

Missouri Youth Write

2022

Gold Key Winners

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 Regions's Scholastic Writing Awards Contest, sponsored by The Alliance for Young Artists and Writers (www.artandwriting.org)



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Missouri Youth Writes 2022 - Gold Key Award

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ABOU ANTOUN, SANA'A**Sana'a Abou Antoun**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

Evil, Was This Your Intention?

Evil, Was This Your Intention

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines 'evil' in many different ways. However, there are three significant definitions that one might identify with. One, a morally reprehensible, wicked, or sinful impulse. Two, something that causes discomfort or repulsion. And three, something that causes harm and misfortune. Every person has their definition of what evil is whether or not a dictionary defines it objectively. These peoples' definitions will be heavily biased as a result of their experiences shaping their understanding of evil. For example, authors like Roger Shattuck have claimed that evil "comes in several forms" (Shattuck 1) and that there are categories evil presents itself as in our world.

In addition, other writers like Lance Morrow have concluded that "evil sometimes means the thing we cannot understand, and cannot forgive" (Morrow 3). As a whole, Evil has many interpretations because of one fact: it is a broad concept that has challenged many people for centuries. Morrow states that "we can know [evil] poetically, symbolically, historically, emotionally [and] by its works" (Morrow 3). This fact is one that no person can truly deny. However way evil has affected me or anyone else, I speak for everyone when I say that it has caused immense pain and torture. No matter how significant or trivial that form of evil has played out in someone's life.

The existence of death, poverty, political corruption, famine, natural disasters, and so much more have convinced me and many others that someone or something out there is to blame. The mere fact that there is a word to describe these problems tells us that humans desire closure and understanding when incomprehensible events occur. They want to believe that there is an entity or villain out there causing their pain. The word "evil" serves as an explanation for the horrible incidents that have occurred in history and that are occurring today.

Overall, the universe is not void of evil. Evil lives everywhere and envelopes itself into forms humans can experience with their senses. Many times I swore to myself that evil was constantly mocking me. Many times I felt like I was the dead horse evil kept kicking and kicking. However, with these experiences I have gained insight that is worth sharing; knowledge that has helped me perceive experiences in a new light.

For about a decade I lived in a small country called Lebanon. At the age of 6, I began my life there and grew up surrounded by a certain culture, family, friends, and school. The beach was a prominent part of my life since I lived on the coast and friends were too. The atmosphere was always filled with excitement and safety because everyone I knew and loved lived near me. Weekends consisted of excursions up to the mountains to see cousins or plans with friends in the city or beach when the weather allowed it. I loved my life and everything it consisted of. From the friends I made in middle school to the beach that was part of my identity. It is safe to say that the idea of leaving my home never occurred in my brain. All until one fateful month.

Suddenly during October of 2019, nationwide riots broke out as well as Covid-19 which changed my life forever. These protests were bound to happen as a result of the corrupt government that is still run by greedy self-interested politicians. The people were rioting against the proposal of new taxes on products most Lebanese people utilize and would not be able to afford. With the virus and the economic crisis hitting Lebanon and its people all at once, my world turned dark. It's an understatement to say that Lebanon was not equipped to deal with the ravaging chaos. More specifically, the people in charge of the country. Wildfires broke out that month and I was appalled when fire departments proved ineffective in putting out the blaze. This news resulted in public outrage and brought awareness to the underfunding of public services like Lebanon's crisis response teams.

Throughout the following months, I witnessed and experienced the struggles of people living in my country. My school and every other school shut down completely due to streets being filled with people burning tires and straight-up blocking the roads. Inflation hit my family and many more in the following months and unfortunately, so many people were dragged into poverty. I felt like my whole world was crumbling around me. As friend after friend left the

country seeking a better life, my heart became filled with despair and loss. The country and city I loved, admired, and made memories in was dying and the people responsible for it were not doing anything about it.

The government neglected the people and this fact was rubbed in our faces that year and the years following. With hundreds and thousands of people getting infected with COVID-19, hospitals became overwhelmed and there were already limited healthcare institutions so many people could not receive vital treatment. Every problem whether it be the lack of electricity, medicine, basic goods, gas for vehicles, hyperinflation, nationwide famine, dismal internet connectivity, lack of hospital beds, and contaminated water affected every Lebanese person and could all be circled back to the Lebanese politicians that cared more about self-enrichment than public welfare. Every night I slept wondering what tomorrow would look like. The unpredictability of my future sparked fear and anxiety in me. I blamed and still blame the so-called 'leaders' of our country for their selfishness, and inhumanity. Their greed has caused millions to suffer and ruined many people's futures.

The build-up of corruption and mismanagement of the country caused my life and so many others to collapse. After two years of inflation and a lack of resources in the country, my family was forced to leave. I had to leave my childhood home, the beach I used to go to every day with my best friend, the school I planned to graduate from, the friends that I made over the years, the magnificent mountains where my cousins lived, and so much more. Everything I built I had to rebuild in an unfamiliar place.

I cursed the politicians and everyone responsible for the pain I went through leaving my home and all the pain I witnessed my friends and their family go through. With all my heart I knew our country's leaders were evil. They had and have so many lives on their hands. They caused so much loss, suffering, and destruction. Those few years convinced me that evil people existed in our world. Reading about evil was not enough for me to open my eyes and see how real and destructive it is. But now, after experiencing it first hand I confidently believe evil exists in our world. Facing the disaster and misfortune of my surrounding environment all as a result of the incompetent government ignited rage in me and an understanding of the term 'moral evil'.

In Roger Shattuck's article "When Evil Is 'Cool'", he explains how he groups different kinds of evil. Evil is categorized into four different types: natural, metaphysical, radical, and moral. Moral evil, he exclaims, "refers to actions undertaken knowingly to harm or exploit others in contravention of accepted moral principles or statutes within a society." His definition of moral evil stands out to me because moral evil refers to humans that harm other humans and do it knowingly with wicked intentions.

The article "Evil" by Lance Morrow raises a significant question that that has three answers. If I read that article at the time I just arrived in the United States I would have sided strongly with one answer and not thought about it any further. Morrow asks "Who or what is responsible" for the existence of evil. Basically, who is the perpetrator of evil? One, Is it God himself? His responsibility? That would fall under natural evil. Two, is it the acts of the blind-the universe? If that's the case no one is to blame. What about three, "moral evils, acts that men and women must answer for?" (Morrow 2).

Back then, I would have quickly circled number three and moved on. Content with my answer but also angry that it was right. At the time when my family and I just moved, I hated everything about where I lived. Sleeping in a small Airbnb every night, existing with no car, snow all day and all night, and doing school online with different time zones. Those inconveniences highlighted the pain and homesickness I felt. Existing was unbearable and sleeping was almost impossible, especially while sharing a bed with my sister who constantly stole the blanket all for herself. I dreamed about going back home and sunbaking on the beach with my friends and family having no worrisome thoughts. However, every time I thought about my home I felt sorrow and the only way to lessen that feeling was to blame the politicians of Lebanon for all my problems. After all, their corrupt and neglectful leadership was the cause of my leaving. So of course I would agree that people themselves are the perpetrators of evil. They (the corrupt leaders of my home country) are the epitome of moral evil.

Now coming to this conclusion, I ask boldly: Why does that matter? To rephrase: Does believing that my native country's leaders are morally evil matter? More specifically, does that erase evil from existence?

During that cold month when all I could think about was my loss and struggles at the moment, I believed that loathing those men that called themselves leaders mattered because it gave me closure. I thought I could move on if I felt that way. Yet that held me back. My hate for the politicians spread to the world and everything around me. I hated evil and blamed everyone for all my misfortunes. Deep down I did not want to move on with my life. I wanted to keep hating the people responsible for the reality I was in. I thought if I moved on my feelings of despair would mean nothing and somehow those greedy politicians who lived thousands of miles away would get away with what they did.

One day in early March, I sat watching my mom and younger brother build a snowman through the living room window. Later, as my brother passionately described how he built it, a newfound feeling filled my heart. Was I so preoccupied with the thoughts in my mind that I missed everything going on in front of me? As all these thoughts rushed into my mind at once I realized that I was blind to all the beauty and fun around me.

I rushed outside and stood in the sparkling white snow. Feeling and breathing the cold air, I realized that I was too fixated on the things I lost instead of the things I gained: shifting my entire perspective. Yes I had fallen from my home and entered a new world I was unfamiliar with but I entered it with my family and hope for a better future. Breathing heavily I looked up at the sky and never felt colder in my entire life but I didn't care. I finally felt alive and excited for the first time in weeks as I envisioned all the new things I wanted to experience.

Now attributed as a theological concept related to Adam and Eve's fall from paradise, the term "Felix culpa" is a Latin phrase that originates from the words Felix, meaning "blessed" or "happy" and culpa, meaning "fall" or "fault". The best translation is "fortunate fall". The definition of Felix culpa many can relate with is when a disaster or horrible incident occurs as a result of evil or sin but as a result the consequences are happy and they find fortune. Standing in that snow and seeing that big smile on my brother's face when he spoke to me made me admit to myself that being in the U.S. when so many Lebanese people couldn't escape the corruption in their country was something I should feel grateful for.

In John Milton's poem *Paradise Lost*, the first humans, Adam and Eve, live in the Garden of Eden more famously known as Paradise. However, it is not long until evil makes its way into their beloved home. Satan disguises himself as a serpent and manipulates and deceives Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. To summarize, she and later Adam consume the fruit and are forced to leave their home. In Milton's poem, evil was the cause of their leaving. It existed in their world and drove them out. Just like how the politicians and leaders in charge of my native country drove my family and me out. Like Adam and Eve, I never wanted to leave my Paradise. When Eve finds out from Michael (the chief of the archangels in heaven) that she has to leave her home she is heartbroken. She exclaims with great despair,

EVE. O unexpected stroke, worse than of death!
 Must I thus leave thee Paradise? Thus leave thee native soil,
 These happy walks and shades, Fit haunt of gods? O flow'rs,
 Which I bred up with tender hand from the first op'ning bud, and
 Gave ye names...How shall I part, and whither wander down into a lower
 World, to this obscure and wild, how shall we breathe in other air...?
 (Milton book 11. 268-284)

Eve's lamentation is one I can heavily relate to and identify with. She wonders how she can live in a different world when she's been living in a world she has bonded with all her life and feels a connection to. These were questions and fears I felt when I found out I was leaving my native home. Michael then cheers Eve up and tells her that her husband Adam is going with her. If he's by her side they can go anywhere together. This is a feeling I felt when I sat in the airplane freezing from the air conditioning. My sister was sitting beside me and let me share her blanket. At that moment I felt like I didn't have to be scared because she was there experiencing everything with me. We were on this journey together just like Adam and Eve were.

If it wasn't for Adam and Eve's fall from paradise their bond with each other would never have strengthened and they would never have the chance to redeem themselves for their sins. When I think about my departure from my home, I realize that if I never left I never would have never been able to gain the independence I have today. To secure a job or ride my bike anywhere I want to go. That day while standing in the snow I gained a deep sense of motivation and appreciation. I looked at my parents differently from then on. I stopped thinking about how much I hated the Lebanese leaders and how evil they were. Those thoughts were stopping me from loving my life or at least accepting it which I realized I had to do to stop being so angry and hateful. All I wanted was the pain to go away and to do that I just had to slowly let go and mature into the person this new world would shape me into.

In the days following, I felt my mind and body being lifted out of my formerly miserable state. It is an understatement to say that it was hard to move on from my feelings of rage and loss. However, I just kept looking to the future for motivation. I later took advantage of the opportunities here that were nonexistent in Lebanon. In mid-march, we finally settled into a new home and I enrolled in a new school. When spring arrived my mom bought me a bike. Traveling to parks and libraries I explored my new environment. With music in my ears and wind in my hair, I felt myself healing and rebuilding my strength. I look at biking as a luxury because I could never imagine riding on the bumpy, automobile-filled streets of Lebanon. When I went shopping with my parents on occasion, I compared the packed shelves in American stores to that of the nearly empty supermarkets in Lebanon which opened my eyes and made me see how lucky I was. Later, I became thrilled that I accomplished the goals I set for myself like getting my driver's permit and securing my first job. My everyday life started to feel bearable. I started to look forward to waking up every morning and felt grateful for everything I had and everything my family and I accomplished in just a few months.

With this experience, I recognized that the world is filled with many evils. With that truth, I learned that I should not and will not allow evil to stop me from anything I desire. Having hope in the future or in anything is what keeps evil from consuming everything. When I first stepped foot into the United States, I despised the world I

thought was against me. I despised evil and wished the world was kinder. Now, I have grown from that mindset and will keep growing. I have accepted that evil will always exist. Pain and suffering as a result of evil will continue as well. Yet my rage and hate because of this fact does not have to continue. My continued existence that consists of happy moments and hope is what keeps evil from winning in my life. Without evil, I never would have experienced all the great moments in the United States. My bond with my family never would have grown as much as it did. All the new experiences and “firsts” would be nonexistent if I didn’t leave my native home. Evil’s doings may accidentally cause one to discover a greater fortune that is sometimes greater than what they had before.

ADKINS, PAYTON**Payton Adkins**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Basehor-Linwood Middle School, Basehor, KS

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Haunted By The Ghost Of You

Haunted by the Ghost of You

August 12th, 9:12 pm. I walked through the garage door, and I immediately knew something was wrong. It was quiet, and the dogs hadn't moved to greet us. My mom walked in behind me; I could tell she felt just as uneasy as I did. "Where's Fat?" I had asked. Fat had been my first thought when I walked into the house. She was our English bulldog who had been diagnosed with lymphoma a year before that night.

As soon as I asked, my dad came into the living room where we'd been standing. He'd been crying, I could tell. His eyes were red, and he was silent. "Is she dead?" my mom had asked. I froze. I think I had known the question was coming, but that didn't lessen the blow. He pursed his lips and shut his eyes. He tried to speak, but it was like he couldn't find the words. Eventually, he just nodded.

"Where is she?" my mom asked. My dad, still at a loss for words, pointed towards his bedroom. My mom was calm, and kept telling me that it was okay, that everything would be fine. I had already been crying since my dad confirmed she was dead. My mom walked with me to the room. She was lying in Nala's, our other dog's, kennel. That moment felt so unreal; she looked like she was sleeping. If it had been any other day, I wouldn't have even begun to think she was dead.

My mom asked if I wanted to pet her. I didn't respond. I just sat in front of the kennel and put my hand on her head. I noticed that her tongue was sticking out. That's what did it for me. I stood up, and my mom and I hugged for a while. My best friend of six years was sitting there, dead, and there wasn't a thing I could do. I hadn't even been with her before she died. The last time I saw her alive was two hours before she died. I felt so, so guilty.

My dad had been home, but he hadn't been with her when she died. I can't imagine how she felt. My mom had kept reassuring me, telling me that she had died peacefully. She didn't experience any pain. I knew she was telling the truth, but I couldn't shake the guilt. She looked peaceful. It was a painless death, but no one she loved had been with her. No one was there to comfort her.

My sister came into the room after a couple of minutes. We were all crying; my mom, my dad, and I. She wasn't crying, and she acted like she didn't care. It made me beyond angry. I didn't understand how she could pretend she didn't care. This dog she'd had almost her entire life was dead, and she didn't care. I didn't get over my anger for a while. Eventually, I realized that it was her way of coping.

After I had left the room and managed to calm myself down, I texted one of my closest friends. She loved my dogs, and she'd known Fat for five years. She deserved to know. She cried. I knew she would; she had cried when Fat had been diagnosed. She asked me if I was okay. I wasn't. Not at the time. She asked why God had to take her. I wish I had an answer. I still do. I wish, more than anything, that I knew why she couldn't have stayed, even for just a little longer.

My parents wanted her cremated that night. They called a vet and scheduled an appointment. My dad went back into his room for a while. He came back out carrying Fat. My sister and I said our goodbyes, and my parents finally left. After they left, everything felt more real. This wasn't some sick dream. It was real. Fat was dead. I cried for an hour, just thinking about her, remembering her. All the memories I had of her were coming back to me. She was the best dog I could've ever asked for. She was so strong, and she fought until her last breath. She was deaf, but I don't have any doubt she can hear me from heaven. I know she can hear me every time I say I love her. Even if she can't, I know she felt it when she was alive. A lot of the time, when I get stuck in my thoughts, the guilt comes back. I can't help but feel that I'm haunted by the ghost of her.

AN, HANNAH**Hannah An**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Parkway North High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Melissa Pomerantz

Category: Poetry

Remains

Remains

I find myself in the ruins of my Father's house
Inhaling the air of a deserted grave.
An open crematorium littered by fragments of glass
Each step an ode to the Time once here.
Of stained glass walls
Woven with songs of glory and ecstasy
Of soil inscribed with the polyphony of Him
Breathing life into the wailing dead;

I cut my hand on the soot-caked glass
Carmine pigment painting glories on His soil.
Bleaching veins with the remnants of reconciliation
like the drunk cleansing himself of desire.

I thirst for the alcohol
that burns these bones
The divinely crafted poison that generates blood
That creates song
out of a molded statue of
Crumbling dust.

The trembling husk of this scavenged statue
is the last prisoner here.
Hope
Grasping by his fingertips
To the hollow reflection of himself
A glinting shard of
what Mourning desire of the unknown remains
Dragging across his wrists;

If Time has left this place,
Tell her of the longing.
Tell her that these sand-gritted walls
Hold the memory of its collapse
Tell her that broken shackles hurt more than the grinding of bone
Tell her that the song for her
is the song for him
Tell her that the lullaby brings no end.

Sing to her that if she comes back once again
He'll build himself as a martyr

For his Father waited too long.

I am the shuddering image of Hope
Horrified of what remains.

ARD, EVA**Eva Ard**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Hickory Co R1 High School, Urbana, MO

Educator: Marilyn Yung

Category: Poetry

I'm Sorry Mom**I'm Sorry Mom**

I'm sorry mom, for how you found me.
I screamed your name from the bathroom, but in reality, I remember it sounding so so quiet.
And I didn't yell your name from the bathroom,
I entered the hallway and met you halfway into the living room

"Mom? Mom?"

I'm sorry mom, for the shock I put you through that night
You were only feeding my brother dinner, it was something microwavable and simple
Bubba's dinner plate was balancing on the arm of the couch,
I'm sorry for ruining that, I wasn't trying to make it fall, or create a mess

"Mom? Mom?"

I'm sorry mom, I should've known all I had to do was tell you
I kept so much trapped in a cage within my head
If I made you feel like you couldn't help me, please know that isn't true
My thoughts were spilling out, but I came to you

"Mom? Mom?"

I'm sorry mom, I love you so much
And I love my dog, and bubba, and dad and so many more
But hopelessness and paranoia invaded my thoughts
I felt numb, and I was afraid of the help I could get

"Mom? Mom?"

I'm sorry mom, for that night so many years ago
Where I made a rash decision, that could have changed everything
Where I called your name and sobbed endlessly
I'm sorry that this night wasn't my only time making a final decision

"Mom? Mom?"

I'm sorry mom, for that night
For that night not being the only time I made that choice
But what I should really say, is thank you, mom,
For guaranteeing my failure, and saving me.

"Mom? Thank you"

ODE TO MY WHITE LIGHTER

I want to live, longer than
when I wanted at nine,
thirteen, fourteen, and twelve.

I will live as long as I have you,
my pocket companion, my white lighter,
I choose to believe, the theories are true.

Kurt Cobain, and his aqua seafoam dreams
kept his heart-shaped box, his white lighter,
his addictions and screams.

She was all alone, willing her
tears to dry on their own
Amy died at twenty-seven, as it all became a blur.

I have found a reason to stay for
nine more years, with hobbies and dreams
I can sustain life for a few years more, with mi amore.

Simple chord by simple chord, I play guitar,
with a white lighter in my pocket
I struggle to learn when proficiency stays so far

But I will never approach, playing
with my right hand, what Hendrix
revolutionized, our anthem in his style time sustaining.

I'm not Janis, I don't own a harpoon,
To keep in my dirty red bandana,
but I own a lighter the shade of a blinding moon.

The superstitious won't read this poem and relate
Because too many artists died with
you in their pocket, at twenty-seven. and saving them was too late.

I never traveled to the crossroads,
to make a deal for fame. But like those who did
I carry you with me, hoping your fuel won't explode.

I never thought I'd last this long,
But oh, how I hope for longer life,
My will to last longer is oh so strong.

I want to live, and twenty-seven
may seem soon, but at least
It's longer than I once wanted, and I will wait for heaven.

POWER (A Poem Inspired by Metaphor Dice)

Power is a desperate animal
Power crawls into your heart
It tells you to tear everything apart
Power corrupts the souls of saints

It fuels your darkest desires
 Those who catch even a glimpse of power, cannot let go
 Those in power will harm others, in gluttony, they feed, they let their power grow
 Power brainwashes everyone surrounding it
 Power is a desperate animal, chomping at the bit
 Men throughout history have held power in their hand
 They use their power to diminish and destroy women, so power is owned by man
 Defining women as weak is a perfect way to control half the population
 While desperately weak men, force copulation
 But the fairer sex is not immune
 To how power sings, a siren's tune
 They too can tear apart lives
 While children and men cry
 It doesn't matter who you are
 Power corrupts, and try as you will, you're never far
 You can lie to others or lie to yourself
 Saying "I would do the right thing" but you won't
 Once you've got it, you can't give it up
 Power tears apart the people in a sick and sadistic way similar to the crimes of a cannibal
 Power is a desperate animal

The Infernal Serpent Visits

A life in hades is the snakes simple home
 Eve lies in Eden as the serpent writes his tome.

The original symbol of evil and strife
 Is gliding towards my head, teeth as sharp as a knife.

I do not fear the venom of this valiant viper,
 For this creature comes to take me home, after my life as a kiper.

Thieving and lying, bound me to my fate,
 And this poised python has escaped my hate.

This serpent, this snake, slithers my way,
 And for my new friend, I accept his choice, on making this my last day.

The Song of The Fey Folk: A Villanelle

Dancing and spinning until we grow old,
honest fair folk, take in crying creatures.
Manic zealots have us in a chokehold.

Fruits and honeyed cakes grow covered with mold,
a child eats these treats, did no one teach her?
We won't survive if we are not controlled.

Power behind words, and a glare so cold,
I notice their proportions and features.
Manic zealots have us in a chokehold.

On a throne, is the king who was foretold,
their ruler, their emperor, their preacher.
We won't survive if we are not controlled.

Reaching out to her, her hand feels so cold.
I grasp for her, I just want to reach her.
Manic zealots have us in a chokehold.

I brought a friend, to a kingdom so old,
filled with cruel fairies and violent creatures.
We won't survive if we are not controlled.
Manic zealots have us in a chokehold.

BENNEKIN, AVERY**Avery Bennekin**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Center High School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Jonathan Danduarand

Category: Poetry

a summer day on the back porch

my grandfather keeps his lawn pristine.
his blades of grass are sharp—
energy stretching from root to tip, telling the sun that they are alive.
branches lie across the sky, interrupting the blue,
letting wind move through them like squealing schoolgirls
kissing their leaves and running away.

the breeze is giggling, chuckling, and chortling through chain link fence and brush
it's playful against my skin, melting away the heat of an August sun
the relief, ephemeral.

my sister lounges in the shade, a fist full of watermelon rind.
her lips are staining red, a seed clinging to her chin.
she pulls the fruit with her teeth,
taking the soft from the shell.

my grandmother is manipulating smoke with tongs,
raking lunch over a sputtering grill.
she stands in the sun, a baseball cap pulled over her eyes,
glasses sliding down the bridge of her nose.

I tell her I love days like these; days where summer sun paints stripes across our skin.
sudden memories of Arkansas—red soil, thick air.
Gentle words escape her:
enjoy life. The soil beneath, the clouds above; see it all.
The lush, the beauty, the bounty.

BOLLA, SUPRIYA**Supriya Bolla**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Kat Buchanan

Category: Poetry

Blank Pages

I wish I had trauma that I could spin into a story,
 a story that would grip your thoughts tighter than leather binding,
 Something I could rip to shreds, over-analyze in the margins,
 sew back together, and send off to the publisher before I tear *myself* apart.

Because, who *am* I without a story,
 without paragraphs to explain my personality,
 A chapter for the reasons I cry,
 A stanza for why I laugh at little things far too long,
 And at *least* a sentence for why I do everything as if I'm about to run out of ink.
My pages,... are blank

I wish I had trauma that explains why I'm breathless at the sight of a blue M&M,
 Why my mind floods with a cascade of memories,
 The way opening Blue Balliett's books bring back rooms full of laughter,
 Shining blue eyes full of mischief
 Why *my* eyes are wet when there isn't a single "Blue One" in my fun size m&m's on Halloween.
 Handprints from six years ago of kids I called *family*
 remind me that giggles won't always echo, and scribbled hearts don't always mean love.
Resuscitating dead conversations is a lot harder than thumbing through paperbacks and sobbing over blue candy.

I want to have trauma to explain
 Why when someone says "I love you",
 I say back, "yeah, I *know*",
 Watch them leave the room...
 leave my life.
 Why I whisper "I love you too" under my breath,
 Why I fear that the words will bleed through the paper
 the moment they are said too loud,
 the moment I can't take them back,
 the moment they leave my lips,
I'm scared,
because what if instead of turning the page, it rips?

I think there *might*... have been trauma that explains my urge to slam down chairs,
 Trauma that rattles my teeth,
 Two feet, two inches in the air.
 The tip back,
 plastic whack,
 head crack.

Motionless brother, hysteric mother,

And the inky red blood that doesn't come out of carpet when your eyes are too swollen to watch it fall.
There *has* to be buried trauma for why in my mind staples don't live on paper stacks and bulletin boards,
but make their home on red ridged skulls and paper delicate bones.

I can't remember much, I think those pages are fading.

And there **should** be trauma that explains why it comforts me to stand on our high-rise apartment's balcony and look straight down,

why my subconscious tells me I should step out, tells me I can fly,
That angel's wings are pillow-soft and I *could* let go and take a ride,

My empty chapters are feathers in the wind

There's other people with pages shredded and stained,
Who are tired of folding away their trauma into perfect paper cranes,
and just want feathered wings to ferry them away from the flurry of paper.

**Hands full of paper cuts,
Pool red ink on their fingertips
And write their *own* "The End. "**

Maybe I *have* trauma, but I've pushed it deep down,
Pages folded and creased into a thousand misshapen origami birds,
Because once I let them loose, I can't ignore that my childhood wasn't some kid's book of sunshine and rainbows,
Instead, a tattered anthology written in blue and red ink.

I wish I didn't have trauma to claim
I want blank pages.

BOYCE, WILMA**Wilma Boyce**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: David H Hickman High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Flash Fiction

Sadie**Sadie**

There's a cat that comes by my house now and again. She used to come by randomly, most often in the morning, once or twice a week. She comes by much more often now, most always in the afternoon since I started putting out an egg for her every day or so. She's small and skinny, you'd think a stray, but she's got a little collar around her neck in a dull, grey-pink. I don't know where she goes, I don't have any neighbors within an hour's drive. But after this cat, the collar says Sadie, eats her egg and I pet her a little, she leaves. She's got somewhere to go, I think. My home isn't hers.

She still brings me little things, now and again. Most of the time she brings stuff you'd expect from a cat. Mice and birds and bugs. I don't have the heart to get mad at her, I've never been able to get mad at cats. I'm not squeamish, either. So when Sadie brings me a rat, puts it on my porch or on my seat or in my lap, I just pet her and throw it to the chickens. But sometimes Sadie brings me odd things, things you'd never expect would catch the eye of a cat.

A dirty white sock. A scrap of floral patterned fabric. Coins, a handkerchief, a bit of stocking. I figured they were stolen from her owner, some old lady in a little cottage I didn't know existed. When Sadie brought them to me, I wasn't bothered. They were probably as useless to her owner as they were to me. The only time I ever got concerned was when Sadie brought me this long, beautiful pearl necklace. It looked well loved and a bit rusted. Definitely antique. I felt bad, this woman had lost something that looked quite old and valuable. But how was I to stop it? I was old myself; I couldn't follow a cat into the woods.

But it was on a bright, sunny summer day that Sadie brought back what I knew she shouldn't have touched. At least, not to bring to me. In my lap she left a small, dirty white envelope; too wet to read, stomped on and wrung by the elements. Even so, I could tell there was no return address, no stamp. On the back, smudged, I could barely make out *To:* and then a name lost to the rain.

The next day Sadie brought me back a scrap of rope. The day after that, an eyeball.

BUCHOWSKI, MADELINE**Madeline Buchowski**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Robert Henningsen

Category: Poetry

Vignettes

I asked you why the birds fly over the sea when there's nowhere to
land in the middle
And you laughed as you imagined them
dropping into the water
Knowing everything but the answer—thinking—but saying nothing
Nor moving. The waves pulled us along and we drifted over the wake
Me first with you behind me.

There's been a lot of finger-crossing lately,
But I feel like I'll never find out if it works.
Whenever I look in my bathroom mirror I see your painting
Of a pinky promise, and I still wonder if I hung it the right way.

You brought out the binoculars from the basement
The right side of the staircase caved in
And purple paint peeled from the banister.
You pointed out the craters as if I'd never seen photographs
My arms were numb from the cold but my hands still shook
So I rested my elbows on the mailbox.

On the boat, I had to force the binoculars into your hands
You knew that if you didn't look through the lens
You would never know what you were missing
And you couldn't take it away from me.

We unclipped the rainfly and watched the swaying evergreens
Feeling the approaching regret
But it's ok because it's not tomorrow yet
And it doesn't come when tomorrow comes.

CAMPBELL, CLARKE**Clarke Campbell**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Joy Gebhardt, Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

Hometown

Hometown

Howling wind scraped the sides of the off-white trailer home, rocking it gently in the darkness of night. Inside, Lucia sat bundled up on her makeshift bed, staring at the ceiling as Marty Robbins ballads crackled softly through the kitchen radio. Each time the gale blew harder, the frequency of the intermittent static rose to match it. Lucia didn't like Marty Robbins much – but these days, the tranquility his rich sagas brought her mother was worth it. If she strained her ears, Lucia could hear the rhythmic breathing that denoted her mother's slumber had become pronounced enough to block out any disruption or commotion. Seizing the opportunity, Lucia untangled herself from the threadbare blankets she cherished and rose with a quiet sigh. Her head filled with unwanted thoughts, she quietly opened the creaky trailer door, longing for a breath of fresh air, and stepped out into the night.

It had been months since Lucia's father, John, had left them in this backwater town, just on the edge of the Sonoran hinterlands. 'Course, she didn't blame him – not much *he* could do to prevent the cancer from engulfing their lives just as it extinguished his. But Lucia *could* blame her mother, Susannah. She'd never really accepted the criticality of John's terminal diagnosis, and once he died, it washed over her like amber does the fruit-fly, paralyzing her with grief. Susannah's eyes, once vibrant and bright, now shone bloodshot and blank. Crinkles at the creases of her features where smiles had once lingered now became harsh blotches of discoloration, her entire figure emaciated and practically marinating in the sour fumes of hops and nicotine that she constantly exuded. That's what Lucia thought, at least. She didn't speak to her mother much anymore. What was the use? She hadn't even remembered to re-enroll Lucia in school! Actually, Lucia didn't mind *that* too much. How could school help her now – at twelve, she was basically all grown up, anyway. She shook her head, averting her gaze from where it had been trained on the gravel road far ahead in the distance before beginning to stroll down the path from the trailer.

Lucia had been walking around in her daddy's old boots since she could barely stand up straight. They had never failed her, and always kept her moving forward; albeit, forward meant out towards the wilderness, and never into town. Even without him here, it was no different. And so, she walked. Eventually, the wind had calmed down, the chirps of cicadas and blackbirds rang through the air in its place, and small rays of light crept over the horizon.

"Today will be the day," Lucia stated firmly, to nothing and nobody in particular. "Today *will* be the day," she repeated, but louder this time. It made no sense that she'd waited this long, she knew, but something inside her still held hope for a miracle. Every summer since they'd moved back to his hometown, her father had guided her down the long, winding paths and each day they would end up at the same old spot: the tucked away pond, hidden among rolling sand-hills and almost out of place in the otherwise dry and arid climate, with a singular Saguaro cactus protruding from its central island. This was their place. Their last summer had been different: she recalled how her father's face was caked in sweat though the sun beat down no hotter than it had before; how he was determined to stay upright as his fragile body faltered at every piece of uneven ground; and finally, the shake in his hands as he traced a light 'X' into the base of the towering cactus.

"Kiddo, I don't have much time left. I know that, you know that. So it'll probably be a lot for you once I finally go. If you ever want to learn about me and my life before you came around, well, just remember: X marks the spot!" He had said, his tone becoming increasingly light-hearted as the sentence went on.

Every couple of days, Lucia would walk those same winding paths, getting farther and farther down to the pond before turning back and heading home. Some part of her didn't *want* to uncover whatever was hidden in the sands beneath the old Saguaro; after all, burying it had been one of the last things her father ever did. Undoing his final acts would strike one last note of finality in the saga of his life; was she really ready to do that? But her curiosity would not be abated, and today, she was determined to go through with it. The crunch of gravel underneath her feet

became softer, and pebbles grew smaller and smaller until she was trudging through sand. Just up ahead, she could hear the faint sussurating of the pond. She had arrived.

Taking off her oversized red flannel shirt and tying it loosely around her waist, she knelt at the base of the cactus and traced the fading X with her index finger. With a sigh, she reached her hands into the sand, still cool from the chilly night. Sure enough, wedged deep down into the ground, she felt a piece of leather handle. Even after giving it a few good tugs, it wouldn't budge. Lucia brought her feet up onto the base of the cactus, looked at the sky, and grunted "sorry, Dad," before giving a large yank upwards. Veins popped in her arms as she slowly pulled the box to the surface. Small cracks had formed in the Saguaro's trunk where her feet had pressed into it, but the cactus still stood tall. The box she had unearthed was heavy, and looked to be metal all around – rusted shut, no less. Reaching into her left boot, she withdrew her trusty Swiss army knife, and jammed it into the sides of the lid. The box finally swung open with a groan, revealing stacks upon stacks of photographs. Lucia brushed her hands on her faded jeans before holding two of the snapshots up in the air. Each photograph, infused with the light orange hues of the sunrise now shining in-full, painted a picture of her father's life she'd never seen before. After a few childhood moments, scenes of children riding bicycles and family members gathered around at special occasions, lay hundreds of instant-film photographs from the war. Each little picture bursted with mystery, setting her imagination in motion. A young "Johnny" beaming with friends in the boot camp mess hall prompted visions of loud chatter and scraping plates, creating memories in her own head that most certainly weren't hers. In action shots of conflict at the front lines, she could practically smell the gunpowder and hear the rip of artillery through the sky. Pictures of men, really boys, who she had never met, playing cards in tents or throwing shoddy paper airplanes at one another as they waited for new deployment orders. Soldiers balled up in foxholes, trenches, and pits, fear immortalized on their faces as they prayed to the powers that be for their own safety; some, probably, to no avail.

Lucia sat, fascinated, and examined each and every photograph, setting them aside on her flannel, which now lay spread out next to her. The sun beat over her head, and sweat beads rolled off her skin, but she couldn't stop. Finally, at the end of the pile, a single large photograph covered the bottom of the box. Examining it closely, she saw her father standing next to what looked like an army nurse, before realizing– it was her mother! She was practically unrecognizable, but the nurse's eyes shone just like her mother's had when her parents were still together. Folding the picture in half and then half again, she placed it in her left jean pocket and prepared to put all the other photographs back into the box when something caught her eye. There, in the corner of the box, was a small, singular key. It was unusually shaped, with its head forming some sort of insignia that was unfamiliar to Lucia. After giving it a once-over, and checking the box for any secret key-holes, she concluded it was useless; yet, something inside of her told her to keep it, so she slipped it into her right-hand pocket. Finally, she carefully moved each photograph that lay on her flannel neatly back into the box, before sealing it shut. She hadn't yet decided what to do with the box, and so she left it sitting there, kicked off her boots, peeled off her jeans and the rest of her outer coverings before jumping into the refreshingly cool pond.

Once she'd left the water and dried herself off in the sun, Lucia knew the right thing to do. Firmly grasping the box in her hands, she placed it right back in the sandy hole where it had once sat for months on end. She scooped the surrounding sand back on top of it, erasing any trace of disturbance aside from the elements. Finally, unlatching her knife, she carved a tiny heart into the big Saguero just below her father's mark, before standing up, dusting herself off, and heading back towards the path. After only a few seconds, she faltered for a moment, turned back towards the pond, muttered "X marks the spot," with a definitive sigh, and resumed her trek home. The memories in that box weren't hers to take. She wouldn't come back here ever again.

Lucia left that small Arizona town as soon as she could, never looking back, and thrived in an urban lifestyle she hadn't been subjected to in her childhood. However, many years later, she received word that her mother had fallen into extremely ill health, gone into hospice, and wasn't expected to survive the week. Reluctantly, Lucia boarded a Greyhound bus, leaving her life behind, and headed back home. She stared blankly out the window the entire ride, fading in and out of sleep, when finally the gentle tapping of the man sitting next to her woke her up. Squinting outside, she barely even recognized where they'd stopped. In truth, she hadn't spent very much time in the center of town as a child, instead devoting her days to the milieu of wilderness, and even her schoolhouse had been much further out from town– nearer to their trailer home. Collecting her bags, Lucia disembarked from the bus, sleepily thanking the driver on her way out. She rubbed her eyes and exhaled, looking down the main street for any sort of taxi, when something caught her eye.

Ever since she had dug up her father's box, she'd kept that curious little key nearby, half-hoping that someday its purpose might be revealed to her. Lately, Lucia had barely even given it a second thought whenever she opened her wallet; but now, standing back in the town of her adolescence, something clicked in her head. Her hand frantically fumbling around her bag, she grabbed the little piece of metal and thrust it up into the air. Her gaze first looked at the mysterious insignia on the head of the key and then shifted to a diner down the street, where sure enough, that same

symbol was plastered on its front doors! Forgetting for a moment the time-sensitivity of her mother's circumstances, Lucia strolled down to the diner, fueled by the curiosity which had laid dormant in her for so long. She swung open the doors to find a white-haired, bespectacled gentleman in a stained apron hunched over the counter with a pleasant look on his face.

"Well hey there, young lady, what can I get for you today?" he rasped warmly, a smile stretching across his face from ear to ear.

"Oh, hi. Well, actually, I was wondering if you could tell me anything about this key I've got here? I've had it a long while, but never knew what it was for until I saw your shop here." she replied, handing him the key. Hope bloomed inside of her; for what, she wasn't quite sure.

The man squinted at the key through his glasses, then back up at Lucia, before exclaiming, "well, I'll be damned. You must be Johnny's little girl!" Her confusion must have been palpable, as he continued to explain, "your old man and his buddies used to all come and meet here after the war; my little brother, Andrew, was in their unit, so I'd always let them into the back to play billiards and mess around without interfering with the customers. That's what the key's for, see. Here, I'll show ya." He beckoned her to a door just off to the side of the kitchen entrance, shuffling leisurely as he went. Unhooking a keyring of his own from his belt, he withdrew a key almost identical in appearance to her father's, but full of scratches and discolored from years of use. The man jimmied the key into the lock with trembling fingers, callused from years of doggedly wiping down glasses and silverware, before unlocking it with a click and swinging it open. He gestured for Lucia to follow him, and then went on through into the room. Lucia scanned her surroundings, but to her dismay, it seemed to be just another billiards room, not out of place at any bar or saloon. Upon closer inspection, however, she noticed familiar faces in the pictures lining the walls; her own father, yes, but people she faintly recognized from that metal box she'd dug up so many years ago.

"They all wondered what happened to Johnny, when he stopped coming 'round." the proprietor called out from the middle of the room as she went from picture to picture. "He was the first to get hitched, you see. Straight outta the army. Your pretty mother, well, she didn't much like this place, and so once you popped outta her stomach y'all were gonna move far away, so Johnny said. Plenty of the boys stayed in town, had families, but over the years, everyone was pulled apart. Weekly meet-ups became monthly, monthly became yearly, until nobody came 'round no more. I think they weren't the same without Johnny. By the time he came back, hell, everybody was gone!"

"By the time he came back? What do you mean, he came back?" Lucia interjected.

"Well, sure! He came by the diner once, looking all pale. Said howdy to me and all that, asked if Andrew and the rest of 'em were in. 'Course, they weren't, and I told him so. He looked devastated, I remember, but just went straight back on out the door, and I never saw him again." The old man's eyes had fogged up in memory, but suddenly, he shook his head and made eye contact with Lucia. "Say, whatever happened to Johnny, then?"

For some reason, Lucia couldn't find the courage to really tell him. "Oh, I think my mother drove him mad!" she laughed, hoping to lighten the mood. "No, just getting old finally did him in, I guess."

"Spry young buck like your father? Lord, I better start counting my blessings! Well, I suppose none of those boys was ever the same when they came home. Left a part of themselves over there, felt like. My shoddy eyes, bless them, were the only thing stopping me from shipping out with them when they heeded the call." The man cleared his throat, before sidling back towards the door to the foyer of the diner. "Take all the time you need, dear. I don't get much business these days, but I still shouldn't leave the counter unattended!" He paused in the doorway, looked back towards Lucia, and with a slight smile, said, "and say hello to your mother for me. Gosh, it's been a long time." before disappearing from view. Her mother! That's right! Lucia had been so caught up in all this that she forgot what she had come for. She took one last look at the happy faces in the pictures on the walls, each with their own story that she would never learn about, walked straight out of the room, and pushed open the diner doors back out onto the busy street.

By the time she found a ride to the hospice, things weren't looking good for her mother. Lucia stood over the bed, where Susannah lay curled, deep in a feverish sleep. Setting her bags down, Lucia walked across the room to where an old-fashioned radio sat on the shelf. It didn't take her long to find a station playing the same old Marty Robbins ballads her mother had loved so many years before; as his voice rang out softly, Lucia hummed along, fishing around in her bag for something. To her surprise, when she looked back down at her mother, a smile had formed across her face as she slept. Lucia's cheeks warmed with color as all the resentment she'd felt towards her parents left her body at long last. Holding up what she'd been looking for in her bag, she unfolded it, and then studied it intensely; after many years of carrying it around, the photograph had barely smudged at all. Lucia gently held up her mother's hand, and placed the picture in her palm. Then, without another word, she gathered her things and headed out the door.

As she walked back down the hallway towards the hospice exit, she glanced back at the room. Forever afterwards, Lucia swore that she had seen her mother's eyes cracked open, with her fingers tracing the picture in her hand, before relaxing back onto the bed with a sigh. The last Lucia heard of her mother, as she pushed open the

door to the outside world, was the flatlining sound that pierced through the air, augmented by the shuffling of attendants in lab coats and blue scrubs rushing towards her room.

CHEN, ELISA**Elisa Chen**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

Ephemeral Beauty

I pumped my fists into the air before keeling over, resting my hands on my knees as I gasped for breath. After stumbling over steep rocky steps and watching the looming mountains on the horizon slowly grow closer all day, I had finally reached the viewpoint. I toppled over on a wooden bench as my lungs collapsed. I looked up to see the sun strike down and cast shadows over the jagged textured mountain, illuminating the years of natural wear. A half-frozen lake lay at the base, reflecting the snowy summit and azure sky. Sunlight beamed off the frozen ice and caused the snow to glitter like there were a billion stars embedded into its soft crystalline surface. A gray flick caught my eye: a small fish that got stranded on top of the ice. I watched as it flailed around so desperately... and so helplessly, slowly suffocating. It frantically thrashed against the ice. I held my breath as it reached the edge of the ice just for the thrashing to change directions. After a few tense minutes, its flailing gradually ceased. As if its suffering were my own, a tear slipped from my eye, and I began to sob. I walked up to the water's edge, glanced down, and wondered if my boots were taller than the water level. Some desire rooted within me wanted to march through the icy water and save the fish. However, I was naive. The water was far too deep and even if I did assist the fish, there are still thousands of other animals helplessly and powerlessly suffering. If I help this one, could I save all the others? Would such trivial assistance improve the world? Perhaps it will only improve my vision of myself. I laughed at my own foolishness. What kind of mind causes me to have such a strong desire to save a fish suffocating on a frozen lake yet leave me capable of happily indulging in a steamed fish on my dinner table without a second thought?

The origins of morals are uncertain. Some may conclude that it is derived from an outside source like a divine deity or from the natural process of evolution. Regardless, morals are relative based on each individual. Our moral compass for complex issues is a hybrid of various shades of gray. There is no black and no white. The mysteries, contradictions, inconsistencies, and fallacies of the human mind are limitless. "For grossly imperfect creatures like us, morality may be the steepest of all developmental mountains" (Kluger, 60). However, one key factor in morality is empathy. "The deepest foundation on which morality is built is the phenomenon of empathy, the understanding that what hurts me would feel the same way to you" (Kluger, 56). Though my obligation towards the fish in the lake versus the fish on the dinner table was equal, there was a difference in my level of empathy. "The plight of a person you can see will always feel more real than the problems of someone whose suffering is merely described to you" (Kluger 58). By watching the fish struggle so helplessly, I was able to envision the pain the fish was feeling in myself. My strong desire to help stemmed from my empathy for the fish.

Empathy is unexpectedly self-centered at its root. Famous sayings such as "treat others how you want to be treated" and "put yourself in someone else's shoes" all center back to one's own self. My empathy and desire to help weren't completely altruistic. Rather, my actions are under the notion that I would want someone to help me if similar circumstances were to befall me.

Perspective lays at the base of all morals. How is it that people can feel such strong vengeance during war for a deceased soldier when both sides are mutually slaughtering each other like they are animals? How can artists make propaganda that burn with rage at the injustice placed upon their own country yet ignore the crimes their country has done to others. Despite our capability of "a sense of moral grammar" (Kluger, 58), the way we feel empathy and apply our morals heavily depends on our experience. Complex ethical issues that weigh the importance of two or more values aren't separated by a line; It is a murky, bleak river. What is the greater good? It all lies within the perspective of an individual and around the basis of existing life. If the existence of humans was obsolete, would a greater good still exist? If a greater good doesn't exist, does life have meaning?

Many look towards existential optimism as a silver lining. However, does there need to be something purposeful outside of our fleeting lives? Happiness, sorrow, anger, frustration... those momentary emotions in a human's ephemeral life, are they not important too? The history of humanity is the "temporal equivalent of those subatomic particles that are created in accelerators and vanish in a trillionth of a second" (Kluger, 55). And our individual existences are worth much less. Perhaps humans stay young and frivolous throughout their entire life. Perhaps our lives won't have any great effect on the world or have any purpose in the grand scheme of things. Perhaps a greater good doesn't even exist. However, despite our transient existence, our lives aren't meaningless. In *Paradise Lost*, a free-will theodicy, Adam and Eve commit sin which causes them to be exiled outside of the Garden of Eden, a perfect paradise. After being exiled to Earth, they have to face permanent ties to disease, natural disaster, warfare, famine, corruption, toil, hardship, and far more tragedies. However, after their introduction to sin which brought such horrors into the world, their prayers became more genuine and faithful, "With incense, I thy priest before thee bring, / Fruits of more pleasing savor from thy seed / Sown with contrition in his heart, than those / Which his own hand manuring all the trees / Of Paradise could have produced, ere fall'n / From innocence" (11.25-30). The faith from their prayers becomes stronger which makes the fruits from the trees more delectable compared to the fruit from their original innocent state in Eden. Despite the sorrow and suffering their sin has introduced, their defiance in suffering and the strength in prayers offers an undeniable beauty.

Although society tries to find a way to validate our existence and suffering, a life doesn't need to accomplish anything great to be considered meaningful. If the lake was shallow that afternoon and I was able to help the fish, it might have been trivial assistance. However, there is no need for a great meaning or importance to carry out an action. By not forsaking someone or something in need, if I can offer even a slight, ephemeral moment of joy, there is enough meaning. The world is ugly and imperfect which in itself lends a sort of beauty.

CHIEN, EMILY**Emily Chien**

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Kimberly Moon

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Power of Voice

“Go fuck yourself off the planet with your viruses. Your chink species can die, so your Chinese virus will as well.”

My virus. My species. My fault. In the vast gym, laughter erupted, and teachers and students began to form a crowd around me and the racist white student. However, nobody said a single word. Not a teacher. Not a friend. The gym echoed, but everyone’s voices were deafeningly silent. I tried to utter something, but my mouth was sealed. A putrid lump formed in my throat, my face stung red, and tears started streaming down my cheek. I sprinted outside for a breath of air by myself and waited for my dad to pick me up. When he arrived, he looked at me in dismay and asked, “Are you okay? why are you crying? Weren’t you with your friends?” I couldn’t force myself to tell him what happened even though I still felt the intense anguish, so instead, I told him, “Nothing happened. I just have a stomach ache.” I was so ashamed. I was so ashamed that I was born Chinese. I was so ashamed that I had to learn Chinese. Because all I am is a Virus.

As I tried to sleep that night off, I had the same voice lingering in my head. I should have just forgotten about that one moment. That one sentence. That one minute. However, it was not just one moment; it brought back the reminiscence of myself when I was younger. When my classmates pulled their eyes back to mock me. When my classmates made a face of disgust at the noodles I brought to lunch. When my classmates called me Ching-Chong because of the language I spoke. For years, no one ever stood up for me, said a single word, or fought on my side. Still, I was also unable to stand up for myself. I carried the heavy weight of guilt and embarrassment for years and swallowed it down every single day. That night was exasperating, and my thoughts were racing in my soundless, empty room as I was shaking on my bed. My heart was pounding, and my hands were trembling even hours after the incident. I felt so alone. It was as if I was drowning, but yet surrounded by a sea full of people. I feared for my future because of the inevitable cause that I’m Asian, something I can never change nor control. I knew the racist classmate was in the wrong, but I wanted to tell him, *I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m Asian, I can’t change. I’m sorry I’m Asian, I deserved to feel ashamed.* I could not hide from my everyday reality; it was unbearable to carry such a heavy weight. The words were cut so deep into my skin.

After living in shame of my own identity for years, I woke up with a clarity I never had before. That night reflected on how I kept on repeating the same mistake over and over again. I needed to stop living in my abashment. I realized that I needed to be the one to stand up. I realized that enough was finally enough. I refused to be walked over while hoping that there would be a change. How could I expect something to change if I had not indicted any? I needed to use my voice and finally speak up for myself. I was once again furious that injustice lurked in the corners of people, but no reprimandments were created. My anger was a factor that drove me to speak out and open up about my experiences. I began a petition to intact consequences, and surprisingly enough I got an overwhelming amount of support from others.

Soon after, I quickly discovered the StopAsianHate movement in an instant google search. There I saw pictures of Asian Americans; standing and fighting against injustice. I was astonished; everyone fought alongside each other even though one person faced discrimination. It was as if the aggressive swarm of confusion in my head was rapidly clearing up. I wasn’t alone, I was surrounded by people who empathized with my pain and struggle. I joined an Asian heritage group, and I found a safe space. A place to share experiences. A place where I was proud to be myself. We stood with each other, united.

It has almost been two years. Although I still continue to carry scars, I am proud to say that I have been able to

look out for others while I continue to grow, educate, and love myself. I will continue to fight for my beautiful ethnicity. Fight for my beautiful heritage. Fight for my beautiful language. Because being Chinese is who I am and what I'm proud of. Although the voices in the gym were silent, I will continue to keep on raising my voice.

CHUA, KIMBERLY**Kimberly Chua**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rolla Senior High School, Rolla, MO

Educator: Star Hargis

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Adolescent Etude*“Waiting to see his friend,**Hoping he will come again...”*

I sway with the music as I sing. My brother joins me as the music picks up, and I roll over on the plush carpet and swipe the lego bricks from my calf.

*“Wishing and hoping and waiting and dreaming of flying high,**Just James and the red balloon?”*

I sing the last line an octave higher because it’s low, and the red hot-air balloon fades to black. From the kitchen, my dad’s says, “She’s definitely a soprano.” My mom nods.

Interested, I sit up. “What’s a soprano?”

They turn to me and smile. “It means you have a high singing voice.”

