PIMPLES COVERED THE MAJORITY OF HER

FACE, AND SHE SAT ALONE AT LUNCH.

AS LEA WALKED TOWARDS CARRIE IN THE HALLWAY, I SAW A MEAN GLINT IN HER EYE. CARRIE TRIED TO SHUFFLE AROUND LEA, HER HAIR COVERING MOST OF HER FACE AS SHE HUNCHED OVER. IT WAS LIKE WATCHING A HORROR MOVIE IN SLOW MOTION. YOU WISH YOU COULD YELL AT THE CHARACTER TO STOP, TO SAVE THEMSELVES, TO GET OUT OF THERE. YOU CAN HEAR EVERY SHAKY BREATH THAT PASSES THROUGH THEIR MOUTH, GOING IN, OUT, IN, OUT, IN, OUT, UNTIL EVERYTHING FALLS SILENT. YOU CAN IMAGINE HOW THEIR HEART BEATS LIKE A RAGING DRUM. I WANTED SO BADLY TO CALL OUT TO CARRIE AND WARN HER.

BUT I DIDN'T.

I STOOD BY AND WATCHED AS LEA STUCK HER FOOT OUT, HER BLUE SANDALS SHINING. I STOOD BY AND WATCHED AS CARRIE'S PENCIL CASE SPLIT OPEN, THE PENCILS ROLLING AWAY, SCATTERING ACROSS THE HALL. I STOOD BY AND WATCHED AS LEA MERCILESSLY KICKED CARRIE'S TEXTBOOK, THE BINDING BREAKING. I STOOD BY AND WATCHED AS CARRIE'S FACE TURNED A DEEPER AND DEEPER SHADE OF RED, UNTIL SHE RESEMBLED A BLOOMING ROSE. I STOOD BY AND WATCHED AS HER EYES MET MINE AND SILENTLY PLEADED FOR HELP. I STOOD BY AND WATCHED AS THE COLD HEARTED WORDS LEFT MY BEST FRIEND'S MOUTH.

"UGH. GET OUT OF THE WAY. I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M FORCED TO LEARN WITH PEOPLE LIKE YOU AROUND. YOU TAKE UP SO MUCH SPACE IT'S RIDICULOUS."

I WATCHED IT ALL. AND I WALKED AWAY.

I check myself one last time in the mirror. I

squeeze my eyes shut, the words pounding in my skull. When I open them again, the mirror makes me question myself. **WHO HAVE I BECOME?** I quickly shake my head to rid myself of the memory, and leave the house, walking to the bus stop.

I press the home button on my phone, and a red alert shows me I have three missed messages from Lea. Bracing myself, I open them.

SIX THIRTY.

Where r you?

SIX THIRTY FIVE.

The girls and I are walking to the coffee shop, we're not waiting anymore

SIX FORTY.

Ugh. Nevermind. Ttyl.

SHOOT. I'M SO DEAD.

A long creak of bus wheels snaps me out of my temporary horror. Running up the bus steps, I greet the bus driver and walk all the way to the back of the bus. Curse words are flying through the air and the driver is making no move to stop anyone.

The only seat left is next to, **JUST MY LUCK**, Carrie.

I sit down on the edge of the bus seat and heave a fake annoyed sigh, unsure of who could be watching. **YOU HAVE A REPUTATION TO UPHOLD.**

Glancing over at Carrie, I'm surprised to see her smile at me. My eyes widen before I arch one eyebrow and turn back to look at my

phone.

WHY DID SHE DO THAT?

Carrie still continues to watch me. "I don't blame you," she says. "I probably wouldn't have helped me either."

"Excuse me?" I ask.

"I know you saw me yesterday."

"I don't know what you're talking about." **LIAR.**

"So you're going to deny it all?" she questions.

"Seriously, I have no idea what you're talking about." **STOP LYING.**

"If you don't want to admit to it, it's fine. I just thought that even though you're popular and best friends with Lea, you might still have some kindness in you. Why do you hang out with her anyways?"

"Um . . . because she's my best friend?" I say, although it came out as more of a question than a statement.

"Are you sure?" When I turned to look at Carrie, instead of seeing someone who's nosy, I saw someone who was genuinely . . . **CONCERNED? THAT'S WEIRD.**

I feel my phone buzz in my hand and look at the screen. It's a text from Ava, a girl who rides my bus.

Look up

I do as the text says and meet eyes with Ava from a seat ahead. She's giving me a 'what the heck?' face. **RIGHT, DON'T LOSE SIGHT**

OF WHAT'S IMPORTANT.

"Look, can you just not talk to me? You're being weird and I don't have time for this," I say. **WHY WOULD YOU SAY THAT?**

I turn back to look at Ava, and she nods. **THAT'S WHY. REPUTATION.**

"Okay." Carrie turns back to reading her book, but it didn't fool me. I could see the tears in her eyes. **IT'S FINE, IT'S NOT A BIG DEAL.**

We finally arrive at school, and I meet up with Lea outside of her locker.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey, I guess. Why weren't you at the coffee shop this morning?"

"Oh my gosh, my mom was being so annoying. She said I couldn't go unless I finished my homework, which I didn't." I **DID.** "I'll just copy off of Ava later." **YOU'RE SUCH A FAKE.**

"That's so unfair. I hate parents," Lea responds.

Faking a laugh, I respond, "Yeah, me too."

"Hey you got rid of those ugly earrings! See, I told you it would make you look better."

"You really think so?"

"Totally." I practically beamed with pride. **MAYBE THIS ISN'T SO BAD AFTER ALL.**

"Well, I gotta go. History." Lea pretends to gag.

"See you later." I walk to math class.

A few days later I got home from school and prepared for my hair appointment. I get off the bus, walk home, and open the door. "Mom!" I shout.

"Yes sweetie? How was school?" My mom comes rushing into the kitchen, her forehead creased.

"It was fine. I was wondering if I could get blue contacts?" I question.

"But why would you want to do that? I love your brown eyes."

"**MOM**, my life will be over if I don't get blue contacts." Maybe I was over exaggerating a little bit.

"Well, I guess if you really want them, I could go buy some from the store. Remember that you have your hair appointment in three hours. Just know that you shouldn't change your appearance to make others like you better."

"Yeah, whatever."

"I don't like that attitude," my mom continues.

"Okay, okay, just leave me alone." I storm up to my room. **WHY DID I HAVE TO SAY THAT?**

I push aside my homework, knowing that this time I really would copy off of Ava tomorrow. I spend the next few hours scrolling through my social media accounts and counting the followers. Finally, my mom walks into my room.

"Time for your hair appointment."

We arrive at the hair place, and I spend the

next two hours sitting in a salon chair as my hair gets washed, bleached, and dyed. At the end of the process my hair looks so much better. It seems to shine, and it bounces lightly around my shoulders as I walk to the car. **I LOOK SO MUCH BETTER THAN BEFORE.**

"How do you like your new hair?" my mom asks.

"I love it. It's so much better than the plain brown I used to have."

"Are you sure you're okay? You're suddenly wanting to change all these things about your appearance."

"Mom," I say with an annoyed sigh. "I said I'm fine. Could you please stop nagging me about this?"

"Okay, like I said, I'm just worried about you."

"It's fine I guess," I grumble. "Let's just go home."

My mom lets me get out of the car once we get home, telling me to do my homework. An hour later she drops off the contacts in my room. "I expect you to change your attitude since I bought these for you."

"Fine." I rush to the bathroom and rip open the box, being careful not to damage the contacts. I put them in and look into the mirror. **WOW.** I look like a whole new person. Blue as the clearest part of the ocean, eyes that aren't mine stare back at me. Light blonde hair makes me seem like a model. Under the bright bathroom lights, the blue and blonde glimmer like diamonds under moonlight. **NOW I CAN BE JUST AS POPULAR AS LEA.**

I get to school the next day, trying to act as

confidently as Lea can. I push past the other kids with an air of confidence about me. I see the eyes staring at the new me. Everyone in my wake seems stunned. **YOU'RE FINALLY BEAUTIFUL.**

I pass Carrie in the hallway on the way to math.

"Lea, I just wanted to say--" she pauses for a moment, shocked. "Woah. What did you do?"

"I don't have time for this. People like me shouldn't be talking to people like you. It's just unfair I should have to be around you," I say. Tears threaten to overflow onto Carrie's cheeks.

I quickly walk away to math class, and stop at Lea's locker on the way. Instead of being greeted with a smile like I expected, I'm greeted with a scowl.

"Why are you acting like this? And what happened to your hair?"

"Don't you love it? I look way better now," I respond. **WHY DOESN'T SHE LIKE IT?**

"Sydney, for one, you totally just copied what I look like. Secondly, you've turned fake. Didn't you notice everyone staring at you?" "Well obviously, why wouldn't they? I'm gorgeous." **AREN'T I?**

I twirl a piece of hair around my finger as Lea says, "No. You're not. You're being really mean, and this isn't like you. You changed your appearance and your attitude. Everyone's shocked."

"What? I just made a few small improvements," I say. My eyes start to water but I refuse to cry, I worked too hard on my

makeup for this.

"Just stop talking," Lea continues. "This is it. I'm not going to be friends with someone who completely changes themselves just to make others like them."

"That's not what I'm doing!" I shout. My hands clench into fists. Everyone in the hallway has stopped to stare at us now, and a crowd has begun to form. I look around at the faces I've grown up with since day one of kindergarten.

Lea, Ava, Katherine, Sarah, and Bailey.

Carrie.

WHY IS SHE HERE?

In a last sense of desperation, I look to Ava. "Come on, Ava. Can't you tell all I did was change my look a little? I was bland anyways."

"Sydney, you're different than I thought you were."

"You guys don't understand. What was I supposed to do?" **DON'T THEY UNDERSTAND? I WAS UGLY BEFORE. I'VE MADE IMPROVEMENTS. THEY SHOULD LIKE ME BETTER NOW.**

"Stop lying to yourself. You've changed Sydney. And we're tired of putting up with all of this. You put on pounds of makeup and totally remake your appearance. Stop hiding behind your mask of lies," Katherine says.

"Guys, are you serious? You're overreacting. Carrie?" I turn to look at Carrie. My eyes meet hers, silently pleading for help. I watch the inner battle going on inside of her. I

watch as she turns and walks away, not saying a word.

CATEYE

Abby Greenberg

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Short Story

In the aftermath of Katie's death, taking in her cat really just seemed like the right thing to do. The cat that no one knew she'd had, but had just been there in her apartment after all was said and done. And Jesse said he'd take it. God knows why.

Jesse didn't really see himself as the nurturing type. His betta fish from first grade had died within a week, he was heavily supervised whenever in the presence of small children, and the cactus "living" on his windowsill said a lot about his ability to anticipate needs. So when he found out he'd be taking Kevin (which was the cat's name, and wasn't that just a Katie thing to do, name the cat like it was a freaking banker), he rushed out to the nearest Petco and had bought two bags of cat food, the cushiest looking bed he could find, various jingly toys, and a fat manual that read "CATS: FOR DUMMIES". The cashier had looked skeptical.

When Jesse brought Kevin home, after a brief inspection of his apartment during which Jesse felt embarrassed for not cleaning, the cat bounded to the armchair where Katie used to sit. Jesse now understood why the Egyptians thought cats were all that. Kevin walked in a circle on the chair and settled himself down, tail flicking idly as his eyes flashed in the light. Jesse wasn't really sure what to do for his new roommate, so he decided that leaving him be was the best option.

A week passed, then another, then three, and not much was changing in Jesse's life. Katie had died, and the only difference that seemed to have made was that Jesse's phone was now a little more silent, he no longer had standing Friday date nights, and he added "lint rollers" to his grocery list. Grieving, he found, was proving to be very unremarkable.

But, sometimes, Jesse would wake up crying. He'd had nightmares since he was nine. His parents had taken him to three different child psychiatrists, and all three assured them that this would pass with time. Really, Jesse just learned to cry quietly.

The worst part about the dreams used to be that he was always alone when he woke up. Then, there was Katie. Katie, with her kind eyes and the way she used to make tea so it tasted like something Queen of England would drink, even though it's just the Costco brand. She would quietly shake him awake, give him a soft kiss on the forehead, and make her way to the kitchen. She knew Jesse would follow when he was ready. And he always did. She'd sit in her armchair and he'd be on the couch and he would talk and she would listen and she

would just know, like no one else ever did. Now, he was alone again.

Usually he didn't remember his dreams, but the ones he did were now always about her. Tonight's dream was one he remembered. He'd woken up in his bed to sunlight streaming through his curtains and had heard someone in the bathroom. He'd looked, and there was Katie, hair done up and dressed for work, doing her eyeliner in his bathroom mirror. Her toothbrush had sat next to his by the sink. She'd caught his eye in the mirror and smiled, that smile that wrinkled her nose and made her eyes dance in the soft morning light. She'd walked over and climbed in bed next to him, and as his fingers had brushed her arm, he was back in his empty room with silent tears in his eyes.

He felt a furry head bump up against his chin, purring and trying to climb up his chest.

"Okay, Kev, okay..."

Jesse wiped his eyes and tucked the cat against his chest as he went to the kitchen. Kevin squirmed until Jesse put him down, and he immediately headed for the armchair that was now His Spot. Jesse sighed, and busied himself with making a cup of tea. He sat on the couch as he waited for the tea to steep.

"I just... I miss her, y'know?" Jesse started, voice scratchy from sleep. Kevin did nothing but stare. "I mean, I know that's not a novel statement or anything, but I just really miss her. Sometimes... sometimes I think she's gonna come back? Like, there are these moments now, where I've just kinda forgotten that she's gone. It's been nearly a

month and things are sort of back to normal now, and there are these spaces where she should be, but she's not. If that makes sense." Kevin gave an ambiguous mewl.

"And, I mean, that's what happens now, right? Forgetting. Like, yesterday? I couldn't remember what color her eyes were. I mean, I knew they were brown, but I couldn't remember what they look like. And I- I just can't forget the rest of her, y'know?" Jesse sniffed a bit, and curled his knees up onto the couch underneath him. He felt a push at his hand and he looked down at Kevin rubbing up against his leg. Jesse let his hand fall down onto the cat's head, scratching behind his ears as purrs vibrated his hand.

"That's what I dream about, now. Her eyes. Just looking at me. And they weren't really anything crazy special, y'know, they were just eyes, but... well they kinda looked like yours," Jesse said with surprise, as the cat looked up at him inquisitively. "Yeah... I've never actually seen a cat with brown eyes, I think." Kevin shifted a bit in his lap. "Well, I guess you're just special." Kevin purred again. "Yeah. You know."

Things were different after that night. Kevin and Jesse fell into an easy sort of routine. Jesse woke up in the morning to a cold nose nuzzling his face moments before his alarm went off. Jesse went to work. Jesse came home and Kevin jumped off of his chair and greeted him by rubbing fur all over Jesse's nice jeans. Jesse made dinner. Jesse watched TV on the couch and Kevin watched Jesse from the armchair. Jesse went to sleep with Kevin curled by his feet. And sometimes, Jesse woke up crying and Kevin sat and listened to him talk, the same way Katie did, but a little different. Actually,

Kevin did a lot of things the way Katie did.

He was a stickler about on-time laundry washing so that he could curl up in the hamper and rub cat hair all over the clean clothes. Katie had always nagged Jesse about doing laundry on time, especially because she really only had three good pairs of pants and needed them clean. Kevin seemed to enjoy Wes Anderson films best, and he despised Quentin Tarantino. Just last week when they were watching *PULP FICTION*, at the bit where Uma Thurman gets a nosebleed Kevin started yowling and ran off into the bedroom. Jesse was reminded of the time Katie and him watched this and she ranted about the anti-feminist rhetoric of Tarantino movies for half an hour. And, most glaring of all was the fact that, now that Jesse had noticed it, he was almost positive that Kevin actually *HAD KATIE'S EYES*. Which, when he thought about it, was terrifying.

And, the more he thought about it, the crazier he felt. Like, full-on bonkers. Because, there was no way his new adopted cat was his girlfriend reincarnated. No way. But Jesse really couldn't shake the feeling that something, *SOMETHING* was just the littlest bit off about Kevin. Just off enough to have traveled from the cat-realm to the dead-girlfriend-realm, and maybe when people told him *SHE'S STILL HERE WITH YOU*, they were hitting the nail a bit too hard on the head.

So, Jesse watched. He watched Kevin as he sat on the armchair, paws tucked underneath his chest, eyes half-lidded like he was tired. Watched as Kevin stuck his claws into the curtains and pulled at the threads for hours and hours until his curtains looked as if they were meant to be fringe at

the bottom. Watched as Kevin sat on the bathroom counter in front of the mirror, watched his eyes and sometimes tried to imagine them with eyeliner. Watched the way Kevin looked out the window, searching the street below them for someone, something.

"She's not coming back," Jesse said one day, during hour two of the window-watching. Kevin flicked an ear in response. "She's gone, Kev." The cat turned and fixed him with a look. Jesse rolled his eyes, and turned back into the kitchen. He gripped the edge of the counter. "She's not coming back," he repeated to himself, and he wondered if he'd actually said that aloud, if it mattered. Kevin was just a stupid cat.

"You're just a stupid cat, aren't you? Jesus," Jesse said, hitting his hands against the countertop. Kevin yowled indignantly at that and bounded into the kitchen, launching himself onto the counter where the remnants of Jesse's PB&J lunch lay strewn about.

"Yeah, okay, not stupid, but you know what I mean," Jesse said, throwing his hands up. Kevin looked at him. Flicked his tail. "God, crap" Jesse sighed with a whoosh of an exhale. He laid his forehead down on the cool counter, screwing his eyes shut. "This sucks. I mean, really. This... **SUCKS**." He felt a tickle of fur by his ear. He turned his head, and warm brown eyes stared back at him. A quiet meow.

"Yeah. You know."

MOONDUST

Amy Jiao

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Lee's Summit West High School, Lees Summit, MO
Educator: Melissa Searls

Category: Short Story

A starry, cloudless sky stretched overhead - a rarity for an autumn night in New England. Cecil treasured it all the same, drinking in the sight of glistening stars blinking above as they cracked open the rusted old window and soundlessly slipped out onto the dormitory roof ledge.

Cecil breathed as soon as they set foot on the the edge of the tiled roof. They firmly pressed their feet against the gutter and then gingerly laid back on the slope of the roof so as to prevent slippage. They were about to pull out their snack bag of carrots when they noticed a pair of legs dangling alongside their own.

"Argh!" Cecil shouted, limbs flying wildly. The intruder placed a reassuring hand on Cecil's knee, and a wave of calm spread through Cecil when they suddenly recognized those fingers. They stared at their friend's neutral face.

"What an utterly charming manner of greeting me," Amelia drawled in that familiar manner of hers. She smiled slightly, inquisitive. "Do you come here often?"

Cecil scowled, then exhaled and dropped their shoulders as Amelia rubbed their knee reassuringly. "I suppose you could say that."

Amelia hummed neutrally. "I wouldn't expect that from you. I assumed that you're a lone wolf who'd balk at any sort of obligation, much less adhere to a routine, but I suppose I was wrong."

Cecil crossed their arms, exhaling coolly. "Do I really come across like that to you, Amelia?"

Amelia didn't immediately answer. The oak boughs hugging the dormitory rattled in the wind, dry garden debris scattering across the roof with a harsh clamor. The frigid wind nipped at any exposed skin it could find. Cecil couldn't bear to look over at her, instead choosing to bury their face into their folded knees.

"Yuna," Amelia began.

"**CECIL**," Cecil corrected, grimacing.

There was a pause.

"Alright," Amelia nodded affirmatively. "Cecil."

Cecil braced, awaiting the moment where Amelia would surely withdraw her hand. They had imagined Amelia recoiling in disgust when Cecil confessed their true name to her. Perhaps this was the moment where Amelia would finally recognize how different she and Cecil really were.

And yet, Amelia's hand remained perched on Cecil's knee.

Amelia leaned closer to Cecil and gestured at Cecil's carrot bag with her other hand.

"Could you please share some of your carrots with me, Cecil? I'm positively starving."

Cecil stared at Amelia as if she'd grown a new head. Was confessing their true identity to their only friend really that easy?

"Please stop staring at me like that," Amelia quirked an eyebrow. "If we're planning to sit out here for a while, you may as well be a dear and share your food with me. Come on."

Cecil extended their crumpled plastic baggie of baby carrots towards Amelia. Amelia delicately took several carrots between her fingers, and as Cecil retracted the baggie their hands brushed briefly with a spark of warmth.

"What's the matter?" Amelia asked around a mouthful of carrot. Cecil hadn't realized that they'd retracted their hand as if they'd touched a hot stove.

"Nothing," Cecil said tersely, turning away.

For a while the only sound to be heard was Amelia's loud chewing. Cecil hadn't recognized just how gross of an eater Amelia was during the past year or so of their burgeoning friendship. Somehow, that knowledge felt intimate to Cecil, forbidden even.

Or maybe they were looking too far into things.

"You enjoy astronomy, Cecil? You're the head of the astronomy club, after all."

"Yeah, I do," Cecil replied tepidly. "I've always loved the night sky ever since I was a kid. I guess I'm pretty passionate about stars."

Amelia hummed pleasantly. "That's interesting to know. Personally, I'm more of a literature person. I'm out here because I couldn't fall asleep after finishing our assigned book for English. The lovely view is only an incidental, if fortunate, coincidence." She smiled slightly. Her eyes seemed to glitter with stars when she met Cecil's gaze. "I do think it'd be brill if I could learn more about stargazing, however. Could you teach me more about the stars sometime?"

"I'd be glad to," Cecil said, attempting to sound as noncommittal as possible in the face of Amelia's gorgeous grey eyes. Knowing their feelings and Amelia's sharp intuition, however, secrecy wasn't possible.

They fell into awkward silence once more. Cecil felt a little bad that they were such a poor conversation partner, but to be fair they hadn't spoken like this to anyone in years - not since their dad vanished all those years ago during a hike to the summit of Mauna Kea. Normally they would've fled from this sort of personal one-on-one conversation at the first opportunity, but something about Amelia and the weather kept Cecil's feet firmly planted on the edge of the gutter.

"Cecil, Cecil, Cecil," Amelia murmured, rolling their name around on her tongue like hard candy. "I never knew that was your name. I think I like it better than Yuna, though, since it belongs squarely to you and you alone. Does that mean you use they/them pronouns, then?"

Cecil flinched, startled. "Yeah. I'd love it if you could use those pronouns for me from now on."

"Sounds alright with me. I think those

pronouns sound very 'you'. 'Cecil' is a really pretty name, too." She sighed.

"I'm really glad you opened up like this to me, Cecil. We are friends, after all." Her voice was soft.

Cecil flushed. Out of all of the things they'd expected to happen once they'd exited the metaphorical closet, unconditional acceptance was definitely not one of them. That made one secret of Cecil's which was now known to one person - and, if Cecil were more open about their feelings, the only person they were willing to share said secret with at the moment.

Amelia finished the last of her carrots with a loud gulp. She placed her hand on Cecil's shoulder. "May I have some more ?"

"Sure." Cecil extended their baggie of carrots once more, and this time Amelia secured her hands around Cecil's in order to reach to the bottom of the baggie. She leaned closer as she wormed the last few carrots out of their packaging. Cecil's breath hitched.

They were so close. If Cecil leaned in further, their lips could touch.

And yet, they drew away.

No. They weren't ready to leap across that chasm quite yet. These tenuous moments they shared were already intimate enough for friends.

Just friends.

Cecil turned back towards the sky, contemplating the sodium orange glow of the school campus against the horizon, soaking in the luminous white aura of the stars above. Celestial bodies moved along

predestined arcs in the sky every day and night, constantly shifting so that no one night sky would be the same as the next.

Perhaps, the time they spent underneath a rare autumn sky would stay between them and them only, secrets kept by fickle stars.

BLINDNESS

Ethan Kalishman

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs
School, Saint Louis, MO
Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

No one asked me if I wanted to be born nine months after my mother fucked that bartender. But because her birth control lost to conception, God delivered me to her door, wrapped in a pretty satin bow on my birthday. There was no return policy. I was a cosmic mistake, and she made sure I knew it each day of my life.

God left a signature when he abandoned me – a reminder of her sin. It was a repugnant smudge, round and tinged with brown, living right above the bridge of my nose. I gave it plenty of attention whenever I passed by my mirror to brush my teeth, use the toilet, put on my clothes or comb my hair, and it haunted me with its tiny black hairs sprouting from its surface. Sometimes, I saw a

savage beast, violent and enraged at the world. Other times, I came across an ogre, whose beauty was only rivaled by that of a slug. Once, when I was shaving, I saw a moult, but the image flitted away when I drew blood. And because my mind ran unfettered each night during my sleep, the mark and my mother both followed me to my internal realm, too. When she was alive, she never gave me so much as a look (perhaps she feared that I'd spread my ugliness). Funny how she never realized we were the same. After all, I was contrived from her sin.

My mother wasn't the only one who abhorred me and my mark. It also drew the ire of my classmates in school, as they whipped jump ropes at my face, using the smudge as a target (I have scars to prove how often they hit the bullseye). In high school, I spent my time isolated. No one, it turned out, wanted to be friends with a sinful ogre. So when I was caught with crack – the only companion the mark could attract – I was kicked out of school. Eventually, legal drugs the shrink gave me became my only confidant. Everyone else just called me **BASTARD BOY**. And there I was: a stupid, young bastard boy.

So I decided to leave my companions behind, and I stopped taking my Zoloft. My energy did not need to be conditioned or controlled; rather, it needed to be transferred and refocused. If I could open a door for the world to see the real me – if I separated myself from the ugliness of my mother – all of that sin could be left in the past. I needed to look the part of normal. If there's anything the world had taught me, after all, it was that appearance is the only thing that matters. Determined, I ditched the pills in favor of smoothies, fitness trackers and workouts. The weights and protein would

lead me to success in marathons, victories in bike races, swim records and CrossFit championships. Despite my grand achievements, no one wrote about me. No one talked about me. I'm sure none of them even thought about me. I obviously had no value. It was the mark. It had to be. With it, I was forced to pay the eternal price for my mother's sin.

It had to go.

I applied to partake in university dermatology studies. I'd give myself to scientific research! None of my calls were returned. I tried the traditional route. Doctors wouldn't remove the mark, because the necessary procedure would take an eye. **BEST TO LEAVE IT BE**, they said, barely glancing in my direction. Three doctors later, each more specialized than the last, came to the same conclusion: **IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE**.

I went back to my old habits, before the doctors, before the smoothies. I picked up the meds. But my mother never left my mind. I avoided my bathroom mirror. I stopped brushing my teeth. I couldn't go to the bathroom. I removed the glass from my closet wall. Sold my TVs—even television screens have a reflection.

SILENCE.

