

Missouri Youth Write 2022 Honorable Mention

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AN, HANNAH**Hannah An**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Melissa Pomerantz

Category: Poetry

Enlightenment

Enlightenment

I. Stream Enterer, Sotapanna

The heroine addict on the corner of Old North waits for his mother to pick him up.

It's late. He's leaning against cold, crumbling red brick and little protrusions dig against his bare skin.

His mouth tastes like ash. He hasn't eaten in days. There's a cut on his tongue that rubs against the roof of his mouth every time he tries to say the letter 'L'.

There's a cup of methadone sitting on the counter of the clinic that he's sitting in front of. The cup has a faint yellow stain on it, and he can't really tell from this distance but

it looks like a fingerprint. It's probably from that one eyedrop solution, the one that the cranky nurses use to dilate pupils and check that the eye doesn't have an infection.

He hates those eye-drops. He hates his eyes, actually. They see things too clearly.

A short, 50-ish year old lady in a black and white Banana Republic blouse makes eye contact with him from across the street. He looks away as quickly as he can, but he still saw her pleading eyes. He hates those eyes too. He hates being, becoming someone. It's dark now, and he's annoyed that someone like her would even be out in this part of the city.

He decides that his mother isn't coming and closes his eyes.

II. Once returner, Sakadagami

For I sit at the foot of my mother's bed and weep.

I am scared to touch her. Her arms are not bone and sinew but a web of purple veins and brittle glass. I do not recognize the small scar on the side of her chin, the mole on the back of her collarbone.

Her eyes, clear. Cracked obsidian. Volcanic snow. Soot.

I look into them and I cannot see myself. She can only see me.

Her voice curls into a lullaby and she closes her eyes.

What am I but a reflection?

I have sought so long to undo my mother's word.

Too shy, too obedient, too weak, no fit for this world.

Not this world.

She whispers a song of quiet despair,

of an otherworldly melancholia.

I cannot believe her God but she must go.

I give her to the unknown.

III. Never returner, Anagami

He does not want to wake.

He feels his veins throb with stale blood

The warmth of glory on the nape of his neck.

But he does not want to wake.

Lazarus wants to remain the cave's prisoner in his allegory,

Blind.

To his forced savior he implores rest.

He is pulled out of the cave by the roots of his hair.

IV. Enlightenment, Aharant

Bloody feet push against the cold rock.

Straining shoulders ache to hold the weight of his own soul.
His mind does not rest.
It does not get easier.
With each breath of the soot-caked air
he lives in absolute ecstasy of himself.
He is complete.
He is Sisyphus.

ARST, NATHAN**Nathan Arst**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Revenge Essay

The Prevalence of Revenge

“Good game bench player,” an opposing player said to me as both teams lined up to shake hands.

On this particular frigid December day, my team had just finished a basketball game, where the crowd was roaring and the energy was sky-high. Yet I was the anomaly: due to the fact that I hadn’t even played a single second in the game, my attitude was worse than it had been all season.

Trash talk was nothing short of ordinary, that after a while, as an experienced athlete, I grew accustomed to the fierce nature of competition that was rooted in my opponents’ blood. However, when another player made a taunt about me sitting on the bench, it was a different story. Those types of comments hit home; outwardly, I could maintain a calm demeanor, yet on the inside, I’d bristle with a mixture of emotions rattling through my core.

Why couldn’t I have at least played for a couple of minutes? Who does my coach think he is, having one of his players sit on the bench for an hour?

As I shook hands with the other players, my heart contained only one emotion. It wasn’t the appreciation that my entire family came to watch; it wasn’t the joy that my teammate, Percy, had scored 20 points; it was a burning fire that struggled to be contained on the inside. From this fire, I believed my vengeance to be a greater necessity than water for a lone hiker in the desert.

Rage coursed through my body, to the point where my mind started resorting to thoughts I would’ve normally considered to be extremely unrealistic. I considered quitting the team, thinking that it would make a point. In general, quitting a sports team is a topic that’s taken lightly. However, at this moment, I wasn’t thinking carelessly--I was seriously considering quitting. I wanted the severity of my feelings to burst through my decision, informing the coach of my tremendous displeasure. If one of his players quit, perhaps he would feel he failed, or angry because I determined him to be incompetent. Payback was my number one desire. I wanted to instill rage in the person who had instilled it in me.

In his article “Revenge”, Jim Thornton states, “A pioneering study published in the journal *Science* in 2004 was among the first to show that the drive to seek out vengeance resides in a specific part of the human brain” (Thornton 114). Likewise in my experience, revenge was a concept that naturally made its way into my brain. At no point does Thornton mention that revenge regards other feelings such as morality and kindness. In fact, the vengeance in my mind pushed away all forms of positivity while it became the main topic in my mind. My idea of vengeance was quitting the team, to ensure that the person that I believed to be the most responsible for my misfortunes would feel an ounce of what I did. I hoped that the disappointment and anger caused from one of his players leaving him would match the extent of my own suffering. However, my thirst for revenge was based simply on me wanting to direct my anger on something specific (and of course, it’s easier to channel anger on a person rather than an object).

“Good game, you’ll get ‘em next time...”

“Don’t worry, you will be on the court in no time...”

I shuffled back to the car, as I listened to my family’s unsuccessful attempts to comfort me. Throughout the car ride home, I barely uttered a word.

“What do you want for dinner, Brett?” my mom asked.

“I don’t know,” I muttered bitterly.

For the next couple of minutes, one could’ve heard a pin drop. I saw my parents and my sister shifting uncomfortably in their seats, not sure of what to say. In fact, I was well aware of the awkward atmosphere in the car, but I was too busy thinking about my own critiques of the coach and the game, that I didn’t bother to say anything.

It’s easy to say the words “I wish that I...” and “I should have...”. But looking back, it’s evident that I could’ve been a better person to those who cared about me most. While I will acknowledge that I wasn’t extremely hostile, I

nevertheless directed my feelings towards people who were undeserving of my anger.

The next day at school, after the game, I was talking with a friend of mine, who was in a similar position that I was (he rarely played as well).

“What’s up, Brett!” my friend, Vince, greeted me with a bright smile.

I stared at him with a confused expression. “Why are you so cheerful? We both have been averaging around two minutes of playtime per game for the last week, and last night neither of us played at all! What’s the matter with our coach?”

“Coach is all right,” Vince shrugged. “I mean, it’s not like he has anything against us. He’s just out there trying his best.” I must have had a look of incredulity on my face since Vince chuckled and patted my shoulder. “I’ve got to go to science. I’ll see you later.”

The following afternoon, I entered the gym and didn’t meet my coach’s eyes whenever he gave instructions. At the end of practice, I was the last one to get picked up, so was therefore alone with the coach. I pretended not to notice and bent my head over, tying my shoes for much longer than necessary.

The coach began to approach me, as he walked over from the other side of the gym. Hurriedly, I gathered my equipment and began to leave, hoping to avoid an uncomfortable encounter. I debated whether or not to confront him, but amidst my fury, the awkwardness was tearing me back.

“Brett, hold on a minute,” my coach called.

I closed my eyes and let out a sigh, and then turned around and pasted an insincere smile on my face, which prevented me from grinding my teeth.

“Listen, I meant to put you in the game in the first half yesterday,” my coach began. “I apologize--I just got caught up in the flow of the game, but I should’ve played you, that’s on me. Once I realized I didn’t put you in, it wasn’t my intention to throw you in unprepared in the second half. I’ll try and do better.”

I looked down at my feet, not sure of why this conversation created such an unpleasant environment. By stringing a couple of words together, I managed to muster a feeble response along the lines of, “It’s okay, no worries...”

Desperately, I rushed to exit this agonizing discussion. I leaped into my car, out of breath and exhausted.

“How was practice?” my dad inquired with a smile. “I notice you’re the last one out?”

“Coach talked me after practice about the game, and essentially apologized,” I responded. Yet again, I couldn’t meet the eyes of the person that I was talking to. *Why couldn’t I do such a simple task? After all of my rage, why do I feel guilty?*

Internally, I was still filled with a glimpse of fiery passion. It didn’t consume me like before, but its existence was unmistakable. *Why wasn’t I satisfied...my coach had already apologized!*

“Before you know it, your time playing sports will be nothing more than a memory. Make every moment count.”

I sat in near silence for the rest of the car ride, reflecting on what my dad had advised me.

That night, I made a promise to myself: the resentment that I had refused to let go must be set free. Before I turned out the lights for bed, I studied myself in the mirror. *Can I honestly say that I’m the best version of myself? Am I “making every moment count”?* At that instance, the vengeance in my heart was vanquished. *Holding a grudge against Coach isn’t going to do anything but diminish my own well-being.*

Philip Yancey explains the concept of forgiving someone through his assertion, “Forgiveness breaks the cycle. It does not settle all questions of blame and justice and fairness; to the contrary, often it evades those questions” (Yancey 37). “An Unnatural Act” displays Philip Yancey’s belief that forgiving someone is often more difficult than committing an act of vengeance, also hence the title. That concept occurred in my example because of the way I tried to avoid the confrontation with my coach. The emotion I felt was, in fact, guilt because after the coach admitted to his mistakes, I took the easy way out by evading the opportunity to settle blame--by continuing to hold a grudge. It was harder for me to forgive my coach than to maintain my desire for vengeance. Revenge was a tactic I used to avoid the ‘unnatural act’ of forgiveness, as portrayed in Yancey’s article.

Throughout the course of the rest of the season, when my coach approached me, I didn’t feel the same amount of guilt or anger that I felt before. My stomach didn’t tie up in knots and my jaw didn’t clench each time he talked. Thornton and Yancey precisely depict what I eventually realized: directing my anger towards someone, and being unwilling to forgive but instead more eager to get revenge--does nothing but decrease my quality of life. Therefore, when I tried to improve my mindset, I was much more positive and high-spirited.

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BARTZ WILLIS, ALTHEA**Althea Bartz Willis**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Joshua Piontek, Megan Roegner, Nicole Strayhorn

Category: Flash Fiction

Swing

Roots grow deep beneath his worn dress shoes, the leather kind with square toes creased from tapping to the beat of swing music. Roots grow deep beneath the not-yet-vintage grand piano and its stool—his seat. It's his because of the ancient scratched out pattern, the lightened semi-circle on the wooden floor—like a glove, it only fits his slender legs.

Him and the piano breathe as one, his long black fingers tickle her keys into intonation, and she responds to his touch eagerly. Together they make love with music—their rhythm always steady, but never predictable. They sway in between beats, weaving new melodies that dance. Large crowds pack into the small, colored-only, speakeasy just to hear them in harmony—their music ripples through open ears, past the bar's ceiling and up into the heavy oak that shades it from view. Their fates are intertwined, his and hers.

She loves him. To her, he is the whole of all the stars of the galaxy wrapped into a tall and handsome package. Not that she cares what he looks like. She loves him for his hands, his tempo, his heartbeat.

Their love draws people from the other side of town, the north end, the upstage, into their world. In their world they live elevated above the ever-whitening crowd. In time the colored-only sign is switched to its opposite.

He wears a brown tweed suit over a green sweater. People point and holler. *A suit on a black body! What a sight!* But he can't hear them over her voice, she speaks for him. She holds him in her arms of melody. The crowd asks him to travel, to dance in more ears, but he won't leave her. She tells him to go, to bless others with his talent. He insists that people with good ears will find him on their own. They don't like hearing *no* from a black mouth. He is too stubborn, grounded by roots to his seat. But white folks don't like black roots. What holds something together gives it strength.

A long night passes without the dancing music. He's missing, she waits. In the morning he appears, paying the price of disobedience. They say he sold moon-shine—a worthy crime. A rope holds his neck to the old oak, and his feet off the ground. His long body shakes in the wind—detached, uprooted. His beautiful hands hang stuck to his sides, spiritlessly still. There is no music in his body's swing.

She would never play in tune again.

The worn hardwood is the only proof of him she has, the rest is memory. When she opens her keyboard, she feels for him, listens for his heartbeat. Across the stars, they sway together.

BENEDIX, TAYLYNN**TayLynn Benedix**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Marilyn Yung

Category: Poetry

Hope's Last-Minute Dance**Hope's Last-Minute Dance** (Inspired by Metaphor Dice)

Hope, the last-minute dance.
 When the facts prove otherwise,
 And fate is not on your side,
 Hope dances its way to your heart.
 Last-minute reliance swarming your thoughts.
 You emit actuality aside.
 You begin to conceptualize winning this war.
 The war against unmerciful fate.
 The war against a mournful reality.
 Hope radiates a light on the dark, forsaken truth.
 It mutters a beautiful song to you.
 A tune that produces happiness.
 A kind of happiness that makes your eyes water,
 Your heart flutter,
 And makes you feel weightless.
 Almost as though you'd float away.
 Hope is a miracle you pray to God for.
 Hope can be both present or absent.
 Hope is the light that flares when all seems grim.
 Hope is a warrior that occasionally wins.

Reminiscence: A Villanelle

I remember the smile in your eyes.
 Your once happy and positive remark.
 Though at night all you can hear are my cries.
 Your being shines like the sun's golden skies.
 Your presence always left a crucial mark.
 I remember the smile in your eyes.
 Always with you, my happiness resides.
 Your laughter caused the room to feel a spark.
 Though at night all you can hear are my cries.
 On my neck you lie in miniature size.
 Any adventure I take, you embark.
 I remember the smile in your eyes.
 At times I wish I could hear your replies.
 Whenever I call to you in the dark.
 Though at night all you can hear are my cries.
 And with you my happiness always lies.
 Your words have left an imperative mark.
 I remember the smile in your eyes.
 Though at night all you can hear are my cries.

Thank you

Thank you, veterans, for your sacrifices..
 Your bravery on the battlefield has made an impact on your country.
 Thank you for continuing to fight, even after witnessing the losses of friends.
 Thank you for fighting in the nightmare, so children didn't have to live it.
 Your strength after losing limbs and parts of your soul proves your bravery.
 Thank you for sacrificing everything to help your country.
 Thank you for having the courage to walk into line of fire,
 To save your members on the field.
 Thank you for having the strength to leave your family and friends,
 Knowing there was a chance you wouldn't come back.
 Your country is free because of your fortitude.
 Thank you for your months, years, or decades of service.
 Thank you to the soldiers who lost their lives.
 You will always be remembered and loved.
 Thank you for your sacrifices,
 But most importantly.
 I'm sorry.
 I'm sorry you had to suffer through the fight.
 I'm sorry for the fear that you experienced.
 I'm sorry that you left the field more damaged than you went in.
 I'm sorry that you were injured on our behalf.
 I'm sorry for your trauma.
 I know that will never heal.
 Thank you for everything you have given us,
 And I hope that one day your country can return to you
 The bravery and strength that you gave us.

I'm Sorry

I'm sorry to my family, and I'm sorry to my friends.
 I'm sorry I don't have much to give you, and I'm sorry for who I am.
 You turn from me, and I follow after.
 I beg you for forgiveness, even when I've done nothing wrong, but no one will listen.
 You come to me with your troubles, and pour them out on me.
 I'm left solving them and feeling very lost, just wanting to be free.
 I ask for you to listen, and I ask for you to help.
 I forget how invisible I am, until you cry and yelp.
 I am the shoulder you cry on, but it will never be enough.
 I'm sorry I'm not who you wanted me to be, and I'm sorry for who I've become.
 I may not be the best of people, but I am the most loyal I can guarantee.
 I'm sorry that's not good enough, but I'm also sorry that you can't see.
 You can't see how much I care for you, or when I stand up for you when you're not around.
 I'm sorry you have the need to damage me and bring me to the ground.
 I'm sorry I'm not the perfect person, but neither are you.
 I'm sorry you can't see that, and I hope that one day you will notice it too.

Glacial Drops

Icy, yet wet.
 Frozen, but fluid.

The feeling of an icy drizzle
Slithers on my skin.
The welcoming feeling of Autumn rain.
Typically preferred, with ice in a glass on a hot day,
But not this particular afternoon.
Today it is served from the clouds,
Cooled by zephyr.
Toes dipped in the frigid creek.
The stream flows through the patterns of my skin.
The cold water surrounds my being.
And yet, I feel warmth beneath my freezing surface.
Enjoying the glacial drops that seep through my pores,
I embrace the cold.

BLANKE, HANNAH**Hannah Blanke**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Dogs and "Dogs"

Dogs and "Dogs"

Even before I had a dog of my own, I knew that the attachment one makes with such a loyal animal is everlasting, even when the dog is no longer around. When I rescued my first dog at the age of 10, however, I didn't realize just how strong one's emotions grew, or how provocative those emotions would become in the face of lies and grief.

Leaving vengeance unfulfilled is a "potent trigger for mental disorders and aggressive outbursts" (Thornton 116). Looking back at my ten-year-old self, I now realize that those emotions did grow to excessive amounts with me trying to hold back, and I did have so-called "aggressive outbursts" when wishing death upon the company that lied to me and sold me my first dog. Before I go into much more detail, however, backstory is necessary.

My inexperience with dogs changed one mild Autumn day in August, when I saw the most impressive dog, Roxie. Her reflective, black fur allowed the sun to dance off of her as if a mirror inhabited it. Her eyes showed a deep sense of compassion, even if she didn't know the person looking at her. She was perfect for me, an introvert who already felt the bond one grows with an animal over the course of years.

My grandma, however, had other beliefs.

"Hannah, do you really believe that you're going to remember to feed her every day? I see that you can't even remember to put your dishes in the sink half the time!"

I could tell by her annoyed tone that she really did not want to have yet another animal in this house. I was one enough. However, I had some tricks up my sleeve.

"But, Grandma! Don't you see how lonely Roxie looks? She needs a home. No one else has come to take her!"

My trick had worked, and she said that if my mom decided to say yes to this "animal," as my grandma liked to call Roxie, she may change her mind. With that, my grandma's phone appeared in my hand within 2 milliseconds, and my mom answered right away. With persistent promising, a kernel of hope growing as I sensed her resolve falter, I heard the response I expected, but one I was no less excited about.

"Fine, I guess we can give a dog a chance. Just let me drive over there."

Beaming with triumph, I was taking home, for the first time, a dog that would be living with us for our whole lives! Or so I thought...

The seemingly nice worker from Diana's Rescue who was working at PetSmart that day gave us all the possible information on Roxie, including that she was healthy, had received all her immunizations, and was ready to be taken home today! My grandma and mom were both still skeptical, but seeing me excited about getting the chance to finally pour all of my love into a dog, they went along for the ride.

I lost myself in the eyes of this beautiful animal, but eventually turned to the worker to ask, "Can you give us any blankets or food bowls for her that she might already have?"

"Nope," the rescue worker said shortly, already distracted with the task of unloading yet another dog. "You have to get those things yourself."

My elation was only dampened for so long, and so we got right to purchasing the necessities for our new family member.

When she first stepped foot into our home, something seemed to be off. She wasn't the excited little pup that we expected her to be. My mom and I are the type of people who watch videos online that show people bringing their dogs home, and how excited the dog gets. Compared to the other dogs we'd witnessed, she just laid down in one spot for the majority of the day, but we decided not to pay much attention to these differences. Although a bit worried, we viewed it as Roxie's own little way of getting to know the new terrain.

As the days progressed, her demeanor changed, and she seemed to be getting more fatigued by the day, immediately signaling my mom and me to take her to the vet. Driving to the vet served as one of the most excruciating ventures in the world, and thoughts like "Is she going to die?" "Is she going to be around anymore?"

circled my mind. My inexperience with dogs sent my emotions into a tailspin, as I didn't understand how sickness affected such an animal. I didn't know if she ate something that she wasn't supposed to, or if something really was wrong. After what felt like an eternity, we arrived at the vet, and those questions would finally be answered. Walking up to the office, I held Roxie a little tighter, hoping that the little movement would bring me answers in itself. However, when the vet finally finished his examination of Roxie, I could partially tell by his face that the news would not be relieving.

"I'm really sorry, but we may have to do some blood work on Roxie today. We want to make sure that there aren't any underlying issues that need to be taken care of." As Dr. Flasar said this, I felt a drop in my stomach. I didn't want to be separated from my dog, whom I looked forward to seeing every day.

"I understand. Is there a rough estimate for how long the tests will take?" My mom seemed more concerned than I. I could tell that she was trying to hide the fact that she was extremely worried. Her leg bounced up and down while she hugged her stomach, as if that one motion would stop the subsequent events from occurring. Dr. Flasar said the blood work would take about 30 minutes to an hour. They wanted to check for multiple diseases, including the one disease I failed to consider: cancer.

The time had come to talk to the vet about the results from Roxie's blood test. I started to fear that other people would be able to sense how fast my heart started beating, so I could barely understand a word the vet shared with my mom.

"Roxie... not producing red blood cells... Myelofibrosis... Cancer." With that, I could feel tears brimming in my eyes. It took all the effort in the world to hold them back. How in the world could Diana's Rescue sell us a dog they considered "healthy," and later expect us to figure out for ourselves that she was deathly ill? I couldn't comprehend it. How could they take advantage of a 10-year-old like that? At that moment, I immediately began plotting the temper tantrum of the century at the doors of Diana's Rescue.

Some may believe my emotions got the best of me, but "You don't find dolphins forgiving sharks for eating their playmates. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there, not a dog-forgive-dog" (Yancey 36). My dog was not eaten by another dog. However, the purpose of such a comparison is to show that when an individual does something to someone close to another individual, that person is going to get their revenge, not forgive. When I finally put the pieces together, and realized that the rescue had sold me a sick dog, I felt the urge to compete in this dog-eat-dog world, and get revenge on the real dogs: the rescue workers.

We sat in the parking lot, helpless, unable to spark a conversation that would make sense at this given moment. Roxie, clueless of the events that just occurred, decided to rest her head on my thigh. My emotions had finally reached the brim. I couldn't hold in my tears any longer. Both my mom and I cried in the car, right in front of the vet's office, unsure of the emotions flowing through our bodies.

I felt positively sure of one fact: I wanted to seek revenge on the people that made Roxie go through this pain, and then willingly gave her away to a family without letting them know what they were getting into. From my own experience, I've noticed many people disregard the emotions of animals, especially dogs. There are many videos on the Internet of dogs being left out in subzero conditions, and it breaks my heart to see that. Having been told Roxie had gone through such terrible conditions with her past family, I wanted to see her live a wonderful life. Roxie, labeled as a "healthy" dog, gave me the chance to finally fulfill these ideas.

The PetSmart workers took that chance right from my grasp.

Revenge, although it may seem unfit and not the favorable approach, "is as natural to human beings as grief, happiness, fear, and hunger" (Thornton 114). Although Thornton was deprived of something that many people rely on in their daily lives--money--and I of the opportunity to provide a once hopeless animal with a chance at life, we both experienced that natural human tendency of revenge. With that emotion being so natural, I did not second guess my feelings of revenge when they started to surface, and neither did Thornton. We were similar in the sense that we wanted to see the destructor face destruction of their own.

At that moment, fueled by the grief of the impending loss of this sweet animal, I made a promise to myself: Roxie is not going to die without having received the hope and care she deserves in her last month of life. As my mom started to pull out of the parking lot of the vet's office, I could sense the wheels moving in her mind, trying to comprehend the situation, and at the same time, formulate a strategy to save this dog's life, even though we were aware of the limited amount of time we had.

We spent the next couple of months spending thousands of dollars on treatments for Roxie in hopes that she would miraculously come back to us as a healthy dog. Those hopes always faded when the doctor called us and told us the treatments were complete, but had been unable to cure the cancer eating away at Roxie. At this point, the cancer seemed to be showing her more love than we ever could, and that set fire to the already burning sensation inside me that wanted to seek revenge on Diana's Rescue. Until I knew there was no chance to heal Roxie of this bothersome disease, I wouldn't stop trying, and wouldn't let that anger win.

However, after having spent well over \$3,000 on this dog in hopes that she would be saved, my mom and I knew

that there was no more hope that she was going to beat the cancer. I hated seeing her struggle this much, but I knew that she needed a sense of relief from all the pain she was going through. So, we made the heartbreaking decision to let the cancer win. We were forfeiting to the cancer that the Diana's Rescue worker didn't have the decency to let us know about.

I wanted to make the worker pay. An eye for an eye.

Now, 6 years later, I still think about this incident, and how crushed I felt to find out that we had to put Roxie down. Because this event occurred so long ago, I can relate to Vernon in *Dead Man Walking* when "He just can't get over Faith's death... It happened six years ago, but for him it's like yesterday, and [Sister Helen realizes] that now, with Robert Willie dead, he doesn't have an object for his rage," (Prejean 226). Vernon, when he had that person to hang onto and blame for his daughter's death, was able to deal with his revenge a lot more than he is now. For my situation, Diana's Rescue is no longer in business, and I was never able to seek revenge on them, so similar to Vernon, I have lost my outlet for revenge. Thus, allowing me to deal with my emotions. There wasn't anyone who I could take my anger out on, or anyone who completely understood what was going on inside me, as even my parents were dealing with their grief differently from me. So, I allowed myself to face the realization that I could be angry at nothing, or I could still feel anger, but I could also reach forgiveness.

I'm learning to forgive, but that fire that ignited the moment I found out Roxie had cancer is still burning, even if it is a little duller than before, and forgiveness is going to take some time to surface.

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BLIZZARD, PEYTON**Peyton Blizzard**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Remember To Remember

Remember to Remember

Do you remember your best friend from preschool? What about your first family vacation? What did your childhood bedroom look like? Although it might sound like I'm trying to steal your identity or figure out your computer password, these are some of the things that seem so easy to remember while you're in the moment, but what about when you grow up? We have so many memories that should be easy to access, but where did they all go? We forget most of our lives and will never get a second chance to play with that little kid again or tell our teacher how our day was. What about the memories that are worth more? Like your grandparents' laugh before they die, or even that one class in middle school that made your day so much better?

Some day we will all be older and have jobs, or even a family. When you get to that point in your life, you start to forget the other "unimportant memories" and start only focusing on "When is that dance recital?" or "Do I really have to clean the house again?" The "unimportant memories" just start to fade away until we lose them. Let's go back to that one class in middle school. The class will get you up in the morning because you are so excited to see what will happen today. I know that I certainly had that class last year. I would look forward to it from the second I woke up to the bell the hour before. Then after class was over I would be in such a good mood and instantly start looking forward to the class for the next day. Most people will tell you Fridays are the best because you get a break from everything for the weekend; however, that is not always the case. If you were to ask me what I thought about Fridays last year, I probably would have said something like, "It is the last time I get to be in fifth hour until the next Monday." I would spend the whole weekend wanting to go back to school - I know crazy right- just to see my English class. Now I'm in eighth grade. I have a different class, and we will all most likely never get that same experience again. All we have left are memories. The time where we discussed how to get away with murder by opening a restaurant, the time we argued over the whole lunch about strawberry milk, and the time we planned funerals for bad people because nobody else would. While we had some very interesting discussions in that class, all it is now is memories. I wish that I could go back and document every single day so that I could never forget, but I know that will never happen. I know that in five or ten years, I won't even remember the time someone's phone went off, and instead of taking it from him, our teacher just started listening to and making fun of his ringtone - Peaches by Justin Bieber. All of those memories will just disappear like dust in the wind. And what about all of the people? Most of the people in that class will never talk to each other again. I made some of my best friends in that class, so what happens when we go to college, or even high school, and start to lose contact with each other?

It has felt like forever since elementary school, and I am starting to lose some of my favorite memories from it. While some people will tell you, "It's just elementary school; you'll forget everything eventually." *No. It's not.* It's where I met some of my best friends and where I had the teachers who believed in me and encouraged me to keep going. Now I'm starting to forget all of that. I don't want it to be that way for the rest of my life. I want to keep remembering things.

We will never be able to remember every single detail of every day, but what if we start with just one thing a week or even a month. That's twelve more memories a year. Then after that year, you can try one a week. Just take the best memory from that week and try, just try, to remember it. Once you do that, you will have fifty-two more memories a year. Just imagine having that many memories from each year of elementary school. If you can't remember things, try to write them down. Get a notebook and write down one good thing from each day. Then, every once in a while, go back and read it. Now you can keep that notebook for the rest of your life. Then what? What happens after you're gone? Where do all of the memories go? Who will remember you?

Some people might think that to be remembered you need to be famous or create something amazing. I do not think that is true at all. One book that I have read answers that. *The Fault In Our Stars* is a book that talks a lot about being remembered and who will remember you. Augustus Waters says, "You say you're not special enough

because the world doesn't know about you, but that is an insult to me because I know about you." Therefore, you don't need the whole world to know who you are, as long as a few good people can remember you. You don't need to do anything amazing to be remembered. Now, the other one is a little depressing, but very true. Hazel says, "There will be a time where all of us are dead. There will be no human beings remaining to remember that anyone ever existed or that our species ever did anything ... Everything that we did or built and wrote and thought and discovered will be forgotten and all of this will have been for naught." Hence, someday, nobody will be here to remember anything you ever said, did, or felt. Nobody will remember that middle school English class. Nobody will be here to remember your favorite teacher. While nobody will remember it forever, we can all remember it while it lasts. We can cherish that memory for as long as we can, and then just hope that somebody will be able to experience something like it again.

It is more important to make memories than to be remembered. Being remembered will last longer, but memories are what keep us together. It is what you will be thinking about in your last days. It's why we live. Being remembered is a lot more complicated. First, you have to make an impact on someone or something. If everyone tries to be remembered by doing something amazing, then we will go back to the beginning, and nobody will be remembered. If you want to be remembered, you don't need it to be by hundreds, or even thousands, of people. If you are remembered by one hundred people, that will likely only last a few generations; then people will start to forget you. You start to just become a memory. However, if you make an impact on one person, but it was big enough for them to tell their kids, and their kids are impacted, too, so they tell their kids, and then they tell their kids, and it keeps going, then that will last so much longer than just one or two generations. If you're trying to be remembered, focus on quality over quantity. We all should attempt to be remembered more by a few people instead of being remembered by more.

Memories, on the other hand, are so much easier. You just have to let them happen. We don't choose to make memories happen, we just need to choose to remember them. If you remember more pleasant memories you can be happier, but we also have to remember the unpleasant things. We need to remember them to learn and know what the bad feels like so when we feel good it is that much better. We need to focus on remembering more instead of trying to be remembered more. Being remembered by one amazing person and having a lot of amazing memories is way better than being remembered by a lot of people without having a lot of memories.

So, I think that we should all make a goal. First, we need to focus less on being remembered by a plethora of people and try to find a few people that are worth it. Next, we need to remember more. We need to remember the good and the bad so we can learn and improve. Lastly, we need to just live life to the fullest while we have it. While it is good to remember things we need to still focus on living life. You can't have memories without living life. We need to have fun while we still can. When we are in our last days, the goal is to feel content. To know that you lived your life the best it could be. To just be happy. So try...try to be happy with life and the memories you have, and look forward to the memories to come.

BOLLINGER, KYLEE**Kylee Bollinger**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

The People Behind The Pain**Anger:**

Anger lives in pain,
She needs love,
She is not insane,

Anger's hope was slain,
Anguish now fits her like a glove,
Anger lives in pain,

Loss forever her bane,
When push comes to shove,
Anger is not insane,

No rainbow, only rain,
Thirsting for cheer, settling for the lack thereof,
Anger lives in pain,

Life in vain,
Her dreams once soared like a dove,
Anger is not insane,

She knows it in her brain,
Until her soul floats above,
Anger lives in pain,
Anger is not insane,

Joy:

Joy is famous worldwide,
Her face is known by everyone,
But she owns nothing but her pride,
Gilded lies her golden sun,

Her house is bright and bold,
With six locks on every door,
For all the rooms are empty and cold,
With no company to fill the floor,

Everyone wants to be her friend,
They chase after her day and night,
But they will not be there in the end,
They care for nothing but her light,

Joy will live and die eternally alone,

Surrounded by her luxury, she will reap what she has sown,

Bravery:

Punk rocking,
Leather wearing,
Motorcycle riding,
Loud mouthing,
Decision making,
Bravery

Hair dyeing,
Lipstick popping,
Hip swaying,
City slicking,
Bold living,
Bravery

Rally going,
Revolution starting,
Muck raking,
Ground breaking,
History making,
Bravery

BOLLINGER, KYLEE**Kylee Bollinger**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

Old Kind of Neighbor

Across the street,
There is a white house,
In it lives a kind old man,
With a kind old smile,
He has kind old eyes,
And a kind old heart,
And a kind old soul that makes the dark a little brighter,
For his is the only light that shines throughout all hours of the night,
Today, I look out at pleading green tree reaching towards the sky,
Sometimes the sky is beautiful and blue,
Sometimes the grass dances with the wind,
Sometimes the road stretches on for miles,
Sometimes the world seems to capture a moment so perfectly,
The world seems to sing in its honor,
But today not even the crystalline lake can find the energy to move,
Because there is a cloud of black smoke coming from the white house,
Across the street,
And somehow the whole world knows,
That the kind old man with the kind old smile,
Will never smile again,
And somehow the whole world knows,
That the kind old man with the kind old smile,
Died alone with no one there to hold his hand,

BREDFELDT , ELYSE**Elyse Bredfeldt**

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Staley High School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Debbie Bredfeldt

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Closure

I think that I am far too much of a hopeless romantic for my own good. If I hadn't spent so much time reading fairytales as a child I might not be like this. I wouldn't have gazed at you as if you are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I would not have learned those small, insignificant details that no one else knows about you. I would have blocked them from my mind, ripped my attachment to you out by the roots. I wouldn't have fallen so unrequitedly in love with you. If I were stronger and drained some hope from my veins, maybe this would have ended differently.

You always walked into a room so quietly, seemingly at peace with everything. I think that softness was one of the first things I loved. Maybe it wasn't that at all, but I have a sense that it was. It could have been those endearing dimples or expressive eyebrows. It wouldn't surprise me if it was the soft green tint to your hazel eyes. Maybe it was a combination of all the things I knew about you that no one else did. Those small things meant nothing to you, but I wish I could have let you know just how loved they were. Maybe it was simply an aspect of your personality that started it all. It could have been the time you called a celebrity a misogynist or the time you used big words in a writing piece that seemed completely out of place. I loved reading it though, knowing you had those out-of-place words in your vocabulary. It could have even been in our first conversation, as early as that seems. When I asked you what you wanted to be and your answer startled me because it sounded so similar to my dreams.

For a while the moments were magical. The butterflies existed for a moment in time. I don't know what drew me to you like the tide to the moon. Like sunflowers to the sun. I knew you would only draw away when someone became too close. Yet, I couldn't find it in myself to turn from you, though that would have undoubtedly been easier. My eyes searched for yours in crowds. I watched out for those brunette curls in the halls and listened for your voice in a room. My eyes analyzed your body language, hoping your body would say the things your lips hadn't. Sometimes your body language mirrored mine, making me feel as if maybe you had room in your heart to let love in. As if there could be a transparent string tied to our wrists, binding our uncertain, fragile hearts together.

Looking back, I wish I never noticed your beautiful light brown curls, tinted gold in the sun. I wish I saw anything besides the smile lines by your eyes or the spattering of freckles on the bridge of your nose. As painful as it'd be, I wish I could erase the way you looked at me that one day like I was the sun. I know I'd chase shooting stars to see a flicker of that smile on your lips once again, even if it would only hurt me. Every time I say your name, you look up at me through those long eyelashes and I can't help but wish that you were a boy with an unbroken, open heart. I wish I hadn't seen all the love songs in your playlist, giving me some fragile, flickering hope that you could love someone new. It's my fault for falling for you though. I had chances to turn back and yet, I didn't. Brokenhearted, beautiful boys like you are the wrong type to fall in love with, but I wasn't wise enough to lift my chin and walk away from someone like you. I know your heart is broken but you made mine begin fragmenting too.

The memories have all found their compartments in my mind. The love has been folded up and shoved under heavy books so that it stays put. I'll protect it but I know it can't belong to you. It's unnatural to move on from love that never existed. I try to forget you, yet I still recognize your voice in a crowd. When I see hazel eyes, all I think of is the soft shape of yours. Your name is like a melody in my mind and I can't quite tune it out.

I hope you find someone that loves you for all that you are, I truly do. I hope you have someone that kisses those dimples, that ruffles your curls playfully. I hope they inspire you to write those big words in stories that don't make them seem so out of place. I hope you find someone that gives you butterflies. That you want to learn every insignificant, beautiful detail about them.

Maybe someday when I'm older and the memories are no longer tinged in blue, I'll think again of you. I'll look over at someone that loves me as much as I loved you. I'll smile, hoping you found that person too.

BREDFELDT , ELYSE**Elyse Bredfeldt**

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Staley High School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Debbie Bredfeldt

Category: Short Story

Eight Pennies, Two Black Roses, Fourteen Poppies

I find myself coming back here for reasons I don't fully understand. You have most certainly figured it out by now. You know me well, why do you think I am here? What do you think I am searching for? You always seem to have the answers. Why are you so quiet now? Choosing to be so incompetent is not benefitting either of us.

I awakened today, as usual, at 3:33 A.M. You know why of course, it's not as if I am being presumptuous. I put on my attire of all blue. Not the light, ocean blue of the lake by our dwelling. But the dark blue that reminds onlookers of the deep, uncharted parts of the ocean. It's genius if you ask me. It keeps the right sort of people from leaving and the wrong ones from staying. Once I was clothed, I exited my dwelling at the late time of 3:49 A.M. It's quite abnormal for me to be so unpunctual. As you know, I start work at 10, so that hardly gives me enough time for my fifteen-minute commute.

I walk on the sidewalk outside our dwelling, making sure to step on every crack in the pavement. The methodical tapping of my feet on the concrete is reassuring, but it is not as if I have time to focus my attention on such frivolous things. I am quite important, which you undoubtedly have come to understand. I pass by a coffee shop and get my typical order, which you would know. At least you should have. I have a strong distaste for people that make stupid mistakes. Someone that looks like you is drinking a tea in the cafe. It makes me think back to a different time, though I assume my reasoning for saying this is cemented in your skull by this point. I refocus on the present moment, disturbed from my thoughts by the whirring of the cafe's machines. Regardless, the barista was able to meet my criteria for my caffeine consumption, so I proceeded along my route, steaming, black coffee gripped tightly in my palm.

I turned toward the park beside the shop and felt a sense of dissatisfaction coursing through my veins. I passed by a fountain that got mist on the side of my blazer, and I instantly wished that I had thought to pack my alternate blazer for today. I selected it months ago as a backup, and I remember it had quite a distinctive shade of blue. It looked similar in color to the veins of my great-grandmother's arms. My outfits are always more put together when I do them myself. You were never as talented as me. For example, the change you were in charge of putting in my wallet. You knew how many pennies I was supposed to have in my wallet, eight. How many did you place in my wallet? NINE. Plus, two nickels! You know how I feel about nickels, you were practically taunting me with that. Extreme audacity I'd say. I throw one in the fountain, wanting to discard any reminders of your blatant disrespect towards me.

The sun has begun rising, unlike other things in the universe. It's not as if I go by the schedule of the sun, but its rising means it is finally bright enough for me to go into the florist's shop. I find the sun arrogant, but I guess my schedule doesn't mean much to any of these irrelevant organisms either. They seem to think that my preferences are meaningless. I find it repulsive truthfully. I walk up to a mumbling, puberty-stricken teenager. He is the only one stupid enough to wake up for a time in which I usually have the flower shop to myself. Must be a new addition, I was always more fond of subtracting. Did I enter through the back door with the lock that I picked beforehand? Of course. But I find it extremely disrespectful that the youth of this country feel they deserve any space or voice in anything I have decided is mine. One thing I decided is mine? The shop. The thing that isn't my problem? This unintelligent child whose voice cracks when he tries to speak up to tell me to leave. He isn't hard to intimidate. After a few words with him, he decides that an early lunch break might be in his best interest. Six A.M. isn't exactly a conventional lunchtime, but I think that people who follow the schedule of the world are unoriginal and quite disposable.

I pick up the flower order you never managed to get correct. 14 poppies, 2 black roses. It never changed, yet you always found a way to mess it up. You always ordered 13 poppies and 3 black roses. You'd think you would have learned. You had more chances than my last wife. I walk out of the shop, leaving the second nickel. It is far more generosity than this rundown shop deserves. That nickel. The smallest of things can often make the biggest

difference. That day you made a mistake that you could never reverse. How can there be order in the universe when I have nine pennies, thirteen poppies, and three black roses? It seems completely impossible, yet I continue on. My bravery astounds me too.

I continue walking until I finally reach the place I always come to, at exactly 6:27 A.M. I visit my mother here and bring her two black roses. She always called my brother and I her roses, because we were sharp towards others, yet she only saw beauty in her children. We were capable of drawing blood, yet she didn't see the thorns. You certainly did though. She had a jar of nickels on the counter that she saved, always dreaming that she'd save up enough to travel to some somewhere with an ocean as far as the eye can see. Beside that jar, she always had a vase of two black roses. Flowers were always her thing. She had a massive garden of poppies in the backyard too. Though strangely enough, it always only grew 14. Every year she'd hope for more and 14 only ever came back. My family was full of oddities, so I'm not surprised I turned out the way I did. The one thing we all shared besides for quirks? Undying loyalty.

I would have done anything for my mother. I respected my mother above all else, and I wouldn't allow your flippant manner toward her memory to continue. You know how that ended already though.

Your death was quite a shock to the community. You never seemed to like tea before, yet happened to be drinking a lethal dose of poppy seed tea the day you died. I prepared that tea for you, though no one will ever know that. I'm quite meticulous in every way. To make such an unfortunate mistake would certainly be out of character for me. You made many mistakes over time, we could call it even perhaps.

I place my hand on my mother's headstone and walk forward to a new stone. I'm sure you remember this, but my genius is too extraordinary to avoid pointing out.

I look to your grave and admire the date. 8/2/14. Those numbers do seem familiar, don't they?

Eight pennies.

Two black roses.

Fourteen poppies.

It was always so simple.

BROWN, DAVIS**Davis Brown**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Revenge's Boundaries

Revenge's Boundaries

I'd be lying if I genuinely said that my brother and I finished more than half of the basketball games we played during quarantine. Every dribble, bank, and swish was always met with whining, complaining, and insults. However, I was used to the patterns that took the place of the last few points of our games. I can recall one game in particular. The morning of, I got dressed and put on my Damian Lillard jersey, in accordance with his spectacular performance the night prior. I skipped around my room, elated by my jersey collection and the open day ahead. There was nothing on my schedule, so without hesitation, I walked outside to the familiar rhythm of the ball bouncing on the asphalt. My excitement was maintained, but my faith that our game would lack arguments had begun to dwindle.

The game started with a shot for who would play offense first, which I missed. Joey checked up the ball at the top of the key with me and the game started. Right off the bat, I picked up an easy steal off of Joey. Just a mere couple seconds into the game, my younger brother was already irritated and hoped to get the ball back. Unfortunately for him, I was stronger and taller than he was. I could usually out-muscle my way into swift buckets in the paint, and if we played with keeps, I got the ball right back and did it again with ease.

After 2 layups, a post shot, and one mid range, I was up 4 points to Joey's meager 0. I got the ball and once again, took it down near the hoop with what felt like the brute strength of Shaquille O'Neal or Anthony Davis, but was really just the scarce amount of muscle I had over my younger brother. I maintained my dribble near where the garden bricks, grass, and driveway met. With a forceful pound of the ball that spewed some pebbles out of the rocky driveway, I prepared myself for a close shot. As soon as the ball left my hands, Joey called the ball out of bounds on my initial dribble. I was appalled. Surely the ball was in bounds. Joey must have just said this solely because he was down. With every bit of certainty in my body, I knew that the basketball never once touched anything other than pavement, but Joey begged to differ. Positive that my brother was lying just so he could get the ball back, a passion to compensate for the cheating done to me began to develop.

It was clear that my own compensation was a priority. I couldn't truly make the game fair on my own, as it was inevitable that my preconceived notions, personal feelings, and most importantly revenge, would get in the way. I thought that as one singular person, I could fix our game and implement the right calls and behavior. However, justice can't be achieved by one person because personal revenge will always get in the way, as expressed in Michael Cohen's "The Victims and the Furies In American Courts." In the article, Cohen discusses a series of Greek plays known as the Oresteia which shows the transition from a world where violence is answered with violence into a world with a better justice system focused on proper punishment as opposed to retribution and revenge. Michael Cohen says "In these plays, Aeschylus gives us a myth about the origin of the justice system, the very system the West later inherited. In the process he shows how society has to absorb and neutralize the force of individual vengeance and the desire for revenge if there is ever to be justice." (Cohen 20). Cohen goes on further to say "We cannot isolate the victims of crimes as somehow being more entitled to retribution; justice means that society as a whole enacts punishment for a crime against society" (Cohen 20).

Unfortunately, it was inevitable that I would want to pursue my own personal revenge as opposed to justice. A singular person lacks the capability of serving fairness into society. The significance of Aeschylus's new court system is society's role in punishing a crime done, as they don't all share the feelings of revenge that a singular victim like myself may have. Although there is a gap between court systems and pickup basketball, the same principles of revenge and its opposition to justice apply.

As mentioned, I was quite annoyed with my younger brother for making such a dumbfounded call on me. Joey got the ball, as the out of bounds call was in his favor. To compensate for Joey's out of bounds call, I pressured him with excessive defense, assuring myself that I wouldn't hear the swish of the net. It was understood that our driveway games were to be shallow and lighthearted. But when I intensified my defense, it took out the elementary fun for

Joey. While I would rack up easy steals and points, Joey lost out on the trivial intent of our daily games. Although I thought I was keeping the honor system and fairness of the game intact, I only could have been avenging myself and pursuing the change that only I wanted to see. I couldn't get the input of the entire pickup basketball community, so my intensified defense was ultimately no more justice than it was personal revenge.

I forced him to his left, knowing he was dominantly right handed. He took two dribbles left and had minimal space to maneuver his way into a shot. As soon as I saw him cut back the ball onto his right hand, I capitalized and stole the ball. The ball found its way to the top of the key with me. All pressure from me was alleviated. Joey anticipated me going right, so I power dribbled where he wanted me and then executed a shifty hopstepped to my left. Joey was anything but slow to call a travel on me and claim I violated the rules. Just like I had done to him, Joey wanted to take out my elementary fun. While I did it by intensifying defensive pressure, he would call bogus fouls and violations on me. We were now engaged in the cycle of revenge. After his call, I went all out on defense for a steal, which then led Joey to yet another heinous violation call in his favor. A series of tit for tat actions, commonly referred to as *Lex Talionis*, had taken over the fun in our game. But how does that happen?

In "Revenge" by Jim Thornton, the concept of victimization and its relation to transgression is brought up to explain the idea of revenge. Arlene Stillwell performed a study regarding victimization: "When we harm someone else, we tend to downplay it and distance ourselves from the seriousness of our transgression," says study author Arlene Stillwell, Ph.D. "On the other hand, when we're harmed in the very same way, we see ourselves as victims of a grave injustice" (Thornton 116).

It's hard for me to imagine Joey losing sleep over his out of bounds claim on me. It was merely just a dishonest call and frankly wasn't that important. On the contrary, I felt extremely irritated. It seemed crazy that someone could do something so harsh to me. There was a fire in my chest. It was the end of the world for me. In reality, neither of our feelings were completely validated.

As the game went on, it was clear Joey thought he could even out the playing field by calling violations, even if they weren't legitimate. Plenty of times, that same area where the stones met the driveway would provoke an out of bounds violation. Each thud of the ball would get closer and closer and then Joey would strike. Personally, I thought I could stop this behavior by taking out Joey's rudimentary fun. The simple game of driveway basketball was thus ruined. The thud of the ball was no longer the loudest sound. It was muted by my shuffling feet, which was the only thing that could compensate for Joey's grave injustice. Both Joey's method, as well as mine, ultimately took out the fun of our game. Pickup basketball is part of some of my best memories as a kid. Summer time was pickup time. The whimsical game could be played for hours. However, our revenge got in the way of that. My fun was halted for insignificant vengeance and so was Joey's.

After I'd had enough of Joey's eye for an eye behavior, despite engaging in it myself, I quit the game. I walked past the hallway into my room, where I aimlessly browsed Instagram with no sense of enjoyment. Ideally, I would've still been playing basketball outside with my brother.

Forgiveness could have truly accomplished that possibility of still being outside. In "An Unnatural Act," Phillip Yancey argues that only forgiveness breaks the cycle of revenge and blame. In order to move forward, or even continue playing driveway basketball, forgiveness is necessary in taking that step away from revenge but towards thriving relationships. Yancey says "Forgiveness breaks the cycle. It does not settle all questions of blame and justice and fairness; to the contrary, often it evades those questions. But it does allow relationships to start over" (Yancey 37).

Yancey's right. Forgiveness doesn't help develop a consensus on the out of bounds call. It disregards it as a matter of fact and puts it away completely. Disregarding such a simple issue like that would be nice because it would allow Joey and I to move forward with our games instead of bickering the whole time. The idea that forgiveness evades questions of blame and justice actually strengthens the entire concept of forgiveness, at least in my case where the crime done seemed far bigger than it was. Disregarding it would give some sort of an idea to me on just how big of a deal Joey's "crime" was. Yancey also claims that "It is not our capacity to think that makes us different, but our capacity to repent, and to forgive" (Yancey 37). Ultimately, it's a gift of sorts to be able to forgive. In my case, not using my human privilege of forgiveness at the right time was what ruined my enjoyment.

Soon after I had quit, Joey and I were both in our rooms. Separated only by one wall, we were now closer than we were during our basketball pastime. It felt like we were isolated from one another. There wasn't just the wall that separated our rooms. We each had our own wall up. Without forgiveness, the rest of the day was spent separated. Anytime the subject was to be brought up, neither of us could back down. Our beliefs on who started it or why we were right were maintained throughout the afternoon, as opposed to our initial game. Because neither of us could merely forgive the other, the bickering went on longer than the game.

Thinking back, I would have forgiven my brother in an instant. After all, he was really the only person I could play basketball with during quarantine. As the brutal pandemic continued, we were stuck in the house for longer. A lot of the time when we played, there would be this tension between us. I knew Joey was trying to level the playing

field even with a couple white lies, and he knew that I couldn't stand losing. I felt a bit guilty for not being more compassionate and forgiving towards what I knew wasn't truly a big deal. We still awkwardly played together, and sometimes even had fun, but I wish I could have forgiven him sooner, and he would have done the same to me. definitely took forgiveness for granted. Instead of breaking our cycle of revenge in something so insignificant like driveway basketball, I attempted to satisfy my want for retribution.

Forgiveness would've kept me close with something I had that most people didn't have during quarantine. I had someone I could spend time with. I had a friend.

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BROZIO, HONORAH**Honorah Brozio**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

A Dog World

“Good.” Professor Po nodded as Liling defeated a rather scrawny girl. She picked up the girl like a toddler with a doll and slammed her into the floor. The sound of shattering cartilage rang through the gym.

The girl clutched her bleeding nose and trembled. Liling took this as a sign to kick the base of her ribs. The professor closed his eyes and swayed when the girl screamed.

“Very good Liling.” He took her by the shoulder and guided her to the door. “Sadly, I’ve kept you long enough. Tell Professor Zhao you were late because of me.” He handed her a towel. “And Ms. Kara,” he yelled to the girl cowering on the mats. “That’s your third nail this month. Keep losing and they’ll never grow back.”

Kara’s crying ricocheted the vaulted ceilings of the gymnasium. *A walking corpse*, Liling thought. She bowed to Professor Po and wiped her face of sweat and blood. She rolled her eyes and headed off to maths class.

She sat through maths replaying her spar in jiu-jitsu. Professor Po said she was his most advanced student and would qualify for The Selection Committee’s national exam. Most twelve-year-olds only got to take the regional exam but her academic grades were just as proficient, maybe more so, as her jiu-jitsu skills. Liling filled out the geometry worksheet with ease and allowed her mind to ponder the excitement of a life-changing challenge.

“Ms. Hau, would you tell me the justification of this question?” Professor Zhao said. Liling straightened her posture and gave a satisfying answer.

“Wonderful. Mr. Yang, can you continue?”

Mr. Yang could not. He stammered and flipped through notes and looked around. “I-I, uh,” he mumbled. Liling held back the urge to laugh.

“...I don’t know,” he finally said. He dropped his head and let his entire body go slack.

The professor walked over to the boy. “You don’t know?”

He shook his head.

“You’re a fucking idiot.” Professor Zhao grabbed an ear from his petrified head and dragged him to the corridor where he’d consequently be beaten. “...knew you’d end up just like your brother. Dead the second he turned thirteen,” the teacher muttered. Liling snorted. Yang was yet another who wouldn’t make it through the semester.

Most students at The Day Institute for Prospering Citizens did not enjoy school due to its strict and violent nature. Liling however, was not most students. She did not mind the constant reminders that “not knowing” meant a beating and losing a jiu-jitsu match meant having a fingernail ripped off. To her, it was all quite exciting. She never worried about failure because she never failed.

After class, Liling braced herself as a miserable boy named Chen Dai stumbled up to her. He was not exactly what Liling considered a friend but she tolerated him nonetheless. All he did was babble about his poor grades and poor parents and the poor score he’d get on his Selection Committee exam. He was the most pitiful person Liling knew.

“You did so well in class. I don’t know how you do it. I’ve been trying to understand this lesson all week,” he said as he edged closer. Liling nodded and offered a forced smile. “My parents can’t afford to let me retake tests but you don’t even need to. You pass the first try. I hope I can at least do well on the exam.” Liling, walking past him, sucked in a breath and replied with a small “good luck.”

She’d managed to scare away any suitable friends her first day at the Institute. Her father was a politician, vice president of RoboC law enforcement agency, which meant Liling and her mother received flakes of humble fame. The public cared far more about vice presidents than little girls and housewives. Once in a while, there were interviews, fancy dinners, or photoshoots that required the ladies of the Hau household to be present. But where her father’s power really got to Liling, was at school. Teachers dared not hand her a bad grade and students clung to her side. Everyone wanted to sit with her at lunch or study after school. She answered them all with sentences of silence. Still, the students kept on her like dogs to a pork rind. So on that first day, Liling put an end to the pestering by

integrating a girl's face into the pavement.

Liling remembered the girl saying, "Hey Hau Liling. Professor Zhao's class was really hard but I think I figured it out. Would you like to come over and do homework together?"

The girl's name was Mei. She was pretty and popular and probably thought she could become the vice president of RoboC's daughter's friend with a few kind words and bats of her eyelashes. Instead of charming her, Mei pissed her off.

Liling grabbed the girl by her forearm and flipped her over her shoulder, slamming her into the pavement. When she tried to get up, Liling kicked her in the side. Mei started crying hysterically and Liling fought the urge to roll her eyes. She hadn't even drawn blood.

On the second day of school, everyone had either seen or heard of Mei's failure and kept their distance. From that day on, Dai was the only one who approached Liling. He was either very brave or very dumb. In all fairness, her pigtails, red ribbons, and knee-highs made her look nothing short of a sweet schoolgirl. Her pale face had a streak of natural blush sparsely dotted with freckles. Nothing hinted at Liling's true nature except her cold unwavering stare that somehow focused on everything and nothing at the same time.

Now, Liling hurried to the door. If she left fast enough she might not run into Dai. Just as she rushed ahead of the sea of students, Dai caught up.

"Liling! Wait up," he followed her down the stairs with his puppy dog eyes and practically whimpered.

Liling stopped mid stair and closed her eyes. *So close*. Students passed them at alarming speeds. They were two river rocks stuck in the current. Liling kept her distance best as she could on the crowded stairs.

Dai's head was bowed. "I failed my biology final." He leaned closer. She leaned back. Sometimes, Liling legitimately wondered if he suffered mental dysfunction with all the assignments he failed.

"I'm frightened." He looked at her and sniffled. "My thirteenth birthday is tomorrow and my grades don't even qualify for the exam. They'll take me away when the clock hits midnight." He breathed heavily. Liling covered her nose with her sleeve. His breath smelled of canned soup. "Liling, is there anything I can do?"

Liling looked at him hard. "Dai, you must not frighten yourself. The Committee might let you take the exam if you work extra hard on...on chores tonight," she finally said. She smiled as genuine a smile she could muster. She knew he was doomed.

Dai relaxed. "Xièxiè." Thank you. "You've always been a good friend. I would do anything for you." Dai took a step toward her and hugged her.

Liling pushed him away. She knew Dai was marked for the gallows from day one. Students like Yang and Kara were foolish no doubt. It was easy to listen to their pathetic answers in class or watch them lay on the mats like useless heaps to know they'd be taken. But Dai was something else. All she had to do was look at his greasy hair and secondhand button-down to know he would not live past twelve.

She swallowed. "I feel the same."

...

"Darling, your friend was submitted to The Committee last night. Now maybe you can find a proper friend" was what Mama gave Liling with her toast and poached egg. Dai would be dead by the end of the day. Hanged or poisoned or sent to the firing squad, whatever The Selection Committee wanted.

Liling took a hearty bite of buttered toast. Mama dashed around the kitchen, her white apron swishing with her as she went from task to task.

"Mama, when is the dress you ordered for my jiu-jitsu finals ceremony coming in?" Liling said, adding a slight pout to her voice. "I want to see if it's as good as it looked in the picture."

Her mother dashed into the living room a second before Mr. Hau left for the office. The Hau family room contrasted starkly with the kitchen's mellow green hues. It had a plush white sofa and bright red walls and a glass coffee table usually tasked with holding Mr. Hau's briefcase or Liling's backpack or Mama's crosswords. A big window, framed with red curtains, sat behind the sofa and was Mama's favorite means of people watching.

Once her husband had a brown paper bag in his hand and a kiss on his cheek, Ms. Hau was back at the kitchen sink.

"Soon dear," she looked at a clock above the sink. "Very soon. It should arrive by tonight." She popped Liling's empty plate into the dishwasher. "Now, make sure you're not late to school."

Liling ended up being very late to school.

It wasn't until she was on her bike flying toward RoboC Headquarters that she thought of herself as tragically stupid. *You didn't even like him. He was an annoying little prick. You're so stupid, stupid, stupid.* All her medals, perfect grades, meant nothing when she decided to show her future, quite literally, out the door.

Liling stepped into headquarters. Smaller than she had imagined and dirtier too. Was this a territory of the empire her father helped command? She covered her nose with her necktie to block the stench of grease and oil. The place was little better than a post office. Grey, musty, stale. Liling rolled her eyes at the plaster popcorn ceiling and

carpeted floors. A rusted fan sat in the corner blowing more dust than air. A service desk took center stage and despite it not even being afternoon, the only light that graced the lobby of headquarters came from a faint flicker behind the desk window.

Liling shut the solid steel door behind her. She went to the desk. The blinds were drawn over a sliding glass window but she thought she could make out a boxy figure. She very much doubted humans worked early hours like these so she lifted the edge of the blinds and stuck her freckled nose in.

“I want to see Chen Dai.”

Two glowing orbs lit up. The robot shifted into action at the sound of the girl’s voice. It pulled the cord and Liling faced a silvery machine modern enough to make it look like a diamond among coal in the headquarters. A layer of grime covered the bot but it was glorious amid its habitat. It slid open the glass and reached its claw-like hand out to point to a sign posted next to the window. Liling looked the robot up and down. *Just a dumb service bot.* It sat square and squat.

“All inquiries, comments, and complaints must be taken to the head of RoboC commissions. This location, D006, is in sleep mode. We hope you visit again soon,” it said in a metallic voice.

Liling wrinkled her nose. She wasn’t used to having to ask twice. “I need Chen Dai.”

“All inquiries, comments, and complaints must—”

She groaned. “You dumb bot, show me where he is now.” She got on her tiptoes and reached through the half-cracked window, blindly palming the desk until she found a stapler. She took a step back, launched it through the air, and nailed the robot square on the face.

“Violence detected. Please remain still to receive a mandatory punishment of twenty slashes by code B0009.” The bot’s warm yellow eyes flipped to an angry red. Its once friendly claw converted into a long jagged knife. The robot wheeled out from behind the desk and pointed its blade at her throat.

The robot slashed at her. She swung her leg at the flat side of the blade, thinking she could knock it out of place. It didn’t move. She grabbed her ankle and sucked in a breath. *This thing’s sturdier than I thought.* As she prepared a punch to the head, the robot thrust its blade into her bicep.

She yelped in surprise. It was a shallow cut but the only pain she endured was the pain she inflicted on others. If she bruised it was from kicking and punching. If she had sore muscles it was from defeating some wimpy kid Professor Po matched her with.

She grabbed her arm and retreated. The robot rolled towards her with alarming speed. She ducked when its bladed hand swiped along the line of her collar bone. She slid beneath the robot’s knife to try and hit its Eiko, a chip that acted as the robot’s brain. The chip nestled where a human’s heart would be. But when her fist was about to smash the chip, the robot came rolling at her. She threw herself out of the way before she became roadkill. Rows of thin spikes popped out and coated every side of the robot.

How the hell do I kill this thing? Liling went to the back of the small room to get a running start and charged the robot. She rammed into its wheels, the only part of it not covered in spikes, but only succeeded in pushing the bot a few centimeters.

“Violence detected. Please remain still to receive a mandatory punishment of twenty slashes by code B0009.”

“Shut up!” Liling sidestepped a frightening stab to the chest and racked her brain on what to do.

Just as the robot prepared its final strike, Liling spotted the stapler. It was on the ground where it must have ricocheted off the robot’s head. She snatched it, prayed her aim was good as her maths grades, and threw the stapler into the Eiko.

The Eiko cracked and the robot went dark. Liling walked up to it and stuck her tongue out in its face for good measure. The robot’s eyes dimmed and its head snapped forward with a crack similar to a neck breaking. Its arms fell to its sides and the Eiko chip sat in its chest crushed almost to a powder. The walls of headquarters had suffered a few dents and the carpet was ripped to shreds. A pool, thick and dark, of liquid seeped from the base of the robot’s head.

She would have stayed to bask in her glory, grin at a government-built RoboC agent’s inability to best a child. But she didn’t want to hear the alarm that goes off when a robot is tampered with. She didn’t want to be arrested and executed on-site for destruction of state property. And she certainly didn’t want the fact she’d disobeyed her mother, failed the Institute, and disgraced her father to set in. She ran out of headquarters without sparing the robot another glance.

...