For some reason, my chest feels as warm and colourful as the pumpkin soup my mom makes during autumn. A soprano? Yes, I am a soprano, and I have a high voice.

On Friday, my friend asked if I was going to audition for choir. I think I’m going to.

“Put your chairs up before you leave!”

There’s the grinding of plastic on rusted metal, then rising babble as we cram into the foyer to retrieve our school bags. My backpack bounces against my back as I run out of the classroom.

I’m early! The transition classroom is still quiet—*tranquil*—so I sit down to wait. When the heavy-footed, laughing children squeeze out the peeling blue door, I spot my brother’s face instantly, dark because he always refuses to wear sunscreen. I’d recognise that face anywhere because I *know* him. I’d know him anywhere. I squeeze him into a hug, then, in synchrony, we fling our bags to the floor, one pink, one black. Then, as I always do, I lift him onto my back and secure his legs around my waist.

When I carry him, I feel strong.

I’m 10 years old and the most intelligent in my class, so I know many things—a *multitude* of things. One of them is that my brother will always be my best friend.

My brother has obstinately been playing the same three bars repeatedly for the last half hour, progressively getting louder. Dad is frustrated. Everyone is frustrated. Finally, dad gives up and he storms upstairs, his shouts ringing in the air behind him.

“So kaypoh,” my mom admonishes as I slip onto the piano bench to join my brother.

His piece is easy for me to sight-read, especially with my perfect pitch, so I play the line for him without fumbling at all.

“Eksi,” I hear my mom say, though I detect a note of pride in her exasperated tone. “Show off.”

“It’s not overly demanding,” I patiently explain to my brother. “If you change position here, all the notes will be in reach. See?”

My brother wipes his tears on my shoulder, then plays the line again. He makes the same mistakes, but I beam at him and run to get our sticker collections. Painstakingly, I peel away one of my favourite water-filled stickers from Singapore and give it to him for his own book. This time, when he tries it again, he plays with fewer mistakes. I pretend not to notice him trying to reach the pedal under the piano with his short legs.

My brother’s cropped hair appears over the top of the stairs, and I rush over to greet him. When I return to the half-wall with him in tow, another boy has taken *my* perch on its peak I shoulder my brother’s school bag and glare at the boy intimidatingly until he climbs down, sheepishly muttering an apology. Sneering at him, I toss my hair over

my shoulder and help my brother climb into the prized seat. I join him, and we swing our legs in tandem.

Every Tuesday is tuck shop day, and I get to buy lunch with my \$5 allowance. Sausage rolls are \$2 apiece, a pie is \$3.50, and nachos cost \$4.50. My favourite lunch is mince-and-cheese pie.

“Guess what?” I ask, forcing a straight face despite the overwhelming urge to smile

His dark eyes are bright with anticipation as he cocks his head. “What?”

I shift his school bag off my lap and manoeuvre my own over to replace it. The sausage roll at the bottom of my bag is slightly squashed from my bulky pencil case, but my insulated lunch bag has kept it warm. My brother’s eyes widen into shining saucers.

He loves sausage rolls.

He eats it as we wait for dad to pick us up, head resting on my shoulder. When we get home, I meticulously polish the one remaining dollar for my coin collection. With their cool, heavy weight and shiny finish, I treasure every single one.

The two trophies on the TV shelf gleam in the bright afternoon sun. I won one of them in a piano competition, and the other one is the top-of-the-year academic trophy I won at school prize-giving.

I preen under my neighbour’s gaze as she admires the trophies, my dad detailing how I won them. She wants her daughter to start learning to play, and she’d like me to help them choose a piano from the music store. If I’m willing, she’d also like me to teach her the basics.

My dad volunteers me to play a piece for her, so I skip over to the piano, brushing lint off my layered pink skirt as I sit on the bench. Because it’s showy and impressive, I choose to play Khachaturian’s “Toccata”.

Fortissimo, I play the last chords, bowing my head with their force, and bask in the enthusiastic applause that follows. I am brighter than the sun, beaming brighter still with every “Wow!” and “Amazing!” and “So talented!”

“Do you want to play too?”

But my brother has run off upstairs during my performance, and my sister shifts awkwardly, looking in the direction of the stairwell and shaking her head in silence. Still grinning, I play Chopin’s Nocturne in E flat major.

“Can you help me?”

My brother holds his maths workbook by its paper cover, thin pages flopping around and crumpling. I look up from my book to see his red-rimmed eyes and snotty nose. Uneasily, I shift my blanket so he won’t cry on it or dirty my bed.

“Why don’t you go ask dad? I’m busy.”

God, he can be so annoying. As he shuffles away, I shake off my discomfort and annoyance and ignore his pitiful sniffles. *The Final Empire*, with its magic and balls and quests, awaits.

“What?” I frown at my sister, who is glancing at me from the corner of her eye. “I helped him yesterday. He knows how to do it.”

She just looks at me a moment longer, then notices the book I’m reading and laughs. “Has *he* died yet?”

In choir on Wednesday, we started “The Rainbow Connection.” I’ve sung it for auditions for years, but now I have actual, physical sheet music. I squint at the notes, fingers hesitantly hovering over white-and-black keys while my mother cooks dinner in the kitchen. I’m terrible at sight-reading.

Finally, I begin to play oh-so-slowly, but it sounds pretty, even without the main melody. Pots continue to clank in the kitchen, but they’re a little quieter. Sneaking a glance at the stairwell, I begin to hum the tune under my breath. It really is a beautiful song. There’s no response, so I finish humming the stanza, then tentatively begin to sing.

“Who said that ever—”

From upstairs, my sister’s voice bellows. “Shut up!”

I cringe, but resolutely continue singing over my sister, and my brother, too, when he joins in the antagonistic screaming.

“Who said that every wish

Would be heard and answered

When wished on the morning st—”

This time, I am cut off by my mother. “Stop,” she tells me, her voice frigid. “I don’t want to deal with this today.”

For a while, I stare at the score in front of me, fingers still pressing noiselessly on the piano keys. *They’re all jealous.*

“Spoiler alert! Teenager! Spoiler alert! Teenager!”

We are drunk on the exhilaration of being up at night, bellies stuffed and cheeks flushed the colour of ripe apples.

My birthday was a couple of days ago, and I am now a teenager.

“Spoiler alert!”

They are mocking my height—how can someone as short as me be a teenager? I can still get into the children’s rides at carnivals. I like to ride them with my brother, while my sister rides stomach-turning roller coasters.

“Spoiler alert! Spoiler alert! Spoiler alert!”

Their voices are loud. Too loud. I kind of want them just to *stop*.

“Spoiler alert! Teenager!”

Please stop.

Finally, the car stops, red lights turning off and plunging us into darkness. I reach for my book, flinching as my brother and sister engage in a screaming contest.

Various toys are strewn across the floor, and my brother and sister sit cross-legged in the centre.

“OT,” my brother scolds, tapping a stuffed ocelot on the nose. “You’re not allowed to steal Oncey’s fish.”

“Isn’t that OC?” I ask. I’m pretty sure I know all of the toy names, and I know for certain that the green-eyed, bright yellow ocelot is named OC.

My sister takes the ocelot, pitching her voice high. “I’m OT,” she replies, animating the toy. “I’m a puma and I have *brown* eyes!”

“Yeah.” My brother pushes me out of the way, reaching for a stuffed wol behind me. “Don’t be stupid.”

I raise my eyebrow at him and sneer, but this is their game, so I go upstairs and leave them to their toys.

Besides, the stack of books at my bedside awaits.

I don’t like to play my brother’s games. They’re all inspired by his favourite computer game, *CSGO*, and are always violent. Nerf bullets and plastic lightsabers hurt, leaving little red marks that fade in seconds. When I trail my fingers over my unblemished arms, a phantom pain deeper than a bruise lingers.

He and my sister recently took up karate. When I try to hug him, he moves into defensive stances that hurt more than any foam bullet or styrofoam sword. It tastes bittersweet.

I love to play my brother’s games. They are exhilarating, even if I always lose. They make my brother smile at me.

“What is your greatest ambition?”

Today is the first day of our *Macbeth* unit, and that is the first of the pre-reading questions. There are a couple of raised hands scattered around the classroom; training my eyes carefully on the table in front of me, legs crossed tight, I am not one of them.

My greatest ambition? How am I supposed to think about the future when everything I want is lost in the past?

I pause at the top of the staircase, fingers tightening on the bannister. The door to my sister’s room is closed, but I can hear her laughter. She has my mother’s laugh—I remember that, even though I don’t really see her much at all. But that’s not what caught my attention.

There’s a second voice. It’s deep, in the awkward stage where a boy’s voice fluctuates between before-and-after, and it’s slightly distorted through my sister’s computer speaker.

My brother.

I only know it’s his voice because he video-calls every Saturday; without context, I wouldn’t recognise it at all. Apparently, he’s taller than my mother now, and a *teenager*, so I’m not sure that I’d recognise him, either. He’s laughing too, and they’re exchanging words like “sus” and “imposter” and “report.” They must have come up with another new game.

My two siblings are very close. They’re six years apart, yet they find the same things funny and understand each other in a way I cannot. I’ve tried.

I can hear his laughter through two doors and an ocean. It’s an unfamiliar sound.

For a second longer, I allow myself to linger, then close the door to my own room and sit at my desk. My sketchbook is open, four hours’ worth of clean, precise pencil lines making up the head and shoulders of Ahri, my brother’s favourite “champion.” I don’t understand *League of Legends*, the video game source, but my brother loves it—or at least he did, the last time we were in the same country. I’ve barely completed a quarter of what will be a full-colour, multi-medium rendering, so I pull it forward, pencil balanced on my index finger.

It will be perfect. Gifts have to be.

CHUA, KIMBERLY**Kimberly Chua**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rolla Senior High School, Rolla, MO

Educator: Star Hargis

Category: Short Story

As the Cradle Falls

I once thought I knew darkness—the black ribbon on my favourite dress, the shadow in my closet when I hid from thunder.

But darkness is the thing that clings to my feet when I fail to stand, the thing that hangs in the air, smothering. I know darkness, now.

It's cold; I shiver as I run my hand along shelves of endless vegetables and jars; a spare key, or even a crowbar—a *crowbar*? I barely know what one is, let alone how I'd use it. But I continue searching.

“Never forget,” Mama murmured, stroking my hair with a warm hand. “They can try to steal our freedom, but we thrive in the dark.”

I curled closer. Her collarbone was sharp against my cheek, her diamond necklace cold against my skin.

“Why have you and Papa been fighting?”

The question had stewed in my throat for days, and now it burst from my lips. Mama stiffened.

“Your father,” she said, suddenly cold, “is a tyrant. He controls us. Nothing *loud* before noon and after sunrise; a curfew! We had servants for everything, but now even the few we have dwindle each day.”

“But he listens to you,” I whispered. “Just tell him.”

She exhaled. “Yes, darling. He listens. But ropes are tightening. A noos—”

“But you love him.” *You love me.*

A silence coiled between us, squeezing. I glanced up at her, then back at my twisting fingers. She was right, of course—she always was. My father'd become... obsessive.

Against that sharp collarbone, I shivered.

I dream in colour.

But that makes it so much worse to wake to darkness.

Has it been minutes? Hours? Days? In the dark, the only timekeeper I have is the metronome of my breath, and even that is *tempo rubato*. Stolen.

In, out.

My dress is undoubtedly marked and dirty, but it's fine. I'm cold, but I can handle it. I'm locke-alone, but I have been before. It's okay. I'm chanting aloud, I think. Over and over again to fill the heavy silence—everything is okay.

In, out.

He was by the forbidden cabinet again, head in his knees. I reached out, fingers brushing his slumped back.

“Papa? Are you alright?”

He looked up at me, attempting a weary smile.

“Carlotta. What a beautiful name...”

I gently ushered him away, to his seat in the drawing-room. He sank down limply.

“How did I let it come to this?”

“Come to what, Papa?”

A guttural, animalistic sound erupted from his cracked lips, then he snapped his head up, eyes suddenly bright.

“Look at who I was,” he said, gesturing wildly to the accolades displayed around his chair. “At the man who challenged everything in his way and won.”

The silver sword and bronze shield shining on the wall above him illuminated the grey strand in his black hair.

“Mama is jus—”

“Having *fun*? *Partying*? We have rules, and your mother defies them.”

I frowned. “Mama is making contacts and business deals.”
His face turned dark. “So you, too,” he finally said.

The squeal of a neglected door echoes in the damp room. It is alien, for it is not made by me. It is the sound of freedom.

I stumble to my hands and feet, blind eyes trained on the source of the sound. *Freedom*. Something glints in the corner of my eye, but as I turn to see it, a heavy weight crashes into my back. I cry out as I fall to the ground, palms and knees scraping against the gritty floor.

Pain. I know pain, too.

I whimper, desperately looking around in the impenetrable darkness. *What was that?* I lay there, heaving. My leg stings. My hands feel wet, warm. It is quiet. I manoeuvre myself onto my back, careful not to move my tender knee. *A glint?* The thought is offered by a distant voice. *You need light to see.*

But I *can* see. My father is backlit by shadow, skin shining like the nacre of a shell. He looms over me with a lopsided, drunken stance. I scream. He raises his booted foot.

Fight or flight, he used to tell me. *A choice for cowards, and a choice for heroes* I told him that I was a hero—that, given the choice, I would stand and fight. That I was strong.

“So I am a coward,” I breathe, curling up on the floor. “And this is my penance.”

The only light brings its weapon down on me.

The walls were too thin. They sounded like thunder.

“Please.”

Papa. When I’d run to my room, he’d been on his knees.

“Please.”

Mama. She’d been standing, hair falling from its elegant chignon, gloves wrinkled from my father’s grasp.

“Don’t leave.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because I sa—”

“How da—”

“How dare you!”

Silence. Then, “I have had enough!”

I’d lost track of who was who, but I’d also had enough. I drew my blankets tighter around my ears to drown out the noise and to drown myself in blessed silence.

I cannot breathe. The quiet crushes me under its terrible weight, squeezing me until I cannot breathe.

I cannot breathe.

I know what oppressive silence is, and I am deafened by it.

“Rock-a-bye baby, on the tree top”

I started singing a while ago—a few hours, as my throat is hoarse. Silly songs, nursery rhymes, because the Verdi and Mozart operas I’d studied slipped through my raw, deadened fingers. Those sprained fingers fumble with the head of a screw. *Twist, twist, twist*. The slightest turn takes all my strength.

“When the wind blows, the cradle will rock?”

The screw twists free. I bring my fingers to the next in the hinge. My fingernails broke on the previous screw; the sacrifice for this one is the skin of my fingers.

“When the bough breaks—”

A thump outside the door.

I scramble away on hands and knees, crouching low to the ground and baring my teeth. My arms shake and betray me to the ground, so instead I huddle into a foetal position, rocking back and forth as I wait. What will he use this time? First, it was his rough hands and booted feet. After that, the bottle that bruised, then the same bottle, broken to bleed those bruises dry. Back and forth. Back and forth.

The door creaks open. I hear footsteps. My eyes are squeezed shut—*it shouldn’t matter in the dark*—but I see him, with his pearlescent skin and dirty fingernails, and his long black coat and the diamond locket around his neck. His belt is wrapped around his hand.

My cuts has dried over and scabbed. He will use his belt to tear them open again.

The belt whistles through the air. The tail slices open my cheek. Warmth runs down my nose and my other cheek like a tear.

One.

I lie on the ground, tangy, metallic fear glueing my mouth shut.

Two.

Three.

“How do I look?”

My mother’s brilliant eyes met mine as she pinned a loose lock of her hair into place.

“Like a queen,” I answered, truthful.

Her painted, practised smile slid into place.

“Then, Carlotta, you must be a princess.”

Her nimble fingers reached behind her to unclasp the diamond locket around her neck. For the first time in my life, I watched her take it off. In my shock at her *bare* throat, I barely registered its weight as she draped it around my own.

I stood there, staring at her back as she left the room. *Carlotta*, I thought reverently, absently tracing the inscription on the back of the locket. The name we shared, along with our near-identical features; two twins separated by a generation. Or so the servants buzzed. *Carlotta*.

I bit my lip to hold back a smile. *I look just like my mother.*

“Carlotta . . .”

Papa’s voice, barely audible even in the quiet. I whirled around to see him slumped at our formal dining table, hand gripping a crystal tumbler.

“*My Carlotta*,” he muttered again, head bowed over his glass. *Mine.*”

Drinking again; he’d been doing so increasingly more, always when my mother went out. His vacant stare—and the row of frosted bottles in front of him—indicated that he’d been drinking for a while. That was unusual; he tended to start after my mother missed curfew.

Shuddering, I ducked my head to avoid his notice and slipped from the room, fingers still caressing my mother’s locket.

The brine runs down the front of my dress, slimy and cold even against my frozen skin. The empty jar is shattered at—*in*—my feet.

Another jar, wasted because I couldn’t hold it steady to eat. The fifth, I think. I don’t remember. I can’t.

I hear... a strange sound. *What is it? It’s scary.*

The shakes from my hands have spread to my shoulders. They tremble uncontrollably, and I wrap my arms around my torso in an attempt to stop it because it hurts.

That sound...

Suddenly, it is easy to be still. The sound has stopped. My arms are loose at my side, and my feet are numb in the pool of cold canning liquid.

Oh. Laughter.

My lips are sticky and salty. My mouth is dry. My brain is searching for the article in the newspaper I read once—the one about hysteria.

I was laughing.

Like everything else I’ve tried to remember, I can’t bring it to mind.

So why do I want to cry?

“What is it?”

My father knelt where his chair had been, staring up at the sword and shield. They bathed him in a golden glow. He didn’t look at me—I doubted he’d heard me at all.

“He is with her, and they know that I know

Where they are, what they do: they believe my tears flow

While they laugh, laugh at me, at me fled to the drear

Empty church, to pray God in, for them!—I am here.”

A prayer?

A letter was crumpled in his left hand; in his other, he held the chain of mother’s locket. It lay open on his thumb, contents removed.

“Let death be felt and the proof remain;

Brand, burn up, bite into its grace...”

“Father?” I stepped closer. He’d taken the necklace when he’d noticed it around my neck, and I’d expected him to return it to my mother.

“She is sure to remember his dying face!

Has she not returned? It’s already morning.

“Papa?”

He turned to me, eyes flaring in... recognition? And something dark lurking behind.

“Carlotta,” he said. His voice, once so commanding and powerful, was silent and dangerous.

I took a step away, then another.

“Carlotta.” His hair was in wild disarray and the skin around his eyes was red and irritated. “You want to leave?”

I stumbled on my third step back.

Twist. Sawdust settles on my knees as I jab the shard of glass deeper under the screw. It digs into my skin, sharp and biting. *Twist, twist, twist.* The glass is slick, wet. *Twist*—I gasp as it slips, slicing my palm. My hand slams into the door, new wound ripping even wider, but the motion knocks the screw loose. I hear it clang on the ground, joining the freshly broken glass.

Why am I removing this hinge?

I cannot remember. It’s important, though. I feel at the ground for a shard that I can salvage, but even the biggest are barely the size of my jagged thumbnail. None will work.

What was important? The doubt is incessant, and I turn to glance around the room. I can’t see anything, but the motion comforts me, as does the darkness. I know the darkness. Darkness is safe. Only the things I see can hurt me. I brush away the glass stuck to my calf as I readjust my weight.

What was I thinking of? I let it pass. Not important. Nothing except the screws. I feel for the edges of each hinge, poking my fingers into empty screw holes, looking for the tell-tale bump of a threaded screw hole.

There. The last one.

“You thought you could run?”

My father had always been an intimidating man, but now he was frightening.

I gaped stupidly.

“You thought you could run from me?”

His fingers found the hollow beneath my clavicle, squeezing. I felt weak, like he held me upright.

“F-fath—”

“After everything I’ve done for you? How dare you!”

“That hur—Mama! Mama!”

My mother would know what to do. She always did.

“Mother?” His voice was harsh and bitter. “Don’t pretend, Carlotta. You’ve always been a terrible mother.”

I could not tear my eyes from the gleam in his eyes. *He thinks I am my mother.* The thought slipped into my mind and silenced all else. *He thinks I am my mother. He thinks I am my mother!*

“No! Papa, I’m your daughter! I’m Carlotta, your daughter!”

Please, please, please, please. Mother, please save me. Please help me, please. But slowly a realisation formed, unbidden and unwelcome. *She’s not going to come* I hadn’t read whatever letter she’d left in the locket, but... *she wrote it because she wasn’t coming back. She left the locket because she wasn’t coming back. She’s not coming back. She’s not coming.*

The last servants were dismissed a week ago. No one would hear my screams. *No one is coming for me*

“Father! I’m your daughter! Please!”

My words fell on deaf ears. *No one.*

“After everything I’ve done for you, you thought you could run?”

My body shook as bubbling, boiling hot terror rose from my stomach and filled my throat and mouth and ears and eyes. I couldn’t breathe. *No one is coming.* My mouth was open, but the screams were swallowed by the lava.

Please—

I collapsed to the ground, hiccuping and gasping desperately.

No one. Vision blurred, I swayed with the world...

Thump, thump.

He’d picked me up and was carrying me; the jerky vibrations stopped my shaking and allowed me to breathe.

But I was petrified.

How was it that being unable to move was so much more terrifying than being unable to stop?

Letmeoutletmegopleaseletmeplease—

We were going down stairs. Stairs? The only thing downstairs was... the root cellar.

The click of a lock. The groan of an old wooden door.

Then, darkness.

The screw twists free. I suck the rust from my lips and teeth and thumb as I drop it to the floor, greedily watching a

ray of light squeeze behind the door. I clamber away as it swings once, twice, then falls to the ground with a thick cloud of dust. A cloud of dust *I can see*. Crouching in the empty door frame, blood drips from my gums as I smile. The stairs are painted in staggeringly beautiful swirls and shapes that I follow with my tongue, tasting the sweetness of warmth and lemon vinegar and a sticky grittiness that catches in my throat and tastes like ash. I follow the trail to its source—a dazzling white light glowing high above. It shines onto me; it is nectar and ambrosia and manna sent from paradise. I ascend to the heaven that awaits me.

There is a girl. In the beautiful warm light, there is a girl. She is skeletal and gaunt—frighteningly so—and her translucent skin stretches over blue veins and gathers in grey hollows between stick bones. Her hair looks as dry as straw and is the dull, faded colour of a rosewood branch that has been lost at sea and turned into driftwood, all value leached and rotted away. She is cast in bronze, like the room behind her; only her wide, blue eyes stand out. When I bend down to inspect the window leading into her room, she copies me, fingers tracing the same line on opposite sides of a wall. I frown at her and she just frowns back, pouting her chapped lip in exactly the same way I do mine. Beginning to feel angry, I reveal my gums in a gruesome face to make her *go away*. She tries to do the same, but blood doesn't run down the sides of her mouth the way I feel it flow down mine. Instead, clear saliva follows on her chin and cheeks. I laugh at her, because she is just copying me and failing. Her fingernails are torn and jagged, fingers cut and bleeding like mine, but she cannot replicate the cut in my cheek or the bruise on my temple. She cannot claim the wounds my father gave me.

I shake my head patronisingly at the girl and though she tries to do the same, she just looks silly, standing there with her ruined hands and straw hair and scrawny shoulders. I inspect the edge of the bronze window again; there is a bold line of shadow where it joins the wall. I dig the ruined pads of my fingers into the tiny gap and pry it away. It falls easily, crashing to the floor with a clang. The wall behind has something on it, but where is the girl? She is still in the round circle on the ground, body curving and tilting to look up at me. Her face is now bruised behind a dent in her bronze room. I laugh at her again—her copycat laugh is warped under the bruise—then turn to the light. *The light*. The girl slips from my mind as I dance in that wonderful light. In the dark, I was too weak to stand straight, but... *In the dark?*

Was that important? I can't remember. I roll my eyes and see something dangling off the back of a chair. It's a delicate chain, and a pretty, shiny rock hangs from it. *A diamond*. I pick it up carefully, and as it swings, casting a disco of stars around the room.

Mine. It is so pretty—how can it not be? I'm not sure what it's for, so I rest it on my head as I leave the room.

DING, SARAH**Sarah Ding**

Age: 13, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Bob Henningsen

Category: Poetry

Seeded Grapes**Seeded Grapes**

The sweetness penetrates your mouth.
No other fruit fulfills the standard of grapes.
Black, green, red, and purple.
Merlot, Muscat, Barbera, and Pinot Gris.
Your mother brings them home from Schnucks.
And you're in heaven. Until you eat a seeded grape.
When you bite, you expect to break the layer
Of thick skin and give your mouth a shock of sweetness.
The flavor explodes in your mouth as your teeth sink further
And further into each grape. Until you hit a bump in the path.
When you spit out one of the many seeds nestled
In that first grape, you realize
You no longer enjoy eating these grapes. In fact, you dread them.
You're no longer happy, no longer cheerful.
Your mom brought home bags and bags of these grapes
From Schnucks. Each time you bite, you get
A moment of happiness, but the moment is over
Far too quickly. The new normal: your tooth hitting a seed.

2020, your brother's graduation year.
Happiness at the end of January.
Third place in the Disney Showcase.
But the sweet taste is gone in a glimpse.
China shutting down travel to the U.S.
As your grandma recovers from surgery,
As your dad is there with her and your grandpa.
Little does your dad know it is his last visit.
You hit your first seed.

The luscious flavor is no longer there.
As you spit out the seed after seed.
The process of recovering begins.
Your dad flies home on the last flight
Back from China, wearing a mask.
He has to quarantine two weeks when he lands.
You don't know this will soon become a lifestyle.

You get two extra weeks of spring break.
Another bite into the grape.
The refreshing flavor fills your mouth.
Your best friend moved to college.
Crunch!

The person you've seen everyday since birth.
The person who used to play the little games you made up.
The person you get to call brother, the brother you can count on.
Seed, seed, seed.

Then: a new grape.
Expecting a better taste.
But 2021 is the same -- worse, actually.

Another battle between your teeth and a seed.
One January day, your dad comes home
To announce he's on probation at work.
Your family lifestyle changes.

You would expect this grape to taste better.
It doesn't.

Another seed to conquer.
Your best friend -- your brother -- has Covid.
The sleepless nights you spend listening
To your mom and dad.
What can we do?
How can we help?
He isn't getting better.
He needs to come home.
He can't get her sick.
In quarantine for your birthday -- the second year in a row.
This time, you can't even leave the house.

You hit a big seed.
One that takes a long time to wrestle from the grape.
Your dad finds a new job.
The moments of flavor permeate your mouth.
Until -- there's the seed.
You find out the job is 800 miles away.
Your dad moves to Houston.
It's like when he was in quarantine, but forever.

Then, the hardest seed to spit.
Your grandpa is diagnosed with Alzheimers.
He's in and out of the hospital.
You and your dad can't visit -- travel restrictions.
Ten days before his 86th birthday, your grandfather goes to sleep.
Your father's last wish: for him to make it to his birthday.
Your dad and brother come home.
A taste of the old normal, just for a moment, returns.

DING, SARAH**Sarah Ding**

Age: 13, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO
 Educators: Robert Henningsen, Bob Henningsen

Category: Poetry

How I Like My Fried Eggs**How I Like My Fried Eggs***Summer 2019*

Often, the yolk is trapped
 Within the crunchy ring of whites.
 With one poke of the yolk,
 One nibble of the ends,
 The vibrant sunset drips out.
 I cannot stand those eggs.
 Eggs must be fully cooked--
 Bright-sun yolks, rusty-Mars shells.
 Crunchy--of course.
 It's hard to even touch them.

Sitting at the Shack with my family,
 I flip through the plastic menu
 As I mentally cross things out.
 I'm drawn to the "Do it yourself, Meg Ryan".
 My own choice of eggs, meat, and carbs.
 The egg options: scrambled, over easy, over
 medium, over hard, sunny-side up, egg whites.
 A sigh of relief when I read "over hard".
 "May I please have my eggs over hard?
 Could you make sure that they are especially well done?"
 "For sure! Our over-hard eggs are always well done!"

A steaming platter arrives.
 I eye the eggs.
 The eggs steam back.
 Fumes are rising.
 With my natural instincts,
 I use my fork to gently press the yolk.
Squish.
 A sea of yellow flows out.
 A lie.

One year later, my friends hang out
 Maskless, not six feet apart.
 At school, one of them mentions,
 "This girl I know never wears a mask.
 She thinks COVID is a hoax."
 But my friends only wear masks
 At school. Never with each other.
 She's over-easy and my friends are over-medium.

I'm over-hard. A sigh of relief
When my school mandates masks.
I wear my mask everywhere -- at school,
While carpooling, at people's houses...
That friend: "I'm so glad we're taking
COVID seriously."
Another lie.

Two years later, scrolling through
TikTok, my eyes catch the title:
Man Caught Faking Vaccination Cards
He wanted to go to Hawaii.
Stupidly enough, they made one
For their eight-year-old daughter.
When will the lies stop?

EISENBERG, AJAY**Ajay Eisenberg**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Ragged Edges and All

Ragged Edges and All

The dry, sandy *atta* coated my lungs, as a rolling pin slid beneath my hands, back and forth, back and forth. Bits of cauliflower that were supposed to end up in the bowl beside me littered the counter, along with the spices they carried. I tore a small piece of dough. *This was going to work. It had to.* Four fingers pressed into a golf ball of dough already generously powdered with flour. I watched as the ball transformed itself into a thick, ugly disc beneath my hands. A mound of finely chopped cauliflower, dyed red from chili and spices, crowned the hockey puck, only to be enveloped by the dough underneath.

I had watched mynani make it a hundred times, the cauliflower-stuffed dough heeding her every command. In the blink of an eye, she would flatten the gobi paratha into a perfect, paper-thin circle. Once, I had "helped" her roll the dough out into circles, then watched as my ragged edges became round and smooth under her expert hands. As we cooked, she recalled her childhood, when she too learned her way around the kitchen. She spoke of a vibrant land, with streets speckled by mangoes brighter than the sun, and vibrant pink saris that danced in the wind along the streets...

Can you miss something you don't remember? I was only three when I went to India: all I remember was riding an elephant, and the thick air, filled with the scents of spices and fire. My ancestors are there, and my relatives too, but are they mine? I was three. How can I lay claim to a land I am a foreigner in?

I faced a newly-formed lump of dough. "Let the dough turn itself," I remembered my grandmother telling me years before, as the *paratha* floated atop the flour-covered counter, gracefully dancing with her rolling pin, smooth from years of use. "You should never have to pick up the *paratha* with your hands." I wrapped the cauliflower inside the dough like a present, perfectly contained inside its tan, elastic shell. So far so good. I began to press my rolling pin into the ball, trying to copy every move I had ever seen my grandmother make. Instantly, cauliflower began seeping out of the sides, tearing gaping holes into my *paratha*. Rather than fix my mistakes and admit defeat, I continued rolling, pressing the rolling pin harder and harder into the dough. When I went to lift the mess of dough and cauliflower off of the counter and onto the hot *tava*, I only further destroyed my creation. The *paratha* was hopelessly stuck to the counter. I shamefully scraped the dough off of the counters, fingers sliding along the sticky countertop in an attempt to salvage whatever I could of my feeble effort.

Again. I recreated my past attempt with more flour and less cauliflower (I have always been an overly-ambitious stuffer.) I tore another ball of dough, feeling the dough press itself into a smooth round between my hands. Flour, falling through my hands onto the granite counter like a piece of modern art, paint splattering across a canvas. I placed the dough on the floured counter, then wrapped the cauliflower inside, only to be rolled once again.

Cautiously, I pressed and flattened the newly-filled dough against my hands, then took out the rolling pin. Now came the hard part. Under my flour covered hands, the rolling pin whispered as it slid, slowly flattening the dough beneath it into a rough oval.

My creation was ugly: The edges were jagged, the cauliflower ready to burst from its uneven cage of dough. But it was mine. I took my imperfect masterpiece to the hot *tava* waiting on the stove, where dough met *ghee* and let out a satisfying sizzle. The scents of bright, pungent turmeric, sharp, nose-clearing chili, and warm, inviting ginger filled the room: familiar scents.

I eagerly slid the now-golden *paratha* off of the *tava* and onto a plate. Aided only by a generous dollop of yogurt, I tore into my imperfect creation. Steam coated the back of my throat, as spices and bits of cauliflower danced along my tongue.

The *gobi paratha* was nothing like those my grandmother had made: it was thick and dry, cauliflower still threatening to burst out at any moment. But it was mine, ragged edges and all.

Key Words:

Gobi: Cauliflower

Paratha: A soft, thin and unleavened Indian flatbread

Atta: A type of whole wheat flour used in traditional Indian cooking

Nani: Grandmother

Tava: A round iron pan/griddle used to make various Indian flatbreads, like *roti* and *paratha*

Ghee: Clarified butter

HODGES, MEADOW**Meadow Hodges**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Hickory Co R1 High School, Urbana, MO

Educator: Marilyn Yung

Category: Poetry

Towards the Light*Towards the Light*

As moths are drawn not to the Light
But also to the calling darkness of night
From the simple little brown house moth
To the emerald glimpse of a lone Lunar moth
So fly little moth
For your life is a quadrimester
Take your wings and soar
Take your teachings of rebirth
And fly
Fly away and find your Light

Until Tomorrow

Wait until tomorrow when you hear,
The bell ring
and the sound of people's joy.
The sound of the car pulling into the driveway.
Until the cats meow
or the bark of a dog,
wait for the scampering sounds of the raccoons retreat
and the growl of a coyote.
For these sounds remind you
of past things you took for granted,
for these sounds are the tomorrow
until your last breath.

Ways of the Silence

To the dark beyond
And the dim nightlight in our rooms,
We fear silence
To the thoughts that wander
And the silent unrelenting silence.
That whispers without fail
The quiet movement
Of the silence.
When morning arrives,
It slips away with the noise of your thoughts.

Dance of Lies (Inspired by Metaphor Dice)

The Truth is a worn down dance
A ballet that has played out for too long
The dancer's feet blistered and swollen
But the stage director is too stubborn to stop it

To be spun over, round and around
With little to no stop
to see the golden light fade,
As the darkness grows,
But the Audience, forever unmoving and faceless,
Somehow turn grim and washed over

Ode to the Renaissance

The dramatic posture,
The death of a damsel
And the slightest touch of fingers
For the hidden body of the women in silk cloth.
In a modern museum,
Someone holds their wilting friend
As the others clutch at their side and legs.
But to only cry,
To imitate a statue aside.
Others paint a oil painting,
Of a small cat wearing a ruff.
But only some can be worthy to be called,
A Renaissance painting.
But in the very end,
For a damsel is a damsel
And a cloth a cloth.

HOU, SHANGRI-LA**Shangri-La Hou**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Sarah Hasselman, Robert Henningsen

Category: Poetry

talk some sense to me*catch my breath*

three years ago I
left my home of red-rusted
brick and white-breasted
nuthatches, foliage that
painted our faces and the
forest floor, of rolling backpacks and
chasing passing-period up the hill and
choose-your-own-adventure stories in
snow you could drown in
Count to three, catch
my breath and I could
Count on shoulder-to-shoulder
singing and laughing and crying and I
remember how much
easier it was when I could
count best friends with one hand and
three fingers

can you forgive
ugly thoughts when they're
colored and laced and
spilt out in prose
Never seen a
girl more selfish than
one with nothing to return
to: don't wanna hear their
tongues running rapid when
running made this tied-tongue tired and I
am tired and my
mouth is sewn-shut

—don't wanna hear their
tongues running rapid when leaving
never eased the heaving in my
lungs and I can no longer
run with my legs or my
mouth and I am three
paragraph-paces behind when the
only sport I've practiced is falling for
my own fiction—three years ago I
bent my creaking ribs over a

marbled bathroom sink, held leaking
 eyes open with forcep-fingers and
 willed the pupils wider than the
 whites—What did she see? no one asks but
 me, I am looking at the
 black expanse of a phone, a
 prop for heads long-turned, a
 message in my mind: talk
 to me, Talk to me but
 know I just talked to you
 Three moments ago,
 in the place where I keep my
 words to my chest, in the
 spine of a story, and they'll
 walk for me and
 wait for me to come home.

astrophysics

sixth-graders dream, as they own
 the world's air to breathe
 She told me: She's gonna go to
 Stanford, become an
 astrophysicist, And I
 told her: I'm gonna go to
 Stanford, become an
 astronomer, just so She would know
 I knew the difference

seventh-grade, cave where
 nostalgia hides and
 comes back to bite, collecting secrets like
 puzzle pieces and
 slotting them in-between breaths
 I was under the stars and She
 wasn't there, She isn't here, so then is it not
 betrayal to gaze into Orion's eye?

now She and I are in
 tenth-grade, million miles and an
 orbit away, have visions like
 grasping at straws, can only see the
 cracks in the pavement; do not ask
 She nor I when
 astrophysics and
 stars fled our lonely night

bad posture

Winter breaks have ways of
 breaking their promises
 I'm thinking about pinky-pacts in
 fourth grade, and I don't mean
 I'll never tells or
 He likes hers but

See you later because later were never sealed with
pinkies and I'm
so far from where I learned what a
promise meant
I'm thinking about the sun
drowned below its horizon, since when did I
stop waiting for bedsheets and blankets to
let him and her and
them into my head I am thinking about the
bending of my back, the
snapping in my spine, traversing the space between
the sheets and my desk when I once wandered through
piñon and ponderosa and God do
winter breaks have ways to
heavy all the weight I cannot
take 'cause Father knows all too
well how easy it is to break a
good habit and I—
I've learned how long it
takes to break a
bad posture

IVATURI, KALIKA**Kalika Ivaturi**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Humor

Influencer Apology

A tall, thin, 21-year-old white woman named Aschleigh sits in her living room. The camera is angled upwards to show off her tall ceilings, white furniture, gold chandelier, millions of dollars worth of art pieces, and her thrifted outfit from Goodwill. Aschleigh moves her hand away from the camera to signal she just turned it on. She inhales deeply and lets out an audible sigh. She starts speaking and does her YouTube video intro hand gestures.

Aschleigh, in a shaky tone
What's up everybody, my name is Aschleigh,
and welcome back to my channel. Sorry for my simple
background today, it's just been a rough couple of hours.

Aschleigh puts her head in her hands and starts to make whimpering noises.

Aschleigh:
I'm sorry guys, this is just really hard for me.
I just need, like, a second to get my thoughts together.

Aschleigh pauses for 4 minutes. She makes multiple large, full-body groans as if she is deeply struggling with what she is thinking. She looks up many times at the camera to comment on how there is so much mascara on her face from crying.

Aschleigh:
My dear, dear Aschleigh-nators, today's video is going to be, like,
the hardest video I've ever had to film. I've spent the past week in Bali running
away from all the rumors and all of my problems, because this whole situation is just
so draining for me, like you guys have no idea. But today, I'm going to own up
to all of the mistakes you guys think I've made, everything you all believe I've
done wrong, apologize for the mess that all of you feel this has caused and
the harm that everyone feels has been done to them.

Jump cut to Aschleigh wailing.

Aschleigh:
When #aschleighdoesntbelieveinclimatechange and
#aschleighisapolarbearkiller started trending, I knew that this was, like,
getting really serious. I am truly, truly sorry for eating that 5 oz. bag of
Haribo Gold-bears Gummi Candy on my Instagram Live three weeks ago.

Aschleigh stops recording for a moment and steps out of frame. She pours an entire bottle of eyedrops in her eyes and steps back into frame. She continues recording.

Aschleigh:
I know that you all think I'm, like, really fake because of this
and because I preach so much about being vegan and gummy bears have

gelatin in them, but I can't say enough how sorry I am that you all feel like this. I just want, like, all of you to know though that you all mean the absolute world to me. I am so thankful for you all because I know that you guys will forgive me for this in a few days. Everyone is human. Everyone makes mistakes.

Jump cut. Aschleigh takes a second to compose herself and immediately stops crying.

Aschleigh:

But you know, me, Malala, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, we all had to go through meaningful and difficult challenges and faced crazy amounts of shame for being who we are, but they all came out stronger on the other side, and I too will meet them there really soon when you all forget about this tomorrow. When I googled how to deal with people hating you a few days ago, a quote from that book *The Scarlet Letter* came up. It talked about how, like, when Hester was in front of all those people being shamed, she just smiled at them. And, like, I realized that that's me. While she was dealing with whatever she was dealing with up there, I'm also sitting here in front of all of you, and there is nothing I can do but face you guys and the gummy bear situation head on, just like she did.

A 2 minute, unskippable midroll plays. Back to the video Aschleigh looks off to the side and begins speaking.

Aschleigh, *sadly reminiscent*:

You know, three weeks was such a long time ago--I was so much younger back then. Growing up, my parents always raised me to eat gummy bears whenever I wanted, so that's what I did three weeks ago, but, like, I've grown and changed so much since then. When I was on my break on the beach in Bali, I did so much research, listened to countless people's stories, read articles on top of articles, and hired a team of people to look at the ingredients of every single 5 oz. bag of Haribo Gold-bears Gummi Candy in the grocery store to help me finally understand that gummy bears are not vegan, and now I know that eating gummy bears goes against, like, pretty much everything I stand for as a person.

Aschleigh discreetly glances over at the papers on the table next to her. She looks up again and continues speaking.

Aschleigh:

Another thing I want to say is that, like, even though I have done so much incredible work on improving myself and my mindset about this whole situation over the past few days, the work doesn't stop here. I--with the support and supervision of my team, manager, and brand--will be dedicating my time to raising awareness about this issue and really trying to make sure that I don't make such an impactful mistake like this ever again. I mean, just yesterday I had my manager go through my social media and follow a bunch of activist people like this girl Ifemelu. My team said that just based off of her blogs, it would look amazing to be following her, and I haven't read much of it, but I just know she would be so proud of me for bravely starting my activist journey in the wake of this situation. Just knowing that I have this problem but I'm, like, persevering through it and constantly trying to find new ways to better myself and fix it really helps me get up every morning.

Looking at her watch, Aschleigh wipes off any leftover mascara stains and tears on her face.

Aschleigh:

I just want to say one more thing before I go. My lovely, incredible, brilliant fans and subscribers-seeing you guys feel like I have hurt you has

just caused me to, like, completely break down, you guys have no idea. Because of you all feeling this way, my manager has decided that it's probably best for me to take a break from social media for a while to try to recover mentally from all of this. I will be documenting my mental breakdown on my Instagram Story this week, so I really hope that you can all, like, respect my privacy as you watch me process this whole thing.

Aschleigh begins to make her YouTube outro hand motions.

Aschleigh, speaking in a downcast tone
Thank you guys so much for watching. Don't forget to like this video, it would really help me out, and subscribe if you want to see more videos like this. See you guys soon.

Aschleigh blows a kiss to the camera, and moves her hand towards the camera to cover up the lens. The video fades to black.

JIANG, EDDY**Eddy Jiang**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Blue Valley High School, Stilwell, KS

Educator: Becky Knueven

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Toy Piano

When I was three years old, I used to smash my pudgy little hands into the dingy white plastics of the dollar store toy piano my parents had bought me for Christmas. I wanted, more than anything, to be able to recreate the iridescent melodies that radiated from the grand piano whenever my sister sat at the bench. I was enthralled by the carefully woven intricacies that coalesced into one and flooded throughout the house like waves, crashing off the walls and settling at the shores of my ears before being whisked away by a sea of silence. Her hands flowed like water as they glided across the silky ivories, angelically cascading down into the ocean. And her fingers danced without a care in the world, like raindrops sprinkling down from the heavens above, splattering against the surface of the keys. I yearned to be able to effortlessly compose a euphonious blend of notes and rhythms like she could, but only a cacophony of distorted sounds would come clattering out when I tried. While my sister graced each note with the delicacy of a light rain, I summoned a demonic hailstorm with every wrong note. Eventually, my parents grew tired of having to suffer through me banging my hands into the keyboard over and over again.

When I turned five, my mother took me to my first piano lesson. From that point on, it was lesson after lesson, recital after recital, competition after competition, an endless cycle of practicing, perfecting, and performing. Yet, after almost every performance, I was on the verge of tears. Because there was always someone who was better than me. And how could I ever come close to them? Whenever I heard someone else flawlessly end their piece with a flourish, I was immediately transported back to that scene when I was three years old, frustrated because I could never recreate that.

They say that practice makes perfect, but no amount of practice could ever make me satisfied. Practice only made it worse. I would sit, dejected, at the same bench my sister sat at, forcing my fingers to move, to dance like hers did, only for them to stumble across the keys uselessly like a drunken man. I would glare at the piano, as if it were the piano's fault that I couldn't produce a sound as elegant as hers. I would stomp my feet childishly and break down into tears, the blacks and whites before me blurring into grey watercolors, burning into my vision. But no matter what I did, I could never break free from the chains and manacles that I had imposed on myself.

And I was broken.

My desperation fed on every wrong note that added dissonance where there shouldn't have been any, every unintentional accent that stuck out like a sore thumb and ruined the musical phrase, every memory lapse on stage that would leave me fumbling across the keys. Not I, nor the world, would ever be good enough for my own standards. I would never realize that perfection is superficial, fabricated into existence by insecurities. I would never understand that, in order to escape from my torture, I would have to first escape from myself.

I still have that wretched toy piano. I guess I just never got around to throwing it away. And so, it sits in the corner of my bedroom. It sits, next to the uneven stacks of books on the bookshelf, haphazardly arranged but still stacked. It sits, next to the unruly sheets and covers, thoughtlessly strewn about the bed. It sits, an echo of a whisper of my hopes and dreams, forgotten and discarded and never to be touched again.

JOHNSON, DEJANAI**Dejanai Johnson**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: David H Hickman High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Poetry

Mistakes**Mistakes**

I know I am not supposed to
But it feels better when I do
To know I am still alive
Seeing the blood of my own veins
Exit the spot I choose to slice
I don't want to be him I *can't* be him
My mind repeats the same thing over and over again
You can't be controlling
You can't be abusive
You won't be
Not after I'm done with you

I mark my body when my minds compares me to him
When I compare myself to him
I punish myself
It's how I cope
It's normal to me

But when I wake up from my thoughts
And feel the pain my mind has tricked me to think is his
I realize that I'm nothing like him
So I clean up the mess I made
And take a deep breath
This is not normal
You do not need to be punished
Everyone makes mistakes
That's the beauty of live
So make the most of it
And stay living

KAPPAS, EVA**Eva Kappas**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Critical Essay

Song of Solomon: Macon in Virginia**Song of Solomon: Writing Style, Theme Analysis and Creative Emulation****The Style of Toni Morrison**

By launching the reader into scenes without context, introducing epithets before their proper nouns, and progressing the narrative through dialogical tangents rather than linear time, all using precise language, Morrison creates a world of which she is the sole proprietor.

Chapters begin by dropping the reader into a situation unmoored in time: “Only Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthians were genuinely happy when the big Packard rolled evenly and silently out of the driveway,” begins Chapter 2, giving the reader no clarifying dates or ages, but even more elusive begins Chapter 4, obscuring the identification of the character described as well: “Once again he did his Christmas shopping in a Rexall drug store.” (31, 90) Morrison proceeds as if the reader was with the characters throughout all the time that they were absent, casually alluding to unknown facts to a surprising effect, such as inserting in the middle of a chapter that Guitar “didn’t believe his friend really wanted to be alone the night before the day of his own murder,” alerting the reader in the most blindsiding way that Milkman is in mortal danger. Morrison chooses to make the reader work for identification of her characters and the placing of scenes in their lives.

The strategy of employing descriptions before placing them in context applies to Morrison’s introduction of characters as well. Every character is introduced before they have a name through epithets in front of pronouns, like “The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent” describing Mr. Smith; “cat-eyed boy,” referring to Guitar; “dead doctor’s daughter” for Ruth; and “the singing woman” for Pilate. Names have meaning, and by describing characters with their qualities or relationship to others primarily, Morrison staves off any associations the reader may already have with names and thus maintains the integrity of her characters, while giving the story an epic-like feel with epithets reminiscent of tales like *The Odyssey*.

Harnessing nonlinear timeline jumps, Morrison takes us through three generations in a single lifespan. *Song of Solomon* progresses not when time dictates it to, but when a character has seen sufficient development in a scene. As such, the reader only learns backstory when it comes up in conversation or is a thought passing through the character's mind. We learn Macon’s relationship with Ruth when he explains it to Milkman, Pilate’s life story when she tells it to Ruth. Characters’ offhand remembrances develop into winding trains of thought that, while they probably take seconds in real time, jump around in pages of backstory.

Morrison’s writing style has an effect that is at first disorienting, but as situations come to be understood, infuse the reader with a sense of an intricate world that they are just coming to understand. In my story, I will attempt to emulate Morrison’s style by beginning the scene without pretext, mimicking Morrison’s epithets and decisive diction, and jumping around in time as the main subject recalls experiences that link him to the present.

Themes in *Song of Solomon*

One of the novel’s central themes is how parents shape who their children become. Pilate and Macon are driven down two different paths, Pilate towards dispossession and Macon towards accumulation of wealth, as they try to

honor their father's memory and rectify his murder. In turn, Pilate brings Reba and Hagar into her nonmaterial orbit, while Macon brings Milkman into the family business. Both of these parental actions have roots in their own upbringing, most clearly seen in Macon's advice to Milkman that "the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too." (55) In Macon's eyes, his own father, Jake, had failed to accomplish this because Jake was scammed out of his land, which had been a source of pride for the family and the Black community in Shalimar. Macon wants to ensure Milkman has a not just economically secure, but economically capable, powerful life, because he has seen what happens when one does not have full control over their financial assets.

That's not to say that the desires of children and parents align--Macon and Milkman clash over what they think will best help Milkman succeed. The father asserts that "Money is freedom...The only real freedom there is," while Milkman, never having known a life without money, wants to choose forging a path over staying comfortable: "I have to get away just the same. I just want to be on my own. Get a job on my own." (163) The reader can see why Milkman, young and uncomfortably comfortable, wants to try something new, but Macon's perspective seems cynical... until the reader connects how Macon's experiences with and knowledge of Jake have determined the type of father he now wants to be. Parents are shaped by parents, and it's impossible to consider one's views without understanding the forces that shaped them.

Original Story Emulating Morrison's Style: Macon in Virginia

Original story expanding upon this excerpt: "I ought maybe to take me a trip down there," said Macon. "Virginia?" Milkman asked him. "Danville. I ought to go by and see some of those boys before these legs stop moving." Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, page 335.

Style Emulation:

It was the first visit he had paid without paying, those illuminated hours in Reverend Cooper's small, linoleum-tiled kitchen, sitting at the table with the all the town's population of working men over fifty: Reverend Cooper and Tim Lakes, Johnson, and Eliot, who looked so identical to his father that upon seeing him, their long-lost comrade, Jake's son, the quick-footed hunter, loud-singing farm boy had exclaimed, "Mr. Williams!" instead of his old friend's first name.

They had accosted him with accolades, spinning silver from the crumbs of his life that Milkman had given them. "I knew it! Didn't I say! That Macon Dead would get himself the finest woman!"

"Her daddy a doctor!" They shook his shoulder fiercely and guffawed loudly over their card games.

Macon yearned to ask about his father, but the subject stayed lodged like a seed in his teeth, the owner of which was hyper-aware but the audience respectfully ignorant. There was no doubt that no punitive measures had been imposed upon Butlers after Jake's death, and Macon knew now that down by the river no bones of his lay--yet he wanted to know. What had followed that shot in the still morning. Not cruel but bewilderingly illogical was the tunneling possibility that *nothing* had happened--that after the smoke had faded, after that gold-shining orb of admiration, precious and precocious, had shattered inside of Macon as his father's body hit the ground, the young errand boys had rubbed sleep from their eyes and embarked on the day, the shop owners had flipped their signs to "OPEN," the alley cat that had slunk around the house, feeding from Jake's palm, would track through another's mud and eat from another's hand as easily as a breeze.

In Danville, of all places, he should be able to rest, to wrinkle his starched suit, lean over the table on his elbows, whoop and holler at the moon like a boy again. Beneath his pocketful of keys, resentment and love simmered, bubbling and bursting in his chest, threatening to snap his placid excitement.