But the curiosity was impossible to ignore. The mark burned down my face and into my heart with a passion stronger than all of my hate, more passionate than the feelings of detestation thrown at me. Even though I couldn't see it, I knew it was there.

I touched it one day. Like a wave, buzzing, spindle-like intensity swelled as it rolled off of the mark, reaching my toes, fingertips and forehead alike. That's something ridiculous

about pain; it confuses the brain, and after a while, you forget about what real agony feels like. And that was progress. Because as I manipulated the mark more and more, I began to realize something: I contained the power to rid myself of my imperfection. So I pressed harder. Pressure worked the first time. But harder wasn't enough.

I stopped chewing on my nails only to be able to break them on my mark instead, yearning to draw even a droplet of blood. And when I imbibed the deep red liquid, the natural salt nourished my head; the drink was dizzying, better than any other drug. But the feeling was fleeting, and my old skin grew back; nails weren't enough. I kept scratching, kept trying, so I could at least make a cut, leave a scar, mask my ugliness. No one would know the mark was ever there. Only, while my nails continued to crack, they couldn't grow faster than my face could heal.

I turned to something harder. Knives were practically indestructible. I could make a small incision whenever I needed one. I started keeping one in my pocket, right next to my wallet. I made sure that I never cut anything besides the mark. Pain was no problem. I'd felt pain. The despair of failure, though, loomed and lingered over me with each slice. My knives grew dull, and my skin grew tough like rubber. I longed for a permanent wound.

The search for the perfect tool became my weekly ritual. One day, during my Sunday run at the store, a neon sign, swaying from the air of a nearby fan, caught my eye: **50% OFF ON ALL ELECTRIC TOOLS**. The mark screamed in excitement, pulling me towards the sign, drawing me closer to the aisle. We were singularly focused. We'd never tried an **ELECTRIC** tool before. Pressing and

holding a button down seemed far easier than cutting, sawing, digging – wasting calories away. And a drill never dulled. \$50. That was it. No one gave me any looks as I left the store today, unlike the time last month when I brought home ten knives.

Throwing open the door to my home, I dropped everything, save for the box holding my newest addition to the family. Snatching my already exposed box-cutter from a nearby cabinet, I tore apart the packaging, and inside of the protective wrapping rested the drill in all of its glory. Like a beacon, the light of my bathroom ceiling flickered on, so I heeded its call. I had picked up a mirror at the store, too, and as I faced myself, I placed it back on its former throne of glory. As I let the needle head spiral, the drill's trigger made music to my ears; things didn't frighten me anymore. At first, the drill created a new sensation, but the familiar feeling of pleasure instinctively unlatched my jaw, giving my teeth a reflection from the shiny new metal of the drill. **CONTACT.** **PRESSURE.** Flakes of skin began to fly away, faster and faster until they turned darker and darker from exposed blood – drifting to the floor like snowflakes on a beautiful winter day. It was finally working. It was finally working! Only, I thought of those doctors. What if...? Teeth chattering, I blinked, slower with deliberation. **PAUSE.** Nevertheless, I persisted, pushing back against my reservations, pressing harder and harder through my flesh until there was no more. At that point, the pain reverberating through my skull became synonymous with joy. My vision began to blur as my eyes lost their control and focus, and the drill pushed further into where the mark had laid. Then... one eye went dark. Hands shaking, my legs lost their grip on the floor, and the drill faltered as I stumbled in reaction. The other eye lost focus. My fingers never loosened their grip on

the trigger. I felt my body crumble and clump on the red-stained linoleum. The only thing I heard was the continued ebullient whirl of metal joining forces with bone. At last, I severed the sin from my soul.

THE VISION

Benjamin Kazdan

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs
School, Saint Louis, MO
Educator: Jackie Gross

Category: Short Story

With a constant beat, icy rain pounded the roof. I wasn't used to being home alone. The wind moaned and shrieked, rattling the window frames. The slim, naked limbs of the trees swayed and snapped as they prayed to a foreboding sky of scudding clouds. I sat alone by the blazing fire whose light cast malevolent shapes on the walls, and threw the windows into an inky black contrast. Jenny, my old dog, enfeebled by arthritis and stricken with cataracts, lay motionless on the sofa, oblivious to the eeriness around her. My parents were far away, attending a bat mitzvah in Toronto. In their absence, dirty pots and pans were scattered atop the kitchen counters, and an air of neglect and emptiness ached throughout the house.

My much anticipated freedom was turning into a lonely evening, as none of my friends would venture out in the storm. I headed down the basement steps,

planning to watch a movie —**ANYTHING** to break the silence. As I descended, my long, scrawny shadow was thrown in front of me. Its dark reflection undulated down the stairs and up the facing wall. Something about its movement seemed strange-- unnatural almost. I stepped backwards; the shadow paused, just as I expected. Reassured, and feeling foolish for having been scared of my own shadow, I descended the rest of the steps and flicked on the comforting light of the TV whose corner was chewed off by the younger, more vibrant dog I used to know. Paradoxically, a thick darkness surrounded me as I bathed in the warm light of my television. Despite the comfort of my TV, I attempted to contact a couple of friends once more.

I texted my friend Matt, hoping he might be available to play video games. I stared at the screen...The three dots flickered in the text bubble on my phone and then vanished. I started looking through the movie selection when my phone vibrated. On the screen was an single image of myself texting Matt. I quickly spun around, but my surroundings lay undisturbed. Unnerved, I started to text a "that's not funny" message but with the first strike of my thumb on the keyboard, more images kept coming. Heart pounding, I hit the home button to no avail. The entire screen filled with pictures of myself. I turned the phone off and ran out of the basement. As I ascended the stairs, I noticed my shadow moving faster than I was, but I tried to ignore it in my panic, convinced that my mind was just playing tricks on me

I resorted to childish sayings to soothe my nerves. "You cannot fear what you cannot see" I said as I switched off my phone. After a soothing cup of warm milk, I went upstairs to go to bed. The storm had mercifully passed and the moon cast pale, ghostly

beams through the window of my room. I moved to close the curtains but paused at the window and caught my breath. There in the cul-de-sac, a shadowy figure glided down the hill. As I watched, it stopped and turned to face me. I moved behind my curtain, desperate to evade its glare. It moved in the same direction, tucking itself behind a tree. I leaned forward slightly, and the apparition followed. I moved back behind the curtain and as I did, I was surprised to hear my mother's old music box playing "It had to be you." I walked to the adjoining room to shut the lid, but the music started to jangle discordantly and before I could reach to shut the box there was a click as the lid snapped down. The music stopped.

I clasped my clammy palms together and started praying. "Shema Yisrael, Shema Yisrael, Hear, O Israel: the LORD our G-d, the LORD is one," but the words were trapped in my throat. Leaning bit by bit into the window to see further up the street, I initially perceived nothing; then suddenly I started as the shadow outside the window rapidly leaned toward me. Its mouth gaped and cackled hideously as I stumbled, panicked and terrified, and fell back into the room.

The shadow's words swam through my head, spoken from behind the glass, as it perched on the dead flowers of the window box. "**BEN, YOU CANNOT FEAR WHAT YOU CANNOT SEE. YOU SAID SO YOURSELF. I AM THE BETTER YOU—THE SMARTER, THE FASTER. I AM ALWAYS AT YOUR SIDE WATCHING YOUR PITIFUL STRUGGLES, YOUR BLUNDERING ATTEMPTS AT LIFE.**" "What do you want?" I screamed. "Why won't you leave me alone?"

"**QUITE SIMPLY, BECAUSE I CAN'T. OUR DESTINIES ARE FOREVER LINKED. UNLESS...**"

"Unless what? Tell me."

"**UNLESS I HAVE SIGHT. I CANNOT GO**

FAR WITHOUT VISION. YOU MUST GIVE ME YOUR EYES."

I closed the blackout curtains around the shadow's form and turned off all the lights. I crept along the passage to the shower but tripped over Jenny in the dark. She continued meandering placidly upstairs, guided by smell and oblivious to the scene. As I stumbled, I intuitively flicked on the passage light.

My shadow morphed from my feet and grew down the passage. It spread in front of Jenny who sat on the carpet, panting slightly. I watched with fascinated horror as my shadow stroked her head and lovingly graced her eyes. I charged at my shadow, wanting to protect Jenny from its evil designs. I swiped at it but it was insubstantial, ephemeral, and I heard its diabolical laughter flow between the walls as our fight played out in a ludicrous pantomime on the wall.

"I CANNOT BE DESTROYED. YOU WOULD HAVE TO KILL YOURSELF AND YOU WILL NOT DO THAT," it mocked me. I reached back and killed the light.

I fumbled down the now dark passage, machiavellian laughter echoing in my head. Panic surged as I struggled to reach our landline and call my best friend, Nick.

"Nick!" I gulped breathlessly into the phone, "you gotta help me. My shadow..following..."

"Ben...you're making no sense. Of course your shadow follows you... it's your shadow." As I spoke with Nick, my shadow dialed random numbers, interrupting the conversation with beeps.

"Go away," I screamed.

"Ben, what the hell?!"

"It won't leave me alone," I managed to choke out between my short rapid breaths.

"Ben calm down..." His words faded into white noise as I saw it doubled over on the

wall, its maniacal laughter still mocking me.

"Nick come help me, please hurry," I pleaded between sobs of anger and fear. I glanced up quickly, only to discover the shadow had somehow dissolved through my blurred visual concoction of cold sweat and burning tears. My eyes burned.

After what seemed like an eternity, I heard the doorbell chime invitingly. I cautiously made my way down the stairs and to the front hall. Once I finally reached the sturdy oak front door, I struggled to make out Nick's identity through the frosted glass. I switched on the front door light and eagerly swung open the door, only to be met with the faceless shadow. Its long amorphous tendrils reached towards me, and my left arm mercifully hit the light switch. I know what he wants. I can't fight this. I can't. Help me.

YOU CAN'T FEAR WHAT YOU CAN'T SEE. YOU CAN'T FEAR WHAT YOU CAN'T SEE. I

repeated it like a religious mantra. Shortly afterward, my heart had returned to a steady beat. My land line's harsh ring sliced the tranquil silence.

"Nick?" I feebly whispered into the receiver. "Yeah, I'm outside. It's freezing. Can I come in?" he said. I could hear his teeth chattering.

"Of course, the front door is unlocked and if my vision last served me correctly, I'm in my room," I declared.

"Okay, sounds good. You sound less distraught."

"You know what they say," I responded.

"You can't fear what you can't see."

I heard Nick's footsteps on the stairs.

"Nick, I'm in here."

"Ben, what is wrong with you? What have you done?" Nick yelled, aghast.

"Why would you do this? We need to get you to the hospital," he said, grabbing me.

"Nick, Nick, can you see my shadow?" I

demanded.

"No Ben, I don't see your shadow. Just mine."

"That's great, Nick. You can't fear what you can't see."

Epilogue: I dialed 911 and sat with my friend, Ben. As the ambulance pulled into the driveway, I guided his stiff body down the winding staircase. When we passed the large, rectangular mirror in the hall, I started. I could have **SWORN** I saw Ben's large, hazel eyes blink at me from the shadows.

WINDOW

Mia McKinney

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Central High School,
Saint Joseph, MO

Educator: Kyla Ward

Category: Short Story

Imagine a large wide open window. The night is cool and silent. You're just sitting in your room, staring out the window. Your phone goes off and light pours out into the dark room. You reach across your bed to grab it. It's your boyfriend, his sharp grey Chevy pickup is parked outside. You look out the big window and hold up a single index finger. You quietly tiptoe to the window and carefully take the screen off. You set it inside and climb out as stealthily as possible. You close the window very carefully, cautious not to make even the slightest of a sound. You climb down the tree branch that leads from the rooftop.

You sprint across the wide open lawn and hop in the truck. He drives away, you looking at the glimmering open window as you pass.

Imagine a robber. Someone dressed in a deep black outfit with a large backpack running away from your street as you're driving home from work. As you approach your house, you notice this suspicious man. You park your car and get out cautiously. You realize the shattered glass all over your front porch. The window next to your door is completely open and bare. You call the police immediately, your whole body shaking. They come, look around, you file the police report, and you head into your empty, violated house. You notice your laptop and camera that you left sitting on your table are missing. Before you search for any other stolen items, you grab a broom and dustpan. You start to sweep up the broken pieces of the window.

Imagine it's a warm and sunny day. The type of day where you just can't feel sad. You're in your house and you have all the blinds and windows open. Everything feels cozy and bright. As you start to clean your room, you set the plants closer to your open windows, so the sun can shine through onto them. You notice some of your bigger plants have been wilting sadly. You spray some water on them and let them absorb the sunlight. As the sun sets, you start to close the windows and shut the blinds. When you go to put the plants back, you can tell they're healthy and standing taller than ever before. You move one away slightly, but still, leave it near the wide window, so it will always be able to stand tall.

Imagine a little girl who lives in a house on Mango Street. She had a grandmother long ago. Her grandmother was extremely unhappy with her marriage, trapped

somewhere she couldn't stand to be. This woman spent her whole life sitting, staring out a window. Other women on the street who are also unhappily stuck in marriages, sit staring out of the closed off the windows. They look down on the street, looking at all the free people. All the people who are young and alive and can be themselves. The little girl can see them through the windows, as they can see her. She promises to never become one of them. She never wants to be stuck, staring out a window.

The window set in front of you is real. You could choose to open it and climb out. This would set you free, temporarily. Letting all worries go and escaping. Perhaps you'd want to use that very window to your advantage. Smash it, and let yourself take over. No one can stop you then, and you get what you want. That's not the only way you could use it to benefit off of. Open the window up. Breathe in the cool air that gushes in. Let the warm sunshine hit your face, and grow off of it. Absorb the energy from the open window. You could always let the window take advantage of you. Sit and stare out of it. You chose not to touch it, not to open it. You're trapped, and you could do something, but you chose not to. You stay unhappy and sit there, just staring out of the window. Whatever you chose to do with the window is all on you. It's right there, sitting in front of you.

PICK SIX

Mason Millerd

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Platte City Middle

School, Platte City, MO

Educator: Laura Hoefling

Category: Short Story

This was it. The play of the game. We were down by three, and they were in the red zone with two minutes left in the game. Thankfully, they were going for the touchdown to seal the deal, which meant we had a chance to force a turnover, but they could change their mind in the next play. We could not take any chances. We had to act aggressively.

"Junior! You're covering Cruz. Think you can handle that?" My coach was a bit of a wildcard, and you never knew where you were going or whom you were covering.

"Yeah!" I yelled back. Tony Cruz was the second string wide receiver, but he was faster than lightning, so I had a daunting task covering him.

We got into position, and the quarterback bent down behind the center. "Ready! Set, hut!" Cruz took off, and I was right behind him. Suddenly, I see his eyes light up. I looked up and saw the ball bulleting toward me, and I naturally put my hands up. Then I jumped for the ball, and I miraculously caught it!

"Run! Run, Kris, run!" I looked back, and I saw that my friend was running to get in front of me, and I realized I had to get away from the other team because these people on the field weren't built to tackle me - except for the linemen, but they weren't catching me. I darted forward and cut across through the middle to dodge the other wide receiver, then I was basically home free!

"Go down! Go down!" My coach was screaming his head off, and I looked at the clock. It didn't have any runoff at the start of the play, so it still had one minute and thirty seconds left in the game, which meant if I

went into the end zone and scored, the other team would still have time to get a few plays in. If I went down near the goal line, then that would risk the game, but we would run down the clock before trying to get the touchdown, sealing the deal for us. Even though I wanted this pick six, I let the guy behind me take me down for the team.

"Atta boy! Thanks for listening!"

"No problem," I said back to Coach.

"Hey! I know that must've been hard for you, but we need to run the clock so the Eagles don't get barely a chance. Just for that, I'm putting you on offense!" Coach had a little bit of a southern accent.

"Really?" I tried out for offense, but I liked being defense better. Although, I have always wanted to score a touchdown as an intended receiver, so this was big news to me.

"You better get out there! They're 'bout to start. I'll trade you out with Anthony. Anthony!" He called Anthony over, and I was in the formation!

I was supposed to run for a couple steps then cut left, still going to the end zone. "Ready! Set, hut hut!" I followed exactly what Brad, the quarterback, told me to do, and I was open! The ball started sailing to me, and it was a high pass. I jumped up and struggled with a defender that popped up and tried to rip it away from me, but I had the same goal, but a better advantage. I finally won our little battle and had possession of the ball!

"Yes! Yes!"

"Woo!"

"Let's go!"

My teammates started picking me up, and I did nothing to stop them. After all, who would not want to look glorious after getting the first touchdown of their season, which so happened to be the winning score? Not me! "Guys, guys! We still have a football game to finish!" I said, forgetting we didn't run the whole clock out and still had twelve seconds

left. Still, I literally got carried back to the sidelines before I was finally put down.

"Nice job!" Yelled Coach. "But we still need you on defense."

We finished off the Eagles pretty easily, still giving us a moderate scare with a little back and forth play when receiving the kick. But we won! That meant we clinched the finals and, no matter what, are heading to the playoffs! I made a mental note in my head to never forget this night.

Later that night, we decided to have a celebratory dinner at basically everyone's favorite diner, Ferdinand's Steakburgers.

Once we got settled into our seats, Brad stood on his chair. "I just wanted to say, we're in the freakin' playoffs!" Everyone cheered and whistled since it was late and practically no one was there. "We couldn't have gotten there, though, without every single one of you guys. I'm looking at you, interception-leader!" Everyone looked at me and cheered. Then someone started a chant, and then it got to everyone yelling it.

"Speech, speech, speech, speech!" I got up and said, "All right, all right. I'll give you a speech. I wasn't the only one who made a fantastic catch this year, or an interception this year. I wouldn't, couldn't, be here without all of you, from the linemen to the running back, from the linebackers to the corners, we did this as a team! Cheers to the Midwestern Football Association leaders!"

Everyone put up their cups and in unison cheered in agreement. It was a fun night, and it lasted for about two hours before we started leaving because Ferdinand's was closing. Anthony was carpooling with me, so he got in the passenger's seat while I drove. "Where's your car?" I teased him.

"Shut up!" He said while punching me in the

arm. "It's not my fault my parents don't trust me!"

"Yeah, it kinda is."

"Whatever."

Anthony and I were the best of friends since kindergarten when I was so shy I sometimes forgot the teacher's name because I barely talked to her. But Anthony saw me and immediately asked, "Wanna be friends?"

Me, being the dumb kindergartner without limits said, "Yeah, sure." Now we were seniors, with him as a wide receiver and I a cornerback, but still best friends all the same.

I dropped him off at his house and went a few blocks down the road to my own. "Mom! Dad! I'm home!" They were probably already asleep, so I went to my room and marveled at my dad's trophies in my room. He was one of the best quarterbacks in Kentucky and had the trophies to prove it. "Mittele Award: Most Yards Passed in a Season," one of the trophies read. "For throwing the most touchdowns in a season, you get the Archer Award," said another. There were about twenty trophies in here, ordered from oldest to newest. His most prized award - it's even in a trophy case - isn't even a trophy. It is just a little plaque stating that: "National high school record for most yards passed in a career goes to Kris Martin, Sr. For this and many other reasons, we have decided to put you in the NHSHF." National High School Hall of Fame. The only thing I remember from that day was the smile my dad had on his face; it was probably one of the few times I've seen him smile. I put that memory to sleep, and my body did the same.

After school was over, I got to practice and started stretching. I was early, as usual, and the only other one there was Anthony.

We were always the first ones there, and the last ones to leave. We started warming up, then Coach came out and said, "Practice is canceled."

"Why?" I asked. Practice was never canceled. Coach would always make us tough it out, even if it was raining, even if it was over one hundred degrees out, the only exception was lightning. Yet here he was, telling us that we needed to pack our stuff up and leave, even when it was sixty-two out with clear skies.

"No time to explain right now. Just get your stuff and leave. And do so quietly!"

I couldn't believe my ears, but nobody argued with Coach. "Come on Anthony. Follow Coach's orders."

"What was that about?" Anthony asked once we were out of earshot.

"Why would I know? Maybe it's something personal."

"Dude, I need all the practice I can get, though."

"Don't know what to tell you."

"I cannot wait for the game today!" Said Khalil, the running back. To be honest, I totally forgot it was the homecoming game, but our school always had a late homecoming. All my friends say I would be the homecoming king for sure, but I always denied it. I was hoping for it, though.

It was five minutes before the school got out. Once it did, the football players would go to the locker room to get dressed, then stay in there until it was time to introduce the players. No one could wait.

"And now, here are your division leaders: the Huntersville Lioncats!"

Lights blared in my eyes as we ran out onto the field, hyping everyone up in the process. We were not here to disappoint.

"And now, your homecoming king, Kris Martin!"

The whole place erupted, and everyone was yelling my name: "Kris! Kris! Kris!" I don't know if I've ever smiled that much before, but I definitely absorbed the moment.

The principal let everything die down before he named the homecoming queen. "And your homecoming queen is, Jen Stelling!" I immediately blushed. She was the type of girl that was obviously the popular girl, but she didn't boast about it. She was friends with everyone, not just the popular group, which made me admire her. She ascended gracefully up the stairs to the platform and took my hand. I became ten degrees hotter immediately. "Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!" I've never kissed a girl before, believe it or not, but I've also never fallen in love. Until now. I never thought I would kiss someone this popular. This is a memory I will never let go of.

Anthony waited outside, while I was still a little woozy. I had a long night. First, I had one of the best games of my short football career. Then, I kissed the most popular girl in the school, then she actually asked if we wanted to go out somewhere after today. Jen never asks boys out. She never has found a boy she liked. That is why I got even happier than most people would think I would get over a girl asking me out.

"Hurry up, Kris! My mom told me to be at home by 1," Anthony was getting a little impatient. I looked at my watch, and it said 12:15 A.M.

"Alright, alright. I just have to get some gas on the way as well."

We pulled up to the gas station, and I went inside to tell the cashier I was at pump number four.

"Okay. You're all ready to--"
POW!

I looked back, and I saw some guy next to my car. "What was that?" I wondered. I started walking toward the car, but then the guy started running away as if he was running away from some police. "Hey!" I started giving chase, but then I looked in my car. There was blood oozing from Anthony. "ANTHONY! HELP! SOMEBODY HELP! MY FRIEND'S BEEN SHOT!"

It had been a tough, tough week.

I was out of school for three days, and those were the most emotional three days of my short life. Anthony, my most trusted and best friend I could ever ask for, was now in a coffin. And it was all my fault.

My gaze swept over to the little mound of cards at the foot of my bed. "Sorry for your loss." "Get better soon." "I couldn't imagine what you are going through right now." "Hey, Kris. You gotta get out of bed. You need to get back to school before there's gonna be a mound of homework right next to your cards," my dad said. "You can't stay in here forever. The real world doesn't stop for you."

"It was my fault. All of it! If I didn't go to the gas station, if I didn't leave the car, he would still be alive if it weren't for me, going to the closest gas station instead of the best one!" I screamed back.

"Come on. How could you have known if there was gonna be a shooter in the area?"

"I don't wanna go to school. I don't wanna even see anyone right now. I don't think I wanna live." At the sound of that, my dad left the room. I don't think I was lying. I

looked down at my hands and thought if I only I knew! I put my head in them and wept some more.

When I finally did go back to school, I felt out of place. Everyone looked at me, but no one said anything. But they all had the same look. Then I thought, I couldn't be the only one that lost a best friend, right? But when I thought about it, it was obvious that Anthony's only real best friend was none other than me.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Jen said sympathetically. "He must've meant everything to you."

"He did," I mumbled.

"Is there anything I could do for you? I want to help you."

I've never been here before, where I'm the one who needs help, but right now, I do need it. I just don't know what type of help. "I don't know."

"Well, you have my number. Call me if you ever need me. I know I can't be like Anthony, and I never want to be known as the replacement of him, but that doesn't mean I can't step up and be the friend you need right now."

That was the thing that made me smile for the first time in days. I didn't even know Jen that well, but, at the moment, it felt like I knew her since I was born. And I liked that feeling.

"All guests that are here right now, please stand in respect for our lost one. Anthony was an athletic, talented, beloved, smart, young man. He had no enemies, many friends, and a drive for success. He died on October 21,

2018, due to blood loss from a gunshot wound in his neck. Born in 2000, he was only 18 years old. Let that sink in for a moment. He didn't even get a chance to live a fourth of what could've been his life, as opposed to some of you in here."

Anthony's funeral was solemn and quiet, going by at a snail's pace. I didn't mind, though. This would be for him, and for it to go by quick, you would not remember as much. I was one of the few to go with the coffin all the way from Kentucky to southeast Georgia, where he originated from until his father got a new, better job here in Huntersville. I don't know what I would do without him, but I still had a life to live, and if it were him, I know that he would press on. He would press on so he could be helpful for other people who needed it. I made a vow to myself, stating that I would live on for him and what he would do.

Fourth quarter. Two minutes and fifty seconds left on the clock. We were up by two, but the Cardinals had the ball with a lot of time on their hands. After all I've been through, I couldn't lose the championship. The quarterback got into shotgun position, so I backed up a little, expecting a pass. "Three eighty-five! Three eighty-five! Set, hut!"

He dropped back, and we were doing zone coverage, but the Cardinals were playing a trick and going with a short pass. Their top receiver, Steele, caught the ball with ease and broke away from the defender, but I shut down anything he was planning to do. The Cardinals ran the clock down to two minutes and played another short pass, but this time the ball fell to the ground, incomplete. The clock stopped at one fifty-six. Second and ten, with the ball spotted on the forty-five-yard line, on our

side.

“Ready! Set, hut!”

They ran the ball up the middle, but no gain. There was nobody in the backfield now. The Cardinals seemed to be doing a Hail Mary. There’s still one fifteen on the clock once they started the play. I wasn’t complaining, though. A Hail Mary is easy to cover, as long as you have many safeties.

The quarterback got the ball once again and was looking deep. He chucked the ball into the night sky, and the whole championship was on the line. I jumped up for the ball, and I caught it! I landed on my feet, looked around, then started booking it across the field. I caught it around the ten-yard line on our own side. Thankfully, that was the only thing I had to worry about, as none of the guys behind me could catch me. I sealed the game with one last touchdown, one of my greatest pick-sixes ever.

“Yes, man!”

“Woo!”

“Unbelievable!”

I looked up in the sky. “This is for you, Anthony.” I pointed at it, and I felt like there was someone pointing right back at me from up there. I ran all the way across the field, and even went into the stands to find Anthony’s parents, and I gave the ball to them. We looked at each other for a long time, and then I nodded and headed back down to the team.

“Thank you,” Anthony’s dad said, tearing up. “I’ll never forget you.”