Liling sat on the sofa awaiting death. Spine rigid, uniform still on. After school, she’d sat herself down and did nothing else. Her homework sat in her backpack and she’d let her cut blossom through the white of her button-down. It wasn’t too much of a hassle to explain. Professor Po was quite pleased when Liling told him she’d come late due to a swordplay masterclass her father enrolled her in. *Mama forgot to tell the front desk. She told me to tell you she was terribly sorry.* He gave her a pleased pat on the back and excused her from the rest of jiu-jitsu

class.

“Liling, please wash up. Your father should be home any minute for dinner.” He wouldn’t be any minute. Liling didn’t budge as her mother chopped celery in the room next door. Wafts of pot roast snuck into the living room.

She’d been easy too. *This cut? Oh, Professor Po had us try knife skills today. I won but barely.* Mama was thrilled the Institute pushed so many skills on the students. She said it was wonderful Liling was being challenged.

“Yes Mama...” Liling’s voice trailed.

Liling tried to use Mama’s chopping to calm her nerves. What’d she been thinking, sneaking into a government building like that? And destroying a robot? A RoboC officer would be at the door any minute. The Committee would grant her a premature death on the grounds she’d committed a serious government offense. They could have her destined for hundreds of different executions. China had no restrictions on killing humans under fourteen no matter how minor the crime. Blunt force trauma, quartering, suffocation. Suffocation, suffocation. Suffocation sounded the most favorable but then again Liling’s neighbor of nine years had paid for breaking curfew. The whole street gathered at his house to witness his execution. A RoboC officer yanked him out of bed, dragged him by his bony wrist to the front yard, and smothered him with his own pillow. He’d thrashed and choked and turned all sorts of colors humans shouldn’t. The RoboC who came could drown, inject, or knife her. Burn, crush, impale her. Maybe she’d be skinned in front of her parents, maybe in front of a crowd like her young neighbor. Maybe they’d rip open the cut in her arm and let her bleed out. She’d die right on the sofa and leave a pink stain on the world.

The oven door slammed when Mama put the roast in.

“Ten minutes dear,” she yelled over to the living room.

Liling’s head snapped towards the kitchen door. She relaxed. *Why hadn’t they come for God’s sake?* It’d been hours since Liling destroyed the bot. The local RoboC Headquarters had to be under surveillance. A single robot cost more than a family like Dai’s would have made in two lifetimes.

Liling heard a knock on the door

BUCHOWSKI, MADELINE**Madeline Buchowski**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Robert Henningsen

Category: Poetry

Gossip

You say it—
Everything? in questions
Tips of tentative wor-ds
Pointing up—
You speak of infrastruc-ture? and
Organized reli-gion? and
Politic-ians? you don't know and
Everything that's not gossip
Because he said it—
Debate is more important than gossip.
Devil's advocate does his deed
Until you can't speak (truth) anymore.
Then you say nothing—
But you lean forward, you
(tell yourself it's not important? you)
Push the chair back, you
(know they're tracing circles? you)
Leave and hope it leaves
Him speechless (that devil), you
Abandon guesswork and
Hear gossip from the room
He said it—

BUCHOWSKI, MADELINE**Madeline Buchowski**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Robert Henningsen

Category: Short Story

Rose

He knocked his boots together, shaking the snow off of the rubber insoles as he pressed the top elevator button and heard the beeping, faded, but approaching...The wires shook and the walls clanked as it descended floor by floor, and he shifted his weight from foot to foot, continuously, breathing into the palms of his chapped hands and humming to himself. He could see the city lights blinking all around him, and despite the stifling flurries, the whooshing of cars and street chatter permeated through all corners of the city. As soon as the elevator door slid open, he rushed inside, dropped his bag on the floor, and pulled off his damp hat. The ascent was short—just three floors up, passing above his two neighbors—and when he reached his apartment he pressed his shoulder against the door until he felt the bolt shift. He froze there for a moment, not reaching for the tarnished knob, as if he were waiting for something...

...He remembered the way Rose looked the first and only time she visited, on a mild day in October, with those perpetually widened eyes and hands interlaced with the straps of her backpack, which she set on his kitchen island. She had stood so naturally in the living room, peering through all of the open doors, curiously but with no hint of intrusion or judgment, pointing out the slant in the staircase and the Pothos plant that sat in the corner of the dusty windowsill. He remembered how she was drawn towards the windows, hair glistening golden in the sun as she leaned forward, fully submerging her head in the open air to watch the crowds below. Her voice had an airy quality to it—almost as if she was breathless—and she incessantly repeated how stunned she was by the constant flow of people and the city's lively energy. She closed her eyes and leaned back slightly, laughing quietly, giving up on words...

... He finally reached for the handle and walked inside. The Pothos had begun to wilt in the corner from the window drafts, and when he peered closer he noticed the raised lumps on each leaf. He moved the pot to the kitchen island where he hoped the heat from the ceiling lights would melt the cold spell, and set it right in the spot where she had put her backpack, that perfect day months prior. Returning to the spot where the plant used to be, he twisted the latches of the window and flinched as the freezing air whirled into the room, stinging his eyes. Two cherry red cardinals swooped down from above, playing tag and darting in and out of the dense buildings and the sparse trees...
...“Why do you think the birds fly over the ocean when there's no place to land?” It was the first question of hers that he couldn't answer, on a humid day in late August, when the sun had beamed down so brightly it seemed to evaporate all sweat, leaving crusts of salt on their golden foreheads. “Do you think they're scared of not having a choice? They either have to keep on going or fall into the water.” He remembered how she paused to let him digest her spilling sentences, marked with a rare rising intonation, and the elegance of that pristine seriousness. There was no hint of her silent, almost choking, laugh that seemed to embrace anyone who came near it. He almost reached for her hand at that moment, but it seemed like she had already dropped the matter and was staring up at the sky in fascination as if it wasn't the same blue it always was...

...He shut the window, blocking out the now black sky, and sat down at his desk. He reached for the top drawer handle, moving his hand with a slow deliberateness, and drew the thin, muted pink envelope out of the stack of letters, pinching it softly by the corner. For four days, he had left the letter there, rejoicing in the fact that it was his possession, and that her name was written there, just a few inches away from his own. He hoped it spoke of everything; the city lights, the creak in the elevator, the birds in the sky, the blue, the heat, the silence, and the cold—She wrote to him, “I hope you are doing well. Has it snowed in the city yet? It is still strangely warm where I am. Maybe it's because I'm so used to the clouds, but whenever the sun comes out I seem to think back to that one day in August. Do you remember?” He smiled slightly, but his expression quickly faded as he calculated the distance between her and the city...“Oh! Guess what! Remember that keychain that I bought before I left? It broke the other day.” He recalled the silver token, which was etched with a tiny rose, delicate and shining. They had bought it at one of the small tourist stands down the street, where she had marveled at the little trinkets that were junk to all of the city natives. He thought perhaps he would go buy her another one, or if she ever came back to see him, they could go together. Every time he saw a taxi or rode the trains, he searched for her face through the tinted glass. He

recalled the way she craned her neck to look at the constellations on the ceiling of Union Station, and how awestruck she was when he pointed to the left corner of the building, where two little blackbirds sat in the white sunlight.

–“Dear Rose,” he scribbled on the flipside of her creased note, “I was hoping you could see the city in the winter when everything is covered in snow...” His hand ceased, but he forced his fingers to grip the pen tighter and tried to continue until it was suddenly too much and he let out a suppressed cry of frustration, tucked the letter back into its precious envelope, and stuck it under his stack in the drawer. The walls seemed to close in, a cascade of memories bombarding the peace he sought in the safe warmth of the room, and he begged himself to ignore the twisted memories sneaking back into his mind, the blinking green light in the shadows of his vision, and all of the pure joy and false hope the past brought to him. He knew his image of her was flawed, only painted with limited hues, yet something had transformed her into a sort of divine being that fluttered into his consciousness every moment the sun, amber and dazed, radiated through the windows, and into the night, when the dark veil extinguished all other stimuli, leaving him with the scent of the roses, the flight of the birds, and the eternal deep blue sky.

BUCHOWSKI, MADELINE**Madeline Buchowski**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Robert Henningsen

Category: Poetry

Monarch

We stand shivering in rosy sunshine,
Clenching sleeves and longing
For rain, the sparkling light, and the welcome silence
That follows. As we trample over baby's breath,
Dandelion fluffs settle onto our shoulders,
As gray rolls in from above, thunder
Rumbling with the rise and fall
Of sharp breaths.
That's when it tickles my scalp, brushing
Pollen onto my tied-up hair.
You try to grab it from my head
(Let's save it from the rain, you said)
Sending it back towards the sky, and I hear
The flapping of its tangerine wings, barely a whisper
I watch it go, a little gem in the slate
Towards the storm
(Please, we can't let it escape)
I reach towards it for you
(It will be drowned soon)
But my heels won't leave the ground.

BURKHART, KATELYN**Katelyn Burkhart**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

The Writer

The sound of a pen writing on paper fills the room.
It's dark, with only a candle casting a small gloom.
Amidst the faint glow is a man at a table,
seeming ever so calm, ever so stable.
His hand shakes slightly as he writes on the page,
probably has to do with him coming of old age.
The man scratched his head before returning to work,
the glow of the candle outlining a small smirk.
Even as he sits in the cold and in the dark,
he radiates warmth like a wick and a spark.
The man seems at rest against the old wicker chair,
breathing in the cloudy and dusty old air.
His thoughts, however, are far from rest,
bursting with colors and ideas to digest.
His imaginative ideas become words that are written down,
all words running from a verb to a noun.
The emotion in his writing comes from deep within his soul,
all coming together to meet the main goal.
The man sets down his pen with a sigh and smiles in delight,
the outline of his words faint in the dim light.
A story soon to be told sits in front of him,
each page filled up with words to the brim.
The writer stands, grabbing the cylinder of wax,
stretching only to hear the satisfying cracks.
His footsteps are heard throughout his house.
The man lives alone, not even with a mouse.
He makes it to bed and blows out the flame,
lying down on the rickety bed frame.
He lays there in silence with nothing to do.
However, new ideas are already starting to brew.

CEPEDA, ISABEL**Isabel Cepeda**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jeanne Gillanders

Category: Short Story

The Holiday Special

The walls felt as if they were closing in on me. I struggled to take a breath as my grandma and I struggled to call for help. When were we going to get out of here? *How* would we get out of here?

It was in the midst of winter at the French Lick Resort in Indiana. My mom, dad, sister, grandparents, and I made the long four-hour drive to Indiana for Christmas. The resort was beautiful- built in 1845, its old yet enticing and glamorous look made me feel like I was transported back in time, a world away from 2014. The memories are still kind of fuzzy, I remember only snippets, but the most beautiful part of the resort is still as clear as day in my head: the lobby. Unlike typical hotels, all the rooms were built around the lobby, making it appear as if the resort was a large, circular dome shape. It was decked out with majestic white and gold pillars, dozens of velvet couches and glass tables, and in the middle, a giant forty-five foot Christmas tree. Adorned with colorful ornaments, it twinkled and shone with red and gold ribbons tied into fancy bows with its gleaming gold star nestled at the top. People constantly crowded around it taking pictures, admiring the wonderful Christmas decor. For eight-year-old me, the resort was my playground. Constantly bubbling with energy, I spent the majority of my time at the hotel running around, snaking through hidden spots and nooks, absorbing in the Christmas lights and decorations, and *especially* going up and down the elevators with my Grandma for fun.

It had been snowing like a Hallmark movie. All. Day. Long. So much so that my mom, desperate to go out and explore the beautiful city of French Lick, gloomily decided for us to stay inside in the cozy resort. Luckily, there was still much to do with gorgeous light displays, Santa pictures, baking events, and not to mention the all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet.

“Can we please please please go down to the lobby grandma?” I eagerly asked, restless to meet up with the Christmas tree once again.

“Por supuesto!” My grandma replied, her youthful spirit shining. There existed one tiny thing that we hadn’t

accounted for that day: elevator key cards. See, at the French Lick Resort, you needed a keycard to be able to access a fully functioning elevator. Both my grandma and I, so excited to go down to the lobby and absorb the holiday ambiance of the resort, had completely forgotten about them at that moment. We absentmindedly entered the elevator and with a click of the “L” button, we were off on our mission. Even though the button lit up and had closed its doors, something peculiar happened. The expected hum of the elevator as it descended never took place. We both looked into each other's eyes as we realized that the elevator wasn't moving. The lights flickered for a half-second, and before us the original pale yellow glow of the lobby button faded back to grey. My grandma quickly scrambled to press the “open doors” button.

The walls felt as if they were closing in on me, I could barely take a breath as my grandma and I struggled to find a solution. My body began to feel frigid and the quickening pace of my heart made me tense up. When were we going to get out of here? *How* would we get out of here? I could feel the beginning of my fear of elevators start to form as we were inside. I used to believe they were only an inconvenience, but there existed something truly frightening about standing on something without a solid floor, hundreds of feet up in the air.

“Ay Dios Mio!” she sighed with frustration as she saw her attempt to open the doors fail. Unsure of what to do, but determined to find a way out, my shaky finger pressed against the “Help” button. We pressed it multiple times, waiting what seemed to be a hundred years— and then miraculously somebody answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi? Is this, um, the elevator people?” I asked nervously.

“Yes. Is everything okay?”

“We need help, we're stuck in the elevator!” I squeaked.

“What? How did this happen?” Through broken English from my grandma and my limited eight-year-old vocabulary, we managed to tell the operator that we didn't exactly know what happened, yet we did know that we forgot our keycard and the elevator never started moving.

“We tried pressing the button that opens the doors but that didn't do anything,” I explained.

“Are you sure it didn't work?”

“Yes!” My grandma replied to the operator.

“Look, why don't you give it another try, maybe something strange happened but it could all be fixed now,” the operator sighed. I grumbled a bit at the unbelieving operator as I pressed the button once again. As soon as I let go, the doors magically appeared and we arrived... back in the lobby? My grandma looked at me with absolute bewilderment in her eyes as she tried to comprehend what had just happened.

“Qué pasó?” She asked me, expecting the eight-year-old to have the answer.

“N-no sé!” I stammered.

We suddenly burst out laughing. Whatever occurred now became an unforgettable memory that was now with us forever.

We made our way out and rushed to the nearest couch, trying to catch our thoughts and breath. A momentary pause ensued and we looked at each other again. I threw my arms around my grandma, hugging her as tightly as I could, just glad that we were safe from whatever had just happened. Our silence spoke louder than words.

I learned a valuable lesson that day through a somewhat traumatic experience: *never* forget hotel keycards again! As I hugged her I saw the shining green Christmas tree, telling me that everything was okay now. I felt hot, salty tears pouring down my face. I wasn't sure why I was crying- I wasn't sad, I just felt overwhelmed. But in my Grandma's embrace, I felt safe, and that's the only thing that mattered at that moment.

CHEN, CONNOR**Connor Chen**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

Home School, Louisiana, MO

Educator: Shang Shang

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

On the Cliff Edge

As the taint orange sun in the sky fell below the distant horizon in Karuizawa, my legs and skis hung off of a twenty-five meter cliff. My upper body rested comfortably on loose snow; my legs lay above a chasm filled with sharp trees and rocks.

I was both fat and tall for an eleven year old. With goggles on, I was convinced that I could pass for fourteen. The ski lift operator had apparently thought so too: the lift was going to close soon, but he allowed me one more run by myself. By now, eleven-year-old me thought he was a seasoned skier, having had two full days of experience. Gloves, I reasoned amidst anger, were for beginners. With a similar logic, I chose to skip the beginner slope for the day's final run. A slope from the mountain peak with a nearly vertical incline struck me as a slope my sister finally wouldn't follow me onto. Unfortunately, and probably deservingly, when I emerged from the top of the lift, I didn't go down the nearly vertical incline; instead, I managed to get myself stuck hanging from a completely vertical cliff. This was all, obviously, my sister's fault.

Half an hour earlier, my family was at an early dinner. My sister was, as she somehow *always* was, being annoying. She wanted to borrow my brand new deck of cards. She wanted to ski with me on runs that were too hard for her. She followed me. She followed me everywhere, and she wouldn't stop.

"Connor won't let me have his cards," she told my parents.

"Because they're mine," I explained.

My mother might have been about to say something, but she didn't get the chance.

My sister reached for the tempura at the center of our table in the ski lodge and spilled her drink all over the table and all over my cards. My lap was wet. I stared at the cards. "You are such a piece of crap," I told my sister and then stormed out of the lodge after my father told me to apologize.

Hanging from the cliff, I was furious. If my sister was angry, sad, or anything in between, my parents would blame me; if my sister punched me, it was my fault. I was tired of always being wrong. It was almost completely dark now. The wind picked up as the sun went down, and my coat seemed thin. In all the possible scenarios I played in my head, I either died from hypothermia, suffered pierced organs from falling into the sharp trees below, or somehow got lucky and merely shattered both of my femurs.

I still blamed my sister.

It took another half hour for the ski patrol to arrive at the cliff, and another half an hour after that for them to tug me away from near certain death and shepherd me down the mountain.

During that time, I calmed. I calmed because it would be ungrateful to appear angry in front of my saviors. I calmed because I was too tired to be angry. The newfound calm and the resulting mental clarity brought me to the conclusion that my sister would've had the same line of logic as me; if I thought she was at fault, then she definitely thought she would be responsible for whatever bodily harm I was going to endure.

I was right. My sister, waiting under the blinding lights of the towering ski lamps, had her hands covering her face with streams of tears flowing between her knuckles. Still shivering, I skied next to my sister, and held her in my

embrace.

“I-I’m sorry”, she wiped her eyes as she stuttered.

“No, you did nothing wrong, I’m sorry I called you a piece of crap.” I told my sister, throat congested and eyes glittering, “I didn’t mean anything I said.” The warmth of her body allowed blood to gradually work its way into my numb right hand; I began to hear her quiet whimpers fading.

Warmth finally returned to my body; not actual warmth, but the warmth of knowing my last moments with my sister wouldn’t be a dispute over some stupid playing cards.

CHUA, KIMBERLY**Kimberly Chua**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rolla Senior High School, Rolla, MO

Educator: Star Hargis

Category: Poetry

Playhouse; Salmiakki; Cheese**Playhouse**

My mother's pride and joy
Were the hydrangeas in her garden
That flourished even in the cheap clay,
Purple-blue in the sun through the window
That broke the neck of a mud-coloured sparrow
I stole the clay from the hydrangeas
And tangled the sparrow's body
In their roots.

When I was ten, I found a tin
Of silver-backed jewels at a small
Garage sale, sparkling pink, purple, and green
Bright enough to convince me that they were real.
I took the lump of clay from my box of secrets,
Shaped it into a lopsided, lumpy vase,
And with every shining stone I
Glued on, I made it better.

I learned to spell "symmetry"
With its *mms* and angles and lines. That vase
In my cupboard was asymmetric, so I peeled off
The plastic gems, sanded it, and stuck them back on
With paint. I cleaned the fingerprints off with
The garden hose, and admired the white
Chrysanthemums, and the red
Hydrangeas.

There was a piece
I liked to call art, that I'd
Worked on all my life. Changing,
Editing, *Fixing*, until the original clay was
Cut down to nothing and discarded,
Leaving behind an empty vase
Of carved paint and plastic.
I stepped away to see
My masterpiece as everyone
Else did—the "art" I had sold my
Life for—and it was hideous. Ugly,
Because it had only looked
Perfect from the one angle
I could not find again,
And didn't want to.

Salmiakki

Heart-shaped chocolate shells
Red roses on Valentine's Day
For one dollar each.
They rot at my taste and touch,
Burning and acidic on my tongue
Like the little black pills
That smell like rust.
Force my heart from my lips
To whisper *I love you*.
Paper cuts and scarred knuckles,
Painted hands and broken fingernails
And red ribbons, thin and bright
In clear mucus streaks
On the tiled floor.
I convince myself that the red
Is made of strawberry.
My veins are filled with strawberries.

Cheese

You called the pretty girls smart
Convinced the smart girls they were pretty
With a paper napkin, we blotted away
At the film of yellow grease and preservatives
Coating the crumbled compliments you fed
To the eager scavengers at your feet.
You told me to smile and say cheese
So I microwaved it for 30 seconds and
Ate it with a fork, chewed it
Until my lips stretched like mozzarella.
You look pretty when you smile
I stitched the cracks in my palms with
Mycelium thread, wore fuzzy gloves
Made of soft blue mould which unravelled
So my hands dangled from marionette strings.
Seal your lovely sculptures with
Red wax; red lips, red cheeks
I look pretty when I smile.

CORBO, SERAPHINA**Seraphina Corbo**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Deana Tennill

Category: Poetry

A Nameless Illusion

Dear Nameless,

When I would hear your voice
I saw blues and browns,
But mostly that blue,
The kind that catches the eye,
Charms the soul,
The kind that your mother wore
As she rose
In a cloud of dust.

The bright beam of morning light that illuminates
And creaks through the cracks of your old wooden shutters.

I close my eyes and I can still see your face,
Your sullen, depressed eyes
The deep creases and folds that transform the face,
Velvet skin and cheeks that sag

The thick brows,
Bold and untamed
That scream arrogance long before the lips begin to twitch
And words begin to undulate like the ocean you followed
The footprints of the phantom of your father
Thinking he would lead you to your mother and you
Never came back up.

The wild, majestic laughter
That shook the delicate china
That still thunders throughout
Your deteriorating wooden house

With your wiles and wails
like an petulant child who couldn't handle the smell of blood
And the sadness of tears
Who yearned for more than the honeyed beguiling speech
Who sought to be transcendent and worthy
Noticed.

But I use your nom de plume
Your alibi
So that my words might be like daggers
And I will be the serpent under 't;

The blank page is my friend and my enemy
 And I am engaged in an eternal battle with you
You are the honeyed speech, the slur, the derogatory remark,
 The caustic wit
 The daggered smile
 and I never stop bleeding.

You torment me
 You are the scent of perfume that lingers
 In the box of the necklace you gifted me you are
 Capricious and mendacious;
 This paper it
 Cuts my fingers and they bleed and with that thick red ink I write
 nameless because Nameless is you
 And Nameless you will remain.

But writing is ephemeral
 A saccharine memory that lingers but a moment in the eyes of the poet
 Who scribbles to save themselves because the poet is always Nameless.
 The words come not from themselves but from the page

Of course, it is common knowledge that writing is sustenance for the poet
 And they are a glutton for ink
 This page it is
 the potential energy, the divine
 seen and appreciated by few.

But I am malnourished and I know that
 What you might see here
 May be an illusion because it
 comes not from me.
 It comes from the page and the outside and that is why
 It is transcendent and that is why
 Nameless are you,
 Immortal,
 Elusive,
 Strange.

What was your soul made of?
 Fire?
 Ice?
 Old cigars and fine red wine?
 That strong coffee which strengthens the fragile ribcage,
 That redolent poison which slowly but surely degenerates the heart before
 Exiting the aorta
 And corrupting the mind?
 Tell me,
 Did you miss your fix that day?

Did it hurt?
 When you let the cold, hard hands of selfishness and indifference
 Force their poison
 Down your throat?

Did you go back to the lab,
 Conjuring venom
 As your elixir?

Only four chambers,
The beating heart is a fascinating thing:
The hummingbird,
With an infinitesimally small heart that pumps blood throughout its body at race car speed
Lives three years,
While the tortoise
Spends its beats slowly and with dignity,
Living a hundred years.

I mean, what were you thinking?
Did you see her face beneath that sickly turquoise abyss?
Could you finally speak the mother tongue of your mother?
Were you drunk with euphoria?
Did the remainder of your heart become numb
And contort itself
Into an abyss of hatred,
Knowing the end was near?

When I would hear you voice as we played together,
Your smile made these suffocating days
Endless.
I saw lavish blues,
The kind that the sky puts on display
Without a single cream colored cloud
But as you grew older I saw the insidious browns
Consume you and now
I remember your spirit as I spread your ashes in the fertile soil.
Sometimes I wonder if the sea was your freedom and the land your cage maybe
Being buried in the ground
Clipped your wings-
And you just wanted a sweet release
As you aged

But I digress.

Even though you may not believe it,
I saw it in your deteriorating heart:
The immortal
The elusive
The strange
And the Nameless
.- Your forsaken friend

CORBO, SERAPHINA**Seraphina Corbo**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Deana Tennill

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

The Final Admonition

“I would like to skip the pleasantries, if you please, Miss. We fast approach the hour of the great feast, and as of yet, I have heard neither the ring of the dressing gong nor the scurry of the servants and we still have the silver shining, wine-decanting, and shoe-polishing to complete before the philosophizing, soliloquizing, fat-faced and pot-bellied scoundrels come lay in the lap of luxury to smoke their pipes while they recline on silk cushions and bemoan their failing lungs and profligate wives. They don’t want to admit it, but they’ve one foot in the grave and another in their mouth, and while we-- Colette? COLETTE, ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?! I WILL SLIT YOUR THROAT AND DRAG YOU BY BOTH BRAIDS DOWN TO THE PIGPEN IF YOU DON’T STOP DAWDLING!!!”

And so upon hearing this pleasant admonition, my delightful daydreaming came to an abrupt end. Nothing could prepare one for the endless complaining of the greasy coat-boy. I suppose idle minds are apt to wander and lonely souls tend to drift from the task at hand, but personally, I found the sin of talking to oneself to be rather trivial in comparison to the egregious crimes of the nobility about which Mr. Baudelaire was lecturing me. I call him the coat-boy, but in truth, he is the rapacious and draconian head of the servants they call the butler. I find every centimeter of his person detestable, from the scuffed boots to his glass eye and obtrusively large forehead, all of which make him appear less of an austere commander and more of an enlarged political cartoon. It is quite humorous that someone so obviously bereft of physical prowess should comment on the gluttony and decrepitude of his superiors.

“Sir, I don’t believe that I am really lollygagging at all. I simply exercise my imagination to a greater degree than the average wretch. Perhaps you would understand if you were such a young person as I am; sometimes talking to oneself is the only intelligent conversation available when one is relegated to the most menial tasks. Sir, I *must* have countless thoughts to entertain if I am to endure the interminable hunger and the eternal grief that agonizes me!”

“Colette, you have absolutely no exceptions, and you are forbidden to find enjoyment in foolish daydreaming. Your ludicrous imagination has thus far been the cause of all the devilish activity in this mansion. You ought to stay put in place and shut your mouth tightly or I’ll have your knuckles rapped and your tiny feet branded! *Mange ta main et garde l’autre pour demain!*”

“I imagine that would be quite the spectacle indeed! You’ve already branded me with your foul breath and daft words. I’ll continue whispering my prayers from feigned lips and offering my confessions to the devil; at least I have someone to keep me company in my solitude. As for your criticism of my likes and dislikes, *De gustibus non disputandum est.*”

After that productive discussion, I promptly took leave of this Goliath, supposing any further rebuttals would fall on deaf ears. Reflecting on my apparent downfalls, I ascended the staircase that led to a small, remote attic largely detached from the rest of the mansion. Many a dull and chilly afternoon had I spent wallowing in this safe nook while my cheeks burned with indignation at being on the receiving end of Mr. Baudelaire’s abrasive tone and swift hand. In my stupor, I had no dreams or recollections of those pleasanter times when, during those long winters of discontent, my parents would come home to embrace me and fill my growling stomach with warm soup. Oh, but now each Christmas, I get naught but the crumbs of the horses and hunting hounds of the bourgeoisie!

Suddenly at my right shoulder, the staircase window flew open, and a fresh autumnal breeze swept across my face and sent chills down my spine. What became of this glorious day? The light that had streamed in through every

crevice seemed to evaporate. All the pluck and initial fortitude that I exhibited left my chest, and a frigid stillness pervaded my soul, leaving me speechless and weak, such that my knees nearly gave out under me. I remember little of what occurred immediately after this temporary fit, but I felt my eyelids weighed down as several leaves rushed about my feet before I fell upon the stairs.

Several moments passed after my collapse before I felt upon my shoulder a delicate hand, an action which seemed to cure me of my blindness, bringing light to the darkness that had claimed me. And lo, there she carried me in her graceful arms toward the door of the attic-- the fairest and most heavenly spirit of my dear mother! Had I been shown divine mercy, or was this another trick of my wicked mind? She spoke not a single word, yet within her grey eyes, wise and profound, I contemplated the vastness of the firmament and the transcendence of time. I had found the solace that I had long yearned for. In the midst of her golden hair, I caught a twinkle of a locket. This object arrested my attention for some time, as it emitted a strange and radiant glow. My trance, however, was short-lived.

I cried out, and with trepidation, I leaped up and clung to the illustrious phantom that caressed my face lest she abandon me again; she, with ten wings of gold who lifted me and carried me up to that room! That one attic corner-- where I had spoken at length with the ghosts of my past, where I had once held the forbidden knife to my heart and begged for a release from a God that I knew had no mercy for wretched scullions like myself, where I heard Mr. Baudelaire and the rest of the servants snicker at my ignorance, where I then heard a slow, loathsome dirge issuing from the walls of that forsaken palace-- those peeling walls had been my sole confidants, and the air held the burden of ten thousand tears of anguish and ire. How purified it suddenly seemed, cleansed with her holy presence and my blessed tears of joy!

She began to hum slowly, and the wisdom of centuries cascaded from her lips, with each sacred syllable a drop of the pure wine of Maron, and I passed in and out of regions foreign to earthly beings. I did not regain consciousness until my heart was content and fortified, overflowing with her maternal love.

Just a moment later, this beneficent angel that graced my presence was no more, and painstakingly I raised myself to a firm standing position inside my hiding spot. Turning to the right, I gazed silently upon the forgotten walls and once beautiful furniture that had been left to collect dust. A table, with legs struggling to hold its weight, had a wooden bowl sitting upon it, holding a dark brown mush about which thousands of flies danced. The small chandelier above the table hung thick white spiderwebs on its arms, and a rusty safe was perched precariously atop an out-of-tune piano. Beyond the dust and debris, I spotted a large wooden chest that I had never seen before, adorned with swirling gold designs that stretched over the top and went far out on both sides. Although there were several windows in the attic, there was but one small window near the chest, which seemed to let in all the light of the luminescent moon.

‘Good lord, what fine treasure is this? Why, never have I seen this strange object in these parts before, and no one is so well acquainted with them as I.’ A deluge of disparate thoughts consumed me, and I wondered whether the sun would ever rise and whether I would ever again lay eyes upon my mother’s divine apparition.

These thoughts and many more passed through my mind while I sat in quiet consternation several paces away from the chest. A faint illumination from within this foreign object caught my eye, and I ventured over to lift the top to peer inside. As I did this, every shutter snapped shut and an impermeable and oppressive darkness swallowed me, while every candle simultaneously lit aflame, immersing me into a world of contrasting shadows. What horror I felt swell within me just then! Hundreds of letters were lifted from the chest, which flew about the room, creating a vortex that ripped the curtains off the walls and forced me onto the floor.

Suddenly the great whirlwind ceased, and before me on the ground lay a diamond locket encrusted with the words *igne natura renovatur integra*. By some urge I picked it up, recalling an almost identical garment worn by the angel that had lifted me into the attic moments before. Taking the chain between the shaking hands, I held the mesmerizing jewel up to my neck as beads of sweat accumulated on my forehead. I clasped it around my neck and in an instant all was black.

The next events the reader may very well doubt, but as I finally regained consciousness I felt that I was laying on some soft surface, and in an adjacent room a light and melodious voice was singing a tune:

*“A narrow escape,
The sun soon sets and a collage of vibrant pink, gold, and crimson fill the sky*

*And the time has come for those fleeing to die,
 For vagrants to sing melancholy songs
 And tell tales of the promised land
 Before barrelling down the dusty road,
 To find a golden world of
 Peace and prosperity;
 This tale oft-told
 She trudges on,
 Wings clipped and feet tied to the barren earth,
 Weighed down by that heavy burden-
 Too crestfallen to hearken
 God's sacred word;
 This disobedience- what for?
 But the end is near,
 But freedom is near,
 The revolution is near,
 And the beginning will soon begin
 Once more."*

As the final chord resounded, a shrill voice rang out from the front entrance of the mansion, which could be found a short distance away from the music room in which the woman was singing. "Oh, my dear Anastasie, how good it is to see you, and after so many years! This is cause for celebration indeed!"

"Oh, absolutely, my dear, absolutely, I am ever so delighted to see you! Tonight we shall feast like royalty, and I hear that the cooks and servants are working tirelessly to prepare a splendid banquet. Did you know that Sir Richard, Sir Henry, Count Maxwell, and Alfred Humphrey are to play the Beethoven String Quartet Number 14, Opus 131?"

These fine, lithe ladies-- I recognized their voices well-- Duchess Marguerite Hugo and Lady Anastasie d'Urville, strolled some 15 meters in front of the spot where I lay in the straw pile by the fireplace in the kitchen. How could I have fallen unconscious in the attic and been brought downstairs just as guests were arriving? My head ached profoundly, and just as I stood up to reach for a glass of water, I found myself looking up at the round and hideous visage of none other than Mr. Baudelaire.

I tried to restrain myself after what had happened earlier, and spoke in my most amiable tone to his royal highness: "Good evening, Monsieur Baudelaire, how do you do? I wish to sincerely apologize for my poor behavior this afternoon. I know better than anyone how much of a scoundrel and a wretch I am. I do hope that we might reconcile before the festivities commence."

He met my gaze with a perturbed and confused expression as if I had never committed a single sin.

Derisively he said, "I would like to skip the pleasantries, if you please, Miss. We fast approach the hour of the great feast, and as of yet, I have heard neither the ring of the dressing gong nor the scurry of the servants."

I grasped at my neck, and I felt a sharp edge cut my hand. I ripped the cursed chain off, and from within it came the song of a fell voice:

*"Our souls were a bleeding moon,
 Once chained but long forgotten
 Crushed in the palm of your hand
 In a moment of thoughtless rage."*

CRIM, ABBEY**Abbey Crim**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Pandemic That Opened My Eyes**The Pandemic that Opened my Eyes**

March 2020. No in-person school. No store trips. No seeing friends- or anyone for that matter. No soccer. No church. No anything. Everything was turned off in the blink of an eye, and we were all left waiting. I struggled significantly with feelings of anxiety and isolation during the pandemic; I pitied myself and my situation. During this time, I couldn't see past my current situation. However, the pandemic gave me a new appreciation for all of us and the problems we're all facing.

My family was one that took extensive precautions during the beginning months of the pandemic. My dad was high risk, which pushed our precautions even further. My days were slow and bland. I longed to go back to "normal" life. As the relentlessly monotonous days of the pandemic stretched on, I began seeing my friends and family getting together and hanging out. Frustratingly, my parents didn't allow my siblings and I to participate. I felt like my life was remaining on pause while everyone else's was just beginning to play again. I was envious of my friends that I saw having fun together, and I was irritated that they were able to do whatever they wanted, while I was stuck at home. Months passed by and I was still struggling with the monotony of online schooling. By this point, I was doing school 100% virtually, something I, along with all of my teachers had never experienced before. I longed to be in school with all my friends, and to be able to learn hands-on.

It wasn't really until about 8 months later that I began to truly think about the circumstances of the others around me as well. Beforehand, I'd compared my problems to others my age and virtuously deemed my situation to be much worse. However, the further I looked, I began to realize that the peoples' lives I've been wanting to live for so many months were not as perfect as I'd thought. Other people were fighting their own battles, ones that were just as real and as valid as mine. I'd wanted to think that my situation was the most difficult, but in reality, everyone was struggling with something, I was just ignorantly closing my eyes to it.

As I look back at the exhausting year and a half we've been dealing with the pandemic, I see one clear lesson I've been learning, discreetly intertwined among the hardships I've been facing. A lesson I could not have learned any other way, one that *truly* opened my eyes to how similar we all are. We are all facing trials, ones that nobody knows about, and that are all valid.

The fictional, yet wise, Atticus Finch once said, "if you can learn a simple trick. . . you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view. . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." (Lee 33) As I lived during the height of a global pandemic, I found myself pent up anger towards many people around me. I looked at others and thought ". . . how lucky they are to be able to go out to dinner with their friends" while I'm stuck at home bored out of my mind. "How is this fair?" I was so busy thinking about their advantages, that I never stopped to climb into their skin and walk around in it. My peers were most definitely fighting their own battles, I'd just failed to open my eyes and recognize that. Teens all around me were struggling with anxiety, depression, eating disorders, feelings of inadequacy, and more. I needed at this time to think to myself, "how would I view this subject if I lived in this area, had divorced parents, no siblings, lots of siblings, was struggling with school, etc. etc." If I had asked myself these questions I would've found answers that would have cured my jealousy or anger towards those people.

In the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* children Jem and Scout both despise a specific elderly woman for the hostile way she interacts with them and others. Harper Lee juxtaposed this contempt with Atticus' feelings of respect towards Mrs. Dubose. On multiple occasions Mrs. Dubose called Atticus inappropriate names to Jem and Scout. One day, while Jem was complaining about Mrs. Dubose, Atticus stated, "Jem, she's old and ill. You can't hold her responsible for what she says and does." (Lee 121) Jem and Scout failed to think about how they might act or feel if they themselves had been old and ill, recovering from a methane addiction.

One of my favorite people was recently hospitalized. One day, out-of-the-blue my mom texted me, “Sarah isn’t able to be at practice tonight.” Something felt off about the timing and tone of my mother’s message. I responded, “Why isn’t she going?” Her response was shattering. “She has been struggling with an eating disorder. (Her mom) texted today and said she’s going to Children’s Mercy for 10-14 days for in-hospital treatment.” I couldn’t focus on school for the rest of the day. That night at soccer, I almost started balling. How could she have been dealing with this and I have no idea? I see her 3-4 times a week. I was shocked, I was scared, I was angry; my eyes had been ripped open to reality. If such a close friend had been battling with this serious trial, what were others dealing with that I was also unaware of? Many issues people deal with are widely apparent. However, perhaps the most significant trials are those that people battle behind the curtain. Often, we think that we understand the obstacles that others face when there is much more to the story than we know. I knew that my friend had been struggling with severe anxiety, but I had absolutely no idea that she was battling an eating disorder. It was a sort of epiphanic moment where I’d realized the extent to which people had been struggling behind closed doors.

From an outsider's perspective, my life may appear perfect. I have a happy family and a comfortable living situation. However, they would not know all the battles I’ve been silently fighting—the ones not even my closest friends are aware of. They would not know how I struggle with severe anxiety. They would not know that I was a victim of sexual assault at a young age and that I carried that with me in silence for upwards of 5 years. They would not know how I struggle with obsessive thoughts and perfectionism. I am not listing my problems for pity. I’ve chosen to list out some of my problems to demonstrate how *every* human on this planet is struggling with things that nobody knows about. If we go around judging people without ever thinking about why they might be acting a certain way we are creating a miopic society. And even when we choose to try and understand someone, we will still never know enough about them to judge. With this revised perspective, I’ve been able to show more love for the people around me as I know that they are battling with things that I can not see.

March 2020. No in-person school. No store trips. No seeing friends- or anyone for that matter. No soccer. No church. No anything. For me, and for everyone around me. Although my situation differed from that of others, we were ultimately facing the same pandemic. We were all struggling with isolation, anxiety, and depression. Alongside these trials, we were all facing issues that were less obvious to the public eye.

I’m working everyday to avoid judging people for their actions. As I make a conscious effort to try and understand others’ actions, and choose not to judge regardless of what I can see on the surface, I have found a greater capacity of love for those around me. If all of us can make a simple effort each day to try and see things from another’s point of view, and to not judge, we will change the pattern of our modern society. We will be able to show more kindness towards our neighbors, and we can live in a more peaceful and supportive community. So before you build up anger towards someone, just remember to climb into their skin and walk around in it, and see how your perspective changes.

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DAY, KATIE**Katie Day**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Revenge/Forgiveness Blended Genre Essay**The Implications of Revenge**

“See you next season!” my teammate yelled from across the soccer field.

I stopped briefly to smile and wave back at her, before running to catch up with my dad. The cool September breeze pierced through my skin, prompting me to shudder. I pulled my jacket closer to my body. It was the last day of this year's soccer season. It had been a good year for our team, we had only lost two games, and I had felt elated by our successes. My enthusiasm didn't falter as we got in the car to head home, and I spent the trip back home talking quickly and happily to my father about the events that happened during the game.

The most exciting reward, I found, was the participation trophy that was given to the entire team before we split for the season. It was some sort of plastic material with a gold film to make it look authentic. In a way, it worked- it could have been made from anything, and I would have still been excited to have it placed in my hands. To me, it was a physical manifestation of the hard work I had put in this soccer season. It was something I could show off to my friends, or proudly place on a shelf. I smiled and sat quietly in the back seat, fanaticizing about where I would put it in my room.

I clutched the gold object in my hands, making sure to be extra careful not to drop it as I got out of the car. Seizing the item even tighter, I made my way upstairs, yelling to signal to my mom that I was home. While taking off my shoes, I examined the room that I shared with my younger sister and decided to place the trophy on a shelf above my bed. I got up on my bed to reach, and carefully set it down. I walked back to examine my work; it sat perfectly on the shelf, and I could feel myself swell with pride. I hummed happily as I made my way downstairs to go play outside for a little while.

I didn't return to my room for a couple of hours, but when I decided to make my way upstairs, I noticed something on the floor beneath the steps. I had walked inside smiling and content, but when I saw the pieces of my trophy scattered across the floor, my heart immediately dropped. It was as if my heart had shattered with the trophy. Each small piece glimmered in the afternoon sun reflecting through the big glass windows by the front door. I could feel my heart beat rapidly in my ears as the rest of my body went numb. Initially, I was extremely confused. *How had this happened?* As I went through every possible scenario in my head, I felt my heart get heavier, as I believed this to be an error on my part. In some way, I wasn't careful enough. As I pondered the consequences of my supposed mistakes, I heard something that caught my attention and I looked up.

That's when I saw his face. I saw my little brother, only 5 years old, standing over the upstairs landing. He was grinning widely, and giggling softly. I quickly pieced together what had happened. When it finally clicked, all I saw was red. I clenched my fists so hard that my fingernails dug into my skin. To say I was angry was an understatement. I wanted to throw something at his face. I wanted to take everything in his room and smash it to little pieces in front of him, and laugh when he cried. My teeth clenched together so hard that I thought that they might break. I looked up at him again. I made my way upstairs to where he was sitting happily, that grin still on his face. Everything I had felt about him in the past, all of it, was trivial now. The only thing I cared about right then, was getting revenge.

In retrospect, this response was embarrassing, a reaction that almost didn't even feel like it belonged to me. Feeling blinded by rage, the only thing that mattered at that moment was making him pay for the distress that he caused me. In the article “Revenge”, Thornton argues that revenge is a natural impulse, and it's nearly impossible to control the feelings of revenge, due to its impression on one's biology. Thornton asserts that “The desire to seek revenge is as natural as grief, happiness, fear, and hunger. The instinct for it had been crafted by natural selection because of critical problems it solved as our species was evolving” (Thornton 114). Thornton claims that revenge is one of the most naturally occurring emotions that one can experience, and he compares the instinct of revenge to hunger. He states that revenge feels like the only way to respond to being wronged by another person. This felt reflective of my situation, as logic wasn't a factor in my thinking, and I felt overtaken by the feeling of vengeance. I was biologically

vengeful. My reaction was embarrassing because it wasn't a response that was completely my own, but rather a natural impulse due to biological reasons. Of course, a person is at fault for the act of getting vengeance, however, the feeling is perpetuated and exemplified by physiological and biological means.

My brother continued smiling as I stomped up the stairs to stand next to him. His smile quickly faded when he saw my face. My face was red with anger, my eyebrows were furrowed, and deep lines appeared on my forehead. My stance was nothing short of intimidating. I must have looked ready to murder from the viewpoint of a 5-year-old. He quickly realized this and scrambled in an attempt to run away from me. Being faster, I grabbed the sleeve of his arm and pulled him back, he stumbled a bit but stayed upright. My rage controlled any actions I took. Everything felt drowned out by the buzzing sensation in my head, which now I know to be the feeling of revenge taking over. It bounced around my skull, preventing any coherent or rational thoughts.

I saw the look of fear in his eyes, and truthfully, I didn't care. I let go of his sleeve, and he didn't try to run away this time; he only looked up at me.

"How could you break my trophy!?" I yelled at him, though I wasn't sure if anything would even come out. He didn't respond.

"I hate you! Why would you do that?" I asked again, getting no response.

His silence enraged me further, but I couldn't stand to continue to ask him questions with no answer, so I ran to my room and slammed the door. I collapsed on my bed and cried into my pillow. My emotions faded from anger to grief and sadness. Yelling at him hadn't made me feel any better, and it hadn't fixed my trophy. I rolled over onto my back to look at the shelf above my head; it was empty. The reality of the situation became apparent again, and I was reminded of that smile that my brother wore so proudly. The feeling of indignance returned. I didn't feel any better after yelling at my brother, in fact, it seemed to make things worse. Now not only did I have no trophy, but I had just ruined my relationship with my brother. I didn't come out of my room until hours later when my mom called everyone down for dinner.

I walked down the steps slowly, I didn't want to face my family. I was ashamed of how I had acted. A different part of me was scared that I would be in trouble. If he had told my parents about how I had yelled at him, I would be in trouble for a long time. As I walked past the place I found the fragments, I became aware that they were no longer on the floor. I was puzzled for a second until I realized someone must have thrown the pieces away. I staggered as I realized that there was no more evidence of my trophy to be collected. My heart felt heavier once again.

I made my way to the kitchen, dreading what was about to happen. I didn't look at anyone in the eyes, opting to look straight ahead instead. That's when I noticed it. My trophy was sitting on the kitchen counter. I immediately felt lighter, like everything was somehow perfect again, and nothing had ever happened. *This is some sort of miracle*, I thought. I swiftly made my way across the kitchen to get a closer look at the object. It was badly glued together, with a few missing pieces in a couple of spots, but there it was, put back together. I was so happy, that I didn't even notice my brother peeking over at me expectantly. When I did notice, however, I was crushed. Not *everything* was perfect. I felt my heart ache once again as I realized what I had done. I remembered his small eyes looking up at me, terrified of what I would do. I was his older sibling, I was supposed to protect him. I had failed.

I felt exponentially worse about the situation, but this time, I was the villain, and it was all because of my own thirst for vengeance. Thornton talks about this feeling in his article, *Revenge*. After a study conducted in 2008, and published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, it was found that revenge can make one feel worse. "In our study," says Wilson, "we couldn't find any evidence that there was any enjoyment of it [revenge]. In the group that was able to punish, almost everyone's mood and emotions actually declined afterward"(Thornton 117). Even though revenge seems so appetizing, it only makes you feel worse off than how you initially felt. It can make the entire situation worse, and can permanently damage relationships, as well as further the negative feelings that were carried on by the revenge itself.

I looked at my brother, even though it was hard to look him in the eyes, only being reminded of my own cruelty. "Did you do this for me?" I asked, holding up the object very carefully, as I quickly realized the glue had not fully dried yet.

He nodded and smiled at me. The pit in my stomach grew. I knew that I had to say something to fix this.

"I'm really sorry for yelling at you. Thank you for doing this. It looks perfect." I said. This made me feel a bit better, but I still felt tremendously guilty about the entire situation.

He just smiled and hugged me, and I knew that I was forgiven. The weight on my chest lifted.

In "*An Unnatural Act*," Philip Yancey argues that forgiveness is the only way to move past pain and the natural impulse for revenge in a relationship, even though humans don't come by forgiveness naturally. Yancey states, "Forgiveness is the only way to break the cycle of blame- and pain- in a relationship"(Yancey 12). Without forgiveness, the perpetual cycle of pain will continue within that relationship, causing potentially permanent damage to the individuals and the relationship in general. When neither can forgive, the cycle can continue for many years, and will never be broken. When someone has done something wrong, it is extremely challenging to be forced to

forget about their shortcomings, and move past the situation without getting revenge. The fact that there is still a sense of injustice after forgiveness is a part of the reason it is so hard for people to accomplish. The act of forgiving someone is to be able to look past these injustices and have the ability to push away the biological inclination to get revenge. Humans will naturally make mistakes, and therefore there will always be reasons for revenge. However, the cycle of revenge, though it seems to be the easiest, only harms the relationships that it invades.

Though revenge was what I wanted at that moment, it only fractured my relationship with my brother and made everything worse. Despite the fact that revenge is natural and hard to overcome, forgiveness is simply the only way to mend the situation. The integrity and justice of the matter directly influence the implications of revenge. Similar to my own instinct to smash his stuff after he smashed mine, being the judge of the circumstances and serving justice how one wants justice to be served plays into the feelings of revenge. But being the judge doesn't make the situation go away, and it only made me feel worse. Being able to forgive was the only thing that made me feel better. Being able to forgive is the only way to end the cycle.

DING, SARAH**Sarah Ding**

Age: 13, Grade: 9

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

Category: Flash Fiction

The End of an Era

“RUN!! HURRY UP!” I scream at the top of my lungs. *We won't make it. We won't make it. What if we don't make it? Our life depends on this.* “We need to make it!” I continue yelling.

The intercom announces, “The Bloon Passenger Ship is two minutes from take off. Every passenger should be on board by now. The doors will close in two minutes. Once they close, the doors will not open.”

Pushing myself to the limit, I force myself to run. *One foot in front of the other. One breath at a time. You need to make it.* I yell to Marcus, “We don't have much time!”

“Stop yelling! You're wasting your breath. We're almost there!”

I listen to his advice, and I stop. We're still around half a mile away from the launchpad. I push harder than I have before. My legs are trembling, and my ankle feels like it's going to collapse if I run just a little bit more. My feet are numb from the cold, and my face is bright red. *I can make it. Just 1000 feet left.* Marcus passes me on the left.

He says, “You can do it, Paige! You're almost there!”

“The ship will close its doors in 10... 9...8...”

I whisper, “7..6...run...5...push...4...go..” Marcus safely makes it into the spaceship.

“3..2..” The spaceship announces.

“1!” I scream as I fling my body into the ship. *I made it. I did it. Bloon here I come* A few people are still standing and trying to navigate around. My hands are sweaty, and my whole body has gone numb. I try my best to minimize the noise of my loud and heavy breaths. Most seats are filled, but thankfully Marcus reserved two near the middle of the ship. I climb up the ladder, and I tip-toe my way around.

“That was the scariest moment of my life!” I announce to Marcus as I sit down.

Grabbing my arm and helping me stabilize myself, Marcus responds, “Don't talk. You need to catch your breath.”

I sigh, “Thanks. We did it! We're on our way to Bloon. If I asked myself 15 years ago I wouldn't have known that we would have to flee Earth.”

“Take off in 3, 2, 1!”

I started zoning out. I need to sleep. My head pounds, and my heartbeat is almost 180. Marcus is snoozing off already.

“Welcome to Bloon!” The intercom declares. We made it.

“Paige! It's time to wake up!” Marcus yells.

I scramble out of bed, and I quickly put on my shoes. They aren't exactly sneakers, but they have this weird technology to prevent any dust and toxic material from getting inside the shoe, or being brought into the house. Everything is normal, but everything has some special changes.

“I'm coming! What time will the bloon tracks come to pick us up?” I responded. The Bloon track is a railroad that attaches to every modernized area on Bloon. It's the only source of quick transportation.

“It's supposed to come at 8 e.t.” Marcus says.

I tell him, “Okay. I'm getting up now.”

I rush to put on my clothes, all with a certain fabric and filter to prevent the toxic sard from coming in. On earth sardines are very similar to sand, but if you inhale too much sard at once you'll die immediately. I gobble down some pasta. Food here is pretty normal, except meats are delicacies. I grab my helmet, that again has the filters, shove it over my head, and rush out the door. I run to Marcus.

“About time you get here!” Marcus chimes in.

“Sorry. How many more e.ts till the Bloon track comes?” I ask.

"I'm not sure. I heard somebody say that the track is running low on coal, and is going slower to try to conserve it. I think that Earth's next delivery for coal isn't for another week.

Safe on the Bloon Track Cart, I sit next to Marcus. I am still a little uneasy about riding this because it has had a few fatalities within the past few months. I have to ride it everyday to get to anywhere

, because cars can't run on this planet. This track is also much slower than a car but is much quicker than a bike.

There are 11 other people in this cart, and the maximum number that can fit in is 24.

"Next Stop the School Yard" The cart announces.

Marcus and I stand up and get ready to leave the cart. Time for school. School lasts around 5 hours. It's different here. We don't learn science because the science here on this planet is still being learned and researched.

"Mom! Dad! Marcus and I are home!" We successfully survived our 100th day on Bloon. I'm still getting used to this environment, but I am thankful that we were able to flee here!

DING, SARAH**Sarah Ding**

Age: 13, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Robert Henningsen, Bob Henningsen

Category: Poetry

Self Validation

Self Validation

Struggling to climb out of a hole,
 It's been a while since light shone.
 The sun doesn't radiate light like
 It used to only one year ago.
 As each practice continues,
 I find myself even further,
 Into the hole, stuck beneath the surface,
 Finding no way to break through.
 Though, I am still there.
 Every.
 Single.
 Day.

At 3:15 p.m to 5:30 pm.
 As the season goes on the,
 The sky gets dark like a veil.
 As it darkened,
 I knew there weren't many days left in the season.

After each practice,
 It's the feeling that I got worse.
 That gets me.
 The thought of,
That was a bad practice.
I hope I can still start the next game.
Hopefully she isn't too disappointed in me.
Why can't I be like my old-self: strong and sharp star.
Maybe tomorrow I'll be me again.
I'll fly through the drills and impress everyone.
By the end of the season, my stats will be the highest.
 No it won't be.
 And I know it.

Every single day I worry what my coach thinks,
 How does she feel,
 What does she want me to do,
 I will never know,
 But I do here the constant croaks of
 "Ball Speed or Less touches"
 Nothing ever satisfies her.
 She's never happy,

But neither am I.

I dread it now. Something that brought me so much
Happiness, is now my fear,
It's like the weight of the world is on my back,
My heart is beating faster than a hummingbird's wings,
Each time I'm on the line on my tiptoe,
Ready to sprint my heart out,
To see if I can satisfy her for once.
Maybe even myself.

I find myself worse than how I had started.
There's nothing that motivates me to push,
To push myself and fling myself out of the hole.
I think to myself,
Why Can't I do good for once?
Why can't I excel in my performance?

My confidence plummets even further,
I try to use all my force and muscle to push me up,
Out of this dark phase of my career.
It's been over 8 games since I last saw the sun.
Let me be free,
And let her be satisfied.
Let me play like I once did.
Stop holding me back.
Free, happy, confident, and determined.
Mostly,
Let me feel self validation.

DOMMARAJU, SRUTHI**Sruthi Dommaraju**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Joy Gebhardt

Category: Flash Fiction

Into the Vampire's Lair

Into the Vampire's Lair

Priya's heart didn't start pounding until she twisted the silver handle of the music room door. She was totally fine straining her ears to hear the end of school announcements over the ruckus of the kindergarten classroom, and she didn't hesitate to prance to her teacher, declaring "I'm signed up for that guitar class!" No, the nerves didn't set in even as Priya scurried across the school and up two flights of steep stairs, losing her way twice in the labyrinth. But as soon as she laid eyes on the multi-colored risers filled to the brim with students twice her size, a lump grew in her throat. Maybe it was because the computer wires lining the floor looked suspiciously like snakes, or because the only light came from the cracks in the guitar cases covering up the back window, but Priya began calculating how long it would take to sprint down those stairs and all the way back home. She poised to execute her escape plan, but it was foiled by those five words: "how can I help you?"

I wish it wasn't Mr. Franzel, Priya thought as she finally entered the music room. Her skin began to crawl the more she thought about that portly white-bearded man. After glancing at the pitch-black storage room, Priya finally concluded *Mr. Franzel is definitely a vampire He needs to store his dead bodies somewhere.*

"Do you need some help?" Priya jumped at Mr. Franzel's menacing words.

"I think my mom signed me up for this guitar class," she whispered, inspecting a speck of dust on the floor.

"Well, let's check and see," Mr. Franzel replied, shuffling through the mess of papers decorating his desk.

Priya began to tilt her head up but snapped it back down again after hearing snickers dance around the room. *I really hate this room,* Priya thought. *I could still run away...*

Priya's head shot up at last, her eyes frantically darting around the room. The most simple path, of course, would be the door to her left. Much to Priya's dismay, however, more students had entered the room after her and were now sprawled across the floor, picking at their scratched, out-of-tune guitars and blocking her path. *But what about the other door?* Priya strained her head to see the identical door on the other side of the room. A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth when she saw a floor free of students, but that smile quickly faded when Priya realized what was there instead. Miles and miles of every kind of instrument blocked her path: two drum kits, ten different wooden xylophones, and of course, guitar cases. *I wonder why there are so many guitar cases* Priya thought, her eyes widening in realization. *Mr. Franzel doesn't keep his dead bodies in the storage room... he keeps them in the guitar cases!* Now Priya really needed to get out of there. Picking at her worn-down nails, Priya once again readied her escape, when she heard a muffled "I don't see your name on the list..." Uh-oh. *Maybe life as a vampire won't be so bad,* Priya considered, turning around to face her death sentence.

Priya was instead met with... a smile?

"I'm sure it was just a mix-up, so how about you take a guitar and sit on that gray riser over there?" Mr. Franzel placed one of his coffin/guitar cases in Priya's trembling hands, and she turned to scurry over to her seat.

"Wait!" Mr. Franzel exclaimed. *What if he doesn't even turn me into a vampire? What if he's just gonna kill me right now?* Priya gulped and turned her head as Mr. Franzel handed her a bowl of what was surely supposed to be blood, but instead was filled with... guitar picks?

"Take three," he offered. "We have plenty to go around."

After Priya dragged her guitar case to her seat and processed the shock of *actually* finding a guitar inside, she squinted up at the unfamiliar symbols projected on the back wall. And as she struggled to hold up an instrument the same size as her, Priya failed to notice the twinkle gracing Mr. Franzel's bright, blue eyes.

DUAN, YICHUN**Yichun Duan**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

Home School, Louisiana, MO

Educator: Shang Shang

Category: Critical Essay

Odysseus Character Reflection

Mythological heroes in epics and stories are considered one of the oldest stock characters created. Most of these heroes remain static characters due to the limited length of many narratives and the lack of complexity of the plots. However, *The Odyssey*, written by the ancient Greek poet Homer, features a protagonist that is highly dynamic compared to other heroes in different cultures.

At the start of the epic, in the section “Telemachia”, Odysseus is described as a generous, wise king by his son Telemachus before his first appearance. Telemachus claims his father is a “godlike man” and treats other people “kindly as a father to his children” (Book 2, line 260). From this description, the reader can infer that Odysseus is a good man and a great ruler. Moreover, Odysseus is repeatedly said to be “noble” throughout the book, not only by his son Telemachus but also by others, even including Athena, the goddess of wisdom and war. She speaks in favor of Odysseus and tries to persuade Zeus to help him: “[her] heart breaks for Odysseus,” and she describes Odysseus as “among mortal men, [he is] far the best at tactics, spinning yarns” (Book 1, line 57). From this quotation, the reader can deduce that Odysseus is a man of strategy and cunning, representing his intelligence. Even Athena speaks very highly of him and decides to help and save him on multiple occasions throughout the epic. It is notable that Odysseus is distinguished from other mortals and can impress a goddess herself.

Despite the praises that the reader hears at the start of the epic, the reader soon finds out that Odysseus’s personality differs in some aspects from what has been described. In Book 9, Odysseus encounters the Cyclops Polyphemus. He tricks Polyphemus by telling him that his name is “nobody”, and later blinds him with his sword. This tactic helps Odysseus and his crew to escape the Cyclops’ cave. However, when Odysseus and his crew are already on the boat, away from danger, Odysseus risks his own life and his crew’s lives by taunting Polyphemus again and telling him his name to gloat. Moreover, Odysseus’s crew warns him before he tries to taunt the monster the second time. Homer writes from Odysseus’s perspective by telling the story of his journey:

“So they begged
but they could not bring my fighting spirit round.
I called back with another burst of anger.” (Book 9, lines 556-558)

Odysseus is different from what the reader previously has been led to believe: he is not kind towards his fellow man; he ignores their warning and puts their lives at stake without their consent. Moreover, the reader finds out that Odysseus cannot control his impulses. On top of that, Odysseus does not respect the gods in repayment of the favors Athena bestows on him; he is ignorant towards them. He taunts Polyphemus and challenges the god Poseidon by saying that he could not heal the Cyclops’s eye:

“Would to god I could strip you
of life and breath and ship you down to the House of Death
as surely as no one will ever heal your eye,
not even your earthquake god himself!” (Book 9, lines 580-583)

To summarize, Odysseus respects neither the gods nor his crewmates; he is also arrogant and impulsive, making him unrecognizable from the image of him that others have created.

Finally, by the end of the epic, Odysseus’s personality changes considerably. He says to his wife Penelope after

returning to his house that he will go to give a sacrifice to Poseidon to compensate for his loss and express his gratitude towards him:

“I must plant my oar in the earth
and sacrifice fine beasts to the lord god of the sea,
Poseidon—a ram, a bull, and a ramping wild boar—
then journey home and render noble offerings up
to the deathless gods who rule the vaulting skies,
to all the gods in order.” (Book 23, lines 315-320)

Odysseus has learned to cover up his mistakes and respect others, which shows that he is reflecting on his past actions.

In conclusion, Odysseus is first depicted as a positive character with both kindness and wisdom. Throughout his journey, the reader finds out that Odysseus is actually impulsive and disrespectful towards other people; however, by the end of the epic, Odysseus learns to reflect on his actions and compensate for other people's losses. From the analysis above, Odysseus is a dynamic character that changes throughout the whole epic.

DUCKWITZ, ALEXANDER**Alexander Duckwitz**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Critical Essay

Feudal America

Feudal America

Many people view America as a society as unfettered Capitalism. Some see it as a net benefit, others, not so much. This seemingly limitless capitalism should -in theory- lead to limitless opportunities. That, however, is not true. In fact, the American version of Capitalism more closely resembles the economic opportunity of Feudal Europe than that of true social mobility. People ultimately spend their life, from womb to tomb, in the same social class. Opportunity favors the rich so heavily that less than one tenth of the lower classes ever find true wealth in their own lives. People slave away under the upper class for generation after generation, and the upper class stays in power and opulence equally as long.