"How many miles you get on that Buick?"

His old schoolmates spoke their exclamations with an intimacy that made him feel guilty, unworthy of their simple astonishment. For the first time, Macon shied from the acknowledgement. All the drives in the Packard, all the dolling-up of his wife and daughters to create some voyeuristic urge to know about *him* and *his* in the families he drove by, in the churchgoers, the street-walkers and animated conversationalists in their thin coats, the cold, rich and bejeweled--it all felt sickly removed from the kitchen, from the proud, shining light in his old friends' eyes. He had come proudly with rubber-banded stacks of bills, philanthropic, but felt their weight like a brick in his pocket. Macon coughed; he had spoken yet a minute ago, but his voice felt stiff from disuse, suddenly wrapped in scratching gauze from layers and years in silence--not a letter he had sent, not a word of success or failure to these men with whom he had chased coyotes off with just their voices, eaten peaches until their stomachs expanded funnily like balloons, sunk acorns into a tin can and celebrated with mouthfuls of cherries. Excusing himself, patting the shoulder nearest to him, Macon pushed his way outside, the screen door swinging behind him. The others carried on inside, reminiscent, triumphant, youth shining in their quick fingers on the cards and buoyant words.

As Macon sat on the porch steps, scratching the cement, a deep ginger smell wafted out of the house. Deep in the dim hallway inside, the square of yellow light of the kitchen glowed, from which the sugared scent unfolded like a line of music, enveloping. Cycling, spicy, it crystallized in the cold air outside like little gems. Macon inhaled, filling his lungs with its warmth, and blinked— his father stood on the walkway, face worn and weathered, a ginger root stuck between his teeth like a cigar. Was this the phantom that Pilate had raved about when she'd miraculously unearthed bones of their father from the green sack? Macon stiffened; the warmth from the kitchen still suffused his limbs, but now made his body feel overheated, artlessly ruddy in the cool dark. Jake lounged upright, one leg bent at the knee, tilting his head back so that his eyes mirrored the moon. And Macon was a child once again, glued in awe, mind filled, as childrens' are, solely with the scene he bore witness to. His pockets stretched and warped under their weight so that his heavy jangling keys and 10-dollar bills sunk down through the pinstriped putty and down into the cement, into the earth, where the soil swallowed them up and the last corner of cash disappeared under a green shoot.

On the first property Macon had bought, he had knelt in the soil and lifted its dust to his lips. His stomach contracted upon taste and he spat in the dry pebbles. Shame dunked like a bucket of dirty water over his head. What did he think, that this poor weathered soil, this base poor-town *dirt* would contain some essence of home? Michigan soil soured his mouth; it tasted of salt although the land was not even on the ocean. He remembered testing his father's garden beds in Virginia, that soil laced with ginger, decisive and sweet. Macon stabbed the "SOLD" stake into the ground with force. He knew then: his father had been a landowner, not a property owner. His father had communed with his soil, with the shoots of green that emerged every spring, not with returns on investments, not with anything tangible, redeemable, capable of being passed on. Land bought for a cent and given with a life.

Macon decided then that he would have a son.

KERRIGAN, GEORGIA**Georgia Kerrigan**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Katie Weber

Category: Poetry

Peachy

Golden pink and sunshine kissed is the fruit of my namesake
Sickly sweet and delicately soft: the princess of all fruits
But picked too soon its bitterness brings only heartache
And saved too long its rotten skin is no longer of use

Sweet are the peaches of Georgia
And arduous is the labor to bear them
But their loveliness makes for a
Reward more valuable than any check or gem

The royal fruit of my namesake is not without her flaws
Her unavoidable sticky juice, which makes a mess of hands and lips,
Often distracts from her deserved applause
And she lives in the shadow of fruits more favorably picked

Sneakily hidden beneath her beauty sits the rough, threatening pit
And all too short is the season of the sweetest subject

KOTZMAN, JOHN**John Kotzman**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lansing High School, Leavenworth, KS

Educator: Gabby Royal

Category: Flash Fiction

Green is Best

Green is Best

It was a lazy afternoon and some of the jungle animals were relaxing by the river. Ruby, the bright red frog was surveying the area and suddenly noticed a leaf move, “Is that you Grasshopper? WOW! You are almost invisible sitting on that leaf, I didn’t know you were even there.”

The green grasshopper jumped onto the brown jungle floor and laughed, “Ha ha! Now you see me now you don’t,” she replied jumping back and forth from green leaf to brown earth. “I am the luckiest creature to have such a fantastic green color. I am invisible when I want to be, no predator can get me.”

Ruby laughed, “I guess it’s pretty cool to be green and camouflaged, but who wants to hide all their life? Red is better, red means danger, and predators know not to mess with me because my poison can kill.”

The grasshopper looked a little annoyed and felt that she had to defend herself, “I think green is best because it is the color of nature, it is obviously Mother Nature’s favorite because green is all around us.”

At that moment, Rusty the monkey raised his head from slumber and said, “Hey Grasshopper, you can’t say that.

Personally, I think my orange, beautiful fur is the best because it is like the colors of the sunset and everyone knows that sunsets are the most beautiful part of the day.”

A few other animals heard the conversation and felt they needed to join in this very important discussion.

Goldie the snake slithered down the tree branches and hissed “ I have the most glorious color of all because the sun gives us life.”

“Stop, stop, stop!” chirped the grasshopper. “Green is the best, look all around you! It’s the color of life, green is best!”

The grasshopper’s rant had attracted a few more animals, and a bluebird flew to a branch and tweeted, “ There is a lot of green, but there is more blue sky and more blue ocean. I think if more is better, then blue is obviously the best.”

Indy the lizard and Violet, the butterfly looked at each other and chorused, “More is not better, Indy and I have rare, unique purple colors, so we are special in nature,”

At this time, all the animals started arguing about which of them had the best color. The scene was chaotic, Ruby, the red frog, threatened to poison the grasshopper. Goldie, the yellow snake tried to strangle Bluebird, while Rusty tried to trample

on Indy the lizard and wack Violet the butterfly.

All of a sudden, they heard a serene voice coming from the sky, they realized the voice belonged to Mother Earth.”

Animals, animals, stop this fighting at once! I created all of you and I cannot let you treat each other this way!”

Grasshopper chirped, “I just wanted them to understand that being green is the best!”

Mother Nature sighed, “My dear creatures, look at the sky and I will show you the color that is most beautiful.”

The animals stood to attention, each of them confident that their color would be the winner. As they stood, raindrops fell and suddenly across the sky, the animals saw the most beautiful thing they had ever seen. Mother Nature had created a rainbow with all the colors of the animals: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.

The animals realized the colors were all equally beautiful and even more beautiful together. Everyone was happy again and they thanked Mother Nature for the beautiful gift of the rainbow.

LI, ARIELLE**Arielle Li**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: California Trail Middle School, Olathe, KS

Educator: James Goss

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

chunks of life

She handed me her phone. The words sat neatly in rows, but they swam back and forth in my vision as I read in disbelief. My entire life had been erased and rewritten by a single email. Nothing would be the same.

The momentous occasion which sent my life spiralling out of control marked the passing of a joyous period to one filled with confusion and change. Before I explain the happening and what it was due to, I will explain what Part One of my life was like.

As a child, I explored a wide range of activities. When I was a toddler, I took swimming lessons but failed to keep going once I first started going to school. I enrolled in soccer, ballet, and piano when I was five years old but quit soccer because I was more devoted to ballet. I pursued basketball, volleyball, and gymnastics, but released those when my interest faltered. In my last year of elementary school, I selected violin as my string instrument and practiced it along with the piano which I had never ceased to play. I loved to read more than anything else. I read until my vision worsened and I needed glasses, which became contacts because glasses were a hindrance for turning and jumping in ballet.

There are many people who do not believe dance is a sport, that it is less difficult, and that it is unworthy of the same amount of respect. However, dance is a sport and art simultaneously. The human body is capable of shaping itself and moving in beautiful ways, but the movements are difficult to master and it is rare to find such a gift. Dance uses physicality along with personality to enrapture the audience and create something eye-opening or breathtaking.

My dance teacher was a stern yet humorous instructor, who guided his students kindly but stayed strict and required us to push ourselves to the maximum extent of our physical ability. I like to believe that his constant insistence I could do more gave me a hard-working attitude, and I would be dripping sweat after a mere three barre combinations. The attitude poured into daily life and I found myself pursuing the extra mile to savor the feel of a gritty success.

As a young dancer, I would watch the older dancers glide across the floor and lift their legs to a spectacular altitude with stability and grace. They would stand on their toes and shape empty space into art and glow with inspiration. I would imitate the older dancers and steal a piece of each one's style, building my own interpretation and flair. I would watch dancers intently, find flaws in their technique, wonder if I myself had them, and desperately work to fix them. Instead of trying to stay better than others, I tried to become as good as those who were better than I. This mindset worked unbelievably well and was highly more effective than the other, as I would later learn.

Because I had picked up on these habits and ideas before my classmates and diligently carried them out, my abilities and technique soon became advanced for my age. I was hoping that I would be cast as Young Clara, the main character of the Nutcracker ballet. It was the first large solo part offered in the company, and was only available to the level I was in. Young Clara danced in the Party Scene and Battle Scene, and then Grown Clara took over.

Naturally, because I have been leading up to this moment, you have correctly guessed I was cast as Young Clara. It was a vivid moment. I entered the building, saw the colorful cast list up on the wall, and stumbled to it. I scanned the cast list several times, unable to process any words out of sheer excitement, then finally my eyes caught on my name. It was listed underneath Young Clara. I wanted to scream with joy, so I instead sprinted out into the parking lot and breathlessly informed my mother who rejoiced. I ran into the studio with energy pouring off of me. I was living off of pure ecstasy for a week. The feeling of being singled out and noticed was awakening and addictive. I enjoyed the experience more than any dancing I had done before. My love of dancing grew tenfold, and I began contemplating life as a professional dancer. My admiration and respect towards my teacher grew twentyfold, and I strived for compliments and approval.

The company chose Don Quixote for the spring performance. The cast list was released, rehearsals began anew, and we worked hard. I was eager to perform such a fun ballet, and we were about two months into rehearsals until a

virus broke out and the entire thing was cancelled.

The world went into lockdown. School became virtual, but more importantly, dance became virtual. The spacious studio I had taken for granted was gone, and in its place, a small rectangle of space. Combinations were difficult to learn with connection errors and loud sounds emitting from around the house. As I think back upon the drop in conditions for my dancing, it feels reasonable to have quit. Surprisingly, this thought had not occurred to me a single time. I pushed on with twinkling visions of being let back in the studio.

The pandemic impacted everything. Life became more panicked and secluded, and it was a lonely and isolated time. Political arguments broke out on the issue of how to act accordingly. Eventually, things began to return to normal, but hygiene carried more of an emphasis, masks became a necessity, and campaigns launched for and against new vaccines.

A year passed. My family stayed healthy. We were back in classrooms and back in the dance studio. Swan Lake, the spring ballet, became one of my favorites. Only two people from our level were cast as swans, one of them being me, and it felt refreshing to be treated as an older dancer. The amount of choreography we were given bounced up by 50%, partially because our cast list was affected by a dancer shortage, partially because our parts were larger and had more dancing involved. We performed Swan Lake to a small audience restricted to only family members, but the energy flowing through our tight-knit group grew exponentially instead of depleting. They were my second family. It was home away from home.

A new school year began. The Nutcracker rehearsals started anew, and I was given a lead role for the first time. It was a breath of fresh air to perform for more than our families. Memories were made, bittersweet tears were shed, and I was content with the product of our commitment. Two weeks later, I was invited to my friend's house.

We weren't long into the meetup before she received a text from another dancer. It felt illegitimate, it felt like a prank. It told us that the company was no longer in existence.

With trembling hands she opened the unread email from the company. I bent my head over her shoulder and read the message, over and over, as if the words would change midway. We joked, pretending it was an early April Fools, kidding ourselves with fake hope that hesitantly sprouted from our grasping minds. The email explained that the pandemic had put an "impossibly difficult strain financially on the studio", that "our hearts will always be inside those walls with our students". They thanked us for the decades of being in business, and told us they would provide refunds. I wanted more from it, but I didn't quite know what.

I felt no pain. It felt like a dream, something that I had conjured from my mind. I took the news calmly without a change in expression. My friend and I began to discuss courses of action that we could take, new studios where we could go, what everyone else was doing. I did not take into careful consideration what the news actually meant.

It took a day for the truth to fully set in, and there came a second where understanding struck me square across the face. The air was stolen from my lungs. My tears were infinite. I couldn't accept that I had lost connection with my teacher and friends in the blink of an eye. The experiences that were to be could happen only in melancholy imaginings. The significance of the moment seemed to slice straight through the timeline of my life. It would be impossible to consistently meet my dance friends, and I would most likely never see my favorite teacher after so many years of maturing as a dancer and person under his guidance. These moments of realisation happened in intervals. At one moment I would be calm, and the next my eyes would be puffy and my face streaked with tears. It felt like I had lost a vital organ and there was no reason to live on. At night when I had too much time to think, I would play through every way life could continue on and none felt good. I wished that I had a Time-Turner to organize a fundraiser of some sort. It was unbelievable that there had been no warning of any kind. There was no plea for help, no reveal that a closing was being contemplated. The dance year had not even finished, and yoga mats and water bottles left at the studio were gone forever. What we had all been looking forward to – the spring ballet of Alice in Wonderland – had never existed.

My parents were not kind. One of them commented – it did not feel like a joke, even though it likely was – that it may be an omen, and I was shocked. The other said I may as well quit dancing, and I couldn't believe it. In Part One of my life, quitting had constantly been brought up, but this time it was all the more fear-inducing. The few remaining sparks of hope I had were extinguished by their brutally honest words. They believed I could focus on academic pursuits and finally do the school clubs I had declined because of time restrictions. I was so moody and sensitive that the smallest remark would reduce me to a snivelling ball of tears and would be impossible to subside. Upon finding the perfect school where many other dancers were headed to as well, my parents explained that it was too far a ride and would be impossible to balance with their work schedule. My ignorant thoughts intruded on all reason and I dissolved into tears with my nose producing endless snot. I selfishly believed that it should be easy for my parents to make it work. Everyone I reached out to seemed to be going to one of two places, but my parents wanted to send me to a studio five minutes away which was of disappointing quality. I was angry at the way things had panned out, but there was no way to change any of it, so I illogically focused my anger on my parents.

If I never danced again, I would lose a fundamental piece of me. I had taken too much for granted once more.

Even though I had auditioned for the company I desired to dance for, there was no validation for whether I would actually go.

At this very moment, I am trying to piece my life back into stability. There are chunks I can reuse in my efforts to rebuild, but others I will have to create from scratch. All I can hope for is to continue dancing and to overcome this point in time. There are many possibilities for me with my newfound freetime, and despite this sharp feeling of loss, I almost feel excited for the world beyond.

LI, ISOBEL**Isobel Li**

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Amanda Keltner

Category: Poetry

to love in a small town

there is a place of endless sky
where the stolid road stretches beneath your feet
virtuously

this is where the defeated freeway ends,
where you take a left
into a town of stillness and sunshine
because there's no other option
where hunched-over trees tangle with the young
and ivy climbs up aged white farmhouses
with west-facing windows that shine in the evenings
where the only tangible traces of their occupants
are gently rocking porch swings and well-fed cattle
where the perpetually empty bleachers at the high school
might even prop up the clouds

nature nurtures this isolation
Helios drags gold-lit fingertips across dusty paths and
cinnamon-flavored raindrops smack the ground and
lonesome children scatter dandelion daydreams

on a map, there is nothing
half-abandoned lots in a half-abandoned town
and the dying breaths of industrialization
yet
standing here, gravel breeze sanding your face
there is something:
a sprinkling of lovers, who rest and rise
with the sun day by day, night by night
and love like a half-life

LIN, JENNA**Jenna Lin**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: John Warner Middle School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Beth Winton

Category: Poetry

rebirth, reinvention**FAMILIAR RELATIONS**

frequently my father asks for fisticuffs
 and i refuse. the heat likes to blur his face out—
 a flesh-shaped whorl
 with a silver tooth glinting in the middle.
 dinner is a sordid affair if you forget my mother. she wears
 two rings on each finger
 and tells me she is rotting
 on the inside. frequently she asks for a smoke
 and i oblige. *hands up, thumbs curled,*
bite your fingers, your
swollen palms, lose yourself in the deluge.
 my father is itching for a fight. he steals my mother's rings
 at night so he will forget my face
 a little more in the morning.

UNABLE TO COMMISERATE: WHO YOU HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN.

your son is in the yard, gripping a baseball bat as he
 swings down wildly and scatters an anthill. in the milky
 white of the afternoon he is shimmering, his soft hand
 wiping at his brow, his muscles struggling against his skin.
 black, squirming, glitters the ground. this animal, half-you—
 the radio hums as he smiles against the sun, his teeth like
 riverbed stones, making a space between his hands, where
 the dirt meets the palm damp with sweat, where the sweat
 meets the weary end of the bat. look at him, swinging like that.
 he's beautiful. look at the ants. look at how they crawl away.

YOUR GREATEST FEAR, WHEN YOU EMERGED—

the motherland: we are all afraid of you,
 your tendrils of blossom,
 your tepid grains pilled by sweat.
 we did not choose who we were born to, where they
 let out their first cry.
 motherland: on tv you reek of
 curling tongues, women shuffling
 in the public square, wooden food stalls,
 dense exhaust.
 my mother tells me you are an old lover,
 my father knows nothing of love.

we turn twelve and blood turns into
rice wine. we have awoken the beast, who slumbers under our skin
and only stirs to remind us it cannot be killed.
this beast is not your problem— *motherland, oh*
motherland. your mother's land but not yours.
the women in the square chant
with their curled tongues. it's not idiocy
until you look the beast in the eye
and try to kill it.

LIU, MEGAN

Megan Liu

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Judith Miller

Category: Flash Fiction

My Yéyé's Dream

There's nothing left — not anymore. The winter chill grapples with his frozen hands as the second hand on the clock spins around, around, around. Air blows from the old heater, but somehow he doesn't feel the warmth. He is worn out, tired. There is so much work to do. He must sell the corn, plow the fields, and boil *jiaozi* in the broken pot. He must feed his daughter, my mama, and craft her flowers from corn husks and sing her songs. He must stay awake, stay happy in a time of empty darkness.

He leaves the window only partially open every morning, afraid that the faint scent of memories will drift away, like angels flying to the sky. He also hears the noises. The noises which seem to penetrate through the cracked walls and into his head, beating against his skull like a drum. The sounds of shouts and marches praising Mao, Chairman Mao, the Great Leader Mao, Savior Mao. He slams the window shut, sending glass shards flying, breathing hard and fast. My grandpa, my *yéyé*, is tired.

To distract himself from the noises outside, he rubs his fingers through the dust covering the window sill, making tiny roads. He pushes the dust into miniature balls between his thumb and forefinger, feeling guilty that he's neglected to clean the window for such a long time. There is still so much work. He moves towards his bed and reaches for the jar. His calloused fingers fumble back and forth inside, and he hears the yuan coins clink dully against its sides. No, that won't be enough for a new shirt. He sighs, holding the jar close to his chest and closing his old eyes.

He imagines a time when work will be easy to find. He thinks of the colorful house him and my mama will live in, and the neighbors who will bake *hóngdòu* cakes for them. He smiles, thinking of those cakes. He will help make the cakes. Together they will knead the dough, back and forth, forth and back, so smoothly that his little girl will be laughing and poking her plump fingers into the soft mush. "Don't do that, honey," he will say, laughing with her and doing the same. He can smell it now — sweet and warm, with just enough sugar inside the bean filling. They will all sit together in the dining room and laugh and share stories and eat every last piece of that delicious *hóngdòu* cake.

He'll marry again. At a party, he will meet a lovely lady with a soft smile and gentle voice wearing one of those simple sundresses he has seen in a shop. He will have the courage he's never had and the manners he's never been taught and be treated with the kindness he's never experienced. He will walk across the room and sit by her on one of those high, spinning chairs he's glimpsed through the windows of small bars. He'll smile; she'll smile. They'll talk until midnight of all their dreams of starting a new life and by dawn he will leave with a smudge of red lipstick on his cheek that he won't wash off for a week.

He dreams of the bridge he will build when they marry, his dream since he was a young boy. It will be made of steel, stronger than any other bridge, big enough to hold thousands and thousands of pounds. At last he'll have accomplished what would have made his father proud of his only son.

He opens his eyes to see the second hand on the clock still spinning and the minute hand moved from the four to the six. The water-stained walls surrounding him and the unmade bed he sits on jolt him back to reality. The jar slips from his grip and crashes onto the wooden floor, its glass shattering and along with it, his dreams. He shivers and notices that no air blows from the heater—probably broken again. Now he must fix the heater. But he doesn't want to fix the heater. He wants to carve a bridge with nothing but his bare hands that are worn from baking all those *hóngdòu* cakes with his neighbors and little girl by his side, yelling "Baba, baba!" as he throws her into the air. He wants to be loved. He closes his eyes again, and his dream is there, right there.

But all his time is gone; he's nothing but an old man now.

The second hand on the clock spins impatiently as he looks down on the shattered glass, the light reflecting an image of a man he can no longer recognize. He hears more noise, louder this time, and looks outside in the bare streets of Shandong province, a place that he once called home.

There's nothing left — not anymore.

LIU, MEGAN**Megan Liu**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Judith Miller

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Living with Dying**2055**

Cold.

It was so cold in here – the icy glare of dim lights on heavy metal doors, the frigid sound of the intercom blasting out patient ID numbers. A woman and a small child. Annora Johnson was her name, and her five-year-old daughter Emma sat beside her. Annora sat as though frozen on a contoured stainless steel chair, counting people as they disappeared behind the metal doors. She watched a young man, the green light on the HealthChip implanted into his wrist reflecting in the door as he passed through. Several minutes later, an elderly couple left the room, their chips also green: healthy, no diagnoses, perfectly normal. A teen boy and his father. She continued counting and counting and counting until only she and her daughter were left.

Annora’s muscles tensed, and with nothing to distract her but her thoughts, her hands picked at each other restlessly. Emma would be getting a genetic test today. It was nothing new — people got them every six months to update their genetic profiles. The tests allow doctors to diagnose diseases before symptoms occurred, so the doctors could formulate medications specifically designed for each patient’s diagnosis. By testing large populations, researchers had been able to complete genome studies, sequencing the genome of many patients with a particular disease to look for shared mutations. This allowed them to know if a mutation was connected to a certain disease.

“Mama, I’m tired.”

“Only a few more minutes sweetie.”

Finally the robotic intercom blared, “Patient number 315, Miss Emma Johnson. Proceed to room forty-nine.”

“Let’s go, honey,” Annora whispered, grabbing her daughter’s hand.

There were low lights in room forty-nine. A bedside table stood in a corner with a half eaten tray of food, and a man stood in the middle, smiling.

“Annora, it’s nice to see you,” he greeted warmly. “Emma, sit here,” he said, giving her a test tube to spit in. “Saliva,” he said to Annora. “It’s so fascinating these days, how fast we can get tests like these done so quickly.” Annora was busy staring down the daunting Genome Data Machine, barely nodding.

“Next we will do the blood. Do you have your daughter’s EHR?”

Electronic Health Records. It was a digital device that contained the medical and treatment histories, diagnoses, and immunization dates of a patient. It allowed access to evidence-based tools that providers could use to make decisions about a patient’s cure. It was required everywhere: job interviews, health insurance companies, college applications. Each device also contained a portable tracking chip worn on a person’s wrist. If the light was green, it meant a person was healthy. If it was blue, that person was already diagnosed by their doctor and potentially carried a genetic mutation or disease. This was implemented to track health patterns throughout different populations.

Finally he glanced up, still smiling. “Done. The test will take a while to get back, but her stats look normal right now.”

The woman sat with little movement as a moment of silence passed. “How long do we wait?”

“Results will come back in a week, maybe later.”

Annora nodded, thanking the doctor. She then left the hospital quickly with her daughter.

A week after the test, her phone rang, and she loaded the report. Annora sat at the kitchen table, stunned.

Her daughter had the p13 mutation.

According to science she had at most five years to live.

11 pm

She didn’t feel anything, really. It was as if she was going in and out of consciousness, almost like the first blurry seconds of waking up and adjusting to the sharp headache of reality. Everything felt cold and pitiless.

Outside, Annora could see the first star in the night sky, and it was when she saw the nightly delivery drone

landing on her doorsteps then she realized a full day passed. Blurs of whirling objects with occasional streaks of color was all she saw for hours. Perhaps she had passed out at one point, but she couldn't remember. The constant restlessness and agony in her mind had succumbed to the shock. She felt like a ghost.

Phone messages were beeping, but she didn't answer.

9 am

"EHR?"

"Got it."

"What about her microbiome?"

"All in here."

Annora watched as the people with white coats scrambled about, occasionally scanning over Emma and giving her a few more shots. They were examining through her daughter's genetic makeup to her sleep patterns, asking her questions that made her feel worse, much more concerned in her daughter's disease than Annora's well-being. "When was the last time she received an immunization?"

"Has she experienced symptoms?"

"Do you know the whereabouts of her father?"

Annora felt some comfort, though, seeing her daughter playing with her stuffed animals.

Towards noon, the doctors laid out a plan for her: the T45 drug. It strengthened metabolism, and would lessen the side effects such as the growing tumor likely to develop in her head. Other medications were prescribed to help with the involuntary twitching. It was incredible, they told her. Early diagnosis had led scientists to detect diseases earlier and find out new ones, such as the p13 mutation.

"It's transmitted from the X sex chromosome," Dr. Jones told her. "Emma's case is so rare because she's a female. Usually men inherit this because they only have one X chromosome rather than two, so the probability is much higher," he continued, as if she understood anything he was saying. "The drug we created for your daughter targets her exact genetic problem, and we can even use it as a basis for others in the population."

She went home that night, feeling as though someone had struck her. Why bother, she wanted to scream. Why bother doing all of this if my daughter is just going to *die* in a year. She was itching to tear down everything in sight.

The pink, flowery walls and barbie dolls scattered in the play-room seemed to mock her, along with Emma's soft red cheeks and sleeping face. A fiery sensation heated her to a temperature so intense she had to grit her teeth to prevent her from destroying something.

She layed in bed, with the lights on, afraid that someone was watching her. Why diagnose her daughter with a terminal disease before she had symptoms? She thought of what would be Emma's last birthday. Her last chocolate cake, her last present. Her very last birthday wish. What possibly could a child with an incurable sickness wish for? To live longer?

She felt like she was sinking, powerless over her own mind, and drowning as the cold ocean water swept over her. And then a thought came, so horrible and unplanned that she flinched. The thought of running away, of forgetting this was ever happening seemed to wash over her. She tossed and turned, imagining the terror of her co-workers when they saw her baby girl's HealthChip glowing the petrifying color of blue and her teachers, who would put her in a special class, or maybe no class at all.

But what could she do?

Her heart rate steadied and her knuckles stopped shaking. Her mind cleared; it was as if her path was simple and right there. Tomorrow she would walk to the colorless hospital and face those doctors and purchase the drugs — all of them. And then she would take Emma to get ice cream. She reasoned that if her daughter was going to live for a few years, then it would be the best years of her life. Now, she could rest, feeling satisfied and content at last. When she looked outside, the sun was starting to come out.

2062

She sat, across from them, mother and daughter, on the train, staring at the eight-year-girl. It was obvious; the shape of her daughter's head, her missing pinky finger. Those eyes. The blue lights on her HealthChip. Annora suspected from their clothing and packed bags that they were moving. Maybe to find an affordable care plan where doctors could offer them a cheaper solution. They both seemed uncomfortable and Annora leaned in a little closer towards them.

"I know you don't understand this now, sweetie, but this will be the best for both of us," the mother said, not looking at her.

"But why, Mama?"

The mother suddenly turned towards Annora, and she looked away, not wanting to be caught staring. Finally the mother looked away, rubbing her eyes, and speaking in a low voice.

"I want to remember you looking healthy."

The bus doors parted with a gasp, and the woman stood, putting on her daughter's coat and handing her a ripped

brown bear.

“Teddy will be with you.”

There was a flood of traffic, on board and off. The crowd finally cleared, and the doors shut again. The bags were gone, and with it, the young girl.

Annora was confused until the bus started again, the fog cleared, and she could make out the words plastered on the building.

LifeCare Hospice

Her heart sank as the fog gradually gulfed the girl in, her little hands still clutching on to the teddy bear. The bus engines started again, and another woman took the empty seat beside the mother, who now stared blankly out the opposite window.

It was just then that Annora realized the horror they had both faced. She had not gotten over her beautiful child's death, and would never. She thought hard and long about what she could say to the mother, but found nothing. But when the brief thought of embracing her filled her mind, she was comforted for a moment, wanting only to protect each other from the coldness of living on without the one thing they tried to protect but couldn't.

LIU, MEGAN**Megan Liu**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Judith Miller

Category: Flash Fiction

The Piano Teacher

He was her favorite student, though she had never seen his face. The deep tones when his fingers sank into the bass notes, the soft touch of his hands as she guided them, and his laughter reminded her of her youth. He was still young, she thought, with immense potential, but it wasn't just his talent that set him apart from the other students. He played not just with his fingers but with his whole heart, creating emotions that often overwhelmed her.

She waited patiently on the couch, listening for the familiar skipping steps and knocking on the front door, usually followed by a happy shout and the kicking of what sounded like heavy winter boots. He was nearly twelve, she remembered, going into the seventh grade. Twelve, she thought, was a good age to be. She had been twelve when she had first opened the lid of a black grand piano and then had been hypnotized by the dozens of white and black keys while learning to read notes for the first time. It was a Chopin prelude she first had performed on stage, she remembered, recalling how the long slurs and legatos of the score swifed her away to a different world, the high notes singing like angels as her left hand steadied the piece with its low bass. Ever since she had started playing, the piano had been her friend, a trusted companion to whom she could pour all of her troubles, and as she got older, it stayed close by her side.

But with age came a price. She didn't know if she could continue teaching: waking up and finding her way to the bathroom had become as troubling as reading a dense Liszt nocturne in her twenties. Even now, there were still nights she dreamed in such vivid detail that when she woke, she was confused, forgetting for a fraction of a second that she was still in the dark emptiness. During the minutes that followed, she felt the grief all over again, the loss of things she'd never even considered missing. She'd never been one to dwell on the small half and quarter notes on her sheet music, the shape of a tree, or passing clouds—poetry hadn't been her thing—rather it was the sounds that she relied on. Now when she went into the bathroom, she couldn't see her aging face in the mirror. In her mind's eye, she would always be fifty-seven and look as she had when she'd last seen her image.

When she heard the first few whole notes being played, she realized that he had already arrived. She found her way to the practice room, and his fingers stopped. There was a shift in the air as he turned to face her. "Ms. Z, why don't you play something for me today?" he asked. She could almost see him sitting there on the black bench with his legs bouncing up and down. It had been such a long time since she had performed in front of someone. Though she was nervous, she slowly felt around the bench and sat down, carefully moving her fingers until she felt them match up with the familiar keys. Her foot fumbled for the pedal, and after a breath, she began playing the beginning notes of her first prelude, relying on muscle memory to guide her through the simple song. The piece came back to her almost instantly: the slow *robato*s, long chords, and familiar notes of the melodic A minor key rushed back to her fingers. The notes advanced into long, languid strides generating a slow tempo but with great momentum. As she continued to play, the boy ignored the blank gaze of her eyes and the walking cane that lay lifeless next to the bench, instead listening intently to the heartfelt emotions her hands created.

Eventually, she, too, forgot the difficulties of her condition. As the whispering sounds of Chopin filled the room, she was almost sure that she could see his youthful face smiling back at her.

MERTZ, GRETCHEN**Gretchen Mertz**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Tex Tourais

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

From Your Foggy Oxford Streets, From Your Very Own Secret Garden

From Your Foggy Oxford Streets, From Your Very Own Secret Garden

Begin back on those foggy mornings you spent in a covered pram rolling down High Street, the lights lining the walk nothing but soft orange orbs floating on top of blue-grey clouds, hanging too low in the sky. You remember how the trees sat sleepily in the meadows at the break of dawn, the dew clinging onto blades of grass beneath the cows that sauntered dreamily along the Thames. You hear the hushed conversation of friends who are punting in the river, the swish of the water swirl-twirling away in your memory. A sense of calm washes over you, the river and the buildings and the streets taking you in, whispering secrets in your ear, making you love them. Years later you will finally realize how important that early morning journey down that street was, how it created a space in your mind and your life that was home. These are now the scenes which you return to in your daydreams and return to each year that you visit.

How can you find home when it is so far away, when you left so long ago?

Now, in your room, the early morning light of day glints off the crystals on your chandelier, the roses printed on the wall falling down upon you. And on those pages, in that book of Oxford prints that you have in your hand you see those spires, those streets. You turn the streets in the book, and then in your life. You think of the picturesque forms that they captured so well onto that front cover. Continue by looking at the stained-glass windows on that front cover; continue by exploring the niches, by perusing the gardens. Feel the weight of the pages of history and art and creation in your hands. Let the glint of the title catch your eye: *Oxford*. Let yourself flip through the heavy pages, captivated by the thin lines of buildings painstakingly and lovingly drawn onto paper years ago, printed into your book of your favorite place in the world, your home. You plan for the next time you will return to that place, the next time you will trod on those wobbly, yet trusted, cobblestones. You gently place the book back down onto the light-streaked surface of your bedside table. And the light catches on the cover of the very book you carried with you on that plane which hurtled much too quickly through the sky taking you away from your home all too soon.

Wish that you are in Oxford in that other room or maybe that other one too, the ones where you stared out at stone walls overtaken by moss, softened by years of rain and foggy weather. The rooms just a step away from the back alleys, just a step away from the city, the city that you love so. The city that houses the room through which you may look out onto the rooftops. Oh, those rooftops. The skyline is a mess of spires and chimneys — dotting the skies and dancing, reaching, spiraling towards the horizon. There are nooks and crannies and libraries tucked behind every main street. The back-alleys twist and turn and float you across town, between churches and colleges, bookshops and cafes. They are safe, cobblestoned paths that carved their way through the city centuries ago and have carved their way into your heart. Now look. As the sun sets, if you are to look out your window, if you are to look outside your third story window, the sky is nothing but a smattering of spires — black silhouettes against a dusky blue backdrop. Every time you leave you want to return to that skyline, to those rooms, to those streets.

Magpie Lane — a miscellaneous curving alley, your favorite — plays in your mind, the mix of shiny, glass covered dorms, cobblestone streets and stone walls so old they speak of the centuries before. There is always a stray bicycle hanging onto the old black lacquered lamp that gently illuminates the road late into the night. On the quiet end of Magpie Lane, away from High Street, the steeple of Merton College Chapel rises above the trees and the ornate black gates. On Sundays before the sun has made its way above the city's walls you will hear the light notes of the choir floating into the air, spreading through the city. The chapel's multiple opaque glass panels and buttery spires jutt to the sky, covered in intricately carved geometric patterns, giving it a boxy, yet gentle shape. And on those streets below the Chapel's highest spire, you can hear the scholars' and the dons' and your friends' laughter echoing out of every college and garden and pub in the city. You see the wood in the pubs yawning and fluctuating under every voice, the beams bouncing up and down as people bustle around in the glowing light of the candles and

televisions.

Tucked behind those TVs, you see the winding stairs that go up to the second story where you are sitting late at night with your old family friends under beams laid into place over three centuries ago. You can hear yourself saying to your childhood friend Thomas, “I just found out that negative energy exists and I’m not exactly excited to learn about that when we get back from break.” But then you can also see as the head of your old friend Mr. Dalton turns at the end of the table, grinning, telling you that he’s afraid it’s his fault you will have to learn about negative energy. His voice carrying across the mess of napkins, pizza crusts, saltshakers as he tells you that his team stumbled across the concept of negative energy in their research years ago: “It was just how the math turned out.” And in that moment you feel yourself wanting to learn more about this intricate, profound, formidable idea that Thomas’s father just happened across one day. In the most unusual of places in Oxford you will fall, and have fallen, onto unknowable truths, confusing discoveries, insane facts. You have tripped over philosophers’ musings, writers’ dissertations, poets’ scribbles. You have become fascinated with the subjects that once simply baffled and deterred you. You are inspired by the booky walls and the debate halls, by the questions answered and unanswered, by the knowledge that pours from every crevice in the hundreds of years old walls of the city.

In that city, you can see you and your mother dancing around the apple orchard hidden away out back — your very own secret garden — where the cat named Simba would meet you. The tabby of whom you used to say, “Simba is my cat but someone else owns him.” Behind Simba, you can still see your hands drawn out in a line, one to the sky and one to the ground, like an airplane, you are running in circles around the fallen red apples and coffee-colored leaves. It is a maze of orchards hidden so far behind the streets that you may only find it if you fall through the manicured, lime green bushes at just the right place on the path.

You now recall the last time you had to leave and that specific kind of sadness. A sadness that you closed into your closet as you yanked out clothes, pushed into your suitcase the night before, threw into the trash bin as you cleaned your room. A sadness that had reawakened with you as you sprang out of bed that morning late for the glaring silver bus that would take you down the monotonous grey highway that would transport you to the menacing airport that would take you on an oversized plane that would deliver over a vast sea — all the way back home to Missouri. But home — home had now come to be in that sun-kissed room, in that open quad, in that ancient town. And as your friend hurriedly helped you tow your suitcases towards the courtyard all you could hear was yourself saying just the night before, “No, I won’t say goodbye to you now. Later.” You uttered those words as you skipped through the quad alongside Natalia on your way back from the last dance, from the garden, from the group that had randomly assembled in a mess of tears and hugs and giggles and laughter to celebrate, to admire, to reminisce, to say goodbye. And back in that very same quad you sobbed as you realized that you had missed Natalia’s bus by a few minutes. You realized that you would no longer awake every morning to the old stone wall outside your window covered by moss and memories. You realized that you would no longer pass the days and nights running into your friends — your family — in between classes and dinner and impromptu excursions.

You would miss making friends in the dining room whose arched ceilings watched over you as you debated and discussed and laughed. You would miss gliding up and down the covered market in search of the cheesemonger. You would miss the streets and the buildings and the libraries which had taken you in on foggy mornings. You would miss that sense of weightlessness, of floating, that you always felt in Oxford — not that drifting of an unmoored ship but that sense that you were free.

And as you boarded that plane, the intense sadness which you had stuffed into your dark black suitcase the night before emerged — perched just above you in the overhead compartment, looming. You watched as the dark of the cabin was sliced apart by stray rays of light jutting from the slightly cracked open window next to you. You opened the window, light rushing in. An entire eight-hour flight to grapple with the fact that you would never be with those wonderful, beautiful people all together, all in one place, all at one time, ever again. It hurt.

But then, you also remembered that you would never forget them, they would never forget you. You had not said goodbye but rather “see you soon,” so then it was not the end. You would live in their memory until next time, preserved, untouched, happy, blissful, joyous, laughing as the summer sun glinted off your hair. And they would live in your own memory the very same way. They will live tucked away in the back of your head for rainy days and reflective moments. And that — that is all you could ever ask for. And you know that all of those memories — the ones that flood back to you every time you leave on that plane, the same ones flooding back to you at this very moment as you stare at the book on your bedside table— are home.

And every time you leave you must remember that you will return soon, sooner than you expect. Yes, of course, that plane will be waiting like clockwork for you at the A4 gate in a year’s time but you may also travel to your own little piece of Oxford much sooner. You may traverse those boulevards and canals and pastures in your mind. You may walk the crisp floors of the museums, the faded wood of the libraries, the hard stone of the streets. You are allowed to pet the strawberry orange fur of Simba, buy violet parrot tulips out of the covered market, spontaneously purchase a stack of books so high they rise above your head as you carry them to the register.

So, even though you have left, you feel Oxford with you still. The city which inspires thought, the city in which the names of the Greats dot every corridor, every nook and cranny. You can still hear loudly in your mind the absolute silence of the library, the creek of every stair in the city, the rain bouncing off windows, the bells ringing at Tom Tower, the hum of the milk truck floating down your street. You can still smell the grass and the stone and the rain in the sky before it has even fallen. Wafting up from the pristine white albas in your hand, you smell the garden and out of the corner of your eye can still see the young boy who picked you a bouquet of flowers: “What a proper English gentleman,” his parents say. The taste of tea and strawberries hang in your mouth. The slippery smooth pathway of the churchyard under your feet and the rough splintered oars in your hand guide you forward. The waxy repellent of your well worn raincoat sticks to your hands still. And you can practically reach out and grab those forest green raincoats and those matte blue welly boots that occupy the front hall for rainy days.

Though it has been almost a year since you last left, you feel the place where you had your first steps, made your first friends, went to your first museum, fell in love with art, with architecture. The place that you return to, long for, the place that has inspired you to become who you are, who you will be. You aspire to be — you will become — an architect: you will create buildings that evoke the same feelings in others that they evoked in you when you rolled down those avenues so many years ago, when you stroll down those same avenues now.

Though you are not there you still feel the impact that the city had on you, the impact of every single one of those memories and moments. You can still sense the joy of running from garden to garden, museum to museum with your mother, finding your love of learning and exploration. You can still feel the fog on the streets and the towering walls of libraries and colleges cloaking you as you walk, finding yourself completely enamored with architecture, finding your passion. You can sense the carpeted floors of Blackwell’s under your feet as you rush up and down stairs, saunter down aisles, wander up and down shelves, finding your fascination with history and storytelling and knowledge and learning and questioning. You think of your friends old and new from Oxford; those days you spent running around the city during Summer with new faces trying to find new places, those nights you passed at dinners at familiar tables with childhood friends trying to regain lost time, when really all along you were finding belonging. You found belonging in Oxford. You found people who made you smile on cloudy days, who provoked thought, who made you laugh until you stopped breathing and were sure you were going to keel over. Friends who, even though they live thousands of miles away, are immediately home whenever you hear their voice through the phone. They know you. Really know you for the way you obsess over every detail in your art until your pencil runs out of lead, for the way you leave a trail of sticky notes behind you, for the way you are always quick to put down your phone and pick up a conversation, for the way you practically skip when you hear that it’s going to rain, for the way that you walked up to them on that first day to introduce yourself, for the way that you are constantly poking fun at life trying to get a laugh out of anyone and everyone, for the way that you always talk and question and wonder, for the way you are the first to volunteer for public speaking and for the way that you get up at the crack of dawn and somehow convince them to go on a run with you.

In the rose dappled light of your bedroom, you hear the echoes of the music dancing through the quad and the giggles of your friends hanging out of the ancient, misty, stained glass windows, waving at you to come up the crooked, wooden stairs, imprinted by the footsteps that have fallen before. You can hear the echoes of your own awe that you felt staring at Shelley’s marble memorial, a beautifully tragic sculpture of a devastatingly brilliant life. The echoes carry through and under the cloisters, across and over the Ocean. And, just as you did when you got off that plane not so long ago, you carry that noise with you — the noise of your home — as you walk forward out into the hallway, down the stairs, out of your house and into the street. Carrying with you the place that shaped you, inspired you, loved you, you go out to face the world and give back to it what you yourself have been given.

And as you step onto that street outside of your house in Missouri, the sandy tones of the hard, unforgiving concrete morph into the grey, smooth cobblestones of Oxford. Below your feet, rain pools in between the cracks in the road. You look up and the towering trees are twisting and twirling, morphing into the buttery limestone of the High Street buildings. Above you, just past High Street, you see the sweeping circle of the Radcliffe Camera moving towards you, welcoming you home.

MYERS, KATHRYN**Kathryn Myers**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: David H Hickman High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Poetry

Death Rattle

Death rattle on the rise
Blue moonlight fights the clouds
Folding closed your weathered eyes
Skin as dry as coffee grounds

Death fills the tree bark
Scraped knees on the roots
Reeking through the dark
are his rotting, muddy boots

Death of the highest order
The willing spirit quickly fades
Eating at your heart's raw border
You won't forget his age

Gasps of air in harmony
The good man never cries
Teeth coated with ivory
Death rattle never dies

NALBANDIAN, MIRANOUSH**Miranoush Nalbandian**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway West High School, Ballwin, MO

Educator: Debra Klevens

Category: Critical Essay

Debunking Critical Race Theory

Any St. Louisan who has been paying even a meager amount of attention to local news this past year is familiar with many ignorant residents' new education buzzword. Last year around this time, it was the perceived threat of their children going to school online.

Like clockwork, however, when one issue (partially) sinks back under the misguided radar of so-called "concerned parents," another one is located front and center. This year, it's the widely misinterpreted social practice of critical race theory.

Deemed "propaganda" and an "evil political ideology," by local Rockwood School District parents, critical race theory has become the next over-attacked enemy of ignorant, and frankly racist, people. They believe it's an attack on them personally, when it's actually a decades-old and ever-evolving study of institutionalized racism in America. In reality, critical race theory is not something to be afraid of, but instead a tool we should embrace to better understand the history and actuality of our nation.

As sociologist Rashawn Ray writes for Brookings, "Simply put, critical race theory states that U.S. social institutions (e.g., the criminal justice system, education system, labor market, housing market and healthcare system) are laced with racism embedded in laws, regulations, rules and procedures that lead to differential outcomes by race."

Almost too predictably, those who fear race-related education sank their teeth into critical race theory, constructing a false narrative of the theory, which they then proceeded to rip apart. The theory studies U.S. society through a critical, racial lens—a nightmare-inducing feat for those who wish to keep their bubble of savioristic, white America intact.

One parent in particular, who also attended the infamous Rockwood School District parent public forum regarding critical race theory in schools, puts into words perfectly the ideology of those who oppose critical race theory: "just because I don't want critical race theory taught to my children at school doesn't make me a racist, damnit." Sorry to burst your bubble, but that's exactly what it means, and here's why.

The history of Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory first came into thought in the late 1970s, specifically as a legal theory. It was developed by many scholars, including Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Cheryl Harris, Richard Delgado, Patricia Williams, Gloria Ladson-Billings and Tara Yosso.

Janel George of the American Bar Association defines critical race theory quite clearly: "[Critical race theory] critiques how the social construction of race and institutionalized racism perpetuate a racial caste system that relegates people of color to the bottom tiers. CRT also recognizes that race intersects with other identities, including sexuality, gender identity, and others. CRT recognizes that racism is not a bygone relic of the past. Instead, it acknowledges that the legacy of slavery, segregation, and the imposition of second-class citizenship on Black Americans and other people of color continue to permeate the social fabric of this nation."

Critical race theory also studies the effects of popular media and mistakenly-named "neutral" opinions, as well as pointing out that true neutrality does not exist in a legal system that is complicit in upholding racism.

Though critical race theory began in the legal field, it did not remain there long. In the 1980s and 1990s, the theory grew quickly and spread to other fields of study. Critical race theory has also grown beyond examining the white/Black experience of racism, expanding into LatCrit, TribalCrit, and AsianCRT, all of which seek to study a certain form of racial oppression.

To those with a comprehensive understanding of the history of this country, the tenets of critical race theory are far from mind-blowing. Admitting that racism still persists in the U.S. is not a difficult task, nor should it be with the vast evidence that people of color, specifically Black Americans, still grapple with the extensive effects of a society that refuses to even acknowledge, much less address, its own prejudice. Critical race theory simply sheds light on this

fact, and aims to study its depth, causes, effects and complexities within American institutions.

At its core, critical race theory seeks to study the truth of racism in America: in the law, in education, in the past, in the present and in the future. And to racist people, and they should be called what they are, the idea of having this truth studied in schools is truly terrifying.

Critical Race Theory in the education system

A critical race theory critique of the education system also includes a few key concepts, which are specific to schooling and encompass the previous tenets of a general critical race theory study:

- Curriculum is white-dominated
- School discipline predominantly targets students of color, and often paints narrow depictions of their experiences
- School funding inequity persists
- Education is still racially segregated

In acknowledging these points, critical race theory also observes how the law fails in recognizing them and enacting change.

One of the clearest examples of the failure of the American legal system to ensure racial equality comes from the well-known court case *Brown v. Board of Education*. Often displayed as an instance of great progress for the U.S. on the basis of race and education, the Supreme Court and lower levels of authority took practically no steps towards making the decision to desegregate schools effective.

After the Supreme Court unanimously decided that “separate but equal educational facilities for racial minorities is inherently unequal violating the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment,” the law was nevertheless complicit in maintaining segregation in schools by failing to outline specific criteria for integrating education.

In addition, the U.S. had little motivation to desegregate education besides the need to protect its international image. Segregation was a quite flagrant example of America violating its own ideals of freedom for all, so even the decision to desegregate schools was made primarily on the basis that it benefitted white Americans by restoring their credibility in the international community.

Regardless of the motivation, the execution following *Brown v. Board of Education* was extremely unsuccessful. It took years of legal battles after the decision to eventually have specific measures to uproot segregation, allowing many schools to circumvent the decision for a long time. In addition, the decision failed to account for demographic and social factors, like white flight and redlining, which perpetuate segregation in schools year after year. St. Louis is a heavily segregated city, and our schools reflect that.

Finally, *Brown v. Board of Education*’s faulty execution caused the loss of Black faculty. When the case was decided, Black teachers and administrators lost jobs advocating for integration, even when racial balance was achieved among the student population.

The goal of Critical Race Theory is to examine why this happened, and point out that the law was complicit in upholding a long history of segregation in schools. If the Supreme Court had clearly outlined in their decision measures to ensure that education was integrated properly, or even if the government had tried to enforce it, we wouldn’t have the same issues we have today. Again, this is the basis of what critical race theory aims to analyze: how our history and our laws have created the racist society we have today, and what we can do to fix it.

The plight of the West County parent

Unfortunately, critical race theory still can be applied to many events within the education sphere in America’s current climate. Brittany Hogan, Rockwood School District’s former director of diversity and inclusion, was forced out of her job due to the same lies issued by the district’s concerned parents at the meetings in which they compared critical race theory to “child abuse.”

Hogan received hate message after hate message on social media and in emails, so much so that she was mentally and physically drained.

“I got accused of being racist against white people,” Hogan said in an interview with Slate. “I got accused of being divisive, of basically not being a good person, not doing good things for children, because we’re talking about race and talking about race is racist essentially.”

Parents were upset with Rockwood’s decision to remove an American flag featuring the Thin Blue Line from baseball uniforms, as well as the inclusion of books like *Stamped*, in Rockwood’s curriculum. Rockwood was all too quick to defend themselves, stating they are simply, “committed to providing an equitable, welcoming and safe learning environment for all students,” a feat entirely possible while also teaching critical race theory, which they do not. The situation snowballed when a memo was found instructing teachers not to reveal curriculum directly to parents and to avoid certain words like “privilege” and “activist,” which the author thought might particularly enrage

parents.

Well, Rockwood parents, you certainly proved them wrong, didn't you?

As per their typical behavior, concerned parents went into a frenzy, threatening Hogan's job time and time again. Most worryingly, after the Rockwood superintendent announced that the baseball uniforms could not feature the Thin Blue Line flag, "security had to be put outside the homes of [Hogan] and Dr. Terry Harris, the two highest-ranking Black people in Rockwood, because of the things that were being said on social media."

As in the aftermath of Board v. Brown, when critical race theory was used to examine the extermination of Black educators through many means, history repeated itself. Eventually, Hogan resigned.

The failures of the law to effectively tackle racism are as ever-prevalent today as they were 70+ years ago when Brown v. Board of Education was decided. This is what critical race theory teaches first and foremost, that the law is complicit in upholding racism, and education is a primary example. As Black people are continually targeted, blamed, harassed and forced to quit their jobs, parents' fears over teaching critical race theory and all its heavily diluted forms only further illustrate its necessity.

Unfortunately, Rockwood isn't the only West County district overrun by racist rhetoric. In Parkway, concerned parents have voiced their grievances over the seemingly rampant critical race theory lessons being taught in schools, even calling for the resignation of Superintendent Keith Marty with an online petition.

One commenter, Fred Carter stated that district educators are "training teachers... critical race theory, without actually calling it that," and that an elementary school's principal believes that "the white children and the teachers are all racist, white supremacists and white privileged."