SOMETHING BORROWED, SOMETHING NEW

Mallory Morgan

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Robidoux Middle
School, Saint Joseph, MO
Educator: Kelsey Davis

Category: Short Story

The sharp blades shook in her hands. She’s done this before, why is it so hard for her now? Maybe it’s because this time she’s going somewhere important. Her other hand gripped the small ponytail that started just below her chin. Tears ran down her face but she quickly wiped them off, being careful about the scissors close to her face.

“Calm down,” the girl spoke to herself in the mirror. She took a deep breath and sawed her scissors through the thick clump of hair. Strands, thick and thin, fell onto the cheap motel bathroom tile. She didn’t even take a moment to breath before she started gnawing the blades on the second ponytail. When she finished, she looked in the mirror. Her once elbow length hair was now a choppy, chin length mess. She tried to salvage the ends by taking the scissors and cutting upwards. Once she was done she flicked the hair off of her shoulders and swept the hair off of the floor and into the trash.

She looked into the mirror one more time to cherish her natural hair color before ripping open the box of black hair dye. Her eyes swiped to the clock hanging on the wall and her actions sped up. The girl only bothered to put the gloves on because she wanted everyone to think that the black hair was natural. She hurried and placed the dye in her blonde roots and made her way down. Normally, when she dyed her hair it took about two bottles, but now with her new cut, she barely used half. She waited 20 minutes before rinsing it out in the sink. The girl tossed it around before putting in a pair of bright blue contacts. She also slipped on some fake, thick rimmed glasses and started cleaning the bathroom. Once she made sure it looked like no one had been there, she grabbed her backpack that was laying on the dirty bed and looked around the motel room. She had been there for a mere hour before she was leaving. She was always leaving.

The girl left the motel room better than when she got there. Her heart raced as she stepped outside. Even though it was dark, she felt as though a spotlight was pointing directly on her. She climbed onto her motorcycle and buckled her helmet on. She dug through her bag to find her fake ID and her licence and registration. Once she was one-hundred percent sure she had everything, she started her engine and pulled out of her parking spot and onto the highway. Here she was again. New hair, new name, new identity. Everything planned out. Her new self could answer any question, and even have a story about it. She knows what she's doing. She has to make sure that they won't find her.

The stench of cigarette smoke filled the small car, making the rolled up windows fog up. She was born a week ago and her parents were already done with her. Her car seat wasn't installed correctly or even clean.

"We could leave her somewhere?" The mother figure rasped, a lit cigar held close to her face. The father shook his head.

"That would be inhuman Melissa. The girl's only a few days old."

"Well then what are we going to do with her?" Melissa scoffed and rolled her eyes, rolling the window down a smidge so the butt of her cigar would float away. The baby started crying which made the father look in his rear-view mirror. He was about to pull over before his wife stopped him.

"There's no need, she'll calm down eventually."

Cars were never her thing. She always preferred her bike. She felt like cars were too stuffy and loud. The girl's bike never changed, even though everything else about her did. No matter what hair color, eye color or name, she always had the same bike. The girl was getting close to Virginia's state line and she was getting nervous. Her bike slowed down to a stop and she set her right leg on the ground, fishing out her "licence." Stopping meant they could catch up to her which made the girl constantly turn to see if they were behind her.

It was her turn to be checked and she held the piece of plastic up to the man, along with her \$20. The man held the licence next to her face. He squinted his eyes at the card, then at her. She was starting to get nervous but of course she didn't let it show.

"Okay, Emma. Enjoy Virginia," the man smiled at her and signaled his co-workers to let her through. "Emma" kicked up the brake and started the engine, smiling to the man as she drove by. She was meeting someone here and she didn't want to be late. Her newly changed hair was almost completely covered by her helmet with just the ends blowing in the wind. She hoped this would make her not as distracting. "Emma" exited onto a neighborhood and she started to slow down. She drove down the road for a few moments

until she reached a house so far back in the neighborhood even the residents couldn't locate it.

When she arrived at the house parked her bike behind the garage, along with her helmet, and walked up the battered steps. The house she was looking at was what used to be a bright yellow house, but now turned into a rotting lemon. "Emma" knocked on the door four times, then knocked on it once more after a few seconds. The peeling blue door opened to a little boy who instantly lit up when he saw the woman.

"Valerie!" the little boy said, using her real name, and running to hug her. Valerie shushed him with a smile and caught the boy and spun him around.

"Hey Hunter! Oh, I missed you so much."

"When did you get back? Did you bring me something? Did you bring your motorcycle? Can I ride it?" The little boy jumped out of her arms and ran towards the garage, looking for the bike. Valerie laughed and watched the little boy try to find her motorcycle with her hands in her back pockets.

"Oh, hey Val! How was your trip?" A man, a few years older than Valerie, stepped out of the door, greeting her with a hug. Valerie smiled at him and hugged him back.

"Hi, Mark. It was fine, how has Hunter been?"

Mark smiled sadly and crossed his arms, looking over at Hunter who was looking at Valerie's motorcycle. She noticed Mark's change in mood and nudged him with her shoulder.

"Is he okay?" Valerie asked Mark. Mark shook his head and brought his hand up to cover his mouth.

"No, he keeps asking about his mom. I don't know what to tell him. Do I tell him the truth or lie to him to make it easier? Hunter needs to know who you really are," Valerie's breath hitched in her throat. **SINCE WHEN DID HUNTER WANT TO KNOW ABOUT HIS MOM?**

"I want him to know about me. I really do. But he's already so attached to me and if we come out and say it he'll never want me to leave," Valerie started to bite her nails, one of her bad habits when she was nervous. "I'm just scared Mark, I want to be an active part of his life but it's just too dangerous." Mark shook his head and moved to stand right in front of her.

"Why don't you just stop! You can stop running! Your parents aren't going to hurt Hunter, and they aren't going to hurt you!! They don't even know where you are! You say that you're running from them because they are terrible parents but in reality, you aren't being the best parent either Val," he spat out the words like they were poison. There was so much anger behind them that he had to step back inside.

Valerie's eyes teared up and she knew what she did wrong. **OF COURSE I'M BEING A BAD PARENT. I'M RUNNING AWAY FROM MY LIFE! I'M WASTING MY LIFE ON PEOPLE THAT DON'T MATTER.** Hunter ran up to Valerie after he saw that she was crying.

"I'm sorry, my dad gets kinda angry sometimes," Hunter whispered, hugging her legs. Valerie smiled and guided him to sit on the porch swing.

"It's okay. He has a right to be mad at me. I've let people take the most important thing in my life away from me. And now I want it back," Valerie spoke aloud. She mostly was telling herself that but Hunter had to hear it too.

"Well, at school last week we learned about borrowing. My teacher said that it meant that someone takes something of yours, but then gives it back. Maybe the person that took something from you will give it back soon?" Hunter smiled up at Valerie and she smiled a teary smile back.

"I hope so Hunter."

Valerie was older. She had just turned 17,

and she was sitting on her messy bed. The faint hum of yelling filled her small room. Tears ran down her face as she held a positive pregnancy test that her parents found in the trash.

“THIS IS WHY WE NEVER LOVED YOU!”

“HOW COULD YOU HAVE GOTTEN EVEN MORE IRRESPONSIBLE?”

“YOU'RE A MISTAKE.”

Valerie has heard it before. **MISTAKE**. But this time it stung. Like a deep feeling behind her heart. It ached. **HER OWN PARENTS**. She knew what she had to do. She started packing a bag with all her clothes. She had enough of this life., she had to run, and this time, they will never find her.

Mark had finally calmed down by the time that Valerie and Hunter finished their conversation. The mother and son were by Valerie's motorcycle. Mark's lips curved into a small smile and walked over to the two. Hunter and Valerie were laughing when he arrived, but when Valerie noticed his presence, her big smile turned into one just like Mark.

“Are you feeling better now Daddy?”

Hunter asked, playing with the handlebars. Mark looked over at Valerie and nodded.

“I'm feeling fine Hunter. Valerie, can I talk to you?”

“I was just going to ask if I could talk to you,” Valerie smiled and walked Mark and her further away from Hunter.

“You don't have to tell Hunter if you don't want to.”

“I think I want to tell Hunter,” the two spoke in unison. The pair broke into laughter.

“Well then,” Mark smiled, “Let's go tell him,” Valerie smiled and walked with Mark, arms linked, over to Hunter.

Finally, she was done running. She was far, far away from her evil parents with her son and the man she fell in love with. Ready to be

Valerie again.

THE BATTLE WE FOUGHT

Abigail Reynolds

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Platte City Middle
School, Platte City, MO
Educator: Laura Hoefling

Category: Short Story

Everybody has that one best friend, someone who acts like your brother or sister, someone who was meant to stay with you the rest of your life. That was how Audrey and I were. We were inseparable. We were born only a few days apart and were next door neighbors on West Martin Lane, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. We grew up together like sisters, sometimes actually thinking that we were. Right from the start Audrey and I were meant to be family. We never let anything get between us. This was a promise that would last for the rest of our lives, but our fate was about to change forever.

In the middle of our freshman year, I noticed that Audrey was acting differently and seemed to be weak. Almost like she was sore all the time. This did seem odd for Audrey. Normally she was filled with laughter and joy. Although recently, she was always complaining about her body hurting. Also, she seemed miserable and depressed. Something affected not just how she looked

on the outside but also how she was in the inside. She was always miserable or grumpy, never happy or excited. Then in February that year, she was diagnosed with bone cancer, Osteosarcoma.

I always tried to make the best out of the situation. I would take Audrey to the mall, the movies, or had her over for sleepovers. Basically doing anything to try and help her but it was useless. She tried to crack a smile or make a laugh but everything was fake. I knew that none of her enjoyable expressions were real.

One day Audrey was in the nastiest mood ever, which is understandable. I decided to take a weight off of her shoulders and take her out for the day. We went to the movies to see the new romance movie we had been waiting for. After that, we went to the mall to get some of our favorite ice cream.

"Hey Audge, want Rocky Road like usual?" I knew the answer to her question before she even asked. Audrey always got the same thing in a king size.

"No, I think I'll pass today," said Audrey in a depressed way. She then walked away from the ice cream stand and sat down at a table, burying her head into her arms. I knew that something was completely wrong, it wasn't like Audrey to turn down ice cream.

I walked over to Audrey sitting in silence for a couple of minutes then, "Okay, so no ice cream, how about binge-watching a show and shoving our mouths with junk food?" I asked with a sense of laughter.

"No, thanks."

"Shopping spree on me?"

"No," remarked Audrey. At this point, I started throwing out any idea that came to mind. Audrey kept giving the same answer, shaking her head back and forth.

When I was about to throw out my last idea, she blurted, "Mara, you don't have to hang out with me, I don't need people to

hang out with me because they feel sorry for me." Now it seemed Audrey was just mad: not sick, not stressed, just mad.

"Stop, why would you ever say that? We hang out together all the time because we're friends, not because I feel sorry."

"There's another lie," remarked Audrey, "Here's a thought, just leave me alone. I'm not going to be friends with people just because they feel sorry."

"I can't believe you think that," I was now getting upset too. Yes, I did do some extra things to make her feel better and try to forget about her cancer. Although that wasn't the point, I loved to hang out with her.

After a couple of moments in silence, Audrey then stood up and with an increased amount of anger in her voice and said, "Just leave me alone, I can't take people who feel sorry for me." Then she walked away. Leaving me under a cloud of confused feelings. I was lost, not knowing which way to go next. I understood how Audrey could come to the thought that people would only hang out with her because they felt sorry for her. Still, I could not believe that she would think I was that type of person.

Later that night, I talked to my mom, "Mara hun, you have to understand. Audrey is in a tough spot, and she might just need some space." This was not the response I was looking for. I wanted her to tell me that I needed to go tell Audrey that she was wrong. Specifically that our friendship was not something that could be thrown away like a piece of trash, left to burn in the fire, and to turn into dust.

Then before I could even speak, my mom said, "Baby," putting her arm around me as I was nearly in tears, "Why don't you just give her some space to understand she didn't mean what she said." I nodded my head and decided I did need to give her some space to think and understand what she was actually feeling. Even though this was not

what I wanted to do.

I stayed true to my decision, letting Audrey have her space. It had been a couple of days and I didn't communicate at all with her. Then, after a week of her not even taking the time to send me a quick text, when I saw her in the hall, I gave her a wave. She paid no attention. Acting like I was a ghost, invisible and speechless. It was obvious that she wasn't over our argument and was still wanting space from me.

It had been almost a month and Audrey still hadn't acknowledged me. She did not give a wave, a smile, or a glimpse of her eye. It was clear to me that I meant nothing to her anymore. I couldn't take it any longer. I gave in and sent Audrey a quick text just saying, "hi." Not expecting a response, a notification came up on her phone, "Text cannot go through, the number has been blocked by the receiver of the message." At this point I was knocked down and not wanting to get up.

Time had passed and gone, it was rounding on four months since we had talked to one another. We just kept drifting further and further apart. After I tried to get Audrey's attention several of months back and she gave no recognition, I have not attempted since. Now and then my mom gets an update on how Audrey is doing, how doctors appointments were going and how the treatments were working on killing her cancer. While the treatments were helping her, they were making Audrey two times more tired all the time. I picked up quickly that the updates were always the same. They all included how Audrey was doing fine and was keeping a smile and a giggle on her face. Although I knew this wasn't true. After so many updates, there became fewer and fewer, each being less and less detailed.

It was rounding a year since Audrey's diagnosis, nearly three months since I had gotten an update about her. It was to the

point that Audrey didn't just avoid me at school, she avoided me at home too. One day I saw her outside getting the mail and her back was towards me. I didn't even think but the words just came out of my mouth, "Hey Audge." She suddenly turned around acting like she hadn't heard my voice in her lifetime. Once I saw Audrey, the first thing that came to my mind was that she looked like a ghost. She was pale and her face looked like she hadn't seen the sun in a thousand years. She looked miserable. It didn't take me long to notice the updates (if they were still coming) wouldn't have been good.

Later that night I was talking to my mom and mentioned my encounter with Audrey. She looked shocked when I told her how bad Audrey looked. After my mom and I had talked, she called Cheyanne, Audrey's mom. I overheard their conversation. It almost sounded like Cheyanne was crying. It had been the first time that our moms had even talked in several months. After my mom was almost in tears, I decided I couldn't understand what was going on with Audrey if I didn't talk to someone. My mom finished her extremely long chat with Cheyanne I decided I needed to talk to her too.

"Hey Mom, it didn't sound too good about the news with Audrey," I noted as my mom wiped away tears from her cheeks.

"Baby, come and sit down."

"Look, Audrey is at a low point in her treatment..." She rambled on. I was getting lost in my thought then the words hit me like a ton of bricks, "The doctors are only giving Audrey about a month."

"A month for what?" My mom just gave me the look like it was obvious and I should know the answer, but I was clueless. Then it hit me, a month to live. I couldn't focus, I couldn't think, I couldn't move, then my face turned into a river. Tears just started flowing and couldn't stop. I didn't know why I was

crying. I hadn't talked to her, I hadn't thought about her, and I didn't care. Although, at that particular moment Audrey was all I could think about, all I could care about.

In so many previous months I was committed to not acknowledge her or even think about her but that changed. There was no way I was going to spend my last 30 days with Audrey still being mad at her. It was going to be tough to talk to her and to feel the same way about her as I did when we were little, but I had to do something. We were special, we were inseparable and we still will be until the clock has finally run out.

The next day I knew I had to do something with Audrey. It took all my courage, and my heart, along with my pride to go next door and talk to her. I knocked on the door and Cheyanne answered, she was surprised to see me.

"Hi, Mara."

"Hi. I'm sorry I should have called and asked if I could stop by." I suddenly realized it was rude for me to come over without notice, especially in a time like this.

"Oh, no honey you're fine. What's up?" Cheyanne asked this as if she didn't even care I hadn't asked. Which took a huge weight off of my chest.

"My mom told me the news last night," I suddenly noticed that tears were forming in her eyes. I need to just get to the point, "Can I talk to Audrey?" She showed me into the house and said Audrey was in her room.

I opened the door to her room and Audrey's mouth dropped as if it would hit the ground. Even though I couldn't see myself I'm sure I had the same shocked look on my face too. I also imagined that my eyes got the size of basketballs. She changed, Audrey didn't look like herself. I knew she did not look so good yesterday, but I did not think she was this bad. Her gorgeous tan skin turned white pale and dry, her hair so healthy and

perfect looked like my 80-year-old grandmas, and she had enormous bags under her eyes. Audrey looked so unhealthy, so sick.

After all our looks over each other, I stood there in silence and she sat like a log in her bed as quiet as a mouse. Until she said, "Why are you here?"

To be honest, I didn't have a good answer to her question. I had to respond but didn't know what to say. "Look I can't handle being mad at you anymore."

She just gave me a full out eye roll, "Oh, you heard I don't have much time, didn't you?"

I didn't want her to think this was the only reason I was talking to her again but I couldn't lie anymore, "Yes I did hear."

"Okay, then get out," she just pointed at the door and waited for me to leave and when I did not she said, "Look you're just here after you heard that, once again feeling sorry for me, but I don't need those kinds of people." She just kept pointing at the door.

All those several months ago I would have left and let her do her own thing but I couldn't let that happen again. I couldn't let us stay apart. "Audrey, come on please listen."

She sat there for a few moments then nodded. I knew then it was okay for me to talk, "I need you to know that I never felt sorry for you. I did do extra things for you when I found out you were sick but I did that to just keep you cheered up."

Audrey sat there in silence and kept looking at me so I kept going, "I never hung out with you because you were sick, I hung out with you because we were friends, best friends." She kept looking at me with the same expression. Every word was going into one ear and coming out the other. I didn't know what else to say. We sat in silence for the longest time.

I knew that I had to say something more, "I couldn't handle living the rest of our lives being mad at each other, and acting like we are invisible." Audrey's eyes slowly drifted from staring at the floor to looking me right in the eyes. There was not much facial expression. It was a blank canvas, it had no meaning to it. Then her face suddenly changed, it turned from a ghost's face into a true 16-year-old girl who was getting ready to cry. Suddenly tears started rolling down her cheeks and kept flowing as if it was forming a river. I could not help but cry too.

"Oh gosh, I know, you're right," she continued, "I'm sorry for everything I said to you. I was a real jerk. I was mad at you at the time but I wouldn't even give you the chance to apologize. I just blocked you out and didn't let you in. I'm sorry." Now her tears kept flowing and flowing but would not stop.

We sat there for several minutes, us both with tears in our eyes. Audrey and I were closing that distance between us that had grown over those last months, which felt like a million years. Best friends, something that can fight through any troubles and find the right path to go down. This was Audrey and me.

She was being lowered down farther and farther with so many roses on top of her. People were surrounding each other, giving them warmth. Many thoughts were going through my head, but I could only process one thought. Audrey was gone, forever. I knew this was better for her. In those last couple of months, she was getting weaker and weaker by the day. Experiencing more pain by the minute. She was pain-free now and was moving and running up in heaven. It had been nearly two months that Audrey and I were friends again. She proved the doctors wrong and kept fighting longer and

longer until it was better for her to go.

We made a memory out of every minute we could, in those previous months. Instead of taking her out on a shopping spree or going out to eat, we would hang out at the house and binge watch TV shows, have a movie night while eating ice cream out of the tub, or we would make our favorite foods like pizza or cookies. It was just like old times. I knew that I was going to miss Audrey. I always would. It filled my heart with love that we had become closer in those last two months than we ever had before. Audrey may have lost the battle of cancer, but WE had won the battle of friendship.

HOME

Trinity Umaña

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Short Story

In my world, you're either born with the time and place of your death on your wrist or you're given the choice of how you die when you turn twenty-five. The latter is very rare, only two percent of the population is given the choice. Those are the lucky ones. I am a lucky one.

When I was born, my parents cried. They were so relieved. Since then, they spent all the time possible preparing. They researched the hardest ways to die, the least painful, the

ones that would allow me to die old, happy, and peacefully. It consumed them, but they were content with spending most of their time finding out how to give their daughter happiness.

I didn't care. Getting to choose how I die granted me to be free of worry for twenty five years. I knew I couldn't die, I was basically immortal and I had bigger things to worry about. So I enjoyed my life as best as I could, never being afraid of anything. I'd go skydiving, bungee jumping, anything that could potentially risk my life. I was free to focus on things like school and friends.

In my sophomore year of high school, I met a girl. She was so sweet and bright-eyed, lighting up the world wherever she went. She was one of the unlucky ones. Luckier than some, but still quite unlucky. On her wrist sat a date, far too soon for anyone to be content with. She was to die at the ripe old age of twenty five at 5:36 pm on October 8th. Ironic how my fate is decided merely days before, but her life ends. Lucky for her, right under that dreadful date was a warm word that softened the blow of a youthful death. HOME.

We became best friends. A girl doomed to die young and a girl with timeless freedom. She soon became a warm presence in my life, loving and loyal, a safe place to go back to. Her beauty and her kindness drew me closer until I fell in love. I spent days, weeks, months, years pining after a girl who would soon be gone. A girl that brought happiness into my life. A girl who I began to call my home. In turn, she pined after me. She didn't want to hurt me, but I knew it was too late. No matter what happened between us, the loss of her presence would hurt me. So I asked her to ignore whatever fate was in store for us and just consider a date with me.

The stars were shining on me that day, because she said yes and one date turned to two turned to many. A girl doomed to depart early and a girl destined to depart happily. Together.

The rest of her years were spent with each other as our home. Graduating high school, being on our own, college, early adulthood. We did it all together. While the dark date grew closer, we were happy. We didn't care if our time would be cut short, we were going to spend our time together. One night, she came home to find me waiting. Candles illuminated the room, adding an additional twinkle in her eyes. She was beautiful and I fell in love with her all over again. I took her hands in mine and voiced my thoughts out loud, voiced the feelings she already knew, voiced the love in my heart for her. I knelt, her hands shooting up to cover her mouth, tears forming in the corners of her beautiful eyes. I loved her and she loved me, and although our time was short, it was ours. I loved her and she loved me, so I asked her to be mine forever and to take me for just as long. Crying, she accepted, and we spent the night dreaming out loud. Dreaming of a day in white, sweet and tender, proclaiming our love to the world, to the law. And soon enough, the day came. Standing under an arch of flowers, I watched her walk towards me like an ethereal angel. She was mine and I was hers, and we had the rings to prove it.

Blissful days had come and gone, the dreadful date looming closer. Though we loved and were happy with our time, we couldn't help the cloud that covered our sun. She would miss me and I'd miss her, our love eternal yet short lived. The coming months were spent together, crying almost endlessly and feverishly enjoying our vanishing time. My birthday was growing closer, but I had not decided on my fate.

Caught up in living and thinking about her death date, I hadn't paid a single thought to it. I ignored the calls of my parents in the days leading up, ignored the early birthday wishes, ignored the well-intentioned advice. I didn't care about myself. I was in mourning before I even lost her. She occupied my world, my heart, my mind. It was soon the day before my birthday and I still had nothing but her. She was all that mattered. I could worry about myself after. I couldn't sleep that night, occupied with worry and grief. I turned to the clock to see that it read 11:58. Staring at it, I waited for it to turn to midnight, signaling the start of my birthday. Soon enough, it came, and something, what I could only assume was a heavenly force, placed a thought in my head. It was time to decide. I turned to look at her. She was sleeping so peacefully, her beautiful face so serene. I glanced at her wrist, the word under the date sticking in my mind. I closed my eyes and thought of my decision. I called my parents and said only two words. "I'm sorry."

I woke up and it was my birthday. She asked me what I decided and I told her I decided on home. We cried for a bit, but we cheered up, not letting our fate get in the way of happiness. We spent the day having as much fun as possible. We laughed and we loved and we lived. Days soon passed and that mournful day was upon us. We watched our favorite movie, ate our favorite food, and just stayed together. It was October 8th and we laid in bed wrapped in each other. She fell asleep in my arms and I soon joined her in slumber, the steady rhythm of our breaths intertwined. A few minutes passed and the sound of our breaths ceased. Together in each other's arms, a girl doomed to die young and a girl with timeless freedom. HOME.

BITCH

Ann Zhang

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Category: Short Story

Anna did not know she had bled through her shorts until the gym coach reluctantly called her into the game, and she stood, revealing a pungent streak of crimson where she'd been seated.

Anna sighed, then scrubbed. The evidence vanished beneath her jacket sleeve.

"I have to pee," Anna told the coach. She had already slipped out the door by the time he looked up from his folder and shrugged at the space she had once occupied.

"The lazy bitch can't even benchwarm," quipped Maria, one of the prettier girls, a competitive tennis player who took Ultimate Frisbee too seriously. She stood at the center of the gymnasium, and when words descended from her mouth, the surrounding high schoolers rotated their eyeballs in respectful agreement.

But Anna didn't catch Maria's cleverness because she was already in the girl's locker room, digging through her backpack and her locker stuffed with plastic grocery bags she'd used to bring gym clothes, dirty sneakers, afternoon snacks. Most of the bags were empty now. Anna never

bothered to throw anything away.

Amidst the trash, the Anna's storage of feminine products was nowhere to be seen. This was odd because she'd bet her life that she had at least one or two pads and a whole bag full of tampons in her possession, but not too odd because the kids at her school had no qualms about plucking hidden treasure from their classmates' lockers, and Anna counted herself another victim of their pilfering.

It was time for Plan B: Anna pulled four quarters from her wallet and stuck them in the tampon dispenser, which gulped down her money. She wiggled the knob.

It wouldn't budge.

Anna was considering stuffing her underwear with toilet paper when she heard a voice behind her: "Stupid machine's been empty since the 90's." Anna glanced at the mirror and saw a scrawny, pale-faced girl peering over the shoulder of her reflection.

Anna asked the stranger, "Hey, do you have a tampon I can use?"

The girl squinted at Anna's face, taking in her warm skin, flat nose, and monolids. "You speak perfect English," marveled the girl, as if it were a darn miracle.

Anna said, "I grew up seven miles from here." And then, to be polite, "Where do you live?"

"Here." The girl waved her arms in the air.

"Here in Saint Louis?"

"Here in this bathroom stall. It's got my name on it."

"Oh," said Anna.

The girl jabbed a finger at the inside of the stall door, where in between **PUSSY EATER** and **MADDIE LUVS NUTELLA**, someone had carved in jagged letters — **BITCH**.

There was a pause. Anna stared at Bitch,

taking her in.

"I do," said Bitch.

"You do what?"

"Have some tampons. You can take 'em." Bitch extended her hands to offer what she'd been holding behind her back — a **SHOP N' SAVE** bag containing enough tampons to last at least one month, maybe two.

"That belongs to me," said Anna, recognizing her missing bag.

"You're fucking welcome," said Bitch.

Anna accepted the bag. "Thanks."

"Say, 'thank you, Bitch.'"

"Thank... you."

Bitch's lips curled into a grin. "There. We're friends now, ain't we?" Then quietly, to herself: "I've got a friend now."