That is the American dream in 2021. That is the American culture. One day, long ago, people came to America longing for a new life, to, "make it big." Little did they know, however, that generations from now, their children have less opportunity in America than their ancestors did in the countries they left. Because the American Upper class have been attempting to subvert the lower classes into subservience, even though American culture glorifies the idea of hard work and, "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps," but, in actuality, the rich become even richer and the poor plunge deeper into the cycle of poverty; the lack of social mobility hurts everyone and paralyzes the nation.

Social mobility is defined as the, "movement of individuals, families, or groups through a system of social hierarchy or stratification" (Encyclopedia Britannica). Social mobility seems like a wonderful idea, people moving up and down the income ladder depending on how much work they or their family puts in. If it exists in a society, then that society can properly incentivize work, and those who work enough will be rewarded. The issue in America, however, is that we don't have social mobility.

America lacks any major mobility in terms of generation over generation income. The vast majority of Americans ultimately die in the same income bracket which they were born into. The statistics tell a horrifying story. "the amount of economic advantage passed down from one generation to the next is much higher in the US. Approximately 50% of a father's income is inherited by his son... 8% of children raised in the bottom 20% of the income distribution are able to climb to the top 20% as adults" (Rank and Eppard). The vast, vast majority of people ultimately stay in whatever class they were born into, and only a tiny amount of the poor ultimately are able to find any sort of substantial income.

In our nation, it does not matter how smart you may be, how well spoken, how hard working. If you are born into a lower class, you will struggle to achieve success. It doesn't matter any of the advantages you may have, they will likely not be enough. *Only eight percent* of those in the lower classes of America are able to enter the upper-middle class before they work themselves to death. 66 Million people live in the bottom 20% of income earners. Of them, only 5 million will ever earn a decent living.

This is not social mobility. Not even close. This is modern-day Feudalism. While many believe that Feudalism died when Capitalism rose, we are seeing a rise in its rigidness once again. Feudalism, in a broader sense, is defined as, "A closed system where... peasants who worked the land served lords for generations and generations as the estate system hierarchy was automatically reproduced at birth... A person's birth determined his or her social standing" (Hoiland). American Feudalism may not be one of Lords and Ladies being served by Serfs and Vassals, but it most certainly exemplifies the rigid class structure of it and the near impossibility of success when you are born into the wrong family.

Class structure in America is exceedingly set in stone, and the rich use many different ways to keep it that way. Capitalism is *supposed* to be a system of equal opportunity, but when the rich leverage their wealth and power, they and their families can easily stay on top of the hierarchy no matter how hard those below them may work. There are so many ways that they keep their families in power and with wealth, but the largest example is education.

A degree in business from a prestigious university may land you in a corporate boardroom, raking in millions of

dollars every year, but poor families often don't have the time or the money for a prestigious university and a business degree. They are instead forced to work low end jobs, scrambling to support their family. Someone in the lower class is lucky if they can even go to a Community College, much less Wharton or Stanford. Rich families enrich their children by supporting them to and through college, and their children do the same. Just rinse and repeat.

A large portion of people who attended prestigious schools, such as Harvard, are considered "Legacy students". A legacy student is simply someone who is attending the same college that their parent(s) did. "Harvard's Class of 2022 is made up of over 36% legacy students" (Martin and Blumberg). A fraction of a percent of the American population hold a Harvard degree, but a massive percentage of Harvard students come from a family that already has one. People who possess these degrees become incredibly successful and obscenely wealthy; colleges such as Harvard continue to give wealthy legacy students a massive leg up in applying, furthering generational wealth and strangling social mobility.

Not only do colleges give preference to wealthy legacy students, the rich also donate pay amounts of money to colleges so they accept their children. "Federal prosecutors have brought charges against 50 people in a sweeping college cheating scandal in which wealthy parents allegedly paid a collective \$25 million to help their children get into top colleges and universities, including Yale, Stanford and USC" (Martin and Blumberg). It is known that education ultimately paves the path to success, but only the rich are able to practically bribe colleges to accept their children. When they can ensure their children attend these prestigious institutions by using their financial resources to influence the admissions process, they are furthering the lack of social mobility, and are taking away opportunities from those who truly deserve them.

This gap in education is not the only way that the rich continue to keep themselves and their children opulent, but it is one of the most obvious ones. Even though those 50 were caught, there are thousands who are not. The rich have completely sidestepped the idea of equal opportunity. They've shaped the economy to be reliant on education, and then they made a proper education available to only themselves. This unending cycle has cemented the rich and powerful in their positions, and holds everyone else down.

This inequality of opportunity and outcomes lead to utterly cataclysmic effects. Not only does this inequality take away from the American dream, but it actually leads to death. A lack of healthcare is an issue many people face every day. "The impoverished members of society are subject to disproportionate occurrence rates of certain kinds of illnesses. Access to quality health care and healthy food is sometimes limited or unavailable for poor individuals" (Birdsong). When people don't have access to vital healthcare, then they become more sick, and their illnesses are more likely to be fatal. Especially in a society that does not guarantee healthcare to anyone, the cycle of inequality is even more disastrous for those in poor families. Not only are they stuck poor, they become more likely to sicken and die.

America lacks social mobility. We have always said that if you work hard enough and have a spectacular idea, anyone can become a billionaire. But that simply is not true. American culture is one of Feudal Europe; people's class and life is decided by the class that they are born into. We may say that we have a culture that incentivizes and rewards difficult work, but, in actuality, it is characterized by one class strangling the other in order to stay in power. This leads to detrimental consequences, including, but not limited to a higher risk of death due to disease. This issue is deeply ingrained in our society and our culture, and likely will not be fixed without radical change over a long period. Instead, we are now stuck with a class system that perpetuates itself infinitely, ultimately killing the 99%.

American culture idolizes the idea of hard work and opportunity, but, in actuality, only exacerbates the struggle between social classes, and the top income earners will do anything that they can to keep the rest of civilized society at the bottom. The upper classes are born in the hamptons and die in there, too. The poor, on the other hand, tend to live their entire lives in the slums. Through education gaps, among other things, the rich are able to ensure that their children will remain wealthy, while the children of the poor will stay that way. This has led to the decline of social mobility, and the erosion of the principles of our nation. Opportunity is dead, and it was killed by those who continue to champion it. Our culture acts as if social mobility is the backbone of our society, but our society is spineless in more ways than one.

DULIN , KINZEY**Kinzey Dulin**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Platte County High School, Platte City, MO

Educator: Derek Yost

Category: Poetry

Encounters with Celestials and Other Tuesday Commonalities

An angel came to me and said,
“Please may I rest for a bit?
It’s tiring up there.”
I don’t know much else, but:
When an angel knocks you answer.

I asked them,
Are you sure this is the place?
The place in question:
the humble abode that is
the mind of a worldly dweller.
There are many demons here.

They have overstayed their welcome.
Kept their spaces in the
nooks and crannies (lodged).

Tiny spaces in my rapidly beating heart filled
by people like you.
Souls substitute for blood.
The result of codependence.
Remnants of a love turned sour.

My incubus,
you left your demons here.
Yet you still carry the anger
disguised as fulfillment.
I sent a letter.
It came back with no return address.

Are we the results of circumstance?
Or the inorganic forcing together of humanity
that is perceived as some version of love?
This is no place for the ethereal.

Is an angel really falling
if it only creeps towards the edge of heaven
to glimpse the depths of hell?
Who's to say if they were pushed
or if they jumped.

The desire to be a light is equally as alluring

as the proclivity to see what lurks in the dark.
From experience, I can tell you,
there is no need to know the things that will only hurt.

You cannot fix those who use
their brokenness as a weapon.
You will only cut yourself on the shards.
Consider it the sacrifice for loving someone else.
What a false assumption.

Jesus comes at weird times.
He stood on my porch in the rain.
And asked for a place to dry off.
I don't know much else, but:
when the metaphysical body of faith knocks, you answer.

He said to me,
"You know, you can leave behind what isn't yours to carry.
You are the outcome of many people's hurt.
Their pain, their anger.

In the center, the binding force:
the unprocessed feelings that come
with forgetting your humanness.
Remember it."

So much bottled up
that couldn't possibly be perceived.
When pouring from your own
cracked, slowly dwindling cup,
not even the slightest recognition that
what drips out is the sludge of pain
that comes from trying to heal the wounds of others.
You haven't taken the time to heal yourself.

Why is it so hard to let the light in?
You would think it would be a welcome force,
away from
the consistent blackness of the dark.

Magnetized emotions.
The breaking of a dam.
Scarred tissue reopens.
Healing is painful.

Searing, bright displays of vulnerability.
I was never the type to share.

Sharp line and edges,
this is what the daylight brings.
Cauterize the oozing thoughts.
Let it burn.

Heal then let it go.

EASTEP, DARCY**Darcy Eastep**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Breaking the Cycle

They say the words that truly break you are the ones that get caught in your throat. In this instance, I suppose the circumstances never broke my childhood innocence, but am I truly insensible or was the transparency of their actions too blurred through their words for me to grasp the actual conditions behind “I only did those things because I was sad” or “cut me some slack”. Ruining childhood innocence is such an ambiguous concept. If coherence is destroying innocence, what characterization do parental figures blaming their mental, physical, and emotional abuse on being “sad” fall into? Do parents truly think abandoning their obligation as a parent rather than coming to terms with their own illness protects their children’s flawless perspective of the world? I wasn’t too young to comprehend. Hiding the truth didn’t leave me oblivious, it left me confused. I was confused because I saw his actions, I saw the cameras, I found the drugs, I felt his hands. And it was because he was sad? Maybe it was out of shame, but I would’ve rather seen him get help while present in my life and break the cycle than flee his family with the opportunity to continue feeling comfort in temporary pain relief. This limitation of honesty has left everlasting scars on my perception of childhood, regardless of the pain I know endure. What disturbs me now is, will I develop these detrimental traits and lack of culpability? With never being taught how to cope, how to accept faults, how to engage in healthy resolutions, will I continue this generational pattern of trauma?

I must admit, for the abundance of my childhood, I never grasped that my parents were flawed human beings, as most children don’t. In my perception, they were superheroes with unlimited capabilities. I truly admired their traits. While I often was awakened to muffled voices, seized with unease, as well as the occasional strike of unidentifiable objects, all moms and dads argue every so often, right? These circumstances were normalized in my childhood, therefore the idea of routine disputes was never perpetually concerning to me. It wasn’t until December of my third grade year that I realized my parents weren’t the painted picture I had fabricated them to be.

As the years progressed, what began as the unintentional encounterment of a marriage dispute quickly escalated. I often ponder back on the situation and wonder why it took so long for me to fully grasp that my dad was the antagonist. One late evening, my mom, sister, and I arrived at our house to find my dad painting my bedroom, the fumes of paint lingering throughout the first floor. The culprit of this night’s argument is still unknown, but my vivid remembrance began at the shrill of my mom’s voice frantically pleading, “Call 911. Call 911”. I barreled my way to the stairs to find my dad over my mom, pinning her against the stairs as though he found power in his traumatizing domination. As fearful as I was, I couldn’t bear making my way to the home phone. “No no no. He is just mad. It’s okay he will stop.” I couldn’t fully comprehend his actions, all I knew is that they induced fear. However, reacting in such a manner was normalized in my life. The shouting, the tears, the holes in the walls concealed with family photos, it was all I had ever known. Therefore, while I feel immense guilt for having hope in my fathers behavior, my perception of how to treat the ones you love was altered through his behavior during my childhood. Now, the question that lives rent-free in my head is, will I adapt to managing my emotions in a similar manner? Will I become the mirror of my biggest fears?

As I was exposed to external situations that assisted in my realization of what is morally incorrect, I began to communicate these concerns with my father. There was one instance in which my father was blatantly disrespecting my mother despite her absence in the situation. I remember shouting, “I will not let you talk about my mom like that”. There was instantaneous regret. The car came to an alarming halt, launching my head into the headrest. Immediately, my dad jumped out of his seat and opened the backseat door. He grabbed my neck, raised my eyes parallel to his, and hissed through his teeth, “don’t you ever disobey like that again”. I resisted the urge to cry and swallowed my distress. But it didn’t end there. I became smarter. I found the drugs concealed under my sister’s

own bed and my own bathroom. Imagine stowing away your possession of drugs in your own children's areas. Gradually, the immense respect I had for this man disintegrated. After these encounters, my own house became a place of inescapable vulnerability.

Even after the separation of my parents. I now realize the unhealthy level of manipulation I endured. While I desired for my father to get the help he desperately was in need of, he was continuously hurting me in the process. I remember communicating the possibility of seeing him less often, not because I didn't love him, but because it was causing me mental and emotional distress. Lodging at a casino hotel every other weekend with unfamiliar faces coming in and out of our room was not necessarily the ideal conditions or consistency I was in need of. After addressing this concern, my father responded, word by word, with "You guys are the only thing I have to live for. If you don't keep seeing me, I will kill myself". This singular phrase drained me of my own identity for months. I tried scrubbing these heavy words off my skin, but I have recently realized that they are permanently tattooed into my mind. Having to remain silent in the fear that my own father may take his own life if I disobey his wants was draining. I felt as a piece of property he simply wanted to recover, not nurture.

How are children expected to recover from the substantial toll that manipulative parents bring onto them? From direct experience, restricting the truth doesn't preserve the innocence of the child. Children eventually capture these unhealthy tendencies, therefore your contradicting words simply allow gaps in the child's ability to fully grasp what their parent is capable of. Yes, I will always have these fears of the unknown, what I could become of my father, and if my reflection will one day fade into him. I want to be the cycle breaker. I will stand in the face of these generational behaviors and assert, "this ends with me". My father may not have started it, but I will be brave enough to end it.

ENZ, CATALINA**Catalina Enz**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Revenge forgiveness blended genre essay

Catalina Enz

Lovera

Honors English 2

December 4 2021

The Taste Of Revenge

August 15th 2018, the day before the first day of 7th grade. Excitement had rushed all over me, while I was getting my backpack ready, with all 7 pencils (one for each class), colorful notebooks, and vibrant sticky notes. The day was beautiful, lively colored leaves, blooming flowers, and the sky was as blue as the ocean's surface. There was a slight cool breeze cooling off the hot and humid weather of Missouri. Everything was going as planned. 7th grade was going to be the best year yet. The first day of school was going to be unforgettable.

I lit a candle and began preparing lunch for the following day. The cool, fresh smell of it reminded me of prior that week at the mall,

"Mom, look at this shirt. I love the color, it's going to go so well with my leggings" I exclaimed, jumping around on my feet, with a smile that extended to both ends of my face.

"It looks so good on you! Let's get it for the first day of school!" She said, smiling at my happiness, putting her arm on my shoulder.

Thinking back on that perfect shirt, made me giggle, smirking my eyes closed. I ran upstairs to lay down the new outfit. Everything was organized perfectly, even the socks I was planning on wearing. Everything had to match up in place.

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of the alarm. It was probably one of the only days where I appreciated the loud, annoying buzzing of it, like mosquitos swarming around. I quickly jumped out of bed and dashed to the bathroom to get ready. When suddenly, to my surprise, out of anything that could have possibly gone wrong, my perfect outfit was destroyed. The clothes were full of grass, all muddy, full of leaves and mildly damp. My heart raced a million beats per minute, pounding on my chest, my nostrils flared as I looked at my clothes. My sister had somehow used my clothes and ruined them. I looked in complete incredulity, how could she have done this to me?

"I hate her. I hate her. I hate her." I thought to myself, with my face red, and eyes wide open.

Anger rushed through my veins as a kettle steaming,

"I am going to kill her. I am going to get all of her clothes and burn them down. I'm going to throw them out of the window, and destroy them. I'm going to leave her with nothing to wear." I said to myself vengefully, with my eyebrows scrunched together, my lips tightened, my jaw tense, clutching my fists.

However, these feelings seemed out of place for me. But at the time the only priority was to make her be in the same situation I was in. According to *Revenge* by Jim Thornton, the "desire to seek revenge is as natural to human beings as grief, happiness, fear, and hunger. The instinct for it has been crafted by natural selection because of the critical problems it solved as our species was evolving" (Thornton 3) *Revenge* is a "natural" set emotion. If someone hurts one, then the instinct is to cause the same pain for the other person. It makes people feel satisfied, and confident that the person that caused harm feels the same way they made them feel. It also relieves the pain made, knowing the person is in the same situation the victim was. It is an equal and opposite reaction that balances out the consequence of an event. My defense mechanism was to get strong feelings of anger towards my sister, and was something that came out of animal instinct. At the moment, I couldn't properly think things through, naturally I needed to defend myself.

Indeed, revenge is something that is built in humans. It is a defense mechanism. Also particularly, wanting to seek revenge overpowers clear consciousness, and anger and frustration takes over one's mind and decisions.

Impulsiveness becomes increasingly high with these emotions revolving around.

Likewise, my consciousness blurred out, I couldn't think of anything, not even what my backup shirt was going to be. All I wanted to do was get her back. I rushed into her bedroom and grabbed her planned outfit and hurried to the bathroom. I soaked all her clothes in water in the sink, overjoyed. Caught up in the satisfaction, I decided it was best to smother toothpaste all over her shirt, as it is difficult to get out. To top it all off, I purposely wrote a note saying "your welcome" with a smiley face, and hung the masterpiece inside her closet.

Creeping outside the bedroom, it felt so good to know that now she couldn't wear her shirt, "If I can't wear it, neither can you" I said to myself triumphantly standing over the edge of the sink, slightly chuckling with my shoulders back, standing up tall.

Hopping onto the bus, I had the biggest smile I could possibly have. Although I didn't have my outfit I was planning on wearing, getting my sister back paid off the irritation of having to wear my plain black justice shirt from a couple years ago.

As school went by, the day began to feel gloomier, big clouds were forming, and the day had started to turn grey, slightly drizzling. There was something unsettling in the air surrounding me, as if it was pushing towards me, creating pressure and discomfort.

I tried to convince myself that what I did was right.

"She did the same thing to you, she ruined the perfect shirt" I thought, taking a deep breath, lying to myself I was confident of this statement.

It seemed that convincing myself did not patch up the guilt that I felt, the disappointment I had, and the sadness I felt for causing my sister pain. After all she was only a child, a 7 year old girl. The image of her waking up, and crying because her outfit was ruined kept replaying in my mind, like a nonstop commercial. Besides I didn't truly know if it was truly her fault. I didn't truly know if she did it on purpose. I didn't truly know her side of the story.

I was supposed to be the big sister she looked up to. I was supposed to be the big sister she could trust. I was supposed to be the big sister that protected her. But I wasn't. I was the big sister who ruined her shirt. I was the big sister who acted childish. I was the big sister who looked for her own satisfaction.

Illustrated in Jim Thornton's article "Payback can make you feel worse" In the same text, a 2008 study in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, found that "People given the chance to payback think it will make them feel good, but actually most feel bad afterward" (Thornton 8) Revenge seems like an easy process, its just giving back what someone originally gave you. For instance, an eye for an eye process. However, it always comes back to bite you. Once clear emotions come back into play, there is a feeling of disappointment within one, and empathy towards the other person. Once my clear consciousness acted again, I had the chance to reflect on the situation. Recognizing that my sister was innocent, and wouldn't have done it on purpose made me regret the actions I took in response. Although she ruined my piece of excitement for the day, I felt absolutely terrible for taking it away from her too.

The school day was awful. My mind had been wrapped around the morning situation. I just wanted to go home and cry.

As I walked home from school, droopy, looking at the floor, I saw my sister sitting in the corner of the room, eating a snack. She noticed me. However, she didn't make eye contact. A small droplet of water falls down her cheek, leaving a trail behind.

I walked towards her, threatening my tears from falling down,

"Julia, I am really sorry, I should have never ruined your shirt. I should have never ruined your outfit. I am truly, truly sor-"

Without letting me finish, she bolted upstairs. Not a word escaped her mouth. Leaving me sitting alone, looking at nothingness, surrounded by my thoughts. My tears ran down my face like a river escaping a dam. I didn't know what to do.

Forgiving someone isn't always easy, in *An Unnatural Act* by Philip Yancy, it argues "Forgiveness is no sweet, platonic ideal to be dispensed to the world like perfume sprayed from a fragrance bottle, it is archingly difficult"(Yancy 12) Forgiving someone is "difficult." It's something that humans aren't designed to do. It's a skill that is not "dispensed," and ready to "spray" anywhere one wants to. Being harmed by someone changes one's view over them, making it difficult to put the past truly back in the past, and move on. My sister had a hard time forgiving me quickly, because I had truly hurt her. And although I communicated my sorrow and regret to her, it wouldn't have taken away the pain that caused her in the beginning. As Yancy illustrates, it's not an easy process, especially if it causes major pain. Time is crucial in the process. Time allows people to think things over, and truly think about what they want the relationship to continue like. In order to forgive it is crucial for healing to occur. Once a person has gone past the pain from another person, is when they can truly empathize with the person who hurt them. In order for my sister to come in terms with me, she had to get past the fact I ruined her shirt. She had to take time to think things through and heal from the situation which affected her deeply.

After taking a couple hours she finally reached out to me in my room,

“Catalina, what you did really hurt me. Me and my friend Jessica were going to go matching, and I had to wear another shirt instead. But, I am also sorry that I ruined your shirt. I didn't mean to do it on purpose. I'm sorry.” She explained, looking down at her feet, with her eyebrows down, crossing her arms and crouching down.

“I forgive you Julia. I'm sorry too” I said. As I wrapped my arms around her, giving her a big, warm hug.

Forgiveness is the key in relationships. Explained in Phillip Yancy's article, “Forgiveness breaks the cycle of blame in a relationship. Forgiveness loosens the stranglehold of guilt in individuals” (Yancy 13) There will still be pain from the events that happen, however forgiveness drives a step closer to putting it in the past and moving on. It's easier to close the gap and better the relationship between individuals. My sister and I were able to move past this event which hurt us both deeply, by accepting the situation, forgiving each other, and by our guilt being diminished, we were able to continue our relationship in peace, and happiness.

In the end, Revenge is a dead end. Though in reality, revenge is a natural act. There is no way one can truly acquire the pleasure of getting things “even.” Revenge causes actions to be made with no consciousness. And these feelings take control over any other logical thinking in the brain. Resulting in acting out of anger, frustration, and sadness.

Revenge drives people to be unable to think of the other person, nor let sympathy feelings shine through. The cycle of revenge is an easy thing to get stuck in. However, the only way to overcome it is with the power of forgiveness.

The act of putting all fair and unfairness behind, and moving on. In order to live better in a relationship, community, and society forgiveness is key. There really is no such thing as sweet revenge, there is always bitterness in the end.

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FENG, ERICA**Erica Feng**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Lawrence Free State High School, Lawrence, KS

Educator: Jeff Morrison

Category: Flash Fiction

Sandstone

Sand was Sophie's archnemesis. She hated the tiny gritty bits of quartz and cliff and weathered bone, always finding their way into her shoes and bags and food. She hated the way sand slightly gave way when she stepped on it, hated how the sand on the beach was as cold as ice during the night and as hot as fire during the day.

That was why it was such a pleasant surprise when Sophie's parents announced that they were moving to the middle of nowhere, somewhere on the border between Colorado and Nebraska. She had always dreamed of tall mountains that she could ski down, the chill biting at her nose and cheeks, of plains that rolled as flat as the eye could see, of road trips and of *no sand*. For her, it seemed like she was moving to a heaven. When she told her grandfather this, he simply chuckled and messed up her hair.

Finally, their things were packed up, they had moved across the country, and the sand was gone. There was no more sand to find its way under her fingernails. For once in her house, it was quiet. There was no crunch of broken shell under her shoes, and she could hear the kettle whistle, and she could hear her footsteps against the floor rather than only hearing the sound of the ocean pulling and pushing, and it was so wonderfully silent.

Then, it wasn't so wonderful. She missed her friends who would complain about the weather when it turned grey and dreary. At nights, she lay wide awake, unable to sleep without the thrum of angry waves crashing against the beach, reaching high for the moon before inevitably crashing down, because it wasn't the same *thinking* about angry fists of water punching the soft sand when she wasn't there to *hear* the epic fight that would never cease. And there was something just *wrong* about being able to see the entirety of the concrete sidewalk underneath her feet, about seeing wooden porches that had welcome mats that were actually dirty and not sun-bleached.

Perhaps that was the reason she kept seashells in her room, a conch that she would put up to her ear as a constant reminder that the battle was forever ongoing, even if she wasn't there to witness it every night. Perhaps that was the reason she bought that piece of sandstone from the souvenir shop, absentmindedly reaching for it every time she was working, because things weren't the same without the feeling of grit underneath her fingers.

Sophie hated sand, that was a fact. She would proudly exclaim that to each and every person who asked her. What she wouldn't explain, though, was how sand would get into her bag without being anywhere near the beach. After all, sand was Sophie's archnemesis.

FRONT, OWEN**Owen Front**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Andy Chen

Category: Poetry

Lies*Lies*

Lies.
Good Lies
Bad Lies
Half Lies
Whole Lies
Small Lies
Big Lies
White Lies
Bright Lies
Dark Lies
Black Lies
Bald-faced Lies
Hairy Lies
My Lies
Your Lies
Our Lies
Their Lies
Earth-shattering Lies.

Lies

Landing like a snowflake

Each one

Different

Intricate

Painfully cold

Insignificant alone,

But together:

A blizzard

Snow piling up

Around you

Over your head

The frost

Nipping at your fingers

Little taps and tingles

That slowly spread

Like an inkblot on paper

Till the white

Turns to black

And you can't breathe

And all you can see is

Lies.

Lies.

Lies.

GLOR, KAIGEN**Kaigen Glor**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Marilyn Yung

Category: Poetry

writing

Ode to Death

The way you surprise us
The way you surprise others
The way you destroy
The way you heal
You truly are a confusing nature
You bring light upon dark times
The way we celebrate the old life
And anticipate the new
You're a beautiful reality
That not many want to live
You bring fear to most
Helping them realize
How alive they really are
The way you bring tears
And reincarnate memories into our minds
You're always there
Awaiting your turn
But sometimes you get too anxious
And rush the process of life
Coming onto the scene a little too soon
Most do not welcome you to their doorstep
Others invite you in without hesitation
Death
You truly are a confusing nature

Cold Water

I go swimming through the deep pools
Of my mind,
Clawing through them.
Trying to get back to the surface is like
Wading through the crashing waves of an ocean,
An ocean empty of water.
The only water in the ocean is tears,
Colder than ice.
The pools are an empty void
Of only your thoughts
And so you take a dive,
But soon learn you can't swim

In a pool without water.
And as you drown in your thoughts,
The little bit of cold water in the ocean
Comes out as tears

Silence

Silence
When there is no sound
But, there really is sound
Even in the silence
Even when you think it's gone completely silent
There are still sounds roaming about
Sounds so high pitched that we can't possibly hear them
Sounds rushing through our mind, our thoughts,
Sounds that you may even ignore and not realize,
Causing silence in your ears
Silence of those who have been lost
And of those yet to be found
Silence can be pleasant,
While also hesitant
Maybe silence, is not always so silent after all

The Future Is A Broken Trophy (Inspired by Metaphor Dice)

The future is a broken trophy
Not promised but expected
Not guaranteed but accepted
Not earned but given
We take it all for granted
Now, later, tomorrow
We act as if we'll see day after day
Like the future is always around the corner
The future is a broken trophy
Like an award won for nothing
We didn't do anything to win it
Some are proud to have gotten this award
While others feel as if it's not deserved
But even now and then
Trophies tend to break
Bringing pain and sorrow
Because trophies aren't meant to last forever
We forget about them
Throw them in the attic in a box labeled "*Stuff*"
We don't care for them as we once did
When we felt so accomplished for getting that trophy
The future is a broken trophy
Because the real trophy is at the end of the day
When you've accomplished the day
Seized every moment
Been all that you could be for that day
And in the future
In the future you will receive more trophies
Yesterday is history
Tomorrow is a mystery

But today is a gift
That is why it is called the present

GREEN, NATHANIEL**Nathaniel Green**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

The Elusive Nature of Evil

The Elusive Nature of Evil

Since World War II, humanity has been increasingly consumed by the desire to fully explain and understand the concept of evil, incited by the atrocities committed throughout the Holocaust and Cold War, and perhaps motivated by the attribution of genocide and terrorist attacks to the concept of evil by journalists and politicians attempting to respond to the horrors of the century. Since, philosophers have discussed a myriad of proposed questions and answers relating to the nature of evil: it's an open question in philosophical debates if there is even a universal, transcendent definition of evil that exists, or whether one's definition of evil is determined by one's social or cultural background. Nevertheless, with so many questions, a shocking few have had satisfactory answers developed for them. However, this is not to say that evil is unknowable or impossible to define and analyze to some extent; on the contrary, analyzing and categorizing evil can help prevent evil from happening in the future, in that it makes it easier to recognize the many forms evil can take. I propose that while some traits about the nature of evil can be definitively identified, and some logical theories explaining the mysteries of evil developed, it is ultimately not possible for humans to definitively and completely explain the nature of evil from the senses alone; there is simply at a point no information, clear definitions, or unbiased position to deduce from.

Evil is most often defined as the absence of good, and most often used in two different contexts: broadly, to describe any bad state of affairs, and more narrowly to describe something that is considered to be profoundly wicked or harmful, where words such as "unpleasant" and "wrong" seem to fall short. The broad definition is also typically divided into two major categories in philosophical discussion, that of moral evil, which is caused by the intentional evil desires and choices of human beings, and natural evil, which refers to natural disasters such as floods and hurricanes. As a result of this, moral responsibility can be assigned to individuals in the case of moral evil, but not natural evil, as moral evil is committed when an individual chooses to do something immoral of their own free will, but natural evil cannot be assigned to an individual. In "When Evil is Cool", Roger Shattuck defines two more categories of evil: Radical Evil, which "applies to immoral behavior so pervasive in a person or a society that scruples and constraints have been utterly abandoned", and Metaphysical Evil, "an attitude of assent and approval towards moral and radical evil, as evidence of superior human will and power" (Shattuck 76). Both of these are perhaps subcategories of moral evil, as they each require a conscious effort and choice on the part of a person's will, but they are singled out because of the shared trait of not recognizing evil as evil. It is in these that a common trait of evil is revealed: evil is typically self-deluding for the evildoer, perpetuating itself by twisting perceptions of right and wrong. It is rare to find a villain either in fiction or history that did not believe themselves to be justified somehow in what they did, and when evil does appear without any sort of justification or rebuttal from the evildoer, it prompts us to search deeper for what the root of that evil is, not satisfied in the idea that a human could fully recognize their evil and refuse to change their ways. This is necessary for evil to perpetuate itself as, if successful, it is a way to escape the conscience through self-deception, and therefore prevent the conscious from ending evil behavior. As a result we are able to understand and develop a reasonably complete analysis of the motivations of a character who does not admit their evil, but struggle to do so in the case of one who does.

However, while Shattuck's examples can be defined as moral evil due to the influence of free will, what about the case in which a person mistakenly holds the honest belief that evil doesn't exist? Various philosophies relating to this concept have been presented, such as Alexander Pope's assertion that evil only appears evil due to the limited perspective of humans, and is actually good from a divine perspective, or Nietzsche's view that contemplating the concepts of good and evil at all is pointless and destructive. Such philosophies are the target of Voltaire's satire *Candide*, in which he mocks the idea that evil could not exist, or even exists at the minimum amount possible. Throughout the novel, the optimistic Candide and philosopher Pangloss suffer many evils, some moral, and some natural, none of which serve any apparent good. Pangloss repeatedly tries to find some sort of justification, but his

reasoning is absurd, mocking the thought of Leibniz, that this world is the best possible world God could have created, and that everything happens for a reason, part of a divine plan. “Observe: noses were made to support spectacles, hence we have spectacles [...] My Lord has a fine castle, for the greatest Baron in the province should have the finest house [...] consequently, those who say everything is well are muttering mere stupidities; they should say everything is for the best.” (Voltaire 2). Once practiced in the real world, Pangloss’ philosophical speculation proves to not only be useless but outright destructive, resulting itself in further evils, such as when he prevents Candide from saving a drowning man by “proving that the bay of Lisbon had been formed expressly for this Anabaptist to drown in (Voltaire 9). While Candide lies under rubble after an earthquake in Lisbon, Pangloss neglects to help him for the sake of trying to prove the cause of the earthquake. In creating his satire, Voltaire demonstrates that such ideas are not only incorrect but furthermore by refusing to acknowledge the widespread nature of evil can result in further harm, not good. Is Pangloss morally responsible for the death of the Anabaptist? When finally confronted with the evidence that all isn’t for the best, can only defend himself by stating “after all I am a philosopher, and it would not become me to retract since Leibniz cannot possibly be wrong, and besides pre-established harmony is the finest notion in the world.” (Voltaire 70), essentially a plain statement from Voltaire that philosophers refuse to change their theories in light of any evidence around them, preaching them only through pure stubbornness. In adapting a position of universal optimism, one falls into the trap of moral lethargy, as all evil that exists is instantly excused. Therefore, in such cases where individuals have the full knowledge and exposure to the evils of the world, yet still continue to hold to beliefs that evil is not truly evil, and therefore should not be interfered with, are morally responsible for any negative consequences of their beliefs on account of actively choosing them in light of the evidence of evil itself. However, while Voltaire’s arguments can help support the extent to which evil is present in the world, *Candide* still doesn’t offer an explanation of why evil fills the planet, as by the end of the novel, Pangloss’ philosophies are rejected for the joy and satisfaction brought in practical work, and in simply not contemplating the matter at all. To continue the discussion we must turn to an analysis of the problem of evil and the concept of theodicy.

Voltaire addresses what is known as The Problem of Evil throughout *Candide*, another question essential to the analysis of the nature of evil which in short is the appearance of a logical contradiction between the existence of an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God with the presence of evil in the world. *Candide* is somewhat inconclusive in response to this, but other writers and philosophers have attempted to resolve this problem through a theodicy, reconciling evil with the omnipotent nature of God. One such theodicy is the epic poem *Paradise Lost* by John Milton. He primarily forms a free will theodicy, which argues that God allows moral evil because it is necessary for beings to have free will. Additionally Milton asserts that free will is a gift, the existence of which prevents God from being a tyrant and gives actual meaning to the decisions people make in their lives. When speaking to the Son, God the Father discusses the fallen angels: “Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell. / Not free, what proof could they have giv’n sincere / of true allegiance, constant faith or love, / where only what they needs must do, appeared, / not what they would? What praise could they receive?” (Milton 3.102-106). Essentially, no moral responsibility can exist without free will, and although this means no one could be blameworthy, no one could be praiseworthy either. In addition to this no real relationships could exist between God and humans or heavenly entities, as they would be serving necessity rather than actively choosing to be a part of the relationship. Therefore, when God creates humans on Earth, he does not completely shield them from the influence of Satan and prevent sin from entering the world, because to prevent any opportunity for the choice between moral and immoral action would be interfering with that free will and invalidating the moral responsibility of the conclusion. *Paradise Lost* is also secondarily a *felix culpa* theodicy, demonstrating that God responds to evil once present in the world by using it to create greater goods, which would not have been possible otherwise. This is seen in multiple instances throughout the text, with the ultimate one being the prophecy of Jesus’ arrival on Earth which God and Michael give to Adam in the garden, prompting him to remark: “O goodness infinite, goodness immense! / 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! Full of doubt I stand, / whether I should repent now of sin / By me done and occasioned, or rejoice / Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring,” (Milton 12.469-476). As a result of evil entering the world, God responds by creating the greater goods of salvation for humanity and the recreation of Earth as a paradise happier than Eden. In this way Milton addresses the issue of moral evil, but *Paradise Lost* has been criticized for focusing less on the issue of natural evil, which also requires an analysis for a theodicy to be complete. The central question is of course, is natural evil necessary in any capacity similar to moral evil being necessary to free will, and if not then how could God be entirely good? Analyzing natural evil in *Paradise Lost* and The Book of Job from the Bible reveals that unlike moral evil, it has no relation to justice. In *Paradise Lost* as well as The Book of Genesis, natural evil comes into existence as a result of the fallen state of the world after sin enters it, with God cursing the ground that Adam and Eve must now toil on, and *Paradise Lost* describing the movement of celestial bodies to now create seasons of painful heat and cold. The article “Leibniz and Job” by Leszek Kolakowski compares the response of the

philosopher Leibniz to natural evil with how it is shown in the Book of Job itself. Kolakowski notes: “Leibniz inferred from these that God must have created the best world that is logically conceivable, and that this is the world we inhabit; any other world would be worse. Voltaire’s famous derision of this idea is too easy. Leibniz was well aware of the horrors of life. Nevertheless, belief in the supreme goodness of creation is irresistible.” (Kolakowski 18). Leibniz’s attempt to logically derive the world as holding the minimum amount of evil possible falls short when faced with a single example of evil that does not produce a necessary equal or greater good as a result from it, and as Voltaire observed, a look at human history provides numerous examples of exactly that. This is similar to another which was held by many before the 20th century: for many years it was generally thought that bad things happened to people only when they did evil, as divine retribution for their actions. However, Kolakowski points out that the Book of Job argues against this: “We all know that pain and catastrophes are [...] distributed at random and cannot be interpreted in terms of merits and misdeeds, rewards and punishments. Job knew this as well. Job does not try to construct a theodicy. He has been a just man all his life, and God knows that his misery is not a retribution for his crimes. He suffers for no reason, but he is able to say: “Though he slay me, yet I will trust in him” (Kolakowski 20-21). Kolakowski goes on to state this as evidence that the Christian God can support the wicked and torment the just according to His whim, suggesting that perhaps this means no theodicy was ever possible or needed due to the assumption that God is perfectly just being untrue. However, Kolakowski’s assertion that this closes the door for theodicy is not entirely true, as some aspects can still be applied. Some concepts of the *felix culpa* theodicy can be applied to some natural evil, with the idea in Christian theology that suffering can help build faith in God by forcing humans to acknowledge a lack of control over the world and the need to rely on and trust in God. Therefore this can result in a greater good by opposing pride which might influence a person to do evil, and encouraging faith in God which leads to salvation. But still, ultimately anyone composing a theodicy one will hit the issue of the natural evil with no positive effects, which seems to stump Leibniz and many other philosophers. Suffering under natural evil comes with no promise of more good to make up for it in the future, such as all the lives that are taken in natural disasters within an instant. At a certain point one must acknowledge that there is some evil that has no logical explanation, or ability to be assigned as the fault of some individual, but in the current state of the world, there is no clear limit on the amount of evil that for whatever reason is allowed to exist in the world. Perhaps it is a condition of the state that the Earth is under as a result of sin entering the world such as is seen with Adam and Eve, such as the aspects of death and disease, perhaps it is a necessity of God allowing Satan free will to afflict mankind such as is seen in the Book of Job, perhaps intervention in the evil in the world is not a necessary attribute of a good God, or perhaps every detail of the nature of evil is simply impossible to deduce. Yet still, as novels and observation of the world demonstrate, evil does exist to an extent beyond what Leibniz gave it credit for, and even if evil may have some good effects, that does not make evil good. Even without complete explanation, the presence of evil cannot be dismissed but must be responded to with a human attempt to prevent them as much as possible.

Throughout this essay I have provided my position on various aspects of the nature of evil, from categorization into moral and natural evil, to traits such as perpetuating itself by deceiving the evildoer into being unable to recognize it, that beliefs leave a person morally responsible, even if theoretically objectively incorrect and honestly held, because generally everyone has the ability to view and awareness of the full extent of evil in the world. However, I admit there are still some areas where I fail to form a satisfactory conclusion about evil, possibly due to lack of study or experience, or possibly due to the nature of the questions themselves. In the short story “Ethan Brand” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the titular character returns to a New England village after many years’ absence, declaring that he had found what he set out to seek: the Unpardonable Sin. However, he discovers that the Unpardonable Sin lies in seeking the knowledge of what the Unpardonable sin is itself: intellectual pride and the vaulting ambition within undertaking the search in the first place is considered to be the sin that God’s love cannot wash away, in that it is the separation of one’s head from one’s heart and humanity. While detaching oneself from emotion and humanity may be narcissistic and self centered, and even lead to the harm of others, the search for a definition of a type of evil can hardly be blamed as the root cause of this, and furthermore the implication that searching for a more complete explanation of evil is in itself immoral does not only lack evidence from both secular sources and theological sources, but is harmful in that it discourages the study of the nature of evil in the first place, similar to Leibniz’s or Pope’s philosophies that evil is not evil, or is already as good as it can possibly be regardless of the actions of humans. The continued study of morality, the human conscience, and evil is one worth pursuing, not only for the sake of satisfying our own knowledge, but also for the collective human effort to lessen the presence of evil in the world, one of the few things that everyone can agree on. Therefore, even if there are some questions about evil that cannot be answered, and even if philosophy and the study of evil risks reaching incorrect conclusions and requires revision throughout time, it should still attempt to do so for the positive action that deeper knowledge of evil allows.

H, MADDIE**Maddie H**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

Literary and Heartbreak (A Piece on LGBTQ+ Youth and Coming Out)**Monsters Vs Men**

“I hate her”

I said

Venom dripping from my teeth like a monster

Foaming from the mouth at its prey

What I didn't know is that I really was a “monster”

Doomed to hell

Doomed to lifelong erasure

Doomed to have people try to destroy me

“Why”

He asked

Curiosity blooming from his branches

Blossoming from the heart of his trunk

What he very well knew was that he was the hero

Destined to win

Destined to conquer

Destined to be the destroyer

Literature Vs Heartbreak

I knew

From the first word

I could tell.

In literature

There is a point

Where the good and the bad

Are supposed to differ

Their are points where they are the same

Uncanny, even

This was mine and his

Because really,

While we both had “tragic” backstories

While we had similar faces

While we came from similar places

While we loved the same people

He would win

I would lose

We would fight

And there was no going back now

Dialogue

“She isn't accepting”

Understatement

“How so”

A mistake

“She is transphobic and homophobic and a misogynist”

Understatement

“What’s so wrong with that”

A mistake

Out of 1.6 million homeless youth

40 percent were like me

“Monsters” they’d say

An understatement

“A rough night”

He’d later say

An understatement and a *mistake*

Facts About Literature

Leonardo Di Vinci’s Journal cost \$30.8 million

Something I could never make

Because villains never make it out safe

Tolstoy’s wife copied *War and Peace* by hand

7 times

Something I’d never do because

Evil couldn’t love that way

A language dies every 14 days

My language of grunts and growls

Seemed unrecognisable by the hero

Maybe if he could hear

He would change his mind

There are only 4 words in the english language

That end in ‘dous’

Tremendous

Both my understatements and mistakes

Horrendous

The pain

Stupendous

The ignorance of I

And Hazardous

A touchy topic I have tried to ignore

Facts About Heartbreak

Breakups are like drug withdrawal

I was addicted to reading and writing and

Escapism

Heartbreak can lower your immune system

I’d rather be sick on love than healthy without

Your brain might think you're in physical pain

I know mine does, did

You might question your identity

I had to question the comfort I found in mine

Because of him

Your heart might actually break or cause heart attack symptoms

While my heartbreak didn’t

I couldn’t breath

My heart was being attacked

With the weaponous words thrown down my throat

From the fictional characters

That I wrote

Argumentative Writing

I read the script out of my head

I had practiced for this moment

But scripted out the rage of this “good guy”

Our war raged on

The middle man put his hands against our chests

I chanced a glance at the middle man
 His child face pleading for the childhood I too was denied
 A brutal punch to my chest screamed
 "Hate"
 So I stepped back a continued with our battle
 Of logic
 Of opinion
 Of feelings
 Of facts
 Fact: More than half of "evil" people never admit to their "evil"
 Opinion: This was worse than the hell he told me I was going to

La Vie En Rose

If the song had come on
 That I dreamed of so often
 Playing as I twirled in my wedding gown
 I would have experienced the following
 Inspiration and a mental breakdown (earlier)
 I could no longer picture
 What my wedding would look like
 Would I still dance
 Would I still smile
 Would he still walk me down the aisle
 Would he even come
 Now that he knew for sure
 Would he love my monster
 Would he love my monster's family
 Or would I even marry a monster
 Would I be alone
 Would a hero fall for me?

The Monsters Inside of Men

"I'm not hungry"
 I say
 I really am
 But I don't want to get back in the car
 To face what we just went through
 I was beaten and bruised
 My fur was caked with blood
 My horns broken
 My teeth are unable to bare...
 I am not a monster
 Something inside me says
 The hunger clears
 I cannot control this
 The bruises and cuts seal themselves
 As I work through it and regain myself
 The fur clears, the horns clear, the teeth dull,
 And I try to run
 But just as I thought I had it under control,
 Myself, I mean,
 I realize that I can no longer use escapism
 I did not bring books
 Portals into other worlds
 Although thinking back
 Would it have been enough?

My (Our) Hero (s)

I called her to save me.
 After being told so,

I thought that people would need to be saved from me
 But instead I waited at the curb
 Where I had been kicked (idiom)
 My glass heart fell to the floor (metaphor)
 As I realised the police were pulling up instead of my mother (the hard truth)
 My monster limbs began to grow back
 But on the inside rather than the out
 They stepped out of their vehicles (fear)
 I bent at their will and I ripped my own lungs out my chest
 And I couldn't breathe
 My eyes pleaded and my knees buckled and he couldn't see me

Monsters Never Win

My savior never came
 My father never sobered up
 There's never a moral to my stories
 I never won
 But he never won
 I never let him
 I'll never let him forget
 He'll never be free from the names and knives he threw at me
 I'll never admit
 That I'll never be the hero for admitting the things I thought
 I'd never admit
 I'll never forget
 "Monster"
 "Tragic"
 "Monsters"
 "Hate"
 "Evil"
 And I've been doomed never to win against him
 He'll never let me
 We'll "never" be accepted
 Until
 They stop seeing the monsters
 And they look at the literature etched into our skins
 The stories they will silence
 No youth should have to go through this
 So open your minds to the fiction, the nonfiction, the *stories and the truths*
 Your children communicate to you
 You are blessed to hear the monsters
 The growls and grunts you've refused to hear
Listen

HARRIS, JACQUELYN**Jacquelyn Harris**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Summer Nights...

Summer nights...

I always dreamed about my teenage summer nights, about exploring through night skies filled with stars and planes and the exciting breath of adventure.

July 2021: The moment.

I sat comfortably in the front seat next to my forever friend. She asked me to set up the queue of our music, but per usual, I tried to deny responsibility to avoid making any decisions. She turned on a mellow, but lively playlist to match the ambience of the intriguing balance between the relaxing night and our vibrant energy. One of our other friends sat in the middle section of the backseat. This created a triangle of our bodies looking out to what felt like an endless Kirkwood Road of people doing just as we were...living.

Mid-August 2021: The realization.

Last night three of my friends picked me up so we could hang out together. There was a moment when the wind rushed in and out of the car, bringing a sweet, but subtle smell of night breeze. Chill music was playing. The boy sitting next to me in the backseat and the girl driving were softly singing along, as I put my head back on the seat, closed my eyes, and breathed in the feeling: one that brought me peace and comfort.

It was still a bit warm, but there were soft, cool gusts of wind that came in and out of the open windows. We were craving Andy's Frozen Custard. As we drove towards this hot spot, the bright neon Andy's sign gleamed through the night sky and the laughter of those walking the streets blended with our explosive chuckling as we recapped what we all had done that day. Soon we were in a quite long drive-thru line, looking around for a car similar to ours, but instead filled with cute guys (I know what you're thinking, but we were teenage girls hoping for a true summer teenage experience). We actually did see many cars filled with teens doing the same thing as us, listening and belting out to our favorite songs by Kanye West and Rihanna while waiting for ice cream. After we got our frozen treats, we sat and ate them in the parking lot, so we could people watch--partially so the girl in the backseat could scout for boys, but also because my forever friend and I love observing people "in the wild," as we like to call it. As cars drove through the line, we saw teenagers that looked just like us and others who couldn't be more different. Boys with mullets. Teenage girls with their families. Ball caps and country music. Eager young couples. But in watching these strangers, I realized how exhilarating it is to see people just live their lives, as they observe the same of us, while we all wonder where they are going and who they will become. But then I quickly grew more interested in my friends again and was brought back to my serene reality of ice cream and good vibes. It was such a refreshing feeling, not to be thinking about anything else except for the incredibly smooth, creamy custard that contrasted to the sweet, crunchy Heath bar mixed in.

My mind wandered to my own personal problems, about a boy of all things... but then I looked over to my left to the singing and dancing boy beside me who noticed I lost my vibrancy. His smile instantly fixed my mood, and then I looked to my right to see the bright crescent shining through the window. I pointed at it, saying, "Look at the moon," and he leaned over me, all but a few inches from my face, to appreciate it too. He sat back, our knees touched, and we all continued to drive through the night.

After painfully listening to a few of the backseat country enthusiast's favorite songs, we moved back to smooth R&B and indie music. We drove around and through Kirkwood in circles looking for new observations of the same spaces from different angles and perspectives. Along the way, we also searched for someone familiar, a guy I soon learned the name and story of, because our driver had talked to him a few times and was interested in exploring something further (hint: we did not see him that night).

We drove under a train, which made me feel like I was in a true coming-of-age movie. The girl driving started to relate a little too much with an emotional song pertaining to relationships, and the boy and I turned to each other in response. Our eyes held the stare for a few seconds--that felt like hours-- until we broke out in laughter. Later during our night drive, he put his head on my shoulder and I rested my head on his. We stayed like this for a little while...

On the way back from ice cream and our night drive, we listened to "Starboy" by the Weeknd. We attempted to figure out the lyrics of the pre-chorus, but struggled to decipher the mystery words. The laughter that ensued inflated my lungs with joy, the kind that lingers in your smile for a few minutes before your mind and body settle back to calm contentment.

I never wanted this moment to end.

HEFFERNAN, MARGARET**Margaret Heffernan**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Gabriel The Archangel School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Ronshausen

Category: Poetry

The Script of Anxiety

Why do I freeze?
Why do I stutter?
When I try to speak clearly
I only mutter
I lower my head,
hidden by a curtain of hair
My lungs stop working-- I can't handle their stare
This ache inside me grows every day
When I open my mouth, ready with thoughts to convey:
shame fills me up;
silences my thoughts;
my head starts spinning;
my stomach turns to knots
Why am I silent?
Why am I mute?
Why do I feel like I need to reboot?
These feelings inside me are brewing self-doubt
My mind is telling me I need to speak out,
but only a small thought escapes from my lips,
"no, I'm fine," I say as I read from the script

HENSKE, WILLA**Willa Henske**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Poetry

the flight of a bumblebee

De Capo

adagio, she flies searching for some pollen elixir
in a lush sea of purple, white, and green,
diminuendo, he moors on the nearest sunflower,
the bud was fertile, suited for a queen,
and the apricity was lovely in the golden hour.
she must supply for her colony.

Interlude

fortissimo, a large bellow and gray fill the sky,
she flurries his wings with all his might,
for a bee cannot fly in rain,
not even if he tried all night.
sforzando, she accepts her journey was in vain
and hides immobile under a nearby plant sprout.

Coda

decrescendo, the calmed storm leaves crisp dew on the meadow,
suddenly, a majestic azure sparrow appears
he offers his wing and she struggles to get on
the sparrow takes flight, the murky sky clears
the bee hangs onto his velvet feathers, they ride towards the dawn
the sparrow arrives at the bee's hive and soars into the moon glade,
leaving the bee behind.

Dissonance.

HOLLANDER-BODIE, JULIUS**Julius Hollander-Bodie**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: John Pierson

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Names

When I was little, I felt I had another name. I didn't know what the name was, its origin, its spelling, how it was pronounced. But I knew I had one. I would look inward, move my little fingers and toes, and say to myself, "Your name is Julius, but what is your true name?" That is gone now.

My name changes like a chameleon. It started with my great-grandfather Julius. A son of immigrants, he sold coal door-to-door, building his very own trucking business from nothing. I have none of his Caesarian ruthlessness, but I do have his drive and love for family. And from this love came my family nickname J.J., often shortened to J. With time, I became Julius with teachers, classmates, bandmates, and my flute teacher; OJ (Orange Julius because of my long fiery hair) with teammates; Julio with friends.

For a while, I ignored the mountain of names, but within my outwardly lighthearted indifference grew a labyrinth of walls. I began to unconsciously define myself by however the person I was talking to would define me. With teammates, I was OJ, the gritty soccer player who loved all things Manchester United. In school, I was Julius, the determined student and flutist. With friends, I was Julio, the outgoing, randomly weird, energetic "life of the conversation." With family, I was J, the crazy, laughing middle child who just wanted to have fun. These boundaries protected and more clearly defined my various identities. But in relying on them, I had unknowingly siphoned off parts of myself. I felt unexplainably uncomfortable mentioning flute on the field, or talking about soccer with friends. I felt uncomfortable being all of who I was.

But when people began calling me OJ off the field, my labyrinth crumbled. As I hustled through my days, nicknames were escaping their bounds, and they surrounded me like hornets, menacingly clamoring for my attention. It agonized me—how could I be OJ, Julius, Julio, J.J., J, all in the same day, all in the same body? I'd fall asleep feeling lost, unsure of who I really was. And the inability to superlatively fulfill any one name now ate at me as well. I wasn't the D1 commit soccer player, "full-on-mathlete" AMC conqueror, or Carnegie Hall flutist. What was I, then?

Struggling for an answer, I realized how ridiculous the situation seemed. I had been given all the opportunities I could imagine by the best family I could've asked for. Why was I having so much trouble with my identity? All seemed lost, a chaotic mess of names loosely jumbled together by the simple fact that they belonged to the same body. That is, until I remembered.

When the memory came back, a calm washed over me. I began to move my fingers and toes, not so little anymore, and considered that fleeting moment. My 5-year-old self was right—Julius was my name, but it was not my true name. My true name captured my passion for soccer, love for flute, awe of math, joy for Latin poetry, extreme indecisiveness, "ya love to see it" and "epic" catchphrases, often overly congenial congeniality, philosophical discussions with Grandpa over tea, affinity for pink pajama bottoms... and everything else.

I now understood what my 5-year-old self had felt. I had hoped my true name would fully define me. And for years, viewing my nicknames as categories, I had attempted to find some sort of working definition. But by forcing myself into names, torrents of needless confusion and expectations had consumed me. My true name was in a realm apart from words. There could be no single concrete way to define me, and for that matter, not even a finite number of ways to define me. The name that seized every bit of my being, every atom of my existence—it didn't exist. I'm not a label. I'm just me. All of me.

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

lingering*I. bouquet*

is this as familiar to you as an
arm 'round your shoulder
Faster than a river
the tongue runs, to dry
humor, plastic smile and
cheap laugh
Say something, please laugh, a
real laugh, Am I
singing to someone with
narcissus in their ears?

do you chase love like an
old friend
Round the corner I let it
gain another mile, I give it
first-class front-row seats, I am
gone before the room is dark

could you get so high on
crashing down to Earth
With art and eyes and a
soul like yours, can your body
dangle anywhere but the
ninth cloud?
what do you see in
What is molded by these hands
bloodied, squeeze harder on the
thorns of a rose I
cannot smell

do you mouth the lyrics of
the verse you can't sing, do you
let sleep out catching visions with
pictures, with words, do you
lay above the covers and wonder why
storms are named after
people, or can you
see me—coughing up this
red flower,
choking on a
pathetic love?

II. dawn

Dig your fingers into
 the crevice of her collarbones
 each dip along this spine,
 trace and cut along the
 dotted-line
 She's slipping a note under your door,
 clings onto wilting whispers
 You told her you'd be here
 when the sun comes up:
 don't you love her
 long hair, her
 midnight eyes, her
 sickly-sweet smile
 hold her, twist her limbs to your
 picture, Last night you
 loved it, loved
 her 'cause she's
 pliant like clay, papier-mâché

woeful husk of a girl, you'd
 love to be on the
 other side of the windowsill
 —sleeping with her sun-shadow
 plays hide-and-seek, catch her hand
 on fire too late after dawn

III. dressing for cold weather

white flake and
 fire-flicker
 you toss little truths
 into silent envelopes carried
 by a waxing wind
 claws at the scarf you
 taught me to wrap in those
 dandelion-days

do you remember when I
 pressed my lips to the
 cuff of that heavy coat
 you wore in summer our
 woolen hideaway place
 whisper secrets to its
 single pocket so that time couldn't
 steal them away

my breath in your ear
 drifts along the Rio Grande
 dipped fingers below its cool clarity
 trying to catch every word and
 keep every smile
 we are leaked and thawed and

frozen-over and still I
slip on our matching boots before
crossing the border
I will never forget
how you bought them
knee-length to keep the snow out and
I will always remember
how to fill them with
envelopes and whispers and
secrets and truths when
cold weather wears me
again and
again and
again

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

sorry, little girl*contact-lenses*

lately I've been going
blind
first-period
monday more muddled
than I'd
memorized, chalkboard
monotony comes
eighty inches
black, white, green
—scribbles
hagoromo-clean the
one percent I
couldn't take, a
ninety-five it
never made and

I'll sprint to blindness
before glasses or contact
-lenses I'll
see more in the blankets of a
dream than the
ground that keeps my feet so
Teach me
how to find the
beauty in learning when
there is so much
beauty in
getting things
right
where I can't
see

mouth

I quit piano
in september, could've been
october or november
Became more practiced in
covering for cold fingers and
waiting for my black-and-white

to run out of tune

I lost Chinese
at four, maybe five
used to be so fluent, I'm told
Mouth made sounds only my
ears understand now

I thought that
cutting out my tongue'd be harder
Could a little girl know
that she'd have to speak louder with the
rest of her mouth?

And the keys, I loved you
for ten years
half into 15, a lifetime
—did I not love you enough
to feel more shame, more remorse
when I dropped you
as easily as a
paper-clip from my pencil-case?

And I know that I know
these paper-clips stuck to the floor
Can't grasp them with nails
still freshly-trimmed, obsolete rituals
That they
double their weight, to me half
the rhyme, the reason

And how well I know this
mouth can talk
Never seems to stop
to stop from laying again
at the mouth of the baby grand

HUNTER, NAOMI**Naomi Hunter**

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Short Story

The Best Memories are Made Outside

For the past two summers, my family has gone to a place a few hours away from where we live for a few days. These are the most fun days of my entire summer. We live on the lake during these few days. I wake up and go straight outside and spend the entire day out there. My brother and I spend hours paddleboarding, kayaking, paddle boating, playing catch, and so much more. One of the best parts is hiking. It takes some convincing to get my parents and brother on board with it, but once we are out there it is so much fun! There are so many different trails that you can go on all around the different lakes. You get to see waterfalls and cool trees, and pretty flowers. It's the reward after trudging through thick mud, jagged rocks, and thorny bushes. I love the challenge of it. We always go in August, when the highs reach close to the hundreds, so it's hard work hiking only a few miles, but it's always worth it in the end! I remember one specific time.

It was the hottest time of day, around 3:30. I had convinced my parents and brother to go on a hike. We had studied the map the night before, choosing a pretty short trail. The map said it was a 2-mile loop. Because the actual trail wasn't very long, we decided to just walk to the start of the trail, adding only about a half-mile each way. By the time we found the blue diamond marking the start of a trail, we were already sweating and my dad made it very clear that he regretted agreeing to this. We continued though, through the trees upon the dirt paths. We eventually got to this huge hill that you couldn't even properly walk up. My brother ended up halfway crawling up the hill because it was so steep. You would be standing up straight and you could touch the grass in front of you. It took a while, but we made it up the hill and stopped to drink some water. Getting dehydrated out there would not be good. We hadn't seen anyone this entire time. Then, we continued on! We got a little bit confused at one point and thought that we had gone the wrong way, but we found a blue diamond and knew we were still on the right path.

As we continued hiking, my brother saw a tree that was shaped weirdly and started excitedly talking about it like all 10-year-olds do. He wouldn't stop talking about this tree and we all contributed, adding our own things that we thought the tree was shaped like. I guess we got too into talking and went the wrong way, because soon we ended up in a field by a road, with no clue where to go. It had been going so well, I thought my dad was even enjoying this. He seemed like he was having fun talking about what that tree looked like. But any fun we were having, was now gone. We were all tired, and I had thought that we were almost done. My watch said that we had gone 2.5 miles, meaning we should be approaching the start of the trail, the end of the loop. This did not look like anything I recognized though. My mom pulled out the map, spinning it around trying to figure out where we were. My dad crossed the road trying to figure out if the trail continued on the other side of the road. I stood there helpless. We started wondering where my dad had gone after a while. Had he found the other side of the trail? We couldn't see him from where we were standing, but finally, we saw him come back across the empty road. No luck. There were no signs on the road that we could see, and no cars going by. My dad looked at his phone out of habit but soon realized there was no internet. My brother was still in his overly-excited mood. He ran around for no particular reason.

"Look!" he yelled from down the hill. I strode through the field of tall grass and weeds, coming to meet him. There was a narrow path of dirt that looked like it might be the way we needed to go. It was obscured by some trees and bushes, making it impossible to see from the way we had come. If it wasn't for my brother running around, we wouldn't have found it. My parents stayed up on top of the hill, not believing that my brother actually had found anything worth seeing.

"Yeah come down here!" I yelled. They carefully made their way down the hill, and we started back along the trail. You wouldn't believe how excited we were to see a blue plastic diamond nailed to a tree!

We made it back! We must have gone the wrong way though because we definitely didn't end in the same place we started. It was supposed to be a loop, but we found a road that would lead back to where we were staying. The rest of the day was spent relaxing around the campfire. We could go kayaking or play catch like Sam and I would

normally do, but we were all exhausted from the day.

There are so many things in the world around you that you may not even know about. So many incredible things a few miles from where you live just waiting to be seen. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, Americans spend about 87% of their time indoors. Our indoor lives have been filled with screens leading to a much more sedentary life. One survey found that kids spend an average of 4 to 7 minutes outdoors every day. This is much less than past generations. In an article by the White Plains hospital, Ashour wrote that getting outside can help your vision, cause your brain to function better, and of course, you get a boost of vitamin D. Time outside with your family or friends leads to the best memories. Even though at the time this hike seemed never-ending, it is what we talk about most to this day. Remember that time we got lost on the hike and Sam found the way back?