Another, Brad Neece, added that "Critical race theory & all of its variants are defacto TEACHING racism."

Well, despite the grammar errors, that last one isn't actually too far off. Critical race theory teaches what racism is, and how it's enacted by the systems we live under. This shouldn't be something to run from, or something to threaten people to resign over. Not to mention that Parkway has never taught critical race theory in the first place, even in any sort of disguised manner.

Still, despite this fact, parents and other outraged individuals have been harassing Parkway educators. They might be voicing their opinions on the matter, but they really only prove why critical race theory, or any form of education on racism, is important. The ignorance that fosters insecure people to take such actions against anyone remotely related to education about racism in general could be eradicated with such education. The irony lives on.

Even among students, racist acts remain rampant. Parkway high schools have struggled with racist incidents for years, most infamously with writings of slurs and racial messages around schools.

We can clearly see the effect of failing to properly educate students about racism: our children become ignorant, and eventually hateful. "Working to help students understand the views, values and cultures of others," or encouraging parents to "take time to discuss with your children the topic of race and racism in our country and region," as Marty suggested in a Sept. 23 email, is simply not enough when parents refuse to acknowledge that racism even exists. Schools must take an active stance in educating about race, and they must stop shying away so quickly from anything related to critical race theory over fears from parent retribution.

A national threat

St. Louis isn't the only place grappling with criticism over critical race theory. Currently, across the U.S., 28 states have introduced or will introduce bans on education about race-related topics.

In Texas, House Bill 3979 banned the education of critical race theory in schools starting Sept. 1, even though critical race theory isn't taught in primary and secondary education. Though it's important to note, even if it was, that doesn't mean banning critical race theory is reasonable.

"Making laws outlawing critical race theory confirms the point that racism is embedded in the law," sociologist Victor Ray said in Brookings. In other words, by banning critical race theory, lawmakers are simply demonstrating why it is necessary in the first place, in addition to ignoring that critical race theory isn't even being taught in the vast majority of schools.

Five states in total have managed to pass legislation banning teachers from teaching about racial equity in general. In Louisiana, Rep. Ray Garofalo introduced such blatantly-racist legislation which would ban K-12 schools from teaching "certain topics related to race."

"To cut out half, almost all, of America's history will put Black kids at a disadvantage. If we don't know our history, how can we come up with our own point of view? How can we grow?" student Re'Kal Hooker said to NBC News. Hooker attends the Living School in New Orleans, La.

The nation's determination to root out critical race theory, or any education that tackles racism in general, only goes to show why it's so important. critical race theory is not something to be afraid of, and it's not something to ban. Even our local school districts like Rockwood have been complicit in the fear, reassuring worried parents they certainly do not teach critical race theory. Though they say they "are committed to providing an equitable, welcoming and safe learning environment for all students," this rhetoric only reinforces the idea there is something wrong with

teaching critical race theory.

“The banning of CRT makes it seem like people of color’s identities aren’t worthy enough of being shared or talked about. It keeps the white narrative at the forefront of our education system,” Ekene Okolo, a student at Westview High School in California, said.

Experts have said it time and time again: critical race theory is not something to fear. When white people are frightened of confronting the fact that racism still persists, and we have something to do with it, then we will continue to live in an age of fear, where banning materials from being taught is not only acceptable, but frequent.

As Rashawn Ray writes for Brookings, “Scholars and activists who discuss CRT are not arguing that white people living now are to blame for what people did in the past. They are saying that white people living now have a moral responsibility to do something about how racism still impacts all of our lives today.”

The bottom line is, critical race theory is not an evil ideology or a ploy for divisiveness. Racism is the divisive force. This theory simply aims to address why these divisions occurred, who perpetuates them and how racism still harms people today. Whether it be studied in the legal field, or introduced to children beginning to grasp racism embedded in the U.S., critical race theory is not a weapon. Rather, it is an essential tool all of us can use to gain a better understanding of our world.

NASEEM, JORDAN**Jordan Naseem**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Discovery Middle School, Liberty, MO

Educator: Carrie Sparks

Category: Novel Writing

The Ring**Brief summary:**

When the sun must set And the tides must rise There's a fleeting magic That takes to the skies The magic in a bottle Will grant the answer To power lost, power found To every life, small and profound By the the time the lavender moon rises And the power falls away The skies turn to ashes The world coated in gray Windspeaker, Facechanger, Ringmaster The three with limited power And yet, unlimited heart Will forever change the fate Of our world and all that comes after Terzenalia Olimacky lives in a world ruled by six magical goddesses, who are better known as the Creators, each possessing a different elemental magic. Once children turn 16, their hearts, souls and minds are examined by the Creators to determine whether or not they are considered one of the Worthy. As of the current moment, though, no-one has received magic for two years. Terzenalia doesn't expect to be chosen, as most of her hope left with her late mother. However, when she is determined to be Worthy, and her best friend Soudfix isn't, their friendship snaps. Soudfix is becoming a threat to the peaceful world of Zennia, and Terzenalia, her sister and a newly-found friend seem to be the only ones capable to stop her. The fate of the planet's welfare lies heavily on their shoulders.

Excerpt:

Chapter 3

The ceremony

"The day is upon me. I was powerless to stop it's arrival. It's the day of the Ceremony of the Worthy. Time to endure my sister's furious makeover." I speak to myself in my mirror. I sigh. I don't want to let anyone down. I don't want to let myself down, because something inside of me really wants to be a Worthy. But, I know better than to get my hopes up. I've been let down before.

¶

When I was three, and Kelgizfi was five, our mother told us that hope was the key to your wishes coming true. Shortly after, she fell ill. I hoped with all my might and prayed to the Creators every night. Every day she got a little better until Omolu, her doctor, said she was fully cured. But Omolu was wrong. Two days later, my mother fell ill again. It was worse than ever before, so I prayed and hoped again. My efforts were in vain. Before she died, she sang Kel and I a song:

Gather water, sand and sky
 And head past the vast horizon
 There's a large, all-knowing eye
 That eye will tell what you want to know
 And then it will say goodbye
 Venture forth and seek out the river
 Where the clouds touch the sand
 Gather hair from the dead, hair from the live and hair from the inbetween
 Now the journey into the center
 Of a fire is what you shall face
 But fear not!
 You shall not be touched so long as you keep your courage

When you thought the journey was through
 There's something there to burden you
 Keep your wits and your faith
 And journey ahead with your companions
 Yes, bad could always befall us
 But good will always prevail
 For if you're strong at heart
 You'll always find your way

Mother had sung this to us before, but it really stuck with me that day. Then, right before she died, she gave each of us one of her hairs.

"It will aid you," she said. "All things come to us for a reason. Songs, people, stories, they all come, and with reason. Perhaps not the best logic is behind each one, but explanation is explanation. I wish to help you before I depart from this world. Keep these, for they will come in handy someday. I just know it." And then she was gone. We have each kept them in a little bottle. It's our little treasure from her. My hoping didn't work. I had my expectations way too high. I haven't done it since.

□

Later that evening, Dad, Kel and I walked over to Yche. We live right on the outskirts of the city, and walking from home to the Central is a breeze. The Central is the place where the Worthy are chosen. It's not as grand as you think. The area is pretty dusty, and the stage we stand on isn't really a stage. It's more like a slightly raised wooden platform. I mean, it's only used once a year, so it makes sense that it's not that impressive or well taken care of.

□

Kelgizfi had me all dressed up from head to toe. She also made Dad put on a suit and tie. The air is chilly, but that didn't stop her from making us both look fabulous. I had on my star dress with the bun we had decided on. She tried to get me to wear heels, but she couldn't push me that far. Or at least, I didn't want to be pushed that far. Surely my willpower is strong enough, right? No. No, unfortunately it isn't. I walked out of the house wearing an ankle-length, short-sleeved dress, my lavender-brown hair in an elegant bun, my feet stuffed into heels about four inches tall and with Qurstar trotting at my heels. Dad said that I could bring her because she made me feel more comfortable in my own skin.

I see someone in the distance. Walking closer is my friend, Soudfix, and her family.

"Soudfix!" I holler out. "Hey, Soudfix!"

"Terz!" I hear her voice call back to me. My name, Terzenalia, is really long, so people usually just call me Terz. "Terz! It's good to see you!" We run towards each other. Well, she runs while I trip and fall about half way. "Oh, my," She giggles. "Being clumsy again?"

"No, Kel made me wear them," I say, lifting myself up off the ground and brush off my dress. This dust is really starting to get to me.

"Wear what?"

"These wretched high heels." I mumble, lifting my skirt slightly so that she could get a better look at what should be classified as a torture device.

"Oh, I got to wear tennis shoes," she says, pointing at her own feet. She too is wearing a dress, but the skirt of it isn't as long; it only goes just beyond the knees, and it's really puffy. Soudfix is quite the beauty queen. Drama might as well be her middle name. My sister grabs my elbow, waves to Soudfix, and pulls me to the Central. An old lady stands right in front of the stage. It's a lot more crowded than I thought. *So many people!* I panic-think to myself. I hoist myself onto the stage and stand there, looking at all of the different faces. *Woah. That's way too many people staring and talking at the same time. Too much noise and too many people.* I try to keep my blood pressure from shooting through the roof. I take stock of the audience to calm my nerves. As I look around I notice something. *There's got to be people from all over the planet of Zennidhere,* I think with awe. There are people with dark skin, light skin, little boys who look psyched out of their minds, mothers who look overcome with worry. My father is out there, too, along with Kel. We lock eyes, and she gives me a small thumbs up. I can't help but notice that my dad seems uninterested.

□

"Ladies and gentlemen, Worthy and not! We gather here today for the Judgement of our new generation." The little old lady had a weak voice, but it seemed to pan over the entire Central. There was a round of applause. "Will all of our potential Worthies please step onto the stage." I join the line of 16 year olds stretching across it. The lady then reaches out her right hand and closes her eyes. A faint purple glow makes a small circle on her palm. Out of the gently setting sky, a very round, smooth, ever-so-slightly-illuminated wooden bowl came swooping out of nowhere and landed on a small pedestal that stood before her. She began to call out names.

“Arimina Himilzilaria, Unworthy,” The girl who appeared to be Arimina stepped off the stage in tears. “Hio Themisia, Unworthy.” The boy merely shrugs and walks off. We make brief eye contact, then he breaks it. I shake it off. “Hyradraim Amitrure, Unworthy.” This girl seems to have no reaction at all. I know I will be standing here for a while, because I haven’t had that many Worthyies in my family. Then I hear a familiar name. “Soudfix Jamlenia. Unworthy.”

¶

I can see the old woman’s words pierce her heart like an ice shard. This has hurt her deeply. I can’t do anything to help her, though. Not right now. Tears are puddled in her eyes and I can see her frustration. She looks like someone threatened to murder her family and then punched her in the face. Pain coils like tendrils over her facial features. I want to help her but my body won’t let me move. I stay rooted to the spot. I zone out, my only thoughts are about my friend. *How can I help her? I guess I could make her some food. She likes my cooking.* My mind works so furiously to come up with ways to help that I almost missed my name being called. “Terzenalia Olimacky,” I’m the only one left onstage. For the third year in a row, it seems no one will be a Worthy. “Terzenalia Olimacky, Worthy.”

¶

I can hardly believe my ears. My heart begins to pound and my head spins. *Worthy.* I shake myself. That can’t have been right. What have I done to receive this. *If not Soudfix, then why me?* I must have heard it wrong. Maybe she declared me an Unworthy. Yeah, that’s it. I heard it wrong. Heart still threatening to beat from my chest, I begin to walk off stage to console my friend. *The viper of despair has bitten, and now it’s venom courses through their veins.* The old Zennien proverb comes to me immediately. “Where are you going, Ms. Olimacky?” The old voice calls out to me. It’s filled with questions.

“I’m going offstage to join the others, why?”

“But you are a Worthy, Ms. Oli-”

“Please, just call me Terz,” I say, cutting her off. The world gains a slight tilt. Trying not to hyperventilate, I resume slowly, “And did you say that I’m a Worthy?”

“Yes, Ms. Olimacky.” I bite my lip. *Oh Creators. Please tell me this is a dream.* The most coveted power in the world, and I’ll be the only one to receive it for the first time in *two years.* The most coveted power, and I don’t know if I am *truly* worthy of receiving it. “Come back up, you must receive your power.” She motions for me. I pause, hesitant. But then I look at my poor friend. Soudfix has been waiting for this moment since she learned how to want. *If for no other reason, do it for her!* I take a deeper breath than I thought possible and begin my walk slowly to the stage. “For the first time in two years, we have our first Worthy!” There are shouts and cheers. The old lady points her walking stick to the skies and cries

O great Creators!

This one has surpassed your judgement!

As you have done for others, bless this young lady each with a fraction of your power!

Grant her power!

A bolt of lightning came down from the clouds and struck me. I scream. It’s hurting all of me, but I can feel power spreading within me. I am still bathed in light, and it occurs to me that perhaps no one can hear or see me. Just as a test, I shout:

“I THINK THAT THIS IS ACTUAL LIGHTNING AND IT HURTS! GET ME OUT OF THIS DEATH TRAP!” No response, but I can hear people whispering quietly about how amazing this must feel. Yep, they definitely can’t hear me, or see the agonizing look on my face.

“Greetings, my child,” A voice calls out to me. It sounds like...

“Mom?” I call out. My cylinder of light expands and I find I have room to walk around. Also, I am no longer in agonizing pain.

“Zeny,” Only my mom called me Zeny. It must be her. “I need to tell you something.”

“Okay, what is it?”

“The rest of the song I sang to you and Kel as kids. It goes like this:

Gather water, sand and sky

And head past the vast horizon

There’s a large, all-knowing eye

That eye will tell what you want to know

And then it will say goodbye

Venture forth and seek out the river

Where the clouds touch the sand

Gather hair from the dead, hair from the live and hair from the inbetween

It will send you to where you need to be

Now the journey into the center
 Of a fire is what you shall face
 But fear not!
 You shall not be touched so long as you keep your courage
 When you thought the journey was through
 There's something there to burden you
 Keep your wits and your faith
 And journey ahead with your companions
 If you ride on a passing wind
 That tells you 'Come on, let's go'
 Use your power and follow
 You'll end up where you need to be
 Now go forth and face the evil
 But the evil was once a friend
 It is harder to fight
 Someone who was right
 And now someone who is wrong
 Yes, bad could always befall us
 But good will always prevail
 For if you're strong at heart
 You'll always find your way...

Her voice slowly dies away, but her words seem to stick to my brain. The beam light started to fade away, joining me back into the world. I see something...no, someone. Someone is trying to break through the beam to get in, and they keep becoming more clear as it fades. No. No way. It can't be.

"Soudfix?"

Chapter 4

Welp, we've got to do something about this, don't we

"Soudfix? What are you doing?" Was my best friend just trying to break through the power-charged beam? Why would she do that? The crowd turns to look at the ongoing scene, anxious for some sort of exciting drama. I slip from the platform (which groans in protest at my doing so) and trot to meet her.

"It's not fair!" She looks me dead in the eye, tears flowing down her face. Her ebony black hair is tussled, and her perfectly done make-up is streaming down her face in streaks of black and maroon.

"What's not fair?"

"I was supposed to get the power! It was supposed to be *MINE!*" I don't know how to help my friend. I move forward to comfort her. "NO! Stay AWAY!" She's screaming at me. I take a step back. She's never done this to me before. "You think you're all high and mighty with your power! You're better without it!"

"High and-," I'm at a loss for words. "What are you saying, Soudfi-"

"Do not," she's breathing heavily now. "Do not call me Soudfix."

"What do you prefer I call you then?"

"Lady Cigam!"

"You do know that's just the word 'magic' spelled backward-"

"BE. QUIET!" A moment of silence goes by. "Congrats. You just lost a friend." She cries and runs away. My cheeks flush with embarrassment as the crowd gasps. I try my best to ignore them; I have other matters to deal with at the moment.

"SOUDFIX!" I shout as I follow her. "SOUDFIX!" I sprint to catch up to her. What is wrong with my best friend? I chase her through the city of Yche, trying not to hurt anybody as I pass through the crowded shopping district. I find her stopped at a clearing by the beach. She's spaced off, seemingly lost in thought with a tight-lipped scowl fixed on her face. "Sou-I mean, Lady Cigam," I puff. I'm still tired from sprinting through the town. It feels weird to address my best friend that way. She's always been Soudfix to me, not Lady Cigam. Which, might I add, is a pretty sad name. "Why are you doing this?" Her head whips around, breaking her concentration.

"Why won't you leave me alone?"

"You're in a mood," I mumble.

“What was that?!”

“Uh, nothing,” I say. “So, what are you doing?”

“Trying to get rid of you.” Her words cut me even deeper. “The ‘Worthies’ are just weaklings that those Creators took pity on.”

“What are you going on about?”

“Same goes for you. You are a weakling unworthy of your new power.”

I feel tears welling up in my eyes, but I blink them back.

“I. Am. Not. A. WEAKLING!” Piping-hot rage boils beneath my skin. Her words hurt like a punch to the face.

“You just keep telling yourself that.” She’s laughing in a way that hurts me. I reach out my palm, and feel a heat welling up inside of me. A great rush of power I’ve never felt. Is this my magic? It wants out. I don’t want to let it out. It seems out of control. It could hurt her. But it’s moving me on my own, like I’m a puppet. No. I don’t want to! I can’t resist anymore. It’s too strong, burning every part of my body. I scream as all of the heat and pressure leaks out of me. I’m powerless to stop it as my feet lift off the ground and even more power floods from me. I look around me and find that there are rings of the elements encircling me. I look down to see Soudfix staring at the rings, her eyes filled with lust and desire for my power. “This is exactly what I thought. You ‘Worthies’ are threatening our peaceful way of life.”

“Please,” I manage to squeak. “Don’t do this. Don’t say things like that!”

“Thanks for the idea! Since you appear to be stuck, just hang there while *I* go spread the news.”

“What news?” My voice is weak. I’m fighting to stay conscious.

“The news that the new ‘Worthy’ can’t control her magic, and that the ‘Worthies’ are more like the ‘Worthless’!” She lets out her unfamiliar laugh again. It hurts me even more. She runs off, leaving me with my emotions and the element rings. Suddenly, they collapse in on me. My body feels like it’s being blown up from the inside. I let out another scream and fall back down onto the sand. The world goes black.

NEVINS, ADELINE**Adeline Nevins**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Maplewood-Richmond Heights High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Allison Kester, Derek Rowley

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Smell of Death

You might've listened as someone described the smell of a dead possum on a movie you were watching, or maybe you've been to an old person's home and walked in and thought to yourself, "it smells like death in here". None of these things prepare you for the real experience. Death doesn't smell like old people. Death doesn't even smell like that squirrel on the side of the road you found last Tuesday, smushed almost to a point where you had to guess it was even a squirrel. You might think death smells pungent, but in reality, it smells sour, almost sticky. It smells like what you know has to be bodily fluids but you can't pinpoint which ones. I know this because my mom smells like death. She smells normal in the beginning of my memories, reminding me of a L'Oreal face cream she used to use, sweet and floral. She dances around, laughing at her beautiful baldness, letting me put all of my best princess stickers on her scalp. Her giggle as my dad tickles her on her good days, her stillness on the bad. The sound of her voice came as a surprise to me on some school days in elementary, sweet and loving, when she volunteered to help out even in the midst of her own body's epidemic. She knew when her meds kicked in she wouldn't be able to stay awake, so she planned her time with us around it. The sun was still rising on an October morning when I learned what 'playing hooky' was to get donuts instead of reading with the rest of the class. She loved harder than anyone I've ever met, especially for having such little energy, she was full of life.

She was the kind of person that would write you a letter after a big fight. We would argue about little things, as normal families do, and we would fight. I would be sent to my room. She would think on it for a while, and then get to work. About an hour or two later, every single time, she would never fail to slide a letter under my door. She filled them with sweet "I love you"s and pictures of us over the years, showing only love. She would remind me that we were a family, and that families do fight, but they love each other no matter what.

I would typically follow up this letter with a less-intense 'walk of shame' to her room, cuddle up next to her, and apologize. We would lay in bed for hours, well up past my bed-time, and talk about everything. She was my person, my rock. She was the holder of all my secrets, and now will be for the end of time. We would talk about boys, or soccer, or a book I was reading. We would talk about the upcoming week and what it might bring, and what that means for me. She smiled sweetly, and laughed a laugh that sounded like music. She was tired, and the back of her eyes showed it, but never the front. You had to look really hard to know. In my memory, and everyone else's, she was a fighter.

But as the memories come to an end, the sour stench slowly starts creeping up on me. Vivid images of us dancing around our kitchen on a Friday night, throwing popcorn at our old dog, who now shares that all-too familiar scent in my mind, slowly fade away into a memory I wish I didn't have. The smell. Doing homework to stay caught up with everyone else in my grade, while sitting beside a cancer-ridden soon-to-be corpse.

I hate to associate such a foul smell to such a beautiful soul, but it's hard not to when that smell took up a month of my life, and 4 years of my mental space. As her soul slowly and painfully disconnected from her body, all 7 of her long, pink, surgery scars from years before opened up, gaping and oozing as that familiar smell took control of the air around us. Death. It was all I could think about.

The smell of death didn't filter out the front door as "old friends", who I had never met, filed in to say their last goodbyes. It didn't even leave when the men in suits came to take her away in a disturbing manner that I was probably too young to witness. When they lifted her too-limp and too-cold body into a sheet, the smell of death didn't go away. When they rolled her stiff, empty vessel off the bed we placed in the living room for her comfort, the smell didn't even waver. When they clumsily carried what was left of my mother out of my front door in an awkward shuffle, the smell didn't follow. Even after the car drove away with a last goodbye I never got to say, the smell never left. At her funeral, where her body wasn't even present, it reeked of death. The smell only grew and grew as I had to accept that my person was gone. Not just "on a trip to Hawaii" gone, or even "moved across the ocean" gone. She was dead. Her body left to be used for research, as if she were a lab rat. Upcoming doctors stared into the

open body of what used to be my mom, knowing that when they were done, they would just burn her into dust with the rest of the test subjects, leaving my family and I with nothing to remember her by, not even a headstone. No evidence to accept what had happened, only the smell the trauma left behind.

Even now, if I stand in the right spot in my house, the smell of death still wanders through the vents, my nose twitching at the scent. Death doesn't smell like the movies make it out to be. It's not a pungent, horror movie, stench that causes the characters in the film to realize they've fallen victim to the movie. The smell of death has followed me for the past 4 years, always as strong, never wavering, and still sour. I don't think I'll ever be able to escape it, as it slithers its way through the cracks of my broken mind, into my memories, filling up every fiber of my own being.

NEWSOM, ALEXA**Alexa Newsom**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Shelley Moran

Category: Poetry

Stars and Scars

Little Girl dreamed
She could touch the stars, pick up
The black threads between and weave constellations
New and old
With her child-sized fingertips.
Her mother would say,
Shoot for the moon—yet
All Little Girl wanted was to land amidst the dancing stars
And forget the spotlight-like-moonlight altogether.
Glitter, she would say,
Not glow.

Her feet learned to carry her,
Her body, her heart, her mind
Open and flowing and strong.
The world was constantly in motion, and so
So was she, the
Fallen star on the earth, still
Dancing to her people's pricks of light in the dark sky, her
Flaming candle roaring into fire.

Little Girl thought that stars and glitter
Were like scattered happiness, moments—
Small, but plural. Strength from numbers like
When the sprouts flowered with the hint of Spring;
When the wind whistled through the trees;
When the sun wove its rays through the hills.

In school, she
Saw endless things:
Make-up and hair-up and pink/purple decorating
The already barren
Landscape of femininity.

Little Girl grew a head taller from her stargazing days, but
Not a third eye, the
Future still out of grasp like the stars she reaches to, aspires to
So close, and yet—
So, so far. Truly
Unknown and unexpected, as unexpected
As the day, when
Her feet no longer carried her, when
Her legs could not stop the crowd from huddling around her, their

Assumptions more dangerous than the spotlight-moonlight
 Little Girl had hid from for so long.
 His child-like fingertips reaching for her body like she did for the stars, but
 She was not like the stars. Or the future. Or even the past.
 She was in reach of his grubby hands, his
 Nails—clipped to his skin—
 Claws—cut and jagged—
 Enough for the thumbnail to leave tiny crescent moons in her arms;
 Enough for the rest to poke cruel scars into her flesh. His
 Dreams forever engraved into her skin but more so into her nightmares, his
 Laughs forever saved in his predatory smiles but more so in her ears, his
 Joy forever hanging—
 In the air.
 (or lack of) between them. Frozen—
 And saved in the wind, but more so in her heart, forever
 Digging, digging, digging
 Away.
 She learned to feel another's tongue on her teeth under
 The spotlight moon,
 The pitch-black night,
 The glittering stars of another blinding her
 Into submission. Without hesitation,
 She's gone—into a void, a hole
 The scream in her mind crying
 Stop
 Stop
Stop!
 Somewhere far away, like her own stars—
 Hidden and unreachable.
 Heart hollow and empty,
 Stars less like glitter and more like flickers—
 Tiny flames biding their time before they are
 Blown. Out.
 Still a dancing candle, but
 Without hope of becoming fire.

Little Girl awakes, the
 Third night in a row,
 A year after the incident,
 Soaked in a mix of sweat and tears,
 Crystallized so it wouldn't just *leave* her skin, like
 The mental retelling of that day wouldn't just *leave* her mind.
 A re-run of fear.
 In bed, she sits up straight,
 Eyes staring into the ghost of her past she
 Has longed to forget for a long time.
 She closes her eyes tight, tells herself:
 Deep breath in—
 And—
 Deep breath out.
 And again.
 And again.
 And again and again and again
 To soothe the *what if* exaggerations, the
 Repetitive tangent coming from
 One nightmare.
 One memory.

'Cause unlike red marks on skin that disappear,

Memory

Does not, *Memory*

Stays, asks for a cup of tea, a box of tissues.

Memory

Manifests into something more.

And the weight of the judgemental world comes crashing down

On Little Girl's shoulders until, she

Learned to be a princess, powerless.

A pretty diamond emerging from the pressure-filled rough, she

Dressed in pink and purple ever since until

The sight of those colors no longer stood for

Spring or royalty or clouds in a sunrise, but

For the suffocating chains and cages of the status quo.

Little Girl learned to let go.

To let go of what she had known,

And what she had thought,

And what she had been.

The taste of another's lips fresh and she screamed

Hear me, but

No one did—no. Doesn't matter—forget that, scratch that, and start again.

Rewrite the narrative in her mind, the

Memory of years that had gone by.

She,

"Grew up."

And as she grew up,

She grew in,

Learned

To keep the pain and embarrassment to herself, learned

To guard her already-scarred heart under lock and key,

Grew in and

In and

In

Until the smile that people said

Would light up the room

Was really just

A show of teeth.

'Cause that was easier. And it was, but—

She liked ferocity and freedom, and

You can't have either with a mask pulled over your face.

All day and eventually, all night until, eventually

She was a stranger even to herself.

Until expectation became a way of life,

Adaptation an expectation of its own.

To conform, an instinct.

Each school, each state—lies, but

They always seem to please people and pain never does, so

Nothing changes.

Status quo.

Little Girl

(not-so-little anymore)

No longer reaches towards the stars or even looks up to the moon,

Walking onward, face forward

Shutting her journals before anyone can see.

Blindly passing through life in a haze,
A cloud of dust of her own making.

Little Girl

(even less little now)

Learned to carry herself in the wind and
Learned to sprout her own flower, not at the first kiss of Spring, but
Many, many years after.
Many, many years later, when
Her clouds above cleared
And her stars blinked brilliantly, the
Moon hidden and only her constellations in sight.
Her fingers reached to the sky and plucked
One inky strand by her pointer, and
One by her middle, and
One by her pinky
To weave her own Spring.
Finally touching the stars, her
Fingertips catching on their light to
Relight her flame, and
Hair coloring in their warmth to
Red.
Strong red. Bold, like her
Brave red. Feared, like her
Blood red. Scarred, like her

True red.
Beautiful, like her

Stars forever glittering overhead.

NG, ALLY**Ally Ng**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

Home School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Piper Abernathy

Category: Poetry

glassy sky

glassy sky

i never even knew you
but i did.

the music that occupies my conscience
and whose sheets remain blank,
became mine.

i hear the unfamiliarly familiar pronunciations,
as if i am the protagonist
in someone else's story.

i attempt to fill the empty staves
with the sound. sound that reeks of you.
What is it? A major?

can scenarios become more than
hypotheticals? *No,*
definitely B.

i've convinced myself
that the notes will enjoy my company
just as much as yours.

but the seat was made for you.
your hands rest with ease atop the
once white keys.

i've convinced myself
that the yearning
was simply to fill the clear pages.

i know the artist.
i don't know the person.

i'm forced out of the comfort of my imagination as
you unknowingly drag me towards
reality.

NGUYEN, KATHERINE**Katherine Nguyen**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

Home School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Sarah LaPierre

Category: Critical Essay

Technology, a Broken Promise**Technology, a Broken Promise**

Technology is everywhere. From microchips to large metropolitans, our life is constantly entwined with man-made devices. Within recent decades, humanity has completely shifted its societies to adapt to the ever-growing world of science. Most people inherently assume that this has been for the benefit of humankind– the progress of science equating to the progress of well-being. This belief is a mere delusion, hiding the fact that science has not been able to keep its promise of “improved life”. The same devices people deem as our “salvation” has brought a multitude of ecological changes and human suffering. Still, we overlook these small details and blindly improve technology, even without any sense of direction. As a society, we must reconsider the route we are taking with technological progress.

A Dangerous Trap

The technological industry is a fast-growing dictatorship, one that has thoroughly convinced people of its “beneficial effects”. We are led to believe that faster phones, newer cars, or clearer cameras will increase our quality of life. Because of this, society has drastically changed in pursuit of these ideals. Just within the last century, we’ve transformed our cities and modernized the world in record time. The inventions of smartphones, the internet, and modern automobiles have completely shifted the lives of many. But are the world’s people actually getting happier? Not necessarily. From 1999 to 2019, suicide rates have increased by 30% (CDC). Additionally, the Gallup 2018 Global Emotions Report, found that the global levels of stress, worry, sadness, and anger are hitting new highs. In America, the citizens are experiencing more negative emotions than compared to their recession years– alarming. So why is humankind getting more and more miserable even with the growing sciences and technology?

Quite simply, technology and happiness are not directly correlated. The same Gallup report notices the disconnect between standard of life– GDP, longevity, physical health– and emotional well-being. Just because our standard of life improves, it doesn’t mean that we get any happier. It is a much more stable idea that science only helps develop human capability: our ability to complete tasks. We can confidently conclude that aspects of our lives such as communication, travel, or education have immensely improved with science. There is no doubt that our standard of life has increased over time. Even so, this objectivity does not assure for our emotional health (subjectivity) to follow suit. If we evaluate the improvement of our lives on emotional well-being, then according to history, no– better technology has not been an assurance of better and happier lives.

Yuval Harari, the author of *A Brief History of Humankind*, believes that we find ourselves in what he calls the “luxury trap”. The idea is that as humans attempt to make life easier with innovations, we ultimately fall into the trap of unexpected hardships and pain. In the pursuit of an increased standard of life, humans fail to fully fathom the extent of their actions, ultimately creating a plethora of new problems. The devices that supposedly make life “easier” and more “enjoyable”, actually become a burden on individuals’ day-to-day lives. Harari uses the example of emailing to illustrate the unexpected side-effects of seemingly beneficial technology. Although online e-mailing is useful for fast communication, there is also an undeniable amount of stress from the increased efficiency. For many, they find hundreds of emails accumulating in their inbox; whether it’s school, work, or spam, the emails never fail to keep on delivering. Even more stressful: the replying part. Faster emailing also created the societal expectation of faster replies, forcing people to worry about quickly responding right away. Compare this to the “snail-mail” system

of the past: the letters were rarer and more thoughtfully written, creating less concern to respond immediately. Less demanding and anxiety-inducing than its modern counterpart. Harrari states, “We thought we were saving time; instead we revved up the treadmill of life to ten times its former speed and made our days more anxious and agitated.” Following the tempting route of a seemingly auspicious tool, we unknowingly fell into the luxury trap of communication. The increased efficiency of emailing did not equate to increased well-being: it created more hardship.

This luxury trap has been prevalent for many centuries, even existing long before modern technology, one example dating back to 12,000 years ago. Jared Diamond, a passionate founder of the “agricultural mistake” belief, brings to light the arcane consequences of the agricultural revolution. More commonly known as the start of farming, the agricultural revolution opened two crucial doors for us: more food and more people. The domestication of plants and animals led to small communities, these small communities leading to civilizations, and these civilizations leading to the society we have now. All in all, the agricultural revolution was a necessary advance to create the world we live in today. Even so, Diamond takes an unconventional belief; he proposes that the agricultural revolution wasn’t so beneficial at all. In his book *Guns, Germs and Steel*, he compares early hunter-gatherers to their newer more “advanced” early farmer selves. Hunter-gathers, viewed as “nasty, short, and brutish” to many, lived an unsophisticated yet simple and enjoyable life. Foragers were able to live with minimal stress and pain, even being able to spend the majority of their time storytelling or creating art. On the other hand, the farmers got it bad. Choosing to settle down and tend to the lands created many problems, namely disease, pain, and stress. From sunrise to sunset they would dedicate their lives to cultivating their lands, performing a great deal of laborious physical effort. It didn’t stop there: the domestication of new plants and animals created a powerhouse for germs and viruses, each eager to cause pain and suffering for their farmer host.

Still, the early farmers continued their agony for the farms. Even if they wanted to quit, most couldn’t. Due to the increasing population and dependence on farming, they had no choice but to settle down and continue laboring away. Sure, farming brought an excess of food and larger populations, but was it worth the weary and painful life they had to live? Looking back at the agricultural revolution, we can now realize that the technological advancement of farming didn’t make their lives happier or easier—only worse. This is truly the luxury trap Harrari warns us about—the ultimate compromise of well-being and materialistic growth, building the unnecessary hardships of life all for the sake of “improving” the conditions we live in.

We must look around our world and wonder: is technology making us happier? Are the laptops, TVs, and elaborate devices simply increasing the standard of life or providing fulfillment? Society is invariably geared towards scientific development, delusionally believing that better tech will create better lives. During all this mindless advancement we lose the true objective of actually improving peoples’ well-being. We’ve been ignoring the worsening mental health of society and instead—continue to progress.

Danger of Technology

Technology and science are not innately good. We often forget that science is the collection of mere knowledge: inanimate facts that aren’t moral or immoral, simply neutral. The effects of technology are how we—as collective humanity—decide to use it. Humans add the moral or immoral aspect to amoral science. Yuval Harari states, “But science is not an enterprise that takes place on some superior moral or spiritual plane above the rest of human activity. Like all other parts of our culture, it is shaped by economic, political, and religious interests.” Yet, we expect the progress of science to automatically equate to the progress of humanity, eventually solving all our problems. Sadly, this is not the case. The progress of science only equates to its growing power—a power that can easily bring us danger. With each successive and more advanced device, the potentiality of destruction only grows stronger.

The entire field of science is mostly biased towards societal goals. Within countries or certain organizations, scientific ventures are geared towards specific ideals. It’s not as simple as pure scientific discovery just for the sake of knowledge. This is the reason why countries dedicate more funding to war developments rather than the study of things like mushrooms. Whatever the biased objective is, quite frankly, it doesn’t matter to science; amoral technology will aid any wielder’s cause whether maleficent or good-willed, a scary notion. Science provides the power, humans belief, and the entire world is affected by these two hand-in-hand. In the case of the Holocaust, a horrific genocide of the Jewish, the mass destruction was executed from not only the will of Adolf Hitler but also the destructive weapons and tools he had at hand. The Nazis recognized the potential within science and therefore

dedicated many resources to inventing new technological weapons. Gas chambers, bombs, guns: these machines, handled by the hands of homo sapiens, were able to kill *six million people* (Holocaust Encyclopedia). Horrendous. It's ridiculous how one man can form a belief, manipulate science and armies alike, and then destroy a substantial amount of lives. But that's the power that technology gives you: the ability to execute any goal, no matter the moral foundation.

Furthermore, technology is so influential and ubiquitous that as humans, we fail to fully control its effects. With each device that we put out in the world, numerous unforeseen changes take place. No matter the original purpose, it's impossible to figure out whether good, bad, or a mixture of both will result. Jared Diamond states, "Technology causes problems as well as solves problems. Nobody has figured out a way to ensure that, as of tomorrow, technology won't create problems. Technology simply means increased power, which is why we have the global problems we face today." Take the telephone for example. They went from large blocks of wood to the pocket-sized smartphones that we have today. Over nearly two centuries, we have dedicated an enormous amount of effort, money, and time to improving these technological devices. But in following the linear path of improvement, we failed to account for the detrimental side-effects affecting the people using them. Even though this device seems like a completely harmless tool, it's evident that it is not. An abundance of studies has been done to observe how smartphones affect individuals. Many of them have found a correlation between phone usage and worsened anxiety, productivity, or sleep. For teenagers— it's even worse. The increasing use of social media across adolescents has caused an "epidemic" of mental health problems. Suicide, depression, and newfound insecurities have all been traced back to social media (Blue). Improving the telephone came with problems no one had expected. With more capabilities unlocked, so were the downsides.

We mustn't rely on the progress of science to drive humanity towards "heaven on Earth". There is a vast amount of potential danger with each device, one that we cannot control or fully trust in humanity. As long as there is imperfection in humankind, there will be imperfection in technology.

Progress at the Price of all else

The effects of technology do not only alter humanity but extend to our planet and fellow organisms— a fact we usually disregard. If we simply take a look around us, we can see that our growing societies, population, and devices aren't making a positive impact on our environment. Pollution, climate change, and animal extinction are all prevalent examples of how we are ruining our Earth *each day*. The growing sciences increase humanity's power over the entire planet; these increased capabilities only fuel our pursuit of selfishness further, causing an innumerable amount of global damage to our world. I ask: how can we continue progressing whilst ignoring the dying animals and ruined ecosystems? It seems that we are hedonistic creatures willing to sacrifice all else, simply for the sake of improving the standard of *our* life.

From work to relaxing, our lives constantly depend on using the natural resources around us. This reliance creates a parasitic relationship— humans—the egotistical leeches. In the past century, our destruction has only grown stronger, the recent increase of science allowing us to more proficiently follow our selfish goals— even at the cost of the planet. In 1950, our plastic waste was only around two million tons per year— only 65 years later— and that number has jumped to a whopping 448 million! Such an increase is horrifying, especially when it's expected to double by 2050 (Parker). The invention of man-made plastic is convenient for many aspects of our lives, but it causes entire ecosystems to be destroyed and for the ocean and land to be marred for many years to come. Many animals have already experienced the negative effects of our environmental damage; between 1970 and 2016, the population of mammals, reptiles, fish, birds, and amphibians have collectively experienced a population decline of 68% on average (WWF 2020). Why? Because of our ill-used technologies. Factories, agriculture, burning of fossil fuels: we use these technologies to create a "better" life for humans, often forgetting about the major impact we have on our planet. Science provides easy solutions to our problems, so we take the bait— ignoring the price that Earth has to pay. We failed to recognize the climate change, a decrease in biodiversity, and deforestation that we have caused. Or if we did realize, we simply validated our destruction for the pursuit of selfish human ideals: a better standard of living. Ultimately, the Earth is unable to protect itself from the immense power of science that humanity manipulates to its advantage.

Fortunately, there is increasing awareness surrounding the disastrous problems we are actively creating. Companies, individuals, and organizations alike are working towards reducing their negative impact. *Unfortunately,*

we still have a long way to go. Until we find some sort of “miracle solution”, society will continue to harm our planet endlessly. This is not surprising, considering that just to support a population of nearly 8 billion humans, we will indefinitely have some sort of effect on the Earth. Yet, even if we did find a temporary solution, it doesn’t mean that humans will cease to impact the environment forever. Even before modern technology, homo sapiens were notorious for harming any nature in their path; they made many animals extinct and brought other environmental damages in most places they went (Tel-Aviv University). It raises the question: will humans ever be able to coexist with Earth? The founder of the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), Les U. Knight, thinks not. He advocates for people to stop reproducing, allowing humans to slowly go extinct. VHEMT states, “We’re the only species evolved enough to consciously go extinct for the good of all life, or which needs to.” Without nearly eight billion humans and abusive machines ruining the world, Earth will find its way back to its natural and balanced lifestyle (not immediately, but after a while). VHEMT values prioritizing the planet rather than selfishly supporting the Homo Sapien species. It’s a seemingly radical idea but one that truly opens our eyes to the destruction that humans *and* their technology inevitably bring.

Endnote

We spend many resources on technology: the goal– improve, improve, and improve. Blindly, we continue progressing and implementing sciences throughout our world. What we don’t notice is how we destroy the environment and at times– human happiness altogether. We need to realize that science is not a savior. It’s a power that grows day by day. A power that holds the potential to lead humans to prosperity, but also the potential to be our downfall. The collective path of technology and humanity is one that we have to reassess before it is too late.

NGUYEN, KATHERINE**Katherine Nguyen**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

Home School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Sarah LaPierre

Category: Short Story

Stock Market**Red:**

The mountains on the screen plummeted— all numbers plunging down. As the small girl stood in the front of the computer, confused by the suddenness of everything, her mom began to shriek. Both of the girl's parents collapsed into each other's arms as if grasping onto something that could bolster them up— nothing could. They fell onto their knees screaming and crying hysterically, occasionally shouting curses at the unresponsive screen. Their desperate pleas meant nothing to the computer; it seemed that the precipice of the mountain had long past reached its peak, from there on out the slope was downwards. The bright red of the machine illuminated the entirety of the dim room, a scarlet shadow engulfing everyone and everything. The girl was stunned.

The next morning, the little girl wandered into the kitchen for breakfast. The family called it a kitchen, though it was just their living room filled with appliances: a microwave, icebox, and single gas burner were all they had. She found her dad sitting at the table, mindlessly probing at one of the three chipped plates. Each small platter contained a single egg oozing out its yellow yoke, bleeding out onto the sides. No salt or pepper, just a small egg that wasn't enough to fill anyone.

"I know it's not much, just eat it Grace." The dad whispered whilst finishing his own meal. The girl silently nodded and ventured to her seat across from him. It took her a couple of minutes before finally picking up her fork and deciding to eat the lonely egg. It wasn't that she didn't want to eat it or wasn't grateful for the meal, it was just that she felt a terrible amount of guilt after each bite. Looking at her father's face, she could tell that he desperately needed some more sustenance: his face was a milky pale, his eyes barely able to stay open. As much as the girl wanted to help her dad, a sharp pang of hunger struck her stomach and forced her to eat. Little by little, she reluctantly ate and chewed— savoring each morsel of white or yolk she could gather.

The two were interrupted by incoming slow and heavy steps.

"Here's breakfast Susan." The dad gestured towards the plate waiting for her.

"Paul— we need to talk. We can't keep ignoring the inevitable." It seemed as though she had trouble conjuring a voice, the raspiness was a mere mutterance. Her eyes were bloodshot, the eyebags protruding through the cheeks: a face of a lifeless skeleton. The little girl could smell a harsh stench coming from her mother; she couldn't put her finger on what it was, but she knew that it appeared after long nights of pain and anger. Paul released a heavy sigh before following Susan back to their bedroom. Grace didn't receive a second glance from either of them.

A sudden boom of a door slam startled the girl. The disruptive noise was quickly followed with shouts and screams echoing throughout the house— heck— maybe even the streets; it came from her parent's bedroom. With no place to hide, little eight-year-old Grace hugged her knees and covered her ears with her frail hands as tight as she could. It didn't keep the violent words out, but it was the only thing comforting her. She stayed in this position while watching the clock, waiting until it hit 8:10.

"I guess it's another walk-to-school alone day." She murmured to herself. Hoping not to be late, she rushed around the house to gather all the necessary school supplies into her torn backpack. As she was about to move past

her parent's bedroom, she came to a halt and cupped her ear to the door. They weren't shouting anymore; Grace could only hear soft sobs and hearty snores. She continued listening for a few more minutes. But, in truth, Grace had wanted more than to just listen; she had hoped that one of them would come out to be with her. She wanted to be hugged and kissed, for all of them to laugh as they had before. Oh, how she miserably hoped. When the clock struck 8:20 she realized her plan was futile. Grace rushed out the door without saying goodbye.

The school was only a block away, barely a distance, and one that she had memorized by heart. She wasn't scared at all, it was a trek that she made alone many times. The only thing she hated about it— and *absolutely* despised— was the stares she would get from other families, other *parents*. When other toddlers were walking handheld with their moms or dads, she stood alone. There was nothing she could do but be the kid people would wonder about, *why is she by herself? Is she okay?* Grace was very confident that she was okay alone. She always has been, she's gotten used to it by now.

Green:

"Grace! Come celebrate with mom and dad!" Just as the little girl got home from school, her parents popped open a sparkly bottle of champagne. Grace immediately understood that this was a *really* special occasion, her mom's bottle of champagne had sat dormant in the cabinet for, well, forever, at least since she was fired from her old job.

"You're father's a genius. Thanks to him, we're going to be living pretty lavishly from now on." The mom's vow made Grace's eyes light up: *lavish? Happy?* That's all the girl ever wanted— happiness— for herself and for her parents. Everyone began laughing in a giggly and intoxicated manner. Nothing mattered now, everything was okay. At least— that's what Grace let herself believe. In the heart of the moment, her dad picked her up in a subtle swoop, making her fly all across their living room.

"Woohoo!" She splayed her arms out like a superhero. Whilst spinning, her eye caught the machine in her parent's bedroom, the computer was blinking a new neon green. Paul gently sat Grace down on the floor again, beginning to talk in a spirited booming voice. He was going on about his brilliance of the "stock market", he continued rambling on as if there was an audience to listen to him. Only Susan was listening; she sat staring at him in wonder, like falling victim to one of her favorite fairy tales— lies.

Grace's parents were so focused on this "stock market" that Grace was eventually able to slip out unnoticed, soon venturing into the hallway. She snuck into her parent's cramped bedroom, still able to hear her dad's speech, as time went on, it became more and more slurred. The color machine displayed mountains on an incline, the room brightened by the beaming green of the computer screen. For a few moments, tears of pure joy slid out of her eyes. She didn't have the slightest clue what the strange words of numbers meant, but it was the colors that had importance, this much she knew. She profusely thanked the machine and prayed that it wouldn't turn red again.

Red:

It was less than twenty-four hours until the green euphoria faded away.

To Grace's dismay, she woke up with another single egg for breakfast. Her parent's shouts echoed louder than ever. They forgot to shut the door to the bedroom, probably forgetting Grace altogether. The little girl stood in the hallway directly outside their bedroom, a single glance inside the room provided information for Grace to realize what had happened. The machine was flashing red again, the mountains steeper than she had ever seen.

She silently whispered for the screen to flash the green that she loved so much; she begged and begged, hoping that someone somehow will listen to her just once. The green promised hugs and kisses, food, and family: *love* for at least an hour. She wanted her parents back— *green* parents.

Nonetheless, she didn't have the effort to cry. She condemned herself for trusting in the short-lived illusion yet again. It has happened too many times to count on her ten fingers: red, green, high, low. For years, she constantly watched as the colors dictated her family's life.

It was another walk-alone day: a red curse.

PROUTY, QUINN**Quinn Prouty**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Poetry

Wilted

We would visit her at noon,
lean over and confide
sweet, regretful tunes.
Bearing armfuls of orchids
and lilies to wealth a new home.
To let us atone over stone,
our every signature
confined to a stiff A7.

(Her, scribbling
in a notebook bound round
full of words she never
cared to share. Coincidentally,
left a page on the kitchen counter
beside a cold pie and hot oven.
Baking was never her specialty.)

Slowly, our lunch comradery
began to desert.
Softly I wept,
for I believed their absence to be
ignorant. Not until
the flowers' peace petals lay dying
on my mother's grave
did I finally stop coming,
my letters addressed to heaven.
Apologies.

PROUTY, QUINN**Quinn Prouty**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Poetry

Anatomy of a Poet**Heartbreak, line break**

Your voice cracked
the part of my heart
I had saved for you.
The upset texts
unraveling me, you
stopped typing and I
stopped trying.

I am left with the remnants
of our three syllable mantras,
unsorted sonnets,
and the softness on my hands.
You had seized the caesura
where a space had crept
between us.
Betrayed by blank ballads,
for I believed in opportunity
while you became
the blinking bar,
barricading me in.
Underlined my every error
and rewrote our history,
you were my
overbearing editor.
But I miss when you
would fix my typos
and leave me
love notes.

Suddenly I am lost for words.

The Weight of Words

Letters fall out of sentences
as people do out of love.
Gradually the gravity
is too much to bear,
just as the bar becomes
burdened across
the slim shoulders
of the capital "T."
While the tail of a "Q"
only barely blocks it

from going belly up.
Though the “P” ponders why
it stores such grievance
upon its chest.
They separate quietly,
not risking a syllable.

Which writing
lays heaviest on text?
Does a joke or soothing song
require a gentle hand?
And if so does that mean
tragedies of heartbreak
and harsh history
strain a writer’s wrist?
Still, that pain
will not push them away.
The heaviness is home,
the pen point imprinting
the next page. For thoughts
have sunk to the bottom
of the line
and mind.

REDICK, CLAIRE**Claire Redick**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Marina Ganter

Category: Dramatic Script

Lady MacBeth**Lady Macbeth (alternatively, Act 4. Scene 2.5)**

Lady Macbeth approaches the open window of the Royal Chamber. The room is finely furnished, built from stone, and covered in expensive tapestries sporting images of war and conquest. Lady Macbeth is alone and clothed in a simple nightgown with bare feet, dwarfed by the terrible majesty of the palace's splendor. Her face is gaunt and she appears ill. Wind and fog swirl in from the chilly afternoon beyond the window, blanketing the room in an eerie ambiance. As she delivers this soliloquy her husband, King Macbeth, communes with the witches once more.

LADY

Perhaps it was folly to so believe
 That Duncan's fall would constitute our rise.
 For the King has forgotten himself
 To swim in the madness which sullied the
 Very robes that presently grace his shoulders.
 When I perverted my figure with hope
 Of blood, I thought not of that night stretching
 On beyond the bounds of time. For now a
 Darkness permeates the land which cannot
 Be quelled through fire, nor firm repentance.
 I have turned my face to the Heavens and
 Laid bare my crimes to unforgiving stone.
 Still, the chamber of the King stinks of plague.
 I have scrubbed the floor myself when he first
 Emptied his stomach o'er the spot upon
 Which he claimed he perceived the beating heart
 Of noble Banquo atop the carpet.
 Now he believes the very walls to which
 I prayed are wrought from flesh and human bone.
 He lays upon the bed, dubs the room a
 Grotesque organ. He has, once, taken me
 By the arms and bade me listen to the
 Pumping of the blood which roars in his ears.
 I confess, of late, it has made itself
 Known to my fragile mind and straining heart.
 He has once again to the Weird Sisters,
 And has left me upon the windowsill
 To dutifully await his fresh news.
 Even so, the blood beats out a familiar tune.
Beware Macduff, beware the Thane of Fife.
 But hark! A dispatch below, three horses,
 Riders cloaked in black do go swiftly from
 This place. Once, I might have applauded their
 Speed, but now accept that shame is far too

Often begot by haste to laud them here.
But what is had when remorse returns to
Marr the deed which hath been conceived in haste?
Why, fear. And anger. Such unnatural
Wrath that might press one to repeat the same
Act which had precipitated it.
I harbor not so great an ire.
But my husband...has taken up the knife
Again, albeit not with his own hands.
Duncan was to be the sole casualty.
Now, who is to say who might be slain? Surely
Macbeth had cause for Fleance and Banquo,
However reckless the order was.
But the selfsame madness that plagues his ears,
May drive him to spill the blood of any.
Even, perhaps, the very same one who
Enabled him. He may, if prompted, pluck
A blade from the table and pierce the white
Throat from whence the very conception of
Murder came. The mother of his sin, and
Also his kingship. But hush, Macbeth arrives.