As Anna disappeared into a bathroom stall — Bitch's bathroom stall, to be exact — she asked, out of genuine curiosity, "Do you have many friends?"

"More than you can count! Like... you, to name just one." Bitch turned up her nose. "I'm a pretty big deal around here."

"Of course," said Anna. She held her breath, positioning the tampon between her legs and pushing it out of its plastic applicator. Her organs twisted in revulsion, as always at the start of each cycle.

The first time Anna had had to use a tampon was at Maria's eighth-grade pool party, back when they were still friends. She'd done her research beforehand, and the welcome-to-Puberty sites told her she would hardly feel it, but it hurt, and Anna cried a few tears in Maria's pool house. When she came back to the pool she dove in headfirst and opened her eyes underwater so she could blame the redness on the chlorine — even though after she surfaced, puffy-faced and choking, nobody asked her what was wrong.

"Anna, Anna, Anna," Bitch murmured,

testing the name out on her tongue.

Anna emerged from the stall, her arm hooked through the bag of tampons, and slowly, meticulously washed her hands, as she tended to do when in the company of other humans at the sink. She squirted out a worm of soap and watched the light-pink foam slide from her palms. The water splashed. Her pearly skin sparkled.

“No!” cried Bitch when Anna stepped to grab a paper towel. “You can’t leave.”

Anna dried her hands on the sides of her jacket. “I have to go back to gym class, though I’m as thrilled about that as you are.”

“Just talk to me,” pleaded Bitch.

“Coach will wonder where I am.” It was a lie, and surely Bitch knew it. The gym coach wouldn’t bat an eye if Anna flew out of class, poised atop a giant Frisbee, but Anna didn’t like the way that Bitch was looking at her — wide-eyed, unblinking.

In an instant, Bitch leapt forward and snatched the **SHOP N’ SAVE** bag. The plastic handles tore against Anna’s reddening arms. “I won’t give it back,” said Bitch.

Anna pondered this. Her menstrual flow was pretty light right now, so the tampon presently on duty would last her at least four hours — enough time to trudge through the rest of the school day, hopefully without acquiring TSS. On her way home, Anna could stop by Walgreens.

Bitch observed the whirring gears of Anna’s mind. “Please....” She grabbed Anna’s hands, abandoning the tampon bag, which fell in a ghostly heap, scattering its contents across the floor.

Anna was surprised by the wintry shock of the pale girl’s fingers. The cold was piercing, and Anna felt a dull ache in her bones, felt her muscles clenching, swelling. She blinked and watched white and blue flicker at the

edges of her vision... then flash and overtake her.

“Please?” a high voice echoed. The bathroom tile, in reply, said nothing.

Three or thirty minutes later, the door to the locker room opened with a shrill squeak, announcing the influx of adolescent bodies, conversations piling atop each other, clothes peeled off and tossed in lockers.

Maria led the pack. She was nursing a new bruise on her shoulder, courtesy of a clumsy boy who had managed to tackle her at the very end of the match, just two steps before she would have reached the end zone, frisbee in hand, and won it all.

Maria projected as she spoke, addressing a girl at a neighboring locker: “Don’t touch me, bitch.” The poor girl’s head was stuck inside her sweatshirt, but she tried her best to nod, **OKAY**.

“Maria, she’s not even trying to touch you,” boomed a voice. Maria’s deep-blue eyes swept the room for the source of the backtalk.

Having collected her tampons from the floor, Anna emerged from the sectioned-off bathroom. Bitch was nowhere to be seen; in the place of two girls, there now remained one.

At the sight of her old friend standing tall and violent, Maria widened her eyes, then narrowed them. One side of her strawberry lips pulled upwards.

Maria’s smirk was toxic, and all around the locker room, the weaker girls held their breath against the fumes. The silence reminded Anna of the cafeteria, and the classrooms, and the hallways, and all the way back to middle school, when the girls would wait outside for their parents’ cars to line up along the sidewalk, and Anna would forget to exhale until she’d clambered into

the safe haven of her mom's front seat, and the car would push soundlessly towards the edge of the city.

Maria's gaze flickered. With her right wrist, Anna swung her SHOP N' SAVE bag in circles like a high-speed Ferris Wheel, the bag's momentum somehow preventing the tampons from spilling.

When the two girls locked gazes, Anna felt a spirit spark to life within her. Her brain crackled with a thousand witty remarks. She opened her mouth and let the words emerge like knives, silver and glinting.

THE COLOR BLUE

Carrie Zhang

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs
School, Saint Louis, MO
Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

A puddle of frothy toothpaste falls onto my blue t-shirt as I rock from side to side in front of my bathroom mirror, listening to Penny's favorite song, "Don't Let Me Down" by The Beatles. I never really liked the old timey band, but when she said that they were her favorite, I had to give them a try. I hastily drop my toothbrush into the cup holder and snatch the towel off the rack, dabbing furiously at the dripping toothpaste. It's too late. The stain is too noticeable for me to wear to school. It's a shame. Blue is Penny's favorite color.

After I yank the ruined shirt over my head

and fling it into the blue basket in the corner, I slide open my closet door and select a fresh shirt that smells like cinnamon. I have never been fond of the sweet, stifling aroma, but cinnamon rolls are Penny's favorite dessert, so now I love them too. I return to my bathroom and slip on the new blue t-shirt that rubs at the back of my neck whenever I move. It will have to do. I smile. I am a good boyfriend. Yes, I am.

I sling my blue backpack over my shoulders and clamber down the stairs that creak beneath my feet, ignoring my mother's calls for breakfast and slipping out the front door. Her pancakes are more often burnt than cooked, and they fill my mouth with a fish-like flavor.

When I reach for the keys that jingle in my left pocket, I notice Jackson Hayes perching on his red truck that scintillates in the warm weather. Kara, my sister, stands next to him beaming, occasionally flinging her blonde hair over her shoulder. Penny has blonde hair too except hers is two shades lighter and more feathery. Jackson notices me setting my backpack in the back seat and waves to me cheerfully.

"I'll see you at practice later, Pete," Jackson hollers, cupping his hands around his mouth as Kara winks at me and giggles. I nod my head slightly as I open the car door and slip into the driver's seat.

I glance at the clock. The blocky green numbers read 7:12 A.M. School starts at 8:00 A.M., which means that I have fifteen minutes to drive to Penny's house, drop off her present, and arrive at school before first bell rings. As I ease out of the driveway and pull into the tightly packed street, I keep a close eye on my speedometer. The speed limit sign reads 20 mph in this neighborhood, but I never go past 19 mph.

Penny only lives ten houses down from me, which usually takes one minute and

thirty three seconds when I drive, four minutes when I ride my bike, and seven minutes if I walk. Every morning when I drive past, I wave to Mr. Waterman who waters the lively lilies and scarlet roses in his garden with his faded orange can. I can also usually spot Terry Brown in a gray sweat suit, no matter the season, jogging with her midnight black Labrador.

Penny's bedroom light is still off by the time I arrive at her two-story, faded brown brick house. She's always late to everything, even her swim meets, and when I don't see her in her seat twirling her pink pen in her hand in our first period class, I know it's most likely because she's slept in. I smile to myself as I walk up her driveway and pull her present, a crisp copy of *POEMS BY CURRER, ELLIS, AND ACTON BELL*, out of my backpack. I set it down gently on the doorstep and stroll back to my car. It's been four months since I first saw her. She was sitting by her bedroom window reading a book, occasionally pressing her index finger against her peachy lips. The book was *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*.

I smile as I drive to school, listening to another song by The Beatles: "Penny Lane". I'm starting to like them. As I pull into the parking lot and make my way towards my locker, I think of Penny and me dancing to a song by The Beatles at prom. Her dress and my tie are both blue.

As the first bell rings, I slip into my seat in the back. Even when Mr. Peterson, a 60-year-old, disgruntled man who always sports a tweed jacket, begins his lecture on the causes of the Civil War, Penny is still nowhere to be seen. I have 42 more minutes until the class ends. I drum my pencil against my notebook, occasionally scratching down notes on whatever Mr. Peterson is teaching, but my mind is on my girlfriend. What if she doesn't like my present? What if she stayed

home sick? What kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn't go to her house and check on her?

The clock's mechanical twitch starts to pound in my head. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. My eyes consume the hands, begging them to turn a little faster. The sooner school is over, the sooner I can be with my girlfriend.

When the bell rings and Mr. Peterson finally dismisses us, I leap out of my seat, pushing past the mob of students in the cramped hallways to reach my locker. I toss my biology books into my backpack before stopping by the bathroom. I run a hand through my brown hair that is pasted to my forehead from sweat and nod. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. Calm down. I'm being foolish. Penny is probably just sleeping in like she always does. You can check on her later. I am a good boyfriend. Yes, I am. The bell's shrill pounds through my head. It's time for Mr. Saunders' biology class.

When the last period bell rings, I rush to the athletic wing, where Penny stands with the rest of the swim team outside the locker rooms. I wave to her, but she doesn't seem to notice me through the horde of students in the hallway. I frown. Before I can go up to her, Jackson pushes me and two other sophomores into the locker room.

"Come on, guys. We've got practice in five minutes. Go change," Jackson chuckles, nudging us into the locker room that smells of moist socks and fried rubber. I grit my teeth and plaster a smile on my face. I will have to talk to Penny later.

After practice ends, I drive home in 22 minutes, which is one minute and ten seconds longer than usual, and take a shower. The water is scalding, leaving splotchy rosy marks on my back and upper

arms. After I slip into a fresh, blue t-shirt and shorts that are made of cotton, my favorite material, I rest on the living room couch.

My mother is still at work, and Kara told me she would be at Jackson's house for dinner. I glance at my watch. 6:03 P.M. Penny should be back home from swim practice by now, and I want to know how her day went.

After I slip into my car and drive to Penny's house in one minute and 33 seconds, I walk on the balls of my feet up the driveway. Her bedroom light blazes against the faded brick that seems darker in the night time.

Hi, Penny. I love you. I hope you liked your gift. I missed you at school today. I love you, Penny. I love you so much.

She taps her fingers delicately against her blue spiral notebook, tilting her head from side to side as she listens to music. My guess is that she's listening to The Beatles.

I smile. Penny, I love you.

It is 10:02 P.M. when I leave her house, two minutes and fifty seconds earlier than yesterday. Kara texts me that she has brought home some pork chops and mashed potatoes from Jackson's house if I am still hungry. My mother says that she will be staying at the office a little late today because she is working on a case for a new company in town.

I glance through the window one more time, staring down at her sweet, oviform face. Her blonde hair glides down her shoulders in one fluid motion, and she twirls a thick strand as she lays on her stomach in bed. She twirls a pen in her other hand. Penny loves pink pens. I should buy her some soon. I put my hand on the window just for a little longer and take a deep breath. She smells of pumpkin and weathered fall leaves today.

I LOVE YOU. I LOVE YOU, PENNY.

I sidle back into my empty car and turn the music on. Another song by The Beatles. I've decided that I like them now.

One minute and 33 seconds later, I arrive home. Kara is already tucked away in her room, and my mother's car is not in the garage. I slip quietly up the stairs and rest my head against my pillow that envelops me in a cloud of cinnamon.

I smile. I am a good boyfriend. I am. Tomorrow, I will see Penny again. I will get to see her peachy lips and her curly hair that is two shades lighter than most of the blondes at school. I will hear her endearing laughter that soothes me in class. I will wear blue because that is her favorite color. And I will go over to her house again after she comes home from swim practice. And I won't be late. I am a good boyfriend. I am.

I smile.

I wake up to the sounds of my mother cursing in the kitchen. The smell of burnt bacon wafts into my room as I run my hands through my hair and trudge into the bathroom. I place my phone on the counter and play "Don't Let Me Down" by The Beatles. I wonder if that is still Penny's favorite song. I will have to ask her in Mr. Peterson's first period class.

Today, I will not spill toothpaste on my blue t-shirt. Today, I will see Penny in first period. Today, I will wave to her in the hallways, and she will see me and wave back. I don't have a present for Penny, but I am still a good boyfriend because I will cheer her on at her swim meet. I spit the toothpaste back into the sink and let the cool water drag it down the drain.

I smile.

I am a good boyfriend. Yes, I am.

WRITING
PORTFOLIO

I LIKE TO WRITE ABOUT MYSELF, AND SOMETIMES OTHER STUFF

Eli Hurwitz

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School,
Saint Louis, MO
Educator: John Pierson

Category: Writing Portfolio

MOTEL 6

Category: Dramatic Script

SCENE I. A BATHROOM IN A MOTEL 6, MID-MIDWEST.

(IN THE BLACKOUT, SOUNDS OF SCISSORS SNIPPING HAIR. LIGHTS UP ON APRIL AS SHE MAKES THE FINAL SNIP OVER THE BATHROOM SINK, COMPLETING HUEY'S NEW BUZZCUT. APRIL SETS DOWN HER SCISSORS, LOOKS AT HUEY WITH A SMILE, THEN GRABS A BROOM AND BEGINS TO SWEEP UP THE HAIR ON THE FLOOR. HUEY IS LOOKING AT HIMSELF IN THE MIRROR, RUBBING HIS HEAD.)

APRIL

How do you like it, Hue? (PAUSE) I like it a lot. I think you look handsome.

HUEY

I look like ROBIN. But from Arkham City.

APRIL

That's the new one, right? The one you were raving about?

HUEY

Yeah.

APRIL

Well, I hope Robin looks cooler in that one than in the books I read!

HUEY

(HURT) Robin's always been cool.

APRIL

(BACKTRACKING) No, of course he has, of course he has! I just meant... Well, I just never liked his floppy hair back then. But he was still awesome! And I bet he's even more awesome in this new one, with a fresh new cut like yours. (PAUSE. APRIL STOPS SWEEPING AND PUTS AN ARM AROUND HUEY) Hey, I'm sorry, sweetie. Of course Robin's cool. He's Batman's best friend in the world, right?

(AFTER A MOMENT, HUEY PUTS HIS HEAD ON APRIL'S SHOULDER. THEY LOOK IN THE MIRROR TOGETHER.)

HUEY

Dad thought my hair looked cool long. He said I looked like a rockstar.

(APRIL STARTS, THEN TURNS TO FACE HUEY.)

APRIL

Well, I think your hair looks cool short. I think you look like a superhero. (PAUSE) Besides, Huey... You shouldn't be thinking about what dad thinks right now. He's not... He's not the kind of influence you

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need right now, baby. He's not what you should be lookin' up to.

HUEY

I know. (PAUSE) Are we ever going to see him again?

APRIL

Not if I can help it. I'm gonna keep you safe. (STEPPING BACK AND LOOKING AT HUEY) You've got some hair on your face. (BRUSHING HAIR OFF HUEY'S CHEEK WITH HER THUMB, THEN SMILING) There. A fresh start.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE II. THE MOTEL LOBBY.

(HUEY IS STRETCHED OUT ON AN OLD ARMCHAIR WAY TOO BIG FOR HIM. APRIL STANDS NEXT TO THE OTHER ARMCHAIR, ACROSS FROM HUEY, WITH HER ARMS CROSSED. SHE GLANCES AT THE FRONT DESK, AND THEN BACK TO HUEY, WHO IS LOOKING AT A CAP FOR SALE IN THE MOTEL LOBBY.)

APRIL

No, baby, we can't aff-- I can't get one for you right now, is all. But you look so handsome, anyway! Don't you wanna show off that haircut?

HUEY

I wanna HAT. I'm cold.

APRIL

There's blankets in the room.

HUEY

(SITTING UP STRAIGHT) Can I go back?

APRIL

You know the way? You've got your key?

HUEY

Sure.

APRIL

Sure?

HUEY

Yes, I mean. Yes, I got 'em.

APRIL

Alright then. I'll be right back in, okay? Don't eat anything in the fridge, even if they have pop -- they make you pay for it. I'll be back right after the desk man comes back.

HUEY

Sure, mama.

(HUEY STANDS AND BEGINS TO EXIT THE ROOM, RUBBING HIS HEAD. AFTER A SECOND, APRIL CALLS HIM BACK.)

APRIL

Huey! (HUEY TURNS BACK) You don't... (QUIETER) You don't want to cover your buzz, do you? I know you're cold and all -- you just look like so handsome, you look like such a good kid. I want everybody to know that you're a real good kid, Hue. Even if... You know you make me proud, don't you? (PAUSE) And what did I just say about the 'sure's? You tire me. How about a "thanks, mama"?

HUEY

Thanks, mama.

(APRIL PULLS HUEY IN FOR A QUICK HUG.)

APRIL

Get outta here.

(HUEY EXITS.)

(APRIL SINKS BACK DOWN IN THE SAME TOO-BIG

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AND TOO-CRACKED ARMCHAIR. A MINUTE OF SILENCE – APRIL RUBS HER TEMPLES, SIGHING – THEN THE FRONT DOOR SLAMS OPEN; PETER IS STANDING IN THE DOORWAY, A CAP IN HIS HANDS. A SUSPENDED MOMENT, ALL TENSENESS.)

PETER
Where is he?

APRIL
Get out.

PETER
I've got his cap for him.

APRIL
He don't need it.

PETER
He loves that cap, April -- lemme give it to 'im.

APRIL
He don't need it.

PETER
April, I'm not leaving 'til I see my boy. You didn't -- you didn't let me say goodbye.

APRIL
Peter--

PETER
I'm his father, April, and if I wants to I should be able to see him, and you never shoulda taken him from me anyway, and--

APRIL
(QUIETLY) You're not a father.

PETER
What?

APRIL
You're not a father. You're not any kind of father to my boy. (PAUSE) It ain't my fault, it's what I've

gotta do -- you're not safe for him.

PETER
Don't say it like that.

APRIL
Say it like what, Peter? Like the goddamn truth? You want me to sugarcoat it, huh? --

PETER
(OVERLAPPING) --C'mon, April, you know I'd never hurt him--

APRIL
(OVERLAPPING) -- You want me to say it's okay by me if you walk -- if you STUMBLE in at all hours of the night into the house where my baby is sleeping, huh? You want me to smile when you walk in with that stuff on your face and you smell like sweat and some AWFUL perfume? You want to come in like this THING, like this monster I don't even recognize, like something outta the devil's awfulest fantasy-world and you expect me to tell you that that's JUST FINE, that that's safe for our boy?

PETER
You never let me explain.

APRIL
Can't explain sin.

PETER
If you'd've let me EXPLAIN, I woulda -- I woulda told you how I'm working on it.

APRIL
WORKING ON -- working on how? You QUIT it and we talk.

PETER
I'm trying, God's truth. I know -- I know how it ain't right, I know how it's shameful, but it helped me in that dark time and I can't just let go of that.

APRIL

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I helped you through that dark time. Me and Hue.

PETER

No, no, you're right, you did, only -- you knew I took drives at night. I didn't know how to tell you.

APRIL

You shoulda left. Kept yourself away.

PETER

I couldn'ta. I love him, and I love you, and I love you both too much to let that happen, you know that.

APRIL

Then you shoulda stopped.

PETER

And I'm trying!

APRIL

Try harder.

(HUEY RE-ENTERS WITH A BLANKET AROUND HIS SHOULDERS. HE SEES PETER AND FREEZES.)

HUEY

Hi, Dad.

PETER

Hey, Hue. Your hair's different. (PAUSE) I missed you.

(HUEY GOES TO HUG PETER.)

APRIL

Hue, could you come here please?

(APRIL GRABS HUEY AWAY FROM PETER AND PUTS HER ARM AROUND HIM, GLARING AT PETER.)

PETER

We can't... We shouldn't be like this with him here, April.

APRIL

You can leave.

(PAUSE.)

PETER

So you'll hear me out here, then? (NOT STOPPING FOR AN ANSWER) April, I know it ain't natural, but I would -- I would NEVER let that interfere with him, with my being a father to him. I'm not gonna bring that stuff into his life, I'm not gonna raise him up with those -- TENDENCIES, I'm NEVER gonna put him in danger. You know I couldn't.

APRIL

You're lying. You brought that STUFF into his life the moment you walked through our door in those heels.

PETER

Those heels and what, April? I'm still a man!

APRIL

You're gonna call yourself a man when you stood in front of me with two tits on your chest and no spine in your back? You're not a man, and you can't raise Hue up to be one.

(PAUSE.)

PETER

I don't want my son around when you're talking like that.

APRIL

I don't want my son around when you're dressing like that!

PETER

That's not true. You don't want him around me at all.

APRIL

BECAUSE you're dressing like that. BECAUSE of all this... this transvestite, this transvestite shi--

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PETER

--That's enough for you to take my whole family away from me? I thought you trusted me more... I thought you trusted me at all.

APRIL

I did trust you, before you... I thought I knew you! (PAUSE) I can't trust a man who I don't know.

HUEY

(STEPPING FORWARD) I don't get it.

PETER

Huey, you should go back to the room. I think --

HUEY

I don't get it. (TO APRIL) Why don't you know dad?

(PAUSE. APRIL SLOWLY SITS IN ONE ARMCHAIR AND CROSSES HER LEGS, TRYING TO COLLECT HERSELF.)

APRIL

Baby, there's some grown-up stuff we have to talk about, okay? Your dad's right -- you should go back to the room now.

HUEY

You told me dad was being scary but now you're yelling at him and you're sounding scary and saying all this STUFF that I don't get and... and I don't get it.

PETER

Hue, this really isn't the type of thing--

HUEY

I don't GET it. (TO APRIL) Why are we here? Why aren't we at home?

(APRIL AND PETER LOOK AT EACH OTHER. AFTER A BEAT, PETER SITS DOWN IN THE ARMCHAIR ACROSS FROM APRIL. HUEY STANDS IN BETWEEN, ARMS CROSSED.)

PETER

Your mom -- she found out something I had hidden from her for a long time, a secret. A secret I shouldn't have had.

HUEY

(PIECING IT TOGETHER) You came back home in a dress.

PETER

(STARTLED) Yes. That's right.

HUEY

So why'd you keep it secret? You said a secret was the same thing as a lie.

PETER

I--

APRIL

He kept it a secret because he knew I'd be angry. Because... dressing up like that... Because it's not right, because it's an unnatural thing to do.

PETER

But I... Your mom's right. It's a problem, Hue, but I didn't want it to mess up our family. And I was afraid that we'd all fight if I didn't keep it secret.

HUEY

Well, you DID keep it a secret, and now we're all fighting. So bad job.

APRIL

Hey! Watch your attitude, Hue!

HUEY

Why? We're stuck here because dad was stupid and kept a stupid secret, and for some reason that meant we had to go to this stupid motel and I had to get this stupid haircut and you're yelling at each other but I'm not allowed to yell at you? It sucks, and you both suck, and I'm cold, and I'm tired. And -- and I'm going to bed!

(HUEY GRABS HIS CAP OUT OF PETER'S HANDS AND STORMS OUT.)

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THE TWO ADULTS WATCH HUEY LEAVE. APRIL BEGINS TO RISE FROM HER CHAIR, BUT PAUSES, LOSES THE STRENGTH, AND SITS BACK DOWN. SHE AND PETER LOOK AT EACH OTHER, QUIET. SILENCE.)

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY.

GAZE

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

I didn't want to come back here.

I tried everything else, really I did. I've looked everywhere, found everyone, but there's only the eyes. And there's nothing else I can think to do about it now. So I'm back at Mama's grave.

It wasn't so bad getting in -- the sharpness of the frost, the depth of the shadows, and the weight of the shovel on my shoulder all altered the scene, all made the walk up from the cemetery gates something close to unfamiliar, something really almost tolerable. But I was right back in the middle of that awful day as soon as I read Mama's name on the headstone.

The clouds had come in on that too-warm afternoon; it was a slippery, grey sort of late autumn day, the kind of day that makes you feel like it'd be easier to die. My grandma -- THEIR my grandma -- was pressed against my side, clinging white-knuckled to me and her cane as if we were the last two solid things on earth. Fog makes the ground even more slippery than rain, she said. One has to be careful these days, she said. I nodded and squeezed her shaking hand.

Most of the service went just fine; I didn't even notice him until after the KADDISH. I didn't notice him until we were lining up to bury Mama. I suppose that he must have been there the whole time, only I hadn't seen him at all. And then there he was, standing over Mama's grave, not to the side waiting for the spade but right down by her feet, looming over her. I didn't like the way he looked down at her, so unblinking-like. I knew he should have been crying.

I guess I felt bad for thinking like that back then. I probably felt ashamed for not noticing him before, for not noticing him in front of Mama. Or maybe I really did feel some kind of sympathy, some kind of solidarity with Eddie, though that's hard to imagine now. But for whatever reason, I went to stand by his side. I put my hand on his shoulder. And then he looked up.

His eyes were what started it all, really. Because it was only when those deep-set eyes saw me that I saw that GLINT inside them. It was only when Eddie made eye contact with me that I knew that he wasn't Eddie at all -- that whatever was behind those eyes, it wasn't anyone or anything I knew.

The glint is hard to spot, but once you notice it, you notice everything. I didn't see it perfect in Eddie's eyes -- it's not so quickly recognizable -- but I figured it out at the nursery. It's the glint of a camera lens is what it is, the glint of a camera lens when it's focusing. You can only see the glint when they focus on YOU. And it makes me want to vomit.

Being at the foot of Mama's grave brought Eddie's glint back, kept him swimming in front of my eyes. Back then, I didn't know why I didn't know Eddie anymore. I didn't understand what that glint was. And I didn't know that seeing it would change everything. And then I started noticing everything else.

I could only notice the details around Eddie, at first -- the click of his eyes when he blinked, the way

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the pupils only moved in measured rotations, the way he bent over so smoothly, like an oiled machine, to heap dirt on my mother, and the way he smiled when he hugged me, like he had already forgotten about Mama. At first, I was convinced that the problem **WAS** Eddie, like he was some sort of evil supervillain; I even wondered if he had killed Mama. The glint took me back to my 12-year-old bedroom listening to those screaming fights, convinced me once again that he was the reason my life was so broken, that this would have never happened with Dad. I thought that what was behind the glint **WAS** the real Eddie, and that Eddie **WAS** the evil. But then I found the glint in Dad.

It took me a while to see the glint in the others, definitely. Didn't want to, I guess. But I started to see the eyes as soon as the funeral was over -- the round leaves of the tree, the headlights of cars, the stars. I thought it must be Mama's spirit watching over us, her presence shining upon us. Or at least I told myself that I thought that's what it was. I told myself that it was Mama, only Mama, that I was noticing all around me. And I ignored my churning stomach.

I saw the eyes in the cookies and in the coffee that they brought to our shiva. I saw the eyes in the Rabbi's tallis, in the stains on the prayer book. But I told myself again that it was only Mama, Mama watching over me. It was the very last night of mourning, the seventh day of the shiva, when I saw it in Dad.