HYCHES, RAIIVIAN**Raivian Hyches**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Paseo Academy Performing Arts, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Ben Bullington

Category: Poetry

Mirror

In the early morning where the sun shines,
the sun rays hit my eyes upon my face.
My sight peaks at my glorious design,
in front of a mirror that I embrace.

The beauty wrapping around my tight skin,
whipped to perfection, wonderfully made.
The mirror shows my deadly soul within,
which resurrects the truth beyond the grave.

My bones started to pierce through my tight skin,
stabbing through my bloody and slimy eyes.
Taking my beauty to reveal my sins,
grotesque looking anything but benign.

But even so in my arrogant mind,
my fancied eyes are enough to be blind.

JALADI, RAJESHWAR**Rajeshwar Jaladi**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway West High School, Ballwin, MO

Educator: Debra Klevens

Category: Poetry

The City I Call Home**The City I Call Home**

Mighty Gateway Arch shining under the sun
Lewis and Clark Trail, for thousands to run
Ten-story slide at the City Museum with loads of fun
Animatronic T-Rex at the science center comparable to none
Forever beautiful and elegant St. Louis, the city I call home.

Home to the Cardinals,
Eleven times World Series champions.
Home to the Blues,
2019 Stanley Cup champions.
Home to the Battle Hawks,
One of the brand new XFL teams.
Playing on the banks of Mississippi and Missouri
The endless thrill that never fades in St. Louis, the city I call home.

Breakfast with bagels and panini at St. Louis Bread Co.,
Delicious creamy milk from Oberweis Dairy,
Novelties and frozen custard from Ted Drews,
For dinner, thin crust square cut St. Louis style pizza,
Topping off with St. Louis gooey butter cake,
Delicacies and desserts, I enjoy in St Louis, the city I call home.

Scars from chronic racial trauma
Nights with disturbed sleep from guns and violence
Schools and learning subject to periodic closure
Streets in a state of emergency and eerie silence
Painfully disrupting St. Louis, the city I call home.

St. Louisans, post riots, cleaning up the rubble
Fergusonians, with an uproar of antiracism movement
Survivors of tragic events rising stronger
Changemakers with a goal of transformation, and betterment
People I love and live with in St. Louis, the city I call home.

A city blessed with diverse cultures, backgrounds, and strengths,
Jeweled with of energy and valor
With wide experiences and tireless, selfless efforts
Constantly evolving with an envious dose of resilience
I yearn for peace and justice in St. Louis, the city I call home.

Come join me

Politicians, activists, firefighters, police, young and old
legislate, protest, fight fires, serve and protect, boldly and wisely
So you too can call my beautiful city of St. Louis, your home!

JARANG, ANISHA**Anisha Jarang**

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Sean Rochester

Category: Flash Fiction

The Grass Revolution

The Grass Revolution

We were the first to cultivate our grass, fawn over it as it grew. As we stepped back to take in the glorious views of our fresh-sown grassy fields, we made room for it to grow out, over, under, left, right, insatiable. The grass has always been there, eventually climbing into the very heart of society, climbing over her eyeballs, filling her ears, coating her fingers in the soft, the lush, the perfectly-clipped.

You need not look far. Outside your window, a lawn of grass is sure to greet you. On patches in the middle of the road, next to the highway, on patios in hospitals, grass is the omnipresent brand of our unquenchable love for the small, the delicate, the innumerable.

It followed me no matter where I went. The strongest have fallen to its cool calls as they fertilized and mowed it. But I did not. The grass became a celebrity among celebrities as I grew. It mocked me as my friends and family fell to its whims.

“Marigold, honey, the home renovations start today.”

I could hear my father’s lawn mower outside and my brother Juniper playing catch with his friends at the grassy park across the street. I had prayed that Neighbor Rose would have been the last to contract the disease of home updates. I let out a shaky sigh as I realized my mother was next.

“The flooring is going first. Your father already brought the sod and seeds.”

I stood straight with my back to my mother, my hands behind my back, facing the window as I witnessed, first hand, how the grass had infiltrated the minds and lives of my neighborhood. Had she already fallen? If so, no amount of arguing could bring her back. Her judgment melted, her logos vanished, her prefrontal cortex returned to its fetal, undeveloped state over the course of the next sunny days, when I would look out to see the clear cornflower sky contrasting the sun-hungry grass. Only her authority remained as she ordered my belongings to be packed and carried away over the lawn to the moving truck. All I could do was stand straight with my hands behind my back. And watch. Watch as the strong oak planks were stripped from the floor. Watch as the black soil spilled down and was spread like honey on toast. Watch as the perfect squares of sod were laid down in the kitchen, the living room, the stairs, the bedrooms, my bedroom. I was nothing more than a witness to it all.

At the end of the renovation phase, I stood facing my house, or the remnants of my house, with my hands behind my back, quiet fear spreading through me like the grass revolution I had dissented against for so long. My mother laid her hand on my shoulder and sighed pensively.

“The new grass flooring nearly doubled the value of this house. I don’t know why we didn’t do this sooner. I know it’s hard to get used to these changes, Marigold, but you must admit, the grass makes our place look so fresh, doesn’t it?”

My unfeeling eyes met my mother’s pleading ones. I turned away and glided over the lawn to the car. Juniper snuck a handful of grass in my pocket. “Memories of home,” he whispered with a sympathetic smile as we climbed in.

My mother turned around in the passenger seat as my father started the car. “You do like the renovations, right Marigold?”

I glanced at the remains of my neighborhood as we drove out for the last time, perfect lawns on every house, lawns in the parks, lawns on the fields, lawns on the staircases too.

“Yes, mother.”

JENSEN, AUBREY**Aubrey Jensen**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Difficulties And Possibilities Of Trust**The Difficulties and Possibilities of Trust**

Some people may have problems with trusting others, whether it is someone they've met before or someone they've just met. It can be hard in life to make friends, and possibly harder to keep them. If friends betray your trust, it can also be hard to trust them again.

Trust may come easily for some, but it may be hard for others. It can allow you to be comfortable around others and can help bring people together. It can, however, be used bitterly. It can be used for manipulation, and it can cause a greater sadness when that reliance is betrayed. If your trust has been betrayed before, you may know what I mean. You may fear you can never put faith in anyone again, you may feel alone and close yourself off to everyone around you. When your trust is betrayed, you may feel like everything is a lie; that everyone you ever counted on may betray you, too. That is a terrible way to go through life, and a terrible way to live. I fear that too many people throw their trust blindly at everyone who crosses their path. This is not always wrong, but it does make you more vulnerable to the possibilities of conflict.

We should take the time to become properly acquainted with people before we throw ourselves into a relationship that we can't get out of without conflict. We should walk through life one step at a time, rather than just leap at every chance to get ahead. Trust isn't something that can be tossed aside. It is one of the many integral parts of life.

Without trust, rifts could tear in relationships, friendships, and families. Without it, there is less balance, hope, and compromises. Everyone would feel alone. Depression would consume us, and no one would feel safe. No one would want to live this way—feeling disconnected from the world, your loved ones, and your own lives. Trust is what brings us together and what makes us whole.

If you don't trust others, they, themselves, may feel hesitant to return the favor. It can go both ways. Abraham Lincoln once said, "The people, when rightfully and fully trusted, will return the trust." If you believe in someone enough, and show them your loyalty, they'll trust you back. There may be times when trust is difficult. You may know how to do something, but someone else is called on to do it. Instead of being frustrated, try accepting that the other person knows what he or she is doing. Look at the bright sides of life. With darkness, there must be light. With lies, there are always truths. Everything happens for a reason, and advantages can always come from it.

I was impacted by trust once when my friend gave away a secret she swore she'd keep. I was sitting with them, and some of their friends at lunch once, and one of their friends brought it up. Everyone's attention then turned to me, and I was singled out. I was hurt and felt betrayed. Ever since, I haven't been as close to her as I once was. We are still friends, but just not as close. I put my trust in my family, specifically my sister, for everything. I share many things with her, and I trust her to keep them secret. She is my best friend and the person I put the most amount of trust in. If it is broken between us, I'd either feel more hurt, or it'd be easier to forgive her because I am closer to her.

Trust is important to me because it can lead to anything. It may be easy to obtain, but it's harder to keep. Promises, honesty, truth, faith—all of these facets trace back to trust. Even the most harmless tasks can deceive trusts, such as jokes, or pranks. If you lie, it will be hard to believe that your truths are genuine. If I trust someone, I feel sure that they will feel the same for me.

Just as you can trust others, you must have the ability to trust yourself. You have to have faith and believe in yourself. You have to be willing to tell yourself the truth. Many people already lie to themselves daily, saying things such as, *I'm not good enough*, or *I can't do this*. This negativity can lead to major uncertainty, and if we can't count on ourselves to be able to succeed, we won't be able to trust others. If you can't count on anyone else, you can lose faith in who you are. Trust that you can do anything you put your mind to, and you will.

JIANG, RICHIE**Richie Jiang**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Janet Duckham

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

To Spite the Rain

It was a foolish idea at first. The kind that children come up with, born of innocence and fear. The kind that adults brush off, having made their peace with those fears long ago. I, however, could not be content. Over time, it flared into an obsession, searing with pride. I, with my well-intentioned arrogance, saw a chance to deliver humanity from its futile, short-lived suffering. I would escape death.

It's raining now, a heavy rain. It reminds of the first time I feared death. I was only a child, caught unaware by a sudden storm. So heavy was the downpour, it felt as if the whole universe was pushing down on my shoulders, trying to make me submit. Barely able to see more than a few feet in front of me, I stumbled blindly forward all while the skies rumbled with amused malice. By some stroke of luck, I returned home. I had managed to escape what I was sure was meant to be my certain death. Ever since then, I had feared rain, and the death it brought with it. Growing older, alongside that fear developed indifference and disgust.

Take that raindrop on the window over there. It does not complain that time and gravity must draw it down to the earth. It does not complain that it may be turned into something fundamentally different when it soaks into the soil, never again to be the same. It does not lament the fact that nobody will remember it. It does not drown in its own worthlessness.

And it shouldn't. How could it, when it does not think? How could it, when it cannot feel? Us humans, cursed to know enough to understand our insignificance, but not enough to save ourselves from it, are different. Do we not deserve better? How could those I loved be satisfied with the clear injustice of the universe, stealing away minds and bodies, then every trace of their lives? Filled with these impassioned thoughts, I began my efforts to cheat death. Not once did I stop to consider whether my spite, and my struggle, was justified.

In a rainstorm, each droplet by itself is insignificant. Even the whole deluge is only a ripple in the great expanse of time. Just like those I knew. They toiled to summit the mounds in front of them, mistaking them for mountains. When they reached the top, they stood proud and content in their achievements and lives, blindly refusing to see the futility of it all. How foolish. Everything they had strived for would be stolen away from them, and inevitably, they, and the ground they stood on, would too disappear.

I could not, would not, understand the value behind the lives they led. They were just as meaningless, as fleeting as the raindrops. There would be more time, after all, when I had circumvented the end.

But the solution never came. As I grew older, failure after failure humbled me. Still, I had never been able to admit I was wrong. Until now. The end has come for me, and with it, one final chance to understand and accept the beauty in the impermanence of human life.

I see now. New drops collect and collide on the glass, replacing old ones that slowly sink to the ground, forming an ever changing portrait. Whatever might become of these little bits of the universe after they fall, in this moment, they are beautiful.

Faced with death, I understand that for me, it was never about cheating death. Rather, I had sought to prove myself better, to prove that their lives were only flickers to what I was sure to accomplish. All because I had been too afraid to try their way. Too afraid to admit I was wrong. I had let my obsession and fear mix together into an acidic malignity, dissolving the bonds with others I had once held dear. All because I could not accept that I was only a droplet in time, and still be able to live with a smile on my face.

How could I ever have scorned the honest efforts of others? How could I ever have turned away from the happiness I had been blessed with from birth, believing that only in the eternal could I find peace? How could I think that I alone could defy death, solve the unsolvable? How could I delude myself that those I had once treasured would gladly follow me into a forever of bliss, after I had shunned and scorned them for a lifetime? How presumptuous.

I step outside. It's different, much different from what I had imagined. The raindrops soak my hair, slide down my

shoulders, almost like the universe has put its hand on my shoulder, consoling me. My vision is becoming blurrier. If I squint, I can recognize some familiar faces, scattered among these droplets. The rain continues to fall. I close my eyes.

JOHNSON, ASIA**Asia Johnson**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

Home School, Roach, MO

Educator: Brian Johnson

Category: Poetry

Invisible**Invisible**

Invisible

Definition:

Noun

A thing that is unseeable

As in: I am invisible.

People can see part of me
 They see what they think I look like
 What they want me to be
 The kind of person they think I am

It is an illusion
 They see the costume, the mask
 I put on each day
 To hide who I really am

Invisible

Definition:

Adjective

Being unable to be seen

By anyone except yourself

Antonyms: Revealed

I like painting my nails
 Blues, pinks, greens, sparkles
 I don't have the patience that everyone thinks I do
 The paint never dries fast enough and gets scuffed

Instead of being beautiful, people see my nails as they really are
 Small, pale, plain
 If people see my real nails this easily
 Do they see my hidden self as well?

Invisible

Definition:

Adjective

Describing someone who is hidden

Because they are afraid of what will happen

If they are revealed

I like roller coasters

Not the kiddie ones, but the crazy ones with loops and corkscrews
 I like them because they connect me with the world
 They make me feel like I belong

On a coaster, you aren't the only person out of control
 You aren't the only person who can't tell where they're about to go next
 You aren't the only person whose life is upside down
 They make you feel like you aren't the only person falling

It's nice to have that feeling
 Even if it isn't real

Invisible
 Definition:
 Noun
 Someone who is concealed or disguised as themselves
 See also: Empty

People see me,
 But do they see who I really am?
 The void inside me is invisible to everyone
 Expect to me

The void that is me
 Is a raging fire blazing against the cage
 I am a fire
 Someday I will burn the cage

The wild animal that is me
 Rages against the bars
 Of the prison that the world sees
 They see the prison

They cannot see the prisoner
 Someday I will escape

Do people see me for what I really am
 Or as they want to see me?
 Do I see myself as I truly am
 Or as the world sees me?

Invisible
 Verb
 Definition: Revealing yourself to the world
 As in: I am invisible.

JOHNSON, TORINA**Torina Johnson**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

Society Failed Me

I am 3.4480
My family doesn't matter
My personality doesn't matter
My history doesn't matter
All I am to the world is a number
I am 3.4480

To schools all I am is a test grade
A letter amongst seas of paper
Insignificant unless I start with an A
Useless to the public if I do not have above a 90%
Worthless if my number is not desirable
To schools I am a test grade

To society I am ugly
I am not skinny with big thighs
My skin is not flawless and is filled with scars and bumps
My hair does not shine and my nails are not painted
For a girl I am too tall
For myself I am not enough because
To society I am ugly

My child will not grow up this way
They will not grow up feeling like a number
They will not grow up feeling like they need a certain grade on a test
They will not let society determine their self worth
My child will not be a number
A test grade
An object for judgment
My child will not grow up like I did

JOSEPH, ANN**Ann Joseph**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Revenge Essay: The Fit**The Fit**

The alarm which woke me up for the past two months finally sounded like true bliss as it filled my room with sound. I almost leaped out of bed; a few more inches into the air would have caused a serious head injury. Not wanting to wake my parents, I sprinted as quietly as possible to my sister's room.

"Hey Sarah, excited for senior ye-" I started as I opened my sister's room, but her bed was empty. I shrugged and went to my bathroom to get ready for the much-anticipated day. As I brushed my teeth and heard the water sloshing in the sink, I knew this year would be different. I was a sophomore, after all. I pictured my first homecoming and all of the changes this year would bring.

My thoughts were interrupted by my mom's yelling. Her groggy voice shot through the bathroom door, and I was startled from picturing my dream year.

"It's the first day of school and you can't be there on time? It's going to look bad if you're tardy before the school year even starts!" She knew I had a habit of being late, and her banging on my bathroom door disrupted my peaceful thoughts, and reminded me of how important today was.

The first day of school. First impressions, reactions to people's glow-ups, first time seeing my best friends since, well, a few days ago: that feeling only comes once a year. As I finished up in the bathroom, I briskly walked to my closet, not wanting to waste another second. I heard my parent's door open, and my dad walked out into the hallway.

"Hey sweetie, do you know what you're going to wear?"

Of course I knew what I was going to wear. The day before, I had folded my outfit and made sure that nothing was wrinkled. After all, the first-day fit was critical to making a lasting impression.

When I opened my closet door, I couldn't have felt worse. My blood ran cold and I felt a shudder through my body.

My perfect outfit was gone.

Okay, well, I guess it's true that my initial reaction to the clothes being missing was a bit drastic. I felt rather fine since only half of my outfit was missing, but it was the most important part. I threw my clothes around, shuffled through my laundry, hoping that the shirt had just fallen off the shelf. To my utter shock, it was gone.

I was already running late, and I didn't have another second to lose. My mom called out to me, but I couldn't waste any more time. I sprinted down the stairs, barely noticing that my sister wasn't home.

"Where could she be?" I wondered as I rummaged through the freshly washed laundry, stuffing my face in a sweatshirt out of frustration to distract myself from this nightmare. The distinct smell of our flowery detergent mixed with the delicious pancakes my dad was making for our first day of school breakfast.

"Hey, do you know where Sarah is?" I continued to throw clothes left and right as if my life depended on it. At that moment, it really seemed to.

"She already left two hours ago for the senior sunrise," my dad said nonchalantly, not noticing the fear in my eyes.

"Hey Siri, Facetime Sarah." I felt a wave of anger start to overtake me, and I knew this feeling was starting to single-handedly ruin my perfect day.

"Hey, what's up? I can't talk right now," she said with a laugh as she showed her friends that I was on the phone. I chuckled and waved with a sweet smile, but it disappeared the instant my sister looked at me, wondering why I had called in the first place.

At that moment, I wanted nothing more than to reach my hand through the phone and grab the shirt myself. She knew how much I wanted to have the perfect first-day outfit, and she had even told me the day before that I would look great in that shirt.

I had never hung up the phone so fast, and with a groan loud enough to worry both my parents, I plopped onto the couch, feeling furious and a strong desire for vengeance.

Inside, I knew my severe feeling for revenge was a bit dramatic. After all, there were other clothes I could wear.

But, for some reason, I couldn't shake the feeling that my sister tricked me.

I had conflicting thoughts, trying to decide if I should be the bigger person and just let it go, or avenge the perfect outfit that was mine. Thankfully, my surge of feelings towards my sister's horrible actions can be justified. According to Michael McCullough, the director of the Evolution and Human Behavior Laboratory at the University of Miami, "The desire to seek revenge is as natural to human beings as grief, happiness, fear, and hunger. The instinct for it has been crafted by natural selection because of the critical problems it solved as our species was evolving"(Thornton 5). Not only does the need for revenge affect people in situations like mine, which was on the less severe side, but the feeling itself is one that everyone goes through. The idea that it's natural for everyone to feel a strong sensation for justice. Revenge isn't some evil feeling that we have to suppress, but rather, it's part of our human nature. It's a necessary feeling that isn't entirely in our control. I could barely control my urge to get back at my sister, especially knowing that she was in the wrong. Looking back on the situation, especially after reading that article, it helped me to realize that it wasn't wrong or inhumane for me to overreact in that exact moment. But, with all of this being said, had I really been waiting so long just for my perfect fit to be destroyed?

The need for revenge flowed through me like hot lava. I hadn't wronged her in any way; at least, not recently. I didn't know what I had done to deserve it.

Feeling defeated, but still having to go to school, I threw together a mediocre outfit, gobbled down breakfast, and trudged through the door, knowing that I would have felt much better in my perfect first-day fit.

I wanted her to feel exactly what I felt. The excitement was building up for days, and suddenly, in a split second, that excitement turns into disloyalty. I wanted to do to her what she did to me. This 'eye for an eye' mentality is often justified by people who say that justice must be properly served. It's true that at the moment, I wanted nothing more than for her to feel my pain, but looking back at it now, it's foolish. After all, if it just kept going back and forth, trying to dish out revenge on the same level, it would never stop. This idea is portrayed nicely in Helen Prejean's "*Dead Man Walking*". When Patrick Sonnier, a man who helped rape and kill a young couple, was going to be sent to the electric chair, the attorney's son said something that really helped explain why an 'eye for an eye' wouldn't work as well as people think it would. He asked "then who is going to kill them for killing him?"

CITATION. By them, the child is referring to the people that send him to the electric chair, and his idea of continuing the cycle helps explain how even though revenge is a part of human nature, it isn't the best way to handle situations because of the effects it can have. In my case, if I stole my sister's outfit on an important day, the cycle would continue, and nobody would benefit from the damage it would cause.

The cars trying to get into school were backed up so far, but it gave me time to contemplate this morning's events.

The sheer betrayal, my thirst for payback, and worst of all, the sickening feeling it gave me. I knew deep down that it was just a small inconvenience in the grand scheme of things, but I couldn't drop that feeling; knowing that she did something that affected me, and she barely cared or even knew.

After what seemed like an eternity, thanks to the construction at the middle school and the lack of organization for students being dropped off, I rushed to my first class. The hallways were nearly empty, and after checking the time, I understood why. As I sprinted down the ramp and into the theatre hallway, I stopped like a deer in headlights.

My sister and I had our first hour together. Until then, I was granted the privilege of not having to see her, or I would have been furious, seeing my perfect outfit ruined so carelessly. I hadn't had anywhere to direct my anger, and keeping my thoughts in my head was helping them to die down. I slowed my pace and distracted myself by reading the achievements posted on the walls.

"It's fine, Annie. It's just a shirt. There's no need to overreact. You can wear it tomorrow and it'll look just as good," I reassured myself, knowing that it was all pointless. I couldn't suppress the feelings of revenge, and I could feel that it was out of my control.

I walked through the door, and as everyone's eyes fell on me, I scanned the sea of faces for one in particular. More specifically, for one t-shirt in particular. After standing for what felt like an awkward four seconds, I found an open seat and situated myself.

The hunt wasn't over. I continued to search for the piece of clothing that I knew was supposed to be with me. Then, I saw it. What made it worse is that I saw her.

She looked like a princess on cloud 9, and to a stranger, it wouldn't even seem like she had done something terribly wrong.

But she had.

After I glared at her and mumbled under my breath, I thought about what I was doing and whether there was any point. If I told her how I felt, it would just make her feel bad, and it wouldn't change what had already happened. I didn't know if I should make her feel guilty like I had felt betrayed, or if I should just forgive her and spare her from

those sickening feelings, knowing that an ‘eye for an eye’ wouldn’t benefit anybody.

My mental contemplation between forgiveness and revenge could be answered by *An Unnatural Act*, by Philip Yancey. She talks about forgiveness as a virtue, and explains how “As forgiveness breaks the cycle of blame, it also loosens the stranglehold of guilt on us and others”(Yancey 13). When someone is in a position to forgive, they are often feeling other emotions as well. Getting hurt never feels good, whether it’s knowingly or unknowingly, and being able to loosen yourself from those strong feelings can be very beneficial. Not only will forgiveness help you, but it also benefits the person who did something wrong, and it can cut the never-ending cycle of revenge. Even though we can’t escape the strong feeling of revenge, we can fix it to the best of our ability with one powerful idea: forgiveness.

Keeping all of these ideas in mind, and wanting to rid myself of the need for payback, I decided to erase the event from my mind, only bringing it back now to compare it with ideas I have learned about recently. If I had continued the cycle of revenge, who knows how many more outfits would have been ruined, just for the sake of payback?

KANTROVITZ, KATIE**Katie Kantrovitz**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Joy Gebhardt

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Grampsie

Grampsie

My grandfather wears two watches on one wrist. One for the time and the other for the date, but one reads 3:27 AM, and the other says it's 2015. His second watch sings a high-pitched sound that only my dad and I can hear. "Grampsie, your watch is ringing again," I add, smiling. "But I can't hear it!" he responds. His alarm was a common occurrence every Sunday night dinner. I continue to twirl my pasta while my eyes blur out the muted Cardinals game highlights on the television. Glancing over, I hear my grandfather say, "Where is my fork?" but before I can say anything, my grandmother picks up the fork sitting right next to his plate. He rubs his crumpled face with his sun-spotted hands and gratefully takes the utensil. My sister and I lock eyes from either side of the table before we continue on. "Remember when you got me my first car, Dad? Can you believe Katie will be driving so soon?" my father asks. I smile and let out a little giggle as my father gets no response from my grandfather, who is inspecting his burger. My dad nods his head while my sister and I share another look, both of our eyes widening. My mom saunters into the room, holding two images that she had printed at Walgreens to add to the collage on my grandmother's cabinets and icebox. As she slides the images across the table, I notice the first image features my sister and me feeding carrots to my horses; the second shows my horse and me jumping at a competition. "Wow, that's incredible!" my grandfather says as he studies the second image. A slight smile cracks from my face. "Yes, Katie loves riding! You guys will have to watch her sometime," my father notes. "Are you also an equestrian aficionado?" my grandfather asks my dad. "No, Dad, I like cars," my father sighed. I immediately look back down at my pasta and move the bowl to the other side of my placemat. My lip quivers as I twist my pasta into tighter and tighter spirals. I tried to check my phone, but my grandparents' house has no service, so I resort to scrolling through old pictures in my camera roll under the table. "Are you okay?" my sister asks from across the table. "Yes, I'm fine," I reply in a flat tone. My dad gives me a comforting pat on the shoulder before we continue eating.

When my mom begins to take everyone's dishes back to the kitchen, my grandmother brings in a cookie-cake, like she does at the end of every dinner. This one has colorful balloons on the border. She cuts us all slices, using both hands to pass us the plates. Everyone but my grandfather takes one.

"Grampsie, would you like a piece?" my sister asks.

"No thank you, I don't like cookie-cake," he responds, looking at the dog. Cookie-cake has always been his favorite, though. So much so that my grandma started buying cookie-cakes, rather than traditional cakes for birthdays.

I scarf my piece down and my mother starts gathering the dessert plates together. We get up to leave and I hug my grandmother tightly before giving the dog a few pats. I don't hug my grandfather though and only offer a wave from across the table, to which he gives a salute. My eyes water as we walk through the hallway to the screen door.

"That was a yummy dinner," my mom says as we pile into the car.

"Mmm-hmm," I mumble, clicking in my seatbelt. My family members make small talk on the way home, but I remain silent, keeping my gaze focused out the window, my mind in a constant loop of the dinner and a realization of what just happened.

KEHOE, WHITNEY**Whitney Kehoe**

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: South Middle School, Wentzville, MO
 Educators: Lindsey Kehoe, Travis Kehoe, Mike Penrod

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Princess of Poison**Princess of Poison****Chapter 1**

You get good at pretending when you do it so often. For as long as I've known everyone has known me as the sweet innocent princess, I've been doing it for so long I don't know how else to act around people. I stand over his coffin glaring at his expressionless corpse, his red hair moving with the crisp morning breeze. Although I know I should feel a wave of sadness, but I don't, all I could feel is anger, anger for what he did to me. For the one year we were married I would look at his red hair and think of it as fire that seemed even brighter when he was angry.

The flashbacks of what I did come back to me in a neat timeline. First the abuse telling me I was worth nothing, nobody loved me, you're not good enough. Just thinking of the horrid things he said in the course of a year makes something stir in me. When someone constantly puts you down you start to believe it, but I wasn't going to fall victim to him.

A weight on my shoulders startles me. Before I can turn to see who it was a deep voice-a *man's*-says, "He was a good man, my brother."

I almost scoff at him but I've been acting for too long to do that, so instead I say, "Yes, Samuel was good indeed. He treated me so well, and didn't deserve any of this."

I look down at the freshly cut grass needing a moment to turn on my tears. He takes my hand staring a little too long at my ink black wrist length gloves, which makes me kind of confused. *What's so interesting about a glove?* But he pulls me out of my train of thought,

"We're all here for you Victoria. I hope you don't mind me asking but-"

He got cut off mid sentence as his mother and mine walked over arms extended for a big hug because they saw the tears in my eyes. Their black dresses waving in the wind and black hats with black lace to cover their puffy faces. As they try to comfort me I make myself cry harder to really sell my act. After a while I noticed that Samuel's brother-*Phillip*- had slipped away. I still wonder what he was going to say?

Once I'm back in my room the first thing I do is take off my gloves revealing my blotchy rash on my right hand and I curse myself for not wearing gloves dealing with *Oleander- a deadly plant that can cause heart attacks* I had been reading about plants forever. How could I have been so careless? I undressed from the uncomfortable black dress that was so puffy I could barely function and swapped it for a blood red nightgown, which my maids usually do but I'm done faking, for today at least.

I go to my window which has a perfect view of the garden where we held the funeral. I watch as maids put away chairs, leftover food, and even the coffin that still holds the body. Nobody wanted to see him get buried, not even the parents- *king and queen Rumbold* which I thought was odd because why not say one last goodbye to your eldest son? But maybe Samuel and Phillip aren't the only odd, and kind of annoying, family members. As for me, I said it would be too hard for me to watch him be buried, but in actuality I just never wanted to see him again.

I put my honey blond hair into a loose ponytail. I marched over to my bed, the silk sheets feeling softer than normal, but just as my eyes start to flutter closed a hard knock hits my door and for a second I think it's going to break down.

I roll my eyes and get up. Before I get to the door I check myself in the vanity outlined with carved wood made to look like roses, once I spot my rash I get the only thing I could think of to cover it up with, a robe.

The fluffy robe feels good against my cold skin as I open the door, for a split second I think Samuel is standing there

and panic rushes over me as I think, how? But then as fast as the panic came it was gone as I realized it was his brother Phillip. Even though Phillip and Samuel are not twins their similarities are uncanny: the fiery red hair, freckles, and even the same eyebrow furrow which made both of them look forever angry. Confused, I opened the door wider and gestured him inside. Phillip is wearing the same thing he wore at the funeral, a jet black suit, but now he's loosened his tie and his hair is like an untamed flame.

"Excuse me for my appearance, but I have to talk to you about something."

I nodded even though this could have probably waited till morning. He looked around the room trying to think about what to say.

"Your room is awfully plain. You've been living here all your life, why not decorate?"

Is this what he wanted to talk to me about? He's not wrong, my room looks like no ones ever lived here. The only pop of color is the two red roses in a crystal vase.

"I suppose I should try to decorate, but I'm always so busy." I say in my sickly proper voice.

His brows furrow even more than usual and he purses his lips and his voice drops from its lighthearted tone to an angry tone making me flinch because it's so close to Samuel's voice.

"I saw the rash on your hand," Phillip says. "Don't try to play it off like you don't know what I'm talking about. I know about plants and young people like my brother don't just have heart attacks. Also Samuel was with you when he had his heart attack. Face it Victoria, all the evidence is stacked against you and I'm going to prove you're guilty."

My mouth hung open so wide it could have hit the floor, all my words died in my throat and came out as a weird noise I didn't even know I could make. He didn't even give me a fair chance to speak. He walked out after he said what he needed to say. I stood in the middle of my room dumbfounded, replaying what he said in my mind over and over until I started to feel nauseous.

That night I toss and turn in my bed not being able to get comfortable and my mind torturing me with the thoughts that I could be stripped of everything if anyone finds out about what I did.

Chapter 2

(a couple weeks ago)

All my weeks of planning have come down to this moment. If everything goes as planned then Samuel will soon be six feet underground. I've done extensive research on plants.

My mother, the queen, always uses herbal medicine. If she wasn't a royal I'm sure she'd be a doctor curing everyone in her village with her herbal remedies. Even though she uses them to cure people they could also kill just as easily as they heal. Through researching I have found the perfect plant, Oleander. Oleander can be used in herbal medicine but can go wrong very quickly.

When I was a child all I ever wanted was to be free from the restraints of being perfect and the closest I've ever come to doing that is finding all the secret passageways. A long time ago the passages were used by the servants but then a rumor spread about how the servants could sneak out of the castle and let's just say when the King found out he wasn't happy. All the passageways were closed up to ensure this wouldn't happen again, but luckily they forgot one and it headed straight to the kitchen. The passageways are eerie and dark with a lightbulb every ten feet or so. A flickering light tells me that I'm at the kitchen and the knot in my stomach has just tightened as I realize what I'm about to do.

They left me no choice, I repeat in my head over and over because when I step through that door there's no coming back. I take a deep breath and grab the silver door handle. It feels cool against my skin and I slowly open the door to an abandoned broom closet. It's stuffy in the closet and smells faintly of mildew. You can also hear the clattering of pots and pans and the main chef shouting commands. I've snuck into the kitchen a billion times.

When I was younger I would sneak into the kitchen just to observe everything that went on when they thought no royales were there. Sometimes I would overhear people talking about the royal family, but it was never anything good.

Every time someone would talk about the royal family my heart would beat a little faster anticipating what they were going to say, but no matter how hard I wished they would say something nice it never was. The kitchen workers would always say stuff like *they do nothing for our country or these wars are pointless they'll never end. Too many people have died from this.*

Even though people didn't like what we were doing-or should I say *my father* it was nice to hear things from their point of view so one day it would make me a great queen.

I check my brown satchel one more time to see if I have all the ingredients: Oleander seeds, Oleander leaves, cloth tea bag, and the herb grinder bowl.

My nerves run through my body as I adjust my black chef's apron and cream colored dress which feels like a potato sack. I got the clothes from the servants' corner, it was hanging in their community laundry room for anybody to

take.

I take my shaky hands and grab the cold door knob feeling weird against my sweaty palm. I keep my head down hoping not to blow my cover. The chattering of the people I heard before is now just background noise muffled by my panic. I get to a corner in the kitchen where no one can observe what I'm doing. I carefully put the tea together, the knot in my stomach loosening as I get closer and closer to putting this part of my life behind me.

I go back the way I came and switch back into my lavender dress with capped sleeves and the dress flows to my ankles. I take a deep breath before I enter his room, the door creaks open and his head whips toward me and I almost flinch with surprise.

"What took you so long?" Samuel grumbled and his red hair seemed to get brighter with anger.

"The tea took longer than expected to make dear," those sickly sweet words felt like poison in my mouth.

"What kind of wife are you if you can't do anything correctly?" he spat back at me. The only thing I could do without blowing my cover is just lower my head and place the silver platter with the tea on it on his desk.

As soon as I put the platter down he takes the tea cup and starts sipping, I walk away from the desk and I'm just about to leave when I see out of the corner of my eye Samuel grabbing his chest as if to tell his heart to keep beating.

After a couple of seconds, he falls on the floor trying to gasp for air like a fish out of water. I walk over to him. The Victoria he knows is gone, replaced by the real me and I grab his chin and say, "I guess there is one thing I can do correctly...revenge."

His body goes limp and that's how I know he's dead. I make my eyes pool up with fake tears and kneel at his side yelling for help.

Eventually guards come rushing in trying to revive him. One guard grabs me by the arm to drag me out of the room and I obey, wanting to get away from him as soon as possible.

Once back in my room I realize for the first time in a year I'm happy and free of his control of everything I do. I know tomorrow will be bad. People will ask me what happened and I'll tell them I think it was the stress, and I'll have to put up with the hugs and one to many people saying "sorry for your loss." I know after today my whole life will be different.

Chapter 3

(present day)

The next morning my brain is clouded with worry of what could happen if everyone found out what I did. In the midst of my worry I see a note slid under my door. I get an uneasy feeling in my stomach but stalk towards the door pushing the funny feeling out of the way. I opened the thick envelope to find a letter written by no other than Phillip. Victoria,

I don't buy your little perfect princess act and I'm going to make sure know one else does to. I am going to destroy your reputation so watch out princess.

-Phillip

His bad spelling makes me wonder if he ever passed the 2nd grade. I know I should be scared but looking at how he can't even spell "little" right makes me chuckle and gives me the confidence I needed to bring him down.

The rest of the day it was like I was there but I wasn't, I spent the whole day in my head coming up with things I could do to drag Phillip down but still keep my "little perfect princess act".

Some of my ideas I had come up with are, cry in front of Phillip and make him feel bad for thinking I murdered Samuel (even though I technically did), or I could tell everyone how bad Samuel was to me and confess that I murdered him and beg for forgiveness.

If I beg for forgiveness there would still be a chance that everything I have could be taken away from me and I don't want to take those chances. I feel like since I've gotten the letter there's a ticking time bomb in my head waiting for my reputation to be destroyed.

Once back in my room I see yet again another letter but this time it's placed nicely on my desk meaning that that snake was in my room, I wonder if he went through my things? I wouldn't put it past him. I debate whether I should open the letter or not, it's just Phillip trying to get in my head which clearly doesn't work when you spell like an eight year old.

Even though my brain tells me not to waste my time on this foolishness my hands are saying something way different as they carefully open the letter.

Victoria,

Hope you haven't missed me too much because I have a plan and you won't even see it coming.

-Phillip

At this point I'm surprised he can spell his own name. As I read over the letter again and laugh at his lack of a brain an idea pops into mine. All these "threatening" letters could actually help me bring him down. If I can play my cards right the Rumbold family will never step foot on my palace grounds again.

The next day I put my acting skills to the test and act sad and depressed because phase one of my plan has just started.

As my maids dress me for the day I can see their worried expressions which makes me feel slightly guilty for bringing them into this but I just keep telling myself it'll be over soon. The day passes by with what seems like millions of worried faces. As the day comes to an end I walk back to my room knowing that soon this battle will be over and I will emerge triumphantly, but then I see him stalking towards me and my happiness from five seconds ago is now filled with annoyance.

"Did you read my letters? I wrote them myself just for you princess," he said with a smug smile, one I've seen many times on Samuel's face.

"Really! I thought an eight year old wrote them, especially with that many spelling errors," I spit back. Then I see my parents strut towards my room, phase two of my plan, and I immediately start crying.

Phillip is baffled and my parents run towards me and ask repeatedly what's wrong and I say, choking back the fake tears, "Phillip is threatening me and sending me letters trying to destroy my reputation."

Phillip standing there is icing on the cake because my parents turn back to him with fire blazing in their eyes.

Phillip tries to explain himself to make it seem like he's innocent but fathers already called for the guards and who wouldn't trust the princess that everyone sees as someone who wouldn't even hurt a fly.

As Phillip is dragged away screaming and kicking his feet like a toddler I smirk at him and mouth "I win".

Once things have settled and all I could hear is the hum of crickets in the night and I start to think of how I've overcome the mental abuse of Samuel and the threats from Phillip. It really makes me think that if I overcame that, I can overcome anything. And just thinking about it gives me this new found confidence I didn't have before and I feel like I can take on the world.

KENNEDY, SAM**Sam Kennedy**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Pembroke Hill School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Piper Abernathy, Jason Lips

Category: Poetry

Hangman's Heed

Hangman, hangman, give all unto me
Step along and lend your voice,
 So I may set you free
Hangman, hangman, gather up your hair
Step along and keep your eyes
 Devoid of all despair
Hangman, hangman, swallow all your fear
Wander not beyond your post,
 For solace finds you here
Hangman, hangman, sell a silver mark
Mint a coin and carve your name
 To give the starving lark
Hangman, hangman, cry into my skin
Cover me in sinner's tears
 To nourish me within
Hangman, hangman, wade along the shore
Wail at the shades at dusk
 Who bear the noose you wore
Hangman, hangman, stray not from the path
Step along and heed my call
 Pray not invoke my wrath
Hangman, hangman, listen unto me
Step along and bleed upon
 My gallows-ground for me

KENNEDY, SAM**Sam Kennedy**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Pembroke Hill School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Piper Abernathy, Jason Lips

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

The Endless Dream

He waded through blood. It looked black in the dawnlight, the surface glinting with ribbons of gold. Ripples spread from his legs as he moved, black ripples that pushed gold ribbons to the bodies that lay around him. The blood ran thick, and corpses drifted in the current. One body brushed his foot.

The dead man wore armor, strong plates of bronze lashed over layers of cloth. It hadn't saved him. Nothing could have. The bronze had peeled apart like a brittle leaf, and from it now ran a rivulet of blood to meet the river. His eyes stared open towards the sky, where the clouds flowed like serpent scales, or feathers. They glowed in the light of the rising sun, rippling like the hide of some great . . .

Softness touched his hand, a little prickle of silk. He reached out to catch it. A feather, black against the dawn. He turned it, iridescent with the tilt of his fingers.

And then it was gone, and he held his spear again. It was black too, blackened with the blood of the dead. He tried to wipe away the darkness, and his hand came away streaked with red. It would take time. That was something he had: time. That was the only thing he had. That, and his spear.

So he sat on a stray corpse, sloshing through the blood, and began his task. Far ahead, a treeline hid the sun. As he clawed at his spear, he looked up to see if the sun had risen at all. He found a knife in the corpse's belt and with it carved flakes of dried blood from his spearhead. They fell, one by one, like autumn leaves, like spring petals, like feathers.

He swam upward, surging through the water, soundless but for his struggle against the current. Darkness swallowed the depths behind him, so he swam faster. His breath left him, fleeing to the surface, where the waves cast rivers of light down upon him. A silhouette floated above him, a figure darkened by the glow around it. Something tickled his feet. A feather? No, a flower. It was black.

He blinked, and he scraped away the last flake of blood. Sore legs lifted him upright. The corpse shifted beneath him as he rose. There was a hill to his left, in the distance. Half of its slope shone like rust in the rising sun. Slowly, he made his way through the field of blood and bodies. Crows circled overhead.

It didn't take him long to reach the hill, or it took him an eternity. No matter. He stepped out of the blood and onto the grass, brown and dry. It crunched underfoot and squelched as he left behind dark footprints. He stained a path to the hill's summit, where he sat and rested his spear on his knees. The sun hadn't risen at all.

"It doesn't serve you to go on like this."

He started, turned to see a figure sitting beside him. "Mother?" His voice was slight, hoarse, a whisper.

"See what you've done?" She stared at the black fields, glinting in the dawnlight.

"I-I saved you, Mother. I saved us all."

"Did you?"

"I slew them all for you. I saved you, Mother."

"And you'll save us all again. Won't you?" Her skin shriveled, cracking and billowing like snakeskin. She crumbled.

He dropped his spear, clutching at her form, but it dissolved beneath his fingers and blew away with a stray gust of wind. His hands raked the air, then his face. His fingers were warm to the touch, and when his hands came away, the breeze made the blood feel cold on his cheeks. Did he feel it?

Something rang, far away. It was the tinkle of a faint bell, a sound black as blood, as death, as feathers.

The mists rolled in, and with them rose the dead. Wails filled the dawn. The corpses drew their weapons. Horses choked awake from their slumber, and grim riders mounted them. Banners lifted, warhorns blew, and ranks of soldiers crested distant hills.

Tears cut lines down his cheeks. He clenched his teeth and screamed. The sound of his agony met the roar of armies.

Waves of spearmen coalesced, forming walls of shields that charged him up the hill. On every side they came, shields glinting together like golden ribbons. He waited until they were almost upon him, picked up his spear, and spoke a word, an old word. That word was his as well, and when he spoke it, the grey light curled around him. His spear shone with it. He blasted through a shieldwall with a swing, whirling like lightning. Where his spear moved, a trail of grey light followed, blazing dull against the glinting bronze. He cut down man after man, opening throats and bellies and skulls. He didn't scream as he did so, as corpses fell like leaves around him. With every death, he saved himself a little more. He saved Esthonia. He saved Mother. He saved Father. He saved his brothers and his sisters. He saved the spirits of the trees and the rocks and the flames and the wind and the sea.

He saved thousands.

The grey light faded, and he waded through blood. Ripples of gold spread out from his boots. His spear was stained again. Something stirred in his mind. The color blue. The color green. Blue water. Green grass. Ripples of water, not blood.

It was dusk. His feet nestled in the sand, buried farther and farther with each cold wave. The wind had whipped up the river today, tossing little crests and ripples around and around his ankles. River spirits leapt and danced, kissing his feet with their fins. He lay back on the shore, staring at the swaying trees and the clouds beyond. He found shapes in them. There was a bull, there was a sack of spilling coins, there was a snake, there was a spoon, there was a fortress, there was a moth. He sighed and stood, slipping out of the sand. He dried his feet with a cloth, picked up his walking staff, and trod barefoot through the rushes and up the path to where his cottage rested overlooking the river. Smoke puffed out the chimney, and the hearth flickered from within. He touched the trees around his house, spoke to them kindly. He smelled the new blossoms and smiled as the flower spirits took flight, fluttering around him like moths to a flame. Leaf spirits joined them, swirling out over the river with a sudden breeze. He entered his cottage, tended his fire, set his pot to boil, and sat with a creak in his chair. He waited as the sun went down, then decided he ought to get to work. He chopped some vegetables on his table and sliced a warm loaf of rye. He tossed the vegetables in the pot as the water began to boil, droplets hissing on the fire. That was strange; he'd forgotten something. Chuckling at his poor memory, he hobbled over to the shelf and grabbed at the pouch of salt. It fell, spilling across the floor.

"My, my," he chided himself. He bent slowly to clean the mess, scraping it together with his hands. Something caught his eye. A floorboard was loose beneath the shelf. He pushed aside the rushes and pulled at the board. It came loose easily. Beneath where it had been, a small box lay tucked away in the shadows. The boiling water must have been overflowing; it spat and hissed as it fell on the fire. He lifted the box out of the hole and examined it: nothing special. It was wooden, familiar.

He opened it. Inside lay a flower shaped like a bell, black as blood. When he picked it up, it tinkled faintly. The sound echoed around the room, chimed quietly from the forest outside, grew louder and louder. He stood. The flower was gone. The pot was overflowing. He crossed the room and flung open the door. Blood trickled in through the threshold. It was night now, and the mists were rolling in.

KHAN, ALEEZAY**Aleezay Khan**

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

academic validation

I think we all need hope in reasons for something to live for. Because I know when I was drowning I felt like simply breathing was a task. I was being held down choked and drowned in a sea of meaninglessness. All my life there was one thing I had always wanted which was a purpose or a reason to live. I soon found that through my passion for swimming to horseback riding the thrill of jumping and winning. As well, through my grades and my parents' expectations. I tied myself to academic validation. I thought my only purpose was to get straight A's and to perform well in my athletic and academic endeavors. In addition, it was also to exceed my parents' expectations and everyone else's.

At that point, I had lost love in everything that had become a period of loss dedicated to morning myself. The reality was I lost myself in the pool of learning a new language, getting straight A's, and getting into a good school. What didn't help was that I was already a perfectionist the minute I was brought into this world. Which made me perfect myself to the point where I couldn't recognize myself. I was so focused on my grades and my performances that when I did mess up I felt not worthy of life. I felt as if the life of joy I once had been sucked out of me.

My academic and athletic validation is what I prided myself on, being a child prodigy was what I was known for. Hence, it wasn't easy. because I had put this weight on myself to where I needed to do something so sentimental and extraordinary that it would wow everyone. I so thought that was my purpose of life of meaning.

Therefore, if I couldn't live up to that expectation I am replaceable. Because Harvard doesn't accept "ordinary". My heart has always been set on going to Harvard. I believe the real reason is so I can prove to myself. That I am worth something. That a panel of administrators picked me and that my application was supreme. Which would fulfill my life's meaning.

Alternatively, a few months later I realized my life's meaning was through my friends. Through the roses that lie outside my bedroom window. Through swimming as well as through the turtle that occasionally visits me. Most importantly though laughing with my Father. Also, debating with my Mother about current events. Through being a person my younger brother can rely on. Also, through the lens of my love of writing.

So to all the burnt-out people in this world that have the need for academic and/or Athletic validation. That believe that this is your sole purpose, your purpose does not lie through that. Neither are you worth any less if you mess up. Your purpose is through touching people's lives for good and to find joy in the little things even the silly ones. Because even the greatest people in history needed something more in life than to be great. In conclusion, you need something more in life for your own stability.

KHAZEN, EMARY**Emary Khazen**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Christ Prince Of Peace School, Manchester, MO

Educators: Amy Anderson, Amy Anderson

Category: Poetry

Living LifeLiving Life

What does a straight-A say?
 Is it the ripping of hair,
 The fretting over small, standard texts,
 The beading of sweat on brows,
 While haunting white light
 Rains in through starry blackness?
 Is this vivid terror made
 To sustain such dim reputation?
 Or is it a devilish choice,
 Made by man to stop minutes "wasted,"
 While this other pants in human fear?
 One paper passed,
 One call composed,
 Then later one high grade shown.
 Almighty is this letter's strike
 In the selective, bold eyes of worth.
 You see,
 Dictators are these expectations;
 We cower beneath their omnipotent sway.
 To please is prosperity and gold arrayed before.
 We execute by however much it takes;
 We implement power by whatever makes.

Now, who is a gymnast to the world?
 Is it the hair a tight, glossy crown
 And a leotard adorned in fairy's dust?
 Or is it that woman,
 Sweating, bleeding,
 A million times a week,
 Made not weak,
 But hit her peak,
 In integrity, grit, without another's peek?
 You looked her over until performed outright
 And then you all bathed in her pride-filled glory.

Who are those athletes
 Who decided to defy sexualization?
 Whose motive beats any ancient, stereotypical belief?
 For their courage, they got fined.
 How can we be so adaptably blind?

Who was that woman with darker skin
 And an attitude of steadfast valiance?
 Who was that woman
 Who didn't give up,
 Didn't give her seat up,
 And will forever be the face of a crowd?

What is this world
 Where our past selves,
 What we aspire to be,
 Our reputations,
 Our sex,
 Our exteriors,
 Define us?

An aristocratic man oppresses,
 Stoic expression covering up no sympathy.
 With unwatchful eyes around,
 Does he still not cry about his cruelty?
 Does he not see
 Our purity,
 Our livelihood,
 Our beautiful diversity?
 We smile and love;
 We frown and hate.
 We are together,
 United,
 Named at the Founders' intent.
 This is US,
 "We the People."
 There is no breaking us.

The answer lies in prejudices we pass
 And seeing what lurks beyond our one-sided eye.
 Fortunately, from the depths of our despair,
 God directed down His mortal repair.
 You took in my immigrant grandfather,
 Burdened with traumatic past-life.
 You united over 9/11 deaths,
 Comforting friends and foes alike.
 This is no fiction, America!
 Though, do these generous accounts
 Outface any appalling, enacted ignorance?

The future rests upon our shoulders,
 A continuous narration of the never-ending present.
 Our predecessors' sight lurks beneath heaven's gates.
 They watch us advance their legacy,
 Manifest all they never could.
 But our posterity has eyes.
 We inspire their lives.
 This is not living history anymore;
 History solely has revolutionary eyes.
 This is our legacy, here and now,
 A world forevermore.
 We have our marker;
 It's how we decide to draw.

Black is how we could somberly paint,
Or instead in a rainbow of vivid awe!
We are alight and ready,
Alight and ready,
Alight and ready,
Alight and ready.
Still, the days tick,
From the minutes we do not pick,
But a finger not to prick,
But a finger not to prick,
But a finger not to prick,
But a finger not to prick.
So heighten your senses and see me stand!
Make your life far more than grand!
Raise your banners as Joan without a knife
Because it's time to make parables living life.

KING, KAITLYN**Kaitlyn King**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Revenge Essay

A Lesson From the Court and the Sport

The overhead lights shined down upon me. The lines on the court blurred as my feet propelled me down the floor. The soft leather of the ball grazed my fingertips in between its pounds on the wood. The hoop stood, in all its glory, only a few feet in front of me, calling my name. Nothing exhilarated me more than basketball. Hearing the squeak of shoes against the court, I started and opened my eyes suddenly. I looked down at my stationary feet, then up at the dozens of girls around me, and then towards my coach in the middle of all of us.

“On the court, we’re all equal. Everyone will be getting the same opportunity here,” he declared with a booming voice.

“Thank goodness,” I thought to myself.

There’s nothing that makes me more indignant than injustice. The concept of getting what one deserves is ingrained in the human mind from the very beginning. When little kids get their toys taken from them, they scream, “That’s not fair!” When people receive a reward that’s not rightfully theirs, their peers become aggrieved, all too aware of their unworthiness. When people work hard, pouring every ounce of themselves into something, and they still aren’t rewarded, the fury gushes out.

I had quite the vision for my first high school sporting experience. I wanted it all: the varsity spot as a freshman, the recognition, the adoration, the praise. As I stood awkwardly under the basket on the first day of tryouts, glancing around at the girls and trying to gauge the competition, I breathed in the musty air of the old gym and visualized myself scoring the game winning three-pointer in the last half second of a game. I was ready to put my dream into action.

During the rest of tryouts week, to say I worked hard would be an understatement. I went home everyday, my shirt thoroughly soaked through with sweat, my mask damp and sticking to my face, and a wide grin under it because I truly loved the sport.

Plus, part of the reason for that grin was the fact that I was killing it. The ball would bounce off the backboard, and I appeared right there underneath, launching myself up for the rebound. The squeak of my shoes would echo throughout the whole gym as I shuffled back and forth on defense, letting no one by me. I could feel the whoosh of air passing by my face as I sprinted down the court and made a dazzling move that ended with a perfectly executed layup. The coaches would make eye contact with each other, admiration in their faces, when I sunk a three-pointer. I walked out of that Parkway Central gym on Friday knowing I had put my best effort in and that I was bound to get the best result out of it. I could practically feel the cool dry-fit material of the varsity uniforms on my skin, hear the student section roaring my name, and see the looks of disbelief on people’s faces when they find out that I’m a freshman.

That varsity spot was in the bag.

The bag must’ve had a hole in it. I walked into practice on Monday, played my usual game, and the coaches were calling girls out into the hall at the end. I was one of the last ones to be called, and as my anxiety grew, I had to keep reminding myself of the age-old saying about saving the best for last. Nobody ever said that sayings were one-hundred percent correct all the time.

Finally, my name was called. I tried to walk nonchalantly towards the door, but I could feel goosebumps on my arms despite the stuffy atmosphere of the gym. I was giddy with anticipation, trying to cover up my impatience during the small talk that preceded the placement.

After what felt like an eternity, my coach said, “We’ve agreed that the best fit for you this year will be on the freshman team.”

I tried not to let the spark in my eyes vanish as I eagerly nodded my head in feigned enthusiasm, quivering lips hidden under my mask. It’s said that “ignorance is bliss,” and this saying I agree with much more than the “save the

best for last” one.

I expressed my fake excitement for the upcoming season and thanked my coaches. As I walked out of the wretched gym, I glared at the stupid orange spheres and ugly white roped nets, the only feeling vaguely resembling happiness resulting from the fact that half of my face was covered.

Laying in bed that night, I stared at the ceiling and all I could think about was how unfair it was. I had worked extremely hard and provided an excellent display of talent, yet I wasn't given my desired results. The program didn't cut people, so I could've just as well played horribly and ended up with the same outcome. My work was for nothing, down the drain.

After reflecting for a while, I woke up the next morning. I still possessed the dejected and somber emotions, but I also felt something even stronger: vengeance. The events from yesterday came surging into my mind like a forest fire, consuming everything in its path, and I felt blinded by this rage. Grinding my teeth and breathing heavily, the fire devoured me and vivid images filled my mind. I imagined myself walking into practice and throwing my bag and shoes down, then stomping off as I roared, “I quit!” I imagined my coach sitting there, incredulous, breaking down with worry about how much the loss of me would hurt the program. I wanted him to feel the type of hurt he caused me. An even more devious plot filled my head: I wanted to put in zero effort, to do absolutely nothing, so that my lack of performance would hurt the coach even more than me leaving.

These feelings swarmed around in my brain, pleasing me as I envisioned the type of pain I had the power to inflict on my offenders. In the back of my mind, I could see how out of character this was for me, but it was as if I had no control over my wild thoughts. A study published in the journal *Science* in 2004 shows PET scans of people who wanted payback with extreme activity in the dorsal striatum, an area of the brain associated with reward processing that makes revenge appear attractive (Thornton 3). However senseless my desire for revenge was, my brain made me see it as a most captivating idea. All of the warnings I had heard over the years about the detrimental effects of revenge exited my mind. In that moment, it was my one desire, greater than anything I had ever felt. The thought overtook my mind and I could not do anything to suppress it. I knew that thirsting for revenge was an immature way to view the situation, but wanting revenge is innate. “The impulse for revenge is potent and natural” (Brownlee & McGraw 3). Psychologist Michael McCullough says that it's even as natural as grief, happiness, fear, and hunger (Thornton 3). My desire to get revenge on my coaches for where they placed me was natural too. I felt as if revenge had made itself at home inside of me, without my permission. Although I hadn't let it in voluntarily, it felt as if it belonged there. I couldn't regulate the way I was feeling. I couldn't regulate the thoughts I had of causing my coaches angst and torment. “We can't control when toxic emotions flood our minds, but we can control what we do in response to them.” (Cox, 3) Staring at the wall, I came to terms with the fact that this new feeling would stay inside of me, whether I liked it or not. However, I also realized that I retained control over my actions moving forward. I could choose what I wanted to do next. Still sitting on my bed, still deluged with vengeance, I inhaled slowly and then exhaled until I felt my diaphragm release its tension. Thoughtfully, I came up with another plan, different from the first two. I decided to focus on the one aspect that I could control in the whole situation: my response.

The 17th century English poet and orator George Herbert once said, “Living well is the best revenge” (Cox 2). I resolved to take this path. My first course of action was to stay on the team. I still possessed that red-hot desire for revenge, but I settled on a different approach, rather than the pulverizing form that most revenge comes in. Dr. Meredith Thompson, associate professor in the Department of Management at Utah State University's School of Business says, “If somebody tries to take revenge and have a more future-oriented approach, that kind of thinking tends to orient the person to the future and can make them stronger, happier and healthier” (Cox 2). If I was not able to change the past, I had no choice but to act differently in the time ahead. Stronger, happier, and healthier sounded better than the anger brewing inside of me. I looked forward to the future by making a plan of what to do next. My objective was to prove Coach wrong. That natural revenge was indeed still present, but I used it as a source of motivation. “It's not about trying to ignore negative feelings entirely, which studies show isn't effective anyway” says Caroline Cox (Cox 2). Since I could not rid myself of the negative feelings, I figured they could at least be beneficial to me. They could inspire me to work towards the change I needed to achieve my goal. They could drive me to put the effort in and push me to my full potential.

Here started the kickoff of my response. That day, I strutted into practice with my head held high and a smug smile under my mask. The balls looked a bit less stupid, the nets a bit less ugly. I knew that I possessed the skill, talent, and effort, and if my coach couldn't see that, then that was his fault. If it was even possible, I worked harder than I had before at tryouts. I paid attention to details I previously didn't know existed. I pushed myself to the limit, my shirt even sweatier and my mask stickier than before. This time, my smile existed as less of a grin and more of a smirk, an effect of the desire for revenge that motivated my exceptional performance.

One day, a few weeks later, my coach pulled me aside after practice. Making eye contact with him, a rush of *deja vu* overcame me as the partially smothered fire sparked again. However, his words acted like cool water on the

fire as he complimented my work and expressed his unexpected delight in my recent playing.

“Honestly, you’ve got one of the best shots in the program,” he had admitted frankly.

After the conversation, I sauntered away, the smirk still plastered to my face. I had succeeded in surprising him, and the blaze became tamed slightly.

I continued to play my heart out that season, pushed by the intangible force of the need for vengeance. As I raced down the court, legs pumping relentlessly and ball pounding against that wood floor as if it was the very heartbeat inside of me, I caught a glimpse of the coach leaning casually with his arms crossed in the doorway to the gym. I came to an abrupt stop, my shoes squeaking, and effortlessly pushed off my legs and let the ball sail from my fingertips. My shooting hand dangling in the air following my shot, I turned my head towards him and locked eyes as the swish of the net resounded throughout the gym. The cheering of the crowd became muffled and it felt like Coach and I were the only ones present. As his eyebrows raised in pleasant surprise, I broke off the cool stare and noise flooded my ears as I jogged down the court as if nothing had happened. I was impressive, and it seemed as if he was finally acknowledging that.

After that game, I was walking out of the gym with high spirits and a bounce in my step. A voice I knew all too well halted me in my tracks.

“Hey, wait,” Coach called as he signaled for me to come over.

As I walked towards him, I wasn’t anxious like that one day. My heart burned as his demoting words repeated in my head but simmered down as my three-pointer and personal best performance from the game I had just played filled my mind instead. When I stopped in front of him, I genuinely smiled.

“Great game today. If you continue to work this hard over the summer, you have a strong chance at making it on varsity next year.”

As excitement saturated my face, I turned and coughed in an effort to hide my surprised emotions. It seemed as though my heart could’ve beaten through my chest at that moment.

“Oh, t-thank you,” I stuttered, trying to remember how to speak correctly. “I really appreciate that.”

He offered me a warm smile which I returned to the best of my abilities, and with a pat on my back, he parted. I stood there in awe for a few seconds, not fully believing that my original goal was so close within my reach, and then shook off my torpor and exited the gym.

A few days after that conversation, I was once again at practice. The buzzer blared and Coach yelled, “Drink break!” as he retreated into the hallway with the other coaches. I was headed towards the bleachers where my teammates stood gathered with their bottles when I realized that I still had my ball. I turned around and jogged towards the rack where the rest of the basketballs rested and placed it in the open spot. Just as I was about to turn around, I heard my name said in a volume just low enough that I knew I was being spoken about, not to. The voices were coming from the hallway that the coaches had retreated to. Pivoting back to the rack, I adjusted my ball a few times as I strained my ears.

“Yeah, in hindsight, it’s not where she needed to be,” I heard, the information barely audible. “Her skill level and work ethic are on a greater level than the freshman team and we should’ve put her higher.”

My eyes widened and I could again feel my heart rate increasing. I forced myself to turn away from the voices and move my feet towards the bleachers, one in front of the other.

I sat down with my water and reflected on what I had overheard. It was comforting to have that approval, but it didn’t affect me the way I thought it would. I thought it would fill the empty void in me and appease my burning soul. However, I realized that I had already done that. It wasn’t from some overheard feedback or shallow praise. I fulfilled myself through my own hard work and the internal growth that accompanied it. I didn’t need affirmation from anyone else to know that I had earned that approval; I already knew it within me.