Lady Macbeth
(alternatively, Act 4. Scene 2.5)

Lady Macbeth approaches the open window of the Royal Chamber. The room is finely furnished, built from stone, and covered in expensive tapestries sporting images of war and conquest. Lady Macbeth is alone and clothed in a simple nightgown with bare feet, dwarfed by the terrible majesty of the palace's splendor. Her face is gaunt and she appears ill. Wind and fog swirl in from the chilly afternoon beyond the window, blanketing the room in an eerie ambiance. As she delivers this soliloquy her husband, King Macbeth, communes with the witches once more.

LADY

Perhaps it was folly to so believe

That Duncan's fall would constitute our rise.

For the King has forgotten himself

To swim in the madness which sullied the

Very robes that presently grace his shoulders.

When I perverted my figure with hope

Of blood, I thought not of that night stretching

On beyond the bounds of time. For now a

Darkness permeates the land which cannot

Be quelled through fire, nor firm repentance.

I have turned my face to the Heavens and

Laid bare my crimes to unforgiving stone.

Still, the chamber of the King stinks of plague.

I have scrubbed the floor myself when he first

Emptied his stomach o'er the spot upon

Which he claimed he perceived the beating heart

Of noble Banquo atop the carpet.

Now he believes the very walls to which
I prayed are wrought from flesh and human bone.
He lays upon the bed, dubs the room a
Grotesque organ. He has, once, taken me
By the arms and bade me listen to the
Pumping of the blood which roars in his ears.
I confess, of late, it has made itself
Known to my fragile mind and straining heart.
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Again, albeit not with his own hands.
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Throat from whence the very conception of
Murder came. The mother of his sin, and
Also his kingship. But hush, Macbeth arrives.

REDICK, CLAIRE**Claire Redick**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Mark Luce

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Highway 150**Highway 150**

There's a quiet stretch of Highway 150 in Lee's Summit, Missouri, and the well-worn grooves in the curves of the pavement know my tire treads well. Out here I've got no name, never had any occasion to give one, but the roadkill says hello. Guts all out on the concrete nice seeing you here again. It's hard to scrub their stains from the highway. Possums, raccoons, the odd deer. Rain and blistering sun and greedy flies pick at the blood, organs, and muscles that carried them onto the road. The elements make their bones ready for whatever comes after. Every road prepares its visitors for a destination. I'm going forward, being made new, embalmed by this asphalt purgatory's gas stations and signage I've seen a thousand times before.

Highway 150 can be chronicled by its billboards. Some are tattered, others new. A few have little lights illuminating the letters. As I cruise down the road, one of the signs tells me I'm on the path to salvation, which is half true because my turn-around point is the Aldersgate Church. Not for any particular reason. It's just a route I know. Advertisements for Amish kitchens and late-night drive-thrus roll across my line of sight through the windshield. If I was a lonely traveler with no home to go back to, I might stop in and chat awhile with the wait staff. My mother would say it's not safe, but I don't mind. I don't look so delicate anymore. Leonard Cohen's "You Want It Darker" warbles on the radio that isn't really a radio, at least not in the classical sense. I control the music. I wish I could leave the decision-making to the stations, but nobody plays Cohen at the hour I want, except me.

The moonlight digs into Missouri potholes full of gravel and litter. All those fragments of time and space baked into the concrete. All those ghosts rising up in the cool night air to breathe again. And here I am on the highway flexing my wrists, gripping the steering wheel real gentle with one hand, spinning the volume dial with the other. Ready for the spirits to sing along. When my voice splinters over the notes, it screams to every midnight deer that they shouldn't come bounding into the road.

The last time I was here it was dusk, earlier than it is now. Something was alight on the highway. I drove by as the smoke blended with navy storm clouds, fire licking at the skeleton of a vehicle. A half immolated sedan smoldering with the dead cowflesh of its leather seats. A week-old charred scar carved into the shoulder of the road makes it hard to scrub that memory from the highway: the way the fire seared off the white paint lines, preparing the pavement for something after. Scorch mark from metallic flesh cooked, unseasoned. The car burned in the night like a beacon. It would've stayed to light my way even if purgatory's street lamps flickered out.

The heating system in my car catches up to seventy-two. Its hot breath fans out over my hands. The Aldersgate Church marquee is visible now.

WE ASKED GOD FOR A SIGN
AND HE GAVE US THIS ONE!

As I turn toward home, I wonder if anyone told Moses it's illegal to drive without his shoes on.

REDICK, CLAIRE**Claire Redick**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Robert Kohler

Category: Dramatic Script

What's He Building?*Working Title: What's He Building?***Scene 1: Do Not Disturb**

A TRUCK rumbles down a highway, headlights illuminating the foggy nighttime air around it. It pulls off the main road and slows, turning to park below a sign that reads MADIGAN MOTEL. Two middle-aged men dressed in worn denim, work jackets, and heavy boots step out of the truck. The men, ROSS and WILSON, sport haggard, sallow faces, and scruffy beards. WILSON carries a canvas tote bag with the words HARWOOD PUBLIC LIBRARY printed on the front. He winces when he uses his right leg.

WILSON: Ah, hell.**ROSS:** You alright?**WILSON:** Yeah, yeah. My leg fell asleep.

He stretches and wiggles the offending limb. They trudge across the parking lot to the motel office. The bell jingles when they enter the dingy space. The sound alerts a teenager, AUGUST, who looks up from behind the desk. Vicki Lawrence's "The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia" plays from a radio on the counter. A dull thudding sound drones from somewhere deeper inside the motel.

AUGUST: It's \$48 a night, you can check out any time you like.**WILSON:** But you can never leave?**AUGUST:** Funny. Price includes pool access and a complimentary morning coffee.

She gestures to a plastic table in the corner with a jug and a stack of paper cups on top.

AUGUST (cont.): Only we ask that you stick to one cup so all guests can participate, but I'm really not a stickler.**ROSS:** We're not staying the night. Is the owner around?

This earns him a puzzled look. WILSON walks over to the vending machine in the corner, feeds it a bill, and presses the button for root beer.

AUGUST: She's taking a phone call in the back.

WILSON bangs on the front of the vending machine a few times. Nothing happens.

AUGUST (cont.): Sorry buddy, the machine's dead. Are you guys lookin' for directions? Cos we got maps on the shelf over there.**WILSON:** Nuh-uh.

He lifts the tote bag and gives it a shake. It jingles.

WILSON (cont.): Coins.

On AUGUST — "oh!"

AUGUST: Oh, sure. Key's right here.

She opens a desk drawer and fishes for a moment, eventually producing a silver ring with two small keys on it. She tosses the key to ROSS.

AUGUST: The brassy key is for the rooms, silver one is for the machines. Knock yourselves out.

ROSS: Thanks, we'll be outta your hair in no time.

AUGUST: No worries, place is practically empty or I'd make you wait 'till morning.

She resumes reading a battered copy of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy as ROSS and WILSON make their way down the hall. They stop at Room 100. ROSS produces the keyring and holds it up to his face.

ROSS: Which one did she say opens the rooms?

WILSON reaches out and taps the gold-tinged key. ROSS unlocks the door and the two enter. ROSS makes his way toward the Magic Fingers Machine next to the bedside table and unlocks it. WILSON steps forward with a canvas bag. ROSS reaches into the machine and transfers a small handful of quarters into the bag WILSON holds open for him.

WILSON: How much do you think they make from these things? For real.

ROSS: Can't be a whole lot since it's just quarters.

WILSON: Imagine telling someone you made your fortune in quarters *(beat)* Have you ever skimmed a few off the top? Just for spare change when you've got nothing left in your wallet or something?

ROSS (joking): 'Course not, it's against company policy. You'd have to file a report if I did.

WILSON: To who? Human resources?

Ross grins and pockets a few of the quarters with a wink. They head to Room 102.

ROSS: Y'know maybe Jimmy should think about instating something like a human resources department.

WILSON: He's got the suggestions box.

ROSS: I'd like to complain about the truck. The heating's shot. I think it counts as abuse of staff since we're averaging a whopping 20 degrees this week.

ROSS stoops to open the next machine.

ROSS: It's empty.

WILSON: Yeah, nobody uses these anymore...which is weird cos it's so cheap.

He squints down at the machine and reads out the sign.

WILSON (cont.): I mean who wouldn't want to be carried "into the land of tingling relaxation and ease?"

WILSON makes a face, ROSS snorts.

ROSS: When was the last time you used one of these things?

WILSON: Dunno, I sleep in the truck mostly.

ROSS: Still. I think it's because the machines are all ancient or broken down. Last month there was a whole string of them with busted springs and even I couldn't get 'em to work.

WILSON nods solemnly.

WILSON: End of an era. We're gonna be out of a job pretty soon.

ROSS plunks a quarter into the machine and presses the button. The bed buzzes. WILSON moves over to the wall and examines the peeling paper.

ROSS: Well. It works, at least.

WILSON: How many people do you think have died here? Like in this room.

ROSS: Jesus, that's morbid.

WILSON: I'm just saying. I mean, look how yellow that wallpaper is. This place is ~~old~~, old.

ROSS: No Wilson, this place has no smoking restrictions. Stop picking at the paper.

WILSON removes his hand from the wall to walk with ROSS to Room 103. The thumping sound from before is much louder now. It's coming from behind the door. A "Do Not Disturb" sign hangs from the handle.

WILSON: Seriously, think about it. Old motel, off the beaten path. So obscure the Magic Fingers barely have any coins in them? How many missing persons do you think wound up here?

ROSS: Should I knock?

WILSON: It says Do Not Disturb.

ROSS: Right but the kid at the front sorta gave me the "go ahead."

Wilson shrugs.

WILSON: It says Do Not Disturb.

The two stand in silence for a moment, contemplating the door and the mysterious, noisy proprietor behind it. A loud clang follows more of the rhythmic thumping.

ROSS: I'm gonna ask her.

ROSS jogs down the hall back to the front desk.

ROSS: Hey, hey. What's the deal with Room 103?

AUGUST: Oh, Jenkins? He's a resident.

ROSS gives AUGUST a look as if to say "so?"

AUGUST: Well...he's not officially a resident but he's been here for the better half of the year. He almost never comes out of his room during the daytime. I've only seen him once when he came to check in. Best to just leave it alone.

ROSS: But we need to collect.

AUGUST: I mean, you can try but I don't think you'll have much luck.

ROSS: If he never comes out of his room then how does he make his payments?

AUGUST: I come by each morning and he just slips them under the door.

ROSS: Well how's he making money?

AUGUST: Maybe he saved up. Beats me, I just keep track of the cash. He's the only one here right now, all the other rooms should be open for you guys. Does it matter that much if you miss one?

ROSS: Not really, most of the machines are empty anyway.

AUGUST: Yeah it's cos they're kinda...

She trails off, thinking of the best way to phrase this.

AUGUST (cont.): I dunno, unsettling?

ROSS: Unsettling?

AUGUST: Yeah. I tried one out when I was a kid just to see what it did. I couldn't sleep at all. It felt like something was alive under my bed, and the machine kept making this growling noise. Freaked me out.

ROSS: And here I thought it was because nobody carries that many quarters anymore.

ROSS returns to WILSON outside Room 103, steels himself, then—

ROSS: I'm gonna try knocking. Just in case.

WILSON taps the Do Not Disturb sign.

ROSS: Oh come on, it's worth a shot. Clearly someone's awake in there.

WILSON raises his hands in defeat. ROSS steps up and raps on the door once. The thumping stops. ROSS and WILSON stand completely still as they hear heavy footsteps approaching the door. After a moment of silence, the footsteps retreat, and the thumping resumes.

ROSS: What the hell?

WILSON: What's he building in there?

ROSS: Building?

WILSON: Yeah. Sounds like a hammer to me.

ROSS listens for a minute. Thump. Thump. Thump.

ROSS: Y'know what? Maybe he's got us beat, maybe he's fixing the Magic Fingers.

WILSON: Or maybe he's busting it open.

ROSS: Yeah, well if that's the case, you're fresh out of extra change this week. No more gumball machines. Come on.

ROSS and WILSON make their way to Room 104, bantering as they walk. We linger on the door of Room 103. Once ROSS and WILSON have fully disappeared into the other room, the thumping ceases again. The figure behind the door walks up and unlocks it. The door opens a crack. From the shadows of the room, a sliver of an old man's face appears. His eye swivels ominously to the right, then back to the left. He stands for a beat... what's he going to do? Abruptly, the door slams shut and the lock snaps back into place with a click, followed by the sound of a metal chain sliding into place. The Do Not Disturb sign swings gently from side to side.

[END]

REDICK, CLAIRE**Claire Redick**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Marina Ganter

Category: Dramatic Script

Lady MacBeth**Lady Macbeth (alternatively, Act 4. Scene 2.5)**

Lady Macbeth approaches the open window of the Royal Chamber. The room is finely furnished, built from stone, and covered in expensive tapestries sporting images of war and conquest. Lady Macbeth is alone and clothed in a simple nightgown with bare feet, dwarfed by the terrible majesty of the palace's splendor. Her face is gaunt and she appears ill. Wind and fog swirl in from the chilly afternoon beyond the window, blanketing the room in an eerie ambiance. As she delivers this soliloquy her husband, King Macbeth, communes with the witches once more.

LADY

Perhaps it was folly to so believe
 That Duncan's fall would constitute our rise.
 For the King has forgotten himself
 To swim in the madness which sullied the
 Very robes that presently grace his shoulders.
 When I perverted my figure with hope
 Of blood, I thought not of that night stretching
 On beyond the bounds of time. For now a
 Darkness permeates the land which cannot
 Be quelled through fire, nor firm repentance.
 I have turned my face to the Heavens and
 Laid bare my crimes to unforgiving stone.
 Still, the chamber of the King stinks of plague.
 I have scrubbed the floor myself when he first
 Emptied his stomach o'er the spot upon
 Which he claimed he perceived the beating heart
 Of noble Banquo atop the carpet.
 Now he believes the very walls to which
 I prayed are wrought from flesh and human bone.
 He lays upon the bed, dubs the room a
 Grotesque organ. He has, once, taken me
 By the arms and bade me listen to the
 Pumping of the blood which roars in his ears.
 I confess, of late, it has made itself
 Known to my fragile mind and straining heart.
 He has once again to the Weird Sisters,
 And has left me upon the windowsill
 To dutifully await his fresh news.
 Even so, the blood beats out a familiar tune.
Beware Macduff, beware the Thane of Fife.
 But hark! A dispatch below, three horses,
 Riders cloaked in black do go swiftly from
 This place. Once, I might have applauded their
 Speed, but now accept that shame is far too

Often begot by haste to laud them here.
But what is had when remorse returns to
Marr the deed which hath been conceived in haste?
Why, fear. And anger. Such unnatural
Wrath that might press one to repeat the same
Act which had precipitated it.
I harbor not so great an ire.
But my husband...has taken up the knife
Again, albeit not with his own hands.
Duncan was to be the sole casualty.
Now, who is to say who might be slain? Surely
Macbeth had cause for Fleance and Banquo,
However reckless the order was.
But the selfsame madness that plagues his ears,
May drive him to spill the blood of any.
Even, perhaps, the very same one who
Enabled him. He may, if prompted, pluck
A blade from the table and pierce the white
Throat from whence the very conception of
Murder came. The mother of his sin, and
Also his kingship. But hush, Macbeth arrives.

REDICK, CLAIRE**Claire Redick**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Robert Kohler

Category: Short Story

Pardon Our Dust**Pardon Our Dust**

Here in these pages I have collected, I am close to those of the past, with nothing but time to separate us. From their words, I know of life before, and from mine, they could be sure of life after. How I yearn for the certainty of those to come, for they speak truths so vast and akin to mine that our combined voices would teach any poor uncertain soul the permanence, the heaviness, of the infinite utterances of humankind. So as we crumble here in our little hallway amidst the pock-marked wallpaper, please forgive how we rot and leave our souls to speak themselves from ink. I hope it will not be too much trouble to sweep us out.

...

Joan and I like to sit in the little pocket of time between the kitchen and the living room where ornate paper covers the walls and sunlight spills from the bathroom doorway onto the floor. Joan splays her fingers across the designs and lets them dance with the lush green vines and floral patterns. I don't like the twists and turns, so I keep my hands to myself.

Joan said to me, four months ago in the exact same spot, that she didn't remember a time before now. I pointed to the array of tick marks carved in the wall at the end of the hallway.

"How many's that, then?" Joan asked.

"I don't know."

I used to count them, but now they're just scratches that make the wall look different than before. Life like this makes moments stick and fester. Time draws slow, but the hallway does not differentiate, so neither do we.

...

There's a vine creeping through the crack in the bathroom window. It poked its head through a year and a half after everything began. The next winter we thought for sure it would die off, but when summer rolled around it clawed its way back. I told Joan to take one of the big kitchen knives to it, but she was fascinated by how long it lasted, thought that if it'd made it this far then we should let nature take its course. Then two more winters passed and it never stopped, just crept closer all the time, drawn in by the heat from the furnace. Last winter it slithered down the bathroom wall and hit the floor two weeks before the furnace broke and the second wave hit. Joan says she hopes it survives next winter, even if it brings in bugs because the bathroom wouldn't look right without it anymore. I still want it gone, but Joan won't let me touch it.

...

Dad would spend his evenings listening to an old emergency radio hooked up to a generator in the basement. Even in earlier days. For these past few years, when he was but a fleeting shadow manifested only in sacks of food stowed in the garage, we could still hear the news waft up through the vents. We'd speak to him through the metal slats, waiting for muffled answers about what he did that day, or if he saw anybody on his way home.

We told him about the vine, and he said to cut it out before it caused any trouble because he couldn't come up to fix it, but Joan said she didn't mind. It wasn't something that needed fixing. He sighed and shuffled over to crank up the volume, grumbling as he wrestled off his scrubs. After the broadcast ended we could hear him switch the device off and lumber to his cot against the back wall. The radio was on again in the morning until he slipped through the garage door, returning only when he was too tired to be of any use.

...

The water pipes broke three weeks after the furnace. In wintertime, we caught the snow and dragged the buckets over by the fireplace until the flakes melted into frigid water. Now Joan and I set the buckets outside in the grass to catch the rare bouts of summer rain. The tepid water bakes in the unrefreshing humidity. It tastes thick and buttery on my tongue.

There's a creek just up the street from our house but we cannot use it for drink. In the spring the water rose and

the pulsing current brought with it a fresh horde of bodies from far upstream to sour its contents. The rainwater is clean, born anew from the summery sky, fresh and safe.

...

The house is so hot the walls sweat, bubbling Joan's floral wallpaper. It peels and sags, wilting halfway down the wall before drooling glue onto the baseboards. Still, she runs her hands over the sticky flowers. I spent a whole afternoon convincing her to find a stapler so we could tack up the paper. Once we found one, another hour was devoted to prying open the base and loading it, firing the little pieces of metal into the wall until they stuck. The flimsy staples held up for approximately forty-two hours. Joan thought it was funny, but I counted.

...

The radio has been running non-stop for a week. We sat still in the hall the first day, paralyzed by the constant barrage of sound, but by nighttime we let the white noise lull us to sleep. On the second day, we woke to lilting bouts of sulfur hanging in the air. The smell drifted, nauseating, an invisible cloud through which we would pass from one end of the hallway to the other. Joan worried. She called down to Dad with little terrified questions. By the fifth day, the vine in the bathroom unfurled its yellowish leaves and the odor morphed into a sour, decaying perfume. Joan never spoke about the radio or the smell again.

...

Joan chopped off most of her hair last weekend. Mine is past my waist now. She says she doesn't know how I can stand it in this heat, offered to cut it, but I refused. I was always trying to grow it down to my feet as a kid. Like Rapunzel.

...

Yesterday, Joan scratched herself on a staple poking up from the wallpaper. She didn't notice at first, kept running her bleeding palm over the designs until the red stain caught my eye. I tried to help but she insisted on bandaging it herself. She didn't want the blood to touch my skin. I drifted off lying in the middle of the hallway by the bathroom door, head pillowed on my arm, eyes trained on the vine while she searched her room for something to disinfect her hand. The radio whispered its nightly lullaby through the vents as I fell asleep.

...

I woke up in the hallway alone this afternoon, face-to-face with Joan's rust-brown wound in the wallpaper. The fresh staples we put up lost their hold in the night. The paper sags down toward me. There's been no sign of Joan for hours. The thermostat at the end of the hallway reads eighty-nine degrees. The wallpaper has begun to sweat. The wound bubbles and bleeds.

...

The sun is going down and Joan hasn't come back yet. The stain still peeks out at me from across the hallway. It seems to grow and morph and smear all across its home on the printed white flowers. The oatmeal background, overlaid with soft ivory petals, strung together in sage green spindly vines is perfectly unsullied, save for the horrid mark just above the peeling baseboard. It stands, takes up space, unfaded and darker than the night before. Like seeds in the ground, it has taken root.

"What about downstairs?" Joan's voice echoes, fuzzy, from her doorway.

I keep my eyes on the wavering shadow cast across the floor. My voice floats up from my mouth like a reflex, disembodied and shaky, unfocused.

"Where were you?"

"I feel asleep in there."

"Oh," then, "what about downstairs?"

"We'll have to go and get him." The flower is marbled in crimson, completely and utterly coated, drowning in it.

"Why?"

"You'd like to leave him down there?"

Joan's voice is clearer now, and the mark seems to grow smaller, duller. She steps fully into the hallway. Her bare feet peek out from the baggy pajamas she wore yesterday. Her hand is swathed with a white bandage stained the same shade of brown as the blotch on the wall.

"How's your hand?"

"Fine."

"There's white paint downstairs."

"What are you talking about?" Joan doesn't understand.

"We could fix the wallpaper."

Joan turns, eyeing the mangled flower and the wilted parchment. She lifts her injured hand and clumsily waves it back and forth.

"I'm right-handed. You'll have to do it."

I nod. "Tomorrow, then?"

"Tomorrow."

Joan turns to her room.

"We'll need something to cover our faces."

She shakes her head.

"It hasn't rained in weeks."

"But--"

She looks me in the eyes and shakes her head. It is then that I understand.

...

The next day I find her sitting in front of the basement door. My hair is long enough for her to reach out and touch the ends. She pulls the strands taut with her fingers before releasing and watching them coil back up, curls strung into looser waves by the weight.

"Maybe I'll let you cut it tonight."

"Really?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I thought you were trying to grow it out."

"Could always do with a little change."

She looks pleased. "I think so."

"That's why you cut yours?"

"No."

"Why then?"

She shrugs, a slight smile playing on her lips. "Bored."

...

The door to the basement sticks when Joan tries to yank it open. The smell is worse over here, so she pinches her nose with her right hand and heaves with her left. Eventually, the wood pulls free of the frame.

It's a slow descent. Joan and I haven't been to the basement since before, and when we reach the landing the space is pitch black, save for the faint light from a small egress window. Joan didn't think to bring a flashlight, but I am grateful for the luxury of feeling out the near-darkness. I stay near the landing and let Joan venture out in front of me. Her voice rises from the back wall.

"I've got him."

She shuffles back over, hand flailing about my torso for a few moments before settling on my wrist to guide me forward, all the way to his feet. Then she leaves and taps her way around to the head. I can feel the body shift below me as she heaves him onto her shoulder.

"Grab his ankles."

"Where--"

"Upstairs, just head for the light."

"Okay."

...

The pale glow from the window and the movement of Joan at his shoulders are all I have to go on. The radio warbles and crackles after us the whole way up. Joan bumps against a table. I keep my eyes on the holes in his socks.

When we've finally cleared the basement door I let go and flurry back downstairs for the paint. The acrid scent of the room penetrates the protective hand I clasp over my nose and mouth.

Fortunately, the paint can is close, visible from its stance on the shallow windowsill above Dad's old desk. The radio crackles as I reach above my head to drag the paint down by its handle. The unexpected weight of the can hits my arm instantly and it goes down, slipping from my hands to land against the wooden hutch below. The sound cracks through the basement and Joan's footfalls cease above me. In that interim of sound, everything pauses except the radio.

I switch it off so there's naught but my pulse and the shuffle of my feet to accompany my second ascent.

...

I carry the white paint can to the hallway and push it up against the wall over the gaping floor vent where it sits face-to-face with the wallpaper's newest bloom.

When I step out the door, Joan is sitting on the front steps, eyes closed, panting. The wrap-around porch groans beneath my feet, wooden railing freshly pitched to the ground below. I spin to face our home. It's a place I have lived in my whole life, a constant, invariable in my mind.

But the house never seemed so old. Its once pristine exterior is faded from rain and grime. The wood is gnawed, once white paint chipped, coated in varying layers of dirt which thicken at the base. The gutters are stuffed with

leaves and branches. The walls are enveloped in spindly vines. Shingles of the roof have tumbled to the grass below, littering the yard with scraps of rounded wood. Even the fence surrounding the area has broken down; formerly sturdy wooden beams are now half held up, deeply bowed, or splintered. The grass no longer shifts to green. The patchy yard stands stark, unyielding.

Our metal buckets litter most of the ground closest to the house. All are empty, save one, where a few lonely droplets of water cling to the interior seams.

I do not have to turn to know where the wheelbarrow sits several paces from the buckets: its own little island in the scraggy yard, fire truck red faded to a clay orange.

Dad used to push us around in that wheelbarrow when we were kids. Invariably we'd hit a rock and go tumbling out onto the yard. We'd whine and cry and demand to be held, two pairs of kicking legs and aching scraped knees clambering closer, pleading to be fixed. But every time, without fail, we'd come careening into his room on Sunday morning, begging for another ride.

Joan swings her legs over the side of the stairs.

"Any trouble?" I ask.

"Not really, the hand wasn't as bad as I expected."

"That's good." I keep my body turned toward her, eyes on the ground, away from the wheelbarrow.

"He's covered."

Sure enough, Joan swathed him in a sheet. A piece of the white cloth peers over the rusted lip, fluttering in the breeze. It is safe to look, and I do.

...

We take turns pushing the wheelbarrow out to the creek. The path stretches before us, unmarred by footprints as we carve one long tire track through the dirt. By the time we reach the creek the sky is clouded over and the wind has picked up, brushing what little soil we disturbed back into place.

The water rushes rapidly along, crashing over rocks and felled tree trunks. It takes some time but we manage to struggle down the bank together in our designated positions; Joan at the head, me at the feet.

As we lower him into the water, straining to keep his body steady against the current, Joan meets my eyes. The faintest trace of a tender smile. No tears.

Others are bobbing about in the creek, floating gently beneath the thicket of trees that hang over the water. Their clothes billow, ragged and worn but still clinging desperately to their owners despite how far they've likely traveled.

The trees have woven together to form an intricate tunnel gracing the outskirts of the water, affording those who choose this burial ground a semblance of privacy. The branches bend in the stream to till the graveyard rapids.

"Should we pray?" Joan asks.

"I don't know any."

"Neither do I."

And with that we are struck dumb, searching each other's faces as if one of us might burst into a hymn or anguished cry.

No such sound is forthcoming. The wind and the creek drown out our stilted murmurings as we kneel deeper into the water as if, perhaps, to share his course.

Joan lets his shoulders slip through her fingers and then it is only me clinging to the sheet, a frightened child, grasping the fabric that molds his swirling body to my hands so that I may keep him to quell my nightmares. She moves toward me and stoops to fold an arm across my shoulders.

His body twists with the splashing current. I open my hands.

...

I stand there with my eyes closed, Joan's arm slung about me until a clap of thunder sounds out over the neighborhood. When I open my eyes, the white sheet is no longer in sight, obscured by the reeds that grow in abundance on both banks downstream. The branches are thick there too, teeming with birds that flutter about over the water to sing with the churn of the water. Joan fades from my side until only her hand is left resting over my wrist. The bandage is wet when she tugs.

...

On the way home, it begins to rain.

REDICK, CLAIRE**Claire Redick**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Robert Kohler

Category: Dramatic Script

Oliver**Act 1, Scene 4: OLIVER**

Spotlight on OLIVER who stands on an empty stage save for a chair and a full-length mirror. He is facing the mirror, turned enough so that his reflection is outwardly visible, but not so much that his back is completely turned to the audience. (Throughout the scene he'll interact with the glass, as if he's having a conversation with himself. Aside from explicit stage directions, the ways in which he does this are entirely up to the actor.) He's haggard, in loose-fitting pajamas and bare feet. He drums his fingers on the glass.

OLIVER

You know that which I do not, cannot, know.

He points at his reflection, accusatory.

Nothing's written yet, and so it remains.

He taps his foot on the ground, gaze fixed to the floor.

That which I saw, merely an eclipse of the
Mind, a fault of sight, that perception
Which often deceives those of little wit.
I confess to be neither sharp of mind,
Nor of a disposition that would refute
A claim such as this, for I am most meek.
Yet in this tender hour of soft nightfall
I relay the details of what I saw
Only for this poor, tattered reflection.

(beat)

It was not John who murdered Andrews.

He looks up, meets his reflection's eyes.

It was night when I stole down to the docks.
I sought a boat, surely a sea trip would
Clear my mind, cure my fevered quivering.
It was but four days after I fell ill
With a terrible cough that wracked my very
Bones with its treacherous, heaving demands.
My sister bade me go to the sea and
Converse with the quiet spirits on the water.
She is young but well versed in medicine
So I heeded her request, left my warm bed
For the misty, sea-sprayed docks down below.

It was when I unlatched the boat that I
 Heard a scuffle...thudding and boot-scraping.
 I thought to take a look, perhaps it was
 Merely a dispute over fish prices.
 But when I ventured over I could see...

He shakes his head.

It was quite dark, mind you, and my eyes,
 They lose more sharpness with each coming day.
 But I swear, for shame, I saw my brother
 Fighting with a younger man, Andrews.
 I knew him from the market, a fine man,
 Though he did charge far too much for his goods.
 Perhaps that was the reason for their fight.
 I know not, only that my brother brought
 Far more than his fists, for in the dim light
 There flashed a blade I had not seen before.
 I had little time to examine it
 Before it was buried in Andrew's side.

(beat)

He took the knife, left Andrews to be found.

He begins to gesture at the mirror, reasoning with himself.

But, but perhaps, it was an accident.
 In all my years in this house, I've never-
 I've never known my brother to be a violent man.
 But then again perhaps it was not him.
 As I have said before, my eyes fail me.
 Were it him, such disgrace would fall on us.
 We would be exiled, murderer's kin.

He has an idea.

If I were to relay to them my tale,
 Surely I would be a hero, and my
 Family extolled for serving justice.
 But, alas, I love my brother too deeply
 To throw him to the wolves in such a way.
 No, no, if I must tell them of a murder
 Perhaps all that must change is the murderer.
 The sour old fisherman, Higgs is his name,
 Now that would be believable, yes, yes.
 His capacity for hatred is well known,
 And my need to confess overwhelming.
 It works nicely, doesn't it? The town
 Has a place to push their blame, and I, well...
 I'm just telling the truth...or a version.

He exhales and the lights go down. During this blackout OLIVER changes into a shirt and trousers with shoes on his feet. The chair moves downstage. He sits facing the audience, the mirror from his apartment has been flipped and now sits beside him as one-way interrogation glass. His hands are folded in his lap.

OLIVER

Do I possess knowledge of his killer?

He looks to the side, catching his reflection's eyes in the mirror, guilty. He turns back, says this line straight to the audience.

Of course...it was irrefutably...

He pauses again. Will he really say it? Will he implicate the wrong man? He blurts out the next word.

Me.

[END]

REDICK, CLAIRE**Claire Redick**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Robert Kohler

Category: Dramatic Script

Layla**Act 1, Scene 1: Layla**

Lights up on our bride, LAYLA BROWN, standing on a raised platform stage left. She wears a gaudy wedding dress sans veil. She plucks at the fabric of the gown, twists it this way and that. Her friend, SADIE MINOUGH, is dressed in casual pants and a blouse. She pokes through a dress rack on stage right.

LAYLA: Sadie.

SADIE doesn't respond. LAYLA raises her voice.

LAYLA (cont.): Sadie!

SADIE startles and looks over her shoulder.

LAYLA (cont.): Whaddaya think of this dress?

SADIE: 'S nice.

LAYLA's grin drops.

LAYLA: That's it?

SADIE shrugs and continues thumbing through the rack.

SADIE: It's not my wedding.

LAYLA: I'd appreciate some input, is all. I didn't drag you out here just to have a conversation with the wall.

SADIE: Well, what'll Frank think?

LAYLA: I didn't ask Frankie. I asked you.

SADIE looks LAYLA up and down. She shrugs.

SADIE: It's flattering.

LAYLA: Mmm I thought so too.

SADIE: Sleeves are a bit much.

LAYLA: Why?

SADIE: Too...

She gestures vaguely in a circular motion.

SADIE (cont.): Poofy.

LAYLA inspects herself in the mirror, toying with her hair and turning to look at every angle of the dress.

LAYLA: I dunno, I think I could pull it off.

SADIE snorts.

SADIE: I certainly couldn't.

LAYLA: Well I'm not you, am I?

SADIE's eyebrows shoot up. Her next words are harsh, she's meant to have a sense of satisfaction from the fact that she lacks the careless vanity of her friend.

SADIE: No. You sure aren't.

SADIE walks back to the dress rack on stage right and resumes her browsing. LAYLA continues to examine herself until she notices that SADIE is no longer looking. She stares at her for a moment. "Oh."

LAYLA: Oh come on Sadie don't be like that.

SADIE doesn't respond. LAYLA waves her arms wildly in the air above her head. Nothing.

LAYLA (cont.): Look out there's a fire!

Still nothing.

LAYLA (cont.): Sadie, come on. I didn't mean it that way.

Still nothing.

LAYLA (cont.): I met Princess Diana on the street last week.

SADIE fights a laugh.

SADIE: Nice try.

LAYLA: Okay...my hair isn't naturally this color.

SADIE: Mhm, strike two. I already knew that.

LAYLA: Alright, how about I don't want to marry Frankie at all.

SADIE turns around.

SADIE: What.

LAYLA turns back to the mirror. For the following conversation, she never takes her eyes off herself. She fixes her hair, adjusts the dress, pulls at her face, anything to keep her hands busy, and her eyes off of SADIE's reaction. SADIE slowly crosses back to LAYLA's half of the stage

SADIE: Layla what.

LAYLA: Maybe I could get them to take off the sleeves.

SADIE: Layla.

LAYLA: I like the bodice quite a bit. I think I'll have it tailored.

She has a thought.

LAYLA (cont.): Oh! Did you hear about that murder down on Fifth? It was on the news just this morning. So sad. They have no idea who did it.

SADIE: I heard. Layla, why don't you want to marry Frank?

LAYLA shrugs.

LAYLA (matter of fact): Well he's a mean old drunk, for one, but what have I got if I haven't got him?

SADIE: You've got me. Layla, I'll go to bat for you on this in a heartbeat. Just say the word. We can call it all off.

LAYLA: It's alright Sadie. 'S not your mess.

SADIE: To tell you the truth, I never liked Frank.

LAYLA: See, you've got that luxury. I don't want to go to the trouble of backing out now.

SADIE puts a firm hand on LAYLA's arm.

SADIE: Because of what Frank might do? Or because of the money?

LAYLA is offended at that implication.

LAYLA: It's not about the money! And it's not like I gotta stay married to him forever.

LAYLA turns to look in SADIE's eyes for these next few lines and her demeanor switches, she digs this next line in deep, partially to change the topic, partially to make SADIE feel as embarrassed as she does.

LAYLA (cont.): Careful Sadie, if you want me to leave him so bad, I might drop him on you when I've had my fill.

LAYLA barks out a laugh. SADIE looks appalled. LAYLA pulls back but just keeps on going, emotions building, almost hysterical.

LAYLA: Or! Or! We *do* have a murderer in town. Less of an ordeal to be sure. God bless the 8AM news! Maybe he'd off another one for enough money!

SADIE (quietly): Jesus. You really hate him.

LAYLA realizes what she's saying and shrinks back.

LAYLA: *(Beat)* Of course not.

SADIE: You're talking about killing the guy.

LAYLA: Not seriously, come on. I'm not a murderer.

SADIE: Right, but apparently you'd hire one.

LAYLA: No, no. I was joking.

SADIE stands silently, skeptical.

LAYLA: Sadie.

SADIE: Hey, you said it, not me.

LAYLA: Sadie I swear, I could never kill a man. Directly or indirectly. It was a joke.

SADIE: What's the saying? Many truths are told in jest?

LAYLA rolls her eyes.

LAYLA: I don't want him dead.

SADIE: Then what do you want?

LAYLA glances at herself in the mirror, then quickly looks away. Any trace of her former vanity is replaced with shame at her outburst. She speaks quietly now.

LAYLA: I have no idea. I really don't wanna kill anybody. I don't know why I said that.

SADIE: But you want out.

LAYLA: Maybe, I don't know. The ring's nice. Frankie's nice.

SADIE: You said he was a mean old drunk.

LAYLA: Only like thirty percent of the time. Besides, he went to Pennsylvania for college, Sadie. He's a smart cookie.

SADIE: So?

LAYLA: So he's got...prospects! And he looks nice in a suit and maybe it'll work out fine.

SADIE: I'm not sure you should get married on a maybe.

LAYLA: Why not? This dress is a maybe and I'm buying it. You said you'd "maybe" be here today and you came.

SADIE makes a face.

SADIE: If I remember correctly I said I'd "never" come dress shopping with you.

LAYLA: See? And then you did anyway. Even better. Hand me that veil?

SADIE picks up a bridal veil from the rack and brings it back to LAYLA who places it on her head.

LAYLA (cont.): There.

She preens in the mirror.

LAYLA (cont.) Plus I'd never miss a chance to wear this in public. It'll all work out, hon. Don't worry 'bout me.

[END]

RENFRO, ISABELLE**Isabelle Renfro**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Basehor-Linwood Middle School, Basehor, KS

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

You Are Enough

You ARE Enough

Various thoughts arise when people see social media. Some people think, *Am I pretty enough? Am I smart enough? Am I tall enough? Am I interesting enough? Am I fast enough? Am I loved? Am I talented enough?* People often compare themselves to others. They see pictures on social media of teenagers, adults, or even kids using filters to make their photos look better. When they see these photos, people think they have to compare themselves to those who put the filters on their photos. People should not have to think these thoughts because everyone is enough! We were all made for a reason, and we were all put on this Earth for a reason. Most teenagers in this world have social media. Social media is putting things into childrens' brains to make them feel horrible or show that they are not enough in this world. Not only does that lead them to poor thoughts, but it also can lead to more horrible things. Teenagers should not have to think that they do not belong on this Earth. They should think that they are wanted and loved. Have you ever thought that you were not enough in a sport or activity that you were doing?

It was Thursday, September 23, 2021. The air outside was calm, it was not too hot, but not too sunny. I woke up early, ready to kick off my day! I could not stop thinking about the cross country meet I had later that day; I knew that it would be challenging. I thought that I couldn't accomplish it because of how difficult it was going to be. I got up out of my bed, went to the restroom, brushed my teeth, and put on my outfit for the day. I could not wait to go to school, so I could finish my day and attack my cross country meet.

The day started great! I walked to first period with a couple of my friends. First period was amazing. We got to work on our assignment around the room with our friends. After first period, the bell rang for second period (which was choir). I walked in the doors, grabbed my stuff, and sat down waiting for class to start. Our teacher said to everyone, "Alright, let's warm-up shall we." Everyone stood up and started doing the warm-ups. During warm-ups, I still had the thought going through my head about my meet. I finished second period, and then I was off to third period. I got to third period, and when the bell rang, we started our bell work. We went over bellwork and started reading our book. When we were done reading our book, it was time to leave. I went to fourth period, then fifth, then sixth, and finally, it was seventh period. I could not wait because it was almost time for the office to call out the cross country team. I sat there waiting and waiting as the clock kept ticking, tick...tick...tick. The intercom rang, a subtle voice came on and said, "All cross country runners please report to the commons area; again, all cross country runners report to the commons area."

After a long ride to the meet, we were finally there. When the bus pulled up to the stop, everyone was excited but nervous because of how many hills there were. When I saw the course, I started getting worried because I thought I was going to be last place and not make it through. We walked down to the tree where we put our things and began walking the course. The course was going to be tough, but we had to push ourselves to our limit. When we got back to the tree, it was time for us to get ready for the race. Usually, the 7th-grade girls would go first, then the 7th-grade boys, then the 8th-grade girls, and finally the 8th-grade boys. Today was different. The 7th and 8th-grade girls were running together, and the 7th and 8th-grade boys were running together. The girls' race was first, so we gathered everyone up and did a warm-up jog, and then stretched like usual. When we were done with our warm-up, it was time for the race. It was time for everything we had been training and waiting for. We walked up the hill to the chutes where we started the race. It was time! We did the traditional breakdown and said a prayer. The man with the gun said, "Girls, how this is going to work is I am going to say runners on your mark and shoot the gun, do you understand?" He stepped to the side and said, "Runners to your mark." Boom the gun went off, we all started running. I said to myself, *You can do this; you can do this.*

Halfway through the first lap of the course, we had our first downhill. I strode out, sprinting down the hill passing a couple of girls. Then we went around a corner, and now it was time for me to drive my arms up the steep

hill. I told myself at the top of the hill there is another downhill after this flat straight away. After that first hill, my legs were tired; I started looking around at the other runners thinking I was not as determined as them. Another thought popped into my mind as I went down the next hill; it was a thought that I had before. It was about how I did not have the power to finish this course. I had to remove that thought, but I just couldn't. I couldn't get rid of it. I was almost done with the first lap, and now it was the second lap. I kept thinking that I was not good enough, but all of a sudden, I got this strange feeling, a feeling that made me go faster. For the first time throughout the whole course, I felt like I could do this. I had already run the course once, and now I just had to run it better than ever before. I was done with the first hill. I drove my arms up the hill and then came down the next hill. The finish was right around the corner, and I knew it was going to be tough because it was a straight-up hill. I got to the bottom of the hill, and my arms were driving faster than they ever had before. My legs were climbing up the hill. Sweat dripping down my face, spectators cheering me on. I had done it! I had accomplished so much that day. When I got past the finish line, I was so relieved. I gave my friend a hi-five and said great job. I got my stuff and walked to my car.

Later that night, as I took a shower, I thought to myself, *Did I accomplish that goal I had been striving for?* Next thing I knew an email popped up on my phone. It was the results. I clicked on the email and saw my time. I got a personal record! I rushed downstairs to tell my parents; I was so happy. I thought, *Wow, I really should not have been comparing myself to the other runners, because I tried my hardest to get a personal record.* I learned quite a bit that day about how I should not compare myself to others because everyone is different, and everyone has struggles. You have to power through those struggles and believe in yourself. With that thought in mind, you have to remember as you go throughout your life that you ARE enough. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

ROBISON, CAMAY**Camay Robison**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Blue Springs South High School, Blue Springs, MO

Educator: Daniel Mathis

Category: Flash Fiction

Warmth

The chat box between me and you is open, the little light next to my name blinking to show that I'm here. You type a message about how you feel lonely and I respond back saying I feel the same way. We both know each other's stories by now – you, agoraphobic and afraid to leave your home, and I too introverted to make new friends in real life. You message me again about how you wish somebody could give you a hug. My chat bubble pops up for a little bit, waiting as I finish my message. Suddenly, the bubble disappears and instead there's a join call message. Clicking it, you watch as my face fills your screen, a tired look on both of our faces. We smile at each other for a minute before my eyes glance away and a message pops up on the corner of your screen.

"Put your hand on the screen."

Obediently, I put my hand gently on the warm screen, watching as you do the same. I type with one hand in the chat.

"Why?"

"We're both touch starved."

If I think hard enough, I can pretend the screen is your warm hand resting against mine and we both sigh quietly. I type in the chat again, our hands still pressed against each other's.

"Yeah."

RODRIGUES, IRA**Ira Rodrigues**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Ladue Middle School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Natalie Zook

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

No Time Left**No Time Left**

Captain Zada Thindrel buckles herself into her seat and secures her helmet over her head. She pats the cool metal of the *Liberty* machine. “Are you ready for this?” she murmurs to the metal surrounding her.

No answer. But the *Liberty* is not a humanoid. It is dead metal, so it cannot respond. Captain Thindrel is okay with that, though; the humanoids have always freaked her out a little.

She flips a switch and her beloved *Liberty* hums with power. An automatic computer display shines *Closing Doors. In. 300. Seconds.*

In her head, Captain Thindrel begins the countdown. She can still remember the High Scientist’s face as he solemnly told her: *300 seconds, Captain. Not too soon and not too late. We’re dealing with a highly sensitive atmosphere, not to mention manipulating time. Everything must go according to plan.*

They certainly picked the right person for the job. Captain Thindrel is the most reliable Flight Captain in the Underground. There is no one better to save the human race, unless you count the humanoids. And she doesn’t count them.

280 seconds left.

A blast from the Surface shakes the *Liberty* machine; its tungsten exterior is built for this, however, and it holds firm. The captain’s chair whips back and if it weren’t for her seatbelt, she will go flying into the back engine room. Another meteor hitting the Earth. Captain Thindrel doesn’t know how long her planet will stay stable, now that the toxic pollution gases have destroyed the atmosphere. Beloved Earth has held out for 8000 years; the prediction is that it will last another two months. This is considered generous.

250 seconds now.

Over thousands of years, humans have been polluting the air. When the 6000s rolled around, they had migrated underground after it became lethal to stay on the Surface, when the Smog covered everything and everyone. That marked the New Era, when Earth became dangerous to live on. They’d taken the most precious robots, the humanoids, down below the Surface. There is only so much space underground, and humans were (still are) top priority. The rest were left to die.

How many is that? 230 seconds?

Captain Thindrel’s fingers tremble on the controller. Her skin is a shocking green— this is because of the poisoned water all the humans have to drink to stay alive. There’s all kinds of toxic things above ground and the noxious fumes have seeped into the safe haven under Earth’s crust. It’s gotten into everything, including the humans’ supplies of water.

The pollution is taking its toll. The average human is smaller and weaker than its ancestors; only a small part of the price that they pay because of early mistakes.

The global community is watching her now, the captain knows; they are all desperately hoping for salvation.

200 seconds.

The *Liberty* is going to change all that, because it will save the Earth. It is a time machine. The captain is only going to rewind the Earth’s lifespan 6000 years, back to the ancient times of the 21st century. With the *Liberty*, humans can continue their polluting ways and never have to face the consequences. All of humankind’s problems will be solved!

Captain Thindrel believes in this feverishly, as do the rest of the humans. It is their last hope.

183... 182... 181...

A blast shakes the earth once more, but this time it is much closer. Captain Thindrel gasps in fear, hearing chunks of meteor pelt *Liberty*’s exterior. And then she hears a horrible *thump* noise.

What just happened?

She unstraps herself from her seat, switching her helmet to danger mode, and goes to investigate.

~~~~~  
172 seconds.

The captain moves cautiously to the back of the machine. She flicks on a light switch and yells, “Who’s out there?!”

She hears an electronic whirring.

“Show yourself!”

Finally, a tiny figure in tattered rags appears from behind one of the engines. It raises its hands, palms upwards, to sign: *I come in peace*.

Captain Thindrel sucks in a rattling breath.

It is a humanoid.

No, worse. It is a Junkie.

The Junkies are humanoids that were left to rot on the Surface. They are robots, so they can't be destroyed by the polluted Smog that covered the Earth... but they'd inhaled the fumes for so long that they are nothing more than corroded metal. They are not worth any attention from the humans.

How did one manage to get on the *Liberty*?

“What is your name?” Captain Thindrel demands, hand hovering at her side. A highly explosive grenade is attached there; if she decides to throw it, it will wipe out the humanoid.

The Junkie starts to move closer.

“Don't – stay where you are!” the captain's voice wavers, revealing her fear. “Answer my question!”

“07604,” the Junkie replies in a voice that fades in and out, in and out. Junkies are modeled to what their human owners wanted them to look like. This one has dry, withered brown hair that hangs limply from its robotic head and huge blank circles for eyes. It has metal the color of yellowed paper.

“How did you get on my ship?”

The robotic head tilts and whines, as if it can't understand the question. Then it repeats, “07604.” It is saying its call number, one given to every robot when they are created.

“How did you survive this long?” Captain Thindrel feels a headache start to pulse at her temple.

It repeats, “07604.”

The captain gives a groan of frustration. “Say something else!”

The Junkie whines again. “07604.”

A distant *blast* sounds from somewhere far away and brings Captain Thindrel back to reality. She has forgotten the count.

There is no time to throw the grenade, so she decides to take the Junkie with her to the 21st century and kill it there. Feeling sweat bead on her brow, she races back to her seat and buckles herself back in. How much time has passed?

She guesses close to 2 minutes, which means she has only 30 seconds or so left. Captain Thindrel hits all the power switches and grabs the controller.

The *Liberty* roars with energy. Captain Thindrel can feel it buzzing at her fingertips. For ten precious seconds, her mind is illuminated with possibility.

What if she rewinds time further and exposes the humans living in that period to the inventions of the New Era? She can become a queen!

No. *Stay focused*, the captain chastises herself. *Everyone depends on you now.*

15 seconds left. Her hands close around the controllers. She is ready.

10... 9... 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...

The *Liberty* shudders into high gear. It begins to spin.

~~~~~  
Something is wrong.

The captain has always had a sense for danger (it's the number one quality that the government looked for when they recruited her), but this is different. She feels something much more than regular fear.

Panic.

The *Liberty* chokes in the middle of its spin and then it rapidly reverses back the way it came. “No, no, no!” Captain Thindrel wails- or at least she tries to. The *Liberty* is traveling at such high speed that its occupants are moving in slow motion. She can only form the first syllable of her cry before the *Liberty* is dragged back into a portal. The captain unleashes a desperate yell, reaching for the controller, but she is too late and too slow. Time is against her.

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“Wh-what? Where are we?” The captain steps out of the *Liberty* in shock. She knows for sure that this is not

the 21st century, because the Earth in that time period does not match the Earth she sees here. In fact, she's not sure if this is her home planet at all, because she can breathe the air as normally as she would in the Underground.

She stands on silver metal and stares out into miles and miles of nothingness, wondering if she's failed, wondering if the *Liberty* is damaged, because how else could she be sent here? The captain has never been one for patience and this is the last straw.

When 07604 emerges from the *Liberty*, Captain Thindrel's anger ticks up a few notches. The Junkie doesn't have a scratch on his body.

Her explosive grenade is still intact. Maybe she should throw it at the humanoid, see how it reacts.

The Junkie follows the captain's gaze to her belt, where the grenade is attached, and then moves closer. The metallic voice of it speaks, and this time it does not say the call number. "Peace, human. Do not attack."

Captain Thindrel goes weak at the knees. "You can speak?!"

07604 makes a screeching sound that the captain decides to take as a chuckle. "Most of us humanoids have lost the ability, because we cannot function on Earth any more."

"And here, you can?"

"Yes." 07604 pauses. "We are in a time warp. Your primitive machine will not carry its passengers any further."

The captain wants to pace, but she doesn't feel comfortable turning her back on the talking humanoid, so she pours out her frustration in words. "What do you mean?"

07604 sighs. "Although the machine can travel through time, it is not built for more than one passenger." The metallic voice is unemotional when it says this, but the robot's white eyes seem to be staring right at her, trying to convey a message. "It cannot carry a humanoid any further into time."

Captain Thindrel gets it now, and it's making her mad. "So you're saying that since a Junkie decided to hitch a ride on my time machine, I'm stuck here in this time warp?"

The robot twitches when she says the word 'Junkie,' but does not react further. "That is correct."

"Then it's simple." The captain rubs her hands. "I'm sorry to ask you of this, but I'll make sure you're honored greatly for your... sacrifice. I'll come back to collect you when I've saved the human race."

Words slip past her lips; that's all they are. Empty promises and transparent lies. *But it's for humanity's survival*, she reminds herself.

"There is a small problem with that," 07604 ventures.

"What is it now?" Captain Thindrel doesn't bother to hide the disgust in her voice.

"You cannot leave this time warp without my help.

A second of silence passes.

"Explain!" Captain Thindrel demands when she recovers from her shock.