I was leaning on Dad for the whole service that night. I took a break to lean on Amy while we were walking around receiving sympathy, but then I was leaning on Dad again to cry. I always leaned on Dad to cry because I knew that they had never stopped loving each other, really. I leaned on Dad because I thought that I knew that he would grieve with me and help me. He didn't cry, either, that last night of the shiva. He should have cried.

I had barely finished crying when the clock tolled

nine that night. That was Dad's cue, I guess; he wiped the tears from my cheeks and half-smiled, half-grimaced. He lowered his voice to get away from the crowd and to tell me that he loved me. And he told me that he really had to go. It was when he went in for the hug that I noticed the glint. And it was when I noticed Dad's glint that I really started to see.

I caught the next glint in Amy's eyes, and the one after that in the Rabbi's. Then it was the people at work -- first the actors, then the rest of tech crew. My director had a glint that was hard to spot, with her eyes so sparkly all the time anyway, but it was there and I found it. And all this time that I was noticing the glints, the eyes were surrounding me, too; the ones in the buttons and the flowers stay half-hidden, but you'll feel the windows and the paintings watching you even if you refuse to believe me. The eyes were stuck inside the sets I built at work, even though I never put them there. They want to have me supervised, you see. They're watching as I work, and eat, and sleep. So I had to start investigating.

I started to go out walking in the early afternoon after Amy left me and the theater fired me -- which was just as well, really, because I couldn't work anymore at that awful, constructed place, and I certainly couldn't love anyone who wasn't real anymore. And it was just as well, too, because I had to find out who it was that was taking the people I knew, and how they had transformed everyone I loved into these gleaming and horrible facades, and why they wouldn't stop watching me. So I went walking and I saw the neighborhood around me glisten at me, and glint at me, and look at me forever, and I knew that the ones behind the eyes had made everyone but me.

Before I came here, I tried everything else I could think of to find some sort of source, to find the moment where everything had stopped being real. Before I came here, I searched for everything else in the world that I had known. I had coffee with my closest college friends, choking on lattes

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that were looking at me, focusing on the shadows under their glinting eyes, rushing out to escape the glare. I volunteered with my religious school and tried hard not to see it in the children, tried to see their scampering about as something natural, tried to see the gleam in their eyes as something “developmentally normal”. But it was always really the glint.

Yesterday I went to the nursery. I just had to see it, you know. I guess I couldn't make myself believe what I so feared without really seeing it. So I went downtown to the orphanage, and I smiled at the glint in the nurse's eyes, and I told them that I wanted to adopt. I told myself that if I found a real baby in there, a baby who looked at me with nothing behind their eyes, I'd take it home. So it wasn't really a lie, what I said.

I strolled past the eyes that followed me from the magazines like I wasn't feeling their gaze at all, and I walked slow and mechanical with the nurses that led me around. But I looked in every bassinet that I walked past, and I noticed every glint in every eye that looked back at me. So, you see, there wasn't anything left to do in the world. I had to come back to Mama.

It was Eddie's glint that I saw first, but it wasn't his fault. Because I think that it's the whole world, you see. And I think that it's always been like this, too -- I didn't want to believe it, but you can't deny reality when it stares you in the face. The glint in the eyes of every baby at that orphanage told me more than I wanted to know, but at least they made me understand. Because this world was never real at all, really. Because I think that they've always been watching.

So I've made it back to Mama's grave, but the shovel is falling from my hands because I don't think that I can do it. Of course the plan had to be to dig her up, because she died before I noticed anything and she was buried before I knew how to check for the glints. Because now I **HAVE** to crack the coffin open to let this nightmare be over, to solve it all, to find out once and for all whether I

had really loved her, or whether it had always, always been them.

But I'm realizing now that I don't want to know. For the first time since I've noticed them all around, I don't want to know. This is the first time I've cried since the shiva.

The shadows have started retreating, and the eyes in the stars are watching me with something that could be desperation. If I do it, and I need to do it, I have to do it now. They'll catch me if I don't. But they'll see me if I do, too. So I'm not sure what the point is anymore.

The gravestones around Mama's have started to grow moss, and I know that they made it to be that way. But I've started to pretend that there's something natural about it.

I glance down at my shovel, and up at the stars, and I don't know how to bear this anymore.

Maybe I'll just sit by Mama for a while.

SCIENCE FICTION/DOUBLE FEATURE

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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

Ask me about my **IDENTITY** and I'll tell you that I'm a **GSM** (if I'm trying to adopt my school's cool, new, inclusive term for Gender or Sexuality Minorities), a proud member of the **LGBTQIA+** community (if I'm talking politically), **bisexual** (if I'm coming out or filling out a form), **gay** (if I'm

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functioning under the assumption that you'll understand the use of the word as an umbrella term for various LGBT+ identities, not only as a term for homosexual men). Ask me to tell you about something [QUEER](#) and I'll mention Prince as a queer icon, MoKaBe's coffee shop as a hub for queer activity in St. Louis, and [THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW](#) as a staple in queer media that I've been listening to nonstop for the past two weeks. Ask me about my identity and I'll never say queer. Ask me to talk about something queer and I'll never tell you about myself. I have this sort of mental divide: yes, I am a part of queer communities; yes, I am invested in queer culture; yes, I am not heterosexual; no, I'm not queer.

So I've been thinking a lot about queerness recently – wondering what it means to [BE](#) queer, wondering why I don't identify [AS](#) queer, wondering what it is about this specific label that makes me so averse to adopting it – and I think that I've finally found a definition that makes sense to me. A comprehensive definition for queerness: [THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW](#).

I know that doesn't make sense – at least, doesn't make sense at first. But about two weeks ago, I started listening to [ROCKY HORROR](#) (the 1975 movie starring Tim Curry, not the original Richard O'Brien musical of 1973), and I couldn't stop. Like, really couldn't stop. I think I've listened to the soundtrack about 300 times since that fateful Tuesday night; I'm listening to [TOUCH-A, TOUCH-A, TOUCH ME](#) as I write this sentence. And I was just so pulled in, so interested in this show. I was obsessed. I am obsessed. It's iconic queer media, right? The movie with the longest single release in history, the movie that brought portrayals of gender expressions and sexualities never before seen by the general American audience, the movie that still has a cult following more than 40 years later. And, honestly, every song on the album is an absolute banger, an absolute celebration of the weird and the queer. But the more I listened, the more I realized that the queerness of [ROCKY HORROR](#) isn't just portrayed

through its performative, glam rock fun – sure, [ROCKY HORROR](#) is queer because they took makeup inspiration from David Bowie, but it's also fundamentally queer in the dangers that the story presents.

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

I am so, so scared of being seen as the monstrous side of [ROCKY HORROR](#)'s queerness. I'm still not comfortable holding hands with girls in public. I'm practically unable to make assembly announcements that mark me as a GSM. I fear my own fashion choices, I fear locker rooms, I fear raising my hand to ask about LGBT organizations while on college tours. I fear my identity as it manifests in the world. I fear queerness because its narrative, even in iconic queer media, shows

queer people as sinful, as indulgent, as unsettling, as alien – as killer monsters. As fundamentally wrong. And, thinking logically, of course I know that there's nothing wrong with holding hands, with making announcements, with wearing clothes that I like. But there's that association, lurking in the shadows, lurking behind the glitz and glamour of **ROCKY HORROR**. I don't want to be a monster. By extension, I don't want to be extravagant, or dramatic, or sexual, or stereotypically gay. By extension, I don't want to be queer. I don't want to see a scarlet corset from Frank N Furter become my scarlet letter – I don't want to watch this one unconventional aspect of my identity and relationships become my monstrosity. I don't want to be damned by my label.

But I kept listening to **THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW**, even though I found it deeply concerning, even disturbing, in its portrayal of queerness. I kept listening to **ROCKY HORROR** until I started hearing another narrative. This wasn't the narrative of Frank N Furter's atrocious actions causing the ruination of the other characters, the narrative of damnation or destruction following the sin of being **OTHER** in sexual preference and gender expression. There's that, sure, but there's another narrative, too: a story of liberation, of pride, of some kind of real acceptance. Because the human, "straight" characters, Brad and Janet, who stumble upon Frankenstein Place one dark and stormy night? They aren't alive until they meet the Transylvanians. Brad and Janet's opening number is sung as the young couple gets engaged, but the lyrics are anything but romantic. Brad's part in this rhyming duet includes a lot of grand metaphors that mean nothing, while Janet is excited about everything **BUT** her fiancé; she's happy about her ring being nicer than her friend's, about the fact that he's met her parents, and about her upcoming trip to go see Dr. Scott – but at best, she's indifferent to Brad. This duet, "Dammit Janet", feels like two kids playing at romance, or like two robots trying to seem human

– it's not real, and neither are they, at least until they get into Frank N Furter's house. With the Transylvanians, Brad and Janet finally show individual agency. Through various sexual encounters, Brad finds out that he's attracted to men, and Janet finds out that she can have sexual agency and desire. Yes, this Transylvanian culture, this queer culture, is seen as monstrous and wrong, but it's also seen as liberating. With the Transylvanians, the humans find a weird, alternative sort of acceptance, a kind of pride in what is seen as perverse, a way to liberate themselves from their completely repressed lives. Brad and Janet encounter queerness and they come alive.

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

ATLAS

Category: Poetry

The cracks resound around her spine and she
Becomes a twisted gnarled trunk, weighed down

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With these great fruits. She's not the tree of life
But damn it, she will strain and strive and crack
Her neck if it will hold this load aloft.

She'll never display toil -- she'll become
Accustomed to each burden as it grows
From deep inside her marrow. Additions:
The crags and chasms of the world at large,
The oceans and the clouds of those contained
Within the blizzards and the rivers of
Her heart, her own unquiet thoughts. These swell
In stubborn grams and subtle lbs. She's trapped
By pride like these new gods, contradicting
Entrapment of her own design and guard.

We all carry our worlds; we emulate
The ancients, grow our lore and learn to break
Our backs and sink into our roots.
She'll bear the burden 'til worse winters come
And leave us branch and bark -- she'd not cast off
This titan's toppling task for all the world.

CISMET

Category: Poetry

jokes were always made of typos (oh, jeez,
dude, did that go wrong) and i'm setting this
one up for you -- i don't think you'll respond.

i said i would stop writing about you...
fat chance!!!

you showed up topsy-turvy again. i don't want
to feel responsible for you. i just hope
that you're safe. then i could stop
thinking about you, maybe

dreaming about you, or about all that was nice --
guacamole. carnivals. talking on the grass.
dreaming about you, or about all that was bad --
talking on the grass (your house). everything after.

do you wonder if we could have been better?
did you feel like it was something forever?

i said i would stop writing about you
but i just want to say what i mean (it is impossible,
you know)
because i did it so wrong last time (kismet,
maybe)
and it's been far too long to talk again.

SUNRISE PUNCH

Eli Hurwitz

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School,
Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Michael Dee, Eleanor
DesPrez

Category: Poetry

Sneak down from snug bed, the floorboards
Are shuffle-shuffle-squeak--careful!
On the last step down, preliminary tests
Of feet on wood required (for sustaining silence,
Maybe the most magic tilting tilting symphony
You've ever heard -- don't scratch it).
Then out past the door and the sunrise hits
You like a brick. Sun is rosy-bleeding skewered
By the scudding night-clouds, titanic
Beasts afraid of day.
Mist on air: world's smallest bubbles and most
powerful
Elixir, concentrated 4 AM. Breathe deep,
Hope for some down your lungs.

THE LIVING ROOM LIGHTS HAVEN'T WORKED IN YEARS

Category: Poetry

But we stay because the parents
Won't wake up with all the noise in here.
Pass the pizza rolls and rumors,
Secrets stuffed in hands and dough pockets.
Pizza rolls taste like elementary school, like recess--
Taste like warm, like hot if you eat them fresh
From the microwave. Rumors taste like bitter
And exhilaration, like addiction.
Parents (bushy haired woman
With suffering smile, long-faced man)
Told us the difference between gunshots and
fireworks, but
I don't remember. Exhilarating, to be scared
Out of safety into rumors.

CURTAINS

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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.

HIGH SCHOOL PORTFOLIO

Elizabeth Joseph

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Mill Valley High School,
Shawnee, KS

Educator: Kathy Habiger

Category: Writing Portfolio

FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION- ISSUED RESTRICTIONS ON E-CIGARETTE COMPANIES ELICIT MIXED REACTIONS

CATEGORY: JOURNALISM

FDA ATTEMPTS TO ELIMINATE VAPORIZER
ADVERTISEMENTS TARGETED TO YOUTH TO
REDUCE PREVALENCE OF VAPING

As you walk into the bathroom, you're suddenly hit
with the scent of mango. You draw back before

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realizing that the smell is coming from a stall, and someone is vaping in the middle of the period. It's an all-too-familiar situation in schools across the nation, leading the Food and Drug Administration to take steps to stop the rise in vaping.

So, just how common is underage vaping? In a survey of 281 students, 43 percent said they have used a vape like one described above, while 22 percent said they have used one in school, whether it's in the bathroom, in class, at the games or in the halls.

Because the FDA believes the marketing of vape has increased its popularity among youth, it has restricted the sale of flavored products at retail locations. The FDA has also banned all vape advertising targeted towards youth. In response, JUUL will be pulling flavored pods from stores and is limiting their online presence.

In a press release from Wednesday, Sept. 12, FDA commissioner Scott Gottlieb identified vaping as "nothing short of an epidemic" due to the nicotine content and prevalence among youth.

"The FDA won't tolerate a whole generation of young people becoming addicted to nicotine as a tradeoff for enabling adults to have unfettered access," Gottlieb said.

While 66 percent of students said they also believed the marketing of such products is targeted towards teenagers, the FDA's actions and the rise in underage vaping have elicited mixed reactions from students, faculty and the community.

MARKETING

The usage of vape products has increased by 780 percent from 2011, according to the Truth Initiative. Nathan Wells, owner of Vapor Generation LLC, attributes the rise to vapes to adults using them as a replacement for smoking, as opposed to youth dependence.

"The main attraction to vaping has been how well it replicates smoking. It satisfies oral fixation as well as nicotine cravings ... two of the main reasons of why people smoke," Wells said via email. "It has more potential to switch former smokers to a less harmful alternative than anything else on the market."

Thus, despite the FDA's action, Wells believes his business will remain largely unaffected.

"Contrary to popular opinion, [the FDA's restrictions] wouldn't have a large impact," Wells said. "I do agree that there should be some sort of restriction on how the product is portrayed. [Manufacturers should] present the product in a professional manner in order to portray an adult oriented product, which most producers already do."

However, according to one sophomore female, who requested anonymity because she is under 18 and has vaped in school, the design of the devices is meant to target teenagers specifically.

"Juuls and [other e-cigarettes] are so easy to hide and the only people who need to be hiding them are people who [can't use them legally]," the female said. "I think the easiness of them to be hidden is targeted towards teens and the fruity tastes of pods is targeted towards teens too."

As for the methods of advertising, Kerry Benson, Strategic Communications chair at the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Kansas, agrees that e-cigarettes and vape products have shifted towards targeting teenagers through social media.

"[Vapes are] easy to hide, less intrusive in any setting and [they have] a modern vibe — even the vapor is 'cooler' than traditional smoke. In 2017, Juul began what I would call an aggressive social media campaign to promote its easy-to-hide e-cigarette," Benson said via email. "It promoted

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sweet flavors, which are not as popular among older users, which seemed designed to hit teens. I think it's a play for teens because your grandma probably isn't as heavy a user of social media as most teens and she probably isn't looking for snickerdoodle taste in a vape. It ain't g-ma hittin' Instagram and Snapchat several times a day."

Though marketing techniques play a role in the prevalence of vapes, the anonymous sophomore female believes that it is common due to the current popularity of the product, with teenagers just wanting to follow the trend.

"[Students] buy one because they see other kids have it or they will hit someone else's and then they are like 'oh, I really like this, I want one for myself so I can do it whenever I want' and they go and buy one," the female said.

On the other hand, Wells believes the demand for vape itself is what increased its popularity, even if he is for some marketing restrictions.

"The vaping market has had to use very little marketing to grow the industry to what it is today. The main reason is that these are products that smokers will seek out in a never-ending quest to quit," Wells said. "Anyone, like myself, who has been unable to quit with traditional methods, is willing to give vaping a try. I am in favor of sensible regulations on social media such as flagging content for adults only."

Ultimately, Benson foresees the FDA's warnings will lead to advertisements shifting from overt to more restrained.

"Probably much as traditional promotion of old-school cigarettes shifted from blatant to more subtle, including different word choices in the ads, it will shift with the language teens are already using as code for vaping," Benson said. "Teens will show marketers the path. All marketers need to do is pay attention to subtle cultural shifts."

PURPOSE

While marketing may play a role in the start to the popularity of vapes, the reasons as to why it is still so prevalent are disputed.

From principal Tobie Waldeck's perspective, the products are so common because they are especially accessible to teenagers, even though they are illegal for minors.

"I think it is access, availability and the ease of doing it. To me, it's a national problem," Waldeck said. "I was at another high school, which I will not name. I got out of my truck, looked down, [and there was a] vape, right there. It's everywhere ... So, I think availability is a part of it. Kids are doing it younger and younger, and it's an issue."

For one senior male, who is anonymous because he is under 18, vaping is a way to unwind.

"It helps me feel more relaxed," he said. "I've felt that I've been a more likeable person since I've started doing it. It makes me act just more relaxed, more mellow. It's another constant, and if things are changing around you, a thing that stays constant can be helpful."

However, for the sophomore female, vaping isn't a choice anymore.

"I'm addicted and it sucks. I feel like everyone at Mill Valley knows that Juuling is bad, I've heard a lot of people say they are going to quit. But, once you start to quit ... you feel the need for the nicotine more," the female said. "One time, I started crying because my ex-boyfriend wouldn't let me hit his Juul ... and some people get really pissed off if they don't have the nicotine."

She isn't alone: 10 percent of students out of the 281 surveyed have said they were addicted to vaping. According to the sophomore female, the nicotine content has hugely impacted how often she vapes.

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"It just feels like you have a need to hit it, like all of the time. It's uncontrollable and it's like [it's] taking over your brain," she said. "It's like a really bad craving. I couldn't focus in English [one time] because the kid who sits across from me wouldn't let me hit his. It was awful."

According to school resource officer Mo Loridon, a belief that the idea that vapes are a safe option for students is a large contributor to their popularity as well.

"I often hear people say that it is better than smoking cigarettes. Well, it may be a little better than smoking cigarettes, that doesn't mean it is good for you. We just don't know if it's harmful or not yet," Loridon said. "It is still a status thing. I think students and young adults just think it is the hip, cool thing to do. It helps that it tastes good and it has the misconception that it is not a big deal."

The unknown chemicals present in vape products make them a questionable product according to Johns Hopkins Medicine, which states that "many e-cigarette users get even more nicotine [from vaporizers] than they would from a tobacco product."

However, the perceived health benefits when compared to other tobacco products are part of the reason why the senior male uses them, as well as casual fun.

"I think vaping is a lot healthier than cigarettes. Not to say vaping is healthy, because it's not ... but, if I am going to harm my body, I want to take some precautions," he said. "[It's] partly because I just kind of enjoy it. There's a buzz. Your body just kind of feels tingly and relaxed. The feeling of the vapor in your mouth and blowing it is enjoyable. Vape tastes good."

CONSEQUENCES

While the FDA's efforts to regulate marketing are meant to help decrease teen dependence on vape products, the school also enforces

punishments to curtail the prevalence of vapes. The nicotine content in vapes is what dictates the consequences, according to Loridon.

"The vapes I confiscated contain nicotine and the state law and the city ordinance of Shawnee states that nicotine is illegal for anybody under the age of 18," Loridon said. "It is my job that, if you are breaking the law while at school, you get punished for it. It's a big deal because it contains nicotine. We wouldn't let students smoke cigarettes, we can't let them vape."

The punishment for vaping or other prohibited behaviors applies both on school and district grounds as well as school activities. It consists of three days of out-of-school suspension and potentially a ticket from the police department, if the user is underage. In the week of Monday, Oct. 22 alone, over 20 students were suspended for vaping at school.

When it comes to the penalties for using vapes at school, Waldeck believes students need to be aware of all the potential outcomes.

"I like to be open and upfront. If they're caught vaping, the consequences are inevitable by policy," Waldeck said. "It is my hope that they realize the dangers involved and refrain from doing so. We just want to make sure kids are safe and healthy."

The dangers inherent in vape are why the anonymous girl believes it is not worth trying out.

"Once you reach a certain point of addiction, you don't even get buzzed anymore. You don't get the effects to sustain yourself, so there is no point in starting it," she said. "I think the adults need to realize that the majority of kids don't like the fact that they have Juuls and stuff, and that [kids] are addicted and don't want to be."

Loridon hopes students avoid vaporizers and e-cigarettes due to the lack of knowledge about the

product itself, as well as what is in it.

“What I want most students to know is that you don't know what you are putting into your body. Not knowing what you are putting into your body should make you not want to do it,” Loridon said. “We had recently a student [who] found a vape and used it and shared the found vape ... The first person didn't know where it's been and what's in it and certainly neither does the second person, so how do we know for certain if there was any other drugs or bacteria or something completely disgusting?”

Despite the unknowns and the consequences, the senior male believes that punishments won't stop those who vape.

“Honestly, I don't think it's going to change a thing. Whether it gets harsher or less harsh, it doesn't matter because if [people] already behave one way, they're going to continue behaving that way,” he said. “I don't think punishment is really going to change that person's mindset. If someone is going to get suspended, I can guarantee that they're still going to use it at school at least some of them.”

However, the sophomore female believes that vapes will naturally phase out as students distance themselves from the negative effects.

“Kids now realize how bad it is for you. That's why I'm trying to quit, because I know it's bad for my health. It's just hard,” she said. “I think within a couple months, people will be trying to stop. Everyone wants to. That'll be a lot of people's New Year's resolutions.”

UPCOMING BOND ISSUE ENABLES DISTRICT RENOVATION

Category: Journalism

Voters in the community will soon have the opportunity to approve or reject a bond for the De Soto school district. A bond, which provides funding for large capital projects, has the potential to pave the way for renovations on the school, as well as the rest of the district. The bond can also fund a new Career and Technical Education center, including an Early Childhood Center within the building, that would be located on the northeast corner of 83rd Street and Mize Boulevard, near Mill Creek Middle School.

A bond is raised for large capital projects, or projects that involve funding beyond the typical amount which would normally be paid for by a capital outlay fund. The issue goes to all community members capable of voting, who decide whether or not the district is allowed to levy a tax in order to pay off the bond, which functions as a loan.

The bond was approved by the state Board of Education in January. Voters will have the chance to vote beginning in April, with results of the vote released in May.

The last time the district passed a bond was 2008, which paid for renovations for both high schools, as well as the construction of Belmont Elementary School.

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According to superintendent Frank Harwood, the upcoming bond will not involve a tax increase, or mill levy, on members of the community “because of increases on [the district’s] valuation and decreases on our bond indebtedness.” Thus, the bonded interest, or the rate at which the bond is paid back, will not change because the district has paid back the bond loans taken in the past.

“What we’ll be able to do is work on some projects that are much needed for the district,” Harwood.

There are six main areas of focus for improvements and renovation: safety and security, technology, career and technical education, early childhood care, facilities improvements and future district needs.

For example, the Career and Technical Education Center is meant to meet the needs for early childhood care in addition to career and technical education, according to assistant superintendent Alvie Cater.

“The whole point of the Career and Technical Education Center would be to expose high school students to potential career paths they might not have even thought of [and] to generate interest in these unique opportunities,” Cater said. “When a student graduates from high school, we don’t want them to waste money and four years trying to figure out what they want to do.”

In order to decide where the funds from the bond would be allocated, the district held facilities focus groups over the course of several years, made up of community members and parents, in order to see what changes needed to be made.

“It’s been a pretty inclusive process with the community,” Harwood said. “When we were doing vision and mission informational sessions ... one of the questions on that was, ‘If you could wave a magic wand, what would you do?’ So, a lot of these facilities projects are a part of that.”

The mail-in ballot for the bond vote will arrive around Wednesday, April 11, so Cater encourages voters to respond by Friday, April 27. He also encourages students over 18 to become registered voters.

“We have some seniors who are turning 18 [and] can register to vote,” Cater said. “This could be their very first election to exercise their voice [and] their right to vote as a citizen.”

The entirety of the bond projects are anticipated to take three to four years to complete, although planning has already begun. Harwood hopes the bond will enable students to experience greater educational opportunities.

“We [want to] help students and their understanding of different careers and skills so that students are in a better place when they leave us,” Harwood said. “We’d like [students] to be successful while they’re in school, but our ultimate goal is that they’re successful when they get out of it.”

A LETTER TO MY MOTHER

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

A Letter to My Mother, Who I Love Very Much and Who I Hope Doesn’t Read This

When I needed a white sheet for Toga day at school, my father immediately gave me his own white cloth. The weave was loose and rough, with a smooth strip of gold running down one side, so large I thought it was a sari.

“This is a **MUNDU**,” he said. “We use it for traditional, formal occasions.”

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The first thing I said was, "I can't wear it. I don't want to stain it."

The first thing I thought was; **IF I HAVE A SON, HE WILL NEVER WEAR THIS CLOTH.**

Mama, you always assume I'm going to have a child. In fact, I'm sure it's expected, to some degree. I'm aware you want me to make my own choices. But I am aware this may not be a choice I completely make for myself.

Here is the problem with uprooting yourself, Mama: the culture you were surrounded in was left behind, and you can't blame me when I see things differently.

Scientifically speaking, the older I grow, the smaller my chance gets of ever learning Malayalam, our native tongue. As my ears grow attuned to the intricacies of English, they fall more and more deaf to the Indian languages you know so well. And I know that you say Malayalam isn't important in the scheme of things. But the last words my grandfather spoke to me were in Malayalam, and I will never get to understand what he tried to say to me six years ago.

If I have children, they will bear an anglicized name like **ELIZABETH JOSEPH**, the nuances of an Indian-Catholic name lost in the reverberating effect of having a white-sounding moniker. If they ever go to India, it will be through a homogenized process with no tangible connection to the people. Their hopes of understanding the culture that I have received rests entirely on you, and I don't even know if you'll be around then to share it.

Mama, I'm afraid to have children because, when the time comes, they will have to fight to hold on to a culture that will not belong to them, not in the way it belongs to you. How long will it take for our future family line to forget their past altogether? Ancestry.com doesn't cover immigrant families.