I thought back to when I was first wronged and how the idea of quitting or not trying in order to exact revenge was so appealing but how, ultimately, I had settled on proving my coach wrong. A *New York Times* article says, “Seeking revenge or payback may seem like a good idea at the time, but in the long run it’ll likely only do us a disservice. The better option is to turn inward, finding the root of that feeling and either using it as a learning experience or warning flag as we move forward to something better” (Cox 3). I had sought out the root of my revenge and used it to drive my effort and work ethic. It made me the bigger person. I had used it to move towards something better: self growth. I was elated that I selected the path I did. It felt as if a weight that was holding me down had been lifted from my shoulders. It felt as if I had been stuck underground, fighting my way up, and that I was finally above ground, even with everyone else. It felt as if I had finally gotten my revenge, but it was even more sweet knowing I had done it by taking the higher road.

The feelings of anger at my injustice were always there, no doubt about it; but I used that desire for revenge to look towards the future and to motivate myself. I went out of that season feeling satisfied with the work I had put in due to my change in mindset that brought me the outcome I had originally wanted. I knew this was all thanks to the fact that I stayed and kept working and never gave up even when all I wanted to do was cause my coach pain.

George Herbert was right: living well really is the best revenge. I strutted out of the smelly gym that day with a grin on my face and a newfound appreciation for those orange spheres and white roped nets that taught me more about life off the court than on it.

KING, MALISSA**Malissa King**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Marilyn Yung

Category: Poetry

You Deceived Me**You Deceived Me**

The ground is spinning beneath me
 I shut my eyes and let myself go
 Your lies were too clever for me to see

You said our friendship was meant to be
 So I believed everything you said
 The ground is spinning beneath me

Now because of you, I lay here dead
 All those years we spent just you and me
 Your lies were too clever for me to see

You said I would only have to agree
 It would guarantee us forever after death
 The ground is spinning beneath me

I sold you my soul thinking it would be free
 Now I lay here begging with every plea
 Your lies were too clever for me to see

I thought you were my friend no one could see
 Turns out you were the devil in disguise
 The ground is spinning beneath me
 Your lies were too clever for me to see

Death Is A Silent Drum (Inspired by Metaphore Dice)

Death is a silent drum
 Every moment we get closer
 Our drum beating with each second
 our drum getting faster
 Our hearts can silence the beating of the drum
 With the beating of life
 But it can't silence the lost time
 Our life slipping away
 Our drum beating louder
 Until it stops
 Then he comes
 He was waiting

Listening
 Waiting for the drum to stop
 Now he's here
 Only then you realize
 He was holding the sticks
 He was beating on the drum
 He made the drum stop

Alone With Your Thoughts

You think of many things when you're alone
 It's the silence that allows you to cook up those scenarios in your head
 Thinking about all those things you could've said

Then there are sometimes when you sit in silence
 Thinking of the things you did wrong
 Making you feel like you just don't belong

Sometimes silence is deafening
 So listen to silence instead
 Because after all,

Those thoughts are just in your head

A Vacant Wasteland (Inspired by Metaphore Dice)

Our memory can be a vacant wasteland
 Unable to remember the importance things
 So you're left with the tiny details that don't matter

Our memory can be a vacant wasteland
 Everyday it lets an important memory tumble out
 Like grains of sand in an hourglass

Our memory can be a vacant wasteland
 But sometimes a flower lies in the center
 The one important memory that you won't forget
 The memory that lasts forever

Veterans

You might just see a man
 But we see a hero
 You put your life on the line
 Everytime you laced up your boots
 You continued to help us
 Even the new recruits
 You showed them the way
 As you fought for us everyday
 And for that,
 There is no way
 That our appreciation is enough
 So far a thank you is all I can say
 So thank you
 Happy Veterans Day

KRUGER, BENJAMIN**Benjamin Kruger**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Lunch Table

The Lunch Table

“Hey! What’s up?” My voice quivered with excitement. Years of overthinking and countless sleepless nights had been in anticipation for this moment. Upon hearing my voice, she turned around and her eyes found mine. Instantly I found myself infatuated; I could stare into her eyes for hours and still be unsure of their color. Amidst the rowdy environment that can typically be associated with a high school hallway, she began to speak. Despite the cacophony around us I could hear only her.

“Hey! I haven’t seen you in forever.”

Separated by a devastating pandemic and impaired by social barriers, we had been apart for almost two years. However, in a single moment all of the adversity and heartbreak that I faced dissolved. I finally reunited with the figure of my romantic musings.

We strolled through the crowded hallway engaging in a simple conversation. I struggled to keep my tone neutral in a futile attempt to hide my emotions.

“So how are your classes going?” I said as confidently as possible, hoping to eliminate all traces of boyishness from my voice.

With a hint of a smile on her face, she replied, “They’re not much fun this year. Also we’ve got a ton of homework to do which stinks.”

Enthusiastic to keep the conversation going, I immediately agreed.

“Also I wanted to ask yo--” An unpleasant ding interrupted me, signaling that it was time to make my way to lunch.

“Umm, nevermind. I’ll see you later.”

I walked into the lunch room and found my usual group sitting at the same table, in the same spots, eating the same foods. Despite the consistency, the entire atmosphere felt different. The whole world seemed... sweeter.

“Guys! Guess who I was just talking to!” Unlike my previous conversation, my enthusiasm was met with sympathy and pitying glances.

“Dude you’re gonna want to see this.” My friend put his hand on my shoulder and showed me his phone. The phone glitched for a moment, as if the universe was telling me to look away. Then the video played, a simple tik tok dance of her. She had a big smile on her face and her arm around a tall boy.

Her smile; once one of my romantic ambitions, now the cause of my anguish. I buried my head in my hands and pulled my hoodie tightly down to cover my face. In less than an instant, my despair had been replaced with a new feeling; a sinister feeling. Silently I screamed into my arm, wailing every curse word known to humankind. I felt like I couldn’t breathe. I wanted to rip off that tall guy’s arm.

Around me I could hear sounds of laughter. Giggling, my friends exclaimed, “Did you see that?”

All I saw was red.

While this reaction may seem unwarranted or even abnormal, Jim Thornton points out a perfectly logical reason behind feelings of revenge in his article “Revenge.” Thornton argues that revenge is a biological instinct stemming from a particular part of the brain. In his article, Thornton uses evidence from a 2004 study that places test subjects in a situation where they have been wronged by their peers and have the opportunity to exact revenge. As said in the article, “The PET scans of players with a strong desire to punish displayed an intense surge of activity in an evolutionary older brain area known as the dorsal striatum.” (Thornton 114). The evidence from this study suggests that the dorsal striatum is the part of the brain responsible for feelings of revenge. Thornton goes on to say, “No wonder the anticipation of revenge seems so sweet and seductive: Our brain circuitry is designed to find it so.” (Thornton 114). Not only does this study point out that revenge is a purely natural emotion in humans, it illuminates the reasoning behind the pleasure that can be found in vengeful acts.

If revenge is truly a natural response that stems from the dorsal striatum, then perhaps my abnormal response wasn't abnormal at all. Just as the players displayed urges to punish their transgressor, an unyielding need to exact revenge had taken root in me. For me, the enticement of moving on or forgiving the one that had wronged me, paled in comparison to the appeal of exacting vengeance. My dorsal striatum asserted that I must punish the one who has hurt me. More than a need, I hungered for the chance to heed the will of my dorsal striatum. I would have done anything for her. Now, I would do anything to avenge myself.

When a person feels that they have been wronged, they often find themselves unable to think of anything but their transgressor. Thornton addresses this concept in his article by quoting Arlene Stillwell, Ph.D. Stillwell says, "When we harm someone else, we tend to downplay it and distance ourselves from the seriousness of our transgression." (Thornton 116) She goes on to say, "On the other hand, when we're harmed in the very same way, we see ourselves as victims of a grave injustice." (Thornton 116)

While I wallowed in my anguish, the guy that had wronged me lived completely oblivious to the pain he caused. In contrast to his blind state, he and his transgressions had saturated my mind. To me, this guy had committed a crime worse than murder. To me, this guy had inflicted pain worse than death. To me, it seemed as though the world had ceased to spin.

I stumbled through the halls and struggled to keep my eyes open in class. With the viewing of a single tik tok dance, my entire world had changed. Years of infatuation amounted to absolutely nothing. In my mind, the world had been spinning when I was with her. Now, the world hadn't just stopped spinning, the world was going to end.

Caroline Cox and her article "Ever Wanted to Get Revenge? Try This Instead," proposes an interesting take on revenge. Rather than indulging in vengeful behaviour, Cox makes the argument that the best way to deal with feelings of revenge is to improve oneself. Cox says, "Think of it this way: You could use a feeling of envy to examine whether or not it illuminates what you value and prioritize, or you could spend time dwelling, ruminating and calculating a plan to hurt someone in an attempt to quash the feeling. Which seems more likely to be effective?" (Cox 2). Cox points out that vengeful feelings can consume a person and lead them down a dark path of violence and depression. While revenge may be a powerful emotion, it is better to deal with it constructively than to give in to destructive impulses. Cox explains that "the better option is to turn inward, finding the root of that feeling and either using it as a learning experience or warning flag as we move forward to something better." (Cox 3).

Cox and her article construct two options to handle feelings of revenge: the first is to continue to be dominated by feelings of vengeance, and the second is to better yourself. I had the choice to continue my obsession with those who had sandbagged me, or to work to improve myself. However, the latter is no easy feat and oftentimes is the more difficult of the two options. It should be noted that Cox exerts that revenge is a consuming, destructive, and dominating emotion. It is much easier to stay consumed and dominated by revenge.

"Yo, you tryna hit the gym with me tonight?" I looked up in surprise to find my friend looking at me inquisitively.

"Umm, maybe I've got a lot of homework."

"Nah dude, you've gotta come with me. I'll pick you up around 6."

And just like that, something had changed. A new morning routine began. A sudden desire to improve my life in all aspects had emerged. I packed up my lunch, and sat down at a new table.

However nice and appealing this scenario would be, it is an absolute fantasy.

In reality, two weeks had passed and a pattern began to emerge. The same drowsy morning routine. The same stressful classes. The same pernicious feeling that I had been wronged.

A reality in which one is able to swap their pain and vengeance for a desire to improve, is simply unattainable. While Thornton and Cox's articles proposed vastly different perspectives on revenge, they are equal in viewing revenge as a dominating and immensely powerful emotion. While bettering oneself may be a constructive way to deal with revenge, it is unrealistic when compared to the utter domination that comes with vengeance.

I still see her sometimes, walking down the halls listening to music. With our masks on, I can never tell if she's smiling. Perhaps she's reminiscing over the moments we spent together, but more likely she's simply moved on. I yearn so badly for that. An opportunity to forget my obsession, diffuse the revenge that has taken hold of me, and to move on with my life.

Cox and her article conclude that moving on is the most effective and productive way to handle revenge. When a person is wronged by another, they find that they cannot be successful until they have resolved their vengeful thoughts. Cox points out that "It [revenge] tends to anchor that person to the past." (Cox 2). Throughout her article, Cox stresses that retaliation for an injustice is not the answer to resolving feelings of revenge. Instead, she argues that moving on is the only healthy way to find retribution. Cox says, "Letting go of toxic feelings can give you an added bonus of making you feel powerful - not by exerting power over someone else, but power over yourself." (Cox 2).

In comparison to the previous statement, there are three options that come with revenge; obsession, improvement, and moving on. In my case, obsession only results in pain. As I continued to formulate my revenge, I

became distracted and distanced from reality. In my case, improvement is simply unattainable. The domination and consumption that comes with revenge surpasses all attempts at bettering myself. In my case, the third option may be the solution to my revenge.

Once again I walked into lunch. Behind me she was standing with her arms crossed.

“Hey! what's up?”

At the sound of her voice I stopped. There was a sense of familiarity in her words, a sense of *deja vu*. I had been in this hallway before. We had talked through this conversation before. I had been broken this way before.

Slowly I shook my head and walked into the lunchroom. I walked past my usual friends, sitting in the same spots, eating the same foods; but something felt different. The entire atmosphere felt... cleaner.

I sat down at my new lunch table.

KUSNETZKY, MADISON**Madison Kusnetzky**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Define Perfect

Define Perfect

The definition of perfect is, having all the required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics. Most people don't have all of the "requirements" to be perfect. There is no need to compare yourself to others. *Be you*, is what your family tells you, but you probably think you can't "Be you." Honestly, being you is hard in today's society because most people say they must have the best skin, or they need to get skinnier thighs. Everyone, including me, thinks we have to have the perfect body to "fit in." Nobody can look the same as someone else because that is not you. You are perfect in your own way. Perfect is different for everyone; you just don't know it.

I look into the mirror and tell myself to do better and look better. I feel like I'm not good enough most of the time. I feel like I have to be like everyone else so I do not look like an outcast. That makes me really stressed out every day. Sometimes I can't handle the stress I put on myself to look like everyone else. Or that everyone is skinnier than me or looks better than me in certain types of clothes. This makes my self-love get lower and lower, and it does not make me feel any better about myself. I define myself as someone I am not, and it hurts because I know this is not the real me; in fact, it's the fake me. I put on a mask and push through the pain that I have every day. It honestly hurts me inside more and more. When I see new trends or new clothes, I try to be like everyone else so I get the new clothes that I see, so I can "fit in" with the crowd. Having many other stressful things like school and sports and even going through some rough times in my life does not help me be someone I am not.

Towards the end of September, I went through some really tough times. Nothing was working and I was breaking inside. I acted like nothing was wrong, but when I was alone I could not help but sit there and cry about everything I did wrong. During that time, I tried to make my body perfect, and let's just say that did not go too well. It hurt me thinking I looked "fat" compared to everyone else. Yes, I still feel like this, and it is very hard to overcome it, but now I do not try to become someone I am not. I do not try to change everything about me, I just roll with it.

Many people think they have to look like the person who we think is perfect. Maybe it is a celebrity, or it could even be the most "popular" person at your school. Usually, we all want blonde hair, blue eyes, and all sorts of things changed to our bodies, but changing your body to look different is not okay. When most people are focusing on trying to be perfect and have the perfect body, they do not eat much, maybe some carrot sticks every day or an apple. That can harm your body. Starting eating disorders because you want to have the "perfect body" is not so perfect. Having eating disorders can lead you down multiple different paths; it can harm the heart and teeth, as well as other parts of your body. It could eventually lead to depression. With depression, you could have suicidal thoughts that lead to more serious medical conditions. Trying to be someone you are not can harm your mental health. As we all know, mental health is a huge part of our lives, both physically and mentally.

Most people think they have to be perfect because they think they are not enough for someone or themselves. They also have been told that they aren't acceptable. Being told that you aren't good for their standards can hurt inside and out. It makes you feel insecure about yourself, and being insecure about yourself puts you in many different places. Maybe you could care less, and you go on with your life, or maybe you really care and now feel that you have to change yourself no matter what. You can easily change your thoughts when you feel insecure, or you can stop listening to what other people say about you about your body. Even when you think you have to listen to their opinion so you can "fit in", you don't. They can't control you and what you wear, or who you are as a person.

You can't change yourself to fit in with the people at school because we all know that is not the real you. You can be the real you and still "fit in" with people. You don't need to have the "perfect body" or the "perfect hair" to be friends with people. You don't need to harm your body by putting it through all that work just to have friends. You can't always have the newest items because no one else has the best items either. Life can still go on, and you can feel better about yourself. There is no reason to feel terrible about yourself. People get down on themselves thinking they're not passable for anyone. Just live your life, and don't worry about what people say about you. Even if you

want to worry, don't because you are you, and no one can change that. You are perfect just the way you were made, and you shouldn't change it for anyone or anything.

LANG, KEIRA**Keira Lang**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Tryouts

“Do I have to go? Come on, I’m not going to make a team anyways,” I complained to Mom. “What’s the point of even trying?”

“Don’t talk like that! Believe in yourself a little; everything will work out,” Mom snapped back. I had been whining the whole car ride there.

I shuffled along the hall that was lined with fold up tables. My knee pads made my knees stiff. People were talking in cheerful and excited voices from both sides of me, but I would rather be anywhere else. Mom ushered me up to the table outside the gym doors. A woman with pale, blonde hair smiled at us from behind a table. I recognized her as the head coach, because of her name tag. *Heather*, it read.

“Which age group are you in?” a different lady asked, sitting next to Heather. She also had blonde hair, but Heather was thinner and slightly shorter. Her name tag said *Tilly* on it. *She could be my future coach*, I realized. “Elevens,” I responded simply, trying not to let them notice my dread. Tilly got a pink piece of duct tape and stuck it on my back while Mom signed me in. Then, she reached over and got a blue piece of fabric with safety pins attached to all the corners.

“Number 43,” Tilly told me. “Pin this to the front of your shirt.” Mom led me to the side of the hallway and carefully attached the safety pins to the front of my blue cotton shirt. I twirled my ponytail of black hair with my index finger until she finished.

“Good luck,” Mom murmured. “I’ll be watching from the top.” I nodded. This was my first time going to a volleyball tryout. My first one with Momentum. My first one where I knew absolutely no one. Anxiety whirled in my stomach. Butterflies? No, more like angry wasps. I *couldn’t* do this.

This was also my first time at Westminster Christian Academy. It was a Christian private school. The entrance of the school looked significantly nicer than the rundown public elementary school that I go to. The ceiling stretched so high, I bet I could’ve stacked 4 of me on top of each other and still not reach the top. The tile sprawled: white in the middle and brown lining the walls. I let out a sigh. I would kill to be at Mason Ridge with my friends rather than here, and that was saying something.

I stepped foot in the gym and was instantly blasted with the voices of girls playing volleyball. There were so many! Two courts were set up and they were both fully occupied. Girls played games together while the ones who didn’t want to join on the courts played in small groups around them. Dread flooded my brain. Everyone had someone they knew here. Except for *me*. I felt like I was drowning. No one would ever find me. I was that needle in a haystack.

This was going to be the longest two hours of my life. I grabbed a volleyball and walked over to a wall covered in worn, wooden bleachers. The ball felt warm but tough in my palms. Silently, I passed to myself. The gym lights high above were harsh on my skin. It was like they were spotlighting me, just for Mom to watch me fail. Every little squeak of a shoe on hardwood sent me deeper into despair. My neck started to hurt as I craned my head upward to watch the ball fly up and drop onto my forearms again.

Thankfully, Heather walked in shortly after and called everyone to line up around the court closest to the door. I hurried over and stood at the end of the sideline where there wasn’t really anybody else. My toes lined up with the white line. *You can do this*, I encouraged myself.

After Heather had explained the first drill of serving, my words deflated like a balloon. I was defeated. Everyone had friends it seemed, and no one was looking for any more. I walked around awkwardly for a few seconds, pushing shoulders and making my way to the ball carts. The mass of people was loud and had no order. This sailor was lost at sea. Then, I found a girl who had been third wheeled by her friend group. Her brown hair was tied in a tight ponytail. I couldn’t help but notice how much more used her knee pads looked than mine. *How much longer has she been playing than me?*

I didn't really feel any worse when she gave me a reluctant yes, after asking her to partner with me. We didn't talk at all after that. The drill required us to face each other on opposite sides of the court. We would serve to each other and every time we both got a serve over, we took a step back. I was never a consistent server. My ball flew over to the other court and I silently flinched every time. *She must be so annoyed with me already.* I only proved my harsh thoughts right when her serves went right to me. Ugh.

Drill after drill, my spirits withered a little bit more. I struggled to find partners in the sea of volleyball players. *Argh, why is everyone so good?* I would ask myself. I was just a child, faking her way through an adult's life. During the passing drills, I shanked the ball so many times that I stopped counting to make me feel better. The volleyball would fling itself from my arms to the other side of the gym. I watched it roll across the wooden floor with sad eyes. *You're interrupting the drill, and, Oh my god, what was that?*, were all the thoughts that had decided to accompany me.

I breathed in the warm air of the gym, tainted with the smell of rubber volleyballs and sweat. My arms seemed to sting more from the malicious convictions in my mind than the ball itself. I swear, the shaggers would look at me with searing glares before they had to chase the volleyball I had passed. I *sucked*.

Despite feeling useless, I had an untamed will to impress someone. Anyone. I didn't want to be that one kid who couldn't play for the life of her, even if that was how I felt. This didn't stop me from questioning myself over and over again. *Why try? I know I'm not going to make a team. I'm not good enough.* I focused my eyes on the court instead of looking for Mom's reactions on the balcony. She must see how terrible I'm doing.

"Bring it in, girls!" Heather called, surprising me. "Call it out for water one last time! When you guys come back, I need you to line up on the end line by number order." Relief crashed over me. This meant we were finally done. Once she confirmed that I wasn't on a team, I could go home and just flop on my bed. This night would never have happened and I would never have to do it again. I willed her to talk faster. *Just let me go home.*

Even after inhaling plenty of water, my throat still felt dry. I briskly walked over to the end line and squished in between the girls whose numbers read 42 and 44. *But don't you want to make a team?* A small voice urged inside me. The same voice that said I could do this. Yeah right. I crushed it down as easily as before. I would never be able to keep up if I couldn't now. Besides, there were so many better choices here than me. Heather started off by calling the girls that were listed as alternates. See, for the 11s age group there were two teams one could make. Navy was the top team and Orange second in place. Alternates were there just in case someone didn't accept their invitation.

I listened for number 43 but didn't hear it. *I must've not even made the alternate list then* I felt a small, uninvited twinge of disappointment. Next, Heather started to call out the names for the Orange team. Number by number, girls jogged off to meet their coaches. There weren't many girls left in line now. 43 was not called. It felt like years before she started to say the numbers that made the Navy team. Why make me wait so long if I wasn't going to play for them anyways?

"25, 37, 40..." I held my breath, hopeful for some reason. I didn't want a team but... if I made the Navy team that would be pretty cool... Mom would be so proud... "43!" Heather called out. I snapped back from my thoughts. Did I hear that correctly? Did she just... call my number? I looked up at Mom. Her face was lit up with joy. I couldn't help but grin back at her. I made a team! *I made a team!* All the hateful thoughts vanished. Was I terrible? Well yes, but clearly not as bad as I thought. How could I doubt myself like that?

I met up with Mom and walked confidently into a smaller gym connected from the back of the big one. There was a whole crowd of girls. *My girls.* I reminded myself. *My new team.* The voice spoke into my brain once more. *See? Look at what you can do!* It marveled. Instead of smushing the comments as they whisked excitedly in my head, I beamed at them. The butterflies in my stomach spread their bright blue wings and took flight for the first time. I *could* do it.

LEUNG, JEREMY**Jeremy Leung**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

How a Broken Clown Can Save You From Looking Like One

“I hate you!” Julie screamed.

All I could do was stare at the floor, now riddled with the clay fragments of my sister’s clay sculpture I had grabbed at right after she told me just to look.

“Joshua, that’s it! I’m tired of you. You’re grounded for a week!” my mom yelled.

Though I was angry with my mother’s punishment, I was equally angry with myself. Even though I was going to endure suffering from my mistake, it didn’t negate my sister’s. I had to make it up to her. Nothing stimulates growth more than redemption from one’s mistakes. That familiar sentiment of guilt imposing the necessity for rectification is universal throughout all aspects of the human experience. When a groupmate is scrutinized for their poor work ethic, they may attempt to take on a greater workload to make their contributions on par. When a stranger bumps into a kid and makes them drop their ice cream cone, they feel the need to buy another one like it, if not bigger; all in an attempt to make good of their wrongful action.

Blubbing through her tears, my sister cried out, “Fung Xa just gave me back that clown! I spent so long on it!” Indeed she had. Throughout the past 3 years of art classes with our aunt Fung, one thing was certain. Fung’s perfectionist attitude coupled with her persistent micromanagement of every nook and cranny of each one of our pieces made her comparable to a prestigious art connoisseur, despite those expectations falling onto the shoulders of her 9 and 8 year old niece and nephew. As a result, each sketch, painting, or drawing could easily expect to have four to five weeks in the works at minimum, with hours upon hours of detailing amidst our aunt’s countless comments ranging from insults to praise. With such methods being present, “so long” was about as accurate as anyone could describe the process. The initial days of planning for something as complex as a sculpture alone called for intricately drawn sketches from so many angles that anyone would be surprised at how much time could be demanded of the humble pencil and paper. What followed was weekend after weekend spent molding the dark crimson clay into their generic shapes, only to go on to be cut and textured until they perfectly mirrored the sketches and could be baked then painted to finish. Producing pieces like these could be grueling at times, but Fung’s method was unmatched, as one could always trust that anything that came out of her workshop was a masterpiece.

Julie’s clown had been no different. While initially observing, I could easily make out the fine detailing in the crosses delicately cut into the clown’s checkered uniform, with concave wavy pants as if it had been a living being in motion caught and frozen, captured in a jovial, energetic moment. The paint which had been glazed over top was beautifully toned out to bring a realistic look to the natural shading that could have been expected of lighting on a real person.

All this, of course, was ruined by my spontaneous compulsion to touch what wasn’t mine.

The stinging guilt continued even as I layed in my bed that night. I soon came to the conclusion that I had to remake what was destroyed. I recognized that this was going to be a grueling endeavor, seeing as I wasn’t as naturally gifted in art and the fact that my sister’s creation took 5 weeks which took me less than 2 seconds to destroy.

Acknowledging the workload that was to come, I began to feel a newfound drive to make it even better for her. *I could make it bigger* I thought, *and add the nice acrylic paint that Aunt Fung stores in her cabinet with the expensive materials.* As the time passed, I was left to my own thoughts as they trailed endlessly in their amending nature. It was as if my sister’s anger at me had fully become my own, and in trying to make her feel better, I was trying to help myself as well. A study cited by Harvard Professor Marc Hauser showed that unmarried couples, when told their partners would experience a painful stimulus, would have their brains light up precisely as if they were about to experience the pain themselves after being warned, despite themselves never actually receiving the stimulus. (Kluger 57) This projecting experience of empathy was just another reminder of the fact that I was human. In the same way, the experience of my mom’s reprimands reflected this sentiment on a broader scale. “Just as syntax is nothing unless words are built upon it, so too is a sense of right and wrong useless until someone teaches you how to apply it...One of the most powerful tools for enforcing group morals is the practice of shunning. If membership in

a tribe is the way you ensure yourself food, family and protection from predators, being blackballed can be a terrifying thing”(Kluger 58). Sure, my survival didn’t depend on playdates and TV time, but it still functioned to act as a reestablishment of the boundaries I held which were deeply seeded in this primal behavior. Just as much as empathy was inherent to my being, it was equally taught and expected of me. Laying back on the bed, I interlaced my pinkies to make a pinky promise, telling myself that I would tell my aunt what had happened, making sure that I could work with her to make a sculpture so great that my sister couldn’t stay mad. Drifting off to sleep, I felt a fire burning inside of me. I was capable, and fully prepared to redeem myself to Julie.

Although, that fire was short-lived. The next time we went for lessons, I couldn’t even get a single word out of my mouth to explain to Aunt Fung what I had done. Immediately as I attempted to speak, a lump began to form in my throat as I began to start crying. A very confused Fung tried to calm me down, but I had already reduced to the point of becoming a blubbing mess on her cold basement floor. Just attempting to verbalize what I had done brought on so much guilt that I couldn’t contain myself. The reminder of my wrongdoing made me feel evil, and I couldn’t even handle fully facing the fact that I could be the source of it. Author and essayist Lance Morrow argues that, “Evil and good have probably been more or less constant presences in the human heart”(Morrow 52). Just as Adam cries out in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, “in me all / Posterity stands cursed: fair patrimony / That I must leave yem sons; O were I able / To waste it all myself, and leave ye none”(Milton X 817-820) after being told him, and his successive offspring’s punishment for his sin, evil is shown to be part of the nature of man. Even the first man to ever exist is riddled with this inherent presence of evil existing within the individual, and in being forced to acknowledge it, one feels reduced, often lowered. Adam withholds those same qualities of any human being. Both his sympathy (for the damages caused to those that follow him is reflective in his desire to take all responsibility and subsequent punishment) and self degradation reflected my own feelings as my aunt picked me back up and wiped my tears with a washcloth.

“Joshua, what’s wrong?” she asked, her voice lacking its familiar strictness

Holding her hand, I was eventually able to get my plan across to Fung. She seemed angry that I had broken Julie’s sculpture that she had contributed to so much, but seeing that I was already well aware of what I’d done, she held back. Wiping off the last of my tears, my aunt told me not to beat myself up over it and that we could work on recreating my sister’s piece during my lessons. She even promised to keep it a secret until it was ready. Just as Oedipus in Sophocles’s *Oedipus The King* understood his faults in stating, “Don’t be afraid. My troubles are mine / and I am the only man alive who can sustain them”(Sophocles 1548-1549), I now could fully handle the Funggh I had put myself under with my destruction of the clown. Oedipus had understood his pollution was none other than his own, and evil was not an infectious disease, but a similarly inherent feature in his design. As classicist and Author Bernard Knox put it, Oedipus’s acceptance grounds him, as “the confidence which was once based solely on himself is now more firmly based; it proceeds now from a knowledge of the nature of reality and the forces which govern it, and his identification with their will”(Knox 97). Orating my issue allowed me to consolidate the fact that I had done wrong, and encouraged me to work with the next decisions that I could control. Once again, I began to get that rigorous, liberating feeling that had started nights ago in my bed, but this time, it was more real.

Encouraged by my Aunt’s acceptance of my plan, I immediately began working from that day. Luckily, Fung had kept all of my sister’s planning sketches so I was able to save time and start by sculpting the clay. For about four hours, I sat in the workshop fiddling around with a sole clay knife being my only assistance. As I cut out tiny pieces of the generic shapes, some of the originally oily textured clay would stick onto the table as well as my hands, becoming dry and flaky as they stuck. By the time I was finished with just the main features, my hands were covered in clay scales, with the material becoming nestled in my nails; its pungent odor sticking to my clothes and hair. Like a newly hired construction worker, my hands weren’t nearly used to the strain of such an activity. On top of being dry and ashy, the palms of my hands and pads of my fingers quickly grew sore due to the constant pounding and awkward movements required to shape the clay. My attempt to redeem myself had already shown itself to be more damaging than what I had endured simply taking my mother’s punishment.

Two months of hand aches and cramps later, I found myself at the last lesson of working on the clown. I had been in for the long haul, but it finally seemed that my labors had begun to pay off as I had successfully recreated a sculpture that almost perfectly mirrored what had been destroyed. The figure shared the same checkered uniform and wavy pants in form, now all there was to do was to paint it. As I sat down at my station, I saw that the rusty clay knife had been replaced by an angled brush, and yet there was no paint to color with. Noticing my confusion, Aunt Fung called me over to her cabinet. “Here, use these. I think Julie is gonna like them more than what she had” she said, as she handed me the expensive acrylic paint I hadn’t ever been allowed to use. It was such a sweet gesture that it made me feel even more inclined to put my best into the piece to make it even more special.

A few hours later, I was finally done. The original shape, patterns and shading of my sister’s clown were still there, but I decided to add elements that I knew my sister would enjoy. The originally red checkered shirt and nose were now rosy pink, her favorite color. I also added deep, sky blue eyes that were only a tiny bit lighter than the heavier

royal blue pants that followed in the shading for the illusion of shade which was greatly accentuated by the lacquer-like sheen that the acrylic paint was able to produce. The sculpture was truly special, and Fung seemed to agree. Setting it on the drying rack, she stared at my work with her usual critical expression, finally starting, “y’know, I think this might be the best work you’ve ever done. I’m sure Julie is really going to appreciate it.”

“Yeah, I hope so,” I responded. “Do you actually think it’s that good?”

“I actually do,” she chuckled, “If anything, you should’ve been breaking stuff all this time!”

At the time, my prepubescent brain couldn’t grasp the joke my aunt had made, but regardless she had brought up a good point. My bad actions had opened the door for greatness to emerge. Had this never happened, my guilt ridden suffering might not have existed, sure, but neither would’ve the beautiful clown that came out of it. “Evil has such perversities, or good has such resilience, that a powerful(if grotesque) case can be made that Adolf Hitler was the founding father of the state of Israel. Without Hitler, no Holocaust without Holocaust, no Israel”(Marrow 53). This defiance of good in being able to overcome or illuminate itself in working through misdeeds and wrongdoings is similarly present when examining Adam once again. As the angel Michael shows him how humanity could be set in a greater place than even Eden after Judgement day for their good works, Adam cries, “O goodness infinite, goodness immense! / 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 XII 469-473). In essence, evil holds an inherent presence in life, yet the good that is able to come of it trumps it, in fact being greater than infinite good as a result of the ability to overcome. Just as Israel has become a state greater than what had been lost during the holocaust, Adam illuminates how mans’ ability to overcome their inherited evil can even be greater than the Son of God’s all good formation of the entire world. Taking one last look at my sculpture, I could truly appreciate what I’d achieved. The same hands that shattered a great piece created one which was greater in design if not already in its significance.

A few days later, the paint had set and the clown was ready to be given to my sister. Putting it in a gift bag, I quickly called for my family to meet me in the living room, where I handed the gift to my sister to open up. “Here,” I nervously said as she opened the gift, “I felt bad about breaking yours so I wanted to make it up to you. I hope it looks good enough”. She looked back at me and gave a warm grin, reassuring me that it did. I breathed a sigh of relief at her immediate forgiveness, though brief, as my mom decided the moment required us to spend the next 20 minutes doing her personal photo shoot of us two.

My mom had seemed especially impressed by the self inclined act. “Thank you for taking responsibility and being a good brother, Joshua” she whispered, seemingly proud that I had shown even the slightest bit of maturity in basic human sympathy despite my nature to make mistakes. In the moment after Oedipus realizes he is the incestuous paricide the oracle foretold of, he tells Creon, “Drive me ou of the land at once, far from sight, / where I can never hear a human voice”(Sophocles 1571-1572), thus making an acknowledgement to his irrepremandible darkness, yet also a mature decision based on his newfound credence to see himself as the source of the plague. Just as Oedipus had come to terms with his darkness yet went to grow beyond it, I had done the same in my own development. This exaltation which comes as a result of learning from prior mistakes can be made even more clear when once again considering it through the dichotomy of the perpetual good of Gods and the good of human development. “Oedipus is symbolic of all human achievement: his hard-won magnificence, unlike the everlasting magnificence of the divine, cannot last, and while it lives, shines all the more brilliant against the somber background of its impermanency”(Knox 98). Thus, though natural human evil may exist regardless, it is the ability of man to grow beyond it in redemption that can bring the individual to an even greater point. What makes this even greater is its exclusivity to the human experience. “Man is not equated to the gods, but man at his greatest, as in Oedipus, is capable of something which the gods, by definition, cannot experience...for the condition of their experience is everlasting victory”(Knox 98). So, even though I had endured the hardships that came with such a project, I was glad to experience it, as my redemption was an integral part in my ability to grow. Through my mistakes, I may have displayed my folly. But equally so, I was able to prove my human ability to take them in stride, using them to push me forward rather than weigh me down.

My own ability to be evil hasn’t left, and I certainly am not immune to acting in a sinful manner, nor do I hope to ever be. All my good actions are a reflection of the mistakes I had to make to understand them, and subsequently develop. Though awkward now, I’m secretly glad that I can remember the moment. I’d gotten my happy ending. Just as Adam and Oedipus became greater in their flaws, I had grown as an individual as a result of my disservice. So what if it came with a pile of clay shards and months of joint pain? My attempt to redress my mistake proved to have molded me into a greater person in the end, making a figure in myself perhaps greater than any I could’ve molded out of clay.

LI, ARIELLE**Arielle Li**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: California Trail Middle School, Olathe, KS

Educator: James Goss

Category: Poetry

dancing letters

he couldn't read the words
its letters were moving
twisting and twirling
jumping and pushing
he envisioned them in a ballroom
laughing and dancing
skirts billowing, cufflinks glinting
the music growing louder and louder, faster and faster
their feet moved in a frenzy
their teeth gleamed with slaver
their eyes became red and possessed
but he was snapped out of his dream
"Gabriel, why don't you read page twelve?"

LI, ISOBEL**Isobel Li**

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Amanda Keltner

Category: Critical Essay

The Violent Binary of Racial Ontology and the Model Minority Myth

“You’re Asian, so you must be smart, right?” This phrase has echoed countless times in the ears of Asian Americans across the country, including my own. Most of the time, the inquirer means no harm, but inherent within the assumption that being Asian equals being intelligent is a history of violence. Tracing back to restrictive US immigration policy, the Model Minority Myth has been a favorite instrument of white supremacists to perpetuate anti-Blackness, especially during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The Myth’s creation is often credited to an article written by William Peterson, “Success Story: Japanese-American Style,” which details the “unprecedented” economic successes of Japanese-Americans despite post-war discrimination and injustices. Peterson describes “problem minorities” then “compliments” Japanese-Americans to be even “better” than every group of society, including White people (Peterson, 1966). Many believe that the Myth is a form of praise. Most don’t realize how untrue and how dangerous the Myth is. It’s crucial to recognize that the Model Minority Myth was created to uphold white supremacy, and continues to inflict violence on all minorities today.

Asian Americans are forced to assimilate to white ideals and mimic the Model Minority Myth in order to be recognized by society. Under the Model Minority Myth, Asian Americans are thought to epitomize the American dream. However, the stereotype primarily focuses on economic achievement rather than cultural or social belonging, demonstrating the negative purpose of the Myth (Eng & Han, 2019). The Model Minority Myth stereotypes Asian Americans as successful, a perverted form of “proof” that racial barriers don’t mean anything. Within the current Black/White binary, success becomes a measure of proximity to whiteness. How can a minority be both a minority and a high achiever? This ideology sets a dangerous precedent. These harmful representations produce racial tensions between Asian Americans and other minority groups, especially Black people. Because the Myth is comparative by nature, it is impossible to have a “model minority” without having an associated “problem minority” (Lee et al., 2017). Phrases such as “if Asians can do it, why can’t Black people?” demonstrate how pervasive the Myth becomes as not only a detriment to Asian Americans, but all people of color.

Under the eye of white power structures, Asians become a homogenous mass, “constituted of paradoxical stereotypes” (Liu, 2017). Asian Americans are essentially “de-minoritized” due to their stereotyped successes and therefore ignored, despite the varied institutionalized problems they face (Lee, 2006). At the same time, Asian collectivism stands in direct contrast to the individualistic American society. Thus, the Asian American subject experiences a unique form of racialization where both their Model Minority status and their non-Americanness designates them as a “forever foreigner” (Tuan, 1998). This “racial triangulation” cannot accurately be described by a Black/White binary (Ng et al., 2007).

Representations of Asian Americans through this oversimplified racial framework exacerbate the harms of the Model Minority Myth. Often, internalization of the stereotypes promoted by the Myth results in mental health struggles. Feeling obligated to meet expectations created by white supremacy, such as being quiet, hardworking, academically gifted, and economically successful, Asian American youth are vulnerable to mental health crises. Overwhelming pressure and lack of self-identity can result in worsened well-being. The Model Minority stereotype also acts as a barrier between Asian Americans and mental healthcare. Numerous studies demonstrate a relationship between the internalized Myth and an unwillingness to seek help, possibly because the Myth acts as motivation to preserve a certain calm and collected self-image. Moreover, internalization of the Model Minority Myth isn’t limited to individual wellbeing, due to the Myth’s construction as a tool to maintain the racial status quo. Even Asian Americans themselves may be unintentionally complicit in this violence, as studies prove that internalizing the Model Minority Myth results in higher levels of anti-Blackness and hostility towards affirmative action (Yi & Todd, 2021).

Ultimately, rejecting harmful portrayals of Asian Americans begins by accepting a different racial framework rather than the traditional binary, which doesn't accurately examine the nuances of discrimination. Instead of addressing racism towards non-Black minorities as purely symptoms of anti-Blackness, it is crucial to realize how racialization of different minority groups can actually perpetuate anti-Blackness. The Model Minority Myth was created to enforce white supremacy and disprove that systemic racism existed nor mattered, resulting in widespread division between racial minorities. Refusing the Model Minority Myth creates a new narrative of coalition-building between minority groups to ultimately end the reign of white supremacy.

LI, ISOBEL**Isobel Li**

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Amanda Keltner

Category: Poetry

all the things that make it so

yesterday,
i was greeted by the moon herself in your driveway.
she left my palms damp with slobber in her wake
and i stood outside your front door,
feeling like a fraction, small but rightfully so
and across the street, adult chatter and laughter
rose and hovered, indistinct and comforting
i could hear your jazz seeping through the walls
a new alto saxophone, vibrato on the b flat
gentle and clear and ever-so present
mixed with a crisp winter evening
the snowless ground tinted blue
and my body felt opaque
with my newfound understanding
of whimsy, of existence
of solace, of dogs
and what i have been trying to say is,
how lucky i am to have learned
the fortune of being alive

LI, JEREMY**Jeremy Li**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

Just Keep Swimming

“There’s an inquiry in lane four” announced the head official ominously over the intercom.

A collective hush fell over the entire natatorium as people scrambled to figure out what had just happened. At a swim meet, if you hear the word “inquiry,” it’s never a good thing. Essentially, it means that the officials are in the process of reviewing a possible disqualification. Just moments prior, in lane four, our school’s medley relay had just smoked the rest of the field at the State Championship and etched themselves into the history books, breaking a multi-decade old school record. A disqualification would eradicate all of that.

All eyes darted toward my coach, as he hastened towards the officials’ table. Everyone’s attention remained glued to him as he desperately pleaded his case to the emotionless officials, who remained stubborn and unmoved. No one could interpret exactly what he was saying, but it was clear that his words were just a light breeze against the unwavering pillars that were the officials. After a couple of minutes, Coach threw his arms up in defeat and sauntered back over to our team section.

“What happened, Coach?” We all asked together in a frenzy. “Did we get disqualified?”

Our coach, a highly composed man who always remains collected in the most intense moments, slammed his clipboard down next to him. He didn’t need to respond to our questions. We already knew the answer.

Our worst nightmare had come true.

According to the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, “we all know that pain and catastrophes are--on the face of it--distributed at random and cannot be interpreted in terms of merits and misdeeds, rewards and punishments” (Kolakowski 20). Our team had done nothing to deserve our disqualification. In fact, upon quickly replaying the live broadcast of the race, it was undeniable that the “false start” that we were penalized for was incorrect and actually clean. However, due to the rules, all judgment calls were final and could not be challenged.

Instantly, rage possessed my entire body. I hate injustice, but even worse is the feeling of helplessness in the face of such unfairness. In his *Time Magazine* essay “Evil,” Lance Morrow asserts the notion that “Evil is easier than good. Creativity is harder than destructiveness” (Morrow 50). My first instinct was anger and hatred, as blaming someone else and being mad at them appeared to be the most obvious and easiest response. All of this anger was directed at the officials, who I blamed for making such an unfair call and smashing our dreams to bits and pieces. The fiery rage was burning within me like I had never felt before. Part of me wanted to wrap my hands around the neck of every person I saw wearing a white polo and khakis and not let go. Obviously, my common sense prevented me from doing such acts, but it didn’t help to subdue the anger that was raging within me.

As time went on and the reality that nothing could change the call began to sink in, my rage began to be replaced with a sense of hopelessness. I felt that if there was nothing we could do to reverse the call, I might as well give up. Why continue? Everything we had worked for all season, all our dreams, had been unjustly robbed from our fingertips in the blink of an eye. My condition of despair mirrored that of Eve after she is ordered to leave Eden in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Following Michael’s dictation of God’s order that she may no longer live in Paradise, Eve falls into a deep depressive state, lamenting, “O unexpected stroke, worse than of death! / Must I thus leave thee Paradise?...Where I had hope to spend, / Quiet though sad, the respite of that day / That must be mortal to us both” (Milton 11.268-273). As a result of her evil, Eve must pay for her crimes and suffer. She is left dejected, no longer wishing to continue and even claiming that death is better. I was in the same boat. I felt like I had just been punched in the gut a thousand times, then spit on and stomped on while I was down. I just wanted to pack everything up and leave, feeling like there was no point in me even racing anymore. For what felt like an eternity, not a single noise was made in our team section. Everyone just stared off into space like mannequins, not moving a single inch. Finally, Coach had enough and decided it was time to step in.

“Boys, get in here. All of you,” Coach called out, gathering the team for a meeting. Like naughty children being scolded, each one of us lumbered over, dragging our feet in gloom. “Alright, look at me.” Nobody made eye contact

with him, as a great weight dragged everyone's head down. There was a general sense of depression and distraught that plagued our huddle.

"LOOK AT ME," he repeated, this time with much more authority and emphasis. Out of respect, all eyes reluctantly elevated to match his gaze.

Listen," his eyes panned around to every single one of us as he spoke. "Take five minutes and cry about whatever you're sad about. After that, we're done. Get your heads back in the game. There are plenty of races still left to swim. It's not over."

"Yes sir," we all muttered under our breaths, as we began to diverge from the huddle. Our spirits were at rock bottom.

"Hey guys," said Coach, regathering our attention for one final, brief moment. This time he spoke in a much more calm and empathetic tone. "It sucks. I know it does. And there's nothing we can do about it. But this shouldn't affect how we approach the rest of the meet. We've put in way too much work this season. Don't let this stop you from going out there and smashing it."

Once again, Coach's words reminded me of a quote from Milton's poem. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton justifies the existence of evil in claiming that "to create / Is greater than created to destroy" (Milton 7.606-607). Rather than defeating Satan and thus destroying the evil that he brings, God chooses to create a new world and fill it with mankind. While destruction is an option in the face of adversity, the better route to take is the act of creation, creating good that overpowers the existing evil.

While it was very tempting to just throw in the towel, I realized that doing so would be Continuing to mope and accept defeat would only further squander all the hard work and sacrifices I had made in the last several years. The hundred of thousands of monotonous laps I swam, twenty-five yards one way and twenty-five yards the other, would be thrown to waste. All the mornings I hauled myself out of bed before the sun had risen and jumped, still half asleep, into a chilling pool, would be down the drain. But most importantly, giving up would be a sign of weakness, something I would not allow. Rather, I had the obligation to persevere and show that nothing could hold me down.

As I approached the blocks for my race, motivational thoughts dominated my mind. *This is your moment, Jeremy*, I told myself. *This is your time to shine.* As I stepped onto the block, the hopelessness that I was previously experiencing felt miles away. At that moment, all the noise around me drowned out, and it was just me with myself. *They tried to kick you down. Show them who's boss.*

Although I plunged into freezing water that sent a shiver down my spine, the fire within continued to burn. Nothing could put it out. The rage within me that previously dragged me down like a weight was now my fuel, driving me to swim as hard as I could. Like a machine, I began hurtling through the water, my arms and legs propelling my body like oars on a boat. Directly in my line of vision, I was able to subtly make out a blurry silhouette of a stroke and turn official standing erect and glorified at the other end of the pool. I could feel his concentrated stare stab me like a dagger as he tried to find the smallest infraction to penalize me for. Instantly, the floodgates in my head burst open, and the thoughts of disdain and hatred that I had previously shut away rushed back in. Yet, this time around, instead of allowing my rage to drag me down and hinder me, I turned it around and used it as further motivation to swim harder.

At last, I made my final lunge into the wall and instantly jerked my head around to see the scoreboard. Due to my subpar vision, by squinting my eyes, I was able to barely make out a small, blurry "1" next to my name, indicating I had won my heat. I looked over to my team's section, where everyone had their arms raised high in the air. I couldn't clearly make out what the expressions on their faces were, but from the streaks of white on each of their faces, I knew they were smiling just as wide as I was.

I wasn't the only one who had a great race that day. All of my teammates were able to recuperate and demonstrate all the work they had put in throughout the year. Thus, even after losing a large portion of points from our disqualified relay, we were able to bounce back and secure fourth place in the state, bringing back a piece of hardware home with us.

In *Paradise Lost*, even though Adam and Eve are exiled from the Garden of Eden, they enter the new world with optimistic spirits, as "Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon; / The world was all before them, where to choose / Their place of rest, and providence their guide: / They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow, / Through Eden took their solitary way" (Milton 12.645-649). Despite being forced to leave their homes of comfort and enter a foreign place of danger and unknowns, Adam and Eve embrace this challenge, as it is an opportunity for the couple to strengthen their relationship together. By putting their love through trial, they effectively strengthen it, as it is effectively affirmed to be genuine. They choose to remain together, amidst their disagreements and sin, demonstrating the power of their true love.

Although I ultimately walked away that day having fallen short of the big goal, I could not have been more proud of what my teammates and I were able to accomplish. We were knocked down in the worst way possible, yet did not

let that stop us from continuing to fight. It's easy to be motivated and determined when you're at the top. However, it is only after being beaten down, being tempted to give in to the evil thoughts brewing inside of you, that you demonstrate your true character. Instead of allowing the evil within me to grow and inhibit my success, I used it as a test to demonstrate my true character, that in the face of adversity, I am able to stay resilient and fight through.

I often look back on that day and fantasize about what could have been. Raising that first-place trophy, replacing the panels on the record board, celebrating as state champions--these are all things that I still heartily wish and believe could have been a reality. However, as I take a step back and reflect, I realize that that day, I was able to walk away from the pool--and my swimming career--with something far more valuable than any trophy or medal. A better me.

LI, ROGER**Roger Li**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Lakewood Middle School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Jennifer Tavernaro

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Road Trip

My family has taken road trips to national parks every year. Then the pandemic hit, and our trip was put on hold until August 2020, when my parents announced a vacation to the Rocky Mountains. My sisters and I all groaned our complaints. Since school went virtual, we were so used to our cocoon in our little isolated reality, in front of screens. Traveling felt very foreign and even threatening to the frail mental balance I had worked hard to build.

The eight hours drive seemed unbearable. Mom tried engaging us in a conversation a couple of times but failed miserably. I buried my head in the movies that I had downloaded, rather than paying attention to anything else, not even when the car stopped, and a herd of mule deer crossed the road.

That night we camped at Estes Park. The Colorado wind is merciless after nightfall, so our tent almost got uprooted. We huddled under a pile of sleeping bags and tried to find something to do to “calm” our nerves. Knowingly, Mom proposed watching “The Shining,” a movie inspired by the Stanley Hotel we had passed by at lunch. We were brought back to the grandiose colonial mansion following the lonely car driving along the winding mountain road. We were totally absorbed by the terror of how isolation could affect a person’s mental state. Strangely, I felt that we bonded as a family in our collective gasps and screams. We jabbed at each other about our reactions to every plot twist in our jokes. The wind outside didn’t seem to quiet down, but we connected strangely yet familiarly.

The next day we headed to Pikes Peak. Just our family occupied the entire trail. When the softwood chip path turned rocky, my siblings and I lost our parents in the distance. We passed the time by singing catchy songs, discussing upcoming superhero movies, and chatting about school and friends while waiting for our parents. We trudged up the mountain again when our parents finally caught up. The boulders became bigger and steeper, and the path was hard to find. I was tasked to be the pathfinder to decipher which turn to take, which foothold to grasp. We slowed down to wait for each other and lent a helping hand to Mom, who was shaky climbing up and down. It was near the mountain’s summit when I looked back, the majestic mountains blending into the foggy blue skyline far away. My ankles were burning, and I felt fatigued, but I also had a sense of serenity and assurance I had not felt for a long time. I wasn’t isolated anymore but connected in a meaningful way, not only to my family and the nature surrounding me but more importantly to myself. I felt I opened up once more, ready to enter the world that was locked away from me. The trip gave me a glimpse of what matters in life, where I can draw strength, and how I would like to tread the path in life.

LITTLETON, TERRELL**Terrell Littleton**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Humor

Brandon Brown and the brief history of the creation of the universe

13.7 billion years ago a small particle about the size of a grain of rice that weighed about ten pounds continued to gain mass until it reached its threshold and exploded, filling a void with vacuum and two basic elements- hydrogen and helium, the two lightest elements. These elements had mass and density, and in this new universe, things with both mass and density had gravity. Two particles were drawn towards each other, building on each other's gravity until two particles became three, three became four, until vast clouds of elements condensed into dense balls, who underwent nuclear fission and created stars. Stars died and exploded, giving birth to new elements and the process repeated itself over and over again until a ball of elements began to rotate around another star, a large ball of hot molten rock began to cool and asteroids of ice crashed and formed an atmosphere while the heat and moisture gave ideal conditions for single celled organisms to evolve into multicellular organisms who then began to live their lives underwater feeding on chemical vents on the bottom of vast plains of water known as oceans until the atmosphere began to trap greenhouse gasses and protected the earth's surface from cosmic radiation and plants began to grow giving the fish a new food source giving them reason to go to the surface giving rise to amphibians until they evolved to survive on land without needing water to lay their eggs. These beings, no longer amphibians are called Dinosaurs and they thrived for millions of years until a mass extinction event happened wiping out nearly all life on earth but some survived, only the toughest of plants and the new breed of animal- mammals with warm blood capable of generating their own body heat to keep warm in this new ice age until it ended and the ice melted giving life to places where it was once barren, and in these new vast plains of life, a new breed of mammal known as Ardipithecus came to life.

The Ardipithecus died out as they evolved further and further, from homo erectus, homo habilis, and finally, five million years in the making, homo sapien. Homo sapien became a social species, mastered the art of agriculture, metalworking, and eventually, war. Thousands of years fought against its own kind over things that did not matter as civilization after civilization died out, and many times their knowledge died with them.

The burning of the library of Alexandria set humanity back hundreds, if not thousands of years. It burned for months. After hundreds of years, civilization became a permanent staple in many places on the planet. Vikings came to continents unknown and Europeans took their credit. This new world was "discovered" and mapped and settled by outsiders until the settlers became the rulers and bought land that was never owned until a new country was born- the united states of america. The United States grew into a world power and people lived and thrived in the United States. Wars are fought with the entire world involved, and the power of the sun is harnessed to destroy. For the very first time, humanity has the power to wipe itself out. The population around the world booms. People are born, live their lives and die without leaving the country. One of the people who lives his life in the united states is a small boy named Brandon Brown, who just broke his mom's phone like an idiot. The lies he tells cost his family more than they could properly imagine and the lessons his father attempts to teach him fall on deaf ears.

LIU, ANYA**Anya Liu**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Joy Gebhardt

Category: Poetry

Vacancy

Each morning I open the door and wait for you to come in. I make a pot of tea and I sit. I watch the morning sun spill gold onto the carpet, over our plants in their well-loved pots. I wait for your shoes to shuffle next to mine, your jacket to hang over the coat rack like an embrace. The TV flicks on and the weatherman drones: *sunny skies- accident on highway 64-why don't you care- why won't you come home?*

The tea's been cold for hours. I sip anyway. The door, awash in sunset hues and secondhand embarrassment, swings shut if only to relieve the despondency of the setting sun. I would have run into the street, heart bleeding out over the pavement, on my hands and knees if you'd asked me to.

In my room the curtains fold in on themselves like sad dogs. The mattress has a permanent indent of where your body used to lie, a stubborn reminder of your absence. It makes it hard to put the fitted sheet on but even harder to sleep without reaching for you. I lay and I miss you. I lay and I wish you loved me as much as I love you. There's nothing else I can give you. I tried being a sweater or a skyscraper but it didn't work out. All I am is love. It's the only thing I'm good at.

LIU, EMILY**Emily Liu**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Susan Ashby

Category: Short Story

Fireworks

“Do you remember when we first met?” she asked.

Her eyes remained fixated on the vast expanse of stars above us as we lay together on the grass, and she whispered her question to me. Despite the passing of many years and maturing from childhood, that day was a memory I was able to pull seamlessly from the depths of my mind.

The evening before we met, I had sunk myself deeply into the plush cushions of a dusty armchair in my living room, eavesdropping on whomever I could when news of my grandmother launching fireworks for a friend who had passed made its way to my waiting ears as the most interesting tidbit of information thus far. Curious, I leaped up to ask what she meant.

The connotation of fireworks was something I had secretly wondered about for many years. Most nights, the sparkling rockets would be loaded and fired as a commemoration of someone’s life, as my mother had told me when they died. One firework for each year of their lives.

I used to prop myself up next to a window and count the bursts as the multicolored lights rained down upon the Earth and wonder who the glittering, fiery flowers were for. It was an inexplicable feeling, that of anticipating for perhaps one more to shoot into the air, like holding your breath or clenching your soul only for nothing to come. All our lives were limited, after all. Every night, without fail, I would sit and wait for the rhythmic bursts just before my eyes drooped, shoulders slumped, and dreams came to snatch away my simplistic contemplation of life and death.

Yet, I had thought fireworks were a celebration of happiness and good times to come, and that death was something to be mourned. I eagerly questioned my grandmother on these qualms, to which she laughed, deep and husky from all her years of smoking, and told me I shouldn’t worry about these things, not at this age. Seeing the displeasure on my face, she dismissed me and sent me out to the New Year’s festival outside with a wave of her hand. Frustration and impatience at the lack of response and at how disinterested she had seemed in me festered as I huffed a strand of hair away from my face while trudging out the front door.

Children, families, and couples swarmed the streets below as the sunset behind the roofs of homes in the town, casting a soft orange light amid dusky pink clouds. This year's weather was oddly warm, as if mother nature, too, was ready for the next year to arrive. This allowed many to don their best clothes and bask in a brief moment of comfort despite the impending winter chill.

The paper lanterns that lined the streets lit the scene with a warm red glow as children ran through, holding sparklers that crackled and fizzed, laughing amongst themselves. I walked with the crowd on the cold stone tile and passed stands selling multicolored fans and parasols, my nose turning towards the food vendors with aromatic spices and impressive displays. All around me, people talked gleefully, making predictions of the arriving new year. Their voices blended together with the sound of cheers, the popping of firecrackers, and the sizzling of cooking oil in pans. Legions of townspeople gathered around the spun sugar stands where golden candy flew up and back down again as skilled confectionary artists molded them into shape, and approached dancers who appeared to twirl amongst the music drifting in the air. Soon, I had become lost in the wondrous and optimistic feel of the night that had brought everyone in the village together.

It wasn’t long, however, before a small hand took hold of my wrist.

It was her.

Brandishing a violin in her left hand was a girl about my age in a bright red dress, smiling at me with a gap-toothed grin and long hair that flowed down to her waist. She pointed to where her instrument case lay open, as if she were a professional street performer accepting tips.

Before I could respond, she held the violin up to her face, bow in hand, and began to play a gentle, lilting, tune. However, she could hardly get three notes past when the whoosh of fireworks launching sounded, and the bright-colored blooms lit up the sky with brilliant fire that rose and then fell. For a moment, everything went silent, the only sound coming from her playing, but mere moments later, gasps of awe filled the air from those watching the display high in the sky. Nonetheless, the girl, unfazed, continued on, her eyes closed, elbow jerking up and down as the song picked up speed, her hair flowing as she swayed to the beat. While all else had stopped, she was lost in a moment of her own.

She played right up until the moment the fireworks stopped, as if she were conjuring the notes from her very mind. With a flourish and a wobbly curtsy, she concluded her performance. It was only after she finished that she introduced herself to me as Mei Hua.

Together, we walked past the closing vendors and dissipated crowds together as the lights around us slowly dimmed. It had quickly become quiet as the clamor of voices washed away with time.

We got to talking, and I recall her asking me about my hopes, dreams, and future plans. I was at a loss for words, unsure of what I truly wanted, having been told that I had time to decide. Meanwhile, she laid out her entire life's goal for me, chattering about how she planned to travel abroad with her violin and play professionally in an orchestra and dreamt about going to see Europe, America, and maybe even the Caribbean if she had time. Her playing could take her anywhere, she believed. As she spoke, her eyes glinted and sparkled in the dim light, her grin widening as she continued on, revealing the dimple on her right cheek.

Mei Hua skipped ahead of me and twirled around with her hands spread out, her dress poofing up and twisting around her waist. A burst of bright red from her dress bloomed up from her figure when she spun, like a glowing ring of fire. Recalling my prior conversation with my grandma, I asked her what she had thought of fireworks, curious to see what she had to say. With a beaming laugh, she answered in such a way that both mystified and perplexed me.

Pointing up towards the darkened sky, she described the magnificent light shows as the rhythm of a song, each boom as one beat, stringing together to become a tune she could play the melody to, or the thumping of a heart, each boom as one beat, and as the tick-ticking of a clock. 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4... tha-thump, tha-thump... tick-tock, tick-tock. She brought her hands up to her face and opened her fingers wide from a fist to express each 'boom.' It was how you could feel the loud explosions in your chest, she claimed, how it felt as if your whole body and soul were being shaken, that made her hear more than she saw, and believe you could still see without having to look. She then spoke my own question back to me, and I yet again was unable to respond.

After she left during that summer, we never saw each other again; that is, until today, when she arrived at my doorstep. Just as our friendship had vanished, so had my thoughts on her, fading away until she became tucked away as a memory to unshelve from time to time.

Her long black locks had been cut short into a bobbed style, and her voice had become deeper and softer. The years had both changed and challenged both of us, it had seemed.

Mei Hua sat up, her hair ruffled and messy from having lain on the grass as she turned to look at me, her shoulders tensing as she spoke. "Do you think you could hold onto my violin for me?" she uttered. The mood quickly shifted into a solemn one as she grew long-faced, her stare unwavering from my eyes.

"Please." Concern and confusion trapped my words inside my throat. I hadn't seen her for nearly five years, and was unsure what to say to such a request.

"Why?" I said. "It was your dream to play violin." The words seemed to sting her as she turned away from me, reluctant to face the girl she once was.

"You remembered." She twirled one strand of hair around her finger out of habit. "But it's different now" Mei Hua paused to gather herself, her expression stern and serious. "All you need to know is that circumstances have become

very difficult for me. I need to get away for a while- go somewhere I can be alone.”

“Where would you go?”

We sat together in somber silence, as if suspended in time. With our short lived friendship, I didn’t think I would be the first one she would go to for something such as this. “Why would you trust me with it? It’s been five years! We- we barely know each other.” The only memories we shared were from what seemed like another world. Yet, now, I couldn’t shake them from my mind.

She had been the first person that had listened and answered my questions, and as if she were echoing my thoughts, she said, “You’re the only one I’ve told my dreams to, the only one that’s listened at least. After a while, I just gave up. Besides. It’s easier to talk to you- someone I don’t know well. It just makes me feel less guilty for asking.”

“I-” Mei Hua cut me off before I could continue, whipping around to grasp my hands in hers.

“Promise me.” I sighed, giving her my word. After all, what she had longed for was something she had once given me, and it would have been only proper that I repay the favor.