"We humanoids have been programmed with knowledge of all robotic things. Unless you use my help, you will be trapped here forever."

The captain is at a loss for words, so she growls like an animal. "What do you want?"

07604 pauses for a moment. Now Captain Thindrel is sure of it- that disgusting Junkie is staring at her directly.

"We humanoids would like to be saved along with the human race."

"B-but..." She feels like she's grasping at straws, because she can't find any good reason why she should say no. She's thinking: *this wasn't part of the plan!*

"You said the machine could only hold one passenger..." the captain trails off.

"If you take the machine back to our time period and alter it so that humanoids can also travel with the humans, we can fix the Earth together," 07604 suggests.

Captain Thindrel is at a loss for words. She has always followed the plan- that's part of what makes her such a good captain. And the unspoken rule in their polluted world has always been that humans come *first*, not their metallic counterparts.

07604 waits for her decision with patience. The captain hates to admit it, but this Junkie is making her nervous. Had she known the robot was able to act so... human...

"Fine," she says. "I'll take you back with me. We'll alter the *Liberty*."

07604's robotic voice does not change when it says, "Many thanks, human," but the yellow-paper metal wrinkles a little bit around the blank eyes, like it's trying to smile.

This unsettles the captain more than their entire conversation.

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They board the *Liberty*. Once again, Captain Thindrel begins the 300 second countdown. She waits in silence, but her mind is overturning the proposition from 07604...

She can't fathom the idea of trusting a robot. In all their history, humans have never trusted the humanoids, ever. It's part of the reason why they left the Junkies aboveground.

On some level, the captain understands this is wrong. But she doesn't want to be the one to stand against it.

Time slips away from her. She wavers between doing the right thing and doing the wrong, but she gets confused.

How can she be moral? How can she be virtuous? These are lessons that she was never taught.

She's lost 4 minutes already. With a deep breath, Captain Thindrel gets ready to start the machine.

07604 is turned away from her, clearly vulnerable as it works on the *Liberty*. A devious plan forms in the captain's mind. It's tempting.

"I am done, human. We can go back now," the Junkie says, leaving to stand near the back of the machine.

The captain thinks desperately of all the good things that could come out of saving the humanoids, but the benefits of this insidious scheme are too much for her. Shame colors her cheeks because she's going through with the plan anyway.

There's only thirty seconds left when she stops the controller. The *Liberty's* humming slows to nothing.

07604 spins around, and the look of pure, unadulterated fear on its face almost makes the captain put the brakes on her plan.

Almost.

The Junkie doesn't even have time to react and much less defend itself, because Captain Thindrel unlatches the grenade. She presses a button for the *Liberty* to open its doors to the time warp's blank nothingness, and then she throws the bomb with perfect aim.

It explodes, blasting 07604 far away, unleashing a tiny portion of diluted Smog that Earth has in full supply. Captain Thindrel shuts the door and tries to forget about it, but she can't help seeing 07604's wide open eyes and betrayed expression, the silver metal limbs reaching for her even as they are shattered. The Junkie has no personality, but the captain feels like she has just killed another human. Ruthlessly.

She feels like a monster. To help deal with it, she reminds herself of the sad state of Earth, how it is doomed to die in two months, and how she knows that rewiring the *Liberty* will take too long. It is time she is not willing to sacrifice.

It's for humanity's survival. But these four words— once the motto of the Underground— now seem as empty as the promises she made to 07604.

When did she begin lying to herself? She doesn't know.

In silence, the captain powers up the *Liberty* and travels into time.

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Uninterrupted by interfering robots or a malfunctioning *Liberty*, Captain Thindrel is filled with the same exhilaration she had earlier, only a million times stronger. At last, she can do her duty to the human race. At last!

This time, there is nothing to stop her when the *Liberty* floats into time.

It takes a long time for her and the machine to rewind time 6000 years. But finally, she sees the outside window of the *Liberty* flash with a watery image of 21st century people, getting clearer by the second. Captain Thindrel feels tears flood her eyes as she takes in the scene. So many people, with healthy skin tones ranging from pale to dark. The sky is blue above them; there is no Smog in the air; the captain even glimpses a *lake*, filled with crystal clear water, and *plants*. It's so beautiful, she feels like crying.

She is so close.

Then the *Liberty* freezes. It spins. And then it smashes right back into the 8000s.

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Later, scientists explain to Captain Thindrel that because of a quirky law of nature they didn't know about, the *Liberty* was doomed to fail on its mission, even with 07604 gone. A sacrifice that she forced it to make— for nothing.

Time has rules around it, laws that the humans disregarded when they built the time machine. Once the environment has been damaged beyond the tipping point, you cannot fix it by going back in time and restarting. There are no second chances.

The only option left is to abandon Earth and find a new planet that is habitable. But all the hopes of humanity were pinned on the *Liberty*, and when that failed, there is no time to create rocket ships or penetrate the Smog that has wrapped Earth in layers of poisonous gas, with only a month left in Earth's life span. So that leaves the humans of the 8000s with no other options.

In the end, it isn't a strange construct of space that destroys Earth. It isn't a giant solar flare or a black hole or a nuclear war that is at fault when the planet finally collapses. It's the humans who are to blame.

And they can't fix their mistakes. There is no time left.

ROHDE, ELLA**Ella Rohde**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Troy Buchanan High School, Troy, MO

Educator: Whitney Wood

Category: Critical Essay

Patriarchy: A Prison Based On Gender

Patriarchy: A Prison Based On Gender

During the height of the Civil Rights Movement, lawmakers in the United States passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned discrimination based on race, religion, or sex (Malladi and Mean). Even though this act made strides toward equality throughout the nation, women in America still faced patriarchy in everyday society. When defined, patriarchy means male domination in society and politics, and is often derived from gender stereotypes throughout the traditional household. Moreover, male domination can lead to issues such as assault, catcalling, and sexism (Verniers and Vala). Throughout the past twenty years, the contrast between the treatment of men and women has been studied by researchers and activists alike, with an inadequate result in any change (Malladi and Mean). Patriarchy exists as a barrier toward women which benefits men, creating discrimination and disadvantages due to their sex.

First of all, patriarchy supports inequality based upon gender, especially through discrimination and hostility in the workplace. For instance, a study examining sexism's impact on female hireability found that when a male interviewer showed signs of hostile sexism, the female interviewee was less likely to be hired (Warren). Due to the prejudice caused by patriarchal beliefs, women often face unfair microaggressions that can keep them from opportunities or even society at large. These microaggressions may include use of sexist language or jokes as well as unwanted name-calling. Another example of male and female discrepancy is shown through women being held back from important political and educational conversations. A female college student stated in an interview, "When I was in college I was a philosophy minor and when I took all these classes, I would raise my hand to ask a question and the male professors wouldn't call on me. And then you know then they'd call on these guys" (Demetrakas). To simplify, women are more likely to deal with underestimation caused by the sexist belief they are inept.

Furthermore, patterns of male power in American society take away female opportunity, specifically, through the gender pay gap. In fact, in 2018, women earned 85% of what men earned according to hourly earnings of full and part-time workers. Based on this, it would take an additional 39 days of work for women to earn what men do. Not only does this mean that women have to work more to advance or even be considered "equals" in the workplace, but also have to put in additional effort to be considered financially equal to men as well, further fuelling the inequities of patriarchal society. Additionally, lack of female compensation puts women at an extra risk for falling below the poverty line (Malladi and Mean). Lack of female consideration when it comes to pay supports increased restraint of some women financially, as getting out of poverty can be very difficult. On the other hand, there are people who believe that since the gender pay gap is closing, it is not an issue anymore. However, according to Verniers and Vala, "The global gender gap across education and economic opportunity and politics has closed by 4%, while the economic gap has closed by 3%. Extrapolating this trajectory, the report underlines that it will take the world another 118 years- or until 2133 -to close the economic gap entirely." Although the pay gap is closing, it will take an extended period of time and will likely have long-lasting negative effects, including financial instability.

In addition, the superiority complex of male status caused by patriarchal views has led to lack of female representation in top jobs. As a matter of fact, a study of 42,000 United States executive pay records revealed that women earned 45% less than men and only represented 2.5% of the executives included in the sample (Malladi and Mean). To clarify, women are undervalued in the workforce due to the belief they have less skill in male-catered tasks. This is not only demeaning toward women, but is also wasteful, as employers should be hiring individuals best suited to jobs. Having said that, some Americans believe that the underrepresentation in the workplace does not

exist, as women are still able to find jobs. There is some legitimacy to this, however, it can also be a strenuous task to advance in the workplace. For example, a study found the higher male participants scored in hostile sexism, the more likely they were to recommend a male candidate over a female one for a managerial position (Verniers and Vala). Not only does this mean that it's hard for women to get good jobs, but it's also hard for them to get promotions because of the idea of female underestimation surrounding sexism, reducing overall opportunity.

Moreover, hostility toward women has a negative impact on mental health, specifically through abuse. A Toronto survey of 600 people asked women about their husbands' behaviors in relation to their beliefs. The results indicated that husbands who believed in patriarchal ideology were more likely to abuse their wives than those who didn't believe in sexist ideas (Smith). Patriarchal ideology supports power over women, explaining the dominance some men believe they have based on their sex. Furthermore, the need to keep this control and dominance is what drives abuse and assault, which is trauma inducing for the victim. Not only does this violence occur in domestic environments, but it can also appear at work. One day, a female restaurant employee clocked into work, expecting a normal shift filled with making salads and doing dishes. She was just fifteen when a male customer sexually assaulted her. The employee now lives with the trauma of her assault, stating, "Fear follows me to work. Even though he (the man) has been banned from the restaurant I still look for his face constantly and it's embarrassing because none of my coworkers look at me the same" (Diemer). Unfortunately, this is the reality for thousands of women every day, as they have to take extra precaution to feel safe in everyday situations. And when women can't avoid dangerous situations, they are often left with trauma. Abuse and assault leave people feeling as though they have to live life looking over their shoulder, constantly in fear. It's psychologically crippling and something no one should have to experience.

While there are many negative effects resulting from sexist behavior, there is disagreement on the motivations of these behaviors, with some people arguing that sexist actions result from a desire to protect women. This idea is derived from the term benevolent sexism. To explain, benevolent sexism is the attitude that women should be cherished because they are weak compared to men and therefore unable to do things on their own (Warren). What these people don't take into account, however, is the fact that women are very independent; they are able to work, go through higher education, and start businesses all without help. Benevolent sexism is an excuse for men. To elaborate, benevolent sexism is the justification (some) men make to continue patriarchal behaviors they've been taught, which is a shame.

From the lack of opportunities in the workplace, to the microaggressions faced in everyday society, patriarchy embodies a hurdle based around gender. Patriarchal stereotypes stem from traditional domestic beliefs, leading to a male superiority complex over women. This, in turn, leads to discrimination, exclusion, and larger issues such as assault, which can cause psychological trauma. However, instead of teaching women to fear men, society should be teaching men to respect women, and see them as capable individuals. Women will no longer have to fear men once they begin treating women as humans.

ROLAND, KATHERINE**Katherine Roland**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Personal narrative

The Feeling of Glitter and Guilt

I craved affirmations from others as if they were oxygen on a faraway planet. I took pride in what others thought of me instead of who I knew I was. I would swell with pride when a teacher pinned my work to the board at the front of the classroom and would beam with joy when another student told me, "That was the best cartwheel I've ever seen!" I made sure people knew *I* was one of the good ones.

The second grade was no different. Mrs. Brandon's class is one that is extremely memorable purely because of the strange events that occurred that year.

A particular girl in my class -- we will call her Amanda -- has stood out in my memory for the past 6 years. This is because she was in possession of one of the coolest things -- to a 7-year-old, girly-girl, artist -- ever created. Glitter crayons. Crayons filled with glitter? Even now I think we can all agree that's kind of amazing.

I didn't really have a true relationship with this girl, and sometimes I regret that I never reached out to her, maybe that is why I didn't have a problem doing what I did right off the bat. *'Well if I don't know her, this won't hurt nearly as bad.'*

For longer than I am currently willing to admit, I had stalked those crayons with the personality and 'skill' of an eagle. I thought I was the new James Bond because I was feeling pretty proud of myself for the plan I had composed.

During Independent Reading Time one fall day, I silently smirked as I looked up from my book. Pushing my pride down, I raised my hand, "May I get something from my crayon box?" My poor, poor teacher nodded, completely unaware of my strategy.

The way this classroom was set up, all the students kept their crayon boxes in this cupboard beneath the whiteboard. Due to our last names, Amanda's box was conveniently placed beside mine. I squatted in front of the cupboard and took a deep breath. Cautiously glancing over my shoulder to where the teacher was sat, I began my heist.

My plan was simple and I carried it out as such. Amanda kept her glitter crayons separate from the other things in her box, meaning all I had to do was take the cardboard box out and place it in mine. Did I do this? No. I removed every last crayon from the stiff cardboard and returned said box to its rightful place. I then delicately implanted the gorgeous utensils into my box. This means the box was left empty! That is beyond psychotic! Who does that?

I sighed in satisfaction from the waxy residue that had been left on my fingertips. Bits of glitter remained there, itching the sensitive skin. This meant I had gotten away with the one thing I wanted. And it was good... right?

I returned to my seat as if nothing had happened and went on with my day.

A problem arose when art time came around. Every student retrieved their boxes and began drawing. I vividly remember drawing a hand turkey. According to those around me, I went through a bit of a phase.

When Amanda discovered her desolate box, she solemnly brought the box to the teacher, tears threatening to fall from her eyes. Once I saw her speaking to a person of authority, the color drained from my face. Mrs. Brandon's eyebrows furrowed, clearly concerned for her student.

"Has anyone seen Amanda's crayons?" The class shook their heads in unison. 'We' began milling around the room, our eyes scanning the floor. While the other students honestly searched for their classmate's lost property, I squirmed inside my skin. I knew, however, they were safe and sound inside my flowered crayon box.

Eventually, guilt overtook me. I gathered the coloring supplies in my shaking hands. Never allowing my eyes to leave the ground, I brought myself to the teacher.

Scrunching up her face, Mrs. Brandon peered down at me, red hair falling in front of her eyes. "Kate? What can I do for you?"

Shyly, I muttered, "I found these." I lifted the crayons toward the teacher and I heard a soft gasp leave her lips. When she asked me where I had found them, I replied with a simple answer. "In my crayon box."

Mrs. Brandon then shook her head disappointedly, "We cannot steal things from our classmates."

My stomach churned as guilt filled my heart. I nodded, swallowing hard.

After gaining control (somewhat) of my thoughts, I asked her, "Are you going to call the principal?"

Sighing, she answered simply, "No."

"Are you going to call my mom?"

Again, "No."

Feeling vaguely confident and calm, I returned to my seat, silently praying I wouldn't get in trouble. Maybe I convinced myself I was safe. Maybe I knew something was coming and it was not good.

What happened next still haunts me in my dreams to this day. My eyes widened when the abnormally tall principal waltzed into the room. I pretended to continue on with my work as the teacher conversed quietly with the man. She would periodically glance at me while she spoke, causing my gut to twist.

The principal nodded after a period of time and strolled confidently towards my shaking figure. "Can you come with me for a moment?" He asked. I wanted more than anything to say no and jump out the window to ensure no one would ever be aware of what I had done. But I knew better than to rise up against a person of authority, so I stood and followed him out of the classroom.

The walk to the front office was silent and awkward. My classroom was down the longest hallway, on the bottom floor, of a three-story building. Where was the office? In the very front. This means I was forced to take my walk of shame past the 5th graders muttering 'oooooh' tauntingly and kindergarteners gazing questioningly up at me.

I chewed on my lip when I entered the office. My heart pounded while the principal slowly interrogated me, "I have now been made aware you have stolen something from a classmate." When the man got no response from me, he pressed further. "Why would you want to do this?"

A pit remained in the depths of my stomach as I answered, "I wanted them to like me."

He sighed solemnly, almost sadly. "That doesn't give you an excuse."

I mumbled a quiet, "I know."

The man placed a piece of paper in front of me as well as a pencil. "Write an apology letter to Amanda," He told me.

This is exactly what I told this poor girl on this lined sheet of paper. “I’m sorry I took your glitter crayons, Amanda. They looked cool and I wanted them. I won’t do it again, I promise. Sincerely (which was most likely spelled wrong because I was... 8 years old), Kate.”

This event altered the way I viewed the world and the way others viewed me. When I returned to the classroom, the atmosphere had changed drastically. The same students who watched in awe as I performed a perfect cartwheel looked at me with a sense of sadness. They were surprised their ‘golden girl’ had slipped from her throne made of grace.

To this day, I continue to be bewildered by how much the way my classmates saw me changed my view of myself. I crumbled the moment they turned up their noses. It was as if I had been denied all oxygen on the Earth. I was lost without their positive feedback and that can cause crippling self-doubt. From the looks in their eyes, I came to the same conclusion they had long before me. The ‘perfect one’ can indeed fall from grace.

All names used in this essay are purely fictional

RUI, YIMAN**Yiman Rui**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Tex Tourais

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Reflecting on the Past with Tai-Tai

When I was five years old, I was sent to live with Tai-Tai, my great-grandmother. It was a four-hour drive from Shanghai to my hometown. I watched as the skyscrapers and apartments became smaller and were gradually replaced by mountains and fields. I did not realize we had arrived until the jerk of the car stopping woke me from my dreams. A tall, mesmerizing house with sharp corners stood proudly outside of my window. A traditional proverb echoed in my mind: “Nothing can be accomplished without norms or standards.” Surrounded by the freedom of the broad green fields, simply looking at the cubic structure made me feel restrained.

Moved my feet out of the car, I followed my mother and she rang the doorbell. When Tai-Tai, a gray-haired woman in an azure Qipao shirt, opened the door, an enthusiastic, off-white puppy ran across the dirt and tackled me to the ground. I was holding my mom’s hand. She pulled me up from the ground and dragged me closer to Tai-Tai, and I forced my lips into a smile. Although she smiled back at me, I was frightened by Tai-Tai’s blind-gray eye and her sternness. My mother and Tai-Tai spoke in a dialect so unfamiliar that I thought it was another language, and I worried what would happen when my mother left. She placed my hand in Tai-Tai’s palm, and Tai-Tai took me to my room. There was nothing complicated or fancy in this standard-sized room, inducing in me a sense of confinement.

My fear of Tai-Tai became more intense the next morning when she told me the story of Nang, a green-eyed bird monster who lived in the mountains near the cemetery and fed on mischievous children like me. That morning, and every day after that, she would refuse to let me play in the fields while recalling the story of Nang. Afraid to leave the house, I would watch cartoons or count the clouds in the sky. I did not like living with her—she forced me to stay inside while she worked in the rice fields. She chattered about philosophy and history, subjects that I did not understand at the time. What I did not realize then is that she would be the only person who could connect me with my country’s history and culture.

When I was 10, while we were cooking dinner together, I mentioned a trip to Japan for summer break. I was shocked by Tai-Tai’s response. Her hands stopped peeling the edamame, and she suddenly turned her face to me: her eyebrows down and together, eyes glaring at me, lips narrowed. The story of Nang flashed through my mind—Tai-Tai’s facial expression mirrored the monster’s.

“You won’t have fun there. Everyone in that country will be rude to you. I have to tell your mother to reconsider the trip.”

I tried to pacify her by changing the subject, but she held up her hand to silence me and continued to rant. “You don’t understand the true nature of the Japanese. They are not what you think they are. They are all thieves who stole and copied our culture. As you can see, there are still Mandarin characters in Japanese writing.”

I sat frozen as she condemned all Japanese as merciless and treacherous. I listened as she kept calling them “small Japan” and “small Japanese.” Her words punched me in the face, and I regretted ever wanting to visit Japan. Frustrated and confused, I finally yelled, “Stop talking about them like that!” My eyes were hot with tears.

She did not do anything but simply said: “Follow me.” Tai-Tai walked upstairs slowly, and I followed her steps, my heart pounding in my chest. The moment I stepped into her typical Chinese-style room, I smelled the ancient, engraved rosewood furniture. Her room was dim, plain, and tidy. At her command, I sat straight-backed on the edge of her bed, watching as Tai-Tai found something in a drawer—a lollipop, which allowed me to calm down a little bit. With the peach candy in my mouth, she began her story.

“The Second Sino-Japanese War was one of the bloodiest wars and periods for us. The Rape of Nanjing is the war’s most unforgettable event since many civilians were killed. When I was a child, Japanese soldiers invaded our small town. Everyone was screaming, escaping, and falling over each other. RED—blood, fire, and a torn Chinese flag—filled my eyes. My parents were killed that day, and my sisters started to take care of me.”

Suddenly, her previous reaction started to make sense: since Tai-Tai was born in the 1930s, her experience during the war shaped her attitude toward the Japanese. She believed all Japanese were as brutal and ruthless as the

soldiers she remembered so vividly from the war.

Tai-Tai's lips trembled, and she tried to calm down by taking a deep breath. She reached underneath her pillow and brought out a bangle, displaying it for me to see. It was intricately engraved with the word “吉祥” or “Goodluck,” but there was a conspicuous crack on the characters. Tai-Tai held my hand and slid it on my wrist, her hands shaking. My hand was dragged down a little bit by the bangle, and the atmosphere became more serious with the weight of it pressed on my wrist. Tai-Tai stared at the bangle and sighed, “My sister's left arm was injured, and one of my brothers was killed by the soldiers. Fortunately, I was not severely wounded because the bangle protected me from the saber. This, the ‘Goodluck’, saved my life. Without the bangle, you may not even exist.” When I heard the words “not exist,” my mind went blank, and my body froze. I could never fathom living through the violence she experienced as a child. “There was also a man who fought against the Japanese soldiers and saved enough time for us to escape. With some help from adults, my sister and I ran into a mountain, where there is the cemetery that you see today. When there was an invasion, we would head into the mountain, and we felt safe because the darkness, created by the bushes and trees, shielded us from the world and embraced us.”

The peach flavor became more intense in my mouth, and I smiled at Tai-Tai. I was suddenly not afraid of the mountain anymore because I realized it was the “guardian angel” for the people in the town. Nang wasn't a monster. It was the fighter that protected my family. I patted Tai-Tai's hand to make her feel better. Either the smile or the patting worked because she cracked a soft smile and rubbed her vibrant eyes with her palm.

“What do you think of Chairman Mao?” she asked.

“He is monumental and judicial. Chairman Mao led the development of our economy and made everyone's life better. He established modern China,” I said, repeating what I'd read in my textbook.

Tai-Tai laughed at me. “You are not wrong but also not absolutely correct. A man will never be perfect. After the war, the Republic of China was established and Chairman Mao strove to improve citizens' quality of life through the Great Leap Forward, but it was a period when our family suffered a lot. In your textbook, it might say that Chairman Mao helped develop China's economy; in reality, the program led to the devastating Great Famine in China. Families at the bottom of society, like us at that time, suffered a lot from the famine. I used to have four children, but two of them passed away due to starvation. I hope you never understand what it is like to see your children gradually die and know you could do nothing to stop it. And do you know why your grandfather joined the army at that time? It's because our family could not afford enough food for him.”

Betrayal rose in my chest. I twisted my eyebrow and looked at Tai-Tai, not sure what to ask. Why did the government lie to me about the history of China? I did not realize the depths of the lies until I moved to the United States for high school in 2018. The sensation of doubt haunted me when I first learned about the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests during my freshman year. The event was never mentioned in any of my textbooks in China. It's absurd that the information about the events is so limited on the highly-censored Chinese internet. As a result, the history I learned in the US connected to Tai-Tai's personal experience. Even now, after several years, I want to understand the purpose of the Chinese government hiding the truth from citizens.

Although anyone can guess the reasons, the answer to the question is not clear. There is one thing that I have to keep in mind, especially when it's about my country's history. Whenever I see the bangle on the bedside table, it reminds me of Tai-Tai and her stories. Because there is no record in books or access to such information on the internet, much of the history of my country has been obscured. It turns out that only the people who lived during the period could acknowledge the facts. My conversations with Tai-Tai bridged the distance between me and the true history of China. The bangle, which she bequeathed to me, reminds me that I ought not to forget the true history of our country.

I started to understand Tai-Tai's outburst better at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. People started to discriminate against Chinese people because they thought the virus was the fault of the entirety of Chinese people. I felt uncomfortable, afraid that people would isolate me, abuse me, and even attack me solely because of my race. Stories about murders and assaults fueled by Asian hate angered me since I project their experience on myself, triggered me to relate with Tai-Tai: when I reflected on my experiences in the United States in 60 years, would I be as irritated and resentful as Tai-Tai, and have the same feeling she held for the Japanese?

When I was home because of COVID-19, I brought my questions and confusion to my Tai-Tai's grave on the mountain. I swept aside all the leaves, put a peach-flavor lollipop in front of her grave, and reflected on our conversations. I complained about the fear I felt in the US and asked her how I should react to this situation. Do I need to be defensive? Or just ignore it?

My questions were met with silence...and this was the reply I needed. There is no right or wrong answer to the question. No matter what I do, there will be someone who thinks it is wrong and someone who thinks it is right. My Tai-Tai, once again, helped me understand the world—and my place in it—a little bit better.

SCHACHTMAN, ARIEL**Ariel Schachtman**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: David H Hickman High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Poetry

Poems about Death**Radioshow Blues**

Hexagonal
 stripes.
 Litter my bedroom floor as I
 sob
 reachforyou
 The letters dry my skin to (sand)
 paper.
 I eat them, scooping handful after handful, bugs under my
 tongue. crawling down,
 down
 He was the split tongue press of a needle
 over my n e c k. So cold I could (have) ...
 burst.
 (Touch) your petal pink palms
 To mine,
 Sink between my vertebrae like a
 V i r u s.

Body

The crickets are boisterous tonight. Clicking themselves to a stupor and I struggle to hear your heartbeat under mine, the nightly orchestra our only company. You wrap your fragile bones around my back and I take it, basking in the half dark cold-night gloom and when the night has sweated itself to silence, I brush back your hair. Paper thin and translucent, spider web veins track dark trails from the corners of your eyes. A witches crow's feet. I can see them even in shadow.

When I comb your hair you don't speak, fingers against the grey coiled curls coming apart and flailing themselves to the water. They regard me with stony silence, the contempt litters the bathroom floor. My knees are raw from kneeling.

Your skin smells like almond paste, like washing cookie dough off your hands, out between your fingers but sticky sweet still in the cracks. Will I learn to hate that smell? Will I turn from it when a woman passes me on the street, the red copper sting of bile rising to greet me, hands in my hair like an old friend? Or will I crave it, lap it up from eager palms and roll myself between your dollar store perfumes, hoping for a shred of memory in return.

An old dog. You are an old dog, crooked spine humped under thinning skin, soft eyes and those grey whiskers they get? You know, all up their muzzle? You bleed into the mattress and I close my eyes.

Death Repurposed (A Comprehensive Guide)

Part 1. Credentials

I grew up in nature. In creeks and run offs with mud sewn into my plastic rain boots, frogs in my hands and a summertime smile curling my lips. My mother churned out fossils beneath her fingers and owl feathers in her hair as I built fairy houses from river softened bark. I learned how to see. To let my body simply exist, bathed in the cool, sun dried waters. Crawdads peeking their shiny heads from beneath my toes. That's the first step. Learning how to see.

Part 2. The First Step

To some, it comes as easily as breath. Pluck shards of bone from the earth as if they were placed there just for you. Time is best spent in nature, combing creek beds for anything and nothing and there you'll feel it. In the space between each lungful of air, the world will open itself. There are treasures under the surface. Bone brushed white by rivers and rubbed raw by the earth, and once you can see them, they'll come to you unbidden. You'll learn, and the more you learn the more you'll find.

(Bargaining never works. The earth needs nothing of your promises and coaxing. This is not a trade, but it's not quite chance.)

Part 3. Location

The where is just as important as the how. Abandoned creeks still flooded with fish, the pit fall edges of streets that trail into hilly obscurity, a hunter's dumping grounds (each step reeking of innocent death). Or beside a highway, where the grasses lick stripes into your ankles and the sun aches over the back of your neck. They lie there, a myriad of white. Knotted piles of bones, bleached by heat as well as the elements. This is the prize, each delicate vertebrae, edges extended like feathers cross an angel's wing.

Tips and Tricks for Vultures and Scavengers

Strip it with soap (*Dawn*, clear and unscented) for a few days. Clearing grease keeps the bones preserved and cleans soft tissue. Then, move your charge to a solution of hydrogen peroxide and water (1:1 ratio). This bleaches the bones for display, or other such uses. Go with respect.

Part 4. Explanation

Let the bones sit with you. The life of something *real*. Something that ran, and breathed, and loved, skin just as taut as yours or mine. It is a meditation, to sit with nature, a clearing of the mind and a focusing of the body. Nature is proven to heal, and as it works, you too give something back. The bone travels from life to death back to life again under your hands. It's repurposed, recycled as it wouldn't be in the wild. To be human is to encounter loss. But transforming that decay into beauty is an artist's prerogative.

SELF, JOELLE**Joelle Self**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Basehor-Linwood Middle School, Basehor, KS

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

It Started With A Click

It Started With A Click

It began with the click of a button...an action so simple and mindless. Something people do hundreds of times a day on their phones, computers, and tablets. How could this action, so utterly insignificant, start a downward spiral in my mental health and lead to a life-changing event? I simply did not see it coming. Nor did my loved ones. My parents created boundaries on my devices from the start, thinking they would protect me, but I laughed off the notion that using my new phone and tablet would change or impact me negatively. I was wrong.

I vividly remember the excitement and freedom that came with my first social media app. I remember the confidence I felt as I started my YouTube channel, the feeling that I might fit in with my peers more, but inevitably with this came a flicker of regret. My parents allowed me to watch videos on YouTube, but having a channel that I published content to was against the rules. The regret I felt was a little voice of reason I ignored, as I hid my phone under my hunched stature from my parents. That little gnawing thought that asked, *Are you thinking this through? Do you really want to do this?* Throwing aside caution, I grabbed a fluffy blanket, needing comfort, and started my channel.

Without fully realizing the negative aspects, I entered the world of social media, and at first, it was fun. I made and published my first video, started on my next one, and continued to devote more of my daily time each day to a screen; all while hiding it in the shadows from my parents. It was so easy at first because we were all home at the beginning of the COVID pandemic, so we were all spending more time online in order to create social connections and learn how to do work and school in front of screens.

The first click and then “like” one of my videos received was like making a new friend. The more time I spent online, I felt a confusing mix of acceptance, and also a sense that I was lacking compared to others posting similar content. So many teenage girls my age experience this. As developing young adults, we tend to become fixated with it, craving attention. We feel we need it. The need to see if my content was well-liked was a constant gnawing sensation. I’d wake up in the morning, and I’d rush to my phone, wondering who commented on or responded to, one of my posts. I felt like if I wasn’t around it, I’d miss something. It evolved into fear, anxiety where I felt trapped and alone. My stomach started to hurt frequently, and I started to worry about the smallest things, and that was just the start.

As the positive reactions to my videos started to come in here and there, I was so excited, so lifted by it. I felt on top of the world, talented and complete. The anxious stomach aches stopped for a second, and the gnawing ceased. The clouds that rested on my emotions like mist cleared, and I scrolled, looking for more comments, craving more for a sense of self-worth. If there was a notification that I’d received a comment, I quickly read it.

The first was from a person who produced similar content, preferring little skits and animations like me. They commented about loving my video. Wanting to return the kindness of the comment they had written, I responded with thanks. From this, we continued to talk until we grew into “friends”. Literal strangers who would not recognize one another in a coffee shop, but connected by a common interest. This person invited me into their group of online friends in chat rooms, and I felt like I belonged.

For a while, it felt harmless. I’d stumbled into a group of fellow creative individuals. At first, the conversation was around those common interests and ideas for more videos. However, social media is like an awful friend. The more you hang out with a harmful influence, the more you start to act like them, and that relationship can shape you into someone you are not. The optimistic person I was before started to change, and I became more irritable, confused and self-conscious. Unhealthy patterns sprouted like ugly weeds, and I couldn’t tear them out. I was stuck in them and ended up sneaking my phone into bed everyday to talk to people I barely knew anything about. Staring blankly at a screen and refreshing over and over, desperately trying to feel acceptance and connection.

I struggled to pull the weeds out of my unhealthy lifestyle, constantly going back for more. This new online

group of “friends” began to share their negativity with me, straying from our original purpose of creativity to social drama. I was blind to any good happening in the world around me, only becoming ungrateful, looking for the bad. I felt alone, even when my real friends messaged me. I didn't listen to reason, and I turned my back on the people who loved me in a selfish act of doing what I thought was right for me. Not only did the drama get to me, but as I watched everyone else’s pages continue to receive love, I began to feel inadequate if my numbers did not match theirs. Even though I did not receive negative feedback on my posts, my mental health suffered more and more watching others’ channels grow in followership. My feeling of self-worth declined while I was constantly with people I had never even seen face to face.

I'm not alone in this experience. According to a study, using social media activates a chemical called dopamine, a “feel good” chemical related to social activity and other fun activities. Social media is designed to be addictive and impossible to stay away from for long. It is found to be associated with anxiety, depression, feeling left out, and creating the habit of comparison in everyone who uses these platforms. This leaves the 69% of adults using it, and the 81% of teens using social media, exposed to feeling negative emotions.

Those statistics don't even include cyberbullying. As my time went on with the platform, the people who I considered my friends on the app started to tell me terrible things about myself that weren't true. They started to leave dislikes, acting like they had mislicked or didn't mean to in the first place. They stirred up drama, making me feel small and not good enough. The identity I held so dear to me before was now completely redefined, and what was once optimistic and bright was now a person that, if I looked in the mirror, I would see a familiar exterior but have no clue who I was anymore. My confidence had taken a beating. They became intrusive, personal, and told me I wasn't worth much at all. I was at rock bottom, and debating a decision I could never take back. I felt emotionless, unable to come back up. I could see no light at the end of the tunnel, and for the first time in my life, I could see no happy ending. I felt hopeless. Alone. Emotions that were unbearable.

Thankfully, I was discovered. One day, just before school started for seventh grade, my mom found out what I had been doing without my parents' knowledge. They took my phone and my tablet and had long discussions with me about having healthy boundaries and safety measures in place in order to earn them back. It was a long healing process, one that included seeing a counselor, but I wasn't angry. I was secretly relieved and felt loved. It was the chance to grow wiser and regain self-confidence.

One truth that was hard to grasp at first was the fact that failure is not the end. It's an opportunity for growth. Years after my experience, I've gained so much perspective. I've learned lessons that have given me tools to move forward and to help others to move forward as well. Just because I did something wrong in the past doesn't define me today. You do not have to dwell on the negative. You can decide to move on and experience something greater. We all make mistakes, and we can't keep letting the weeds in our garden grow and pretend they are not there. As humans in today's social media-obsessed society, what I went through is an unfortunate reality, but awareness means we can become positive influences. Many of us worry about the future, anxious, scared, or stuck, oblivious to the opportunities that the present provides. There is hope! No matter your situation. So put down your screen, and take a mental health break once in a while. It's never too late to change course. Just keep your head high, and wait for things to click.

SHAH, DEVEN**Deven Shah**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Flash Fiction

The Glove

It takes a lot of courage to stand there and take a bad grounder. You can never predict where they're going to bounce, and yet it's still flying, bounding, leaping at you. The baseball threatens to blow my head to pieces, but my glove will protect me. No matter how hard the ball is hit, it will always be there to protect me. But it isn't just the batters hitting grounders at me; the other kids always hit them hard and without warning, and they always make sure I know that more are coming. But the grounders coming from Mom and Dad are always hit the hardest. And they hit me the hardest.

I walk into the house and hear the shouts of yet another argument. I rush through the entryway, past the living room, and down the hall to my room. They don't even notice me. I dump my raggedy backpack on the bed in a tizzy and reach underneath for my glove. As I study it, I slump onto my pillows, and the memory rushes back to me.

The first time I held the glove, I looked around, my eyes darting back and forth down the alleyway, expecting someone to come and take it from me—Just like everything else. It drooped in my hand, its soft leather worn with scars from where the leather was cinched. There was a dent in the pocket of the glove from countless catches. The glove had received much love in its long life—I envied that glove. Then, I realized how ridiculous it was to envy an object that had just been cast away, forgotten, or lost. I raised the glove to my nose and sniffed. It smelled like leather, oil, and hope. I slipped my hand into it and punched my fist into the middle. It made a soft pop and the glove collapsed around my fist. It was perfect.

As my memories fade and I come back to reality, my glove is there, now sitting on my lap, as if waiting patiently for me to return. I hug the glove close to my chest and take a breath. My nerves start to settle and my heart pounds a little softer. This is far from the first time I've rushed past the living room, afraid to look in and see what's inside. It's almost like I think that, if I can't see what's happening, then it isn't happening. But I can still hear the sounds of angry shouts no matter how I hide. Mom and Dad argue all the time, but even so, I never get used to it. It still hits as hard as it did when I was nine, but I'm not angry at them. They left their lives and family behind when we left India for America. And they did it for us; my sister and me, and all our future children and all our descendants. They did it so we could live better, happier lives, with more opportunities. They made the ultimate sacrifice—for me. It makes me pressured to do something great, make a difference, and make the world a better place. But I'm still a kid.

I walk across the hall, the shouts still filling my ears and the glove still held firmly to my chest, and I walk into my sister's room and close the door behind me. She looks up at me and knows the pain I'm feeling. She puts her textbook down and meets me in the middle of the room and wraps her arms around me, the glove now pressed against both of our chests. We separate, and I look between her loving face and the glove in my hands. I place the glove on the foot of her bed and walk into the living room.

The sound stops, and my parents look at me tentatively. Their faces are flushed and their eyes are sad. "I love you," I say, and a single teardrop falls from my cheek and onto the carpet. I walk over to where they sit on opposite sides of the couch and spread my arms wide, inviting them to wrap their arms around me. When my sister walks in to investigate the sudden silence, I beckon for her to come and join us. She wraps her arms around us, and we stand there, the four of us holding each other tight. I never want to let go.

SHI, JASON**Jason Shi**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Ladue Middle School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Velma Valadez

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Mosquitos

“I gotta say, this house is not as nice as I thought it would be,” I say as our car pulls into a narrow, concrete driveway with leafy green grass growing out of the cracks. My eyes dart from a faded brick wall to a large flat roof, and finally a bristling bush with branches shooting out at odd angles like a pufferfish. Bark peels off a drooping birch tree veering away from the road while a vine strangles a streetlamp, its woody green branches enveloping its iron pole.

Sitting beside me, Alvin stirs. He stretches his arms, blinks and looks around, then drags his fingers across messy brown hair. “Wha– are we here?”

I roll my eyes and step out of the car, but my right foot catches on the doorframe.

Lurching forward, I shoot out my hands and collapse onto the pavement. I scowl, a thin scratch glistening with blood across my palm. “Alvin! Is there a band-aid in the car?”

My brother’s eyes widen as he hops back into the car and rummages around in his seat pocket. Finally, he pulls out a box. “Here.”

I snatch the box out of his hands and remove a band-aid, laying it down over my injured hand and rubbing it to make the adhesive stick. “Alright, Imma go check out the backyard.” I turn, massaging the scratchy fabric.

Alvin grabs my arm. “You’re forgetting something.”

“What?” I turn back around.

He shoves a bottle under my nose. An acrid, lemony scent wafts through the air. “Mosquito spray!”

My nostrils burn. I swat the can away. “Absolutely not. I don’t need it.”

“But...” Alvin hesitates.

“It’s *fine*, Alvin. I’m not going to die.” Pushing past him, I stomp into the yard. Alvin returns his attention to the lock on our new door. Overgrown grass tugs at my shoes as I pass vines crawling up a wall, a squirrel scurrying past a patio, and dead leaves whipping across the red-shingled roof. I stop outside a glass door at the back of the house. Dead branches litter the yard. Moisture clings to my skin. An orchestra of insects buzz– a cacophony of short hums intermingling with louder drones– while our neighbors’ lawnmower grumbles behind me.

An itch springs up on the back of my hand. I glance at it. A welt blossoms up from my arm. I claw at it, quelling the itching before another prickling sensation crawls up my leg. Smacking it, I lift my hand to see a crushed mosquito splattered across my skin, blood splashed around it. I start walking, jogging, running around the house to the front door, slapping my arms and legs. Black dots flit around the trees, the bushes, and the shadows as I leap into the house and wrench the door shut. Collapsing with my back to the wall, I examine splotches of red covering my skin.

“Back already?” Alvin rushes up to me, clutching a canister of mosquito repellent, the surface emblazoned with pictures of leaves and bugs.

“There were a zillion mosquitos out there,” I say, extending my arm with the bite. “Look at this!”

“Uhh...” Alvin frowns. “I hate to break it to you, but you have a lot on your legs too.”

I glance down. Little red patches decorate my leg like berries on a branch, each one throbbing with its own tiny itch. “Aww...” I start scratching my legs, my nails gliding over every bump of every bite.

“I *told* you so.” He shrugs. “But, late is better than never!” He raises the canister and points it at me like a gun.

“Wait! No! Stop!” I throw up my hands and turn my head away as Alvin shoots a blast of mosquito repellent at me.

I look down. Latticed across my legs, thin red stripes sting, inflamed by the spray. I glare at him. “What did you do that for?”

“Oh, right! My bad.” He slaps his forehead with his palm, then walks over to the door and puts on his shoes.

“Wait, where are you--”

He leaps out the door and presses the trigger, coating bushes and grass and trees with tiny droplets of dew that

glimmer and spin.

I yelp, then run out after him, wrenching the canister of repellent away. “Alvin! WHAT are you doing?”

“You told me that I couldn't spray it inside!”

“Well, I didn't say that you could spray it outside either!”

Trudging in, Alvin kicks off his shoes, muttering under his breath. “*So confusing... spray outside... unfair...*”

Suddenly, harsh whining emits from a stubby bush positioned to the side of the door. It lifts into the air. A bee. Black and yellow stripes streak across its body as it flashes toward me. “Alvin get down!” I yell, leaping over the threshold. The door slams shut. But not before- “OW!”

A stinging pain lances through my leg. I wince, blinking away tears. Carefully, I reach down and prod a growing purple bruise with my finger, then suck in a sharp breath. Wincing, I kneel to untie my shoelaces. A creak tremors through the floorboard, and Alvin darts in again.

“Don't worry bro! I found the itching cream!”

For a moment, there is silence. Leaves wave back and forth in the wind. The pungent smell of mosquito spray clings to my nostrils. Finally, I sigh, rub my wound and take the cream from his hand.

“Thank you, Alvin.”

SMITH, EMMA**Emma Smith**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Southern Boone High School, Ashland, MO

Educator: Emma Nichols

Category: Poetry

A Box of Chocolates

If you gave me a box of chocolates, what would I do?
Maybe I would thank you
for your gratitude,
savoring the slivers of tart raspberry jam
tucked away in my cheek
and admiring the pink drizzle

I would keep the box under my bed,
inside the plastic bin labeled
Memories
Because even though that moment
of love
passed, like a moving picture resetting
in my movie theatre mind,
my throat guiltily pauses
for one essence in time
over the thought that you may-
one day-
be erased off the cast list
titled
Complicated

But maybe, I would throw it away
Burn ribbon twisted bridges
Just in spite of your brainless, smug satire.
Sweet swirling smoke twirls blissfully through my throat,
but amber glimmering flames
flicker to strawberry kissed breaths,
I would be left with the lingering aroma
of distasteful sugar invading my home.
The fuschia jam,
sticky in all of its disgusting fascia,
taunts my flesh,
daring it to flow beyond what I have marked and measured.
I would assume you think
my favorite color is pink
The color of blush, you would say.
The color of hives, I wish I corrected.

My blurred eyes follow your choppy movements
in the reflection of salted droplets
sprinkled on the heart shaped box,
Like a looking glass

I watch your unsettling hands tie the pink case
with laced chocolates.
I assume you like strings
as your intrusive fingers manipulate the fabric
to fold under weightful promises.
The fading tag spits out a name
sounding something like mine,
but I know
this version of me
would never accept such a pitiful gift.

Maybe I'll write a stupid poem
pounding metaphors out of my head,
because how can you compare something
with someone so bland?
I'll pull strings of swoonful words,
words I was supposed to love,
out of my ear with bleeding regret
that I ever stored any of those synonyms in my brain.
I'll be coughing up the complacent bug
that decided to live in my throat, stuck
feeding off leftover, unsatisfying chocolate truffles,
tickling my throat
with beating translucent wings.

If you gave me a box of chocolates
I would wish it to be empty,
as I lifted the lid
watching dreamy hallucinations flutter out of that
Pandora's box
and stick my eyes with splintered pricks
dripping in the poison of
Complaisant women,
the women I regret idolizing.

I would flashback
to the dreams of reconstructing my heart
with gummed frosting,
decorating overbaked trauma
with waxy sprinkles that infatuates you,
the perfect topping for trembling fists.
Your cheeky smile lingers,
like gumdrops disintegrating holes
into acid addicted teeth.
When I give you my reserved hug of gratitude
for a box of shiny cardboard
and overpriced confections,
my eyes dart to the nearest escape route,
because I know that if we depart,
that will be the last time I can enjoy
the feeling of freedom.

SNITZER, MIKAELA**Mikaela Snitzer**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

Evil With a Smile

Let's start with a little bit of math. Picture one-thousand people in a room. Each individual is unique. Two of these individuals share one thing that no one else does- that being, that they're Jewish. These two people make up .2 percent of the whole group, as Jews are responsible for .2 percent of the world population.

Two tenths.

A lot of times, I find myself shocked and melancholic about this simple math. For something that has greatly impacted my life and encapsulated many of my experiences and morals, it is only shared with a fraction of those around me.

Growing up, it proved to be difficult entering the public school system, after attending a Jewish preschool, and realizing that not everyone is Jewish.

"Are you a Hanukkah person, or a Christmas person?" asked my six year old self to my fellow classmates.

Almost every kid scoffed at me in disbelief when they realized that Santa didn't bring me presents on December 25th. I remember feeling my face turn hot and red as I couldn't ponder as to why I was so different from everyone else. I constantly searched for answers as to why the Easter Bunny, a cross symbol, and a man named Jesus had never had any significance in my life. When we learned about world religions in middle school, all eyes turned to me when the lesson about Judaism came around. My history teacher would ask me to confirm certain facts about Jewish history to make sure she was teaching them right. I appreciated the willingness to understand and teach correctly, but I couldn't help but wonder, *Why didn't you take the time to educate yourself about it?*

I've spent my years in school experiencing the envy my classmates expressed when they found out I got eight days of presents, ignorance from my teachers when I explained I was missing school for a religious holiday, and fear of expressing my own religion through clothing, social media, and conversation. These feelings from my peers are valid. It's understandable that something so unfamiliar to them can seem threatening; I wasn't like them. While my peers and teachers likely didn't have intentions of malice or evil, it becomes an evil trajectory because by deflecting the unknown, they can remain content with familiarity. In return, they target evil, unknowingly, towards others in order to diminish uncomfortable situations.

American essayist Lance Morrow states that "evil works by dehumanizing the Other" (Morrow 50). In this situation, I was the Other. In the Holocaust, Jews were the Other. While the Holocaust has been over for 8 decades, it is obvious that there are still relics of societal norms that ostracize minorities of all kinds; I think of them as "mini-evils". They aren't meant to hurt me or make me feel excluded because they've just been generally accepted. But, because of their mass compliance and reluctance to reform, these evils still target me because they're what is perceived as normal.

I was in a store with my mother recently and we went to checkout. The cashier was super friendly; asking how our day was and if we found everything alright. We laughed about how cold it was outside and commented about how we loved the jewelry we were buying. Subsequently, she asked,

"Did you finish your Christmas shopping?"

The smile behind my mask immediately sank and I felt a lump in my throat. I looked at my mom as she also noticeably paused in conversation, but in order to subside any awkwardness, fabricated a tone of relief and said yes. Obviously, the woman was just trying to be nice and create small talk, but her ignorance didn't go unnoticed by me. Her assumption that we celebrated Christmas absolutely fumed me and made me wish we never gave her our money. From the looks of it, she wasn't trying to hurt us, which I completely agree with. But because I'm a part of the mere .2 percent, I was faced with the generalization that everyone celebrates Christmas. Many people would probably tell me to just forget this ever happened because I wasn't being discriminated against, because it's true, I wasn't. The reason I'm not going to forget this though, is because this was yet another instance in which the evils we as humans don't intend have shown through and hurt others. Morrow also states that "evil is easier than good" (Morrow 50).

We as humans stick with what we're comfortable with instead of venturing to what isn't known to us. But sometimes, what we're comfortable with, has proven to be a target to others.

It was the beginning of my senior year of high school. Energy was radiating among our class; everyone was in high spirits, excited to kick off our last year of high school. I was regaining routine in my life after a summer away from home and I was ready to conquer the school year.

It was only two days into school. I had dance team pictures in the afternoon. I walked into the blazing summer heat, plastered in makeup with sweat dripping down every inch of my body while my long-sleeve uniform stuck to my skin. I was itching for the moment we could go back inside and cool off. When it was finally our turn to take the team photo, the thirteen of us stacked into rows while the photographer made adjustments. My coach decided to chime in in order to speed up the process. I had to squint one eye in order to see her because the sun was so powerful. I follow the gestures she made with her hands in order to position us. After trial and error with a couple positions, Coach asked,

"Can we have the front row sit in the 'swastika' position?"

My jaw dropped.

Looking back on the moment, I wish I would've spoken up. I wish that I would've yelled right back at her that what she said was a symbol of Jewish hate and the Holocaust and that I absolutely would not follow that direction. I looked right at my sister as I fought back tears because I was in such disbelief that my coach had zero clue what her words just meant to me. It made no sense to me that she hadn't known enough about World War II and the Holocaust to understand what that symbol can mean. There is a major gap between the generations that lived through the Holocaust, and our generation; so how could it be that remnants of it are still used so nonchalantly in our daily lives without even realizing it? Did it not even cross her mind of what she was referring to?

Later that night I sent my coach a message acknowledging what she had done and how it had impacted myself and other teammates. I was terrified to send it. My thumb inched towards and away from the "send" button over and over as every possible scenario played in my head.

What if I get kicked off for speaking up, what if she doesn't believe me, what if she's actually Anti-Semitic, thought to myself.

It took a week for her to address it to the team.

"I have been made aware that I've said something that hurt specific members of the team," Coach stammered, reluctantly.

I couldn't even make eye contact with her. Her apology was so broad that it didn't even serve its purpose. Not once did she recall what she said, what it means, and how she would change it. Not once did she mention that she hurt the *Jewish* members of the team. Whether she was aware or not, her apology that was supposed to mend the mistake only targeted us more. She held too much pride in her authority to acknowledge her wrongdoing. She was staying in her comfort zone rather than doing more good. Similar to how Milton's Satan exhibited excessive pride despite his evil tendencies, my coach would not submit to me; I knew my confrontation was correct and necessary, but I was not reciprocated the justice I deserved. In *Paradise Lost*, Satan says to himself, "None left but by submission; and that word / Disdain forbids me, and my dread of shame / Among the spirits beneath, whom I seduced / With other promises and other vaunts / Than to submit, boasting I could subdue / Th' Omnipotent" (Milton, IV 81-86). Deep down, Satan understands that he should repent for his wrongdoing. Since he has such a great following from the other fallen angels, the pride he inhabits persuades him not to do so. We as humans commit evil that hurts others in order to maintain comfort and grounding in our lives. We strive to find balance and understanding for all people, something I do believe in. But what I have found to be true, is that while we crave to learn more about ourselves, the world around us, and the difference between right and wrong, it's possible to cross lines that cause us to become malicious towards others due to a lack of understanding and a hesitance to make changes in our lives.

From my experiences growing up in the .2 percent, I've been exposed to how individuals react to uncharted situations. When faced with something considered to be outside, our instinct is to retreat and fight back. I'm a victim of this, but at the same time, I'm very well responsible for doing the same thing to others. It's just our mechanisms. My hope is that we can all learn to value these differences between ourselves instead of projecting evil onto others to protect our dignity.