I am afraid because the stories I see around me don't reflect the experience of being stuck in two worlds that overlap but never truly touch. I didn't grow up in the society that shaped you into a blade of pragmatism. I do not have the drive for competition that all of the other Indian kids around me seem to possess so innately. And I know that there are others like me, the second generation immigrants who are also confused of their place. But being surrounded by the Indian kids whose parents took to American opportunity like a fish to water is not easy. Not that you didn't take to the opportunities here, Mama. But you have to admit that you aren't like most of the other Indian parents, who placed their children in activities from day one. I am not naturally talented at math. My chances of being a doctor or engineer are slimmer than yours or my father's. The only discipline I have been consistent in is English. And what kind of Indian only speaks English?

I know that you may not understand, but sometimes, the hyphen between Indian-American is a breaking point rather than a bridge.

And ma, if I have a child, what's the chance they'll fit into one of my **KURTAS** or **CHURIDARS**? What's the probability they'll like to eat fish or **VATTYAPPAM**? American beaches are different from the Keralite coastline. Where will they find freshly ground sugarcane juice besides the Mysore Zoo?

Mama, when I told you that I will **NEED** to go back to India when I'm fully grown, you said a guided tour would be enough. But a family tree is not a fairy tale. I cannot close a book and outgrow the roots that are still planted a continent away. I can't just forget the food that tastes better in India than in the U.S., the way the architecture stands colorful and bold, the rain that rushes down the outside stairs and rooftops during monsoon season. The entire world is different: the celebrations, the academics, the funerals. Where will I find a partner willing to say the same?

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Mama, I know I have years to decide. But I don't want to have children who do not know the losses you and my father left behind. I trace my identity through the hairline your mother gave me, the curls from Pa, the plentiful locks you passed on, the ZHA gene and the absurdly skinny wrists. But I cannot preserve what you have left when all of it seems to be locked in my DNA.

You both are teaching me to pass down our culture through food and clothing. I can tell my children the stories you have told me.

Maybe I will inherit the same wistful tone my father has when he shares his memories. I can try to play YouTube videos in Malayalam to make up for the dearth of my mother tongue. But mama, until I can make a home from the bones you left behind, I do not want to have children.

ATLAS

Category: Poetry

Sometimes I wonder about the territory charted

like contours of earth across the expanse of your scapulae.

The world fits neatly into the crook of your shoulder

but mine can support it too.

I promise.

Your chest rises and falls from the horizon like the sunrise

as you tuck some corner of yourself away like folded paper slips

in the pages of a book mapping the stories you hold,

silvery lengths of yarn unspooling

across linoleum, hardwood, concrete, carpet, car seats

spit out the memories like cherry pits and make me want

to catch them from your mouth.

I carry my own weight, force of gravity hanging over every step

a bucket swollen with more water than it can hold

but you reign over my heart, clearing the rotting compost

and leaving petrichor reverberations behind.

If you let me,

I want to plant your insides with the rosemary and marigold by the kitchen sink.

Let the weight of your world sink into my shoulders,

let you rest

and cement myself to the earth.

BLOOM

Category: Poetry

Your fingers fly across black and white keys like sparrows / rhythms of muscle memory echoing across the table tops // inside, you are wells of blue deeper than the Mariana Trench / clouded over with gray brushstrokes where smears of lavender used to be / and a burning star once glowed / the distance between us is fraught with

fault lines // where we once found patches of
sunlight to curl up in / we spilled creativity like
overturned vases / your voice gliding through the
air, clear and pure / mine hidden in stacks of
manuscripts / both of us scattering lilacs across
the floor / I would trace your pen strokes, heart
lifting / you would trace constellations on my skin
// the patchwork of your soul grows frayed and
threadbare / puzzle pieces forced together and
weighted with expectation / stitches rewritten
with a violent fist / when braiding violet flowers
into your hair fit so much better —

But the day you take flight with Icarus' wings / the
day you kiss the sun // I'll look to the ground /
waiting for lavender to bloom.

HOURGLASS

Category: Poetry

I break down in the supermarket grocery aisles
because I only have five minutes to make the
choice
between a variety of granola bars.

I count the moments until everything stops
because someday I will be forced to catch my
own breath
and pace it against the metronome's slow count
a pendulum swing between empty space
and the pulse of thoughts in beats per second

I share the accrued space in my thoughts
you all amass because I know
each day is a slow crawl,
an unwinding, where I can't come back for
seconds.
I can hear repetition at the base of my skull
echoing TICK-TICK-TICK —

TICK
another flutter of anxiety in my chest

TICK
retread the same thoughts over and over
TICK
grasping the present like water in my fist
TICK
immortalize everything before it fades
TICK.
registering the clock as my time runs out.

Here I am:
in the aisle
wondering
when I start
(and where I end).

A GARDEN UNSEEN

Category: Short Story

"I... I wish I'd known about her magic. And you."

The boy turned away from the frame he set
against the roof, eyes cast down on the streets
below. The expanse of concrete roofing was
occupied by a series of dried up potted plants
and a bag of old potting soil. The soft wind
carried browned leaves across the pavement,
making them click and clatter against the hard
surface. The breeze almost stripped the words of
their levity, carrying them somewhere only she
would hear, and the portrait beside him was
quiet.

The boy plucked a dried brown leaf from one of
many dead plants. He clenched his fist and the
leaf crumbled in his hands. He let the remnants
drift away in the wind.

Both he and the frame beside him were quiet. The
day had started with golden light, honeyed
promise sinking into his head, gilding his heart with

hope for the day forward. Like all the others, it ended with a sense of numbness sinking into his bones and the dull ache of wishing he didn't have to be here, in this home.

She didn't speak, impassively painted eyes flicking up to the blue sky arching over them. The first time she had, he'd thrown a tarp over her. The sun's heat rebounded off the flat balcony, cooking the boy's ankles.

Finally, she asked, "Can you prop me up?" Her voice was rough, as if it hadn't been used before.

He pushed her frame up against the rooftop railing, the wooden edges slamming into the concrete barrier. He didn't like to look at her. Every time he did was a cut to his heart. The boy shook his hands out and took a deep breath as the portrait watched him.

What was she supposed to say? She wasn't sure if the sense of not being **ENOUGH** came from her creator's life-breath mingling in her static, formless lungs. The sparks of magic cradled in the magician's worn hands lived on through her work, not through the son she had left behind. Later, he'd found the portrait, propped up against the wall.

When she spoke, he had covered her with a tarp and locked the attic door. A month passed, and he brought the painting up to the roof, where they sat now.

Maybe, the portrait thought, she could exhale her life into the roots of a nearby plant and convince the boy to leave her out underneath a green canopy. Revive the rooftop garden as her parting gift. He would be happier with that than with a cheap imitation of his mother, kept "alive" through the magic she'd imbued.

The portrait craned her neck towards him as much as she could. "Why do you think I'm here?"

The boy's jaw tensed.

"Mom started this garden because I liked flowers," he said, spitting out the words. "It took the whole day to get it started. She brought these herbs and those watering cans, but she forgot to pick me up from school. Every time, she worked or painted or did anything, she always forgot me."

He rubbed his eyes, furious with himself for crying.

"She never finished anything. She didn't finish this garden. She didn't finish raising me," he said, voice low and tight. "But she painted you. You have her magic."

The portrait's mouth thinned, her eyebrows creasing. It was an expression he had seen on his mother a thousand times before. The portrait seemed nervous, like she had not expected this bitterness from him. He could taste coppery anger on his tongue. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath again, once more scrubbing away at tears.

"She never...finished. Anything. So I guess... I shouldn't have expected much." He hiccuped, his face blotchy and red.

"She died," the portrait said. "Can you forgive her for that?"

"I didn't even know that she was a magician until you," he said instead. "and I didn't know you existed until **AFTER**... she died."

The portrait looked at this boy that she couldn't see as hers, trying to understand. He was determinedly gazing at the roof gardens below them, verdant life painted over in thick swatches of black as the sun set. His profile was cast in red, muscles tense, and the portrait was struck by just how young the boy was. Maybe, when the magician woke her son each morning, she'd seen this same display of light and color washing over his face. So many memories were buried with the magician, and the few stories the portrait held

were barely enough. What could the portrait give to this child that his mother hadn't given him?

The painting was made of canvas and pigment. Yet, she could feel the affection the magician had held for her son, seeing him like this, both of them sitting on this concrete balcony.

"Listen," the portrait said. "Everything she did was for you. She would tell me stories while she painted. I don't know much, but I was created for you. This is why I'm alive. Look at me. Each brushstroke had a thought or a story behind it, ones I don't know. She knew what was going to happen. She must've left me with you to fill in the holes she left behind."

"It's not enough," the boy said quietly, rubbing his eyes. "I'm sorry, but it's not."

"I know," the portrait responded quietly.

They sat on the balcony in silence, the sunset ripening and coming to an end, light pouring over the plants. Maybe he would buy new seeds, and maybe both of them would try again. A sheet of black rose to claim the open sky, the stars ascended, and they were both quiet.

A VISION IN VIOLET

Category: Short Story

Phippa dropped her hand to the gear shift of her car as the sharp taste of peppermint, her evening meal, flooded her mouth. She breathed in the scent of fresh mint and rolled up her indigo sweatshirt sleeve to check the time, her eyes flicking down to her mother's wristwatch - her broken wristwatch. Phippa had forgotten that it

did not work. Of course she had. She had been awake in the early hours of the day that were sandwiched between work and night classes, cleaning up the mess from last night. Phippa's lovely watch that she had never had the will to pawn was now broken.

The radio automatically switched to 105.3 when she started the car, a low staticky hum rolling through the car speakers as she pulled out of the driveway. The setting sun cast streamers of light upon the sky with streaking cloud and color. The world was a series of black hills, the horizon a silhouette. The sound settled, the smooth voice of a community radio host drifting in the car as the moon, out all afternoon, shone above Phippa's car.

Phippa sucked on the peppermint and drove. Her car was cluttered with plastic wrappers, crumpled notes from class, and the suitcase in the trunk. Even the seat next to her had piles of old work on it, junk she had never gotten rid of. There was at least one copy of a hall pass from her high school days tossed on the floor along with three water bottles of varying volume, and though

Phippa prided herself on being organized when it came to her note-taking skills and bedroom organization, she could not deny the inherent trashiness of her car.

"There is always comfort in some corner of this world," the radio host said, low voice pouring from the speakers with the viscosity of warm honey. She had tuned in at just the right time to the show to start. "Welcome, listeners of new and old. It's been awhile since you last heard from me."

Phippa turned the volume up, flicking loose hair behind her ear. She would be late to classes again, but at this point her only hope was that she wouldn't fall asleep during lecture. Phippa had saved up for Cranor Community College's

tuition, returning to higher education years after dropping out when she had lost her scholarship for her dream university. Though it would not have mattered according to her parents, who had been proud of her scholarship but who had also never failed to remind her that majoring in sociology was a futile endeavor. After the accident, she had switched her major to bioethics, tangentially related to the medical degree her parents had wanted her to pursue.

"There is always some comfort in this cold, unforgiving world. A friend, or a relative - someone who loves you. But there's no one who won't hurt you at some point. **SOMEONE** snakes a knife between your ribs and you're gone like that." The host snapped his fingers. "All you have left are shreds of cardiac muscle."

Phippa looked at the radio for a second, curious. The frown lines around her lips deepened. She contemplated whether or not she should have stopped by her storage locker to drop off the purple suitcase in her trunk. It was on the way, just a quick detour...

"Anyway, it's not like that's what everyone experiences, right? Just because a certain someone had that happen to him, it's not like it really matters." There was a pause, and a slow exhale from the radio speakers. Phippa looked at it doubtfully before refocusing on the road. Maybe the host had undergone heart surgery, or a transplant. One of those feel-good motivational shows. Phippa hated those.

"I'm sorry. It's the anniversary of my death."

Phippa's eyes widened.

The host continued. "Ten years ago today, and little progress on the case... Life - or existence in general, I guess, is rough." There was a pause. "We have a guest caller."

"Hi!" said a bright female voice, bringing to mind

an image of blonde hair and brown eyes. Phippa's stomach turned. She forced herself to watch the road instead of glancing down at the radio. Her jaw clenched. "Something like that happened to me too! I died a few days ago."

"...That's weird," the radio host said. Phippa pulled her car over. It was seven-oh-five PM. She shuffled a hand through her hair and pulled out her phone to check Google.

"The funny thing is," the caller said in the background. "I think it was one of my co-workers."

Phippa tried to concentrate on the device in her hands instead of the radio. Her phone had a cracked screen and a broken speaker but it worked. With the city's free wifi and a solid sixty percent of battery life left, she went ahead and searched for "stabbed in heart murder radio host nevada" on Google.

"Really?" The radio host asked. "Please, explain to our listeners."

There weren't any results that looked promising except for an article from 1999 that Phippa opened in a new tab before searching "woman murdered by coworker nevada area." Phippa blinked a couple of times, her eyes blurring with exhaustion, the bright screen out of focus. The sharp taste of peppermint still lingered in her mouth, but it was not enough to keep her awake or drown out the car's terrible smell. Purple-black circles were prominent under Phippa's eyes, the skin around them puffed up. The concealer she had used was cheap and apparently completely ineffective, what a waste.

"Really, I think one of them must have killed me. I didn't know any of my coworkers very well. I don't want to say anything bad. But - well, I don't know," the female voice continued. "I think my wake is next week so the listeners can come if they want. My name's Lauren Heidel,

from Westerburg County.”

Phippa did not find anything useful on the Internet but hearing the caller’s name meant there was no more need anyway. She had known Lauren Heidel. Phippa tugged at the golden wedding rings that hung around her neck, her heart pounding, and started back to class. She turned the radio volume up again, morbid curiosity creeping over her. That was Lauren’s voice. There was no doubt about it after the speaker had confirmed it.

“I understand,” the host said slowly. “We can’t always define what hurts us. I hope you find peace. Do you have anything to say to our listeners, or anything to say to anyone like us? Stuck in this state of being.”

“Oh gee, I don’t know. Death is kinda new to me. It hasn’t been very long since I could last hold hands or reorganize my spice rack,” Lauren laughed. A small, breathy laugh that ended in an intake of air deep enough to be heard through the radio. “I don’t know. What about you?”

Phippa was going to be late to class again. She glanced down at her broken wristwatch again. At the red stoplight she looked up in the mirror at her backseat. If she cleared out her car of the lighter, unused cigarette pack, the heavy torch and brazier, and sheets of classwork, it would not look so bad. The smell was another problem entirely. The stench of rotting food was hard to ignore.

“Hmm... Well, I died a long time ago myself. The nineties,” the host started. “A lot’s changed since then. I’m sure your coworker will be caught in no time.”

Phippa’s eyes widened. Her parents had died a long time ago. She carried reminders of them with her everyday, the weight of the watch and the rings tugging her down with fear and guilt.

She could call in, find out if anyone knew who had killed her parents.

“Many died around the time I did,” the radio host said. “I remember it well. Antheia Whitman, Uthena Joubesen... And now, Lauren Heidel, in the present day. If you have any deaths you have experienced in your years of living... Or state of nonliving, tune into 105.3. We **ARE** waiting,” the host said, and then detailed a string of numbers to dial.

Phippa reached the parking lot of her college. She got out of the car and squeezed the rings around her neck before letting go, dialled into the station from her cell phone and pressed it between her cheek and shoulder. as she picked up her bags from the backseat. The storage locker was across the campus. She could grab the suitcase right now and drop it off. It was starting to smell, though she had sealed it carefully, trying to reduce the stench of old, wet copper that mixed with the smells of molding old meals and rotting meat. Her dinner from last week was in the trunk too, sauce from the limp noodles staining the upholstery dark red. And there was a shoebox in which she had caught a mouse a week ago. She had thrown the mouse out but the smell of rotting meat and moldering food still made her cringe. It always did.

“Hello,” the host said, from both her phone and car speakers. “Whose death have you experienced?”

“Hi. Do you know anything about Jorge and Norma Clost?” Phippa said darkly. If the dead could talk to each other, this would be the only place to find out. If anyone knew who had killed them. She placed the bags down. Her fingers twisted around the rings as she said the words quietly, the night looming blackly around her. There were no other cars in the lot, her only company was the series of streetlights from which orange light waned. She was alone. “They died in 1999. My parents. They were killed.”

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Phippa slammed the trunk door down, locking the dead scents back into her car.

“Oh,” the host said, the sound of rustling paper and mouse clicks resounding in the background. And something else - quiet breathing, clacking keys, the relentless ticking of a clock. “Oh, dear. It looks like they were murdered.”

“Yeah,” Phippa said distantly, leaning against the trunk of her car. She glanced down at the broken wristwatch. “Someone did.”

“Oh, dear. Ummm... I don't think they can call in...” Phippa could imagine the thoughts rolling around in the host's head, **BURN WOUNDS**, as she had been told, asked, and suspected of. It was the kind of burn that needed a large torch or brazier, not something from a candle or small flame. Even a second degree burn could kill someone if it was large enough, infected enough. Phippa had been there in the hospital, watching.

“I was chosen by Providence to speak here,” the host said. “I was very lucky to get appointed. But I don't think either of them can make it. Souls can only travel so far, and we only have so much aura to guide them here to our humble station. And for souls resting as long as those of your parents... It looks like they were carefree. Happy. Had one daughter, you, I'm guessing? They burned through most of their savings very early...”

“Do you know who killed them?” Phippa asked insistently, twisting the wedding rings again. Her heart pounded in her ears. Her legs felt numb.

“I'm afraid it was...”

More noises. Phippa's stomach twisted.

“YOU?”

Phippa took a deep breath. She let it out and

hung up. The suitcase in her trunk was moldering, heavy with dead blonde hair and limp limbs. She glanced over at it, calculating. Dead men told tales after all.

“Well, that was interesting,” said the host's voice from the car. Phippa had turned the radio off. She was sure of it. Yet sounds still drifted from the car radio.

Phippa lifted her trunk again, the stench making her gag, and grabbed the suitcase. She slung her backpack around her shoulders again, already dragging the deadweight case across campus grounds to the nearby storage locker.

“And now, dearest departed listeners, traffic.”

GOLD MEDAL SCHOLARSHIP

Katherine Ream

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Nevada High School,
Nevada, MO

Educator: Bobbie Lou Barber

Category: Writing Portfolio

SILENT BUT DEADLY

Category: Poetry

As the red bell rings and I sit in my next time
wasting class;

I feel a pain in my lower stomach.
I feel tiny air bubbles bounce around my bottom, ready to release toxic gas into the air.
I freeze...
My heart races faster than a cheetah. I start panicking...
What am I going to do?
The tardy bell rings.
I am stuck in this class with an explosion hiding in my bum.
I received an extraordinary idea of passing it real quickly while everyone is so loud.
As I prepare to release the deadly vapor, my strict teacher quiets the whole class.
I missed the opportunity of a lifetime!
I try to hold it in.
I can't let anything escape.... hold it captive.... I... must.... save..... the school!!!!
My face is as red as a chilli pepper.
I am squirming in my chair so much I look like an impatient toddler.
As the teacher begins the lesson; I feel the bubbles pop inside my gluteus maximus.
The cramping of my intestines slowly decreases.
A grin as long as the Mississippi River takes over my face.
I just saved the town from being intoxicated by my gastly fumes.

FAITH AND HOPE

Category: Short Story

I see them everywhere. They're like locusts multiplying by the hundreds. Their fancy cars driving past me as I stand in the extreme, ice cold weather. There is only a dull pointed sharpie and a flimsy cardboard box on this small island of pavement in the middle of this busy intersection.

I ponder the idea of someone actually reading the soggy, small sign I've been holding

for the last forty-five minutes. I daydream about the kindness in humanity, of how little is left in one's heart. God bless the ones who sit in in their heated SUVs glancing at me, just for a second, and remembering the love from their family.

The daylight is starting to fade into a foggy starry night. The walk to my shelter is long on cold nights like these. The dark hairs on my long pale arms stick up. I feel a warm light hit my back . The rush of excitement climbs from my numb toes to the bald spot on my head. This huge busted up white van stops right behind me. I turn around hoping for some compassion from a local citizen, only to be greeted by this large, plump man in a ski mask. I wake up missing my left shoe and my right sock. Inside my left coat pocket I was missing my " Buy one get one free" coupon to Subway. I'm amazed people would take away things instead of give away things.

As the starry night goes down for its daytime nap and the sun wakes up; I move to a curb where the traffic is slow during winter and a ghost town during the hot summer. The elderly lady at the breakfast bar for the needy, who gave me extra bacon because she said I was skinnier than a walking stick, told me this 3-way intersection has the kindest, warmest hearts in the city.

I stand out in the icy cold winter. My nose is a ski resort for the microscopic snowflakes falling from the gray sky. My ears are so numb I can't hear the cars speeding by me. The little bit of hope still in my heart is starting to freeze. My dreams of kindness from every family that drives by is as dry as a rasin.

My stomach snarls at me with a gut wrenching pain, clinging onto the bacon I ate earlier that day. I tell myself to get over the pain. The hope I had earlier today for some food is lost in the abyss of my broken dreams. My fear escalates as I see a white van appear over the distant hill. My mind replays the terrible scene that happened the night before.

I look down at my sock and shoe with fear pouring over my heart. As the white van pulls up to me very slowly, almost as slow as the slug I ate the night before for protein, I show the driver my busted up sign with the little courage that hasn't been taken over by fear.

The driver's window rolls down; my heart was beating so fast. A tan arm reaches out the window and the clenched fist opens up softly to show me five dollars. I stare at the perfectly folded five dollars in disbelief. Without even thinking for another minute I grab the money and thank the driver.

As the white van drives away, I turn around and run through the double doors of the closest diner. My smile is longer than the Mississippi River, from ear to ear. I take a seat down at the small booth by the double doors waiting for a waiter to take my order. As I sit there, I notice, people are staring at me. Little children are pointing in my direction, and their parents are nodding their heads in disgust. I try to ignore them, but I can't shake the feeling of someone staring down at me.

A skinny middle aged woman comes to my booth with sadness in her eyes. She looks down at me and mouths the word "Sorry". It's easy to tell it was peer pressure that got her into this apology. Before she can shed a small tear she asks me kindly to exit and go buy food somewhere else. My heart drops. I slowly stand up, turn around to look at everyone else in the diner, though no one wants to look me in the eye.

I walk down the road with sadness dripping from my eyes. The small drops start to freeze as they fall to the cold ground. My teeth are chattering so loudly I can't even think.

I keep walking, trying to figure out the reason why. Why did that man in a ski mask attack me? Why did that nice lady give me money instead of passing me by like all the other people? Why was I denied to eat at that diner? The most important question is, is this how it will always be? Getting something good

then getting it taken away later on?

A cherry red chevy truck pulls off to the side of the road beside me. I stop and look at it. The passenger's rear door has a dent the size of a baby's head. There's dirt paint scratched off on the fenders. As I study the truck, a middle aged woman with blonde hair and a decent amount of gray hair peers through the window and gives me a blanket. The blanket is an old patched up queen size wooley blanket.

I try my best to say, "Thank you!" But I can't feel my tongue. The only words that come out are a soft mumble of, "Ank-oo" the woman nodded her head and asks if she can buy me a hot steaming lunch. I nod my head no, but try to mouth the words "Thank you." The woman rolls up her window and leans back in the heated seat.

I walk toward the busy parking lot of Red Lobster, tap on my white limo driver's door, and he opens it.

"Good afternoon, Sir," he says to me, "is there still goodness left in this world?"

I straighten my posture and reply, "Just enough to keep one warm and fed for a night." He opens the door for me and I climb in.

THE "R" WORD

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

"I am not Stupid." Everyone struggles in school and in life. "I am not illiterate." Some struggle more in certain subjects like math or history. "I am not retarded." Most people wish they could ignore others comments about their insecurities. "I do know how to speak." Some people need extra help with their ears; while others need help with their mouth. "I know my sentence was wrong." No one else could ever understand the struggles you have had in your life. It is your life, not theirs. "I know

everyone else is finished with their work, but I am not done yet." Sometimes, being different is harder than most people think. "I was paying attention when you went over it the first time; I just need you to explain it to me once more." Right now, it is best to take a deep breath. "Please do not correct me every sentence." Let everything go and just say it. "I struggle with a learning disability and that's why I may not get it the first time. Yes, I do have a lisp. It is minor; that is why sometimes you can not understand me, because my diction is so poor."

My life completely changed when I was being tested for the gifted program in first grade. I scored extremely high in every subject, I thought I was going to be accepted. Except they noticed something when I would try to carry on a conversation with the counselor. She saw that I would slur some of my consonants together, and I would start to mix up my words as I would speak. She had to call my mom in and tell her that I needed to take a speech therapy class; I figured that meant I did not make the cut for the gifted program. I did not understand why I had to leave class to talk to this rude lady that would stop me every few seconds to correct my pronunciation. I had to do exercises everyday, "ssss-nake" "ssss-unflower" "ssss-now". My dad called me the Eliza Doolittle of the family, did not know who she was until I finally watched the movie in fifth grade. The same year I found out that I realized Eliza had speech issues like me, they let me stop going to speech therapy. Just like Eliza, I finally learned how to speak properly; I would be able to carry on a conversation without someone correcting me, or so I thought. I believed I would never have to worry about my lisp or grammar issues for a long time, but each year the grammar became more complicated. My lisp was faint, but it never stopped them from pointing it out to me. It did not help that as I got older my test anxiety got

stronger, my learning disability was more noticeable. It became a regular for my mom to tell all my teachers that I struggled with these issues. Sometimes my teachers would respect it and understand that I may need more time on tests. Then there is the few that would ignore it and treat me like the slowest person on earth. Those teachers would say they were joking when they would comment on my bad test scores, constantly rolling their eyes anytime I would ask if they could clarify a question, and telling other students about my issues, because they felt they needed to be aware of why I am constantly holding up the class. People would start to ask me why I do not try to get myself fixed, or how come I am in the advanced English class if I do not know how to finish a sentence. "Smile with compassion, because they are too stupid enough to realise you are smarter than them." My aunt would always tell me those who like to pick out each others flaws are the ones who have the smallest of brains. I ended up having to teach myself that I will have to work harder than any of my peers to get the grade I desired. Spend each day rewriting my papers so I can at least get a B, trying to keep my grades acceptable to my standards I had set for myself. I will have to wake up earlier each day so I can get extra tutoring before the school day even begins; hoping the extra time will give me a leg up on the next test. I have been told to transfer out of my advance classes because I am the slowest one in the class. The only difference between the two classes is one class goes through topics faster while the other takes each lesson two weeks long to finish. I may need extra help, but I know I belong in the gifted classes; I still score above average when we test for the final. I am not stupid; I just need clarification and an understanding from my teachers. I tend to smile a lot, I still ask for clarification of questions every five minutes, and I always get

corrected before I even get halfway through a sentence. The best part is, people can always count on me to work hard, day and night. These “struggles” are my obstacles in life, I have accomplished more and more each day because I know what it is like to have to work for something. I still have to face others who do not understand what it is like to constantly be climbing a hill, and I just smile with compassion so I can go back to succeeding.