Standing up, she looked at the stars and lifted her arm to point. “There are no fireworks tonight.” Turning to look, I saw only the vast expanse of universe above us.

“I suppose so.”

“Thank you.” she said before passing her violin case over to me and giving it one last pat with a look of longing in her eyes, pausing before turning to leave. A smile graced her face as she tucked one side of her hair behind her ear and waved to me.

Following that night I didn’t see or hear from her for over two weeks when my mom brought her up over dinner.

“Weren’t you friends with that one girl, Mei Hua?” I looked up from my bowl. We hadn’t spoken of her for ages, and I had assumed my family had long forgotten about our friendship.

“Yeah. She visited me recently actually.” My mom reached over and placed a hand on my wrist. Her brows furrowed and she went silent.

“What?” I asked, concern creeping into my voice as she fell silent.

A sigh left her lips as she said, “They haven’t seen her in almost two weeks now. Her mom is performing the rites here tonight.” I panicked, my throat going dry as my voice quivered.

“Which rites?”

“Funeral rites. I’m sorry. It’s been two weeks, love, they’re not going to find her.” I leapt out of my seat and turned to leave without finishing any of my meal. Suddenly, my dad spoke up. “There’s no time for you to worry about issues such as these. You shouldn’t be thinking of such topics at your age.”

The world seemed to spin rapidly out of control as I ran upstairs into my darkened room to reach underneath my bed. I desperately wanted to believe that she was still out there; to combat the guilt that consumed me. Her final words to me played over and over in my head and my breath shortened as my fears began to set in.

Reaching past a few stray papers, I pulled the violin case out. It had hardly gathered any dust as I opened it up. The instrument was slightly worn from use, with parts of the wood having dulled, yet the strings were kept perfectly taut, and the hairs of the bow smooth. Holding it in my hands, I could almost feel the warmth from her fingers seeping into the fingerboard and how her head would have stood upon the chinrest. However, music no longer sounded from its strings, the gentle vibrations having ceased, and her presence a momentary illusion stemming from my own disbelief.

I was lost on how to feel, what to do. My heart sat heavy within my chest as remorse bubbled up from within me. I was unwilling to believe that it had become too late to rekindle our lost friendship. I didn’t feel deserving enough to weep over someone who I now seemed to barely know, yet shaped so much of me.

Then, as if it were some fated response from the universe, or rather Mei Hua herself, the world around me seemed to rumble and vibrate momentarily as the first burst of light filled the air, and I knew, these were for her. I sat in place on the cold hardwood floor of my bedroom, closing my eyes, hands gripped around her violin. The fireworks felt like waves crashing into an empty beach before returning to the ocean forever. The sounds mirrored my heart as it beat.

But through it all, it seemed as if music had begun to play, set to the rhythm of the fireworks. I was then able to realize all that she had done for me. She taught me that I must dream and live for something more than purely existing. It was the first time someone had ever asked me what I wanted to do, or what my ambitions were.

I envisioned her smiling, gleeful and joyous once again, as she played along with her violin. I hoped that wherever she was now, she was playing a song, the melody of which would echo forever.

It was beautiful, and strange how my sadness had evolved. I watched all my fond memories flash by my eyes one by one, knowing I would be eternally grateful to her. Living within our memories once more, I found the ends of my mouth lightening up into a soft smile, and allowed my tears to slide down my cheeks. It was a feeling I had never thought of or experienced before. This happiness I felt within the pain. As the final firework erupted into the sky and the particles fell back to earth, the silence engulfed me, heavy yet, it felt peaceful. As if the air within me was acting in equilibrium with that in the atmosphere. Getting up, I stood to push open my window and gazed up at the stars glowing in the heavens above.

“Thank you.” I whispered.

MADALA, SAHANA**Sahana Madala**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jeanne Gillanders

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Chilli Peppers

The warm sun beams on the small stucco houses of India while the large trees provide protection for children and adults attempting to get out of the scorching heat. The air-conditioning has minimal effect on cooling down the house but the excessive number of table fans make the warmth somewhat bearable. Although the house is compact, it feels spacious and lively because of the numerous presences in it: my parents, my grandparents, and my great-grandparents. From the pictures that fill the otherwise blank walls and small objects on tables, it is evident that multiple generations grew up in this house.

My family and I arrived in a village called Golvepalli, my dad's hometown. Keeping a reasonable sleep schedule was an arduous task, considering the 24 hour flight from St. Louis. I wake up from a long nap and see my dad, grandpa, and great-grandfather conversing with the neighbors. They were shielded from the heat by a lofty neem tree which was essentially a grab-and-go gathering spot for neighbors: anyone who lives close can come and pick the leaves off and use them to cure nearly every medical problem. If you have mosquito bites, you grab a neem leaf. If you have diabetes, you grab a neem leaf. If you have heart disease, you grab a neem leaf. It was almost like a hospital in your own backyard.

Since the windows were always open, I audibly heard my mom, grandma, and great-grandmother working in the large kitchen, the sounds of large pots and pans clanging together. The aroma of delicious food wafted through the air, prompting me to get out and explore what they were cooking. The kitchen is the center of the home and it is located outdoors, a commonality for village homes in India. It is an extensive space that takes up a majority of the backyard and is easily accessible from nearly every room. When I stroll outside, my almost one-hundred year old great-grandmother, who we refer to as *nānna am'ma*, is sitting cross-legged on the floor making *rotis*, a type of flatbread made out of wheat-flour. My grandma, who we refer to as *am'mam'ma*, is vigorously stirring the vegetable curry in the pot. My mom is making her famous afternoon tea, a concoction of herbs and spices that can get rid of a bad headache within minutes.

My great-grandmother asks me to go pick chilli peppers from the garden so that she can add them to the foods she was cooking simultaneously. "*Velli mirapakāyalu tīsukura*," she said in Telugu, her native language. Chilli peppers are arguably the most critical ingredient in Indian cooking because of the ferocious spice they bring to any dish. It was a short walk to the garden that could probably feed the entire village and contained many different types of squashes, tomatoes, chilli peppers, beans, and okra. I grabbed the ripest and reddest chilli peppers I could find and brought them back to my grandma so she could use them in the curry. Regardless of the "simple" task at hand, I felt accomplished. I realized why the house felt so lively all the time even when it was empty. All the traditions, people, and the modest lifestyle allowed people to enjoy "simple" things such as picking chilli peppers.

MAGARIAN, MOLLY**Molly Magarian**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Andy Chen, James Lewis

Category: Short Story

The Little Red Table

I'm not sure why Times Square was my first choice for a safe haven. It's big, wide open, and crowded with more people than almost anywhere else in this damn city. But it's also so packed with sweaty joggers and confused tourists that it makes you feel like just a face in the crowd. Nobody can find you if they don't know what they're looking for. I run my fingers through my new purple pixie. It feels so unnatural - I'm all for androgyny, but I always liked my long hair. So much about me feels misplaced - the biker clothes and combat boots where my sweaters and converse used to be, the oversized sunglasses perching on the bridge of my nose, the extra piercings all up my ears that I hastily added last night, still red and sore from the twenty minute rush job. Still, I remind myself that I can't look like myself right now. Not until I'm out.

"Crap," I groan, adjusting my foot inside my boot. My feet are killing me - walking two miles from the Hudson to the Square in shoes you haven't broken in is never a good idea. Still, I didn't exactly have another option. Before I threw my phone over the bridge, I had forty-seven missed calls from my mom. Forty. Seven. I get that I pretty much booked it out of the house about five minutes before a police car rolled up, but even then, forty-seven is a little much. I'm sure there would have been at least twice that many by now if the phone wasn't at the bottom of a river.

I glance around. The red tables are empty, so I grab my bag and lower myself onto one of the uncomfortable-ass seats. Damn, I wish I had my phone. Without something to do with my hands, I start pulling at the skin around my nails, a habit I had been almost six months clean from before...

Before everything.

No. Stop it, Tris. You cannot think about him right now. You promised yourself you'd never think about him again.

Still, his face lingers in the back of my mind. The rainbow shoelaces, the messy eyeliner, the big smile, the scars on his right arm. It's all right there, and suddenly it's taking everything in my power not to cry. I know it's never gonna get easier, and I really, *really* hate that. Sometimes I wish I could just forget. Forget that night in the woods when I hugged him, his face bloody and beaten, a business card shoved into the pocket of his iconic jean jacket. *Rediscovery in the mountains! A correcting camp for confused teens.* I'll never forget the dread that flowed through me, taking over my entire body until the only thing I could feel was terror. I remember looking at Bridget, standing off to the side. "How much cash have you got?"

A slight shift of the table draws me out of my thoughts. I look up, and oh my god. The most gorgeous human being I've ever seen is sitting down across from me.

They have short, dyed black hair, pink at the roots. Their makeup is flawless - blue eyeshadow, perfect eyeliner, a simple nude lip. Their *The Band Camino* t-shirt is cropped, with high-waisted skinny jeans and a big black belt underneath. Tattoos are poking out from under their clothes every which way - a pan flag, the *Mars Investigations* logo, song lyrics, numbers, dates, a semicolon, and a star on the inside of their wrist.

I am actually going to implode.

"Hey," they say, smiling. "Have I seen you around before?"

I'm so dazed I barely have the energy left to shake my head. "No, I don't think so."

They study me, still smiling. "Yeah, you're right. I think I would have noticed you."

I feel myself blushing. Why am I blushing? I don't blush. "Well, stranger, mind introducing yourself before I decide you're a serial killer?"

"I'd be delighted." They stand up and give a deep bow. "Parker Adams, at your service. You may address me as he or they. Or 'hey you.' I'll always respond to that. And you?"

I smile a little at him, trying to hide the lie about to escape my mouth. Well, half-lie. "Beatrice. Friends call me Tris. You can address me as she or 'hey, you.' I accept either."

“Well, Trix, how is your evening?” They’re eyeing my bulging backpack. “Goin’ somewhere?”

I consider the question. “Yeah, I’m going somewhere.”

He seems to catch on that I don’t want to say more. They kick up their shoes on the table - black low-top converse that have been scribbled all over to the point of no return. “Well, are you gonna miss New York?”

“Not really.” Dammit. Answering a stranger’s questions about my life was not on the agenda for this evening. “I only really ever had a couple of friends here. One died, and one...” I trail off. Should I just say he died too?

“One friend what?” They look genuinely curious, and I feel kind of bad for trying to lie.

“They were in a bad spot. Family-wise, that is. I helped them get out. But we got caught, so now I have to get out.”

“Figured.”

I blink. “What?”

He smiles. “I’m a runaway. Came here from Jersey four months back. Nobody would think to look for someone with my personality in a big city like this.” Their eyes twinkle a little bit, as though he’s in on a special secret. “So. I’m guessing Beatrice isn’t your real name?”

I shake my head. “Tristan. Tristan Yetter.”

“Well, Tris, tell me everything. All the exciting adventures.”

“They aren’t particularly happy.”

“Doesn’t make em less exciting.”

I sigh, glancing around. There haven’t been any sirens in about half an hour - I’m probably in the clear if I stay right where I am. “My best friend Jack is a trans guy. Parents found out, cut him off from all his friends, his entire life. He was alright for a couple months - then he started self-harming, and his parents got worried, and decided the solution was a camp.” On that last word, I meet Parker’s eyes. He nods, signalling that I can continue. That they understand. “Well, I helped him get out. He’s a few states away with our older friend Bridget - she’s got a house and a steady job, can easily provide for him. It was gonna be temporary, until we could contact CPS, but then Jack’s parents filed for my arrest, saying I abducted their poor daughter.” I spit out the word *daughter* like there’s something disgusting in my mouth that I can’t escape. “They have connections in the state court - I’m facing a full sentence if I don’t get the hell out of here.”

Parker blinks, looking as though he’s trying to process everything I’ve said. “Wow. That’s intense. So you’re just running?”

“For now, yeah.”

“Doesn’t seem like much of a plan to me.”

I snort. “Says the runaway.”

“Well, yeah, but I had a plan. I also knew I never wanted to go back, I had a source of income, a shelter - I figured shit out first.”

“And you think I didn’t.”

They smile a little. “I know you didn’t because of the look on your face right now.”

I try to adjust my expression, which just makes him laugh. “Look. I’m not saying you should turn yourself in - though that may actually be better for you in the long run. But maybe you should think about what exactly you’re planning on doing, and why you’re doing it.”

I consider his words. It’s something I’ve already thought about... isn’t it?

Or are they completely right? Was running my whole plan? Why am I really doing this? Because I’m a wanted fugitive, or because I just want some fanciful escape from my own reality?

I nod. “Alright. I’ll think about it.”

“Good.” He stands up. “Well, sunshine, I got places to be. But if you ever need anything, call the homeless shelter downtown, tell ‘em you’re looking for me. They’ll get us in touch.”

“Alright.” I feel myself blush a little as I turn back to my hands, drumming nervously on the table. “Bye, Parker.”

“Oh, this isn’t goodbye. You’ll see me soon.”

That puzzles me a little. I turn back around. “What do you...?”

But he’s already disappeared into the night.

...

I do turn myself in. I walk two hours from that little red table back to my local police station, and I tell them everything. They thank me for the honesty, and promise a fair trial. Well, one lady does. She’s tall, with pink hair and a lot of tattoos and scars on her arms - she tells me she’s not gonna let anybody’s prissy parents get in the way of a fair sentence.

My mom didn’t come by. I called her - we had a few short, clipped words before the line went dead. I don’t think she’s ever been this pissed at me, and honestly, I don’t care. I don’t regret any of what I did, and if it makes her hate me, then so be it. Sometimes doing what’s asked and doing what’s right don’t line up, and you just have to

face the music.

I don't think I would have done that without Parker.

After what feels like forever, but was probably only hours, I'm allowed to stand up, walk to the little water fountain and fill up a grey paper cup. I hear voices coming from another desk, and though I don't mean to eavesdrop, I do anyway.

"Come on, I've been here before, you can get this over with."

I stop dead in my tracks. I recognize that voice.

"Are you confessing?" This voice is unfamiliar - an officer, I assume.

"To anything other than screwing your favorite deputy? Maybe."

"He no longer works here."

"Alrighty. Ex favorite deputy."

The officer sighs loudly. "Wow, the *deja vu*. Alright. Parker Adams, you are under arrest for the murder of district 3 teacher, Kara Larson. You have the right to remain silent..."

His voice fades into the background as I finally turn my head to see Parker - red table Parker - being escorted into the back of the building, somewhere even I haven't been yet. They catch sight of me as they walk by, and flash their devilish smile. I see him mouth *changed your mind?* I nod a little, and he grins, flashing me half a heart with his right hand before the police officer grabs it, dragging them away.

MALLADY, AKASH**Akash Mallady**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Critical Essay

Thoughts Versus Action

Don't overthink it. Go for it. What is the worst that could happen These are common phrases that are thrown around by friends or family to help someone faced with a choice or a tough decision. With such an emphasis on taking action and reducing overthought, our society has been and continues to be one of constant movement. Deadlines, schedules, and success call for action. Rarely do we sit down and become truly pensive individuals. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* depicts characters, such as Hamlet and Claudius, during times of deep thought as well as during moments of direct action. Shakespeare's writing suggests that human character changes during these different times. Does the play give more importance to one over the other? Shakespeare's *Hamlet* gives slightly more importance to thoughtfulness based on the consequences of Hamlet's overthinking, Hamlet's first murder, and Claudius' path to becoming King.

Hamlet's bouts of rigorous thoughtfulness are often depicted in a positive manner. For example, when Hamlet approaches Claudius with seemingly clear intentions of exacting revenge and killing him, he goes into deep, reflective thought. At first, he appears prepared to take action: "Now I might do it pat, now a is a-praying / And now I'll do it...(Shakespeare 3.3.73-74)." Moments later, Hamlet hesitates to follow through with his plan as he ponders whether this is the most ideal time to avenge his late father: "No. / Up sword, and know thou a more horrid hent, / When he drunk asleep, or in his rage (Shakespeare 3.3.87-89)." Clearly, from language such as "No" and "Up sword", Hamlet has taken a figurative step back as his mind ruminates over the choice in front of him. Here Shakespeare introduces the juxtaposition of thoughtfulness and a positive result. In other words, being thoughtful deters him from acting on his ultimate desire for revenge. He ends up walking away from committing a potential crime: murder. While Claudius is an evil character, Hamlet's morality may never be the same after killing another human being. Of course, the direct message here is that Hamlet is searching for a better time to kill Claudius. It should not be ignored, however, that perhaps there is an underlying message from Shakespeare that taking time to ponder our actions can prevent an immoral or dangerous choice.

The play demonstrates the risks of taking action when Hamlet commits his first murder of the play. Hamlet engages in conversation with his mother Gertrude while Polonius is concealed from them; shortly after, a noise from Polonius leads Hamlet to use his sword and kill Polonius. This moment of prompt action and minimal thought led to a result that Hamlet did not foresee, for he assumed the sound's source to be Claudius. The lack of thought behind Hamlet's actions is evident in his response to Gertrude asking "what hast thou done? (Shakespeare 3.4.25)" He says, "Nay I know not, is it the king?" There is confusion and disregard in his tone. The Hamlet of this scene vastly differs from that of the previous scene. In Scene 3, Hamlet takes great care in cycling through his thoughts to determine his next course of action. In Scene 4, his judgement is overlooked by his actions. Had Hamlet taken a moment to peer around the corner or listen carefully to the voice he heard, this death may not have occurred. In general, the play indicates here that action without forethought can lead to accidental consequences.

Finally, Shakespeare depicts resolute action in a negative manner through the main antagonist Claudius. Before Claudius becomes a character that often reflects on his past, his character is defined by taking action. According to the ghost of Hamlet's father, Claudius murdered him "With juice of cursèd hebenon in a vial" and then "seduce[d]... [the] queen" (Shakespeare 1.5.46/62)." These two deliberate moments allow Claudius to gain power in the state of Denmark. Morals or familial relations were not important to Claudius; rather, he was motivated by a single aim. Shakespeare continues Claudius' character arc in a particularly unique manner. Instead of being a completely villainous person gaining increasing authority, Claudius goes into a downward spiral of remorse. An example of this is in Scene 3 when Claudius hopes to be forgiven for his wrongdoings: he states, "[m]y stronger guilt defeats my strong intent" and "But oh, what form of prayer / Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder (Shakespeare 3.3.40/51-52)?" The inclusion of this slight character change might suggest that action in hopes of a materialistic goal is more likely to end in some type of failure. Had he had a more thoughtful approach to his goal, perhaps his ethical side

would have influenced him to properly pursue a position of power in Denmark. For Claudius, constant action leads to guilt and fear.

While themes of revenge or mortality can steal the spotlight when discussing the layered narrative of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, analyzing the complexity of thought versus action within the play can offer lessons to readers. The play uses the experiences of characters such as Hamlet and Claudius to pass on the idea that being a more thoughtful person can be more beneficial than being a person fully committed to action. While Hamlet and Claudius deal with tragedies and conflicts that are abnormal to most people (death and revenge), the results of their actions can teach readers to act with care. Hamlet is stopped from committing a crime when his ruminating thoughts enter the scene; whereas, the spontaneous Hamlet makes a mistake. The thoughtful Claudius asks for forgiveness and acknowledges his mistakes; whereas, the Claudius of action makes moral wrong turns. All people have an inner driving force- just as Hamlet had the ghost- imploring them to take action, seek accomplishment, or create change. Preceding these actions with adequate consideration can ensure that the overall outcome is ethical and positive.

MAYER, TRINITY**Trinity Mayer**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley High School, Stilwell, KS

Educator: Casey Engel

Category: Short Story

The Ashes of My Hopes

The Ashes of My Hopes

My mother used to tell me to find a safe haven, an escape from the torment of life. Some people live it harder; my mother lived it the hardest, but they called it a chemical imbalance. They say it's genetic, but I'm more worried about the life she left, laying in the ashes of the past she left burning behind her.

The idea came to me in the night as I lay awake memorizing the sky, the stars lighting up the bare walls of a fading yellow room that I've come to call mine. Life on a farm leaves a lot of time for thinking, and my life on the farm leaves a lot to think about, especially the nights. Tucked between the stream at the edge of the woods and the back of the shed is a divot suited for my safe haven.

The excitement sparks a rush of emotion through my veins, a feeling that seems foreign after all these years. Suddenly, a place to myself consumes my mind like a drug, my father's daughter shining through the cracks. I'm growing up, but don't tell him that.

The dusty living room reeks of spilled ale, and the pitter patter of my chest relinquishes its excitement to make room for the familiar feeling of dread creeping its way back in.

"Hey, get in here" he slurs, but he doesn't want a response because before I can come up with one that suffices, he loudly spits out "Where's dinner?"

"Almost ready," I call, rushing to the kitchen to heat up the minestrone made this afternoon.

The ear-splitting silence blares through the room and I eat painfully slowly so as not to upset him, making conversation to a room that might as well be empty. My ears ring with the scrapping of his chair followed by him stumbling to the recliner.

"I'll finish cleaning up and then I'm heading to bed," I call back from the sink, daring to hope for a night's rest from his torment.

I don't look back or provoke him, but as soon as the dishes are done I rush to my room and close the door as quietly as possible. But I was silly to think we would both just be able to go to sleep, foolish to dare for what I know is impossible, and my night ended like the rest. Slow tears trickle down my cheeks. The hot beer breath on my ear and the weight of him crushing me, unable to gather my hopes once again until the lingering smell of him that haunts my nights and sticks to my pale yellow walls fades in the morning.

With purpose in my mind, my plan consumes my mind, pushing out the nighttime thinking. Step one, gather materials. Always short on money, what I can find in the woods surrounding will do. The dam in the river seems pretty sturdy so I focus on imitating that structure. I gather any sticks, leaves, mud, and branches I can find, hidden away so Dad can't see what I'm up to. Days pass by as the fall chill makes the air stand still; the in between moments are consumed by my need to finish the haven. Though I've just started, a place all to myself where the pain of the nights are forgotten, drives me forward. A strange sense of déjà vu covers me as memories of Lincoln logs on the dirty rug and my mother's laughter echoes through the halls, our masterpiece falling to the floor. I replay that scene over and over until the laughter is so loud I can think of nothing else. A dome no more than 4 feet tall, but it hardly matters as long as it's a secret. Finishing releases the knot in my abdomen so tight you'd think boy scouts were camping in my stomach; these slivers of peace are the moments I live for.

A blanket on the ground, my artwork on the walls, a miniature stone firepit. Nothing has consumed my mind so much, and I start to understand the control alcohol has on him because for now, everytime I think of the times when the sky is dark, my haven keeps me safe.

Dad says he's going into town today and now's the first chance I have to submerge in the sanctuary. I spend the hours drawing, reading and thinking, but the thinking is different and somehow I keep the parts of my mind I like to ignore out. At dinner that night I can barely keep the smile off my face. Luckily, Dad's so consumed with the idiots at the market and telling me about how they won't be bothering him again, that he doesn't notice. The usual night

routine ensues, but knowing I finally have something all on my own gives me hope.

Later that day I couldn't help but take a couple minutes for myself. Knowing what awaits fuels my day, so I enter. Birds chirping and water trickling fills my ears as the sanctuary embraces me like a baby being cuddled by their mother. Suddenly, the birds' chirping fades away as if they are leaving me. Even nature knows as evil approaches. I hear my father's voice, and every nerve in my body comes alive. Flight or fight kicks in as the realization of what ensues processes. Instead I freeze.

"What the hell is this?" his voice booms in a menacing tone I've never heard. It's not loud; it's quiet in a way that tells me he's sober, scaring me even more.

I have no words.

"Get out." Not a command, but a threat.

Suddenly he hits me across the face and throws me a couple feet away; tears threaten my cheeks. The pain I'm used to, but there was no stopping him as he tears my haven limb from limb and burns the pieces until ash remains.

"I don't wanna see any more of this shit cluttering my land," he calls and faintly mumbles "I need a drink," as he walks towards the house.

Suddenly, tears don't stream down my face and sadness doesn't consume me. A numbness spreads through me as I realize the reality of my life. I can't have a safe haven. That evening, as the nightly routine ensues, the tears don't come.

When the sleep doesn't arrive and bruises keep me awake, I go out to the remains of my sanctuary and sit with what once was a tether to the hope of surviving him. There is no escape from him and even if there is, the future is bleak. So I lay there in the remains of my hopes and dreams. Thinking and thinking, and as the thoughts come slower, I bleed out. The mixture of blood and ash spreads, and I realize that this sanctuary did hold my dreams and forever will.

MAYNES, AVERY**Avery Maynes**

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

Because I Could Not Wait for Love

Because I could not stop for love
She trapped me in a cage

Had me begging for some air to breathe
On my hands a knees

She looked me in the eyes
Told me I was doomed
For I had found someone
I couldn't bare lose

Gasping for breath
I held on tight
Trying to accept my fate
I was bound to lose them
I could only hope and wait

Later that day she let me go
Told me it was over
I cried and cried into the night
I cried till I could no longer

After a while, she took my hand
Dragged me down my path
Soon I meant another
I could only hope it'd last

They helped me up
Wiped my tears
Helped me overcome
I had found another I would gladly call my own

MCKEE, FRANCES**Frances McKee**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Kelly McKee

Category: Poetry

Cheap Plastic Entity

Fake Plastic Entity

I touched the world at 6 years young.
A conscious bulb, fighting demons all in good fun.
In 10 years time, I sprouted under the wrath of the sun.
I feel myself dying although my life has just begun.

All the influence in my life poured me water from a plastic cup.
It's only easy to stay sober when your neighbor is throwing up.
The "loose string" I've been tied to has been manufactured by the Krupps.
My precious world is in a downward spiral, but I only want to grow up.

The view from my window, aspiring industrial New York.
I could manufacture my own front lawn into a thousand tiny forks.
Pixelated madmen gather armed on my front porch,
For I gave their pixel peer a bad twitter report.

I watched a classmate gargle bath salts at 16 years old,
But I shrugged, to be honest I was undoubtedly sold.
My eyes are half closed, tired of doing what my great grandparents were told.
I rolled my eyes and joined in, here lay my green body, chanceless and cold.

MCKNIGHT, SARAH**Sarah Mcknight**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Just Keep Swimming

Just keep swimming

In my family, I'm the youngest, the baby of the family. I have watched my siblings play sports, go to high school, graduate, and even get engaged. I have watched so many important moments in their lives, just waiting for it to be my turn.

I remember when I was in preschool, I would watch my brothers get on the bus every day, just waiting for the day I got to also, and let me tell you, it's not as exciting as it looks. Another time was when I was in fifth grade, and I just wanted to be older so I could play school sports. Now I'm an eighth-grader, and I can't believe how time has flown by. It seems like it was just yesterday that I was starting middle school.

I wish I could go back in time and tell myself not to wish my life away and enjoy it at the moment. Another example was during Covid when we were in quarantine. I don't know about you, but I was tired of being at home. I just wanted to leave. I think we all did, but now I honestly miss it. I miss being with my family because now we are all spread out and busy with our own lives. During quarantine, we got to slow down and enjoy our family time together, but now we are back to the real world. I can't remember the last time I actually got to sit down and just be with my mom, dad, brothers, and sister.

I think being in quarantine was just a good reminder that you have to enjoy it while it lasts. Covid really reminded me that you can't take life for granted. You never know when your life is going to change. It only takes a couple of seconds for your life to fall apart, or to become fantastic. Thankfully I haven't had to experience too many hardships in my life, but don't get me wrong, my life isn't perfect.

Every day brings a new set of highs and lows. Some days you may think there are more lows than highs, but a big part of life is just the attitude you have. Like I say to my cross country friends: *90% of running is mental*. If you tell yourself you can't do it, then you won't; it's just that simple. Attitude is everything, and yes, I know there are many instances where terrible things just happen. But even then, it's our attitude that can make it even worse, or that can change what has happened for the better by learning from certain events.

I'm not telling you not to be upset or not to cry and be upset. I just think we need to learn to cope with thoughts and ideas with a more positive outlook. To know that there is an end to the storm you're dealing with and that there is a way you can get through it. I know some people can't deal with that or don't want to hear it, but it's true. So if you take away anything from this, just remember to be happy right where you are. You will never get this day again. Take chances, take risks and just live your life to the fullest. It's as simple as that.

MENDEZ-DUKE, VICTORIA**Victoria Mendez-Duke**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Kathryn Cooper

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Twisted Realities**Twisted Realities**

Lives get complicated all twisted in a vine
 People get caught inside other people's reality
 What happens when they get stuck
 One choice has the power to change a life

A captain stood at the bow of his ship, leaning with the sway of the boat created by the waves. He reached for his spyglass, wondering what ship was coming closer in the distance. As he fumbled with the heavy metal object, he heard one of his crewmates scream out... "Witchcraft!" He whipped his head around and saw a man standing in the middle of the deck sopping wet. The power this man holds was unknown at the time, but is much greater than any mortal can understand.

One mere man can change the future
 Unknown to the likes of mankind until now
 No survivors
 No stone left unturned
 The evidence of his true intentions are unfolded

The year is now 2012 and things have changed. Skyscrapers shoot up into the sky, people are evolving to fit this new reality. Some people still hide in the shadows though, just as they did 100 years ago. One of whom is Silas. He is the only person who has witnessed the ups and downs of this nation for hundreds of years. Silas blends in well. He gets coffee at 8 am and heads to a 9 to 5 office job, same as anyone else in the big city. To the people he passes he is just an average person, but Silas is far from average. He has hundreds of years of experience in trades that have vanished from this earth long ago. He has seen countries form and break apart. He is a peace holder and a war starter, a simple inbetween. He has the power that people can only dream of in the palm of his hands, he has the ability to time travel.

Past tales lead to present problems
 Promises are broken
 Jobs are not finished
 No witnesses... no survivors... no evidence
 No one gets attached, no baggage left behind.
 Houdini of reality

Once again reality has changed this time the clock moves counterclockwise to the year 2000 . No one gets attached, no baggage left behind. At least that's what Silas thought. Even time travelers mess up. Silas has had many different professions over the years. One of them being a hitman, though he was ill suited for the job. It was a cold December night a year earlier. Silas was on the hunt for a man known solely as the Devil. No one has seen his face and only the worst of the worse have even uttered his name. Silas had gotten a tip off about his location by an inside man. Silas

pulled up to the property and hid his car in some bramble half a mile away. Now there was no chance of him escaping by car, if needed. The creaky steps of the rustic style house never seemed more threatening. Silas's hands were shaking profusely as he turned the door knob. He had the right to be scared. This man was known to place deadly traps wherever he went. These were no ordinary traps. They let the victim suffer and panic. The locations he stopped at were specifically located more than ten miles from the nearest house. No one has yet to make it out of any of his presumed safe houses, crawling can only get you so far. As Silas stepped further into the house he stepped closer and closer to the target, that's what kept him moving. Silas knew that if he stopped moving at all he would trigger one of the traps. That choice could lead him to be pronounced dead in a random field less than a mile away. While he slowly crept through the dusty house, he saw a light flicker in an old reading room down the hall. An old hanging light bulb was swinging gently back and forth, casting unnerving shadows on the walls. As much as it went against every bone in his body, he moved toward it. His feet turned to bricks as he willed his feet to step over the holes in the floorboards, as if there was a chance a hand was going to grab his ankle from below. The closer Silas got to the room, the more his breathing quickened. All the while simultaneously doubting his actions, fearing for his life. Once he made it into the dimly lit room he saw a piece of paper on a table against the window, after closer examination he discovered it was the only thing in the room that did not have a thick layer of dust blanketed over it. The paper read: "You will always be one step behind, I'm on your tail. You think you're following me but really I'm looking for you... Don't get it twisted. - Your Killer."

Silas looked around the room for signs of tampering. He found muddy footprints by the window... fresh footprints.

This meant the man was in the house with him while he was snooping around. The thought of that made a shiver stream down his spine. Silas grabbed the note and stuffed it in his pocket, turning off the light as he exited the room. Silas has always been a quick thinker. At this moment in particular, his brain was functioning differently, slower in a way. He breathed in all the details around him, he took in the smells and ran his finger along the dusk covered tables. He was marking his territory in a way. Silas was still wrapping his head around the fact that he was the first person to leave one of this man's safe houses alive.

Times change
Life changes per usual
Nothing ever stays the same forever
History gets toyed with
The truth gets twisted

Silas rarely talks about his past jobs let alone thinks about it, what happens in the past stays in the past. Silas arrives home from his office job and collapses on the couch per usual, he has picked up an unhealthy habit of drinking when he gets home. When you live forever, there is no way to escape your fears unless you face them. He tends to ignore that option. Life is uncomplicated for Silas right now, he has stayed in this reality for the past two years. To others Silas appears compassionate and approachable so he picks up friends easily. The thing is, it's tough to hide your real life from everyone you meet. Soon he will move again and forget his old life. He will create a new persona and live as a different human being, just as any good time traveler would.

Mistakes are made
Lifestyle changes
Time is of the essence
Stability is nonexistent

Silas is now packing up his life here, using the excuse that he got a job elsewhere. If you were to read his face you would not find much that's real. The tears are an act, but the excitement hidden in those teary eyes are as pure as it can get. Silas may be as old as most artifacts in museums, but he still gets excited each time he travels. There are many rules in being a time traveler. You may not get a little booklet upon being one, but they exist. The rules are as follows: rule 1- leave nothing behind, rule 2- don't get attached, rule 3- don't mess with history. Silas is good at following rules, but appears to struggle with the first and second rule. Mainly because he's gotten into trouble with the wrong people, way too many times. Silas follows the crowds as he makes his way through the train station. He weaves through family's hand and hand, business associates with black briefcases and people just as lonely as him. Silas briefly glances up at the departure and arrival board, just to be slammed into by a gruff faced man. Silas's bag goes sliding across the slick linoleum floor, exasperation now present on Silas's face. The unknown man does not give his splayed out bag a second glance. Silas takes a step back to breathe, "No confrontation remember?" he

recites to himself in a hushed tone. The man takes a few steps closer, leaving little room to breathe. The man introduces himself as Lucifer, which seemed familiar to Silas. The man takes another few steps forward and leans near Silas's ear. Lucifer whispers calmly "You will always try to follow what you can't catch. That's why I find you intriguing, that's why you are still alive." Silas looks down at his feet, figuring out what the man meant. By the time Silas connected the dots the man had disappeared into the crowd. The warning bell for his train chimes, he is broken from his trance and picks up his bag. He finds his seat in the back of the train in an empty car, and settles down. Silas's head was filled with good stories of past memories as the train set off, slowly drifting him into another world.

An empty train seat and a ticket floating slowly to the ground is all that's left of Silas.

Until worlds collide

Fresh starts

New perspectives

Twisted realities

MIRCHANDANI, RIA**Ria Mirchandani**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: John Pierson

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

A Flight of Independence

Passport, Check. Boarding pass, Check. Phone, Check. As I made my way to the terminal to board my flight to California for a residential camp, I was a bundle of nerves. It was my first time flying alone. I had successfully checked in my bag and was bringing a backpack with me on the plane. As I made my way to my seat, the flight attendant informed me that I would need to store my backpack in an overhead compartment, since I was in the very first row of the plane. I was struggling to get my bag in the compartment, when suddenly a large man approached me, lifted and placed my bag into the compartment, and sat down in the seat next to mine wordlessly. I scampered to my seat and thanked him. No response, he did not even look up from the file he was reading. I wondered if he may have not heard me but was too intimidated by him and my surroundings to speak with him again. He looked like an important man going on an important trip. After all, why would he be wearing a long-sleeved red shirt made out of velvet fabric on a plane in the middle of June, and I was just a child on my first plane ride without my parents. I was drawn from my thoughts by the sound of a flight attendant announcing that the flight would be taking off soon and going through the standard safety procedure. Butterflies filled my stomach as I tapped my foot, eagerly waiting for the plane to take off.

Minutes later, we were in the air. I busied myself with a new book, one that was sure to put me to sleep within the hour and keep me asleep until the end of the flight. Sure enough, shortly after I began reading, I dozed off. What seemed like minutes later, I was jolted awake by a sharp poke to my arm. I wiped the sleep from my eyes and turned to see the man from earlier looking at me pointedly. Next to him stood a flight attendant. She looked at me endearingly and handed me a menu, saying "I'm so sorry to wake you up honey but wanted to know if you wanted anything to eat." I looked over my options, most of which I was allergic to, before landing on a safe meal: pita bread with an assortment of hummus. I told the flight attendant my choice. Unfortunately, the last pita and hummus meal had already been ordered by the man next to me. He looked at me smugly. I could practically see the amusement in his eyes. The flight attendant then inquired whether I would like anything else to eat from the menu. I shared that I had some allergies and that the hummus meal was the only item on the menu that I knew would be completely safe for me to eat. She then did something that surprised me. She turned to the man next to me and asked if he could switch his meal so that I would have something to eat. I felt a sense of companionship towards the flight attendant that quickly transformed to guilt. If the man did not like me before, he definitely would not like me now. For a second, however, I saw something flicker in the man's eye. Perhaps he was considering accepting the flight attendant's offer. He then responded with, "I'm fine with what I have right now." I squeaked out a response to the flight attendant. "Thank you for trying to accommodate me. I'll just have a cup of water." With a sad smile, she handed me my cup and then proceeded to the next row. I spent the rest of the flight thinking about this encounter and before long we were landing.

As I gathered my belongings, the man jumped from his seat with a sense of urgency and quickly exited the plane. I shook off the anger I felt towards him and instead chose to reflect on the rest of my journey. I felt a sense of pride. I had successfully gotten myself checked in, through security, onto the plane, and now to my destination. Most of all, I had done all of that independently. As time went on, I no longer felt anger towards the man. His presence on my first flight alone made my story more memorable to tell and taught me a valuable lesson, that people are not always accommodating. This event in my life was perhaps just a glimpse of the world outside my cocoon. At least for a couple of hours on that journey, I almost felt like an adult and was proud of my independence.

As I reflect back on this moment, I know that I am going to have more flights like this one where I am alone and that I will encounter more people just like this man. However, I may not have someone like the kind flight attendant there

to try to assist me. Now, I feel as though I am on the precipice of a major change. Soon I will go off to college. I will have to navigate the world and make decisions on my own. A quote from the novel *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer strikes me, "As if all your life you had been led by the hand like a small child and suddenly you were on your own, you had to learn to walk by yourself." In my case, as an only child, I believe my independence will likely be a more gradual process, just like my first flight alone. Nonetheless, like everyone else, I will one day have to walk by myself.

Citation:

Krakauer, Jon. *Into the Wild*. Anchor Books, New York, 2015.

MITCHELL, SAMANTHA**Samantha Mitchell**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Perfect Is Just A Word**Perfect Is Just A Word**

Maybe I'm not perfect. To be honest, nobody is perfect; therefore, there would be no way I could be perfect, right? I have been trying my whole life to be what people call "perfect", but I have never been able to climb up the mountain to which it stands. Situations sometimes get the best of me, and they take over my life. I spend my time obsessing over what I could've said, what I could've done, or how I could've acted. Everything is always my fault and always has been my fault. I have tried everything to make myself a better person. I have changed my look, my hair, my clothes, my personality, but nothing is ever good enough. I promise I am trying to keep living my life and to keep fighting, but the word "perfect" gets in the way.

I think I've become a better person because of the things that have happened in my life. I have had people leave me, boys not like me, questioned my sexuality, had parents who don't care. Overall, it feels like people just don't want to be in my life. I struggle with trusting people and committing to people. I am so beyond scared that the moment I put my trust in someone, they will get up and leave. I have had so many people just leave me like I was never anything to them, but I think I need to understand that people are going to leave. Not everything goes how you want it to. Things happen, and you can't do anything to stop them. It is like the song "Life Changes" by Thomas Rhett. "Ain't it funny how life changes, you wake up ain't nothing the same." I can't even explain how true those words are. Everything happens for a reason, and once you realize that, you've won in life.

Even though life changes and everything does happen for a reason, not everyone believes that. Not everyone knows that it is ok not to be ok. People always assume at first glance. You see them, you see how small their waist is, how thin their thighs are, how pretty their face looks, and how amazing their straight teeth are. In that second, all you want to be is them. You don't think about the fact that maybe their home life isn't great, maybe they, too, are insecure about the way they look, or maybe they're hiding something. You can't just look at someone and assume they're perfect just because of what you see at that first glance. Now, I am not trying to call you out or tell you, you shouldn't do this, or you shouldn't do that. I'm just saying you should take into consideration others' emotions.

When you think back to when you were younger, you see Barbie dolls, the outdoors, no social media, and you see yourself genuinely happy, or at least that is what I see. I constantly dwell on the past, and it's like that life I wish I could have, but will never get back. When we were younger, all we wished was that we could grow up. Now that we are "grown-up", or at least what feels like a grown-up, you just want to go back to being a little kid. When you think about it, now we just want to go back to the past, and in the past, we just wanted to come to the future. We never really were, or have been, in the present.

When I was younger, I don't think I realized what was going on in my life. My life is, and was, complicated; for one reason, I have never lived in a place for longer than two years until now. I have never had a real friendship last longer than that time period, either, because I went off to my new place and started a new life. New personality, new style, new friends, new hair, new everything, so that hopefully people would like me. The new girl is such a contradicting name. Every other year, on the first day of school, I got a fresh start with new people. They didn't know who I was, or what I had done. For all they knew, I was from Scotland and was just coming here to see how America worked, or I was the mean girl who was now going to rule the school. Now, it's different. I'm living here until I graduate from high school. I don't get a second chance. If I mess up, I have to fix it. The personality I set for myself when I walked through those doors on the first day of school in sixth grade, is the personality I get until the end of high school. No going back now.

I don't think a lot of people understand the fact that I haven't ever really had a true friendship. If I screwed up, it didn't matter because I was just going to leave the next month. Here in this town, where I am going to live until I graduate high school, things flipped once I hit the two-year mark. Everything fell apart. My friends left me because they found out what my true personality was, or at least what it used to be. Nobody wanted to be around me

because I was a “messed-up person”. I started doing things to myself that made me feel like it would take the pain away; it didn’t. It made it so much worse and helped me not move on. I continued to suffer in silence because I had no one.

I still got up every day, put makeup on, picked out my outfit, and went to school. No one noticed. It was like I was “fine.” That’s what I told anyone who asked me at least. People to this day still decide to come up to me and say “You are so perfect.” If only they knew the things that made my mind go to. The word “perfect” crushes me every time I hear it. It makes my mind go back to memories I wish I didn’t have, to things that I wish I could forget. Not saying that I regret what I did to myself, I just wish I could forget. The amount of people who know what happened to me is down to one. One person in the entire world knows everything. It’s me. I know everything about myself because I went through it. Some of it is foggy because of what I decided to forget because sometimes you have to leave what happened in the past. I can mainly remember the pain and utter despair I had in my bed at 3 a.m. I wanted to give up, and I was alone, all by myself, just me and my thoughts. The only things I can truly remember were the feelings of getting hit in the head with a hammer. The a constant feeling of drowning, but there was no water in sight. There is no other way to describe it, other than utter hell. To think I was only twelve, like how does a twelve-year-old go through so much pain?

Everyone goes through so much, and everyone’s problems are all so different. I have wanted to give up so many times, but I am still here, telling you my story and continuing to fight. If I would’ve given up, and let the loneliness take control of me, I wouldn’t have seen my little cousin again, I would’ve left my dogs behind, I would’ve left my brother alone in a family that doesn’t take care of his daily needs. There are so many reasons not to give up and to keep fighting; you just have to look and find them. I found my reasons to stay, and now it is your turn to find yours. No one can achieve the status that perfect is held at, not one single person. No matter how hard you try, it is impossible to reach perfection. Perfect is different for every mind, and I can promise you that when people look at you they think, “She is so perfect.” You may not think that, but I promise other people do. Once you realize that perfect is a standard that no one can reach, you can genuinely be happy with the person you are, and the body you were given. If you change the way you see yourself, you’ll be happy with who you are. It is not a competition of who can be the prettiest, or who can be the smallest, it is about who can be the best person. I hope you win that battle, too.

MOORE, MADISON**Madison Moore**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Flash Fiction

Mirage's Lullaby

As I lie on my bed, gazing out of my window, I watch my reflection stand against the darkness that consumes my room. I glance at the lonely streetlight across the road where moths bask in the warmth of its bulb, missing the moon that only days before shone so bright. The wind taps the glass, its soft whistle growing louder until it becomes a screeching howl. I stare out the window for hours as the familiar tug of slumber weighs me down yet not quite holds me under. I shut my eyes, waiting for sleep to overtake me, willing it to tug just a little harder- for I refuse to face the testament of slumber's weakness that would appear below my eyes- only for me to float back up once more. When I once again pull my eyes open after another failed attempt of sleep, I spot her- the woman under the streetlight.

The yellow bulb illuminates her tightly braided hair and the shoulders of her white nightgown as her face remains dim. I watch from above as a strangled note escapes her, only to be swallowed by the wailing song of the wind. The woman stares at the sky as if expecting the wind to spit out what it had just earlier swallowed. Once she recognizes its greed she opens her mouth and a prolonged buttery note frees itself from her cage. Excited to be liberated, the note bounces off of the houses of the cul-de-sac until it reaches my window and glides through its opening. The tug of slumber continues to persist, this time it's grip tighter, and my eyes grow heavy as the note swirls around my ears. I will for the woman to release more notes, wishing for the selfish wind to relay my message, only for its howls to morph into a piercing screech, spooking the leaves of the tree that lean over my roof. The woman counters the wind's wild opera with a velvety melody, creating the perfect duet with the belts of the breeze. Their music gives slumber strength, allowing it to pull me under and finally hold me there.

Eventually, slumber releases me and the familiar feeling of grogginess replaces it. I roll over on my bed and gaze out of the window expecting to be met with the glaring rays of the sun, only to face darkness and the moths that endlessly dance around the streetlight's bulb to the tune of the wind's one-sided duet. The lady has stopped singing. Without her song, slumber would never again regain its vigor. I stare at my ceiling as slumber fails to pull me under, wishing for the woman to once more allow her notes to escape. As I wait for the woman to reappear, I count each popcorn on my ceiling and imagine them arranging themselves into gleaming constellations, so radiant that the moths outside could not resist fluttering about. Finally, a short tune grazes my ear. I turn to face my window and there, below the streetlight, stands the woman. Each note once again releases itself from the confines of her throat and slips through my window; the wind carries them, ensuring they reach their proper destination. Slumber, its strength once more regained, pulls me under. The lady's notes envelop me, clouding my surroundings, leaving only the long desired feeling of nothingness.

MOORE, MADISON**Madison Moore**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Joy Gebhardt

Category: Humor

Dreaming of a Cookie

The lightbulb overhead illuminates a warm, yellow light, rows and rows of donuts and pastries sit in their clear display case; the smell of freshly baked bread surrounds the girl and pokes at her nose. Her eyes dart from row to row and finally settle on a batch of cookies, “free for kids under ten” the sign above the cookies reads. She’s a little older than ten, but she believes herself to not look a day over nine- despite a few forehead creases here and there. She glances at her feet and then at the cookies. The case is only four big jumps away, but her dad’s words ring in her head, “I’ll be back in three minutes. Don’t move from this spot unless you want to get snatched; a girl almost got kidnapped the other day.” She roots her feet to the ground and attempts to convince herself that a sugar cookie that has probably been sitting out for hours is not worth getting kidnapped for. A sigh escapes her as she squints into the crowd of customers and shields her eyes from the glaring lights ahead. “It shouldn’t take this long to grab a pack of butter and cheese sticks,” she mutters beneath her breath, “At this rate, we’ll never make it out of here before closing time.”

She scans the crowd as her stomach grumbles. It’ll take ten seconds to grab a cookie and if she downs it in less than two minutes her dad will never find out. She places her hand on her chin and curls her lips as she considers the pros and cons of grabbing a cookie. Just as she decides that the pros of eating a sweet, chewy sugar cookie outweigh the meager chances of someone snatching her up, she spots her dad in the veggie section carrying a small, red basket with his back to her. Her eyes widen and, without a second thought, she bolts to meet him. She dodges the crowd of customers and nearly trips over a little boy standing in the middle of the freezer aisle. She dives for her father and wraps her arms around his waist while burying her head into his warm jacket for shelter against the cool air. Her hand rummages around his basket in search of her long desired cheese sticks but instead finds a box of Raisin Bran, “You have a couple more years until you’re ancient enough to eat *this* cerea-.”

Her dad jerks the basket away from her, “What are you doing?” he barks. That’s weird, his voice sounds strange- a little higher but much sterner. She snatches her hand away from the basket and jumps back to look at her father. His nose is soft and rounded, the corner of his eyes sag ever so slightly, his eye sockets have long caved in, and wrinkles stamp his forehead. He looks nothing like her dad. Her heart jumps out of her chest and her eyes widen as a realization dawns on her.

This man is not her dad.

She mumbles an incoherent apology mixed with a note about Raisin Bran’s recent rise in popularity amongst the youth as she scrambles back to the bakery aisle. She glues her eyes to the floor as her cheeks turn a dark shade of crimson. She frantically wipes away the tears that burn her eyes, “A cookie for my troubles,” she snuffles before taking the four big leaps to the display case as runaway tears fly behind her. She reaches her hand into the case and snatches a cookie before any adult could notice the faint wrinkle between her eyebrows that she believed screamed “not ten.” The girl takes a shaky bite into the cookie only to be met with a deafening crunch. More tears than she can catch pour from her eyes, “I think I’d rather have been kidnapped,” she says through a muffled sob whilst eating the remainder of the stale cookie.

MORRIS, ALETHEA**Alethea Morris**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Short Story

Perspective**- PERSPECTIVE -**

With the crash of a wave, her eyes jolt open. She shields her eyes, blinded by the harsh morning sun. The girl quickly flips over, kneeling over the sand that scrapes her knees and digs holes in her fingernails, this beach has never been kind to strangers. To our left, the ocean waves crash against black rocks that would eat her alive. Above us circle large gray birds. They had been there for six days, mocking her attempts to escape. She had arrived several weeks ago during one of the island's frequent squalls. The waves swept her boat towards its shore and the girl had no other choice. Her sailboat was long gone. It had been pulled out by the tide after she arrived. This is not uncommon for the island. Ships often washed up leaving their sailors stranded. Even I had a sailboat once. Alert to her surroundings, she has not yet learned the way of the island. It took me a month, it would be unfair to the girl to suggest she was slow. But then again she had been here for nearly half that.

The girl jumps up, bare feet dancing as they touch the sand. To her right is a tree that usually provides shade, but not at this time of day. It must be around 7am. She slept in. That can be dangerous on the island. She's hungry I'm sure - she hadn't eaten in two days and was beginning to thin. So was I, and most of the animals on the island. If she wanted to survive she would need to get used to being thin. Looking towards the ocean, the girl must wonder if she could swim out and catch fish. She can't. She would have to be strong, not to mention the fishing skills she would need, and she isn't in the shape to make that swim. We've all tried this, but the girl still looks and wonders if it would work for her. Turning her gaze to the forest, she must wonder about a meaty meal. She could make a fire, that skill may be the only thing keeping her alive so far. If she were braver, she might have a chance in the forest. But I can tell she is scared of the jungle. Maybe her dad warned her about jaguars in the brush or snakes swinging from trees, as my father did when I was young. There is some nearby fruit, bright voluptuous purple swinging from it's vine. This particular berry in small doses acts as a hallucinogen. In larger doses, paralysis. Either dose on this island could prove very dangerous. She'd been looking at them for days, but seems smart enough to avoid them. Her only other option is in the sand. I don't know why she struggles with this decision every day. Maybe she doesn't like seafood.

She makes her way onto the beach, and sits at least ten feet away from the tide. It will push out soon, exposing muscles and clams that she can crack open and eat. She's smart, and in some ways reminds me of myself. There are holes forming in the sand already. I would guess 40 minutes before the tide is fully out. Best to be patient. The girl sits on the sand waiting for the clams to come up, digging her toes into the sand and playing with a piece of seaweed between her fingers. Half an hour passes, then another. I was wrong, and we're both getting impatient. Soon enough though, the tide was out and the girl began to see the muscles and the clams poking their heads through the white sand. The girl jumps up with excitement, shaking a fist at the mocking birds above and rushing to her task. She had been fashioning a sack out of seaweed to shovel her clams into. She is hungry and her feet dance across the sand as she collects the meal. The girl scoops up nearly twenty clams before they are no longer there. It must be after nine, she was losing track of time. The girl places her clams carefully by her ill-constructed home; a bed of dried out seaweed, a barely discernible fire pit, and sticks placed two feet apart around the perimeter of the compound. The sticks seem to be a fence for protection. Maybe this girl isn't as smart as I like to imagine. She's out of firewood and the nearest dry wood is quite a ways down the bank. She seems hesitant to leave her structure, but eventually trudges away. While she's gone, a seagull finds her stash and is pecking apart her bags. It's attracted a crowd by the time the girl notices, most likely on account of the squawking. If it were me, I would have covered my bag with rocks or even wrapped and buried it beneath the sand. The girl drops her firewood and runs at the birds, shaking her fist and yelling, unaware that this grabs the attention of the rest of the forest. Squawk and you shall be heard. Her yelling only lasts a moment, and the birds hop off begrudgingly. She's left with just three clams. That must hurt, I can see the tears welling in her eyes. For a second, I want to console her, let her know everyone is bested by

a seagull at least once in their lives. She wipes away a tear and begins to make a fire. It's well constructed but takes some time to light. Last night the girl took almost an hour doing just that, so today she needs to be faster. However occupied with her task, the girl is still completely alert to her surroundings. It's fascinating the way she perks up at the sound of a rustle, or darts her eyes towards a crab scuttling across the sand.

It's a beautiful day, the sky is almost as blue as the sea and the girl's caramel skin shines out against the pale sand. It's been weeks but her hands still look as delicate as the day she arrived. She's beautiful, soft even. I used to be soft, and today I reflect on what I've lost and gained since I've been on the island. My beauty in exchange for my survival. This girl was lucky, she hasn't been here as long as I have and if she survives, I imagine she will also lose her delicate hands and gentle touch. The girl scrapes away at a stone, trying to make a resemblance of a spark, It's taking just as long as yesterday. My father could start a fire in minutes. His coarse hands were as strong as stone and if he were here I would tell him to teach the girl. Her glossy eyes brim with tears as she fails for the hundredth time. Then, she gets it. I make a silent cheer for the girl as she makes a spark turn into a flame. The look on her face says it all; *I'm ready*.

She's getting stronger, maybe even adjusting to the forest. Her fire is small, but steady and warm. The girl eagerly takes one of her clams out of the seaweed bag, hitting it on the rock she had been using as a pillow. Many things in her home serve more than one use. Her pillow could also be used as a cutting board. The fire which keeps her warm can also cook food. Multipurpose is the trend of the 2000's. I'm proud of her in a way, remembering my early days and how long it took me to make the first flame. She's adjusting to the island. I'm also sad for the girl, because in her triumph she loses some innocence, and some beauty. I hope she can avoid becoming a native. To be native is to be grouped with the birds who steal her food and mock her triumph, like me. A wave of disgust washes over my face. I'm not native. I'm surviving just as well as I can. But even now I'm lying to myself. How can I say I'm the same person I was a year ago. I haven't so much as spoken to another human in six months. Maybe that's why I'm scared to show her my face. My ugly, calloused, native face. No, the girl can't lose sight of herself. I imagine she has a father and a sister in some corner of the world, wherever that may be. This girl was alive.

I must have been dreaming too long because now the girl is eating; roasted clam with a topping of salty seaweed. This was the sort of cuisine you could only find in the fancy restaurant or the deserted island. Talk about versatile. After her meal, the day has reached high heat. This is the perfect time for the girl to relax because all the animals are resting in the shade, and she doesn't have to worry about the jungle creatures. I wonder if this is the logic of all the shade animals. She is tired of being alert, wondering if she might be seen. I can't blame her. The girl's been lying still for some time, her tan back exposed to the sun, face tilted to the side. Her back is facing me, so I can't see her eyes but I can only assume she's fallen asleep. It's a common mistake to take a nap after lunch. When the body is satisfied, it tricks the mind into comfort.

An hour passes and the girl is lying still. Is she okay? Unsure of her state, I make my way into the open, careful not to make any noise on the sand. My blood courses quickly through my veins and my chest pounds so loudly I worry it will startle the girl. What am I doing? She's perfectly still on the sand, and I hesitantly approach her, nervous to see if she is conscious or not. I make my way around her, my anxiety feels like a heart attack. She's awake, her eyes are open and filled with fear. I shake her gently, but she can't move, paralyzed. She stares at me wide-eyed. I wish she wouldn't look at me like that. Her eyes are watering and I'm doing my best to avoid contact. I look around, no one else is here. Using her seaweed bed I drag her into the forest. I can tell she is scared but at my house nothing else will get to her. She may feel safer there. We're walking for another half hour before I see it.

My house is bigger than hers, but I've been here longer. I've constructed a real fence, made from logs and clay packed tightly between three trees. My house is shaped like a triangle, and well hidden in the thick jungle brush. Inside it's nice, the walls are at least ten feet tall and most of the roof is permanently covered, leaving only a removable section above the firepit. My walls are well constructed, with slots for my spices and my seasonings. On the far wall is my table, for preparing and eating food, and on the nearest wall is my bed. My bed and my table are similar; both attached to the wall and both nearly six feet long, but unlike the girl I don't want to put my head on my cutting board. I look down at her, still staring up at me with wide, frightened eyes. I envy these eyes. She'll never have to be native to the island, and she will die beautifully, untouched by evil. I smile at her, and lift her onto my table. It took me everything to capture her and I would savour every last bite. I was almost caught when I put the berries into her meal but I guess I do work well with the birds. She may even last me until the next one.

MORRIS, ALETHEA**Alethea Morris**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Jill Donovan, Joy Gebhardt

Category: Short Story

The End of My Life**The End of My Life**

It's 4pm and I'm at work when they come. They say a few things to my boss who meets them in the hallway, before walking briskly towards me and my colleagues. My heart falls as they walk closer to me, three or four of them. They say "Walter we're going to need to take you into custody." I want to argue or say *what for officer* or anything at all really, but there's a lump in my throat that won't let me speak. I follow them out of the building, looking at the ground the whole time. I could lose my job for this. I could lose my job and then my money and then my wife and kids. Of course I'm thinking worst scenario possible but it's hard not to when you're being escorted out of your work at 4pm on a Thursday. It always has to be a Thursday. I'm quiet in the car--not because they tell me to but because I still have the lump in my throat and the knot in my stomach telling me to shut up. When I get to the station they take me into one of those rooms that has a white wall with black lines and the window that looks like a mirror. There are four or five other guys in there that look just like me. Around 6' tall, probably 100 kilos or so give or take, brown hair. It's scary how five people in the same city can look so similar. A short lady hands each of us a slip with the most disturbing dialogue on it. I shudder as I read over the words, but I know what is coming and it almost makes me faint. I like crime shows and I know how this works, they ask you to step forward and read what's on the paper. I'm a religious man though and the words on this page are unholy; I'm dreading my turn. But they call out "Number Three." and make me read those words. Then they make me read them again. They wait for a while and make me read them one more time. This isn't supposed to happen. They only make the one who did it read it more than once. This can't be going on. It is though, a fact that becomes apparent when they say thank you and dismiss everyone else.

It's been a week since my initial arrest and I have to admit, the situation has only gone downhill. A woman who I do not recognize claims I forced her to perform unspeakable things and evidence is piling up on me. I haven't seen my kids since last week and my wife can barely look at me. Even my lawyer doesn't like me, I can tell. My trial is coming up and there's nothing to clear my name. No alibi because I work later than everyone else, and plenty of incriminating evidence. They have a receipt that puts me across her apartment earlier that same day and all sorts of DNA in her apartment. Not to mention that the lady herself is testifying against me and say's without a doubt I am the one who raped her. In times like this the only thing you can do is pray. So I do this now. *Dear Lord, please help me to clear my good name and return to my wife with whom I've always been faithful. Please guide me through the next few weeks and allow truth to prevail. You must know I have not committed the sins thrust upon me and I've been true to thee all this time. Please Dear Lord, show mercy to my name. Amen.* There's not much to do around here, except pray and write. Or write prayers. I've made a few friends though, ignoring the fact that they're rapists as well. Not that I'm a rapist, but if they say I am I'll spend the rest of my life with rapists and murderers wearing orange jumpsuits. I'll never see my kids again, my wife will leave me, and I'll never be in the company of non-criminals. On the plus side though I'll get free clothes and meals; and I bet you can make lifelong friends in prison because you'll literally be there your whole life. And of course I'm obviously not an actual criminal, so I think the guards will loosen up on me pretty soon. I've always taught my boys to think positively, and I could really use some positive thinking right now; the secret behind that was it was always Susan who was the positive thinker. She was the one who kept me positive. It's only been a week but I already miss her so much. I don't know how I'll survive a lifetime of imprisonment without her and the kids. What will they think of me, what will they tell their friends? The harshness of my situation is unbearable so I decide to go to sleep.