SPELLMAN, AVERY**Avery Spellman**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Basehor-Linwood Middle School, Basehor, KS

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Rewriting Regrets

Rewriting Regrets-

I've never been the type of person to be scared of a plethora of things, but somehow I'm scared of a shadow. *Crack* - that's the sound of the ball when it hits the bat. "Go 2 go 2," the coach is sending my Shadow around the base path. The ball is thrown to the player as it flies through the air. The Shadow slides into second. **Slap**, the sound the glove makes when it hits the player's leg. Dust goes hurdling into the air. I have seen this a million times. The umpire takes a second to make the call... everyone anxiously waited for the call. The umpire calls safe, and the crowd gets up and cheers. That was the winning run. This is the game I have watched my Shadow succeed in, but I have consistently failed in. My Shadow and I could not be more different. It is the oldest, athletic, popular, pretty one. I am the middle, chatty, smart, nerdy one. That is why I have always lived in the shadows.

From an outside perspective, there is nothing wrong. I have a loving family and an adoring personality. That's why I struggled writing this personal memoir. I have nothing wrong with me, but my biggest insecurity is not visible. It is a shadow I have to live with. I wake up every day in this emotion I can't describe. I have always tried to do my best to get a fraction of the light The Shadow covers. I've always wanted to see a glimpse of the sun behind the clouds. I have never had a movie-like relationship with The Shadow. You know, the type where they are best friends and talk about anything from boys to clothes. Like the cute Disney movie relationship you see. But for that small time you watch the show, you feel like you are transported to their world. For me, it is more of constant competition. It's always been me trying to get out of the shadow of its legacy. This Shadow is an amazing athlete. So much like my dad, my dad is always proud of it. Not that he isn't proud of me; he is, but it's just different with The Shadow. It's hard to describe; you have to live it to see it. I love this figure so much, and that is why I started the journey to see beyond the clouds.

Behind the scenes

I grew up in this shadow, and it was always perfect. From getting straight A's, to having the perfect friends, to The Shadow's naturally beautiful, get-any-guy good looks, that is what everyone sees, and that's not what it is. This shadow has been pushed to its limits, constantly. Drug through the mud, and forced to get back on their feet. It hit a rough patch in middle school but was able to get back from it. It grew so much as a person, and I couldn't be more proud. Unfortunately, this also created a void between us. Then The Shadow got to high school, and my relationship with this figure only got worse.

Love, compassion, kindness, this is what we all strive to get out of a relationship. Being able to tell someone anything, trusting him/her with your whole life. Being able to place your life in his/her hands. That is the "perfect relationship," right? I want that with the shadow, but how do I get to that? What have I done wrong? I want my plan to come to fruition so much. I will do anything to get this seemingly "perfect relationship," but I can't seem to achieve it. Am I the problem? Is it the indescribable, but always there, an emotion I have? Is it this feeling deep inside I have urged myself, my whole life to have?

I have forced this burden and this stubbornness to a point that I can't get this relationship. I can't even describe why I am this way. Instead of giving hugs and words of affirmation, I have built this wall that I feel is one hundred miles long and fifty miles tall that I'm trying to break down; however, it feels as if I am hitting it with a toothpick and not a wrecking ball. I have loaded these thoughts that are so heavy on me. I'm running as fast as I can to get this relationship, not just a mile, but a whole marathon. And yet something, no, not just something, *someone* pulls me back. Not gravity, not force, but my simple mind. Wanting constant competition instead of constant joy and love. I want to be The Shadow so much that it turns into doing things better than it, or doing things worse. I am in constant need of this reassuring feeling. The Shadow isn't the "nerdy one," so I had to be that, to impress it.

When does it ever stop? When will it be enough or at a point you can't handle it? The answer is never. You have to dig deep down and stop playing these mind games. The games are beating you down to a point you can't take it. The only thing that controls you is your mind, *So when does it stop?* I have to get a glimpse of the sun before it leaves forever. One day it will change seasons and simply leave. *But how do I finally admit that I will miss it instead of pushing down my true feelings? When will I admit that it was my fault and not The Shadow's? That it was never The Shadow's fault, yet the conceived person who couldn't get out of it.* need to be able to push beyond this. **No one will win** I've always lost everything because of these silly mind games I have told myself I need to be in. Things don't simply stay forever. I have started preparing myself for this day that the "Season changes." Once it changes, there is no going back. Eleven months until this particular season changes. I have to make up for fourteen years, in eleven months.

Change

So how do you start this journey? I have started by writing...writing about how I feel so The Shadow will know in eleven months what I have felt. Month one was simple:

Dear Shadow- Saturday, October 2- This makes me so sad. I know it's only really a little thing compared to you graduating, but it was sad. Sadly, you will be graduating in 335 days. And this last homecoming made me realize in a year I will have to step by you, and you won't be there. So seeing you and how pretty you looked tonight makes me melancholy knowing it was your last homecoming hurrah. And this is the first entry to The Shadow graduation letter.

Change is something that naturally happens. You change every day, whether it is your clothes, attitude or something small like what you ate. I hate change; I have always hated having to change. I want things to stay forever. My mom always says, "Change is not a bad thing, just a different outcome in life." What if I don't want to change? What if I told you having a family member leave me or die is my biggest fear. How do you deal with such a change? This Shadow is about to change in eleven months. Yesterday, it signed its letter of intent to go to college. Now in eleven months, or 335 days, one of the biggest changes in my life is going to happen. And I can do nothing about it. So that is why I am breaking this barrier, because either I have the little memories, and those fade away. Or I shape up my actions and learn that you have to embrace change. That is one day, or 335 days, your life can change forever.

Moral of the story

There is no Shadow, and it is not really "changing seasons." This shadow is both, literally, and figuratively, about the relationship I have with my eighteen-year-old sister. She is leaving for college in eleven months, and I had no idea how to tell her that I will miss her. And that, I feel as if I have messed up. Maybe it's not something I have physically done, but more of a roadblock between us. It's like putting a door stopper to stop the door, and you keep pushing it and pushing it. The door eventually won't move, and it's stuck. Then you realize you have messed up, and you start to take that stopper out. Just like the door stopper, I kept pushing her limitations. I was so stubborn with her, and I kept pushing her limits, to a point where I never thought she would trust me again or want a tight sister bond. But in the last year, I finally realized that she will not be here forever, and I started to change.

Instead of dwelling on how close her graduation is, I embrace every second she is here. From doing the little things, like going to more of her volleyball and softball games, or going to the store with her, I do all this because deep inside I love her, and I owe her more than she will ever know. She is my idol and always will be, whether she is twenty-three minutes away, or starts her new life with someone else. I will always be happy I have an older sister, and I have realized I need to change before it's too late.

So don't ever take what you have for granted, a sister is more than just a blood-related person. It's a love you can't express. Wherever you go, always remember me, because maybe that shadow I was always chasing is really the radiance and brightness that's been inside me this whole time. The brilliance that your love and guidance has shown me as my sister has replaced the shadow, and in turn, given me the strength to be me and to love you just the same. Love you to the sun and back, big Sis.

SRIHARI, OVIYA**Oviya Srihari**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Hartigan

Category: Poetry

SCHEHERAZADE

If your daughter returned today, you'd say all the words unwritten in your letters, phrases consumed with love and apology and you'd say *i'm sorry i know he has a name i just pretend not to remember but the nice neighbor boy keeps asking about you and i've never forgotten his*. She wouldn't have left if you'd been able to face the damn music and dance, see her as woman-not-daughter, you tell yourself, but you know that's not true. She left in the middle of a monsoon-season thunderstorm, figure moonlit and aglow, wire fingers igniting hair, told you she would be back in the morning and you both knew it was a lie. She wasn't a child when she left that day. It was hard to remember,

when you'd been the one to teach her about choking hazards and strange men, but he sets downed powerlines on the small of her back like there's no shock in forgetting the body one begins with, no better crown to rule in than one of sparks. How loneliness hurts more, now, but how it worsens once you meet among wildflowers, her brown skin an ocean a boy-king could sink his teeth into. You sharpened your sword, tested your swing on another man's daughter, and now your sword is at your beautiful girl's jugular. In court the jester laughs, his teeth slick with blood.

The king's frolicking with his beloved, now, two bodies burning among dandelions, blue clouds for tonight's storm gathering to watch on the horizon. Nights drawled recklessly stretching out in squares of moonlight on the Afghan carpets— she used to read in her mother's favorite nightgown on the living room floor. It had been raining all night, you'd been reading war maps by lamplight, praying come morning the curved blade wouldn't have to fall upon her scarred neck. Till she hurt you, till he took her, till she left in the damn rainstorm, what a dream it all could have been.

She'd pressed a finger to your lips and hummed *this is where it ends* like a spell, did not choke on her words when she swept into the night. You tried to pry them back open and shout after her but she went: leaving, leaving, leaving. A-thousand-and-one nights you do not sleep; the sun returns quietly without notice. You never were your daughter's keeper. This ends in salvation, somewhere, you know.

You buy a beautiful red tombstone for your beautiful sharp daughter, point the sword at your torn chest, and step inside the dug plot.

SRIHARI, OVIYA**Oviya Srihari**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Hartigan

Category: Poetry

AUDUBON

things had been falling from the sky all summer—

(why you don't like me anymore? she not really gone. just wait). but you find me one day after i trip on hot asphalt—getting the mail, of all things—except you're nothing if not helicopter mother now, shriek ripping from your throat and flapping skywards when you see my *it's okay* smile all frothy with blood.

when i walk inside with you *(be careful! so many thing could happen)* there is a different girl lying on the pavement, hollow bones snapped

in all the right places, tire grease matting feathered wings, the dip between her collarbones filling with blood.

in the dentist's chair he asks if i saw the news about that mass shooting of girls who looked like me or spoke like me or could be me and i gargle up gum-ache and sanguine phlegm, thought about how you'd been forgetting lately *(root canal last friday, grocery lists, pennies under the refrigerator)*

somehow still you'd never-not leave the door unlocked all day, perch in the window all night wreathed in lamplight and somber *(what if she needs to be let in?)*, a midnight meal steaming on the table *(what if she come hungry?)* to be left cold and unmoved till morning, plates stacking high with pillow beds of rice and curried vegetables crusting over.

do you remember the springtime? before our world kept trying to end itself, and we'd all swing in the park? the dishes were always half-washed and i always forgot the picnic basket in the car halfway to the pond, and she would twirl in pretty dresses and wear her hair in curls.

the dentist begins to hum some classic, presses a finger to my chapped lips, hooks with his blue thumb, pulls down. the clicking of teeth. thrum of an x-ray. her closet is untouched and the food is growing pungent, i want to tell him to shut up, stop singing, but instead let him excavate, boy playing archaeologist in the sand pouring in beneath my tongue.

her daisy chains and bitten fingernails. one time i caught you going through her diary, poring over it like it could explain the absence, the goodbye, the relief carving of wings etched by way of pocketknife into the cover.

the overhead light is dying and he apologizes and leans closer, metal slides down the molar row, apologizes and says i have a cavity, apologizes and asks if you're in the waiting room. i tell him that you've been forgetting, lately, and he smiles and pretends to understand.

it all feels so new that her mattress is still warm with the press

of her vertebrae and toss of her left shoulder sunken into the sheets, the flutter of a note she left on the bed. she always had perfect teeth. no braces.

when she left you gripped my hand and your lips pressed into a hard line and your eyes went teary bright and i thought you'd never forgive her for growing wings, for the feathers doodled on the edges of the notebook page, the goodwill birdcage door swung open on its hinges and her window a gaping maw, the nighttime her accomplice and her kidnapper.

the dentist asks me about her and i say that she's on a trip with friends, because that's what we tell everyone. I don't tell him that you are the birdcage, that she ripped you open from the inside for her own survival. I don't tell him about her sundresses and curly hair. I don't tell him how some days she'd scream and she'd scream and she'd scream on the rooftop and pray to fly away.

he says he misses her perfect teeth, and i see every morning before school, how she'd brush them till her gums ached,
then bled.

SRIHARI, OVIYA**Oviya Srihari**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Hartigan

Category: Journalism

FEATURE: Navjith Navigates Identity Through Indian Carnatic Music

Soft notes and intricate musical runs rang throughout the temple. Curls of incense hung in the air and colorful flowers adorned temple altars, but in this moment, sophomore Aditi Navjith was the center of attention. Sitting cross-legged in traditional attire before her audience, she sang to celebrate the Hindu holiday of Ganesh Chaturthi, holding out each note to match the beats of accompanists on the flute and tabla. This was the last time Navjith would sing at a religious festival before her move from India to the United States in 2017. The connection to faith and nostalgia of singing in her old hometown makes it her favorite performance to date, but Navjith's music journey started much earlier than the sixth grade.

"My dad always talks about how when I was little, I showed interest in music, which I think is so cliché," Navjith said. "He is really interested in music—he plays four or five instruments and sang in college. My mom is a dancer who could have become a professional. Arts and culture is really important in my family, and it was just a choice between music and dance. For me, it was always music."

Decision made, Navjith quickly began training in a variety of musical disciplines, from show choir to piano to Indian carnatic music, a classical music genre specific to South India. For six years, she has taken voice lessons, and has taken five years of Indian carnatic music lessons with Soorya Performing Arts. However, when Navjith first began carnatic music lessons after moving to St. Louis, it didn't exactly feel like smooth sailing.

"It was really intimidating, actually. I was [singing] with a ton of high schoolers when I was in seventh grade. They all knew each other, and I didn't. I was a tiny seventh grader who just moved from India," Navjith said.

Navjith moved from Tamil Nadu, India—the birthplace of carnatic music—to St. Louis, Missouri. During the cross-country move, she found the time and energy to continue her pursuit of music, and ended up finding comfort in carnatic singing.

"Having that part of my culture, I honestly think it did make [moving] easier, because I had something that remained the same. It was like a constant. I was able to stay tethered and not feel like I was losing everything," Navjith said.

Navjith's persistence in the face of moving paid off, and she excelled even when challenged with more intricate pieces. Carnatic music is notoriously difficult to master—its technical traps and complex runs require intense focus, breath control and the ability to weave back and forth between different keys with ease—but it can just as easily be dismissed by Western audiences unfamiliar with the genre, something she finds frustrating today.

"If I told someone that I did Indian classical music for this many years, it wouldn't mean as much as it would to someone who's Indian. I wanted to quit because I didn't see the point anymore. Performances didn't happen as often because we didn't live in a community of people that appreciated [carnatic music], obviously," Navjith said. "I thought that it was lame because it was not what my friends who sang here did. They all did Western music."

While at times, Navjith feels alienated as a carnatic singer in a world of Western music, her mastery of the genre helps keep her grounded in her Indian culture and Hindu faith. Even years after moving from India, the common thread of music still traces back up her family tree and gives her a way to connect with her relatives.

"My grandparents love that I [sing], and I was able to make them proud," Navjith said. "It made us all close. It was something that we could all bond over, like something that we had in common, something that made my family happy. Since Indian classical music itself tends to be very religious, it reminds me of the temple, and being around family and friends."

STAMATI, FRANCESCA**Francesca Stamati**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Journalism

The Right to Read

SMSD has restricted the use of Project LIT, a list of books that cover sensitive topics like racism and mental health by disallowing teachers to use the list in English classes. This was due to Johnson County parents expressing concern earlier this school year over a Project LIT book, causing backlash from English departments district-wide.

The novel in question, “All Boys Aren’t Blue,” was part of a reading list issued to students by at least one SMSD elementary school, and is currently part of the library collections at Shawnee Mission West, Northwest and East, according to the Shawnee Mission Post.

LGBTQ activist and author George Johnson intended the memoir to appeal to black queer adolescents, and it contains scenes of the author’s first sexual encounters. Multiple parents labeled the novel as pornography and demanded at district headquarters that it be removed from school library shelves, which caused SMSD to change their policy on how parents file complaints in October, according to Fox4.

Now, parents have to take up concerns about books first with a teacher, librarian or principal, then request a district review and ask for a public hearing if they can’t solve the problem at the school level. However, SMSD didn’t explicitly state the policy change was a result of these complaints.

Following the complaints, the district sent English teachers emails in November stating they can’t use the Project LIT list for whole-class, small-group or individual reading choice, or use them in their personal classroom libraries after the complaints were made.

East Librarian Jennifer Robinson and IB English teacher Meredith Sternberg have shared the Project LIT list to students looking for a book to read in the past, but are no longer able to do that. Teachers can still pick books that are from Project LIT and form a longer list with other books as long as they’re district-approved, but they can’t give students the official Project LIT list in class, according to Sternberg.

Librarians from SMSD high schools began using Project LIT in 2020, meeting virtually with students in a book club where members read a book from the list every month. While the Project LIT book club isn’t active at East this year, it continues at other high schools in the district including Shawnee Mission West and South, and school librarians can still use the list because it’s a voluntary out-of-class activity for students.

While they didn’t outright ban the list, SMSD discouraged the use of Project LIT by reminding teachers via email to follow district guidelines and use books from the district-approved novel list in class, according to Sternberg.

English teachers and librarians across the district reacted to these emails by vocalizing their opinions about SMSD marginalizing the voices being shared from the book list and by discussing Project LIT with SMSD staff at the district level in a curriculum council meeting, according to Sternberg. Robinson says that high school librarians responded with emails of their own, giving their input based on what they know about Project LIT to district-level staff.

“All the schools in SMSD were told [not to use Project LIT] and [teachers responded by saying] ‘what do you mean we can’t give them a list of books?’” Sternberg said. “What do you mean we can’t promote these kinds of books in class?”

According to Sternberg, novels that have appeared on the list, which is updated yearly, include “The Hate U Give” and “Clap When You Land,” which contain topics like racial prejudice, gun violence and loss after the 9/11 attacks. These books help expose students to more real-world applicable and controversial concepts.

Despite concerns that some Project LIT books may be unsuitable for school, promoting books that shed light on these topics is important to the high school curriculum as it allows students to learn new perspectives and also feel represented in the content they’re learning, according to Sternberg.

“It sparks conversations,” Sternberg said. “It can reach out to a kid who perhaps feels marginalized, who doesn't feel like they have a voice or representation in what we consider to be standard English curriculum — to put a book in their hands that speaks more to them and to their experience as a core person, as who they are.”

Junior Eero Alber agrees on the importance of reading about these topics in school and doesn’t think school districts should be able to restrict or ban books or book lists.

“I think we should give students every opportunity to expand their horizons and learn more and have conversations about important topics like what’s on the Project LIT list,” Alber said. “Like racism, sexism, sexual orientation, LGBTQ experiences and mental health.”

On the other hand, junior Tommy Marx believes schools should regulate what books are being used in the classroom to keep their curriculum appropriate, but shouldn’t control what a teacher recommends students to read as they did with Project LIT.

“I’d understand if they were saying no to a book because it had explicit content or something like that, I can get behind that,” Marx said. “But not if it’s actually educational. If it’s going to teach someone about mental illness, a racial matter or the LGBTQ community, that’s not explicit, that’s more informative.”

Before SMSD informed teachers they couldn’t use the book list, Sternberg had planned to give her students a project involving only books from Project LIT and compare the topics covered in each one. She has since had to change her project, now using Project LIT as a launching point for a larger list of books that she and IB English teacher Kristin Anderson have compiled, which Robinson will present to students in the library so they can choose a topic that interests them and promote real-world learning.

“I think that it's difficult to say that diversity, equity and inclusion is a huge part of who we are,” Sternberg said. “If you look at our curriculum, it's not that way. And so [the list we created] is trying to sort of offer different values and different views, different perspectives and different cultures, which again, really shake the status quo.”

While parents have complained that topics like those on Project LIT are unsuitable for school, Sternberg believes it’s important to promote books that cover relevant social issues so students can form their own opinion before hearing about it outside of school.

“I think that people still tend to view schools as these places of tradition, and everything must be the same and everything must be very tame,” Sternberg said. “But if I were to bet, there is nothing that’s more shocking in these books than what you would find on TikTok, or Snapchat, or Reddit or every single day on your phone.”

SUN, CASSIE**Cassie Sun**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Judith Miller

Category: Poetry

Dance With Me the Way You Used To**Papercuts On My Heart**

I don't know what to do
 when my best friend
 weeps into my shoulder;
 I sit there with my hands in my lap,
 picking at the ring of debris beneath my fingernails;
 wishing her shuddering sobs would stop
 and her tears would cease.

I don't like the silence between us
 I want to tell her it's okay
 I want to tell her I love her
 I want to hold her
 until the sun rises for her again

I say nothing and walk away.

Later,
 I sit at her doorstep
 The Tupperware sits steaming in my lap
 I rest my cold fingers against it
 and watch as my purple fingernails come back to life

She cracks open the door
 Cautious as her bare feet brush against the cool concrete
 Red lines scorch the whites of her eyes
 An angry sunset
 Her bony fingers reach for mine
 She takes the Tupperware
 Filled with dòushā bāo
 Her face splits
 Cleaving like freshly baked bread
 Another wave crashes over the shore
 Tears are running down her cheeks again
 Like droplets of rain racing down the window

I hand her the pale, squishy bun
It's okay
 Delicately, she bites into it
 Revealing the magenta red bean paste
 Hidden inside
I love you

We sit there
 Staring at the tired sky;
 With each bite
 I know she forgives me a little more
 For being unable to comfort her
 For having no words
 When the silence was too much to bear

There must be a sixth love language
 For no words are strong enough to carry the weight of my affection
 I reach out
 I touch
 I feel her skin, soft, supple,
 Tender like the surface of a petal
 I touch harder but still,
 She cannot feel what I feel for her
 I try to pull her in close with a bracelet, a bookmark,
 Another mark of my love but nothing marks the depth to which I love her

I don't know kisses on the forehead
 Or hugs where no one lets go
 Or the words "I'm proud of you"
 Or celebratory dinners

But I do know blue ceramic plates
 Chock full of apples, and pears, and grapefruit, and strawberries
 Sliced into cubes and garnished with a toothpick
 I know long looks that wordlessly tell me everything
 I know the scent of glass noodles with fish tofu and bok choy on a weary winter night
 And steaming rice cakes at midnight during finals week

I know that with every minute I knead the dough,
 I am thinking about her
I love you
 With every toss of flour; pale snow sprinkling down, coating the scarred table
I love you
 With each ball of red bean paste, carefully piped into the tender dough,
 I am as exposed as I can be
 Shouting the words;
 Letting it tear through the broken skies
I love you

I watch her until the sunset fades into the night
 I watch her lick away the stickiness from her fingertips
 Our eyes meet;
 Hers are still red, but bright with the clear knowledge that she is,
 In the only way I know how to,
 loved.

BFF (Beautiful & Fatal Friendships)

Nobody likes my best friend.

I hear them whisper how they are afraid when she visits them
 In the dead of night,
 In the idle moments

When they are caught unaware

I see the way they avoid her
They hide,
Seek shelter in a crowd of people
There, they think they are safe,
But she comes anyway.

Her visits are phantom for some,
Livid for others
The first time we met,
I was terrified

She let herself into my house,
Into my bed,
Until she lay beside me,
Slipping her nimble fingers through mine
Until we simply *were*

I felt a smile on her lips as she pushed them against mine
And we were
Breathing
And kissing
And then she was
Suffocating me
Stealing the air
From my offering mouth

And I was begging
And pleading
And crying
For someone to stop her
But nobody could come
Nobody could cross the barrier
The 6-feet between us

And so I watched
As she took turns
Suffocating us all.

She confided in me, later
Under the cover of night,
She told me she loved me
Her eyes sparkled with
Hope
And fear
And passion
As she entwined her fingers with mine
Once again

I asked her
Why
She loved me;
Her eyes darted down,
Cheeks flushed
And softly,
Quietly,

She told me that it was because
I wasn't afraid of her.
Because I wasn't afraid
Of the silence
The solitude
The emptiness.

And as I watched the words
Tumble from her lips
Sticky like honey
Seeping out of the jar,
I think
I loved her too.

I used to call her names
Ugly ones
As she crawled into my bed
When the streets erupted in noise
And they all shouted
And no one said a word to me
Except to tell me how the numbers were rising
How they were all dying
And dying
And dying
And dead

I pushed her away
But then there was no one
So I called her back
I called her awful things
I called her
Loneliness

She asked me not to call her that
Last week
As we lay tangled in my bed
3:47 am with the lights off
Just me
And her
And my promise
To call her something better
To call her
Freedom.

SUN, CASSIE**Cassie Sun**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Judith Miller

Category: Short Story

Remembering

RECORDING [ON] 00:00:00

[Charli] “The first time I saw her, she was wearing a dress. This long, maxi dress that went all the way down to her ankle. And there was this little anklet in the shape of an infinity sign, peeking out under the hem of the dress.”

[Luce] “My first boyfriend gave me that anklet on my thirteenth birthday. Said it meant that our love was infinite or some other cheesy line he probably stole off of Pinterest. I always thought it was bullshit. That infinite sign? It meant that I was fucking immortal. Yeah. That’s what I decided.”

[Charli] “I told you already; every single detail I remember, you can bet I’m gonna tell you. No matter how long it takes.”

[Luce] “Charli said that?” [Laughs] “Oh, ignore him. His memory is even worse than mine.”

[Charli] “Yeah. I was never any good in school. All those numbers and letters and...[mumbles]. They never made any sense to me. Luce, though, she made sense. I can tell you what she was wearing the first time she talked to me or the way her dark eyes glowed gold in the afternoon sun. I can tell you the way my heart stopped every time she looked at me.”

[Luce] “Some people...you look at them and you just *know*, right? You can just feel it in the air. That rightness. The feeling that when you’re by their side, you’re exactly where you’re supposed to be.”

[Charli] “I always thought Luce and I were like that.”

[Luce] “Charli and I were never that type of people. Well, Charli was. I never could be.”

[Charli] “I think she thought she was missing something, some fundamental part of herself. I never thought so, though. To me, she was just Luce. Wholly Luce in every way possible.”

[Luce] “I dunno. Sometimes, I just feel like...like I’m running through this tunnel, and there are a thousand openings on every side of me. And in each of these openings, there’s a beautiful sunrise. Just this stunning show of reds and oranges and violets streaming past my vision as I sprint. And I desperately want to stop running. To choose a sunrise. Any sunrise. To stay in that moment, and feel nothing but pure contentment at the sight of that sunrise. But I can’t. I keep running, even though I don’t know what’s at the end of the tunnel.”

[Charli] “It could be the grandest sunrise of all.”

[Luce] “Or it could be nothing at all, just a canyon of emptiness that called to me because it wanted company.”

[Charli] “She was always running. Couldn’t seem to stop.”

[Luce] “I just kept thinking, *what if there was more? What if I stopped running, and I spent my whole life watching a sunrise that was just okay?* It could be beautiful, I’m sure, but what if I had kept running? What if I

could've touched the *sun*?"

[Charli] "You're never going to be enough for someone who was always chasing after the next best thing. I don't regret falling in love with her, but...on the bad days, I wish I figured that out earlier."

[Luce] "It felt like...it felt like the whole time I was running, Charli was a step behind me, begging me over and over to stop and see the sunrises in front of me."

[Charli] "I...yeah. I tried."

[Luce] "I think he believed I was his Sun at the end of the tunnel. I never knew how to tell him that I was only the shadow left behind."

[Charli] "You had to have been there to believe it: Luce, standing in the middle of winter with nothing but a simple, robin's egg blue dress, snow on her Doc Martens, a hint of red on her cheeks. That wasn't a shadow, man. That was my Sun."

[Luce] "Let me tell you something, though. Charli was my Sun."

[Charli] "She did not say that. [Laughs] No. Goddamn. Way."

[Luce] "Charli was...Charli. In every way possible, he was just himself. You can compare a man to Michael Jackson but who would you compare Michael Jackson to? That's how it was with Charli. He was just Charli O' Donney, decked out in rings and earrings, even if it earned him weird looks from the guys. Charli in one of his 27 variations of the same Calio Green band tee. Original. Acid wash. Ripped at the neckline, courtesy of a stubborn tag. Ripped across the right side, just for the hell of it. Charli who ate lunch at three in the morning because 'lunchtime is a social construct. And it's a stupid one at that.'"

[Charli] [Laughs] "Luce tell you about the time I cooked her lunch at my house and gave her food poisoning?"

[Luce] "Oh. My. God. Can you believe he fed me raw egg yolk?"

[Charli] "It was 4 a.m.! It looked like orange juice."

[Luce] "It, in fact, was not orange juice."

[Charli] "I felt awful."

[Luce] "I was pissed! It was the Friday before the Fourth of July. The long weekend. He ruined my plans."

[Charli] "Oh, she was furious alright. She called me at six a.m. and I was outright terrified."

[Luce] "He picked up on the first ring. I wasn't expecting that. I was still in the middle of rehearsing my anger speech, and his voice completely cut through all my thoughts."

[Charli] "I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to ask if she was okay, since she obviously wasn't, and it just didn't feel right to crack a joke at that moment."

[Luce] "All he said was 'Luce.' And his throat was strained and cracked a little as if he had been crying when I called. And he didn't say anything else. I didn't let him."

[Charli] "She hung up on me."

[Luce] "I thought he would call me back immediately. Most guys I'd been with would've. They would've damned the fact that I needed space, or ignored anything I wanted to say to them. I had forgotten how different Charli was."

[Charli] "I just sat there, staring at the phone. Maybe it was for an hour. Maybe it was for a minute."

[Luce] “I called him back. Of course I did.”

[Charli] “I just couldn’t sit there in my room anymore. I started packing my bags the moment she called me back.”

[Luce] “We talked for an hour, and the whole time I was just wondering where that background static was coming from. Next thing I know, he tells me to get off the phone and my doorbell’s buzzing like hell.”

[Charli] [Blushes]. “I just had to see her. I had to.”

[Luce] “He just walked in, without saying anything, without me even inviting him in. [Rolls eyes] He just...looked at me. Straight in the eye. And gave me a hug.”

[Charli] “I can’t tell you why I did what I did. We’d never been affectionate like that before. It was irrational and impulsive. It was beautiful.”

[Luce] “I almost lost it right there. I don’t know. Standing in his arms like that, being held the way Charli held me...it was a safety and intimacy I’ve never dared to touch before.”

[Charli] “I stayed with her for a week after. It was just us. Me and her. Luce and I.”

[Luce] “He’d wake up 1 hour before me just to make pancakes in the shape of smiley faces. He carried me to the bathroom every time I had to throw up. I’d look at him apologetically, and he’d look at my lips with a smile on his.”

[Charli] “I would’ve kissed her if she didn’t need to vomit every two minutes. Actually, I would’ve kissed her regardless.”

[Luce] “Him being there, day and night...I don’t think I ever realized how lonely I was on my own.”

[Charli] “Best week of my life.”

[Luce] “Best week of my life.”

[Charlie] “I think that was when I knew she was my Soul Mate. When I think about it now, it’s just so obvious.”

[Luce] “Charli had only left my house for a quarter of an hour, and I was already feeling the space between the walls close in on me. It was like all the time I had been alone, I was thinking that I was doing great. I was thinking that this was how life was meant to be. And then Charli burst in and I guess...I didn’t feel great anymore. I just felt fine. And the only person who could make me feel great again was him.”

[Charli] “I got off that subway. Then I was sprinting to catch the line back to her.”

[Luce] “I found myself wishing. Wishing that he hadn’t left. That he could come back to me, if only for another day.”

[Charli] “I hadn’t even figured out what to say once I got to her. Soul Mate bonds are special. I couldn’t just say ‘Luce, we’re Soul Mates.’”

[Luce] “I would’ve been okay any way he told me. I would’ve been okay with anything with him.”

[Charli] “I ended up handing her a piece of paper with my name on it.”

[Luce] “I knew, then. Of course I did.”

[Charli] “It’s a bit of an ancient, sacred custom here in Polico. It’s all part of the Soul Mate Bond process.”

[Luce] “When two Soul Mates discover their bond, they can choose to either accept or deny it.”

[Charli] “There’s no shame in denying it. It happens all the time.”

[Luce] “My buddy Zara was denied 27 bonds and denied 18 bonds herself before she found Callia.”

[Charli] “I had never even come close to the Soul Mate Bond with anybody.”

[Luce] “A part of me thought that I might never find the Soul Mate Bond.”

[Charli] “It was a risk. Of course it was. Me showing up with nothing. Not even a bouquet, asking her to accept the bond.”

[Luce] “I loved that about Charli. He never cared about what he *was supposed* to do or what other people did. He just...did what he believed. I always wished I could be more like him.”

[Charli] “There was just no fear in me at that moment. I could never be afraid with her. Even so, it wasn’t simple.”

[Luce] “In Polico, Soul Mate Bonds aren’t easy to seal. It’s not as straightforward as both parties accepting it.”

[Charli] “After the bond’s been accepted, there is a test.”

[Luce] “We call it the Remembrance Trial.”

[Charli] “Some Soul Mates spend years preparing for it.”

[Luce] “Some are so confident they simply walk into the Grande Roug to begin the trial.”

[Charli] “Each Soul Mate tells their story to the Rouers.”

[Luce] “Every little detail. Every moment they can recall.”

[Charli] “You truly never know what piece of information will save you and what will damn you.”

[Luce] “The Rouers document it all...”

[Charli] “...And you walk through the Tunnel of Forgetfulness.”

[Luce] “No one knows how it happens...”

[Charli] “...Or exactly why the first Rouers believed a Soul Mate’s bond must be tested.”

[Luce] “Soul Mates come out of the Tunnel dazed, their memories of the other person completely wiped.”

[Charlie] “And the Rouers give them this.”

[Luce] “These words. These memories”

[Charli] “All the Soul Mates need to do to pass into eternal love is utter a single word.”

[Luce] “The name of their Soul Mate.”

[Charli] “Soul Mates who pass the test are unbreakable.”

[Luce] “And Soul Mates who don’t...”

[Charli] “...I guess they just come out as...humans.”

[Luci] “They won’t remember their Soul Mate.”

[Charli] “There won’t be anything to prove they ever made it so far.”

[Luce] “Some say there’s a space, though. In their heart.”

[Charli] “An emptiness that never seems to go away.”

[Luce] “Perhaps it’s true.”

[Charli] “We won’t have to find out, though.”

[Luce] “I just know it.”

[Rouer Agent #273E] “Charli, Luce, you ready?”

[Charli] “Always.”

[Luce] “Always.”

RECORDING [END] 00:06:48

[Rouer Agent #273E] “Bedtime, Sea. I’ll play you the rest tomorrow.”

[Sea] “C’mon Miss! I want to know what Momma and Papa said!”

[Rouer Agent #273E] “You know what they said, darling.”

[Sea] “Please, Miss Greer. Just one more time.”

[Rouer Agent #273E] [Sighs] “Alright, Sea. One more time.”

[PLAYBACK] 00:06:51

[Charli] “Luce. [Laughs] Luce. Luce. Luce. My Luce.”

[Luce] “Charlie, of course.”

VISSA, UDAYKIRAN**Udaykiran Vissa**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

The House Sitter

The aged wood door clicked as it swung open. The sweet smell of the moldy wood pierced my nostrils as I watched the black spider at the top corner of the door wrap its prey in its web. There stood the Trappolas, hand in hand. Their matching pitch-black eyes had no trace of pupils, the green veins on their faces visible under their dull pasty skin. Both were dressed in all black, their bare feet on the rotting wood floors. Although I had never met the Trappolas, I could not resist the handsome forty dollars an hour they had offered to house-sit the crumbling estate, tucked away in the far corner of the neighborhood. A slender hand extended from Mr. Trappola. I looked at the hand, the bony structure stretching flesh over fingers. I shook it, the wet stickiness of his grip gluing my hands in place for longer than anticipated. It lingered on my hands as I released. "Please make yourself at home," Mr. Trappola said. A spider crawled across the floor, stopping at Mr. Trappolas feet, oblivious to the couple. I stepped into the house, feeling the floor slack below me. My footsteps reverberated throughout the house as I looked around, the echo replaying in my ears. The dark shadow of the moon was visible only through the small square window near the top of the room. Strands of web interrupted the path of the moonlight. The Trappolas stood with their backs to the door. "We will see you soon."

I turned around. The door swung shut, the collision of wood unsettling dust from the ceiling, resting on cobwebs in each corner of the hallway. A motorized click resonated through the passageway as I walked to the next room, discovering emptiness. The room's only content seemed to be a singular wooden door, a shiny chrome handle contrasting the aged timber. A black spider climbed through the air, hanging by a single thread of its web, the moon casting long silvery shadows of the strand. The planks of the door were engraved with scratches, some forming resemblances of hastily written letters. The light discolorations in the dark wood decayed deeper into its structure. The cold dampness of my soaked cotton shirt pulsed up my back. The collar of my neck felt tight as my lungs heaved in the musty air. My eyes twitched as dust continued to fall. There was nowhere else to go.

I placed my hand on the knob. The sharp metal handle turned smoothly. The room revealed a worn leather armchair and a rustic television set, its antenna positioned upward. The room was dimly lit, an orange incandescent glow illuminating only the chair. A cobweb hung from the ceiling, a singular drape of web attaching to the television set. The corner of the room bristled. I walked toward the television set, my legs trembling as I finally recognized the familiar piece of technology. I flipped the red power switch, a cloud of dust rising in the air. I coughed. The television powered on, the static pixelation supplementing the hum of the machine. My fingers fumbled with the knob, trembling as I attempted to grip the plastic dial. The television remained static. My eyes stung from the perspiration of my forehead. My vision blurred. I collapsed onto the couch, my body sinking into the cold sticky leather.

The television shuddered, its monotone hum replaced by the stillness of the space. A black and white image of the room appeared, the back of my head appearing stiff in the chair. My body sunk deeper into the couch, the trembling of my limbs only stimulating the depth of the cushioning. I turned my head to the corner of the room. The image changed, the pixelated blur of my face reflected in the television set. The chair now encapsulated both my arms. I pushed on the chair, my hands spreading wide on the leather, but I could not get up. My fingers spasmed, refusing to contract as my mind attempted to control them. My neck stiffened, unresponsive to the commands of my willpower.

The corner bristled again. My limbs went numb, needlepoints burning through my dripping skin. My gaze fell toward the sound, focusing on the corner. The illumination of the orange light reflected on eight dull pinprick eyes peering at me from the floor. The small creature scurried into the illumination, its eight legs stopping at the base of the television set. My lungs contracted, refusing to inhale or exhale. My heartbeat thundered in the isolation of the room. A second spider scuttled into the illumination, stopping next to the first spider. Sixteen eyes locked with my two, the sound of wheezing reverberating in the silence as the spiders paused in their stride. A bristling ensued from the corners of the room, steadily increasing in volume. My body convulsed and went limp. Spiders swarmed in the

illumination as the television screen displayed the now-visible arachnids, the scurrying of legs pattering the wood floor. The spiders surrounded me. They paused. I could no longer see the floor. My eyes raced, my reflection visible on the thousands of eyes examining the presence of my body. The television flickered. And then they crawled up my legs. I writhed, my face distorting as the creatures left no flesh uncovered. I looked down as the mass of legs and eyes squirmed over my skin. I felt nothing. And then my body burned.

WASHBURN, ISABELLA**Isabella Washburn**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Lee's Summit North High School, Lees Summit, MO
Educator: Rashelle WeissenbachCategory: Poetry

The World: A Proclamation to the Family*i. Dried Flowers*

By now the petals are brown.
I tried to keep the flower intact, a
Symbol of love withstanding,
But it didn't dry properly between
The pages of my encyclopedia, A-Z.
The center has begun to rot.

Instead, I gather the brittle petals and
Lay them over my face. I don't want
This to be all that I am.

That doesn't change a thing.

I cover everything but my eyes
So that when you stare at me,
I'll be able to stare right back.

If I kept my eyes, why won't I
Meet yours?
I shouldn't have kept them if I'm
Not going to use them. Nothing
Is worth keeping unless it is
Useful.

Your face is shifting idly.
Not like how light dances through
Swaying curtains, but rather with
Deceptive, unrelenting purpose.

I see that it is a whirlpool,
Your face. You want me to look at
You. I want to keep what's
Left of me. My eyes.

Maybe I am using them—just not
With you.

ii. Litany

I recite a prayer in a forest
With nobody around to hear.

I am testing God

To see if he is listening.

If a tree falls with no one bearing witness,
Is it still an act of God?

God doesn't make mistakes
Just us in his image, *copy+paste*.

How exhausting, to have to
Be perfect all the time.

I can't imagine.

iii. Speak Up

Your voice resonates in my skull, knocking things off compartmentalized shelves,
Blunt force in every word. I can't let you hear what life is left in me.
Quick, *one two three*, hold your breath. I can't stay here for long.

Is there a vacancy in heaven? I've always wanted to see how God decorates.
You don't care what God likes unless it's something you can yell about.
Always reaching for perfection so you follow all the rules,
Straight-As, celestial valedictorian. You are very pleased with yourself.

Is life easier knowing that you are one of God's favorites? You think so.
But I don't think that he would like you very much.
It seems we have a difference of opinion on many things.

I can't stay here, so I run to my room. I can't stay there either.
The room isn't the problem, is it?

Can I strip away the layers of myself until I get to a point untouched
Both by body and by mind? I can't stay here so I try to take what's real
And leave the rest behind.

You ask another question, but by now I am not listening to you,
And you are not listening to God. You never were.

iv. Author's Note

I hope you've taken what you wanted—
The light won't touch anything else.
This is all you get.

You want to know how you can still love me.
When you figure it out,
Let me know.

WATTS, JACK**Jack Watts**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

Childhood and Moral Responsibility

Childhood and Moral Responsibility

Right after I turned fourteen, I got to know a family that moved in across the street from me. Three siblings lived in the house, Clara who was sixteen, Ronny who was twelve, and Peaches who was six. I ended up forming a strong friendship with them, but connected best with Ronny. People noticed Ronny because he was outgoing and friendly, even a little rowdy and headstrong. But he was not a bad kid, because he was also charming and sweet at the same time. We started hanging out after he walked up to my driveway one day and asked, “Hey man, you have a cool looking bike. Mind if I use it for a bit?” I was a little surprised by how confidently he asked to borrow a new bike from an older kid like me, but I did not really mind him riding it. Ronny and I bonded by riding our bikes through the neighborhood, and when Ronny borrowed my bike he would always bring it back undamaged. I enjoyed playing with Ronny because he had a lot of energy that kept me entertained and wondering what he would do next. Even though I mostly would hang out with Ronny, I still met up with Clara from time to time. She was smart and pretty, with long braids and cool clothes, but she didn’t ignore me like some other older girls would have. We talked at the bus stop almost every day. She seemed like a good influence on Ronny, taking him with her when she went through the neighborhood raising money for good causes. Their youngest sister, Peaches, I did not know well because she rode the Kindergarten bus and never really played outside with us. But when I did see her, she was really talkative and cute.

Looking back, I don’t remember ever seeing their parents, even though they lived near us. Ronny and Clara walked themselves to the bus stop and back home, and they never really talked about their parents much. At the time, I noticed but did not question the lack of parental involvement in their lives. But now, I wish there had been more.

One day, my parents told me something terrible had happened at Ronny and Clara’s house. When their parents left them home alone with Clara babysitting, Ronny took his dad’s gun out of a dresser drawer to play with it, and unintentionally shot and killed Peaches. This news devastated me. At the time, I tried to imagine why Ronny would do something so horrible, and I kept imagining Clara’s grief for her baby sister. My sadness only increased when they moved away after this, because I never got the chance to say goodbye. As I processed these events, I had a question that I could not answer easily: Ronny shot his sister, but was he truly responsible for her death? The books I read in English this semester have reminded me of Peaches’s death and helped me work through this question of moral responsibility.

One possibility is that God caused Peaches’s death or that fate destined Ronny to kill his sister. We have examples of this kind of determinism in western culture and literature. For instance, in Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*, the gods determine Oedipus’s fate. Regardless of his attempts to escape the prophecy that he will murder his father and sleep with his mother, Oedipus ends up fulfilling it. Oedipus believes that he was morally responsible for his fate, even though he could not control it, and so he gouges out his eyes and calls for his own banishment. “Apollo— / . . . ordained my agonies” he cries, “But the hand that struck my eyes was mine, / mine alone . . .” (Sophocles 1467-70). *Oedipus* is a complex piece of literature with interesting moral dilemmas; however, modern audiences are unlikely to apply its logic and sense of morality to their own lives. I do not, for instance, believe that fate destined Ronny to shoot his sister, or that God somehow made it happen. However, critics’s interpretations of *Oedipus*, specifically the concept of *hamartia* or the tragic error, could help explain Ronny’s situation. One could argue that the tragic hero’s *hamartia* was an error due to his ignorance and therefore Oedipus is not morally responsible (Lovera 16). Using this interpretation, Ronny would not be morally responsible for his sister’s death because, at

twelve years old, he lacked the maturity to judge how dangerous playing with guns could be. In other words, his error was one of ignorance.

Another possibility is that Peaches's death was just an accident, and that no one is to blame. This is a really tempting response because it is just an easier answer to an event that is horrific or difficult to grasp. Peaches's death becomes something comparable to "natural evil," like earthquakes or plagues, over which humans "have limited control" (Shattuck 76). In his article, "When Evil is Cool," Roger Shattuck warns against this belief that when awful things happen "no one must assume full moral responsibility for them" (Shattuck 77). Saying nobody is to blame relieves people of the responsibility to determine causes and to work to prevent similar events. People may find horrific events hard to judge or explain, and calling them accidents allows people to avoid making moral decisions about them. But I do not believe that natural evil caused Peaches's death, or that it was completely beyond human control. I want to believe that human error caused this event, and that humans could have prevented it.

So, which human or humans do I blame? I could blame Peaches, possibly for goofing around or irritating Ronny into committing the act. Maybe she should have been in bed or should have listened to her older sister better. I cannot accept this answer, however. Blaming Peaches is comparable to blaming *Othello's* Desdemona for her own death, which Shakespeare cannot have intended. As Emilia comments after Othello murders his wife, "Nay, lay thee down, and roar! / For thou hast killed the sweetest innocent / That e'er did lift up eye" (Shakespeare 5.2.236-238). Like Desdemona, Peaches was completely innocent in this case. Even more to the point, Peaches was only six years old while Desdemona was a married woman. So I am not willing to blame Peaches, regardless of anything she said or did that night.

Similarly, Ronny is no Othello. From some perspectives, yes, Ronny is responsible for killing Peaches. He found the gun and chose to take it when he was not supposed to. He got carried away and chose to play with it near Peaches. Though by accident, Ronny shot and killed her. Like Othello, Ronny was headstrong and charismatic and got what he wanted in many cases. And in the end, they both did kill an innocent. But unlike Ronny, Othello intends to kill Desdemona. Even though Iago manipulates and lies to him, Othello makes the decision to kill his wife instead of discovering the truth or trusting her word. This makes Othello's actions evil and makes him morally responsible for them. In contrast, Ronny never intended to kill Peaches; instead, he just wanted to horse around with her and show off. According to Leszek Kołakowski, "only our will, our intentions, our deeds can be morally assessed," and suffering caused by accidents cannot be defined as evil (Kołakowski 22). With this reasoning, Ronny is not morally responsible because he did not want the shooting to happen. Also unlike Othello, Ronny was still just a child whereas Othello, as a soldier, made life and death decisions all the time. Ronny, as a twelve year old, lacked the maturity and experience to think through the consequences of his actions.

Does this mean that Ronny is not morally responsible because he lacks free will? According to common sense, Ronnie absolutely has free will if by that we mean that he chose to pick up the gun, play with it, and shoot it at his sister. This kind of freedom to act is called "circumstantial freedom," where individuals have the ability to "act on a desire" (Lovera 10). However, free will is closer to "natural freedom," which depends on the individual's internal ability to deliberate about and determine their own choices (Lovera 10). One could argue that this complicated type of decision-making is what Ronny, like most twelve year olds, lacks. Without natural freedom, or free will, Ronny cannot be fully responsible for his sister's death.

My thinking about Ronnie's guilt centers on his age, the fact that he was still a kid when he shot his sister. But I already decided that Peaches's death was the result of human error. Therefore, adults around Ronny must be morally responsible for Peaches's death even though Ronny pulled the trigger. Ronny's situation, and especially the question of his level of free will reminds me of the question of Eve's responsibility for the fall in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In my opinion, Ronny resembles Eve. The two of them share an immature mindset where they do not have the capabilities to comprehend big decisions for themselves. Like Ronny, who had been told not to play with his dad's gun, Eve had been told by God and Adam not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Eve had circumstantial freedom when she chose to defy what authorities told her. But that does not mean she knew the full implications of her actions. By definition, before Eve eats from the Tree of Knowledge, she lacks knowledge of good and evil. Only afterward does she understand the full implications of her deed. Like Ronny, therefore, Eve is child-like and cannot be held morally responsible for her actions before the fall.

Ronny's older sister, Clara, was in charge that night, and at sixteen years old she is closer to an adult than Ronny or Peaches. Still, that is a big responsibility for a sixteen year old, and I will not blame Clara for Peaches's death. Blaming Clara would be like holding Adam responsible for Eve's actions in *Paradise Lost*. Sure, God put him in

charge of Eve, and, according to Milton, Adam possessed a more rational, “more attentive mind” than Eve (Milton 10.1011). But Adam knew just as little as Eve did about the concepts of good and evil. Adam took responsibility for Eve’s actions, but they were not really his fault. Similarly, Clara will probably always blame herself for Peaches’s death, even though nobody else will agree with her.

Many readers of *Paradise Lost* blame Satan for Eve’s actions. Satan manipulates Eve by tempting her to desire the fruit to gain the knowledge that he says he received from it. This kind of temptation parallels mainstream media’s depictions of guns that make them look appealing to a wide audience, including to children. I never played video games or watched movies with Ronny, but I would not be surprised if he, like many American twelve year olds, was into first person shooter games, or violent movies that romanticize weapons and destruction. Gun sellers and manufacturers resemble Satan when they try to convince people to buy weapons for their homes by making them feel unsafe without them. Gun lobbyists influence politicians, who make laws that favor gun manufacturers. All of these people are like Satan, tempting citizens with the desire to obtain a weapon that can bring destruction upon themselves and others. In my opinion, these adults are more morally responsible for Peaches’s death than Ronny is, just like Satan is morally responsible for Eve’s downfall.

However, I have not yet considered the parents of Ronny, Peaches, and Clara, the most important adults in their lives. In some ways, Ronny’s parents resemble Milton’s God. Both control the rules of their domains, and protect those who live there. They both are responsible for the presence of temptation in their domains. For instance, God put the Tree of Knowledge right in the middle of Eden and then told Adam and Eve not to eat from it. Ronny’s parents left a loaded gun unguarded and easily obtainable to anyone in their home. Most likely, they told their kids not to play with the gun, but they kept it where the kids could easily access it. Unlike Ronny’s parents, God knew that Adam and Eve were going to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and he knew that, ultimately, this *felix culpa* would be better for humanity. As Adam explains, “That all this good of evil shall produce, / And evil turn to good; more wonderful / Than that which by creation first brought forth / Light out of darkness!” (Milton 12.470-73). To gain maturity and wisdom, Eve needed to eat the fruit. But Ronny did not need to kill his sister in order to grow up. There was nothing fortunate about his fall. It was just a terrible event that did not need to happen. More than God was responsible for Eve’s downfall, I believe that Ronny’s parents should be held morally responsible for the events that unfolded that night. They knew that they had a loaded gun in the house that was easily accessible to a child they knew to be impulsive and a little rowdy.

Honestly, I do not know what happened to Ronny and his family after Peaches’s death. They moved out of the neighborhood and I lost contact with them. And, overall, I feel that the shooting was a horrible accident for which many people are to blame. Ronny certainly played his part, but, in general, adults have a moral responsibility to protect children from dangerous situations and weapons. And this was a perfect storm of adult irresponsibility. I am not a gun person. Except for shooting bb guns in Boy Scouts once in a while, I have never been around guns. I cannot imagine hunting for fun, and my family does not keep guns in our house. Still, guns play a role in my culture because they appear in the news, in movies that I watch, and in video games that I play. More frighteningly, guns play a role in my culture because kids my age sometimes use them against other kids at home, school or, more recently, at protests. My experience with Ronny taught me that gun violence involving minors will continue in our society as long as those minors have easy access to weapons. Kids simply do not have the maturity and mental development that would allow them to deliberate and understand their choices in complex moral situations. In other words, they lack natural freedom, free will, and therefore full moral responsibility.