SHORT STORY ANALYSIS OF THE LANDLADY

Category: Critical Essay

“The Landlady” Short Story Analysis

“The Landlady,” written by Roald Dahl, is a historical fiction short story that makes you read between the lines with phrases that have multiple meanings. It is set in the World War II era, in Bath, England. This cliffhanger makes the reader question and wonder what the author was thinking when he wrote this twisted tale.

“The Landlady” has a number of good qualities to it, as well. The author uses immaculate word choice and descriptions throughout the events. He draws the reader in with his deceptive characters and setting. The irony is beautifully placed in the story and the small, but very monumental details, are carefully hidden in plain sight. Roald Dahl’s “The Landlady” uses details and figures of speech to create a suspenseful short story.

The story starts off by introducing the protagonist, Billy, who’s in Bath, England, debating on a

place to stay the night. He spots a bed and breakfast and decides he would rather stay at the bed and breakfast than a bar. As Billy walks up to the door, the author introduces the antagonist, an older lady, who is referred to as the “landlady”. She comes off as a sweet, innocent, elderly lady who most likely lost a loved one in the war. The story continues with Billy observing his surroundings inside the house and the landlady observing her guest. Billy notices there are some peculiar things about the house and the landlady. He starts to question the landlady about her recent guests but she quickly changes the subject. Billy slowly starts to uncover the mischief that happens in the, surprisingly cheap, bed and breakfast.

“The Landlady” is a twisted, nail biting, purely shocking short story. Roald Dahl is an extremely creative writer. The descriptions used in the story bring life to the characters. I also love how he foreshadows throughout the whole story. For example, “There was a vase of yellow chrysanthemums... standing just underneath the notice”(Dahl, par. 7). Chrysanthemums have a meaning of death, the author is foreshadowing the death of the protagonist. The story gives him/her chills and makes the reader wanting more.

Roald Dahl uses details to paint a masterpiece in the reader’s mind. He chooses his words very carefully, making sure the reader feels the buried tension between the two characters. “The compulsion or, more accurately, the desire to follow after her into that house was extraordinarily strong” (Dahl, par. 13). The words “compulsion” and “desire” in that statement gives the reader goosebumps on his/her arms. “Each word was like a large black eye staring at him through the glass” (Dahl, par. 10). The author uses a simile to construe the impact the sign gave Billy on his decision on where to stay the night. Dahl makes the simile have an ominous feeling which help sets the mood of the piece. The mood has an eerie feel, the feeling people get when they are home alone and hear the floor start to creak in the other room. That

feeling of uncertainty that they are NOT home alone, is the feeling Roald is trying to give the reader with his details.

Roald Dahl's "The Landlady" snatches the reader by the wrist and yanks them in with the author's spectral words and plot; then spits out the reader with a vexing cliffhanger. It is a powerful piece because of its foreshadowing, irony, and descriptiveness. "The Landlady" will change a reader's life with its unusual, haunting plot.

INSPIRATIONAL COUPLE IN MY LIFE

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

Not too long ago, an awkward geek with a disturbing, detailed, creative mind is born. She greets the world with loud wailing cries of excitement and wonder. Slowly, she opens her eyes looking up at the two people who will inspire her life as she climbs the black iced mountains of life. The two people whom will light the fire under her to dedicate her life to giving back to others. "Always find a way to put others first," is the motto she adopted from them. This young girl is me and the inspirational couple are my grandparents.

My grandma told me the first time she met my grandpa he was working on a car. Her first impression of him was his feet. My grandmother's roommate would always try to set her up with my grandpa. To get his attention her roommate burnt a chicken to get him to come to my grandma's apartment to help them put out the fire. My grandparent's later started to date and after awhile my grandpa

decided to propose. His idea to propose to my grandma was by asking her if she wanted to buy a wedding ring. They have been with each other ever since, through the tornado that put my grandma in a leg brace, through sickness and health, they stay by each other's side. Their age does not stop them from being involved in everything, with three grandchildren who are involved in about every activity, all year round. My grandparent's continue to sign up for almost everything in church, Least Of These, and my old elementary school. They somehow make it to almost every concert, game, and performance, demonstrating a dedication to family. As a result, I strive to be like them. Always involved, giving back, being there for people; my grandparents have made a difference in so many lives and I want to do the same. They have lived their life to the fullest by doing what they love; helping others and shining God's light through their selflessness.

I have always been "Papa's Girl"; I'm his little angel. I would always come home from school, drop my stuff at the door and run downstairs to tell my grandparents about my crazy day at school. My grandma has always been so close to me, she's the first person I talk to about my problems with boys, school, drama, and teachers giving out too hard of assignments. Usually she empathizes with me, but would disagree with me about schoolwork since she is a retired teacher. My grandpa is a sports fan, he loves baseball, football, and especially basketball. He's helped me get through my terrible middle school years during the basketball season. They have both helped me through the years, and they always cheer me on as I keep pushing through the hard times.

My grandparents have been through so much, I have too. Their struggles have never stopped them from helping others. They have shown me that everyone goes through rough patches, but as long as you have God on your side, things will get better. I want to spend as much time as I can giving back to others

because my grandparents do that every day. Also, I love the feeling I get being able to put kindness back into the world. They have inspired me to be someone who thinks of others, a good Christian girl, a good friend who will be there for others. My grandparents are what I want to be everyday, always looking at the good in the world and giving back to those who truly need it.

INVISIBILITY

Category: Critical Essay

Walking down the pale lit hallway watching the people stop in the middle of their tracks to stare down the early kill of the morning. She once walked with confidence; head held high, shoulders back, and back straightened. Now she slouches with her shoulders drawn in towards her body; her head hanging down slightly swinging back and forth like a scrawny little tree struggling to stand straight in the harsh wind. She avoids eye contact as she sips from the water fountain just outside from her previous class. She looks up and reads the advertisements for all the clubs that refuse to take her in. The little tree walks away hanging her head trying to keep her focus on the next class; she never noticed the one sign that does accept her. The sign that understands what it is like to be invisible; or only visible to the ones that have something to say about its translucent words that have no affect. The ghostly signs are plastered on the walls; declaring their ownership of the school and everyone that is in it. They have no power though. Everyday they watch their people being dragged through their halls with the feeling of being lonesome. Lonely wherever they go; no one to cry out to. No one to help them. No one to stop the torture they will have

to endure for the next four years. The “bully free zone” is now a laughing stock to victims of the dictators who overthrew it long ago. The weak ruler that lost his power; is now forced to watch his people perish, and then join the new rulers, for there is no other way to survive. Long ago, these signs reigned with a bold font, letting all bullies know that they are not welcomed here. There was peace and happiness, people could strut down the halls and never look back. Teachers still believe that it is still that way; the ones who put up the sign believe that bullying is just a myth made up by students. That students are never stuffed into lockers, pushed in the hallways, being told they are a loser to their face. Bullying is not like that anymore, students know how to bring someone down without doing it to their face. The teachers never recognize the girl who is being shunned by her own classmates. They do not acknowledge the boy that never has anyone to partner with, or at least willingly partner with. People do not consider being outcasted a type of bullying; yet these kids still feel the pain as they are rejected by the same people for years. The bullying free zone, it is not considered bullying if the kid is not being tortured or ridiculed by others, to their face. The harsh words are never to someone’s face. The students hide behind the bright screens; huddle in the hallways and whisper to each other as the victims walk by. They move seats to avoid having to talk to someone they do not associate with. They exclude their partner, sitting by their friends and ignoring anything their own partner has to say. The poster sees and watches the once colorful faces turn almost sickly; being sick and tired of the agony they endure every day. Trying to find anyway to stop it from happening, they reach out but all they get is; “You’re overreacting” “they would never do that” “They are good kids” “Stop tattling, no one likes a complainer.” She tries to hold back the tears; the bell rings

and she quickly walks out the door. Everyone rushes out the door, getting in their cars and heading home. She walks back to the water fountain and takes a sip. A small tear falls from her right eye and drops onto the floor. She follows the tear with her body and her back slides down the wall as she is crying. Wishing she had someone out there. Someone to help her up, but the poster just watches her pain. He tries to call out to her, but she hears nothing for her ears are full of the words she never wanted to hear. He starts screaming as she walks out the door; he tries to get the teacher's attention but his bold font slowly fades into the white paper. She's gone, and will never come back.

TIGHT ROPE

Category: Short Story

Tears were streaming through my eyes. My throat was a desert on fire. I couldn't stop screaming his name. The news of the crime was overwhelming. I didn't know what to say; all I knew was that he was gone. My baby was gone. I'll never get to see him again.

I held his cold, lifeless body in my arms: rocking him back and forth. Praying to God to bring him back to me. I stroked back his black curls just like I did when the nurse first brought him to me.

I could see the rope burns on his neck. How they dug into his skin. The bright, pink streaks gave me chills up and down my spine.

The police say it was suicide. That word, "SUICIDE" made my stomach flip in terror. My son would never do such a devastating occurrence.

"He has always been so happy and joyful. Rarely ever showing any sign of depression or anything that could have lead to this. He's very popular at school; has a bunch of friends."

"Some people are very good at hiding depression." The detective said with a sorrowful

face.

My mind told me suicide was not the murderer. The rope burns told me another story. I looked down at my son, I grabbed his hand. His hand was cold and chapped. I Gently kissed it before the medics took him away.

My husband walked slowly over to me; attempted to soothe me and tell me everything would be alright. He knew it, I knew it, nothing would be the same after this.

I couldn't sleep that night. Any time I would close my eyes I would see him dangling from this rope in the kitchen. I would wake up screaming and crying in horror; chanting "It's not real! It's not real!" Since I kept waking, I decided to go in the living room and watch some television.

This force of guilt escorted me to my son's room. He never cleaned his room even though I would tell him everyday. I stayed up all night cleaning his room, weeping over his clothes he had sprawled on the floor.

I guess while I was cleaning I fell asleep on his bed. I woke up seeing my husband crying in the doorway of the bedroom. His eyes were bloodshot, his lip was quivering with disbelief of our son, now until forever, will be gone. I quickly jumped up and rushed over to him.

We cried and hugged each other so tightly, afraid to let go. Afraid to lose each other. He gained the courage to let go and get ready for work. It's astonishing that he can still go to work right after the day our son has passed. I had already called in for a sick day.

Slowly walking into the kitchen, I looked up at the balcony that hovered right above the dining room. It seems ironic, my favorite part of this house, the one feature that I loved most about this house, the one thing that just had me sold as soon as we first walked into this house; is the same feature that killed my son.

Trying to hold back the tears, I told my husband I will make him coffee. He dragged himself into the kitchen and softly said he didn't feel like having breakfast. He sat down in one of the seats at the table. Glanced over at me with a questionable look.

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"You feeling ok sweetie?" I asked him as I gave him the newspaper from this morning.

"Yes. I'm fine." He grabbed the paper and his briefcase and rushed out the door. Leaving an echo of a slammed door with fear behind.

I quickly rushed upstairs to my room and saw my dresser was open. The rope was now on my bed. The home phone started ringing, I ran downstairs to answer it. The caller ID read 'SHERRIFF'. I gulped and slowly put the phone to my ear.

"Hello? This is Mrs. S..."

"Yes. I called about an update about your son's autopsy." He spoke with a stern, deep voice.

"My son wasn't supposed to be given an autopsy. We all agreed it was suicide. No one made me aware he was going to be dissected like a frog in a high school biology class..."

"I'm truly sorry. Did you know your son had cut marks on his arm? We also found poison in his body..." There was a long pause. All I could hear was the sheriff breathing on the other end of the line. "I think he was poisoned then hung to make it look like a suicide. Do you know who might have had a reason to kill your son?"

I stood there looking at the knife laying in the kitchen sink.

"No, I don't know of anyone." I hung up the phone and walked over to the sink and rinsed off my good cutting knife. I opened my spice cabinet and grabbed my special spice out from the back and poured it down the drain.

"I hope arsenic doesn't ruin my sink." I whispered to myself.

It is always well hidden. Can never tell if they are hurt or just being dramatic. The cries are locked in the closet unable to be heard; the shattered hearts are taped together so the attention never goes on them. He is hurting but cannot tell anyone, not allowed to speak of the topic that could destroy his life. He is told to wipe away the pathetic tears; throw away his feeling for he does not have the right to have them. He is forced to go outside and show that he is strong and he is a man. He is a bully.

A recent study from "Why Do People Bully? The Scientific Reasons - Ditch the Label" showed that those who bully others have most likely experienced a traumatic event in their life. Sixty-six percent who admitted to bullying someone were male. (Why Do People Bully) Men in our society have grown up with the philosophy that they can not show fear. They can not show tears. They can not show any kind of emotion for it is a sign of weakness. They are not considered men until they can prove there is no emotion left in their body. Not being able to show emotions and dealing with a horrific event that had a lasting effect on them causes these bullies to put their frustration out on others. Cannot find anyone to blame, so they blame their prey for all the horrible things that has happened to them.

He failed in school, and his dreams of becoming an artist slip out of his hand for no school wants him. His father left him right after his birth, and his older brother died a few years later. It led his mom to giving him up because these events were so traumatic for her. His father died when he was only twelve and his mom sent him to boarding school right after his death. He was expelled for stabbing another student as his school; fleeing the country to avoid enlisting in the army after he graduated. His father and grandfather has ruled the country with an iron fist; it is his turn. He can not let his family down. These were dictators before they became rulers of their country. Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and Kim Jong-Un; just to name a few. Their life, was part of the reason they became they way they are now. They have to rule to a certain standard, they failed their entire life until now, they

THE YOUNG AND OLD OF TORMENTORS

Category: Critical Essay

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have to prove they are not weak because of the events in their past. Then you have Mussolini, who has always been a tyrant and would try to kill kids at school.

A person who uses strength or power to harm or intimidate those who are weaker. The bully described in the first paragraph had to use his physical strength and use what he learned from his father to tear others down so he could feel better about himself. A ruler with total power over a country, typically one who has obtained power by force. The dictators who were feared by many were once young and lonely boys. Dictators and bullies both have a past that has caused them to do harm to others. Whether it was because of a traumatic experience, never feeling wanted, or given high expectations for their future, there is always a reason to the madness. Bullies only rule a school, playground, neighborhood, etc. Dictators rule countries; both of them cause harm to innocent people and command others to follow them as they lead with an iron fist.

MUSINGS FROM SOLITUDE

Alice Wu

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Kat Buchanan

Category: Writing Portfolio

FAR FROM A FAIRY TALE: CRITICISMS

OF THE GENDER NORMS PERPETUATED BY CONSUMER CULTURE IN “WHERE ARE YOU GOING, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?”

Category: Critical Essay

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

Trapped in a fragmented nuclear family

with an absent father; a jealous, critical mother; and an ungainly older sister who is nonetheless preferred by their parents; Connie in many ways mirrors Cinderella. She too dreams of escaping her confining home atmosphere for a luxurious royal ball or consumerist hubs like the shopping plaza or movie theater (Oates 313). However, her dream is eventually perverted into a nightmare. Connie lives during a confusing transitional time in American history, a time of decaying traditional values. On Sunday, no one in her family goes to church, and the diminution of her given name, Constance, which means dependability and endurance, further reflects that decay (Oates 315; Kozikowski). At the uncertain age of fifteen, Connie represents America's maturation from the safety of childhood to the terrifying new possibilities of adulthood. Thus, she turns to the convenience of consumer culture for a sense of ownership and control in her life (Kozikowski). For instance, she blindly absorbs the "sexually provocative but superficial lyrics" of popular music that preserve her idealized conception of adult life (Schulz and Rockwood). She comes to believe that beauty, material comfort, and romantic attention are what matter most. In fact, in Connie's mind, the drive-in restaurant she frequents is like a "sacred building." Consumerism, after all, replaces the role of religion in the formation of her identity and self-worth (Oates 313). However, as she focuses her attentions on material goods and empty romantic pursuits, she does not spare any thoughts towards the responsibilities of growing up such as cooking and cleaning, chores that Cinderella dutifully performed to earn her happy ending (Oates 312). Connie is wrongfully convinced that her future will be easy and comfortable. Her naïveté eventually leads her to lend undue trust to Friend and makes her vulnerable to his advances.

Furthermore, Connie's active embrace of the vacuous lifestyle promoted by consumer culture isolates and weakens her as she objectifies herself and those around her. For instance, she focuses not on the reality of a particular boy she fancies but "an idea, a feeling, mixed up with the

urgent insistent pounding of the music" (Oates 314). Essentially, she is caught up in the sexual appeal of rock and roll and seeks excitement and validation of her youth and looks, not loyalty or honesty. Her friendships, too, are shallow, for in Connie's mind, her "best girl friend," with whom she goes to the restaurant or the movies, goes nameless (Oates 312). She merely seeks a token companion to fit society's expectations and not seem friendless. Moreover, by refusing to attend a barbecue with her family, Connie dismisses them as uninteresting and further strains her relationship with them (Oates 315). Thus, all her relationships are hollow, leaving her alone and vulnerable. When Friend declares his lust for her, Connie helplessly states that she has washed her hair earlier: Connie has reduced her own value to her mere appearance, and washing her long, golden hair, one of her best physical attributes, is her flimsy attempt at asserting her power (Oates 323). Reality, however, is unlike a fairy tale, in which Cinderella earns her happy ending by wooing the prince with her looks; Friend has ulterior motives to exploit her for his personal pleasure. As Schulz and Rockwood explain, Connie then adopts the "frantic words and gestures of a child" and no longer flirts like an adult, crying aloud and covering her ears as if either will alter her reality. However, her dizziness and perspiration also indicate her conflicting attraction to Friend, for he is paying her the sexual attention she craves (Schulz and Rockwood). While his sunglasses provide a mirror to satisfy Connie's vanity, they construct a diminished reflection of her, for he does not view her as a full person with emotional, intellectual, or spiritual value (Oates 316). Friend brings to life the romantic fantasies fed to Connie by popular culture to reveal just how degrading these fantasies are to young women.

As Friend trespasses on Connie's home, she discovers the meaninglessness of objects when genuine relationships have broken down. In the events leading up to her rape, nearby objects fail her one by one. To start, Friend's cheaply painted gold jalopy and eyes like broken glass are the shattered remains of the original Cinderella's

carriage and glass slippers (Oates 315 and 318). There will be no happily-ever-after. Moreover, even though home ownership is a typical symbol of material comfort and strength, Connie's house cannot keep her safe, not when there is a mere screen door between the familiarity of home and the wide, unknown expanse of the outside world (Oates 321). That thin barrier also represents the approaching threshold of adulthood and its harsh realities, regardless as to whether Connie is ready for them. As Connie grabs the telephone and screams into it to reach her mother, she discovers too late that communication has broken down between her and the older generation (Oates 324-325). Furthermore, having been deluded by popular music that romance is always rosy, Connie is like a clueless child when Friend rapes her, feeling as if Friend is "stabbing her again and again with no tenderness" (Oates 325). As Friend sings and calls Connie his "'sweet little blue-eyed girl'" despite her brown eyes, he strips her of her individuality with music and asserts his final mastery over her (Oates 326). In consumerist fashion, he owns her, but she is disposable. All he cares about is her ability to satisfy his sexual needs. Friend fulfills Connie's superficial desires to be noticed for her looks, and she compulsively follows him to a precarious future.

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

VENEZUELAN CRISIS HITS CLOSE TO KANSAS CITY

Category: Journalism

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

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

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

Edward attended numerous protests,

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

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

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

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

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

"He is an educated man," Becker said. "He has been lucky, but he has decided to use that privilege to speak out and has not had great success with it. He does believe that if he were

forced to go back, they would find him, and they would physically hurt him, if not worse."

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

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

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

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

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

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

As the Council on Foreign Relations explains, because the Venezuelan currency carries so little monetary value, producers struggle to cover the costs of the goods they make, and many have stopped selling in Venezuela. Government-mandated price cuts have caused further difficulties for producers, and as a result, grocery store shelves remain barren.

"My parents had good jobs so they were able to provide for us even when prices started to rise ... [but] the government would announce shortages of water in different sectors for different amounts of

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times,” Silva said. “We would plan ahead by filling up big containers ahead of time. Of course it was very uncomfortable because ordinary things such as showering, brushing my teeth or cooking became a challenge trying to save water for the whole week. ... This was four and a half years ago, and since then everything has worsened radically.”

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

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

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

“There is no justice and no human rights in Venezuela,” Silva said. “The government is ... ruthless at the moment and they are doing everything they can to stay in power. It has become a communist regime.”

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

“Everyone says, ‘Oh, socialism is terrible.’ Socialism isn’t bad; the corruption is terrible. There’s no way for the average person to make it,” Becker said. “You either are very wealthy or not, and so a

lot of the times, people who are wealthy enough are able to leave, and if you’re not wealthy enough, you are stuck.”

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

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

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

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

A REFUGE WITHOUT LIGHT

Category: Short Story

“Ma, it’s morning. It’s time to get up.”

Yuan’s eyes flickered open cautiously. The room was dark and shapeless, yet she made out that she was lying in a bed with worn quilts covering her legs. Light slanted from the door, which was ajar. A strange, gray-faced woman walked in quietly and tilted the handle to open the shutters, and suddenly, sharp light pierced into

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Yuan's narrowed eyes.

"Ma, it's me, Jin."

Yuan squinted up at her daughter's face. It was so old. Silver threads shone on her head, and her cheeks, once pink and plump, had begun to sag.

"Ma, can you walk?"

"No," Yuan grunted.

"Oh, alright. I'll help you up, ma." With a firm, familiar touch, Jin helped roll Yuan up to a sitting position.

Yuan stood unsteadily and staggered towards the door, but Jin trailed close behind her.

"Here, ma, let me help you," Jin said.

Yuan's buck-toothed granddaughter, Fei, was slouched against the couch cushions.

"Morning, granny," she beamed.

"Morning," Yuan muttered. Her breath shuddered as she bent her knees to sit down. Jin poured her a cup of tea, and as the steam wafted up to her face, Yuan still couldn't quite open her eyes to the light. Her eyelids twitched. If she could only let them fall, then she would return to the soft, smooth darkness. Light only revealed everything's edges.

"I'm not a fool. Jin, you've done everything you can, but this old body isn't going to last much longer," she said.

"Ma, don't talk like that," Jin pleaded.

"No. I'll say what I need to. If there's one time to listen to me, it's when I'm close to dying." She paused. "I want to be with both my children and see my son for the first time in years. Where is Shan?"

Jin didn't answer, but when Yuan closed her eyes, there was Shan, a chubby boy chasing after his sister in the sweltering heat of summer. Both children came home glossy-faced and panting, and the seams on their shoes were split. Yuan would have to mend the shoes to keep them together, but then Shan cried out that he still wanted to play. She called for him to stay, but he kept running under the blazing blue sky, going farther and farther away.

"Shan's in America, ma," Jin finally said. "He probably can't take time off work."

"He hasn't been back in four years," she protested. "And he only visited twice in the ten years before that."

"It's far away. And it's expensive to fly here. Ma, I'm sorry." Her voice trailed off.

Yuan could see Shan standing by the door and saying goodbye for the last time. He chattered on with big words about how he would send so much money back home. Fortunes were bright in America, he assured her. Even the moon was reputedly brighter, he laughed. Ma, I'll be back, he said. I'll be back.

As the phone rang, Yuan gasped as the muscles in her back seized up. She was back in the sun-lit kitchen, and her ears were flooded with a shrill, persistent sound. As the pain cooled and the noise died down, Yuan heard Shan telling her he'd been forced to take work as a waiter. America didn't want him and his broken speech, not when there were other people who could speak English in a rapid stream and in a clearer accent. He didn't have money to send, Shan said. But he would someday. Later, though, when Shan did find work in engineering, the phone calls seemed to thin out.

"Ma, do you want more tea?" Jin asked.

"Why can't I call my son?" Yuan asked back.

"It's late over there," Jin said. "There's a time difference."

"It's like nine at night over there. What's the big deal?" Fei sputtered.

Jin stared at Fei until the latter shrank into the couch. "Ma, let me help you to the bathroom."

"I don't really need to go."

"Ma," she said firmly and showed a practiced smile. "It's about time."

With small, faltering steps, Yuan eventually reached a white door. Inside, there was another woman waiting for her there. White wisps of hair clung to her head, with several patches missing. There were caverns under her eyes and valleys running through her face.

Yuan had become the winter woman. She reached out to touch the mirror, and suddenly she was lying in another bed and holding a wrinkled, screaming baby up to her chest. Her skin hung

limply on her body, and her throat was hoarse from screaming, but she would call him Shan, and he would pass on the family name. He sniffled frequently, but in the blackness of night, Yuan would kiss him and he would sleep soundly like any healthy baby would.

When Yuan's husband had a hacking cough and spat out brown phlegm, Jin was there to bring a hot cup of tea or watch as her father slept. Meanwhile, Shan was still across the ocean. He be there, he said, even though he wanted to be. Yuan merely nodded and smiled that yes, he would be back someday. There was always time.

"Ma, are you alright in there?" Jin opened the door.

Yuan was led to the couch, where she fell back into the cushions. The television buzzed, and light kept streaming in from the window, but Yuan fluttered between sleep and reality. All of a sudden, the couch shook. Yuan kept her eyes shut and heard Fei's voice piercing the air.

"Why can't we talk about it? She's not even awake. My uncle is dead. There, I said it."

"Fei, you're lucky she's asleep." Jin said. "I never want you to say that near her again, awake or not. It's best to be safe."

"You never told her? She never knew her only son died from cancer?"

"Fei," Jin pleaded, "sometimes it's kinder to keep the truth from people. Especially for old women with weak hearts."

Lifting one eyelid up, light came down like a hot needle into Yuan's eyes. Her eyelids then shuttered down firmly, blocking everything out. In the constant, solid darkness, she could feel Shan's form next to her. She kissed his forehead and lay back in her place. There, she was safe.

JUST A PHONE CALL AWAY

Category: Dramatic Script

CHARACTERS

YING: A 38 YEAR-OLD CHINESE IMMIGRANT LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES.

ZHUANG: A 36 YEAR-OLD CHINESE IMMIGRANT WHO HAS RETURNED TO SHANGHAI.

LILY: YING AND ZHUANG'S SEVEN YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER WHO WAS BORN IN THE UNITED STATES. SHE LIVES WITH HER MOTHER.

MEI: A 27 YEAR-OLD CHINESE WOMAN LIVING IN SHANGHAI.