Today I am at my trial. It's been close to a month of preparation and we're still not ready. It seems like the prosecution will trample us. I don't know what to think if I don't make it, my life would be ruined. I'm thinking back to that first Thursday when my main concern was a lump in my throat. My jobs completely ruined, it's not even about losing my job at this point. It could be about losing 25-life. Oh how dearly I wish numbers four and five would have

gone before me. The thought of losing this trial is so heavy on my conscience I want to think of anything else, but it's pretty hard. Imagine being blamed for a crime you didn't commit, sitting in front of a woman who's hysterical about the whole matter. It's a heavy thing to think about; and what's worse is that I can see Susan somewhere in the middle rows of the packed crowd, and I hope she doesn't see me because I'm a mess. They haven't let me shave, and my clothes are standard issue prison wear. Not orange by the way. I can see the wave of disgust wash over the crowd as they see me. I can hear the words they call me, and I can see people that used to be my friend avoiding my eye contact. I see my boss and my colleagues sitting in a farther back row talking amongst each other and shaking their heads. I'm so glad Susan didn't bring the kids, that would be unbearable. The judge has walked in, and I'm glad for his presence because the room falls quiet. I am grateful for being able to feel their hateful stares on my back rather than my face, and I am grateful they are not whispering anymore. My positive thinking is actually feeling better, although I still wish Susan would be here to help. The silence quickly overwhelms me though and I'm finding myself wishing it were loud again. I can hear the blood pumping to my brain and I can feel myself sweating. I know it must only be a moment before everyone can sit down, but it feels like several minutes. Finally though he says "you may be seated" and attention is turned towards the court. I no longer feel glares from the whole crowd, but I know a few still look disapprovingly. I don't know how this turned into such a big deal but it feels like all of Reno is in this very room wishing my life away. Even if I'm proven innocent, I know I'll be recognized; jobs won't want me, people will glare at me in the grocery store, they'll think it's another corporate tale of a successful white businessman getting away free. Positive thinking. At least I'll be free to see my children, and Susan will believe me. I'll be able to shave again, that's a plus. Before I get called up I do a quick prayer. The prosecutor asks me where I was on Wednesday night seven weeks ago. I told her what I've told everyone else, that I was working late as I commonly do. She asks if anyone can account for my whereabouts and I have to say no. I'm no liar. The rest of the trial goes by quietly, all I can hear though is my own blood pounding. *Oh God. Please let this go in my favor. Please* I'm awakened from my quiet prayer by a gavel banging. He says the court will reconvene shortly when the jury has made its decision. I can't stand up, I can't move, I can't talk. I'm locked in my seat for what feels like eternity; my life flashing before my eyes like during death. I remember in the third grade being accused of stealing some girls pencil, I got in trouble that day. I remember in tenth grade being called up to the principles office because someone could have sworn I was smoking behind the school. Not true, but I got suspended for a week. I'm thinking about all the times I didn't do something, and no one believed me. Just this once, please believe me. Finally the jury comes in, unable to look in my direction. Suddenly I am welcoming the glares, because I know they are pitying me now and are looking away, but the glares don't come. No one glares at me as the room filters back in. It's funny how something you hated just an hour ago is what you'd feel most comfortable with. An older man walks over to the judge and whispers something in his ear. The judge gets a grave look on his face before banging the gavel. Again, I'm wishing for time to stop as it did just an hour earlier. I'm begging God to pause the room and allow everyone to glare at me and shout at me. But this moment is happening, and it won't pause even for a second. I notice the pounding in my ears has quieted. My heart has literally stopped, there's no more blood being pumped to my brain. The judge clears his throat and my chest tightens. I can't breathe, I can't move, I can't think. This must be the end of my life.

MORRIS, ALETHEA

Alethea Morris

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Poetry

Lesson 1

Lesson one

See those old rainboots?

Tattered and torn

Too many times worn?

See their polka dots

Or stripes - no one knows

See how faded they are at the toes?

My mother gave them to me

Her mother to her.

They say its tradition, but isn't this neat:

Nothing worth having is worn on your feet

MORRIS, ALETHEA**Alethea Morris**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Poetry

Country Nights

Country Nights:

Way out there in the country
With the moon and the stars
Where you sit and stare
And think about life
Way out there in the country
With the owls and the snakes
Where the cicadas cry
And the wolf sings
Way out there in the country
With the bugs and the worms
Where the grass itchs
And the ground is muddy
Way out there in the country
With the quiet fields and the loud songs
Where the cities aren't
And the life is
Way out there in the country
With the rusted trucks and the lukewarm beer
Where folks come to dance
And they wear boots that pinch their toes
Way out there in the country
With the big world
Where one goes to be alone
And look at the sky
Way out there in the country
With the dark nights
Where you turn restlessly in bed
And stay up late talking
Way out there in the country
With the moon and the stars
Where all you want to do is be alone
And think about life.

MORRIS, ALETHEA**Alethea Morris**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Critical Essay

Analytical Essay**The Identity Adventure**

How does someone find their identity? Is it an ever-changing mass that can never fully be grasped, or a fixed conceptualization that reaches itself through a lifetime of failures and losses? In CJ Hauser's "The Crane Wife", CJ takes the reader on her journey to find purpose and identity. Her search takes us through her struggles with self doubt, approval, and respect; in the end, she has a fuller understanding of her place in the world.

Hauser's most challenging struggle is her fight to conquer self doubt. From the very beginning of the story, CJ doubts her stability after the split with her fiancé. She lacks an understanding of individuality by opening her story with "Surely, a person who calls off a wedding is meant to be sitting sadly at home". This shows her concern that her differences make her unrepeatable. This same concept is carried into the next paragraph as she thinks about her research trip to Texas. She worries that "everyone else would be a scientist or a birder and have daunting binoculars", again mistaking her differences as weaknesses. We also have many instances of self-doubt surrounding her failed relationship. As CJ has negative flashbacks, she touches on a recent Christmas memory. Her mother-in-law-to-be switched her adventurous squirrel character into a meek mouse; therefore depicting her as shy and reserved. This is a direct bash onto her identity and highlights the difference between her perceived identity and that which is perceived by others. This begs the question: who gets to determine a person's identity? Is it their actions that dictate who they are, or is identity an internal concept? The doubt that stems from this question leads CJ to share that she "wondered which one of us was wrong about who I was". CJ also very strongly doubts her importance in the world, which I'll soon link to self-respect. CJ often speculates that her situation 'isn't so bad' comparatively, saying things like "There are sadder stories than this" and "I am ashamed to be writing about this instead of writing about the whooping cranes, or little famines, or any of the truer needs of the world". She doubts that she even has a right to be feeling bad, or to have feelings of any sort.

CJ's deep rooted self-doubt can in many ways be linked to her search for approval, from her peers, society, her fiancé, as well as herself. She seeks approval in every part of her life. She felt that going on the trip needed to be approved by someone and says "The good people of the Earthwatch organization assured me I was welcome on the trip", validating her purpose. She also seeks approval from her fiancé's family. During the Christmas flashback, CJ mentions "I was agonized over the decision. It felt important, like whichever character I chose would represent my role in this new family", showing us the anxiety she feels when faced with identity. She also felt that she was seeking approval in her relationship; saying that she "often cried or yelled or reasoned or pleaded with my fiancé to tell me that he loved me", or telling us that "I wanted him to tell me I looked nice". She also talked about her people-pleasing tendencies, telling us about a time when her fiancé cheated on her early on, saying "I asked to discuss monogamy and, in an effort to be the sort of cool girl who does not have so many inconvenient needs, I said that I didn't need it". These kinds of 'morphing' moments tend to confuse the identity, and eventually will cause a person to question their purpose.

For someone who is self-doubting and needs the approval of others, respect can be a key component to forming a healthy identity. Unfortunately, for what seems like the extent of her relationship, CJ is disrespected in numerous ways. She is disrespected as a partner, as a woman, and as an individual. The perpetrator of this disrespect can't be defined as solely one person, as we see many instances of self-disrespect. However, her partner in many cases could be identified as the root of her respect-related problems. CJ continues to talk about how "he told me we hadn't officially been dating yet so I shouldn't mind." or "He said that we hadn't officially discussed monogamy yet, and so I shouldn't mind." or "He reminded me that he'd said 'I love you' once or twice before." -- never really identifying these comments as disrespectful. As his emotional disrespect cuts into her identity, her acceptance of these ideas also impacts how she sees herself. Her trip to Texas with a group of strangers, separated completely from the disrespectful environment she's accustomed to helps her see these things. Her experiences with this group touch on

many simple but important respectful moments. She says that they

“Made each other sandwiches”

“Lent each other fresh socks”

“Gave each other space in the bathroom”

“Forgave each other”

“Helped Warren when he had trouble walking”

“Took care of each other”

And this helped her tremendously to understand what mutual respect should look like. She closes her journey by saying “I realized it was not that remarkable for a person to understand what another person needed.”. Signifying the end of her story, but only the midpoint of her journey. As she understands that respect can be as simple as letting another person ‘drive the boat’, she understands that her environment was unsustainable. She now can begin her journey of self-appreciation, self-approval, and self-respect.

A final thought on CJ’s journey to identity - while she searches for this indefinable concept, she brings us on a search as well. Is identity fixed? What decides a persons identity? These are the questions that CJ asks of the reader throughout this story. She struggles with a plethora of problems, from doubt to approval to respect, and leaves us with the room to grow into our own identity as she goes on to work on her own.

MORRIS, ALETHEA**Alethea Morris**

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Category: Journalism

Social Media**Social Media: The Impact and Dangers on Youth**

Social media is a growing industry in America, especially among teens. Teenagers are using social media to learn about current events, communicate with friends, and stay safe. However, parents are concerned that the increase in social media is dangerous for teenagers. Are the spread of information, self esteem and social development, and safety harming or helping today's teens?

The spread of information through social media in my opinion has many negative effects that are not properly addressed by the older generations. A big one for me is the agency for misinformation. This means that not everything you see on social media is true, but teenagers rarely do research before believing a post. This is dangerous for the young generation because it causes miseducation, especially about social matters, and many teens believe anything they see online. This is also bad because it has been made increasingly easy to post information, so anyone can post their opinions. Most of what you see online is not fact-checked or written by an expert. I used to be friends with a republican teenager in our grade, and he told me that he got his news from instagram. I laughed at him at the time, but I wish it were a funnier issue. These "news" posts never have the full story, and are commonly twisted to fit a personal or political narrative chosen by the poster. This leads teenagers to feel like they are educated in political matters because they follow a political news page. This not only makes them misinformed, but confident in their misguided knowledge. I know this happens quite often in smaller towns as well, where social media may be the only way to connect to bigger social issues.

The spread of information can also be positive for teenagers though. It all depends on the information you receive. Teenagers all around the country, regardless of their level of education, are gaining access to information. This of course is good for spreading news, when it is well sourced and unbiased. Teenagers can repost or promote issues they care about as well as learn about topics they may not have in school. Social media has given teenagers access to anything they want to know. Be that health, environmental awareness, politics, sports, or anything they may find interesting. This is especially useful in topics that aren't covered in school or aren't supported by the teens immediate family. For example some teenagers identify with the LGBTQIA+ community and don't have support from their parents or teachers. In this case, their access to information through social media also increases teenagers' cultural and social awareness. Teens can promote any issues they want and share posts they find helpful and interesting. Teens can also connect with activists and through social media become more active in social change. Many teens are learning about issues they had never thought about because it might not have been brought up in their family or school. To use the small town example, I have several cousins who have never met a black person but are very active in the BLM movement. This is because of the increased availability to social policy knowledge so my cousins are hearing about George Floyd even though they are not directly affected by the issue. This is beneficial to social development as well, which along with self esteem is our next big conflict.

A big negative of social media for me is the underdeveloped social skills of today's teenagers. Many of my peers express anxiety when asked to speak on the phone or even just in public places. I often see teens take out their phones in public, as to shield from real social interactions. I'm included in this group as well, I find myself on my phone not looking at anything in public just because everyone around me is doing the same. I think an element of this is social pressure and more teenagers are open to social interaction than proven by a stroll through the commons. A similar con is the decrease in real-life interactions and friendships. Public places are now dominated by social media, and even an online presence can be alienating for teens. I'm referring mainly to fake friends and artificial online relationships. I've experienced this a lot on instagram. If I post a picture, I get so many comments from girls saying how good I look, how much they love me, and other positive comments. These same girls, at school, rarely talk to me - if ever. The 'gushing girls' on instagram is a serious occurrence that I think every teenage girl experiences and participates in. The comments are uplifting, but can paint the illusion of friendship and popularity.

Many introverted teenagers prefer “online friends” to in person friends, which can be detrimental to their social development. While these friendships can be authentic, they can also be harmful and increase feelings of loneliness. There is also a potential for cyberbullying in online friendships.

Cyberbullying is one of the biggest dangers surrounding social media. Apps like snapchat make quick communication very accessible to teenagers. On snapchat, you send a snap or a chat and it goes away on its own after the other person has viewed it. This kind of marketing encourages teenagers to say things online that they wouldn't say in person because it seems low risk. It's also easier for teenagers to make fun of people or be directly rude towards them because of the literal screen it provides. Teens don't have to see the impact of their comments and are in turn more likely to say something rude online. This can happen in friendships as well as with strangers. It's even more common with strangers because the level of anonymity being a 'stranger' furthers the ease of insult. I've seen so many horrible comments on regular videos about people's lives. The name for someone who leaves these comments is a “troll” and has become so common that every teenager knows about ‘trolls’ and ‘trolling’ and knows not to take it seriously. The ease in which cyberbullying has developed in teenagers is startling. For example, I used to post something called a “yolo”, where people I know can comment something to me anonymously and I can post their anonymous comment or question with my own reply. My yolos gained a lot of popularity randomly and I would get hundreds of anonymous comments. Most of them were super mean and they would make horrible comments about my relationship and spread sexual rumors about me. I didn't mind at all because I just knew they were ‘trolling me’. I happen to not take it very seriously, but cyberbullying can have very serious impacts that lead teenagers to self harm and contemplate/commit suicide. I'm lucky that I have people to talk to about the rude comments, and that I am in a healthy mental state already. For a depressed teenager, cyberbullying can push them into horrible situations and decisions that can have permanent consequences.

This danger fits in with the decrease in self esteem that social media creates. Teenagers already have more than average levels of self esteem issues as they are learning about themselves and maturing. Social media is one of the most harmful things for a teenagers self esteem because the posts on social media are engineered, posed, and perfected. The influencers that teenagers follow have all the best makeup artists, hairdressers, photographers, and photoshop specialists. Nothing you see online can be completely trusted, but seeing so many ‘ideal beauty’ standards can hurt teens' esteem. Teens see these and have worries about their body image, acne, jawline, thigh shape, or any other current beauty ‘trend’. This has resulted in increased interest in plastic surgery and body modification. However, social media can also be good for self esteem and social development. Because of the already present social media empire, it's hard to go to high school and not participate. Without social media, you may be out of the loop with school and your peers. Most of the classes I'm in this year have group chats where we discuss homework but also talk and bond. Without social media or a phone, teenagers would be missing out on inside jokes, homework help, party invites, and other important social interactions.

A huge positive of social media when talking about social development is the fast connections you can make. You can instantly connect with friends or family, for any number of reasons. Very recently I was having a panic attack, I have an anxiety condition and this is not uncommon for me. While I know how to handle panic attacks on my own, I called my friend and she picked up instantly and was able to help. It's great to be able to get instant help in times like this, or in good times too. I've called this same friend before to tell her some good news that I wanted to share immediately. This friend actually is a perfect example because she lives in Illinois so I don't have the quickest access to her. It's nice to be able to talk to her still without making a trip out to her house. This is another good reason fast communication can help social development because you can keep in touch with old friends, out of state friends, or in my case keep up with a long distance partner. My boyfriend goes to a boarding school, and while it's not too far away, I appreciate the ability to talk to him and maintain our relationship when he's at school.

Instant connections can lead into the next big concern for social media: safety. Safety is at the forefront of every parent's brain and keeping teenagers safe is priority number one. Being able to communicate with someone through social media can prove critical when assessing real life threats. For example, if I'm outside alone and it's dark, I find myself calling someone just to talk. Being on the phone with a friend or family member who knows where you are can prevent you from being followed or kidnapped. Social media can also keep teenagers connected with their parents so they can feel safe about where they are. Apps like find my phone and find my kid are easy ways for parents to make sure their child is safe during critical times. Another safety feature of social media pertains to mental health and safety. Being able to communicate with people outside your home quickly and efficiently can be lifesaving to teenagers in unhappy or abusive homes. Teenagers struggling with depression and having thoughts of self harm or suicide can call a friend quickly and efficiently.

Of course under the same umbrella of safety are some of the most dangerous and important concerns surrounding social media. Privacy, catfishing, scams, human trafficking, and sexually explicit content are some of these dangers. Privacy is often overlooked in young teenagers who impulsively post content without thinking. This is prevalent to all people, but especially teenagers who may not have the education or maturity level to post with etiquette. Private

content should never be online, because it always has the potential to spread. This is related to sexually explicit content, like nudes or videos that teenagers may share with each other. Teenage boys always want sexually explicit images, and sometimes teenage girls can be convinced or pressured into sharing this private content over social media. This happened to me once when a boy in my grade begged me for nudes. He would say things like “you’re such a tease” when I would say no and he asked consistently for a week before stopping. I never shared images with him online because I don’t trust him in that way, and I know that once an image is sent it is in their possession forever. These pictures can reach far beyond the person you send it to. A couple years ago there was a nude circulating of a girl at my school, and it reached a male friend of mine at a different school. He sent it to me and asked who I thought it was, because he knew she went to Burroughs. I could tell who it was but didn’t share this information with him. Many girls experience this and while this is not always threatening to their safety, it is important to preserve your privacy online. Catfishing is also dangerous for safety and mental health. Catfishing is when someone assumes a fake identity online and talks to someone pretending to be someone else. This can happen during cyberbullying as well as scamming and sex trafficking. When you talk to someone online, you have no way of ensuring their identity. Some young teenagers, girls especially, can be convinced to meet up with people they met online. This can lead to very dangerous situations involving trafficking and kidnapping. Scamming also happens through social media, and targets senior citizens more than teenagers, but it can happen to anyone if you aren’t careful and well educated.

Overall, social media can be good and bad for teenagers, but I think it’s more important to educate teenagers on proper technology use than to take it away from them. Social media is a part of our growing society and American culture, and teenagers will not be able to avoid it forever. I think parents should shift their worries into education and making sure their teenagers are being conscious online.

MORRISSEY, EMMA**Emma Morrissey**

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Category: Critical Essay

Traditional Essay**Absolutely Evil**

The concept of evil has guided mankind for centuries and has made no discrimination between the minds of all living beings. Its characteristics have been ingrained in the very molecules that define what is considered human. Although time has passed, the structural makeup of evil remains continuous. Evil intrigues, consumes, and benefits from the downfall of others, whether physical or mental. Just as a mother can love her child to the moon and back, she can also cease that love in a mere instant with the smack of her hand or a comment from the heart. A toddler can make what seems to be a lifelong friend but end that same friendship over a toy for self-gain. A student can be degraded to the fullest extent for a simple quirk or opinion. Humans, no matter their age, ethnicity, or orientation, have all experienced and inflicted evil. Through the texts of “What Makes Us Moral”, “Evil”, *Othello*, and *Paradise Lost*, a thorough understanding of the condition of evil can be known. The article “What Makes Us Moral” specifically touches on the violative aspect of malicious behavior on innocent intention. “Evil” helps to demonstrate the continuous and infectious feature of malevolence and its irresistible quality. *Othello*, through the character of Iago, hints at the seemingly natural and motiveless constraint of evil on the fragile emotions of humankind. *Paradise Lost* uses the character of Eve to demonstrate the degenerative effects of evil driven by desire. Throughout my own observations of the hierarchies scattered throughout high school, I have been able to observe human vanity and self-absorption on the infliction of evil. All bodies of work create a clear visualization of the versatile attribute of evil. Based on an analysis of each text, and personal experience, it is apparent that evil is absolute in its societal integration, grasp on reality, degeneration of all it exploits, and resiliency.

Throughout time, civilization has been led to corruption by leadership, which when inevitably polluted, becomes tyrannical rule. Whether it be with a singular extroverted high school individual with eyes set in jealousy and greed or a scandal-ridden politician, both grab for power or rule in some aspect of the matter. Through my own experience, I have seen many friend groups pass as a result of one student strategizing for attention. Regardless of the type of group interest, whether that be sports, gaming, or dance, there is always competition for the spotlight. Personally, I have been subjected to the power grasp by being consumed by the need to feel seen in the swarm of opinions and expectations of others. I have felt insecure in my appearance in accordance with trends, such as those that shame second-hand clothing, and have been forced into ideals considered “popular” in society. Such as “What Makes Us Moral” has analyzed, the “brutal line between insiders and outsiders is evident everywhere” meaning that the “[avoidance] of banishment” can lead to greater importance than one's ideals and wants, causing them to become subject to the rule of another or the selfishness they feel they need to inflict. (Kluger, 60) “Evil is a disease” as it allows for humanity to become accustomed to “vicious, violent, [and] corrupt behavior. (Morrow, 48-51) Just as a student has cheated off a test, and encouraged their friends to intimidate in their eventual demise, the product of their manipulation is existent. Eve, from *Paradise Lost*, accurately demonstrates similar subjective tendencies as a student who is pressured into cheating. Driven by the serpents compliments of her beauty, devotion to Adam, and the concept of independence, Eve became subjected to yearn for the power the forbidden fruit might bring to her such as it was supposedly brought the serpent, “so savory of that fruit, which with desire, Inclinable now grown to touch or taste, Solicited her longing eye”. (Milton, IX 740-743) Eve had previously neglected the idea of disobeying God and eating the forbidden fruit; however, the manipulative nature of the snake led her to temptation as demonstrated by traits of all power-hungry individuals intent to achieve self-satisfaction. Iago, in particular, attempts to gain his fulfillment with the torture and downfall of Othello and demonstrated power over him with his recurrent manipulation meant to “diet [his] revenge”. (Shakespeare, 99) Despite the hierarchical differentiation between Iago and Othello, Othello's high rank in status allowed for Iago to seek the need for power similar to the popular friend group. Iago's lower status also allowed for his vengeance to be omnipotent in its effective result over characters such as Cassio, Desdemona, and Roderigo, meaning that evil can become corrupt in both small and large aspects of leadership,

whether that be of oneself or power over another. The force of manipulation is a tactic used by all whose purpose is to seek power of some sort. No matter the individual, all can fall under the reins of the coercive and vengeful, and only then the actuality of evil itself can be analyzed to root the source of its corruption.

The reality of evil can be identified through its blinding effect on the mind. One might be completely unaware of their infliction of evil over another before they have been brought to pain. "Sometimes we [just] can't help " take action toward self-indulgence, without thought of its effect over another. (Kluger, 60) "Behavior slips the grip of reason" as the inner egocentrism of humankind is put forth. (Kluger, 60) I have personally seen hopes shatter with a shared test grade as one individual shows off their grade of A, while another weeps in the corner and contemplates their mistakes with a dreaded grade of C. Without initial thought of another, evil can take hold through self idealization to damage the dreams of a loved one. The phrase "I don't know" conceptualizes the true ignorance of action in situations driven by impulsion. (Morrow, 49) The motiveless occurrence of evil or desire in many instances can be explained through John Milton's interpretation of *Paradise Lost's* Eve, and her fascination with her beauty. As encapsulated by her appearance, and an originating concept of the blueprint of all humankind, Eve helps to reveal the unknown element to unintentional evil. As "a shape within the watery gleam appeared, bending to look at [her]" and her "return" to the reflection, Eve's enchantment with herself reveals the unhealthy essence of egocentric behavior. (Milton, IV 160-161) Concerning Eve's interest in her vanity, Iago's jealousy and hatred for Othello also demonstrates instinctual behavior. Iago's hatred for the "Moor" that "hath no less reason" (Shakespeare, 53) is never fully given concrete origination, his "nature's plague To spy into abuses" is also not completely devoted in understanding. (Shakespeare, 127) Iago's hatred and emotional discontent with Othello can be compared to the student who has received a C, and is unable to understand what they have done wrong, whereas his action to compel physical hatred onto Othello is that of the A student who shows off their grade to self indulge in its glory. As stated in the article "Evil", evil is "a strange coercive force; a temptation, a mystery, a horrible charm. Shakespeare understood that perfectly when he created Iago in his secular and motiveless malignancy". (Morrow, 49) Regarding this statement, the untold origination of evil is compact in the understanding that its demand on the unconscious is consistent and unflinching.

Evil reigns free in its ability to consume and inflict terror on the soul through the exploitation of the mind. In my personal experience, a lack of healthy friendships in my early high school years led to unhappiness and attempted to consume my life, allowing each day to pass on and ruin my understanding of the gift of education and experience I was supposed to be displayed. I was luckily able to rely on the help of others to fully understand the toxicity of those relationships and escape from a never-ending cycle of dread and hatred. Evil is thorough and hazardous as it can occur "in a fleeting instant" and allow "untold horrors on ourselves" never before imagined. (Kluger, 55) It decays whatever it touches to turn "the very air black and greasy" and too thick to breathe. (Morrow, 48) In my experience I wasted my life compelled by the control of another and became "rotten and tragic" to "the prestige of the absolute". (Morrow, 49) Evil erases the image of good in humankind and its coercive effects are ultimately "easier than good" and tempting. (Morrow, 50) Iago perfectly illustrates the disastrous effect of evil on humankind as his hatred for Othello consumes all that he is. Through Iago's attempts of manipulation to solidify his plan to enact revenge, his vengeance became increasingly extreme, and despite originally using others to carry out his misdeeds, he eventually put himself at risk for his own plan-which allowed for his capture. Iago is eventually driven to kill and destroy the life of another to feed his growing desires. Similar to how I was stuck in the continuous rot of unhappiness, Iago faced extreme progression to the degeneration of his morals through jealousy and distaste for himself. The "green-eyed monster" of "jealousy," fair warned by Iago himself, causes his eventual downfall. (Shakespeare, 129) The constraints of evil on Iago's weakened state of emotion in his jealousy led to the progression of his extreme actions. Through the killing of Roderigo, Iago is "damned" to be an "inhuman dog" as his actions had presented as no less ethical as a malicious force of evil. (Shakespeare, 229) Just as evil can take over the mind, it can deform the image of human empathy, creating a "monster". (Morrow, 49) Eve, from *Paradise Lost*, conceptualizes a similar struggle to moral standard as Iago with her consumption of the forbidden fruit. Just as Iago was driven to physical action, Eve, having contemplated the effects the fruit might bring her after her warning from God, chooses to pluck and bite the fruit after influence from the snake. Eve represents the degradation of both herself and Eden in the moments after eating the forbidden fruit, as "her rash hand in evil hour Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she ate; earth felt the wound... That all was lost". (Milton, IX 780-784) So, such as evil was able to consume Iago through weakness, it was also able to grasp onto Eve's curiosity and desire for the unknown, and take away her purity. With the fragility of the mind in its entrance to the territory of the unknown, evil can destroy all opportunities for benevolence in knowledge and progression to enhancement. I was also unable to grow as both a student and person with the hardships of heartbreak and manipulation presented by another, just as Iago was unable to suppress his desire for revenge and Eve was drawn to the concept of supposed godlike power and independence through her disobedience against God. In the words of "What Makes Us Moral", "we surely have a lot of killing and savagery ahead of us before we fully civilize ourselves", meaning that evil's capture over humankind will most

likely never cease without end to compulsive emotions such as jealousy and desire. (Kluger, 60) Evil becomes absolute as it takes hold of its selected host to gain and destroy all it needs, only to move onto another.

The adaptable nature of evil helps not only to form its irrepressible consumption of the human condition but its ultimate inevitability. Despite overcoming an obstacle such as a bad grade on a paper, or a toxic relationship, there is always another possibility. I, for example, have received multiple critiques on my art or writing ability throughout my educational career, but no matter how hard I tried to conquer an obstacle, another comes along. In math class, I have excelled at Algebra, but have been torn down by the patterns of Pre-Calculus. In my early elementary years, I needed the aid of a reading teacher yet have grown to write papers for advanced placement. Despite accomplishment, there is continued challenge to face critique and be subjected to the will of others. Evil is so resilient that regardless it will persevere. Perfection is an incapable concept of human existence, so when driven by that imperfection, evil can seep its way into the rage and frustration of inaccurate decisions. Yet, despite that concept, society is driven to believe that “just as syntax is nothing until words are built on it, so too is a sense of right and wrong useless until someone teaches you how to apply it”. (Kluger, 58) “Evil has been changing” in its form to make a decision, and it twists it to the desire for self-gain to cause destruction. (Morrow, 48) I, just like many others, am subjected to eventual criticism and bitterness over lack of perfection and desire for greater power. But, as I do take and receive discontent, I give “evil too much power, too much status” to take hold of my emotions and lead me to greater mistakes. (Morrow, 49) As society has continued, humans are essentially “the enemy” of ourselves. We create our downfall through our acceptance of evil, causing issues such as “greed, terrorism, crime, child abuse, global pollution, oil spills, and acid rain” to occur”. (Morrow, 49) Such as “Eve” in “evil hour... [gave] ear to [the] false worm” causing her own eventual “fall”, modern society follows under a similar principle as it subjects itself to evil through power grab and arrogance. Iago presents such arrogance with his vow of silence when captured, his refusal to speak on his misdeeds providing his evil with more power and exposing his true unexplainable and compulsive desire to do evil. His “demand” to “never speak a word” is much like that of a child unable to explain wrongdoing or create an excuse. (Shakespeare, 261) The continuation of his torture, much like Eve, was created through the need for self-sufficient action. “The human mind romances the idea of evil”, creating a “doomed defiance” as it moves to the weakest cause of emotional response to cause downfall. (Morrow, 51) The frustration I may feel after failing a test and catching a mean glare from another student may have the power to lead anyone to act on emotion. Such as with a specialized drug, evil is a heavily addictive and distinctive quality of the human condition. Evil latches onto any act of fragility it can find and possesses it to the fullest extent. “Evil is a constant presence in the human soul... there are more souls now than ever” who suffer under the restraints of compulsion and narcissism. (Morrow, 52) Whether it be an infant or an adult, all humans play a role in the continuation of frustration and mistakes. Evil's resilience lies in its ability to take control over the mind and body, and influence its will.

Evil defines the characteristics of human existence as it clings on to both psychological and physiological aspects of life, causing detriment and disintegration of reality through its abundance of flexibility. Just as Iago and Eve were able to fall from the temptation of a driving force, humanity has failed to conquer the concept of empathy and equality. Human emotion is natural, yet allows for instances of unrecognizable decisions that can damage another. Society is cold and critical in its ability to strive towards perfection, yet be the farthest away from it. No matter the circumstance, humans will act in moments of egocentric behavior. The concept of ethics, though created by humankind, is essentially drowned by the possibilities of human desire, as “evil is entertaining”. (Morrow, 51) As a student, I have witnessed glimpses of evil presented in even the most educated and innocent minds. As a member of society, I have seen the world crumble around me through the merciless actions of others. Evil prevails in all aspects of the term, it is only with the realization of every person's evil that a change can be made.

MURPHY, ADDISON**Addison Murphy**

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Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Live Every Moment Like It's Your Last

Live every moment like it's your last

Have you ever regretted something that you did or didn't do that would kick you in the butt every day since then? That is called regret. Regretting is when you are sad or disappointed about something that happened or didn't happen, and regret especially happens over a missed opportunity. Have you ever lost a family member, or been mean to someone who was close to you and pushed them away? Then, after that, you feel guilty and so down. That is regret. You shouldn't take the opportunities and people you see every day for granted, because you never know when it could be the last time you will see somebody or be given an opportunity like that again.

The people in your life could be young, or they could be old. It doesn't matter how old they are because anything could happen to ruin the chances you have. You are only on Earth for a limited time, so don't waste it staring at a screen or being lazy. You should be proud of what you achieve in the time you are on Earth, and you should not have any regrets. Every opportunity and person in your life is a blessing, and every time you see someone, you should act like it's your last; you should always be as courteous as you can to them. So, say you lose someone that is close to you today, would you regret the relationship that you had with them, the times you spent with them, and how you treated them. God gave you certain opportunities, challenges, and people to make the best out of it, and it really shouldn't push it aside. God has a reason for everything. If you worry that something that happened isn't right, and you feel lost because something or someone important in your life is now gone or ruined, don't worry because everything has a reason behind it.

For example, in 2020, I lost two very important people in my life. One of them was my grandma, and she was like a best friend to me. We always talked; we told each other everything, and we were also pen pals. We lived about twenty minutes away from each other, so I would see her quite often. She had been having a hard time breathing for a couple of years, but in January of 2020, she went into the hospital knowing that she wasn't going to live much longer. One day, I got to go see her, and it was really just to say bye and I love you. It was really hard for me because I was trying to stay strong in front of her and not show that I was about to break down. I also struggled with being able to speak clearly for her because I was sad, and once you get to a point of sadness, it's kind of hard to be able to know what to say in a situation. So, I regret that day that I didn't say enough to her because she passed away almost a week later, and I had a lot of regret and sadness.

Another example is my uncle. It was also in 2020, and my siblings and I were really close with this uncle because he was always there for us and came to watch us and hang out with us. He also lived down the street from us, so every day we would drive by his house. He worked with my dad like all of my uncles do, but this one was always my favorite because he tried to have a relationship with me and my brothers and sisters. 2020 was already hard enough for everybody, but then one day, he was out driving a ranger with one of his buddies; he had gotten drunk and turned a corner too sharply, he wasn't buckled up, and the ranger flipped. He flew out, the ranger flipped on him, and he didn't make it, but a couple of days before that day, he had come to our house to pick up my dad's mower to fix it. I was being extremely lazy that day, and I waited too long to go say hi because he was already gone. If I would've known that was the last time I would've seen him, then I would've made sure that I said hi and I loved him, but instead, I was inside playing video games. So, you never really know when it is the last time you will see someone. Like I said, instead of playing video games, go out and live your life and treasure every moment.

Those were really two big reasons that explain why living every moment like it could be your last is important because you don't want to have regrets; it will tear you apart. So, every day you wake up in the morning, value it, treasure it, and treat everyone kindly because everyone in your life is in it for a reason. Live every second in your life like your last one and stay off distractions that will draw you apart from reality.

MURPHY, KATIE**Katie Murphy**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Journalism

Up, Up and Away

Sophomore Grace Smith's hands smelled like latex, her palms were stained with blue, green, yellow and pink dye and her right index finger was throbbing purple from tying balloon after balloon.

Parents, who had been sweating in line for 40 minutes, stared her down as she twisted up her hundredth balloon dog of the day.

Smith was manning her one-woman balloon stand as part of the entertainment for Prairie Village's summer live music festival — set up between The Body Lab and Bijin Spa where she'd been working for two hours and had already made \$140.

"It doesn't seem to matter where I set up because the kids always find me," Smith said. "I show up in a balloon hat and they immediately congregate around me. It's kind of magical."

Smith earns money and makes toddlers smile while learning to handle unusual situations filled with popped balloons, crying four-year-olds and pushy parents — all through her self-run balloon art business, "Balloony Tunes."

Smith first picked up a balloon pump for a fifth grade school project to "create a business." Inspired by balloon artists at birthday parties, Smith ordered 100 balloons off Amazon for \$10. At the time, she wasn't very serious about ballooning — her family was convinced it was just a phase.

Four months later, she had an ear surgery that she had been waiting to receive since she was little. Sentenced to a month indoors with no exercising or sweating, Smith began teaching herself how to make different balloon art projects off YouTube because she "had to stay entertained somehow."

Even after she had recovered, Smith continued to twist up balloons alone in her room late at night, learning to make a flower one week and a pigeon the next. Her mom encouraged her to start working private parties in 2018. She booked her first gig that summer for one of her mom's friends at The Learning Tree, a toy shop in Corinth Square. To prepare, Smith crafted a homemade balloon carrier — Dixie cups of balloons sorted by color and tied shut with zip ties packed into a cardboard box.

"I make sure to keep the bags closed because balloons can go stale," Smith said. "It's not something most people have to think about."

By then, she had a full repertoire stuffed with unicorns, monkeys on trees, guitars and butterflies. Her favorite thing to make was flower baskets — carefully woven with a handle and four white daisies. But once she was set up at the actual event with her first non-relative customers, she panicked. She swears she couldn't remember how to make anything other than balloon dogs in the moment.

"I just couldn't stop making them," Smith said. "Dog after dog after dog."

Her hands were sweating the whole time — sometimes she would burst three balloons before successfully creating a dog. Heads turned with each pop as the line of people watched Smith's every mistake. And then came her least favorite part — closing up her stand.

“Cutting off a line and telling a sobbing 7-year-old that you won’t make them another balloon dog is very difficult,” Smith said.

She was only scheduled to work at The Learning Tree for one hour, but ended up staying for two because she was scared to turn families away.

Her muscle memory and confidence grew at her next few party bookings. She began to loosen up, making more than just dogs, and was able to enjoy her customers’ company more — realizing that “kids are weird in a good way.”

“About a month ago, this kid asked for a monkey on a sword, which was already a strange request,” Smith said.

“Then, he ran off and sold it to another kid right in front of me for \$2. He came back, showed me and was like, ‘Look, I made two bucks’ in a country accent. It made me laugh out loud.”

Wide-eyed kids staring in wonder as she works and telling her she’s “so cool” make the popped balloons, dye-stained hands and summertime sweat worth it for Smith. While some parents politely leave her tips or bring her Kona Ice at parties, the rude parents always manage to find her stand.

“A sword will unravel after their kid swings it around for 30 minutes or pop after they whack it on spiky grass, and the parents will cut in front of the whole line and say, ‘Fix this,’” Smith said. “They think they can control me because I’m just a kid, but I’ve learned to say, ‘No, there’s a line.’”

Now, after four summers of practice, Smith isn’t afraid to cut off lines or stand up for herself against the “terrible parents.” She doesn’t get as frustrated when she accidentally pops balloons.

“I’ve learned to be patient with myself and stay calm, even if there’s a long line of people waiting on me,” Smith said. “It’s made me more mature.”

She works at least six parties per summer, making around \$40 an hour — half of what professional balloon artists charge but still more than she makes babysitting, mowing lawns or coaching elementary school soccer. All of her summer events, fall church festivals and private homecoming parties are booked through word of mouth, and she’s used to receiving positive feedback.

Smith doesn’t know any other teenagers who practice balloon art. To her knowledge, she’s the only teen with over 1,000 balloons shoved in the back of their closet because it’s a cool enough temperature to keep them fresh and who takes trips to the American Balloon Factory — a specialty balloon store — to purchase packs of balloons by the hundred. But it doesn’t bother her to have an uncommon hobby.

“I like being unique,” Smith said. “Plus, there’s less competition.”

NASTASIA, ALEXIA**Alexia Nastasia**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Overcoming Difficulties to Create New Realities**Overcoming Difficulties to Create New Realities**

In 2015, in his remarks at the 50th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery marches, President Barack Obama stated: “For everywhere in this country, there are first steps to be taken, there is new ground to cover, there are more bridges to be crossed.” He was able to symbolically transform a bridge that people dared to cross although they knew they would be beaten and perhaps even killed for their action into a symbol of overcoming difficulties to create new and more equitable realities.

In the Selma speech, President Obama also said: “Young people behind the Iron Curtain would see Selma and eventually tear down that wall. Young people in Soweto would hear Bobby Kennedy talk about ripples of hope and eventually banish the scourge of apartheid. Young people in Burma went to prison rather than submit to military rule.” As a participant in my current home town of Saint Louis, Missouri in the Cultural Leadership Program engaging high school student leaders in such experiences as a Transformational Journey through the U.S. South, I had the same sentiment standing on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma where civil rights leaders stood strong. As the daughter of new immigrants from Romania in Eastern Europe to the United States of America, I have a deep understanding of overcoming difficulties to create new and fairer realities.

When I was born, my mother and father were international students pursuing graduate degrees at the University of North Dakota while also raising a family, which came to include my sister born in Bucharest, Romania and myself born in Grand Forks, North Dakota. When I was approximately two years old, my parents were told that I might never speak because I had not been forming words appropriately. Instead of despairing, my parents put me in every speech, occupational, and physical therapy opportunity available in university, healthcare, and social services settings. Due to their efforts, by the age of four I was not only speaking English but I also became able to communicate in my parents’ native language, Romanian.

This early experience prompted me both to understand the importance of having a voice and to develop a passion for fostering environments in which everyone is encouraged, nurtured, and supported to have a voice. Seeking to find a voice, I started studying Romance languages related to Romanian such as French and Spanish and I also began learning Latin which constitutes the foundation of Romance languages. I also realized I am a good singer and, based on an elementary school teacher’s recommendation, I joined the Saint Louis Children’s Choirs of which I am still a member today. Furthermore, in the process of discovering my own voice, I comprehended that many people do not get to express their perspectives due to societal hurdles and many voices do not get heard due to injustice.

As a child, I was touched by my parents’ stories about the horrors of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s dictatorship in Romania, including among numerous forms of oppression of the population and violations of human rights the lack of access to public discourse for anyone who was not in the repressive political apparatus and the lack of freedom of speech. During several summers I was also able to travel to Romania, where I heard stories about the destruction that totalitarian regimes brought to the region as well as the bravery of those who sacrificed to bring down the unjust system.

During the Cultural Leadership Program’s Transformational Journey through the U.S. South, I had opportunities to visit, in addition to the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, the Central High School in Little Rock, the Temple Beth El in Birmingham, the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, and other iconic places for the civil rights movement, as well as

to meet with civil rights heroes along the way. In this program and additional youth leadership activities, I have come to realize how worldwide efforts for liberty and equity have historically complemented and continued one another.

My own perspective and my family's perspective resonate with President Obama's arguments that what makes the United States unique is not only "the idea held by generations of citizens who believed that America is a constant work in progress" but also the understanding that "America is not the project of any one person." What I appreciate the most in regards to the American experience is the efforts that have been made, despite any hurdles, to ensure that we all become able to live our lives to the best of our abilities, regardless of where we come from, where we live, and how we look like.

Overcoming difficulties to create new realities has become a life mission for me. In a session of the Cultural Leadership Program, a peer made me what I consider to be the biggest compliment I have ever received, saying that I was the most likely to seek difficult conversations but also the most empathetic during such conversations. Reflecting on this observation, I have realized that I am indeed passionate about difficult conversations, even if they may seem conflictual sometimes. I have been involved in such discussions across school clubs and community programs seeking to help expand my own and my peers' cultural awareness. I have also realized that my mechanism of coping with any possibility of emerging conflict during difficult conversations is indeed empathy. I frequently found myself eager to ask during such discussions: "Are you OK?" I want people to be aware of the dire problems of our time. However, I also want everyone involved in such life changing dialogues to feel comfortable.

NASTASIA, ALEXIA**Alexia Nastasia**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Critical Essay

Against Populism**Against Populism**

In book 5 of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates makes the famed statement that philosophers should be political leaders in the following way:

Until philosophers rule as kings in their cities, or those who are nowadays called kings and leading men become genuine and adequate philosophers so that political power and philosophy become thoroughly blended together, while the numerous natures that now pursue either one exclusively are forcibly prevented from doing so, cities will have no rest from evils, my dear Glaucon, nor, I think, will the human race. (166)

According to Socrates, not only should either philosophers become political leaders or political leaders become philosophers, but also until that occurs humanity has no chance for good leadership. Following this statement, Socrates and Glaucon discuss extensively what a philosopher leader or a leader philosopher should be like and thus what philosophy which becomes leadership would entail. After Socrates makes the argument that "in the case of a philosopher, [...] he has an appetite for wisdom," Glaucon exclaims: "In that case, many strange people will be philosophers!" (168). Glaucon suggests including among philosophers or those with an appetite for wisdom all the lovers of seeing or listening or various crafts because they all take pleasure in learning, and while Socrates agrees they are in some ways like philosophers he argues that true philosophers and thus true leaders are the "lovers of seeing the truth" (169). The discussion seeking to identify what seeing the truth would mean involves making a distinction between knowledge (which deals with what is), ignorance (which deals with what is not), and belief (which occurs when people think they know but they are actually ignorant), until Socrates firmly draws the conclusion that "philosophers" (lovers of wisdom or knowledge) are "passionately devoted to and love the things with which knowledge deals" whereas "philodoxers" (lovers of belief) are "passionately devoted to and love the things with which belief deals" (75).

Plato's ideas not only of the philosopher leader or leader philosopher but also of the differences between philosophers and philodoxers are extraordinarily relevant to political realities and political discourse nowadays. Our time is largely a time of philodoxers or lovers of belief who have taken political power rather than philosophers or lovers of truth being able to political power, in a way that remains as dooming for nations and humankind than as Plato noted. It is bad enough that we live in a society in which there is rapid spread of a conspiracy theory such as QAnon which has encouraged people to believe without evidence that Democrats in the U.S. Congress would engage in child pornography and that Donald Trump would have been on a mission to save the abused children, but it is even worse when then President of the United States Donald Trump refused to condemn those who believe in this conspiracy theories and doubled down suggesting that QAnon believers were good people who care about children. In fact, Trump continued to utilize QAnon style conspiracy theories when exiting office, promoting the big lie that he had won the election despite clear evidence to the contrary, making baseless claims of election fraud in court as well as in the court of public opinion, with dire consequences ranging from interminable recounts to the January 6 domestic terrorism acts. As another example, we are still not out of the COVID-19 pandemic and it has become increasingly clear that leaders who ground their response to the pandemic in facts have a high chance to succeed in keeping it under control, whereas leaders who base their response on belief (conspiracy theories and scientifically disproven theories that the virus does not exist, or will disappear by itself, or will be overcome by herd immunity, or theories that the vaccine is less effective than various forms of self treatment, or is a means to exterminate specific groups of people, or it will be used as a surveillance tool, etc.) have little possibility to manage the virus and to control the consecutive waves of the disease.

It can be argued that today's philodoxers are populist politicians, as according to scholar Andrej Skolkay (2000) populism is "a form of sharply antagonistic political rhetoric and politics, which extremely simplifies problems and offers seemingly easy, painless, [...] most often vague solutions." Furthermore, the populist politician "presents himself as a common man who understands people, in contrast to the corrupt elites, incapable and/or unfit to govern" (2). Political analysis such as Skolkay repeat in slightly different words the arguments already made by Socrates about philodoxers. From Trump in the U.S. to Bolsonaro in Brazil to Modi in India, a number of contemporary leaders have been populist philodoxers thriving in belief making while often ignoring facts, and encouraging their supporters to appreciate strong beliefs rather than facts, but as the case of the pandemic response demonstrates choosing to ignore facts can have dire real life consequences. True political leadership should be grounded in love of the truth not interest in baseless beliefs, however it is rare in our worlds today.

Plato in antiquity as well as Skolkay in the contemporary period have powerfully argued that bringing love of the truth and expert knowledge back to politics, in regards to both those seeking to become leaders and the broad audiences of political discourse, is a must today and can only be done with coordinated educational, media, and social media efforts of those on the side of the truth rather than of just belief.

NASTASIA, ALEXIA**Alexia Nastasia**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Critical Essay

Are Wealth and Democracy Compatible?**Are Wealth and Democracy Compatible?**

In the book *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich* Kevin Phillips (2003) wrote: The debate over the compatibility of wealth and democracy is as old as the republic. From the start, concern that the egalitarian-seeming United States of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries might develop wealth concentrations to match Europe's was a worry for many but also the guarded hope of an important few. (chapter 1)

This question of the compatibility between wealth and democracy is what has defined the United States of America from its inception to the present day and it is as pressing today as it was at the beginning of the nation.

It can be argued that the American democracy has been the first successful modern experiment in democracy, taking into account that France which also experimented with democracy at about the same time as the United States went through a revolution, then a reign of terror, then an empire, then a series of attempts to democracy and returns to autocracy (including Vichy France which was a puppet government under the influence of Nazi Germany) until it reached its present Western democracy form. Yet it can also be stated that the American democracy, despite its effective mechanism of representative governance which ensures that no one single person or one single entity ever grabs power in an absolutist manner, has never actually worked the same for all inhabitants of the United States, but rather in the best interest of a group of powerful few.

What is fascinating is that democracy in the United States was not made by “the people” although it was expressly intended to be for “the people.” Democracy in the United States was made by the rich, by a group of very wealthy people who grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of opportunity they were encountering as part of the British empire despite their wealth, and who succeeded not only to win a war against the British but also subsequently to debate, form, and run a government according to principles they thought through and put in place. As compared to the French, the American subjects of the British empire didn't pursue a revolution of the masses but rather a war of the elites. Of course simple, regular people were involved in the war (on both sides), but they were mostly persuaded, paid, and maneuvered to participate.

When the Americans won the war against the British, the wealthy elites who formed the government could have made anything – an authoritarian society, a kingdom, a democracy. In fact, George Washington was offered to become king and he declined. The fiery discussions that took place in regards to the organization of the state, aptly described for example by Bernard Manin in *The Principles of Representative Government*, could have led to any development, but those people involved in the discussions were inspired by the ancient Greek and Roman notion of democracy, by the ideals of the Western Antiquity further developed by thinkers during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, so they decided to experiment with democracy.

However, this democracy as devised by the wealthy elites in the United States, meant to provide representation of “the people”: was never meant to be equal for everyone and fair to everyone, so is it truly a democracy since it entails what Philips called “the guarded hope of an important few”? From the beginning, democracy was not going to include Native Americans, and such developments in the 19th century as the Trail of Tears shows they were not going to be included among “the people.” Washington, Jefferson, Adams and all the other members of the elite could have created a republic that would be fair for people of color, but they willingly excluded those due to economic interest of plantation owners, of fair for women, but they willingly excluded them too despite the outcry of Abigail

Adams to “remember the ladies.” It has taken a significant amount of pressure and movement to gain rights for racial minorities and for women, and it seems these are rolled back and fought hard again every generation.

So are wealth and democracy compatible? Perhaps, but in the context of the historical development of the U.S., they have been at odds rather than in synch, and democracy means more a rotation in power than widespread access to the rights, responsibilities, and privileges that power brings.

NEWSOM, ALEXA**Alexa Newsom**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Shelley Moran

Category: Poetry

everything i wish i had said**memories (all mine now, i think you forgot, but i'll tell you anyway)**

remember when we were in
 third grade, and
 we would act out our favorite book series
 on the playground?
 two girls pretending
 to breathe like the dragons we were (not)

remember when we were in
 fourth and fifth grade, and
 i would come to your house
 almost every day to play
 our made-up game—always the same
 but we never tired of it
 we called it a strange name
 three words
 that no one else will understand, but
 they are meaningless(ful) to me
 they were once meaningful to you

remember when we were in
 sixth grade, and
 i had just moved, and
 we would call every night
 hang up with glistening cheeks, and
 promises to *talk tomorrow*, and
 at least three *i miss yous* before someone
 was brave enough
 to hang up.

remember how:
 we
 cried less, called less, you
 disappeared
 and slowly i became
 best friend to
 friend in kansas to
 person i know in kansas to
 person i once knew

i remember, too

i don't remember as much anymore
 and it's ok: you're the
 person i once knew, too, now, just a
 person i once knew

curse you, the frog

a siren, your song
 flies coming to your tongued trap
 for you to snap closed, their
 head and heart and lungs
 enclosed within your wet, cold mouth
 until you let one go

but they stay—
 stockholm syndrome, you
 their captor—
 to be let into your acid and burned whole
 'cause that's easier
 than the cold winter air
 rejection from your
 barbed-wire tongue

but you dive—
 swim underwater and away
 desperate

wings are not made to swim

and sometimes you'll shed
 your frog skin,
 to talk to me, a fly, with
 your beauty and unfiltered truth

but i should have known it was a lie
 for while your frog skin lay cast aside, the
 night covered us like a blanket

i dreamed once

i dreamed once, and
 now i only have one recurring
 nightmare because of you

we're in a war
 only this time, for the first time
 we're actually fighting in the war
 same side
 there are guns and bullets and copper-tasting blood and shouting and
 death presiding over all, a puppet master.
 only it took you under its wing when it
 connected you with string when that
 soldier shot and didn't miss and you're bleeding and i'm supposed to be shooting but
 i can't look away
 as you waste away
 crying out: *mar*—
 but you're gone before i can finish your name

i relive it again

we're in a war
 and for the first time,
 we're actually fighting in the war
 two sides, but Death is calling all the shots (literally)
 it took me under its wing when it

connected me with string when that
 soldier had perfect aim and
 my side explodes my hands covered in red my throat thick i cough up blood
 this isnt how i die i cant die no—

you don't even look my way

shooting in a frenzy and
 not to avenge, but to save your own frog skin
 i cry out: *mar*—
 but i'm gone before i can finish your name.

everything i want to say

you said: Hey, you want to talk?
 It's been a year.

i said: I know
 and sure.
 and *it's been too long*
 and *why did you refuse my calls?*
 and *i miss you i miss you i miss you*
 i said: I know,
 and how have you been?

you said: Good. You?

i said: Good!
 and *are you doing better now,*
 with the anxiety and all?
 and *when did you stop telling me things?*
 and *i miss you i miss you*
 i said: Good!
 And yeah, me too.

you said: Well, good!
 I have to go now, though—
 something with
 friends
 came up.
 Nice talking to you.

i said: You too!
 and *what kind of thing?*
 and *when did i stop being your friend?*
 and *talk soon!*
 and *i miss you*
 i said: You too,
 and have fun with your friends!

you said: Goodbye
 as if there was
 something good
 about the word

you said: Goodbye

the heart is like lungs: it suffocates

i am drowning
 still seeing you
 screaming your name
 and i don't know if

you
don't notice, don't hear, don't care—
i can't tell which would cause me the most pain.

but then again, if
you will cause me pain
i don't give a damn anymore
gotta protect myself, ya know?

NEWSOM, ALEXA**Alexa Newsom**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Shelley Moran

Category: Poetry

If She Said She Hated You...?**Dear Evan,**

remember how you two met?
 “met” being a vaguely-correct term, “met”
 implying a nice cup of tea
 warmed, maybe even slightly steaming—steaming, instead of
 an event that provoked the hot branding iron of burning gossip
 a scarlet letter of another type
 and made her that
poor girl or *slut*, depending on who tells her story
 steeping and growing, more than a leaf—poison ivy
 remember that specific wall?
 the pink-ish one, by the water fountain and the lockers
 ironic, she still guesses since
 it was that day You gave a key to her heart
 belonging only to You
 and drowned her screams in her silent tears
 until the sound could no longer reach her ears
 or Yours
 remember how her pleas felt?
 pleas to stop
 —little pushes of air, of life—
 when they died at Your lips, and
 remember how her lips felt?
 all pink with innocence
 all soft
 all parted for gasps that You stopped with Your tongue, and
 remember how her hips felt?
 when You pushed them open
 too open
 too open that it hurt, and
 remember how her breasts felt?
 (finally) free of the bra
 too small and too big at the same time
 ‘cause even Your pleasure isn’t good enough

she remembers.
 she will never forget—cannot ever forget.
 that she is Your entertainment, Your pet.
 treasure and golden.
 should she apologize for this?
 thank You for it?

dolls cannot write

*dolls cannot think
dolls cannot speak*

forever Yours,
she

Doll

her arms are
 limp
her legs are
 limp
her hands are
 limp
her feet are
 limp
she doesn't stand—she sits
exactly where You tell her to
on the shelf, by the window
a sign in front of her
 isn't she a treasure?
it's what You said to her in Your vow
it's what You said to her with Your fist
each time with a smile
 isn't she a treasure?
they always say yes
just as they always say
the shattering that spreads
just like spider webs
across her porcelain
comes from age
 I told you she was golden.

A Silent Fight on Wet Pavement

what do You want her to say?
that she's sorry, 'cause You know
that's all she knows how to say.
five letters that You hate her for using, but
find comfort in their usage anyway
'cause it means that she's never right and more importantly,
You're never wrong

when she sees You
standing in the rain
what do You want her to do?
to run to You and throw her arms around Your neck and
kiss Your cheeks with those "sorrlys" that You
 hate more than her
 love more than her
 (but remember You said love conquers all, so
 only pay attention to the second)

and, of course, ask You to save her from the hail of the world's hatred that
stings her broken skin

when You see her
dripping wet
after she has been watching You in the rain
do You expect her to forgive You or to take the blame?

or both—she wouldn't (couldn't) put it past You
 nor hold it against You, 'cause that's who she is, how
 You defined her
 but what You don't know (or didn't care enough to learn)
 is that this is now how she treats everybody—for once
 you're not THE exception

that's it—stop asking
 stop asking Her to make your guilt go away
 not when She wants you to feel the pain of regret

She's not looking at you, by the way
 She's looking to the horizon
 finally allowing Herself to feel again, to feel
 the strength and depression of emotion She's been suppressing for so long
 to feel the tears that run down Her cheeks in

f r e e d o m

In Response to the Poem Above

She shouted, actually
 that word: freedom
 freedom from you and freedom from the version of Herself crafted by the world for
 Her to wear as often as lingerie
 did She ever tell you how much She loves suits? dresses?
 She did.
 actually, She shouted it
 that these shorts and shirts and endless dirt covering Her face and grit
 under Her fingernails and muscles larger than “a lady should have” are
freedom! finally
 She actually shouted it and

She hopes you heard it

NG, ALLY**Ally Ng**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

Home School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Piper Abernathy

Category: Poetry

guhaejwo (save me)

guhaejwo (save me)
(after “Save Me” and “Blue & Grey” by BTS)

guhaejwo,
I'd like to breath. I'd like to wake up now.
I don't like this dream.

i need to escape, find a way out,
but i've lost my purpose to try.
I've been fighting for my life i'd like a break now.

the bottom of the well is my undesired niche.
i avoid the shiny stones
because i don't like my reflection.

the moon's glow,
once my beacon of hope,
has lost its luminescence.

guhaejwo.
i don't make the cut on my list
of companions in this isolation.

the loss of
color is trivial as
the muscles in my cheeks go stagnant.

rescue me, i can't pull myself out
towards the moon.
the feeling of light makes me wince.

I just want to be happier,
but not by the moon.
Am I being too greedy?
guhaejwo, from my nightmare.

NG, ALLY**Ally Ng**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

Home School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Piper Abernathy

Category: Poetry

dry tears

dry tears

unmistakable. her voice.
cuts through my scattered
thoughts, never getting a choice.

she no longer fazes me
or overtakes me.
yet her facial distortions
create mind contortions.

the look of hurt is unoriginal,
the wondering when dinner
is no short of criminal.

sincere words glaze over
just as my eyes did when older.
they have proven ineffective
as their genuity gets neglected.

i didn't mean to make you cry.
once it breaks there's no reverse.
"you've already crushed me like a fly."

NGUYEN, KATHERINE**Katherine Nguyen**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

Home School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Sarah LaPierre

Category: Poetry

a student's state of mind**"Follow Your Heart"**

Fistful of thumping veins,
metallic crimson
pumping in-
and-out.
"Follow your heart" –
a guiding compass,
needle pointing
to happiness.

Fistful of suffocating pressure,
new expectations
pumping in-
and-out.
This is what I follow –
a guiding compass,
needle pointing
to "success".

Future Me

Feed, you *must*.
A buffet of trophies and medals,
certificates
drizzled with glimmer and shine:
gold.

Puppetmaster,
Enslaver,
Manipulator.
Future me.
Feed.

Entrees sprinkled with tears,
desserts sweetened with pain.
I am your servant,
presenting,
food for an ideal,
food not for me.

Feed.

Future me,
you selfish
monster.

Ode to Messy Handwriting

Illegible scribbles encrypted
with fragments of words—
pieces that make sentences—
lines forming thoughts—
ideas that cannot
be understood again.

I condemn my scrambled penmanship,
but also,
see it as my savior.
It hides me,
keeps myself covert,
camouflages emotion and candor;
it masks individuality—
a pervasive disease.

God forbid
someone finds the truth.
Diverging from social norms—
a crime, one that
stems from
and brings
isolation.

NGUYEN, KATHERINE**Katherine Nguyen**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

Home School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Sarah LaPierre

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Fieldnotes from the Sky

I've come to realize, this is not the memoir of decisive resolution I had hoped to write. There's no "we must do this" or "we must stop that"; I fear I do not yet have the knowledge to determine what we should or should not do. I simply share the discovery I have made— one that many have not. I give my eyes: my perspective, thoughts, and questions, and hope that I can incite some sort of sympathy, perhaps even change.

I mustn't dilly-dally; this story isn't about me, it's about "the world".

Discovery of "The World"

"We have fully ascended, feel free to unbuckle."

The pilot's memo ended with a static reverberation. From the cue, all passengers began resituating themselves into more comfortable positions. The lack of space made it difficult for anyone to completely relax, including me. I slid up the window shade beside me, hoping to escape staring at the dull dreary grays that composed the entire aircraft. All of a sudden, the window's bright rays of light attacked my eyes, my natural defense mechanism— squinting— kicking in. It only took a few seconds before I could see again. The oddly placed window forced my head to sit crooked on my neck, it was almost unbearably uncomfortable, but worth the view of the world below. When I squished my face into the window just right, the lands filled my entire perspective: a linear panorama of the world unfolding right in front of my eyes. Slightly bored with nothing to do, I silently sat and watched the screen of the window play a most intriguing film.

This "film" was one that I assumed I was familiar with. I sort of guessed that thirteen years on Earth would be enough to understand the general environment. To my consternation, I was very wrong.

Most— and I too— would think that seeing the world would be a novel sight, one that's entirely filled with pure beauty and amazement. Jungles, clear oceans, vast forests: that's what I had expected to see. We've been taught about fairy tales and magical adventures since we were kids; Disney and stories provided the majestic lies that I so believed in. Foolish, I now know. This childish delusion vanished as soon as the windows brought me an unexpected reality: miles and miles of it spanned beneath my feet.

The discovery of this newfound world caused me much dismay, soon, an overwhelming sense of discomfort burgeoned within me. It was not only the realization that scared me but the plain horror of the reality outside. I forced myself to continue looking and confront the truth.

Thoughts and questions ran through my brain: *How did the world seem like nothing I expected? Why does it look so unnatural, so... ugly?* Within seconds, I pulled out my journal from my squished backpack below my chair. I was desperate to find some answers through writing, or at least some sort of calm that I usually conjure from journaling.

Scribbles and sketches, pages and pages of frantic nonsensical words. My observations of a newfound world, fieldnotes, I will call them— a fancy way of saying, *a child trying to make sense of things*.

Fieldnotes

A strange extraterrestrial parasite seemed to be taking over my beloved planet: machines. A copious amount of metal and concrete was scattered across the ground, latching themselves to every morsel of Earth that they could grasp onto. They came in all different sorts and sizes: some were large, some smaller, some a rectangle, and some completely different. But none of them had beauty; each building or structure was an obvious abnormality to the Earth, never fitting in. With each successive machine, Earth seemed to be progressively mutilated, therefore, there was a dwindling beauty to the Earth. I suppose one might identify it as beautiful since *it is* subjective, yet, if one dislikes hurt and scars then they would agree with me. That's how it looked: machines abusing their surroundings without care. I'll describe it.

1. Roads

These streets remind me of mindless doodles from those of a child: the curved, straight, or winding lines flowing directionless across Earth's surface. Unafraid to color outside the boundaries, they pushed through everything in its path, bulldozing across obstacles such as forests and even bodies of water. With each step forward, the roads demolished a little more of nature. They continued for what seemed like— forever. Wide or small, these roads branched out endlessly, as if veins in our body. I haven't had the opportunity to see one end yet. That is, assuming that they do end. Gosh, I do hope that they stop somewhere— if not, when will they ever cease their destruction?