WEHLING, MATTHEW**Matthew Wehling**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Ink That StainsThe Ink That Stains

Two o'clock, sweating, my blankets thrown to the floor. It was the fourth time I woke up that night, wrongful conviction seeping steadily into the angry color of my brain. I remember my resentment like it was yesterday.

As class started the day before, I noticed writing in clear, HB lead, etched into my clipboard, a war-crime to any elementary school mind: "Eli sucks!" Immediately my mind began racing and in pure shock, my arm shot up in defense of my friend. I yelled across the room,

"Mrs. Smith! Mrs. Smith, someone wrote 'Eli Sucks' on my clipboard!"

The room silenced except for the click of hard heel shoes as my teacher walked from her desk, snatched the clipboard from my hands, and told me firmly,

"Matthew, step out of the room, I'll be out to talk to you in a second."

I stood up hesitantly, the silent room and staring eyes staining me red from embarrassment as I stumbled out of the room. Being asked to leave the room was for the worst of the worst. The most I had ever done was talk a little too much but I had never been *asked to leave the room*. A few minutes later, Mrs. Smith opened the door, while my heart beat like a snare drum and my approval-craving mind was stunned silent. She leaned down to my position on the floor and asked,

"Matthew, I need to know... Did you write this on the clipboard?"

I stopped thinking. She thought *I* had done it? *I* had been the one to write with such pure second-grade malice? Against one of my closest friends? Impossible, but my silent questioning seemed to answer her and she spoke softly,

"I thought so. I want you to apologize to Eli right now, and to the class for disrupting our time." Stunned, I retorted,

"What? No! I didn't write that! I would never do that!"

"Matthew, honesty is one of our core values. I'm gonna have you sit out here and think about this, and I'll come back to get you after class."

My hands fell to my sides, in one, I clenched the injustice of being punished for reporting a wrong, in the other, curling flames of being called a liar and a villain. I knew I had to prove my innocence and redeem myself in the class.

The clarity of memory presents vengeance as distinctly connected to emotional memory. On the physiological scale, the part of the brain responsible for revenge "is an evolutionarily older brain area known as the dorsal striatum" (Thomton 114) that links feelings of reward and satisfaction to revenge; in turn, this link provides a biological basis in the appeal of revenge. Vengeance roots itself in chemical and electric impulses traveling through the brain that control *feelings*, the most memorable part of our cognition. Psychologically, people remember times of intense emotion, negative or positive, significantly better than any other memories. Even now, my own clear memory agitates the same feelings I had in second grade.

Beyond the biological standpoint, a social-evolutionary perspective encourages us toward revenge. Since the beginning, revenge has been a part of human brains and therefore characteristic of humanity. In early human history, revenge was used to cause direct harm to wrong-doers, establish power structures, or create social warnings through punishment. "The instinct for [revenge] has been crafted" (Thomton 114) in order to better solve increasingly difficult social problems. Interpersonal conflict rarely results in 100% satisfaction, but biological and social adaptations allow the conflicting parties to resolve the conflict in an acceptable, just way. Unfortunately, the modern brain retains the primal presence of revenge despite the increasingly complex social barriers and expectations preventing its satisfying use. Even in the contemporary world, revenge's primitive biology persists.

The next morning, I sat down quietly at my desk as my emotionally jumbled mind could barely process the seemingly innocent "good morning!" from my teacher. I was so caught up in my own hurt and fury that I couldn't understand that my teacher's positivity was actually real; it just seemed like a coldly calculated act. I managed to get

through the morning and at some point, my teacher started explaining a project,

“And you’ll take the popsicle sticks like this... Yes, and you’ll draw that on right here... I’ll help you guys glue them together...” and on she went in her typical high-toned, peppy voice, but I could barely focus.

Mrs. Smith had humiliated, judged, and condemned me, yet she could just stand in front of the class as if nothing had happened at all. Was I really that insignificant? Such a great injustice... and she had basically forgotten? My teacher understandably held a great deal of value for what she bought for the classroom. She was strict about the use of anything from cubbies to stickers. She made a point, time and time again to drill into us,

“Don’t bend the tips, don’t press that hard, make sure the caps are on perfectly!”

She valued those markers as much as I valued my friends. Suddenly, I heard my name, “Matthew! Please pass out the marker bins to the tables.”

I stood up warily, grabbed four of the smooth plastic bins from the shelf behind me, and delivered them to the tables in the class, distinctly aware of eyes staring at me while I walked around the room. My brain started moving faster; I could feel the shunned distance between me and my classmates, once friends. Looking over to the teacher, I saw nothing but a Cheshire Cat grin and could smell her grotesquely floral perfume across the room. The sickening positivity seeped into my stain of disgust. Taking those last steps back to my table, I sat down quickly and tensed my legs in angst.

“Remember not to press and cap every marker after you finish using it!”

Mrs. Smith reaffirmed to the class, hovering over the class like a storm cloud. At that moment, that reminder, I knew what I was going to avenge myself.

There were 28 markers in the bin, and I used them all one by one, drawing something or other on the sticks then deliberately and precisely pressing the markers as hard as I could into the grainy wood. Smash. The roaring high that took over me after that first press was exhilarating. Smash. Alone in that classroom, I felt the calming pleasure of a fulfilling physical vengeance in response with each angry eruption. Smash. I hated her, she ruined my life. Smash. My eyes began to water. I was wronged. Smash, smash! While the remnants of intense endorphins settled across my brain, I capped each marker perfectly, one by one. I capped the markers perfectly, one by one. I returned them delicately to the appropriate boxes, stood up, and returned the bin to its shelf, internally giddy with satisfaction.

It turns out that giddy satisfaction results from perfectly natural psychology. As Arlene Stillwell, Ph.D. is quoted in “Revenge,” our perception of harm against others is usually minute, but “when we’re harmed in the very same way, we see ourselves as victims of a grave injustice” (Thomton 116). Humans also act with self-serving bias, in which we perceive bad actions happening to us as due to completely external factors and ignore our own faults. In both phenomena, one views himself as pure and good with some external force tainting them. My teacher likely had no idea her judgment affected me so strongly, but as the self-proclaimed victim, I could do nothing but think of my injustice and potential vengeance. Similarly, my initial response to the writing on the clipboard could have been handled way better, but my internal bias focused the blame for my incrimination on people around me, like my teacher and friends. While blaming her, I also refused to recognize her perspective, a teacher who was just concerned about her students.

More potent and disastrous than mental biases, revenge causes people to lose sight of everything else in their heads. The human brain is so hardwired to revenge that we are often “ruminating on the offense to the point of obsession,” which is “the wrong way to deal with mistreatment” (Cox). Revenge completely frames human mindsets. Innate human biases result in perceptions of victimization that in turn lead to toxic obsessions and potential outbursts of negative emotion, all caused by one simple transgression. Those outbursts can turn out to be like, “in novels and movies [where] revenge turns out to be this great cleansing moment that permits someone who’s been abused to triumph” (Cox). Simply put, revenge is a brief, satisfactory climax to a story in which negative emotions fall on either side. Obsession with injustice and the perceived immediate gratification of vengeance find release in often regrettable action.

Because “revenge is often short-lived” (Cox), the satisfaction we get from vengeance is short-lived as well. It felt so good breaking those markers, hurting my teacher as best as I could, but like the euphoria of drugs, the high of revenge induces a crash. For the rest of the day, I killed time by staring absently at boring stuff in the room, my eyes flitting from one inconsequence to another. Suddenly, my heart dropped as Mrs. Smith announced to the room,

“Time for the gluing! This step means I have to come help you.”

Jerked from my sagging disconsolation, I realized the crime committed against her kindness. I squirmed and pressed back against the chair as Mrs. Smith, as nice as ever, came to my desk to help my second-grade self glue popsicle sticks together for the project. The smell of the hot glue burned into my nostrils and my stomach was rolling over. I felt like throwing up and crying at once. So, as I had the first half of the day, I sat still and lifeless, but this time for a completely different reason. Instead of trying to contain my pent-up anger, I was in shock and traumatized by guilt.

Revenge guts one’s emotions, leaving only a drained regret. It starts as just an idea, a crack in the soil. As it

festers, it digs deeper into oneself, consuming the mind and will. When revenge finds what it is looking for, it leaves nothing but a canyon of dust in its place. A biblical story about Joseph in which “one moment Joseph acted harshly... the next moment he seemed overcome with sorrow” (Yancey) reveals historical and cultural precedent regarding the brevity of satisfaction from revenge. Since “revenge keeps you focused on the mistreatment and doesn’t allow you to move on” (Cox), as soon as it is over, there is nothing left to distract from the pain initially felt and the pain gained from hurting others through revenge. Unfortunately, because the desire for revenge is so powerful, it takes a great deal of time and effort to control the impulse. Regardless, the brief bit of satisfaction is nothing compared to the great hurt caused to the self and others.

That night, I cried my heart out to my parents, admitting my guilt. My feelings of animosity about the clipboard had dissipated, and all that was left was my regret. Even now, ten years later, I still remember how awful I felt, both before and after my act of revenge. Although those markers were worth little in the grand scheme of things, my brain's tunnel vision elevated the issue into an emotional inferno, cemented in memory. In fact, the purity of emotion that revenge evokes is so blinding that it can cause hugely significant actions that can destroy relationships and the self. As much as revenge is a part of the human brain, now, more than ever, people hold great amounts of social responsibility. Humans crave justice, which they think revenge will bring, but so too do they thrive on relationships with others. In modern minds, some sort of balance has to exist between the two. Like marker on popsicle sticks, revenge sinks into the grain of our hearts and souls, promising satisfaction and fulfillment when faced with injustice, but as soon as one acts on it, all that remains is a stain.

XUE, REBECCA**Rebecca Xue**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Jeffrey Baxter

Category: Short Story

Red

Red

The moment I was born, I was wrapped in a red blanket. A tattered red blanket, sewn by Mom with the scraps of fabric she managed to scrounge up. The gingham, the quatrefoil, the argyle, all delicately held together by the deep red yarn my grandma gave Mom before she died. No matter how hard I tried to pry it apart with my grubby toddler fingers, it would never come apart. It followed me around everywhere.

When I was 6, I left my red blanket in my bedroom to go watch TV in the living room. Dad was sitting there first, holding something I couldn't quite make out. But I wanted to watch my cartoons, so I went to grab the remote control. Dad suddenly turned his head to face me, his eyes anything but familiar. I saw an emptiness that I'd never seen before; a pain and loneliness that I couldn't interpret. A single tear fell from his red, bloodshot eye. I followed it, down his weary cheek, his chin, and onto the back of his hand. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, the object grasped in Dad's hand revealed itself. The red wine bottle looked massive in his fingers; Dad seemed defenseless in its presence. It soon became a common occurrence. The wooden coffee table slowly turned littered with glasses stained with red blotches, the kitchen sink eventually dyed with a faded red that would never wash off.

When I was 11 I sat alone on the bench in front of my school, waiting for Mom to pick me up. The red winter jacket she made for me did little to block out the frigid December wind, but I always wore it anyway because I didn't see her often those days. She had promised me that morning she'd come by so she could see my face. But after an hour of waiting, it wasn't tears of happiness but tears of despair that filled my eyes as I got up to leave. Suddenly, a boy I recognized from my class came up to me with his hands behind his back. He told me that he'd liked me since the first day of school, and asked if I would be his girlfriend. His red, rosy cheeks and the scarlet red roses in his hands were enough to beckon my tears. I nodded, reminded of the love and appreciation I hadn't felt in a while. Clutching the red bouquet warmly in my arms, I walked hand in hand with him back to my house that cold afternoon.

I shyly waved to him after arriving at the front door. I really didn't want to go back in. The burgundy wine glasses had been multiplying, seemingly in defiance of my persistent begging for him to stop. My head bowed, I stepped inside. I had always tried to slip away in silence to my bedroom, but this time, I could not ignore the cacophony of voices that filled the house. I made out Dad's voice immediately; it sounded hoarse and threatening, but with a tinge of fear. Then I heard her: Mom softly begging while tears ran down her face, kneeling on the ground. Her cheek was bruised, purple in some places and bright red in the spots where Dad had hit her a few moments ago. A few moments ago, when I was selfishly standing on our patio, too cowardly to face reality. Blood red streaked Mom's arm where Dad had clawed at her, currant red where the blood had already dried. I cried into my blanket that night, the only thing hiding my disgusting, vulnerable body, knowing that I had failed to protect Mom that day.

Ever since I saw what Dad had done to Mom, I couldn't focus. Their voices drifted in and out of my head all day, holding me prisoner to my own self-hatred and shame. My teacher's voice was relentlessly drowned out by the screaming; the whiteboard painted over with the image of my mother on her knees. The boisterous yelling of students in the hallways became overlaid with the menacing shouting of my father. My teacher had asked me to stay after school one day. I could see the red tiredness in her eyes; looking after a room full of teens all day wasn't easy. But it seemed she had just enough energy to screech at me that afternoon. I helplessly watched as she picked up her pen and left dark red zeroes on my assignments in front of my eyes. Nothing felt real to me. No matter how many times that red pen marked my papers, I couldn't bring myself to do anything about it. There was nothing left in me. Only a deep hollowness remained that could not be filled with anything. That night, I numbly grasped my red blanket and fell

asleep, once again, to the weeping of my mother next door.

When I turned 16, I walked to the DMV to get my driver's license. Despite my dropping grades and friends who slowly turned their backs on me, there was one thing I had continued to look forward to: a car. A car meant freedom, the key to unlock the cage that my house had become. The cold air stung my face and my fingers were frozen, but there was nothing stopping me in that moment. I didn't even have to *try* to smile that day. Every morning and every afternoon, I watched the red flag on our mailbox until finally, it faced the sky. I nearly cried with excitement, galloping to retrieve the license I had been waiting my entire life for. My name, printed there in red font, was finally acknowledged somewhere other than in the emails from my teacher pestering me about late work. There was no doubt I wouldn't get a new car, but Mom had allowed me to drive her dusty, old, brick red Honda Civic when she wasn't using it. It was enough for me. The steering wheel was the only thing I had control over; it faithfully led me to see whatever sights I had wanted to see and no one could stop me.

I finally turned 18, and began my last year of school. My last year stuck in this drab, gloomy town. Tomorrow is my graduation ceremony. A wine red jumpsuit is hanging in my closet, ready to be worn on one of the best days of my life. Yesterday, I received an acceptance letter to my dream school. It was to a school two states over, somewhere that I had never ventured before. Nevertheless, I was afraid of leaving Mom here alone with my father. I don't recall the last day I didn't hear them fighting. Her face and arms were still dotted shades of red and purple by the wrath of Dad's hands. Ever since I witnessed him the first time, I persistently tried to convince her to leave. To leave him and the house and the town and everything horrible about her life. I decided I would try one last time. As I held her hands at the dining table, I detailed the possibilities. She could follow me to college, live with me in an apartment, enjoy life like it was supposed to be. She could escape Dad and our nightmarish house. I had imagined it to be perfect. Her face would light up and we'd pack for the day we could leave this place. I had imagined it to be so perfect that when her face became clouded with confusion and doubt, I had to do a double-take. Was there something that I had left out of the plan? I thought I had described everything. Was she worried about the money? I reassured her that my job and scholarship would cover everything. But nothing I said would make that look on her face go away.

Tears welling up in her eyes, she told me that she'd promised Dad she would stay with him. Dad had told her that he would track her exact location and hunt her down. I thought Mom had learned enough in these past years to know that these were all spineless, baseless threats. Yet, she told me that she would not risk it, and that she didn't want to put me in danger. I promised her that he could do nothing to hurt her in my hands. Nevertheless, she shook her head. Her eyes were so tired, wrinkled, and swollen from the oceans of tears she'd shed, but she was willing to let go of this opportunity. Despite the endless pain I had watched her endure, Mom sat firm in her chair and looked at me somberly. I could not comprehend her decision. Frustrated, tears streamed down my face. I pleaded with her for hours on end. I just could not believe my own mother wouldn't trust me.

I trudged up the stairs back to my room, defeated. My closet was already half-empty; I had already packed a whole suitcase earlier, with light and hopeful heart. Instead, that fire had been extinguished and all that was left were the ashes of despair and anger. The red blanket still sat on my bed, waiting to follow me yet again to another new place. I had wanted to help Mom, after all she had been through. Now, I wasn't sure if I could protect her any longer. I realized the two options that faced me. I held the acceptance letter in one hand and my red blanket in the other.

I can already envision tomorrow. My suitcases are already packed, car key sitting on the front counter. I will attend my own graduation ceremony and graciously accept the diploma. I will turn my red graduation tassel to the other side, ushering in a new life. Then, I will hop into Mom's red Honda Civic and drive. Away, very far away. I leave behind the wine glasses, the blood, the red pen marks, our red mailbox flag, and my red blanket. But I hope you understand that I am not attempting to escape my rocky, red-stained life.

I am merely searching for my own shade of red.

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Poetry

Applications of the Derivative

Reading about Zeno and his arrow—

that each moment, made widthless,
contains no motion,you try to prove it false—you shoulder
through impractical sums, explainto your parents during dinner
that they are not meant to be singularobjects, that you are no dumb
conglomerate of still frames,that your fork going up and down
disproves an entire traditionof thought—but they don't laugh,
they're still not speakingto each other, and in secret
you're confusedby math, you still don't understand
how zero is approached,from left or right, from both sides,
with caution—like the young deer tensing
in the wide black yard outsidethe kitchen window,
an animal you understand

but are not supposed to touch.

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Poetry

Sestina for a Stillborn Foal

I remember when we clipped
 the horse's hair. It came away soft
 in my hands, smooth
 and cold. The neck's arch warm.
 The horse's dull eye a stone.
 The hair felt like nothing in my palm.

The horse let me place my palm
 on the back of her neck. She clipped
 her hooves on the pavement's stone.
 Muscles gathered in her back, but it was soft.
 The joints that glided smooth
 through motion. Traced their arc.

Her back was caving down. I saw the arch
 of ribs, felt their ridges under my palm.
 Her belly was round and smooth
 with pregnancy. We moved on, clipped
 her tail—the thin, soft
 hair gathered around our feet, on stone.

Back home, I'd throw stones
 into the lake. Force them against the arch
 of my fingers until my hands were no longer soft.
 Every callus a badge on my palm.
 Sometimes I'd miss. I clipped
 the backs of trees, or the smooth

concrete of the drainage pipe. Smooth
 and worn, every tossed stone
 had the weight of a bird: ones with clipped
 wings. The parabola of flight, the arch
 of movement—in my palm.
 A possibility. Stones in flight are quiet—almost soft.

The horse had dark eyes and made a soft
 sound when I smoothed
 the hair on her back with a palm.
 Her foal was born dead, the color of stone.
 There was blood on the arch
 of its neck. We clipped

the umbilical. After the soft body sank like a stone,
and the smooth water had swallowed the arch
of the back, I weighed the clipped cord in my palm.

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Poetry

The Fly in the X-Ray Room is Sentient & Speaks With My Voice

Fly wings, fly-eyes, look at yourself! these
facets, whirling, iridescent, distort
your face like nausea, like laughing, like
dizziness.

Buzz on, buzz off. Your carapace
is out of date and non-
existent. What if we cut
ourselves out of space
and time completely? A reboot. A
revival. Just like
stitching: we peel off like stickers
and they sew together
the empty space.

What if we
got outside it all? How
about turning inwards, pulling
out the clear snake-tubes
they like to stick inside your arms,
how about you leave it, buzz
off with me? No

more barium-stomach, no more
heavy plastic eyelids, we can
burn ourselves to sky-vault ceilings
and brand like violent sunspots, a violet
afterimage, you
will leave a mark the opposite
of what their prodding cones and
rods suspect.

Fly away, fly free, let
your heavy head be shifted, let
the space inside of you flatten, let's
cut across the maps like
lines, slice the roads in two, you

know it's hard and thick to speak
without your wings, with
the single useless lenses of your eyes. How
about you be like me? How

about you live a life throwing yourself
against the glass:
not because you can't see it, but
because one day
you know
it will have to break—

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Poetry

Lethe, or On Hearing My Grandmother Must Now Walk With a Cane

Where along the black bank
will the root knot, pause?
A blind hand aware of no

open space curling forwards,
choosing where to stop
and nodule, where to thin,

where in the dark to double
down, pressing daily
against the issue, though

the stem and buds know nothing
of it, taking blamelessly
each round of open, dry, retreat—

When sectioned under light,
incised and stained, how does
the root remember?

When severed,
can the dull stalk sense it, tremble,
mark the spiral

of numb space
where something once was
working? And in old age,

when the furrowed
speechless body limps and blisters,
does it feel, seeping up

the root, the unknown dream—
the silence, white reprieve
behind which nothing moves?

YANG, MAX**Max Yang**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Julie Blank

Category: Critical Essay

In the Absence of Hope

The stereotype of the “tortured artist” has long revolved around the work of creative professionals. Since antiquity, mental disorders including schizophrenia and bipolar depression have been attributed to the creative geniuses of Beethoven, Van Gogh, Virginia Woolf, and many others. However, the overly romanticized view presented by the stereotype often overlooks the consequences these disorders have on the personal lives of the individuals. In the case of poet Robert Lowell, his cycles of manic depression would take a toll on both him and his loved ones. His three successive marriages were strained by each of his hospitalizations, cruel outbursts, and alcoholic relapses. Each time, a divorce would inevitably follow, resulting in periods of depressive isolation. His poem “The Drinker,” published in 1958, reflects on the consequences of his own experiences of solitude. In the poem, Robert Lowell uses imagery and a time motif to suggest that emotional despair resulting from social and physical isolation can lead to apathy of one’s own deteriorating condition.

In the beginning of the poem, Lowell utilizes the imagery of water to convey the acute emotional despair experienced by individuals dealing with loss. In the first stanza, the poet introduces a man who appears to be wasting time. The “fifth of Bourbon” the drinker polished off had been “chucked helter-skelter into the river,/ even its cork sucked under” (2-4). The poet vividly describes an empty bottle careening wildly in the air before plunging into a river below. The man’s “helter-skelter” attitude towards his reckless actions points towards his alcoholism, a condition that often arises in individuals who become reliant on alcohol to anesthetize their pain and despair. The poet’s use of the imagery of the bottle cork sinking also illustrates the man’s despair, as despite its usual association with buoyancy, the cork is paradoxically “sucked under” the water’s surface. This downward movement created by the imagery of the sinking bottle and cork supports the interpretation that the man, too, is figuratively sinking into emotional despair. Soon after, Lowell likens the drinker to a harpooned whale. The poet describes the man’s figurative descent as a “warm hearted blubber, foundering down/ leagues of ocean” (10-11). Despite its benevolent nature, the wounded whale symbolizing the man can only helplessly sink deeper into the ocean. The poet uses imagery of a “foundering” whale to parallel the man succumbing to his own despair. In addition, the oceanic imagery created through the nautical measurement unit “leagues” emphasizes the vastness of the ocean and the seemingly bottomless abyss towards which the man metaphorically falls. This image cluster not only conveys the idea that man is sinking into despair, but also illustrates the magnitude of his depression. In the next stanza, Lowell describes the man’s inability to recognize signs of human activity outside his window. Dazed and distracted, the man’s “despair has the galvanized color/ of the mop and water in the galvanized bucket” (15-16). The poet compares the drinker’s despair to the dull silver of the stagnant water inside a metallic mopping bucket. Lowell’s imagery of the mop in the dreary, stagnant “water” conveys the idea that the man, too, is stagnating, moping in despair. Furthermore, the characterization of the water as “galvanized” creates an industrial tone, conveying the bleakness of the man’s current existence. By using imagery of water as both a force engulfing sinking objects, along with creating a bleak atmosphere, Lowell demonstrates that the man drowns in an all-consuming despair.

As the poem progresses, Lowell makes use of metallic imagery to demonstrate the severe emotional consequences resulting from one’s solitude and self-imposed isolation from the outside world. After comparing the drinker’s despair to water in a bucket, the poet mentions a female figure that the man had once known. Lowell portrays the relationship between the two as “water to the dead metal” of the “galvanized bucket” (16-18). The process of galvanization, which involves coating metal with zinc, is often applied as a protective barrier against corrosion. Lowell’s incorporation of the specific imagery of the “galvanized bucket” emphasizes the lack of connection between the man and the woman, most likely a former lover. Even though the “water” seamlessly interposes with the “dead metal,” the “galvanized” barrier still exists, symbolizing the forces barring the drinker and woman from forming a real

connection. The poet's description of the metal as "dead" further supports this idea, emphasizing the man's rigidity and lifelessness. Afterwards, the drinker's gaze shifts to the female figure's leftover belongings. To the man, the woman's "absence hisses like steam,/ the pipes sing..." (23-24). Lowell compares the departure of the woman to the "hisses" of steam in radiator pipes, which he personifies as singing. The use of the word "hiss" carries a harsh and unpleasant connotation, conveying the pain the man experiences in the wake of the woman's absence. Moreover, the imagery of the rigid metal "pipes" symbolizes the man's inability to change, a key factor in pushing the woman away and leaving the man in his current state of solitude. Thus, the harsh "hiss" created by her absence pains the drinker, even though this solitude stems from his own unwillingness to change. Soon after, the drinker observes his deteriorating surroundings before heading off to sleep. As he dreams, "he snores in his iron lung" (26). Historically, "iron lung[s]" aided polio victims with breathing by enclosing their bodies within a metal chamber. The poet employs imagery of this cage-like apparatus to convey the man's physical and metaphorical confinement. As the metal cocoon isolates the man from the outside world, he becomes increasingly detached. Yet, the man's predicament inside the iron lung largely originates from his alcoholism and subsequent deterioration of health. This image reinforces the fact that the drinker's isolation was brought on by his inability to change from his own detrimental actions. Ultimately, the imagery of metal is used to create an overwhelming sense of rigidity and confinement, emphasizing that the man's own behaviors were the principal cause of his isolation.

In the end of the poem, Lowell uses a time motif to suggest that an individual may demonstrate a lack of concern towards themselves and their surroundings as they become overwhelmed by their life's downward spiral. As the drinker dreams about the Garden of Eden, the changes of the world around him come into focus. The poet observes as "the cheese wilts in the rat-trap," and "the milk turns to junket in the cornflakes bowl" (31-32). As time passes, the long-forgotten bait in the "rat-trap" rots, and the unfinished milk from breakfast curdles. Clearly, the man is neglectful of his surroundings. Lowell also highlights the role time plays in this decay through the specific imagery of "wilt[ing]" and "turn[ing] to junket," both of which are gradual processes only facilitated by the passage of time. This time motif demonstrates the man's indifference to his deteriorating environment, which parallels his own deteriorating health. Shortly before the last stanza, the poet reflects on the man and his surroundings. Lowell asks, "Is he killing time?" (35). The phrase "killing time" is defined as engaging in idle and mindless tasks to make time pass quicker, often in anticipation of a more exciting event. However, unlike in the traditional sense, no positive motivation exists for the drinker. Furthermore, when Lowell initially used a similar statement in the opening stanza, the poet intended to highlight the man's wasting of time. Yet, by the last stanza, the focus of the time motif has shifted to the man's apathy and lack of urgency towards his downward spiral. The irony in this time motif demonstrates that while the drinker may appear to be simply wasting time, his life simultaneously is wasting away as well. Finally, the poet describes a scene on the street outside. Two mounted policemen "check on the parking meter violations" as they work in the April rain (37). The poet describes the work of the policemen, including scanning for mundane "parking meter violations," which occur when the time limit expires for a parking spot. The poet again demonstrates a time motif in the specific type of infraction the police are checking for, drawing parallels between the limited time of both the "parking meter" and the drinker. The drinker's apathy towards his own deteriorating condition, compounded with his emotional burden, has resulted in him neglecting to take proper care of himself. Ultimately, the passage of time may result in both of them expiring. Through the use of a time motif, Lowell forces the reader to question if the drinker is killing time, or if his indifference is resulting in him being killed by time?

Through the use of imagery and a time motif in "The Drinker," Robert Lowell ties his own experiences with isolation and the resulting despair into the drinker's neglectful lifestyle. In the poem, the man's downward spiral only worsens with the passage of time, eventually ending with utter hopelessness. Interestingly, the poem's temporal setting, on a rainy April day, adds a final twist to the man's grim situation. T.S. Eliot, a contemporary of Robert Lowell, opened his poem "The Wasteland" with the line "April is the cruelest month." To Eliot, the cruel inevitability of unfulfilled possibilities and disappointment overshadows the hope that comes with spring. Yet, in "The Drinker," no such hope exists by the time Lowell mentions the "April rain." The man's despair, isolation, and apathy for his own predicament had reduced him to a point even lower than the cruelty Eliot believed came with the month April. For the drinker, Robert Lowell, and many others, this realization that even hope comes with disappointment can itself take away any remnants of desire to escape their deteriorating condition. This seemingly inescapable feedback loop explains the vicious downward cycle, that for some, can only end with death.

YOU, ALLEN

Allen You

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Janet Duckham

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Temporal Sunset**Temporal Sunset**

Sunrise and this renewed sense of futility, again. Empty words and this renewed sense of despair, again. Breathe and wonder, again, if this is all worth it.

“I believe in the power of young people to solve climate change,” they told us. *Thanks? Are you just too elderly to give a damn anymore? How did you get a TEDtalk anyway?* Social cues tell me to not say that out loud, so my mind does hopscotch before it settles on a familiar sunset. It’s a saturated clementine hue all around, a crimson red where the land mingles with the sky, and a noxious purple in my peripheral. I regard it for a second before my feet twitch.

I sprint at it from where I sat. But what can I do? The sun sinks into the heart of the earth and the sky hemorrhages a deep maroon. The horizon is, still, no closer. My legs give out. I’m on my knees, collapsed again, wondering if it was all worth it. The last of the sun screams as night falls. With the moon came the stars, shooting their twinkling gaze at me, shining me a light as if to pity me.

“Your generation will be the one to do it.” *I mean, I sure hope so?* The fluorescent lights bare down on me, laughing at us as we burn to keep them alive. *Shut up*, I nearly say out loud. Glancing around, I spot a bookshelf, the teacher’s desk, and there it is... the sunset?

Unsurprisingly, it’s gone at this hour. Instead, the classroom window presents a perfectly false blue brushed with strokes of white — a blanket of false security that eases us, even when the peril is right above. I’m sure if I smashed through the window, it would reveal its true form: a canvas stained with blood.

But all I could muster at the moment was to lean back in my chair, breathe and wonder, again. I let the sky become a sea and I’m swept away immediately into a current of thought, a wave of deadlines, a whirlpool of to-do lists. In this storm, I can’t drown. Because sometimes I will, the sea will revert to the sky, and I’ll fall. Fall. Fall and hit the ground, seeing the sunset, again. It’s bleeding, screaming, and I’m sprinting, again.

Why? To catch the sun, of course. Grab it and put it back in its rightful place at the top of the sky, where it shines on us all. Problem is: I’m not that strong.

“If we all work together, we can overcome anything.” The pessimism nearly scorches me before I pull away. *Yeah, you’re right*. And with time, the bell rang. Hesitant, I cupped that hope in the palm of my hand as I walked home under that baby blue autumn lie.

When I arrive, you’re there. Except you’re not. Hundreds of miles away, at some college campus, you’re making a name for yourself, meeting new people, or falling in love, perhaps. Your class of ‘21 left battle-hardened, taking your energies with you and leaving us with your musings and a wave goodbye. But I kept a special part of you here, like an urn for the living — the template of a high school activist.

With your ambition came my lonely admiration. One incomplete as to never become a passion and brief as to never become an affection. Few know what you did here and of them, even fewer knew the extent of it. Few know that you changed the color of the sky and even fewer know how you accomplished such a feat.

Much to my dismay, I too know not your methods, thoughts, or feelings. What I do have is a recollection, a compilation of those days where the sun set in reverse. If only I could piece together what you were, I’d understand a tenth of what you are. I want to know if you saw the same temporal sunset I did. I want, so badly, to know what the edge of that horizon is like.

Because I’m sure that you’ve been there.

This time, I don’t sprint. The sun sinks, again. It screams, again. The sky bleeds and turns into night like a scab for a wound, again. I sit and wait.

When they come, the stars are deafening. They scream, they shout, they flare as the gaseous entities they are. Each one of them glitters a common tune, but together, they're a hodgepodge of sounds, a combined white noise that we've tuned out like the sounds of a café. In this day and age, we must gaze up to discern any one dialogue. And at times, you're a voice among them. I listen closely for your twinkle. I listen for a precious stray word or phrase that would aid my investigation. More often than not, you're absent. So what I hear instead are all the other voices, far louder and far more booming than yours. One tells me the inconvenient truth, another tells me our times up, again. They all speak with a phantom urgency, because they're spectral messages, like black and white footage, from thousands upon millions of lightyears away that have taken their precious time reaching me at lightspeed. For the moment, you're still within reach, observable, and proximate. But the universe, ever-expanding, will inevitably distance us, members of two different galaxies spreading out on the fabric of spacetime. It's okay, though. Last I saw of you, you were still right in front of me, gazing up at the sun, never taking a moment to look back at me. And I get that. There was nothing as urgent as what we were both looking at above. The back of your head just happened to be in my field of view as I stood behind you. Though at times, I would've liked your reassurance.

What started as a panic became our obsession with the sky. After all, it was our world. The night, our nightmare. The constellations, our predecessors. The sun, our hope. And the sunset, our predicament. We both looked up sometimes with horror, sometimes with ambition, and most often with concern. But with you gone, I'm forced to look up with nobody to look towards. I now look up with nothing but despair and desperation, because looking down doesn't make the nightfall any less noticeable.

This obsession never faded. Rather, I feel powerless against it. It's become a nearly untamed nihilism that consumes me slowly and gently. When the world needed you, you picked up. When the world needed me, I let it ring. At some point, I want to cut the wires to the proverbial phone. The ringing just won't stop. The stars just won't silence. The sun continues to scream. And yet, here I am, calling back but to no avail. One day, I will also ascend to stardom as you did more than half a year ago.

It's hard to look back to that time and admit what we couldn't, or maybe just wouldn't: that we were rather hopeless. We were well educated in our own tragedy, so it was going to take more than five teenagers in a Zoom call to unravel all that. But it took me a second longer to realize that that was besides the point. Our resistance, even if futile, made the sun gleam higher than ever. We sprinted together, aware of our inevitable failure, never to look back and think about silly things in the short term.

Nonetheless, it was still the dumbest thing I've ever had to do in this mind numbing era. In a nutshell: *Dear Old People, give us our futures back. I didn't sit through countless hours of AP Calculus for this.* But all they did was look up at the baby blue lie and tell us, "Don't worry, sweetheart."

We expected as much, even if we were infuriated with their delusion. And so we went back: *Dear Old People, give us our futures back. Oh, and here's how you can do it. It'd probably cost you a fifth of what you spend on the football team.* Again, they gazed up, pointed, and told us, "Sorry honey, that's too difficult."

We petitioned. We spoke to them with our most urgent and still polite voices. We compromised. But just as fast as it started, it fizzled out. And nevertheless, the sun was setting. It was screaming and the earth was bleeding. The end of the school year was upon us.

For most, summer break was a new dawn. For us, it was the evening sun crashing away, tucking itself beyond the horizon. And worst of all, you were graduating. There was no eventual sunrise, again, in August. All I could do was cheer and scream out to you when they announced your name on the football field. The sky cloudless, the sun roasting the turf beneath us. When you walked off, diploma in hand, you vanished from my sight, never to look back. Not even once.

I know what it feels like to drown. When I was much younger, a careless voyage to the deep end of a backyard pool nearly ended me right then and there. I struggled, I gasped, and I swung my arms and legs without thought. It was my body against the elements.

They ask me what it feels like to watch the sunset. I say it feels like drowning. There's no anger or bitterness at anyone. There's no sadness or regret underwater. All that existed was me, my fate, and my thoughts, alone while the clock winds down on my diminishing future.

Maybe in the beginning, there was a kick of adrenaline that made me lash out at the world for putting me in this horrible situation. And maybe when I knew the ship was capsizing, there was a moment of pain where I had to accept the end of things. But those emotions eventually come second to the primal instinct of self-preservation and then the sobering reality of finality.

This is not to say that our job is done or that it's worthless to try. I lived, didn't I? Convinced, head under water, that I would drown, yet I didn't. And who knew if the momentary struggle for buoyancy helped — it was all I could do before being rescued.

It's just a two-fold awareness: I know, to some degree, that our fight is essentially lost, but I also know that we cannot be disturbed by such a thought. One can admit both things; we can sink and swim at the same time. The sun sets and we sprint all the same. The night falls and still, we continue. At the end of this eternal darkness, our perseverance will be rewarded with a solar renaissance. This sea in which I drown will revert back to the sky and I'll wake. Wake. Wake to the morning light. It's healing its blots of crimson into infinite stains of purple and blue, like the sun setting in reverse.

ZHAO, ANNIE**Annie Zhao**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Judith Mitchell-Miller

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Heart of Glass

“Dinner time! Come downstairs now!” my mom yells.

Doorknobs turn and hurried footsteps follow.

“Finally, we get to eat!” my younger brother who just came home from his two Science Olympiad activities, exclaims. I’m right behind him and quickly pick up my phone in the upstairs corner where all the chargers are. *6 new notifications!*

I scroll through Infinite Campus, the app that holds all my grades to see if the recent tests have come back. Clicking on the notifications bar in the upper right hand corner, I see a small print, “43/57 Chapter 8 Chemistry Test.” My phone slides out of my hand, and my hands droop to my sides. A piece of me quietly cracks. Nights staying up past midnight reviewing for the test earned me this. I’d pushed aside my other homework to review for chemistry. Then because I was so sleep deprived from studying late, I’d forgotten to take my flute and math notebook to school. Annoyed at myself, I’d had to use a pencil to pantomime playing the flute in band class, knowing my teacher was disappointed with me. Since the teacher had given us new music to learn, I hadn’t been able to do that. In chemistry, I had to take notes on the back of a handout from world history.

As I trudge down the stairs thinking what a disaster the day had been, I mentally cringe with embarrassment, annoyance, frustration, anger, and stress. While my mom listens to my dad complain about work, she smiles and waves for me to come to eat. Our dining table holds four main dishes and in the center, noodles in the white porcelain cooking pot continue to create a puff of warm air that slowly dissipates. Our individual bowls and chopsticks are neatly placed in front of each pine chair.

Today, our bowls are not filled with white rice but instead replaced with steaming, firm miàn tiáo, or noodles. My mom and dad, even after a long day of work, make noodles from scratch, a task which my brother and I often join. My parents make the dough, sculpt it to the desired length, and throw the miàn tiáo into a pot of boiling water. After the noodles are done, they place equal amounts into four bowls, add soy sauce and sesame oil, and then top each with a poached egg. Surrounding the big pot of noodles are bowls of equally appetizing fish, qīng cài (bok choy), and potatoes.

While I pick up fresh fish and sweet qīng cài, I listen to my family sharing the highlights of their day.

“What activities do you have coming up?” my dad asks my brother to catch up.

“I have a math competition next week, so I’m pretty nervous, and a state level piano audition. Sadly, I got my first 90 in math,” my brother responds while chewing food.

I roll my eyes... *A 90 is my average score*, I think.

“Don’t eat with your mouth open!” my mom says.

I start to zone out when they complain about his eating posture for the hundredth time. Although My brother is a few years younger than I am, he takes a higher math class than I do, and he’s not even struggling. Maybe it’s because he doesn’t procrastinate, and I do. . . . So, Karma? No longer listening to the banter between my parents and my brother, I feel my stress double as I think about all I have to do in the next few days. Four homework assignments for tomorrow, one quiz, two tests next week, a debate tournament this weekend... My chest tightens as I think back to my frightening chemistry score. Instinctively, I start biting my nails. As I try to forget about the test, I hear my name.

“Hey, we called your name a few times and please stop biting your nails,” my dad says.

My hands drop down, but my fingers still pick at my cuticles. I don’t try to rip my cuticles to the point where blood gushes out — it has become a bad habit when my heart starts to feel weird.

“You look tired. Are you ok?” my dad asks.

I’m not sure if it’s because I haven’t heard those comforting words in a long time or if it’s because of how

restless, but exhausted, I am. I feel the crack open finally. Tears stream uncontrollably down my reddened cheeks. My hands immediately rush to my face to scrape off any dirty wet stuff.

What are you doing? This is embarrassing.

I tell myself to calm down, and my face flushes and tears fall. While my chest heaves furiously, my heart feels as if it's going to jump out of my body any moment.

Why are you acting like this? Stop.

After my hands rub back and forth on my cheeks, they push against my ears and temples in an attempt to silence my inner thoughts and my surroundings. However, I only amplify my short intakes of air and grunts that escape my mouth. My head starts ringing.

Who are you? You're becoming weak.

"What are you doing?" my dad says.

"Stop it! She's having trouble breathing!" my mom responds, glaring at him.

My parents' voices get louder, and I feel my mom's hand moving slowly down my back. My breathing calms a little. Quickly, I huff out a few "I'm sorry's," but that only makes it more difficult to breathe. My "sorry's" are followed by my parents' worried sighs and words of comfort. Another voice, which is my brother's, flows into the conversation.

"Baba, don't worry. She's just really stressed, ok?" my brother says.

"I know. She never sleeps. Why is that?" my dad asks.

"I don't know. She hasn't been telling me," my brother replies.

Hurry up! Say you are ok!

I want to say words to let them know I'm fine, but only mumbles emerge from my mouth. All of a sudden, my hands claw against my face and neck and fall beside me, and my legs slide beneath me. My parents and my brother warp into a hundred black shadows screaming at me. The darkness flows through every vein in my body, taking command over me. It sprints to my racing heart where it starts to nip at the already broken glass wall. The glass traps a part of me that I swore never to tear down, while around it vines grow into an alter ego.

Smile, smile, smile.

Behind my facade holds something vulnerable. A side I hate showing to anyone, even my family. I don't like talking about myself or my problems. In conversations, I shift the spotlight to the other person immediately, and I make it stay there the whole time. When questions are directed to me, I modify them back to the other person. With my two friends, I've never sat in the middle, unless it's assigned.

My true self is ugly. Raw. Disgusting. All those times when I overthink every word or action and imagine that my friends will sneer and laugh at me behind my back if I say something weird. All those times when I get worked up, I don't tell anyone, but rather push back the tears swelling up in my eyes and continue. All those times I feel my head throbbing over and over, I don't rest but rather I say it's because I didn't drink enough water even though I already finished two bottles. So, when stress builds up to the breaking point, I don't search up — "how to relieve stress" — but I shut everyone off and blame myself.

Now, I'm crying so hard that I can't breathe, and the sobs get worse every minute.

Until now, I've never been a crier. I've hated crying since I always believed I was strong and I wanted to show my defenseless side to anyone. Even as a tiny, almost four-foot kindergartener, I didn't cry when one kid purposely threw a basketball at my face. In third grade, I didn't cry when another kid stole one of my school supplies every week until I told the teacher I was missing everything, even my backpack. In fourth grade, I didn't cry when someone called me "Ching-Chong" and always deliberately called me another Asian girl's name. In seventh grade, I didn't cry when my teacher read out the range of scores and when she got to the lowest score, a student, who happened to see angry red pen marks on my paper, whispered "That's you," making ten or so heads turn to look at me. A few days before, I didn't cry when my mom asked me if I was okay, even though I was not.

But now, my emotions pour out of me. Gradually, my consciousness knocks me back to reality, and I begin to start taking control of my breathing and tears.

"I have to go back into my room..." I manage to say as I walk as fast as I can back up the stairs that I descended down ten minutes ago.

"Wait..." my mom says, but is hushed by my brother and dad.

Even though I can't see, I don't need to open my eyes to know where my room is. I know the direction to my room like the back of my hand. I shove open the door and slam it shut, a little louder than I wanted, and fall into my bed. The room is pitch black as daylight savings makes any time after 5pm the same 12am; thus, my concept of time is muddled. I faceplant into my pillow and breathe heavily to calm myself down. My bedsheets smell like laundry detergent as my mom and I had made our beds a few days before. I turn on my

side, and the wetness on my pillow feels cool against my left cheek. While tears continue to spill out of my eyes, I hear the murmurs and clattering of spoons and chopsticks against bowls.

As my finger reaches my lips, I stop myself before it touches my teeth.

Maybe I still bite my nails because I haven't grown emotionally. I still tell myself I'm the problem. But, maybe it's a problem that I need to grow out of and solve!

An ache boils in my chest, melting the glass barrier around my heart. I think I have known all along what the problem is and have suppressed the soft but definite voice in my head.

I'm not ok, but that's totally fine. I need to love myself before anyone else can.

"No more biting nails," I announce in the darkness.

No more giving into my fears. I can't succumb to the same insecure person I was years ago. Suddenly, I remember it's almost my birthday. Although I remember the first day of kindergarten when I boarded the big scary yellow bus, it seems as if I've only been on earth a few weeks. Everything starts to get unclear, as I drown myself in questions asking "What is life about?" "Am I hungry?" "Should I keep crying?" One question makes me pause: *Am I ok?* I ponder: *Was I ever?* When I wasn't doing well, was it because of the weather or lack of food? Or is it because of intense anxiety or burnout? With the fast change from online school to in-person, the workload has been intense. I lift my hangnail fingers and count from 12am to 7am, only getting six. Starting this year, I've slept an average of only six hours a night. I rub my eyes and roll circles at my temples. I huff in and out, and my body soaks into my blue sheets decorated with white trees. I'm exhausted from bawling, but I'm refreshed in a sense. I understand myself more — that it's ok. Even if I'm scared, I know there are many people that can help me.

An intimate shift begins. Sitting up, I effortlessly form a smile and open the door without wiping my reddened eyes and tear-stained cheeks. My wet, exposed face is revealed to the world as the door opens, the last piece of glass breaks away from my heart.

Days pass and I don't cry, which I automatically assume I'm all better. That's until I get rifled up easily after my brother shuts his door too hard for the seventh time this evening and I start screaming at him to not do that again. But, my mom screams back twice as loud and we have a full blown argument. But in the end, since it is my fault, I am blamed, so I sulk back into my room. I thread my fingers into my hair and just as I am combing down a small part of my nail gets stuck in my hair and results in a ripped nail. I mutter some unpleasant words under my breath and stub my toe against my desk.

My eyes water and triple down into another crying fit.

"Again..." I hear my dad say to my mom.

"It's high school," my mom replies and I imagine her shaking her head as she sighs.

High school is partially correct, but it's mostly myself. I know now that I need help. I need my mom to comfort me like she did when I had cried after losing my favorite hair clip, when my dad nursed me to life after frequent winter fevers, or when my brother's laugh soothed my gloomy days. I need their assistance and guidance.

Ask them.

But, I'm still too afraid.

Weeks pass and finals are near. More sleepless nights and cries and nail biting and bleeding. I'm exhausted, which can be seen by my weak immunity to cause rashes over my chest area. I barely manage to finish finals and collapse on my bed right after school ends. Winter break begins right after finals and coincidentally it's also my birthday. On my 8th birthday, I got a pink fairy diary with a lock on it from Santa, or maybe my parents, and every year I write a page in it. I look through and see pages of bad handwriting which transitions to a more legible one. My problems were simply not getting to eat a bigger cake or not getting a dog for Christmas. But, now it has transformed just like myself.

I start to write. I write and write until my hand hurts and the pen bleeds through the page. I pour my problems into the page and when I'm almost done, my brother appears at my doorway asking me if I want to eat cake now. I look at him tearfully and begin to tell him... everything.

"Oh, wow. You should have told me earlier. I'm here for you," my brother says.

"Thank you," I peep out.

Starting from my brother, I tell my family and friends my problems. The cage around my inner self disappears and my other identities. Everyone knows my difficulties and I'm always more than happy to share and when I do, people begin to share their own hardships. I listen to their every word as I know it was hard for me to even speak out a single word, too.

At dinner time, I begin the conversation now.

"Ugh, I cried yesterday again," I say, rubbing my temples with my neat nails.

Three voices follow asking how they can help.

I finally smile as bright as I used to.

ZHEN, GARY**Gary Zhen**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

Home School, Warrensburg, MO

Educator: Kevin Zhen

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Tennis Trouble

I step out of our navy blue SUV and pick up my racket. Walking to the tennis court, a bald, chubby man squawks into the phone: coach.

“No, I already have coffee, I’ll talk to you later. I have a lesson to teach,” he says in Spanish. A red basket intertwined by a silver square frame stands to the side. Elongated stems reach down and connect to the wheels, like a cart. Dozens of bright green tennis balls cram inside. We greet each other and he instructs me to stand on one side of the court alongside my friend Charlie while he stands across from us.

Slim black fences guard their community’s court. White streaks intersect midcourt, carving it up into rectangular sections, the baseline, the singles sideline. A net of tangled white rope, black tape, and suspension poles nails itself into the middle of the area. Small benches prop themselves outside of the playing vicinity.

We start with forehands. Charlie bends his knees and swings his racket across his chest. The ball soars into the other side and bounces onto the concrete before rolling into the fence.

“Good,” the coach says. “Now, Gary, it’s your turn.” He tosses the ball at me, but I only tap it instead. The ball stops before crossing over the net. Coach sighs, shoves his hands in his pockets, and walks over to my side of the court.

“Okay, so in order to perform a proper forehand, you have to put your right hand at a right angle here. Now stick your left directly in front of your chest. Finally, you have to rotate your body counterclockwise and face the fence like this.” He walks back to his tossing spot, a Dunkin’ Donuts coffee equipped in his hand, and starts throwing a few more balls at us. Utilizing his tips, I position my feet, pivot my body, and raise my arms. But I stretch my hand too far behind my back, and the ball bangs into the fence.

“Water break everybody! Gary, you’ll get better, just don’t worry for now and focus on technique,” the coach says.

My friend and I sit on the benches and chug the water, streams of it pouring out of our bottles like waterfalls. Our foreheads, shirts, and necks drench themselves with sweat. Heavy breaths exit our mouths. Our hearts boom inside our chests. During the break, the coach strolls over to us, his hands clutching a phone.

“Hey guys, look at this I found on YouTube,” Coach says. The coach plays a video featuring an eagle locking its eyes on a mouse in order to seize it. The eagle perches on a branch in a desolate forest, its vivid brown eyes shining like a supernova. A mouse rustles through dry leaves beneath the trees. Detecting the ringing crunch, the eagle’s head swipes across the wind, and its pupils flick onto the prey. Its sharp beak slices the surrounding air. The eagle’s fuzzy feathers sway like a ballerina, and its feet lacerate the hardened branch wood.

“You can see it’s very focused, it won’t take its eyes off of that mouse. Be like this eagle, and you’ll be great.” I blink twice, inhale twice, exhale twice. Goosebumps appear on my forearms and a bubble of sweat wraps around my body.

Now, the eagle makes its move. It’s claws loosen from the ripped tree, and it swoops down like a thunderbolt crashing into the earth. It’s eyes keep boring into the mouse, like an archer ready to shoot their arrow through the bullseye. In a flash, the eagle’s claws pierce the little rodent and soars away, disappearing into a cloud. It shrieks, the sound of its call echoing throughout the forest before finally escaping from the speaker at the bottom of Coach’s iPhone X.

“Alright, water break is up. Time for rallies. Both of you go on opposite sides of the court. Hustle!” He clicks his phone shut. I pick up my racket. My friend and I jog our way onto the court.

The coach hands a ball to my friend. He shrugs his shoulders and serves, slamming his racket into the ball. It rockets towards my deuce side. But, just like the eagle, I start tracking the ball’s trajectory, my eyes following its path. I raise my racket, coil my torso, sink my knees into the ground and twist, my gaze still on the ball, grunting as I launch it towards the other side of the court.

It brakes at the feet of the net. "0-1 Charlie," Coach said. "But nice shot, Gary."
"Did I do good?" I ask.
"Yeah that was good." Coach smiles.
I grin and move back to my spot.