SPLIT SCENE: SR IS SPOTLIGHTED TO REVEAL YING SITTING ALONE ON AT A TABLE WITH THREE CHAIRS AND DRINKING A CUP OF TEA. IT IS MORNING FOR HER. SHE HOLDS A PHONE AND IS PHYSICALLY TENSE AS SHE DIALS A NUMBER AND WAITS FOR AN ANSWER. A PHONE RINGS FROM SL, WHERE IT IS NIGHTTIME, SL IS NOW SPOTLIGHTED. WE SEE ZHUANG SITTING IN BED AND READING A BOOK. HIS CELL PHONE IS SET ON NIGHT TABLE. MEI IS SITTING IN THE SAME ROOM IN EVERYDAY CLOTHES, LOOKING AT HER CELL PHONE.

ZHUANG: (HE PICKS UP THE PHONE.) Ying?

YING: (SHE DOES NOT SHOW HER WEARINESS THROUGH HER VOICE.) Oh, I'm glad you're still awake over there. It's getting late.

ZHUANG: It's like ten-thirty at night.

MEI: (GIGGLES AT WHATEVER SHE IS READING.)

ZHUANG: I'm fine. So, what do you want to talk about? (HIS VOICE TRAILS OFF AS HE GESTURES FOR MEI TO LEAVE.)

YING: (LAUGHS UNEASILY.) Hey, are you alright? Is something up?

ZHUANG: No, no. I'm good.

MEI: (CLOSES A DOOR ON SL AS SHE EXITS.)

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YING: You are at home, right?

ZHUANG: Yeah, um, I'm just finishing up some work. How was Lily's dance recital?

YING: It was good. I'm pretty sure she forgot all the steps, but she made them all up. (BEAT.) Are you going to be back for the holidays? Zhuang, she wants to see her father.

ZHUANG: I know, Ying, but I have to work. We're coming out with a new product, and there are details I need to stay and work out.

YING: I get it, and I want you to succeed, but you've got to realize that it's been six years.

ZHUANG: I know, but I have to do this. This product is already attracting interest from investors and—

YING: (SHE HAS HEARD SIMILAR EXPLANATIONS FROM HIM MULTIPLE TIMES.) Do you still remember who you said we'd someday be together again? You keep putting it off.

ZHUANG: Ying, I need to make money—

YING: And when have sent a penny of it home?

ZHUANG: That's not fair. I sent you money for Christmas, for your birthday, and—

YING: What? Three times a year? It's not enough to be of any help. And then every time you do come back you spend like a pig and certainly eat like one.

ZHUANG: Ying, what are you trying to say? (HE IS ANGRY NOW.)

YING: Zhuang, I need help.

ZHUANG: What?

YING: I know you're not stupid. I'm sure part of you at least knows. Zhuang, we're running out of money.

ZHUANG: I can send more. You just needed to tell me.

YING: (SHE RAISES HER VOICE.) I work double shifts, but we still have the mortgage to pay off, the car payments, and Lily's dance lessons. (BEAT.) I love seeing our little girl dance, and sometimes it's the only thing that takes me away from all of this, but I can't keep it up. There are costumes and shoes too, and I just don't know where the money's going to come from.

ZHUANG: I can send more and more often. Ying, I don't want you to struggle. I've messed up some things, and I know I have, but I can do better.

YING: Are you sure you can't just come home?

ZHUANG: Not really. I worked on TV broadcast software, Ying. Think for a moment. In what direction is that industry headed?

YING: (SHE TRIES TO RESPOND BUT FAILS.)

ZHUANG: Any of my work experience wouldn't be relevant anymore. Ying, this is what I need to be doing. I wouldn't be any good to you if I came back home. I wouldn't much make money there, either, if I could even find a job at my age. I'm thirty-six now, and there's a crop of new hires coming in all the time.

YING: Will you at least be back for our anniversary?

ZHUANG: I can't promise it, Ying. I'm sorry.

YING: What about Lily's birthday?

ZHUANG: I don't know. I still can't make any promises.

YING: I can't believe this.

ZHUANG: You must realize that this is for you for you. I'm staying here, working long nights, and it's all for you and Lily.

YING: It was all for that dream of yours. To come to America, buy a house, and start a business. I left my job and my family all to follow you.

ZHUANG: And I'm glad you did!

YING: But then you decided to pack up and head back to China to start your business! And I never understood why you couldn't do that here.

ZHUANG: How many times have I told you?

YING: Yes, I know. Labor is cheaper. But couldn't you have made the sacrifices?

ZHUANG: I actually speak Chinese. No matter how hard I studied and practiced, I never fully grasped English. Have you thought of that? Americans also had no patience for my accent. I felt like an idiot there sometimes.

YING: You think I don't? And yet I'm here because of you. (BEAT.) You're alone in your apartment in Shanghai, and I don't know how you do it. I don't know how you spend all the nights alone. (SHE FALTERS.) I know I can't do it much longer.

MEI: (LAUGHS LOUDLY FROM OFFSTAGE.)

YING: (BECOMES SILENT BEFORE DECIDING TO SPEAK.) Is there someone there?

ZHUANG: Oh, just a maid I hired.

YING: It's late.

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ZHUANG: She's just finishing up. (BEAT.)
YING: You know, sometimes I think that this isn't going to work anymore and that it'd be best if—
LILY: (ENTERS FROM THE RIGHT HAVING JUST WOKEN UP. SHE IS STILL WEARING PYJAMAS. SHE WRAPS HER ARMS AROUND YING'S SHOULDERS, GIVES YING A KISS ON THE CHEEK, AND SITS DOWN ON ONE OF THE CHAIRS.) Mommy, who are you talking to?
YING: (SMILES TIGHTLY. SHE WILL HOLD IT ALL IN FOR LILY'S SAKE.) Daddy. Do you want to speak to him, Lily dear? (SHE HANDS THE PHONE TO LILY.)
LILY: Daddy, I missed you!
ZHUANG: Lily, I missed you too! How have you been?
LILY: I had a big performance yesterday!
ZHUANG: I know, mommy told me about it. I'm so proud that you had a solo.
LILY: What? I didn't have a solo.
ZHUANG: Oh, sorry! I thought you did.
LILY: No, daddy, that was my last recital when I had a tap solo. This time, I just did jazz.
ZHUANG: Oh, well, I'm still proud of you.
LILY: I know, daddy.
ZHUANG: Thank you. Do you want to hand the phone to your mom so I can talk some more with her?
LILY: (HANDS THE PHONE TO YING.)
YING: Well, I guess that's about it. (SHE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY ANYMORE.) Call me again soon.
ZHUANG: I will.
LILY: (SPEAKING INTO THE PHONE.) I love you, daddy!
ZHUANG: I love you too. (BEAT.) I love you, Ying.
YING: I love you. Sleep well. Bye.
ZHUANG: Bye.
YING: (STANDS UP.) What do you want for breakfast?
LILY: Pancakes!
YING: Pancakes? Okay, I'll see what I can do.
THE SPOTLIGHT ON SR DIMS AS YING OPENS THE FRIDGE AND BEGINS PREPARING PANCAKES.
ZHUANG: Mei, you can come in now!
MEI: (FROM OFFSTAGE.) Are you done?
ZHUANG: Yeah, I just finished. You can come in!

MEI: (ENTERS FROM THE LEFT IN PYJAMAS.) That took you a while.
ZHUANG: I know, I tried to hang up as soon as I could.
MEI: You know I only deal with all of this because I love you. (SHE CLIMBS INTO BED WITH ZHUANG.)
ZHUANG: I love you too.
THE SPOTLIGHT ON SL DIMS.
ALL LIGHTS OFF.

KEEPING WARM

Category: Dramatic Script

CHARACTERS:

JESS: A WOMAN IN HER MID-TWENTIES WHO IS DATING ZACH

ZACH: A MAN IN HIS MID-TWENTIES WHO IS DATING JESS

IT IS A FRIGID FRIDAY EVENING IN THE MIDDLE OF WINTER. ZACH IS COMING HOME FROM WORK AND ENTERS FROM SL. HE TAKES A BLACK BOX FROM HIS PANT POCKET AS IF TO MAKE SURE THAT IT'S STILL THERE, AND THEN HE PUTS IT BACK INTO HIS POCKET. HE OPENS THE DOOR TO THE HOUSE, WHICH LEADS TO THE LIVING ROOM.

ZACH: Jess! I'm home, Jess!

JESS: (ENTERS FROM SR CARRYING A SUITCASE IN EACH HAND.) Hey, you're home early. (SHE LOOKS GUILTY, PLACING THE SUITCASES DOWN NEAR THE DOOR.) How was your day?

ZACH: It was good. It wasn't as busy today, so I'm a little earlier today. (Beat.) What are you doing with all this? (HE GESTURES TOWARDS THE SUITCASES.)

JESS: Oh, that's something I have to explain. But let's eat dinner first. (ENTERS THE KITCHEN.)

ZACH: (HANGS THE COAT UP IN A CLOSET AND ENTERS THE KITCHEN.)

JESS: (SPOONS HERSELF AND ZACH DINNER. THIS CAN BE SOUP OR PASTA.)

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(BOTH BEGIN TO EAT IN SILENCE.)

ZACH: This is kind of bland. And next time you go to the store, you should pick up some tomatoes. But anyway, Jess, I have something to tell you. I guess you have something to tell me too, but I hope you won't mind if I start. (HE STICKS HIS HAND IN HIS POCKET.)

JESS: (INTERRUPTING.) Please let me go first. I know I'll end up not saying anything if you make me wait.

ZACH: Oh, okay. Go ahead.

JESS: I'm leaving.

ZACH: (BEAT.) What are you talking about?

JESS: I'm moving out tonight, Zach. I'm leaving this house, and I'm leaving you. Tonight.

ZACH: (BEAT. HE STARTS LAUGHING.) You're leaving? Why?

JESS: Because of a lot reasons. I'm not happy anymore. I keep hoping that I'm just having a bad dream and that I'll wake up and everything will be alright, but it never happens. I'm taking myself seriously this time. Unlike you.

ZACH: (HE STILL DOESN'T BELIEVE HER.) Where would you even go? It's not like you could pay your own bills.

JESS: Excuse me?

ZACH: You're a writer, Jess! You barely make any money.

JESS: I have savings.

ZACH: That you didn't tell me about?

JESS: I felt like I couldn't. Like if I did, you'd take them from me somehow.

ZACH: Jess, that's ridiculous.

JESS: I don't know. That's just how I felt. So you think I should stay with you just because you make money?

ZACH: I do. I have a steady job, and it pays well. Jess, let's be serious. You work from home and wake up late. By the time you actually start working, half the day is over.

JESS: I could change that. And besides, that just confirms that I shouldn't be staying here any longer. You're always belittling me.

ZACH: Jess, that's not true. I'm not against you writing, but you have to admit that you don't make any money. If you're actually going to

leave, as you say you are—

JESS: I am!

ZACH: Well, then how are you going to find the time or money to write? How much money could you possibly have stashed away?

JESS: Enough to make it through a few months and figure something out. Zach, I don't need you to tell me what to do with my life. I've packed up, and I'm leaving.

ZACH: Come on, Jess. We've been dating for four years. There's nothing we can't figure out. Why are you mad at me all of a sudden?

JESS: Because I told you, I feel like I can't breathe here! I'm the only one ever making compromises. I do all the cooking and cleaning and buy all the groceries—

ZACH: Jess, I want to help you, but I'm busy most days. I have to work, and sometimes I have to do overtime on the weekends. You're have the time.

JESS: Because of my job?

ZACH: Well, yes. Look, I try to help you on weekends. Just last week I cooked you steak and did all the yardwork.

JESS: Please stop. I've made up my mind.

ZACH: Jess, I can be better. I'm sorry. But you could have told me that you had issues with what I was doing.

JESS: But, Zach, I did! (SHE'S STARTING TO DOUBT HER OWN DECISION.) I told you over and over again that I didn't like all your off-handed remarks about my career or how I look.

ZACH: Have a sense of humor, Jess! I'm sorry if I was a little insensitive, but can't we work this out? Jess, what will people think if you just walk away? They're all expecting us to take the next step at this point. (HE TOUCHES HIS POCKET.)

JESS: Well, I'm sorry if I'm not much fun. Maybe I'm not the stylish girlfriend you want to take to parties. Maybe I don't work out much, and maybe I'm not a very good cook. I'm just sorry, Zach. Maybe I'm not good enough for you. (BEAT.)

ZACH: Jess, we can make this right. I'll be better, and you'll be better. You just had to tell me directly. (BEAT.) Hey, it'll be okay. I've obviously stuck with you, right? And, I guess I do have my own things to work on. Jess, we've been dating for

quite some time, and I just wanted to ask—

JESS: (SHE STOPPED LISTENING.) What time is it?

ZACH: Uh, like five past six.

JESS: I have to go. (SHE HESITATES, BUT THEN SHE MAKES A CHOICE.)

ZACH: This again? Jess, I thought we just settled this.

JESS: I called a taxi. It should be waiting outside the door about now. (SHE STANDS UP AND HEADS FOR THE DOOR.)

ZACH: (HE SITS INCREDULOUSLY FOR A MOMENT. THEN, AS HE SEES HER PUTTING ON HER COAT, HE GETS UP AND FOLLOWS JESS.) Jess! Jess! Jessica Carter, wait!

JESS: (OPENS THE DOOR AND WALKS OUTSIDE.) (THE SOUND OF A TAXI ARRIVING. THEN, THE ONGOING SOUND OF AN IDLING ENGINE.)

ZACH: (RUNS OUT AFTER JESS WITHOUT A COAT.)

Where are you going?

JESS: Zach, I don't know.

ZACH: Then just stay here. (BEAT.) Do you have to do this?

JESS: We're headed for different places in life. You want to stay here, but I can't anymore. I'll suffocate if I stay.

ZACH: What do you mean?

JESS: I don't know. (BEAT.) Take off your coat.

ZACH: What?

JESS: I didn't mean it that way. It's just, would you please give me your coat?

ZACH: Jess, what are you talking about? I'm not wearing one. You have your own coat. And it's damned freezing out here.

JESS: That's the point, Zach. You couldn't count on my love, and I can't count on your coat. That's why I can't go with you.

ZACH: What? Jess, what are you going on about?

JESS: Zach, I wanted so badly to love you. I kept hoping everything would sort itself out and that I was just being soft-skinned. But I didn't have any love for myself left. Coats are like love, I guess. (SHE THINKS WHAT SHE IS SAYING IS STUPID.) If you can't even keep yourself warm, how are you supposed to share with someone else? Zach, just go inside. You'll freeze.

ZACH: Jess, come back. We've been happy

together.

JESS: We were once, but I can't. I'm so sorry, Zach. Goodbye! (EXITS TO THE LEFT.)

(THE SOUNDS OF A CAR DOOR OPENING AND CLOSING AND A TAXI DRIVING AWAY.)

ZACH: (HE STANDS THERE FOR A LONG MOMENT BEFORE TAKING THE BLACK BOX OUT FROM HIS POCKET AND OPENING IT TO REVEAL A RING. HE CLOSSES THE BOX AND THEN RETURNS INSIDE.)

LIGHTS OFF.

OF GORGING AND GUILT

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

I've never liked bread.

They say children want what they can't have, but growing up, my father frequently bought home Costco-sized plastic boxes of croissants or bags teeming with bread rolls.

"Come on, it'll make dinners easier," he'd say to my mother while they were grocery shopping.

Once his purchases were crowding the dinner table and he'd torn away at a croissant or two, he'd falter, as if he'd suddenly remembered that he was a diabetic. Then, he'd turn to me and grin. "Try some bread," he'd say. "It's so good!"

"I don't want it," I'd answer.

"It's so good. Just try some!"

Grimacing, I'd take a croissant and drop it onto my plate. After staring at it for a long moment, I'd nibble on the bland, thick pastry, swallowing slowly.

For years, I've watched my father's endless swinging between gorging and guilt. So many times, he's simply swallowed his better judgment only for it to come back and eat at him later. I've seen him dive into a sandwich and in five minutes come up with melted cheese coating his lips and

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crumbs scattered across his shirt. Other times, he'd chomp down nearly a pound of nuts after dinner. I'm hungry, he'd say. This is healthy food, and I haven't eaten that much.

However, sweets were one thing my father never tried to justify, and though he cut them out almost entirely, that didn't stop him from wanting to treat me. One time, while we were taking a walk in the middle of winter, we made an impulsive detour for the ice cream shop. Moments after taking off my woolen mittens and bobble hat, I sank my teeth into a heaping scoop of rocky road before remembering that my father was still standing next to me.

"Do you want a lick?" I asked with a sheepish smile.

He snuck one lick, and after the flavor had dissipated, he snuck another. "If I didn't have my disease, I wouldn't give you time to ask," he said, smacking his lips. "Growing up, this is what I could have only dreamed of."

My father grew up as one of four children in northern China during Mao Zedong's communist regime. He never went hungry, but there was never anything left over. Most meals consisted of coarse rice and pickled vegetables, and my dad learned to lick each plate clean. Even having an egg to himself was a rare holiday treat. Food was comfort. It was celebration. It was love, and I could only give my father a lick.

"When I was out of college and just started working," he continued, "I had enough money for the first time in my life. That's when I bought all the sodas and chocolates I could want." He laughed. "I could finish off a pound of chocolate in three days. Sometimes, that's all I had for breakfast."

I stared at his thin face, from the puffy skin under his eyes to his sunken cheeks and his pronounced cheekbones. My stomach twisted itself into a knot.

Since I started high school, my father has increasingly struggled with spiking blood sugar levels. I watched as insulin pills were no longer potent enough and he was forced to inject his side, the only remaining flabby part of his body, with insulin before every meal. When his stomach

growled, he could merely sit and wait for the next meal or risk punishment from what was supposed to be nourishment.

The family tried switching to eating brown rice, but when that wasn't enough, my father started making his own bread with white flour yet no added sugar. The results were crumbly loaves that barely rose with crusts that scratched the insides of my mouth.

"Why don't you use whole wheat flour?" I asked him one day, tapping his back.

He kept pouring wheat flour into the bread machine as if he hadn't heard me. I tapped him again.

"Ba, isn't whole wheat flour better for you?"

"Whole wheat flour is too expensive. Besides, this bread is fine."

"Ba, it's not just about sugar. Diabetics have to watch out for carbs in general." As he washed his hands with a lowered head, I kept going: "Ba, I have classmates who are diabetics too, and they count out all the carbs they eat, including crackers and fruit."

"How sick would I have to be to count every carb?" he shouted. "People who are at that point won't live much longer." His voice broke, after locking his flashing eyes with mine, he disappeared into his room.

I stood before his closed door, brimming with steam and yearning to scream. Like a kettle taken off the heat, though, I soon came to a hush. I could do nothing to help. I could do nothing, though I would continue to try.

This Christmas, when my father bought a package of over forty dinner rolls from Costco and claimed they were for my mother and me, I narrowed my eyes at him. "Why would you do that?" I asked. "Neither mom nor me likes bread."

"Your father was shopping hungry," my mother said pointedly. "He wasn't thinking."

After the three of us finished a quiet dinner of noodles, my stomach felt tight and bulging, but my father stuck his hand in the bag of rolls and put one on his plate. I glared at him.

"I'm still hungry," he protested loudly.

In his rounded eyes, I saw a poor boy from a

coal-mining town fighting for the last apple with his siblings. How could I tell him that he had to stay hungry when there was finally plenty of food? How could I tell him that hunger had to last the rest of his life? My hand twitched, but in an instant, I'd snatched the roll off his plate and placed it on the other side of the table.

"If I'm hungry, my blood sugar goes up even more" he tried.

"You've eaten way too many today. These things are full of carbs," I exclaimed. "How many did you have for lunch?"

"Three." He eyed the roll.

"You've had four of these today?" I blinked twice.

"And there was breakfast too."

"You're crazy." I willed him to tell me it wasn't true. When he didn't flinch, I glanced at the roll, where it still wasn't safe. Without even thinking, I stuffed it in my mouth, chewing the slightly sweet, glutinous mass before gulping it all down.

Then, I caught his eye again. Gorged and guilty, I took another roll from the bag and handed it to him.

HOT AND SOUR LOVE

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

I fell in love with the first taste of that awakening flavor. The clouds of egg drops melted on my tongue and were followed by the dark earthiness of wood ear mushrooms. I thought I was drinking liquid amber, bright with acidity and warm with the red kiss of chilies. My father then told me it was called hot and sour soup, and as the last whisper lingered on my lips as my family left the restaurant, I knew I wanted more.

I also knew I would be disappointed. We almost never went out to eat, and I had no hope that I would be able to recreate the dish on my

own. With my slippery hands and flitting mind, my mother didn't even trust me to touch knives or let my hand waver above the stove's flames. Moreover, my family's attempts to cook something new always ended in regret. I remember the linguine swimming in red foam (a dish we called spaghetti) and the separated curry floating on a island of oil. Because my mother's rule was that nothing could go to waste, I also remember those foods being thick and full in my throat as I washed them down with a glass of water. There was a reason why we settled for an empirical formula of rice and stir-fried vegetables, and I willed myself to turn thoughts of the soup away.

One day, however, I let my nose and ears guide me down the stairs to our plain white kitchen, and I paused in the doorway with round eyes. There was my mother, cubing tofu and whisking eggs by hand. A black curl drooped by her glossy cheek, and her voice mingled with steam as it rose in the songs of her distant childhood. When she ladled a hot bowl to the brim for me, I formed the only words I could think of: XIE XIE. Thank you.

My mother began making the soup with astonishing frequency, and, not believing in written recipes or the measurement of ingredients, her creations varied every time. Sometimes, sesame oil would come through and form golden bubbles. Other times, the gentle sweetness of carrots was what sang. She teased that she would never have to cook that soup again if I drank it too often and tired of it, but how could I? It was sure heat when winter was wet with heavy snows. It was clarity in the torpor of summer. Most of all, it was a mother's love, flowing fast and constantly through my veins.

There were times, though, when I struggled to find the magic. The broth would be too thin, or the excess salt and white pepper would coat my tongue. One time, my mother's hand slipped while she was pouring the vinegar, and the resulting soup pinched my throat and made me wince. As she watched the color of my mood change, my mother pursed her lips and furrowed her brow.

That night, she sat down alone with a bowl of the soup before I wordlessly joined her. Her red-rimmed gaze met mine, and I wondered: Why do

we pursue love when it doesn't taste sweet?
Neither of us could find the words to answer, so we
let them fall away instead. We simply filled the
silence with the clattering of spoons and sips of a
four-letter word I was only beginning to
understand.

A SENIOR'S GUIDE TO GETTING REJECTED FROM COLLEGE

Category: Humor

Not participating in enough activities

Many colleges are going to ask for resumés, so you'd better pad yours up. Make sure to join all the honor societies you can, where you can pay and then don't have to do anything for the rest of the year. Join STUCO. Run for class officer. Engage in fascinating debates about the color of the class t-shirt. Show up to a couple of the DECA[1] and FBLA[2] meetings and maybe go to nationals without any preparation. Later, you'll have tons of shiny accolades to regurgitate into all your essays. You won't struggle to fill up the minimum word count, so you won't have to include all that meaningless fluff about passion and growth. You'll be very well-rounded, for sure, and thus extraordinary.

Not taking enough AP classes

If you're not stressed and sleep-deprived, you're not working hard enough. Who cares about pursuing any of your passions in high school? Who cares if you actually enjoy any of your classes? Double up on science whether or not yet want to pursue STEM. Make sure to load up on all the AP

classes you can, especially easy ones like AP Human Geography to AP Microeconomics. Also, make sure to take AP Government online because you'll earn an easy A that way.

Not having high enough test scores

Everyone knows that if you're shooting for schools like Harvard, you need to find a way to stand out, and what better way to do that than through your test scores? Obviously, a 35 or lower on the ACT just won't cut it. Make sure to save up thousands of dollars for a tutor because that's the only way to succeed. Forget about having a social life. Spend hours studying every week. Sure, test scores say nothing about your character or your work ethic. Sure, almost 3,000 people get 36's nationwide each year. But hey, you'll be one of them.

Forgetting to mention your most important awards

On the Coalition and Common Applications, you'll be told to list your five most important awards. If you followed my advice in the previous tips, you would have plenty to use already. As a National Merit Semifinalist and National AP Scholar, you'll certainly stand out among the tens of thousands of other students who also thought their test scores were good enough for top colleges. You may realize that there's already a testing section on college applications where colleges will be able to see your AP scores, but honestly? Colleges are academic institutions, and it won't hurt to make it very obvious to them that you're dedicated to your schooling and not much else. I mean, if you have to spend all your time studying in high school, you'll only have to suffer a tiny bit more in college when your workload is even heavier. You'll already have experience shedding angry tears at 3 A.M. in the morning.

Not having enough people edit your essay

Don't believe all that garbage about conveying your own "voice" in your college essays. Admissions officers read thousands of essays year, and even if your personality hasn't been quashed by all the counselors, parents, teachers, and stressed-out peers who tried to give you advice all

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throughout high school, admissions officers would immediately forget your voice upon reading it. Honestly, you need all the help you can get, and if others want to write your essays for you, so be it. If you can throw in some sob story about death, drugs, or divorce, or even better, all three, then you're a shoo-in. If it's actually true, then great! If not, well, no one's going to know.

Failing to research "fit" for your colleges

Why would these admissions officers ask so many questions like "Why our school?" Let's be honest, every student out there is just after the prestige. We all want to end up at a school that's as high up on the U.S. News best college rankings as possible. Admissions officers know this, and they're just trying to weed out the students who procrastinate too much to finish answering all the college-specific questions. Apply to as many schools as you can, more than 20 even, if you can manage it.

Just don't write in your Princeton essay that you love their International Business major. They don't have one. And don't be afraid to copy paste your responses for other schools to save time. Just remember to tweak your essay accordingly. Don't tell Princeton that you "can't wait to go to Yale." Show even an ounce of intelligence, and that's all colleges want with their "Why This School?" essays. Many high schoolers are dumb, and they need to be weeded out. I mean, it's not as if there are other factors besides prestige in the college decision process.

Not taking college applications seriously enough

Let's continue to assume that you want to go to Harvard. Don't forget to head over to Naviance^[3] and compare your GPA and test scores to past accepted students. Your resulting feelings of incompetence will ensure you take this whole process seriously enough. Still not fazed? Check out College Confidential and read some "What Are My Chances?" forums! Eh, so there are some liars, but that can't be avoided. Oh, some kid in Colorado got a 1600 on the SAT and won nationals in fencing? Oh no, they got rejected?

Welp, there go your chances. You can't compare with that. But you know what, it's not as if you were ever going to get in anyway.

I mean, it's not as if high school is about more than just preparing for your future. It's not as if your life has already started and living in the moment is important too. Turns out you just blew everything, and it's time to go cry alone in the bathroom.

THE VIEWS AND OPINIONS EXPRESSED IN THIS ARTICLE DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THE POSITION OF THE NORTH STAR STAFF AS A WHOLE OR EVEN THE AUTHOR'S.

[1] A high school business organization

[2] Yet another high school business organization

[3] A career readiness software