It's silly, the main goal for these streets is to connect— but ironically, it looked like a whole lot of dividing. From the sky, it was evident that these simple lines brought such a physical divide to nature: a laceration— the severance of entire ecosystems throughout the country.

2. Cars

For each road, even more cars were lured out: the streets constantly piled with infinite hunks of metal. Joined as a pack, they moved together as one, unstoppable by forces of time and weather. Organized signs and lanes kept them moving systematically, no car ever daring to move out of its predestined spot. When one had a calling to turn away from the pack, another would replace it within seconds; there was never a lack of cars. The entire arrangement seemed more automatic rather than a path of choice.

In all my time watching, I had completely expected for the “show” to end, for the cars to all go wherever they “live” and stop for the night. But no— no one had ever seemed to be stopping, they just *kept on moving*. Forward, forward, and forward: nonstop speed and complexity for no apparent reason. Truly, there must have been some sort of end— a satisfaction point, a *reason*. From my personal experience amongst these vehicles, I know that these machines are great modes of individualized transportation. But even so— writing this now, I realize that they never really transported me anywhere. The idea of cars is that they'd deliver you to an end-point and poof you're done. The problem is that there was really no end. I'd travel somewhere and then go home and then go out again— a repetitive cycle repeating for many years to come. So why? Why do we do it? All we do with cars is “get around”— really just spinning in an ever-growing circle of streets, constantly emitting lord knows what.

In all my isolation in the sky, all I could do was wonder from above; humanity continuing to mindlessly meander on the ground below.

3. Farms

The countryside took the most space. They weren't crowded with machines, but their abuse was still evident: agriculture isn't as natural as one would expect. Although these farms contained plants, it seemed more for selfish manipulation rather than love for the environment. Meticulously shaped plots were cut out everywhere, I guess the “properties” that people would “own”. That's such an odd notion, the thought of owning a *piece of Earth*, as if that were even remotely possible and not just figments of our imagination— excuses created to validate our atrocities. A simple title of “owner” allowed people to do practically anything they wanted with their plot of Earth. From the sky viewpoint, it was obvious how many of them decided to completely shave their plots, turning the luscious green hair of the trees to the sallow bald rectangles of barren land. It looked like a disastrous puzzle containing pieces of two entirely different sets; agriculture and nature didn't fit well together.

I genuinely feel bad for the flora that fell victim to these farms. Then I remember how this abuse puts food on my plate— on *everybody's* plate. I wonder if it's worth it. If somehow human needs must equate to Earth's ruin; I wonder, I wonder, *I wonder*.

4. Factories

Occasionally, I would watch a factory expel out a steady stream of black smoke. The entire factory was a monstrosity. It was just a large chunk of gray metal that extended on all sides, a gloomy and scary industrial creation. Their dark puffs floated above and joined with the white pure clouds of the sky. As soon as they met, the black marred the natural white. Yet again, the machines seemed to have no care in the world: they didn't stop; the black smoke took over until no white clouds were left in the proximity. Did the factory *want* to entwine its waste with the environment? Surely, such a foolish objective seems stupid enough to avoid; no one would want to harm something without reason, right? So... I suppose the factories have some sort of purpose that is unknown to me. Even so, I fail to fathom what would be a good enough reason to justify the destruction of the Earth.

Black and white always make gray, one benefiting and one spoiled, humanity thriving and the planet ruined.

5. Where are we?

The funny thing is that I never once saw a single human. You'd think that in a world dominated by a single species, you'd at least see one of them, but no. We are simply *too small* (literally and maybe figuratively). The only evidence of our life was in the machines we created, and in turn, the ruins that we have caused. To be honest, it was quite difficult to remind myself that these objects were controlled by humanity. It seemed impossible that these gigantic, powerful, and *horrible* machines were handled by small animals— us.

I can't help but feel guilty. I even feel ashamed to identify as a *homo sapien*. I want to yell out *I didn't cause this, I'm innocent*. But I know very well that to simply live as a human, is a crime, one that I'll constantly commit.

The Earth is ugly; I wish it wasn't. But what can I do, *what can society do?*

NOEL, MALIA**Malia Noel**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

Educator: Carole Bunse

Category: Short Story

The Persistence of MemoryThe Persistence of Memory

A tired-looking man stands staring at the old, paint-chipped grand piano that sits in the dusty ballroom. Any onlookers would be able to sense the clear grief and despair radiating off of him. The man imagines a swarm of elaborately dressed couples dancing to soft music playing, as it once did, from this very piano—hips swaying, joyous, and laughing without a care in the world. He envisions his lover and him dancing together, hips swaying gently, chests pressed ever-so close as the soft melody guides them across the floor. He remembers countless nights with friends spent trying to teach him to dance. He was rather rubbish at it, but he enjoyed dancing with his lover nonetheless. The memory falls away as the harsh reality of his situation comes to mind.

And as it falls, he can feel his heart crack and disintegrate even more.

Even when the chemotherapy became too much for his lover, they still took time to hold each other close and sway to the music flowing from a record player in the hospital room. Bodies close, hips swaying, eyes closed. A perfect evening to drown out the hopelessness of their world.

Tears fall in fresh tracks down his face. He still couldn't believe it himself. He couldn't bring himself to believe that the man he loved was *gone*. And so, he sinks onto the worn-out bench, gingerly setting his fingers onto dusty keys. His fingers begin playing softly, voice low, almost a whisper, and honey-like as he begins to sing his lover's favorite song.

His voice soars as memories flash through his mind. So many years of friendship, laughter, time spent alone under the starlit sky. Countless kisses and hugs. These memories haunt him, they soon morph to *him* slowly falling into the veil of the afterlife, the void that is the afterlife as the strain of the chemicals becomes too much.

The music surrounds him. The words speak the truth his heart knows all too well.

His salty wounds just won't scab over. Instead they fester, gaping tears in the very cracks of his soul. The pain is just too real, too blinding—there is no escaping it. There are too many memories that time cannot erase. It was as if he was immune from the amnesia of time that others said would help.

He is drowning in sorrow.

Voice emotional and broken, it wavers slightly. He *can't* believe it. Couldn't believe *he* was gone. He didn't *want* to believe it. He *refused* to believe it.

All those nights, held closely by each other, any fears ebbing away. After every fight with their parents, every wound and scar was taken care of by each other. They were always there for each other. Inseparable, in love, perfect . . .

His voice breaks on the last syllable as memories come flooding in like a tidal wave. He can still feel his lover's hand holding his own. It was soft and warm. He could feel the flecked-nail-polish-coated fingers, cupping his face gently as soft "i love yous" are whispered.

He has to keep singing. *For him*. His lover is there, beside him, coaxing him on. His voice grows stronger, louder as the song continues. His lover's face continues to haunt his once pleasant dreams, turning day and night into a recurring nightmare of grief and anguish.

The pain doubles tenfold.

He is always exhausted; for, it is awfully difficult to feel sad and tired when all you want to feel is alive.

More memories flood in.

His lover's eyes are grey, soft and sweet, beautiful and serene. Silky curls frame his elegant face. Sometimes, he can still smell the sweet smell of coconut shampoo and vanilla perfume. His clothes still smell like him. That leather jacket he *always* wore is still hanging on the hook by the front door.

The way his lover's caring arms hold—*no held, past tense*—

Held him close and made him feel less broken, as if maybe someone could love someone as damaged as him. This is shattered as memories of him slowly losing his hair—that they both loved so much—of him slowly succumbing to the effects of the radiation therapy and the chemotherapy, of his heart slowly fading to a still, halting, rasping stop.

Everything always came back to *him*. He never ceased to be able to make him smile when breathing seemed impossible. His smile was so effortless—it was like a drug, intoxicatingly warm and safe.

He loves him.
And now he is gone. *Dead*.

They say to follow your heart, but when your heart's in a million pieces—which piece do you follow? When you're so broken, that it hurts to breathe—

When you feel the weight of the world, crashing down around you; and as the tears flow, as a raging river down your face, and as your breath hitches in dry sobs, that crack in the summer breeze—

When you're so lost, not even a map can find you. Where do you go? What do you do?

Pain.
Longing.
Fear.

All these emotions are prevalent in his voice as he sings. He sings for his lover, for better times, for love, for family. His throat is tight with emotion, choking on the onslaught of tears running down his puffy face as his fingers stall on the keys. Eyes closed, he pauses to keep the sobs at bay.

He was all alone. All alone.
Forever . . .
A l o n e . . .

The note rang out through the room, heavy and opaque.

He couldn't finish it.

He wanted the memories of *him* gone, but at the same time, he wanted to cherish them. He needed to let go— but how is he supposed to let go of what's destroying him, when that was the only thing that kept him together? The sickly face of his lover as he drew his last breath broke through everything else—haunting him, daring him to finish.

He had to finish it.

The last note is drawn out as tears spill a river down his face. And, voice cracking full of unsaid words and promises, he finishes.

He slumps forward onto the piano, ignoring the dissonance that followed him. Chest heaving, he sobs brokenly. He will never hear his laugh again. Never hold him tight after a hard day. Never smile and assure him he was okay after a fight with his parents. He will never see the love of his life, his husband, again.

He was all alone.

No one hears his screams until his heart is splitting open for all to see. All he can hear is the frantic beeping of the heart monitor mixed with his own dry sobs. *The persistence of memory would be his undoing.*

Why is it when the story ends, we begin to feel all of it?

NOEL, MALIA**Malia Noel**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

Educator: Carole Bunse

Category: Poetry

Love Always LingersLove Always Lingers

I knew the sweet smell
of her Perfume,
would linger
on the crisp,
windy fall night

I knew that she would haunt
all of my what-ifs,
as I lay awake
unable to drift,
away to sleep

And that the War that was her Love,
would leave behind
the smell of Smoke and Ash,
that would Always hang around,
this long

I knew I would curse her
for the longest time,
forever chasing
Shadows and flips of Hair,
in grocery lines

Because Love always Lingers,
even after, it's Gone.

NOEL, MALIA**Malia Noel**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

Educator: Carole Bunse

Category: Poetry

Mysteries of the Universe ExplainedMysteries of the Universe Explained*Myth and Legend.*

"According to greek mythology,
 humans were originally created with
 4 arms, 4 legs
 and a head with two faces.

Fearing their power,
 Zeus split them into
 two separate parts,
 condemning them
 to spend their lives in search
 of their other halves."

- Plato

What is a soulmate?

one day you will meet someone
 who will see the universe
 that was melded into your bones
 and the embers of fire
 glow to life in your eyes

one day you will show them
 the most brokenly damaged
 parts of your soul
 and they will show you
 how it still shines
 like polished gold

because broken
 isn't the same
 as unfixable.

What was here before?

before the earth
 and the planets and constellations
 all that was here was
 particles

space junk
 stardust
 debris
 and all this
 stardust
 and debris
 and junk
 became the earth
 surrounded by
 stars
 planets
 and galaxies.

What if we are the recycled stars?

we are bits
 of everything
 we are chaos and order
 and everything between
 we are sunshine and darkness
 held back by clouds

an entire universe has
 imploded inside us
 all the stars
 are sewn into our skin
 we are filled
 with soft, dark music

and we came
 from the earth
 and we know
 no matter can be
 created
 or destroyed.

How can it be?

stars are huge,
 and it's been so long,
 and everything's,
 been jumbled and mixed,
 all thrown about
 the world is filled with mysteries
 yet to be unfurled

perhaps a greater being
 stumbled upon
 this broken universe
 molding
 the ashes,
 the debris,
 the chaos,
 to form these living things

but everything was just too jumbled,
 too mixed,

too thrown about
for it to properly form the chaos
into whole souls.

What if you share a star?

all those people
and animals
and things,
that you just connect with,
on an entirely different level
than anything else

what if you share a bit of a star together?
and so those atoms
that were separated,
are together anew,
creating an automatic connection,
a sense of
comfort
a feeling of rightness.

Perhaps our soulmate shares a piece of our star?

we are all made of stardust,
it's just about finding
the other bits
and pieces
to put yourself back together

it's about finding
yourself
through the chaos
of the world.

NOEL, MALIA**Malia Noel**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

Educator: Carole Bunse

Category: Poetry

the last timethe last time

it was once said
that no one dies
until their name
is uttered
for the last time

this means
that those ancient
tragedies
aren't that tragic,
really

because Icarus and Achilles,
they did not die
for their names are still
screamed 3,000 years later

and so,
i hear
you think
you may be
a tragedy

because
you're falling . . .
 falling . . .
 falling . . .
 falling . . .
plummeting through
a dark and endless abyss

i hear
you don't think
anyone
will remember
your name and

the loneliest thing
in the world
is a figure alone
in a crowd and

if you hit the water
and no one cares
enough to hear it—
will you make a sound?

you were told
of how no one dies
until their name
is uttered
for the last time

and so, you fear
you may have been
dead a while now
but my dear

someone out there
will stumble upon
your mossy tomb
and utter a breath
of your name
reviving you.

OZTOK, SOFIE**Sofie Oztok**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Joy Gebhardt, Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Flash Fiction

Melting-Vignette**Melting**

She opens the door whilst slowly peering inside the dark room. Her hands fumble around the wall searching for the light switch. As she flicks the lights on, she steps inside the room. Walking in, she begins to lift up her shirt and turn on the shower. She moves the dial to the hottest setting there is. She looks at the mirror. A year ago, this girl would have never known that looking would be the start of the end for her.

She examines, she pinches, she pulls, she hits; even her body responds groaning as bile creeps up her throat. She looks at the fat, the skin, rippling and suffocating her, hiding her true self. Slapping herself, she forces her gaze from the mirror and begins peeling off the remaining items of clothes. She cries till crying doesn't help anymore. She screams till no one can hear her. But by the time she musters up the courage to look once more, the mirror is beginning to cloud up. She knows her next round of torture is ready, stretching her foot into the stall as steaming drops of condensation cascade down the glass. She groans softly, yet craves it. Stepping in her body is already fed up; it flinches when the water hits its skin. Numbness creeps over her body, and she savors each stabbing needle of heat, relaxing into it, giving in. Beauty is pain — all the fat must melt off. Her body is begging her to please end this shower but her mind is drunk on the high. The feeling of pain, the feeling of emptiness: it crowds out the clutter and messiness of being. She needs this. When she looks down at her body, it somehow morphs, bulging and swelling, the pricks of water hitting her insufficient, so she scratches and scratches till her skin bleeds.

The wave of agony crashes, and the waters retreat. She smiles and straightens her postures, ready. Stepping from the shower, her eyes glimmer and thirst for the confirmation the mirror will provide. Alas, fog obscures her gaze, blanketing the mirror and robbing her of this satisfaction and glory. She stands frozen in place, a puddle of water tinged pink with blood pooling at her feet. Her mind races as her world spins out of her control. Then, black.

PALOMINO , MIRIAM**Miriam Palomino**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

We Can't Have Both

We Can't Have Both

My brother had his suitcases packed, and was ready for his newly accepted college in Japan. His dream had been accomplished and his hard work and discipline was rewarded. My high school career was about to start and everything was fine. Until I received a phone call from my parents at four in the morning, three weeks before my brother's flight.

My father says "faith only has value when it's kept during difficult times". This becomes the difference between us humans, and the actions of Satan after punishment from God. Christianity is based on a benevolent God that gives us the will to lead our lives. So then, what God takes my brother's dream away from him, with something he can't control? What God leaves him hospitalized for months with an unknown disease, causing him to miss his future? It's God that controls the uncontrollable chaos, and all the natural evils are "the outrages done by God and nature (the cyclone in Bangladesh, an earthquake, the deaths by cancer)" (Morrow, 48).

The questioning of God is not a betrayal, but a riddle traveling throughout time. According to author, Frederick Buechner, there are "Three propositions: 1. God is all powerful. 2. God is all good, 3) Terrible things happen. The dilemma has always been this: you can match any two of those propositions, but never match all three. (Morrow, 51). However, there is another assumption that does fit within the riddle: free will. John Milton tries to answer and justify the ways of God through the Free Will Theodicy. Milton describes the justification of evil in God's world with his epic *Paradise Lost*, explaining evil to be the consequence of the gift of free will his benevolent God offers. He bases his story around Felix Culpa, the divine fall. John Milton explains how Adam and Eve's fall was based on their "free-will", and their responses to their fall made Adam and Eve's faith stronger and more worthy. After their exile from Eden, they continue to pray to God and "Fruits of more pleasing savour from thy seed Sow'n with contrition in his heart, then those Which his own hand manuring all the Trees Of Paradise could have produc't, ere fall'n From innocence" (Milton, Book 11, lines 26-30). Eventually, humans will be purer than how they were on Eden, create a new one and become angels, just as God planned.

After a year of my brother's misfortune, our father told us that everything happens for a reason. "God always has a plan". This would mean, our "divine fall" was planned. In *Paradise Lost*, before the reader even meets Adam and Eve, God already knows they "will fall. He and his faithless progeny. Whose fault? Whose but his own?" (Milton, book 3, lines 95-98), and his Son already sacrifices himself. So, is the divine fall based on freewill? The Greek tragedy of *Oedipus the King*, describes the power of prophecy and seers of fate. Showing that fate is unmovable. If something is fated, then it must happen, allowing for no free will. Jocasta explains how "Laius was fated to be killed by a child conceived by him and me", she also did everything to stop this prophecy by having "fused his ankles tight together and ordered other men to throw him out on a mountain rock" (Sophocles, 836-838). No matter the actions they took, they truly have no free will because it was those actions that led to their fate to be fulfilled. The same goes for Oedipus, who escaped from his home to prevent his fate, only to face it in Thebes. There is no free will, in fatalism. That is the meaning of a fatalistic world, the belief that deliberation and action are pointless because the future will be the same, no matter what individuals do. Milton also embeds fate and seers that undermine his Free Will Theodicy. When Adam and Eve were kicked out of Eden, the angel Micheal shared their importance by showing them the future and God's plan and showing him years of his life, his sons' death, all the way into the modern world. This vision limits their freewill, for it will happen as God plans. So is God's free will an illusion? An important symbol of freewill that Milton tried to describe in his epic were the actions of Abdiel. Abdiel was the only

angel that rebelled against Satan and went back to God, here Milton tries to show that the angels had a choice. This is contracted with not only that the fallen angels were manipulated, but when Abdiel came back to God, he was waiting. God “Already known what he for news had thought To have reported” (Milton, Book 6, lines 20-21). Abdiel’s actions were seen by God beforehand, Abdiel’s actions were fated by God’s knowledge. His loyalty and decisions are meaningless. My brother had no control over his sickness, and no control over our kept faith. Therefore, there is no Free will in the Divine Fall, in a world where God is all powerful.

My father thanks God and his plan, because my brother’s sudden impediment helped him dodge an enormous bullet. After his timeline to go to Japan passed, the doctors found out his diagnosis, a “quick” disease mostly found in children. He was cured and sent home. My brother got a job, and learned independence. We also found out his green card and any chance of an American citizenship would have been revoked if he had gone to study in Japan. It was God’s plan, my father says. However, *If God plans everything, and humans have no control, why does evil even exist?* Evil, then, is a perspective. A disease, when looked at later, turns into a blessing. Like my brother’s pain, “little by little, time brings out each several things into view and reason raises it up into the shores of light” (Morrow, 48). Unlike Milton’s ideals that evil is only the result of freewill, it is actually a tool. Evil is just an instrument to forge God’s path. Milton focuses on the evil caused when Adam and Eve disobey God. However, God set Satan free, knowing its result, and did it for that reason. If evil is based on a perspective, based on our lack of freewill and God’s “plan”, “Will Mozart sound the same to it as gunfire?” (Morrow, 53). This would explain the idea of Leibniz. Where evil does not truly exist, and everything that happens is God’s will into the best of all worlds. If Leibniz is real, and evil doesn’t actually exist, then it is a communistic world where there can be no freewill and create a world with the greatest good.

We understand the value of this philosophical optimism. Humans want to have meaning in their lives towards the greater good, for their lives have value, their suffering be worth it towards the greater good of this world. But we can not have both. Both the comforts of having meaning in life and being in control of one's destiny can not be held at the same time. My brother could have the idea that his hard work, based on his discipline through free will lead him to success, or believe that God watched out for him, and he still has a planned life which will hold value towards the greater good. This is based on preference and idealistic opinions. It is easier to explain evil as God’s will with no free choice than accept the evil brought by humanity and their choices.

However, people are not naive enough to believe that there is no evil in the world. The satire, *Candide*, does a great job to refute Leibniz and explain its absurdness. Voltaire uses ridiculous examples of Leibniz, like when describing syphilis as “an indispensable part of the best worlds, a necessary ingredient” as it ties to the modernization of America (Voltaire, 8). So free will, can be based on the question of the existence of evil, because if evil truly exists, then so does free will and God does not. When pondering the existence of evil, Lance Morrow knows “a man who thinks it does not” and “another man who spent a year of his childhood in Auschwitz” (Morrow, 48). This world has suffered too much, and prefers to blame the nature and will of man, than the explanation of uncontrollable acts and lack of freewill all based on God’s wish. Evil acts are committed by the *choices* made from human nature. In this case, in the beliefs of Libertarianism, then God is not as powerful or even exists. People can't have both the comfort of God planning a meaningful life and deciding their fate. If they do, God isn't as powerful or “God is in exile” (Morrow, 51), evil is real, and we have freewill.

However, free will releases the horrible true nature of humans. Evil just exists, and there is no divine fall, just actions and their clear consequences. The tragic play of *Othello*, takes place in a believed libertarianism setting, where free will exists. There is no divine fall or greater good, only tragedy due to the choices of man. Despite Othello being mostly manipulated by Iago, he is shown to have a choice when he doubts his actions just before killing his wife (Shakespeare, Act 5, Sc. 2, Line 10). He lets jealousy take over and murders Desdemona. The choices of human nature, without fate, led to most of the characters dying, and no overall input into the goodness of the universe. Many writers have said that one of evil’s higher accomplishments has been to convince people that it doesn’t exist. (Morrow, 50). However, this can also apply to free will. Have humans been under the illusion that their fate is up to us? What is the difference between a communist God with no freewill or the free range of evil human nature? Both are tragic. Both suffering, even if suffering is perspective. Does Adam and Eve’s divine fall matter against Othello’s? Does free will even matter, if it’s all built with agony?

The answer is based on the comforts an individual chooses to have. However, it is important to remember the optimism that religion can bring, even if it's not a fate-less world. The divine fall is not about a character but the universe. God’s power makes us puppets, but zoom out further. Oedipus is a puppet, whose actions eventually leads to the prosperity in Thebes through Creon’s rule. If God is real, we have no control over our lives and evil is an

illusion. There must be faith that if he's real, God's intentions are for the greater good. Made from our puppet roles.

PAN, ANNIE**Annie Pan**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jeff Miller

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Moments Before

The clock was ticking.

On stage, a middle schooler finishes his musical performance, taking a deep bow. He grins, relieved that he was done. Soon it will be time for the high schoolers' recital, making my heart pound harder. Within minutes, I knew I would be next; my turn to walk onto the brightly-lit stage and perform on the grand piano.

Having spent over a decade playing the instrument, I should've already mastered the art of "not undergoing a mental breakdown during a recital." However, I have not, and I could feel my fight-or-flight response reacting, fidgeting my fingers as my heart pounded against my chest. Somewhere in my brain, I wanted to run out of the room, rush home, and refuse to exit my house. The problem with that was that the lights were on and my parents were sitting right next to me, which meant if I did do that, I would be dragged back to my seat in seconds.

Instead, I just sat in my seat, trying not to have a heart attack.

Despite spending hours at night weaving in layers of musicality into my songs and listening to Valentina Lisitsa's version of Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 more times than I've watched *Moana* (the best Disney movie ever), in the back of my mind I was going through a list of worst-case scenarios that could happen. For instance, being exiled from my teacher's studio for being such a bad performer was always a possibility. Being booed on stage was another one.

My mind began to backtrack over my repertoire. I had two pieces: Italian Concerto by Bach then Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 by Liszt.

My first piece was a march, which meant one thing: every note had to contain enthusiasm. The nights prior, I had repeatedly recorded my performances in hopes of capturing the song's essence, studying each section to better improve my interpretation of the piece. Perhaps I could include a larger crescendo at the beginning? Or maybe adding smaller crescendos would be better? With every passing day, I looked forward to building my Bach into something better, praying it would be prepared the day I needed to perform it.

My other piece was my grand finale, the cultivation of all my skills: the Hungarian Rhapsody. From sustain pedaling to continuous octaves, anything could go wrong. Yet despite its difficulty, I loved it the most of the two. After weeks of sore arm muscles, I could finally play a series of octaves at its required fast-paced tempo. Perhaps it was the long nights I spent with the music under the warm rays of my lamp, but every single note and dynamic was engraved into my memory.

I take a deep breath as my teacher announces the pieces I will be performing and make my way onto the stage.

The clock is constantly ticking and my time's finally up.

As my march begins, my nerves fade away. And, somewhere along the way, I feel a smile blossom across my face — glad to be next to my lifelong friend.

PATTERSON, EDIE**Edie Patterson**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Bishop Seabury Academy, Lawrence, KS

Educator: Matt Patterson

Category: Poetry

Wild Animals

The mountain stands sun-scorched in July's fiery sunlight,
brazen, green, riddled with bones and wooden fences and
terracotta pots. The bushes tremble with rattlesnakes, burnt
greenery humming with their scales.

I am a blank against the faded horizon, full of succulents and
lamplight, steady as the ocean. The rattlesnake watches
through small eyes and tangled grass, full of ribs and teeth,
fog and trees and beauty, still sharp with fangs.

Vibrant with wild animal fear, uncertain and momentary.
I am out of place without my cold walls and locked doors, and
it is out of place next to me. My fear is fairytales and newspapers
and stagnant water. I see the rattlesnake and run,

darting eyes and instinct. We are both wild, just for a moment.

PATTERSON, EDIE**Edie Patterson**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Bishop Seabury Academy, Lawrence, KS

Educator: Matt Patterson

Category: Poetry

Vivian Maier

the girl's polished shoes are plastered
to the dark asphalt.
in the moment she is dancing, careless.
here, in the silver camera lens, she is unable to
 take her feet off the ground.
you wonder when she will find this
inefficacy, if she will wilt like petals or
 confine herself.
she smiles with callow joy and
cut hair and baby teeth
behind tight coat buttons
and a cinched fabric waist.
the balloon on the stick she holds
 has floated away,
but she is still here,
only here in this methodized
silhouette
between buttons.

you are weighed down only by
the square corners of your camera
and its glassy gaze, bright flash,
and she is a second in its shutter,
 a negative,
ink flowering in tubs of
 developer,
 growing with
 hollow sketches.
you are an observer, always,
exempt from the rules of
 the world she is placed in.
you are only between the camera frame,
a faceless reflection.

you imagine her growing into you,
 taciturn, restricted,
 wool coat and circle skirt.
she is impersonal, photograph,
 momentary.
she is only a silhouette.
she is only when she is happy.

PATTERSON, EDIE**Eddie Patterson**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Bishop Seabury Academy, Lawrence, KS

Educator: Matt Patterson

Category: Poetry

Five O'Clock at the Seelbach Hotel

“She dressed in white, and had a little white roadster, and all day long the telephone rang in her house.” -F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

“Tell them I’ve changed my mind,”
she tries to say, but it falters, fractured light
lost in slurred syllables.

Daisy wears her mother’s wedding dress
and gets married right at five o’clock.

She hears Gatsby’s voice,
metronomic, insistent,
and she wonders if
he has fallen in love with her
or with the way the wind blows across
the rug in her living room.
Blank eyes, she stares at him
and says she never loved him and
doesn’t know if she’s lying.

Somebody is always attending to Daisy
and her melodic formalities,
her purity, her emptiness, her nothings.
All she sees is too many pairs of eyes.

A woman dies in the Valley of the Ashes
while Daisy drives home from New York.
She is impetuous,
her vision blurred.
The yellow car keeps driving.

She is a statue at the museum of her
own spotless kitchen table
where she sits with a hand over hers.
Does it matter whose it is? She is a
moment on a movie screen, colorless and
ordinary. She sits between two unopened bottles.
She has never wanted to be
anything but a mystery.

On the night before her wedding,
she sinks between cast iron angles
in her ice cold bathtub,

collapses like a ponderous tree.
She lies motionless while nobody is watching
and thinks it is too much to become something,
to hold on
to any moment.
She lets go of the letter.
She lets it pass.

PECINA, LORENZO**Lorenzo Pecina**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Staley High School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Carol Toney

Category: Critical Essay

Social Media's Effects on Adolescents**Social Media's Effects on Adolescents****Lorenzo Pecina**

Throughout the past decade, social media has exploded in popularity, from 970 million users in 2010 to 4.48 billion (2021). For example, social media has become a huge platform for news to be provided and consumed (Gulatee, 2020, pg. 80, pr. 1). With recent platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram, social media has become almost an essential piece among an adolescent's life. With their rise in popularity in the adolescent population around the world, researchers have been studying the effects that it has on adolescents. Researchers across the world have proposed this question, to what extent does social media impact the health and well-being of adolescents? Through their research, they have found that there is an increase of negative interactions between adolescents, it has affected the way adolescents view themselves, and that it affects adolescent's mental health leading to possible mental problems.

To begin, studies and research have revealed that the use of social media can result into an increase of negative interactions between adolescents. These negative interactions and feelings can easily be observed by the action of cyberbullying. In a study by researchers Hüseyin Karaman and Coşkun Arslan from Necmettin Erbakan University, it was found that 61.5% of the participants reported that they had been subjected to cyberbullying, while 30.2% reported that they had been the ones who had cyberbullied. There was also 29.3% of the participants that reported that they had both been cyberbullied and had cyberbullied others. (Karaman and Arslan, 2020, pg. 22, pr. 1) Karaman and Arslan also found that social media use had a positive correlation with decreased self-esteem, increase in loneliness, and an increase in anxiety. These negative feelings from social media were found to be the catalyst for cyberbullying in their adolescent years. (Karaman and Arslan, 2020, pg. 22, pr. 3) Aygul Tunc-Aksan from the Ministry of Education and Sinem Akbay from Mersin University furthered this point by reporting that these feelings of loneliness experienced by adolescents stemmed from a "fear of missing out," which may be why adolescents turn to social media sites such as the controversial and problematic Instagram and Snapchat, so they do not miss events/actions done by their peers (Aksan, Akbay, 2019, pg. 563, pr. 4). Because of social media, these negative social interactions, such as cyberbullying, are becoming even more increasingly common. Those who cyberbully are only contributing to a problematic cycle, as their bullying leads to loneliness and anxiety, which in turn, leads to more social media use and increased cyberbullying.

Adding on to the previous point, social media also has a large effect on adolescent's self-image and how they view themselves. Dimitra Hartas of the University of Warwick, reported in her findings that adolescents who are at the highest risk of increased social media usage and its affects are teenage girls. Dimitra found that girls between the ages of 10 and 19 were three times more likely to self-harm and repeatedly self-harm compared to boys of the same age. She also found that 1 in every 4 girls at the age of 14 reported depressive symptoms compare to the 1 in 10 with boys. (Hartas, 2019, pg. 11, pr. 2). Continuing from this thinking, Jessica Brown from the BBC reported on two studies that involved a total of 700 students on what they thought of social media and its effects on themselves. It was found that there was a positive correlation of social media use and depression, which would eventually lead to feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness. Many of these feelings were caused by the quality of social interactions done on social media, with them being more commonly caused by negative interactions (Brown, 2018, pr. 13). Researchers Dorein Beeres,[1] Filip Andersson1,[2], Helen Vossen3, and Maria Galanti1,2 decided to study why adolescents were more likely to engage in these negative interactions online. What they found was that adolescents who tend to bore easily and lack some developmental characteristics are more likely to engage in riskier and sensation-seeking actions such as sexting and other negative interactions online (Beeres, Andersson, Vossen, Galanti, 2020, pg. 958, pr. 1). Self-image is an important aspect of all adolescents in their development and social lives. As adolescents believe everyone is judging them for who they are and what they look like, many go onto social

media to see how they can become “normal.” This usually leads to them finding that they can’t fit in with the normal crowd, feeling out of place, and leading to other sensation finding activities.

Throughout all these studies, there is a common thought that social media affects adolescent’s mental health in negative ways. Once again, Dimitra Hartas goes more into detail of the problems that adolescent girls face when using social media. In her studies of social media and the effects it has on adolescent girls, she found an increase in reports of negative feeling, low self-concept, and low life satisfaction. This, however, did not mean that boys didn’t report negative feelings, as both boys and girls reported low self-concept and life satisfaction (Hartas, 2019, pg. 9, pr. 4). Dorein Beerers and their fellow researchers added onto Hartas’ findings that social media might be used as an indicator of symptoms of mental ill health. They were also able to find that there was a direct correlation of mental health problems between person interactions rather than an on an individual basis. This meant that those who were already predisposed to a mental illness or had been undiagnosed were more likely to experience a start or worsening in symptoms with social media (Beerers, Andersson, Vossen, Galanti, 2020, pg. 959, pr. 4). Similar findings were found in a research study in 2019 by Mayo Clinic researchers. In this study, with more than 6,500 12-15-year-olds, it was found that social media was a large indicator in a teen’s poor well-being. These mental health issues usually stemmed from more than 3 hours of social media use daily placing the participants at a higher risk for mental health problems (Mayo Clinic Researchers, 2019, pr. 5). Mental health is one of, if not the most important thing in the development of adolescents. It is in this important time of life, that they become who they are, and how they will act in the future. If social media is causing problems and changes in their life during their adolescents, it will most certainly have adverse effects later in life.

However, there are researchers that argue social media is a positive thing in an adolescent’s life. A study in Thailand by researchers Yuwanuch Gulatee⁴, Babara Combesb, & Yuwadee Yoosabaic, found that adolescents found social media to be a useful asset in their daily lives. When asked about what they used social media for, 85% of adolescent participants admitted that they posted photos of themselves on social media, so they could look good for both themselves and to their peers. This showed that even though they used social media often, there was no negative effects on them as a person. (Gulatee, 2020, pg. 91, pr. 2). In another research study by Mayo Clinic researchers, it was found that social media was used by adolescents to make a mark on the internet. They said that the reason that they used social media was, so they could create online identities to communicate with their friends and with those they would’ve never met before (Mayo Clinic Researchers, 2019, pr. 2) Gulatee and the other researchers would agree with this statement, as their participants said that social media was used to bring themselves closer instead of harming each other. The participants reported that when they used social media, there were more positive experiences rather than negative ones when online. Overall, the participants viewed social media as a positive thing that would allow for closer bonds to be formed than without it (Gulatee, pg. 91, pr. 3). Social media isn’t always viewed as a negative force for some people. Many of the people who use social media have used it as a great tool for building friendships and contacting their friends. Social media isn’t all bad when people use it for positive reasons. Although there can be possibilities of social media being used for the good of making friends and keeping relationships together, there is still many more negatives that come from social media. Finally, overuse of social media can be conjointly related to an early over attachment to technology. In Aksan and Akbay’s findings, they found that addiction to social media started with an addiction to smartphones. Even though most of these initial uses on smartphones were for valid reasons such as keeping in touch with friends or family, it can spiral out of control into an addiction with their smartphone. Eventually these messaging/calling apps lead to them discovering social media, where an addiction forms to it just as their phones. (Aksan, Akbay, pg. 563, pr. 6). The Dalai Lama can add to this point as he has talked about how attachment is one of the ways life should not be lived. “What characterizes happiness at this deeper level is the senses are brief, while the joy at this deeper level is much longer lasting.” What he means at this level is things that do with the senses, such as seeing your friends on social media, or having the phone touching your hands while you scroll through, doesn’t give as much fulfillment compared to deeper connections such as with family and friends (Dalai Lama, 2016, pg. 53, pr. 2). Dimitra Hartas’ research has shown that if an adolescent’s addiction to social media gets out of control, there can be negative effects to their well-being. On the lower end of their addiction, adolescents who spend between 2-5 hours daily on social media are 31% less likely to report negative feelings and low-self-concept. When compared to those adolescents who use social media for 5-7 hours, they are 44% less likely to report negative feels and low self-concept (Hartas, 2019, pg. 9, pr. 3). The definition of addiction is to constantly keep using a substance, taking an action, or using an activity to fulfill a person’s need. The overuse of social media is a definition of addiction, as adolescents use it to fulfill their needs, sometimes resulting in negative consequences.

So, to what extent does social media impact the health and well-being of adolescents? Social media is a negative influence on adolescent’s social life, mental health, self-image, and likely cause of addiction in those who use it. Social media is a growing problem in adolescent lives, but is there a way to stop its negative effects? One way this could be solved is by educating adolescents and their parents about the potential dangers of the overuse of social

media. There could also be limits for social media for those under the age of 18. The only problem with this is that limited screen time for adolescents could lead to them not being able to contact family or friends. Also, the time that is spent on educating on social media usage could instead be put to solutions for those already suffering from social media use. Is social media an effective tool in people's lives or is it a detriment.

PENG, ALLISON**Allison Peng**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rockwood Summit High School, Fenton, MO

Educator: Gregory Baum

Category: Flash Fiction

broken shells**broken shells**

Sometimes it doesn't take a ghost to feel haunted.

"I miss you. I'll see you soon."

The man is plagued with memories. His wife's laughter rings in his ears, her smile sears into his eyes, her touch lingers on his skin, her scent on his nose, and her words — her words burn into his mind. He's surrounded by reminders, suffocated by the grasp of the past.

None of it is real, he tells himself firmly. She is dead, and she has been for two years. He feels fine on most days, since the worst of the grief has ebbed with time. But sometimes, he feels himself being swept away. His hand is shaking, and the page gripped between his fingers crinkles slightly.

He isn't sure what compels him to do it, but he reaches his arm into the mass of sea oats next to his spot on the beach, and lets the letter slip from his fingers. *Shhhh...*

Something in his jaw tightens, and his face feels stiff. But he turns to look at his daughter, who is picking her way across the watery stretch of sand right at the water's edge. Her dress is tucked into her pants to create a pocket for sea shells she plucks from off the ground.

The girl rinses off a cracked half of a clamshell in the sea water. It's broken, but the concave side is white on the edges with a stunning deep purple belly that reminds her of a geode, and she can't bear to let it go.

"Anni." She looks up at her father, who has walked up next to her and is looking reproachingly at the shell. "It's broken, put it down. You have too many shells anyways." She deflates, but he holds her gaze, and she drops it at her feet.

But when he turns, she quickly stoops back down to pick it up. And when they're turning to leave the beach, she notices something white fluttering gently in the breeze, caught in the wispy green bed underneath some sea oats.

"I miss you. I'll see you soon."

The girl can't read, but the lettering she would recognize anywhere. Something warm flickers in her chest.

The note is gone when he returns the next day. He feels strangely relieved.

Every day, he drops a letter into the ocean, the pages and ink preserved in a glass bottle. He watches his daughter play in the ocean, caught up in her own escapades, and he tells himself that he's making progress. He imagines the old love letters drifting, lost in the ocean.

Every day, she squeezes a new letter out of the lip of a bottle and tucks the paper safely with her shells. She is thrilled. Any day now, Anni thinks, her mother will be back with the same smile on her face. Any day now, she'll be patting Anni's cheeks and laughing, just like before.

The day after the man discards the last letter, he feels truly free. These little physical actions of letting go have helped him finally leave the past behind emotionally. He embraces the breeze, the texture of salty air on his skin, and closes his eyes — just for a moment.

And in that moment, a girl has swum just barely too far into the ocean, where her toes can't reach sand, desperate to find a letter, a letter that was never written. In that moment, a wave comes crashing down, and she's overtaken. The girl gasps out for her mother and chokes as her mouth fills with the sharp taste of salt.

The day after the man discards the last letter, he finds all of them again, organized neatly in the pillowcase belonging to his daughter.

PENG, ALLISON**Allison Peng**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rockwood Summit High School, Fenton, MO

Educator: Gregory Baum

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

testaments of the piano's history**testaments of the piano's history**

The clock on the wall of the piano room is the loudest in the house. Each movement of the second hand produces not just one sound, but two: a light, hissing click and a lower, fuller clack. From a distance, the hand seems to move sharply and cleanly from one tick mark to the next, but from my position just next to it on the piano bench, I can see as it swings just barely past the marks and then trembles slightly back into place, like the oscillations of a tuning fork.

I take notice of many of the irregularities in my immediate surroundings—a small depression the size of a fingernail in the glossy black-painted wood of the bench whose shape reminds me of colorful images of dormant geysers, a scar on the D2 key of the piano resembling a jagged crack in jade, a few chips in the rectangular mirror panels plating the side of the piano's body, all testaments of the piano's history. I inspect my hands, I get lost in my thoughts, and when the minute hand of the clock finishes making half of a revolution, I leave.

I always feel tight, restrained, resigned. With too much energy as an elementary schooler to remain contained on the piano bench, even just to practice thirty minutes a day, I'm always finding ways to busy my hands and my mind in order not to practice. Yet when my parents make me quit my lessons for neglecting to put in the time and effort to make tuition worthwhile, I feel devastated. I cry until I give myself headaches and have to go to bed or take Tylenol, I hide the house phones, I try to drag my parents to the car to take me to lessons. But my parents have had enough of reminding me to practice thirty times a day only for me to practice fifteen minutes a week, and the whole thing blows over with time.

Eventually, I'm given a second chance at music, with violin lessons. My parents, still not entirely forgiving of my previous unambitious approach to piano, buy me a thirty-dollar quarter-size violin off of eBay. It's almost laughably cheap, scarlet in color and tinny and screechy in sound.

Regardless, I'm thrilled. An excitement tingles in my chest for this version of new and different, and I run a finger over the fuzzy yellow interior of the case. With a few more years of maturity on my side, I feel like I'm ready: I've resolved to make the most of this opportunity for redemption. I want so badly to make music again.

So I start to practice with my new violin, now in a different room. I situate myself for practice each time in a bedroom upstairs, where the clock is completely silent and digital with glowing red numbers. The minutes, I find, slip by elusively, one number morphing into the next, and I have no way of tracking the seconds.

I still watch the time carefully. I still notice too many things. And I still find it difficult at times to find the motivation to settle. But I'm determined not to falter.

I move forward.

PENG, ALLISON**Allison Peng**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rockwood Summit High School, Fenton, MO

Educator: Gregory Baum

Category: Poetry

claim**claim**

they plotted the land, lined it
 with houses, with buildings, with bridges, with roads
 stretching far to the horizon, markers of possession.
 it's a land they claimed their own.

or are those trees? stone? shrubs smeared by the cold fingers of winter?

cliffs, hillsides, fields of water turned ice
 who builds where?
 they hunt, not farm, they tend
 to fires and bundle against wind and blankets of snow

on the worn turquoise mirrors
 of ice their silhouetted figures stand
 indistinguishable from the crows in the sky

who owns what?

seasonlessly

The ones who listened
 were the ones who lost

The ones who live
 shiver in coats of frost

The track traverses
 towards tomorrow

The passengers caught
 in yesterday's sorrow

In the guilty light
 of an unshared sun

A silent snowfall
 rallies riders to run

Seeking, searching

for a trace

A path backwards
to a home they can't erase

The dust drifts endlessly in suspense,
withholding the warmth of spring's glow

The survivors struggle ceaselessly
against an undetachable, unshatterable shadow

Ruin occurs reasonlessly;
Saudade prevails seasonlessly

Suspended

I have him pull over.
*Do you know you
didn't signal your turn?*

He shrugs. I sigh.
The glare of the sun
cuts into my eyes
as I twist the face
of my watch to write.

11:30am. Broadway.
Failed to signal
a turn @ Sunrise Highway.

I run his tag, then pause.
*Don't you know your
license is suspended?*

He shrugs. I stare.
99 suspensions, how
would he be unaware?
Two types of people,
I think to myself there.

With nothing to be said,
one will remain
silent as dead
and the other will make
questions of answers instead.

I bring him to the station.
*Canbert Giltres, here for
aggravated unlicensed
motor vehicle use.*

Then, finally, he breaks
his verbal vacation.
*I'm here
for the lost and found too.*

PESTANO, NOLAN**Nolan Pestano**

Age: 14, Grade: 10

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Critical Essay

Americans and Egocentrism

Americans and Egocentrism

Id, ego, and superego. Freud, an Austrian psychoanalyst, described these thoughts as the three main factors controlling one's subconscious mind. The check of greed, maturity, and morals respectively all control our psychothought. In his later writing, Freud characterized the human mind by stating that "... first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface." (109)

However, in contrast to other countries, this idea of id and ego, these ideas are especially prevalent in our American culture. From a young age, we are taught to value bold, brash, and bombastic views. Why do Americans perceive themselves in such a high standing? Why do Americans place such a large emphasis on ego? In order to process and understand this idea, it is important to first understand how we arrived here.

America was founded on the idea of rebellion. From our English counterparts in 1776, to the idea of iron-fist diplomacy in the Middle East, America has always been rebelling against the social norm- *it's just what we do*. Figures in our popular media all exist as strong, almighty heroes, proving that America is the vigorous country that we should believe.

Even though in a time of relative peace like this, there still seems to be a drive for power and pompous status in the peoples. To prove this thought, researchers at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University studied the idea of American cultural ideas.

After separating the group of 60 students (both Cantonese and English speaking, very well exposed to both cultures) into three groups, they were each shown different images as "primer." A group was shown pictures of American cultural concepts, such as Superman, *Manifest Destiny*, and other American ideas. The other, was shown traditional Chinese ideas such as dragons, and mountains (the last group was a control, shown photos of landscapes- ultimately unaffacting in this context). When presented with a game designed to test ego and bluff, those shown the American thoughts were 45% likely to lie in order to "win" the arbitrary game, as opposed to the 5% shown the Chinese thoughts. (Luk et al) Why were the American group so keen on winning? Even enough to lie? With the presentation and setup, it is clear that American Culture is designed to instill these ideas.

These images can be digested to the idea of propaganda. From such a young age, American children are instilled with bright, flashing images of soldiers fighting for glory, strong men fighting evil, and our powerful yet wise governments working for peace. However, could these ideas be any further from the truth? Modern Propaganda is all around us, whether we realize it or not.

The Marvel Superhero, *Captain America*, was initially funded by the American Army to produce an image of the values of a "typical American soldier." (Secker) From there, this Superhero has quickly taken a large market share of the American audience's attention. His flashy moves, quick wit, and glory was all designed specifically with the intention of captivating the American youth- maybe they could be like Captain America if they join the military? Even more so, at sporting games nationally, the government (the Defense Department, specifically) pays millions to the organizer to recognize and play patriotic music while soldiers walk on the field. (O'Shaughnessy) This illusion of power and, ironically, humbleness given to the game's audience captivates them- *maybe America truly is the greatest country in the world if I see strong men walk across a field*.

Regardless, how did we end up *here*? Why does an average American citizen care more about themselves than a citizen of another country?

Paul the Apostle was in his twenties, in 30 a.d. when he said "Money is the root of all evil." Nearly 2000 years later, this perception of greed still reigns. In order to succeed in the capitalist environment of America, one *must* be greedy; one must value themselves above all others.

This selfish idea is simply just *how it is* in our country. With little access to social services that are namely standard

in foreign places, to survive is to be stronger than the system that is exploiting one.

To illustrate how relevant this idea is, the contrast of a foreign entity is necessary.

-

Disney, planning on extending their reach, broke ground for Tokyo Disney in April 1968. Three years later, the 115 acre park was scheduled to open. Internally, the Walt Disney company was panicking. After turmoil within leadership, the park was much smaller than scheduled-- for context, the parking lot in Disneyland is 100 acres large. Because of the smaller park and the large attraction to the surrounding Japanese area, management was worried that the lines were going to be *too long*.

Well, on opening day, roughly 20,000 people flooded the small area. Yet strangely enough, there were almost no complaints about wait time. Why?

Other cultures aren't conditioned to place themselves first.

Even furthermore, the highest recorded time was a queue of four hours (Hiragata). A time like that would be considered unacceptable at an American Disneyland, yet the Japanese culture saw it as simply just a minor inconvenience, only further illustrating the idea of self-importance extremely prevalent in our American culture.

Although literature has laid clear the foundation of ego, id, and superego for eons, it seems as if most chose to live in an ignorant bliss. While it is unlikely for the perception of millions to change in a matter of years, it is important for one to be at least aware, and understanding of how our ego shapes up, and better yet, how we can live in spite of the system.

PINEDA, GISELLE**Giselle Pineda**

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: Moreland Ridge Middle School, Blue Springs, MO

Educator: Heather Pineda

Category: Short Story

Unbearable Grief**Unbearable Grief**

Man, I never knew how awful a Chiefs football game could be.

“Mom! Keller is here to pick me up.”

“Ok honey, be home by ten,” my mom yelled while using her “you better listen to what I am saying” voice.

I thought I would know exactly what to expect that night but honestly I didn’t even come close to guessing what the night would bring. Keller was my best friend, him and I would do everything together. We had known each other since kindergarten and now being in 7th grade we were still best buds. Tonight, I was going to a Chiefs game with him and his dad. He said that they basically got the tickets free because of his dad’s work. My dad never took me to Chiefs games, probably because I was way too young to enjoy them.

It had been almost 9 years since my dad died. I remember tiny details about him, like how he made his hair slick back and how he had buff shoulders. He was young when he died, he had a very sad scraggly beard, he had brown to black hair that would shine when the sun hit his hair in a specific spot, he had freckles that got gold in the summer, and my absolute favorite thing about him was his smile. The smile could just melt you into a pile of happiness, the opposite of how I was feeling right then.

“Hey Khalid, you ok? You look like you might throw up.” I was in a daze thinking about my dad that I didn’t register Keller talking to me. Luckily he didn’t care. “You know, there might be some cute girls there! Girls think these games are the coolest hang out place,” he was going on and on about some girl that had winked at him during the last game. While I was in my puddle of grief thinking about what life would have been like with a father. I was glad that he didn’t push me to talk because I honestly wasn’t in the mood for a feelings speech.

In what felt like an eternity, Keller’s dad announced that we were at the stadium. *Not that there was a need to announce it because it was like a huge donut with dozens of sprinkles and guards protecting the donut from anyone that wasn’t supposed to be there. Red and yellow covered the whole stadium from the tips of the flags to the Chiefs sign on the field. I could only imagine what the stadium looked like with all the fireworks. Everyone wearing red and yellow, having tons of popcorn bags, and having food to stock up for the hours to come.*

I had only been to the stadium once and I didn’t even get to go inside, so this was a first and hopefully not a last. We found our seats which were farther back than I wanted them to be, but I guess I was just lucky enough to go. After we found our seats we headed to a hot dog stand and got some questionable looking hot dogs.

“Man Keller it’s so cool your dad gets free tickets to go to these games! I wish my dad...” For a second, I forgot that I didn’t have a dad anymore.

“Hey Khalid, it’s ok. I know it’s hard to talk about him and you miss him so much, but what if it’s better to talk about him so that you don’t feel so bad?” I knew Keller was trying to help me but at that moment I felt like throwing up that terrible hot dog, if that’s what you can even call it.

“I’m gonna go to the bathroom,” I was in my puddle of grief again, but it was nothing like before. There were tornadoes of thoughts swirling all around my head. There were old memories, old habits, old pictures, and one old image of my dad.

I decided to head out and enjoy the game for a bit. I don’t know what made me think I would enjoy the game. It buzzed by in a blur and in a minute of seconds we were heading to the back of the stadium. It wasn’t until then that I realized that we were heading in the opposite direction of everyone else.

“Keller, where are we going?”

“Oh yea, please don’t freak out but you’re about to find out how we get the free tickets for the Chiefs games. I haven’t told you this before because I didn’t feel secure about it, and I didn’t want people to judge my family.” He sounded like I was gonna run away when he revealed his secret.

We were headed into what looked like a janitors closet, I was still confused and still not understanding what Keller was trying to show me. We kept going further and further into the janitor closet. Until we were in this little room where Keller's dad set his stuff down and swiped a card that looked like a clock in access card.

"Keller, your dad is a janitor?!"

"Yea, he has to clean the whole stadium with the whole-" I was confused, I was always jealous of Keller and now I find out his dad is a janitor. I wanted to cry, scream, and just pass out right then and there. Maybe I was acting up too much about this but nobody knew how I felt right then. This is what Keller was talking about, he did think people would judge his family.

"Khalid, I had a strong relationship with your dad because he actually had a cool job, he always acted like I was a part of the family. You know?" He was talking about my dad being a dad figure to him. I lost it.

"YOU WILL NOT TALK LIKE THAT ABOUT MY FATHER. I AM THE ONE THAT LOST HIM, I AM THE ONE THAT LOST A CHILDHOOD, I AM THE ONE THAT CRIED FOR WEEKS AND MONTHS. THEN YOU DECIDE IT'S A GOOD TIME TO SAY THAT YOU HAD A STRONG RELATIONSHIP?! I don't think so! I am leaving... and just leave me alone," I was so irritated I didn't even register my words until I was left alone. Just like I asked.

I hurt Keller badly, but at that moment I didn't care. He first wanted to talk to me about my dad and then he decided to say he had a strong relationship with him?

That would not slide with me.

I didn't know where to go so I just wandered the hallway. I walked into this room that was pitch black, I kept going and then it was like I was in a bird's point of view. I saw the whole stadium, the football players locker, and every last piece of trash. Every piece of popcorn, cotton candy, and hotdogs. Cans of beer, soda, and water bottles. The person I saw cleaning trash piece by piece was Keller's dad.

I suddenly realized that he had a very important job. I realized right there and then that I was a total jerk and a terrible friend. How could I have said that? He has been my best friend since kindergarten and suddenly, I lash out at him. Was I a terrible person? Would he find a way to forgive me? I know I wouldn't want to. I hear him approach and hope for the best.

"Hey Khalid, I probably shouldn't have said that about your dad-"

"No, I am so sorry for what I said and how I acted. I was a total jerk, and I was, am a horrible friend." Keller stood by me, and we just stood in silence, looking at Keller's dad cleaning up all the trash.

"Khalid, my dad has a pretty important job. If he didn't clean, then the stadiums would be filthy and nobody would want to come." He had a confidence in his voice that I hadn't heard before, it seemed as though he was finally believing his own words. I sat there feeling awful. I sat there knowing that I had made him feel bad. I sat there knowing I had done what he was hoping would not happen.

"Keller I'm so sorry I didn't understand how important his job was. It's like people pay to trash the stadium and it's messed up. I shouldn't have judged you." He looked like he was looking for the truth.

"It's ok, I don't understand how you feel, and I said the wrong thing at the wrong time. Even though you might not want to talk about your feelings, it could help with the pain. Anyway if you need someone to talk to, just remember I am here." Keller sounded sincere and I really appreciated it, but I didn't like being the center of attention, so I changed the subject.

"So, Keller did you see that girl that was looking at you? She was definitely trying to catch your eye." He laughed like we were brothers again.

"Too bad I was taking care of you Khalid!"

We shook hands and our friendship molded back together. At that moment I realized that my dad was a good dad, but he was also an awesome person and role model. He helped so many people and even though it hurts to think about him, it's worse to avoid thinking about the good times everyone had with him. I now realized that he wasn't just my dad, he was something to everyone, and that's what made him special.

PLACE, CAROLINE**Caroline Place**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

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

Educators: Michele Buche, Shelley Moran

Category: Flash Fiction

SHUGART, PRINCE OF BUNNYBOROUGH: A RABBIT TALE**SHUGART, PRINCE OF BUNNYBOROUGH: A RABBIT TALE**

Once upon a time, there was a rabbit named Shugart. Shugart was a prince of Bunnyborough, a jaunty rabbit who loved adventure. Unfortunately, Shugart's father, King Richard, most definitely did *not* love adventure. The King loved his comfortable chaise throne, his cozy throneside fire, and his royal decrees that went through 47 drafts, followed by staged reading rehearsals. King Richard wished desperately that Shugart would be an obedient, pleasant prince of a rabbit, and that he would complete his royal duties without any fuss. But Shugart *loved* to fuss! Fussing, and being soothed after fussing, were two of Shugart's favorite activities, along with adventuring, snacking, and dressing up.

One morning, ready for an adventure, Shugart hopped out for a frolic in the meadow. He was dressed in his favorite soft, dandelion-yellow cape, and fedora with matching brim. On this particular day, Shugart was supposed to meet his sister Ruby, to discuss the carrot shortage plaguing Bunnyborough. And that thought did cross Shugart's mind as he frolicked along, away from the castle. But then Shugart spied another creature grazing in his flowers, in his sunny meadow, and his fussiness got the best of him. *How dare this commoner loiter in my field!* Shugart thought furiously. *I'll show them!*

Shugart thumped toward the creature. He could see soft pink fur ruffling in the wind. *Could that be...? No. They don't exist.* Shugart thought, shaking his head. Slowing a bit, he continued to approach. Shugart could now see a lavender tail and mane, only confirming his suspicions; yet Shugart's irritation was still stronger than his wonder. "Hey! *YOU!*" Shugart's fretful voice echoed. "What are you doing *in* my meadow?"

The creature started, and Shugart saw them in their full glory. Standing before him was a *unicorn!* *This might be an adventure,* Shugart thought. "These flowers were so lovely, and the grass was so perfect, I couldn't help myself. My name is Luna." The beautiful pink unicorn had a melodious voice, soft and delicate like a summer breeze. "I am Shugart, a Prince of Bunnyborough, and you are *trespassing!*" Shugart snapped, fussiness returning. He gave a loud thump for good measure.

"I'm sorry, Shugart. I can leave, if you'd like." Shugart gave a defiant sniff. "That's *Prince* Shugart to you!" he retorted. The unicorn turned with a graceful swish. "Prince Shugart, would you try a bit of grass? I know this is your meadow, but have you tasted it?" Luna bent their legs and touched an iridescent horn to the ground. "*I don't eat grass.* I only consume the finest carrots," Shugart sniffed. But he was hungry, he realized; he had forgotten his snack. Shugart exhaled with irritation, dramatically swept his cape behind his back, and bent down to nibble. Shugart nibbled and nibbled, contemplating this tasty treat. His eyes went wide. These were the most delicious tender greens he had ever enjoyed! This grass was even *better* than carrots! "Luna, this is delicious!" Shugart exclaimed.

"I'm glad you liked it-" Luna's voice was drowned by royal trumpeting. Shugart heard his father bellow, "SHUGART, YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO BE IN A MEETING." Shugart glanced sheepishly at Luna. "I must go. It's been an adventure to meet you! And you may have solved the carrot crisis! Or at least, you've given me an idea. Thank you, Luna. You may nibble in the royal flower fields whenever you want!" With a tip of his fedora and a swish of his cape, Shugart bounded back to the castle to share his discovery with Ruby and King Richard.

PLACE, CAROLINE**Caroline Place**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

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

Educator: Michele Buche

Category: Dramatic Script

TOWN SQUARE***TOWN SQUARE***
A One-Act Play**CHARACTERS****ABBY**

a young teenage girl, living in a suburban home with her brother Jack, her sister, and her mother and father

JACK

Abby's brother, who has autism

SAM

a young teenager any gender, living in an apartment with Sam's mother

SAM'S MOTHER

sleeping on the couch

OFF-STAGE

Abby's sister, Abby's mother

(The scene opens with a split stage. Stage left is the living room of an apartment, with a mother asleep on the couch. In front of the couch, SAM sits facing the audience, playing the video game Town Square on a television screen. Stage right is the living room of a suburban house. ABBY and her brother JACK sit facing the audience, playing the video game Town Square on a television screen. Spotlight on ABBY and JACK.)

ABBY

C'mon, Jack. Let's see what's happening in Town Square today!

JACK

I wanna play Super Racing Kars!

ABBY

No, Jack. We'll play Super Racing Kars after I check in at Town Square.

JACK

(Grimacing)

I never get what I want!

ABBY

Jack, you pretty much ALWAYS get what you want. *(Jack pokes her gently and smiles. Abby pokes him back and smiles back.)* Let me check in with my villagers, and then we'll race.

(Gentle video game music plays, announcing the start of the game.)

ABBY

Oooh look, there's Ranger in the title sequence! He looks like he's going to go fishing. Ewww. Cinnamon is wearing that ugly frilly dress again! I wish she'd just wear the one I gave her. She's a cute kitten, but that dress...

(As ABBY plays, JACK begins to poke her.)

ABBY

Will you PLEASE stop poking me. *(Jack frowns.)* Oh, look Jack! There's Ralph! He's your favorite!

JACK

Hey, Ralph! I see you Ralph! He's on the bridge over the village green. Do your scowl, Ralph! Do it! Do it! Do it!

ABBY

Wait, let me scowl at him, and then he'll scowl back.

(Abby fiddles with controls, and then both she and Jack scowl together at the screen.)

JACK

Look! He's doing it! He's doing it! *(Claps in delight)*

ABBY'S SISTER

(Off stage)

Will you guys please be quiet? I have to keep my mic on for debate class!

JACK

I wanna play Super Racing Kars!

ABBY

(Scowling toward their sister's voice)

Okay, Jack. We'll play Super Racing Kars next. Let's be quiet. Look, Ralphie is wearing that snappy fedora you gave him yesterday!

JACK

He is a detective rabbit!

ABBY

He does look like a detective rabbit. Hey. Cool. Ralphie is giving us for a Patchwork Satchel! Okay. That's weird, even for Ralph. But thank you, Ralphie! *(Jack hoots with pleasure, then folds his arms across his chest.)*

JACK

I wanna play Super Racing Kars!

ABBY

Wait. Who is that? Who the heck is Sam1313?

JACK

I don't know! *(laughs)*

ABBY

Jack. Did you do something? What did you do?

JACK

I don't know! *(laughs)*

ABBY

Did you change the setting to multiplayer again? Jack! I told you not to do that! What a pain. Now we have to boot this guy out of our Town Square. Or at least make sure he's not a psycho.

(JACK pokes ABBY several times as she's talking, and she pokes him back. ABBY puts on a headset. Spotlight on SAM, wearing a headset, and keeping spotlight on ABBY and JACK.)

SAM

Hello? AKR221? Can you hear me?

ABBY

Are you a pervert? Yes or no? My mom is right here, just saying!

SAM

Dude. I'm thirteen. *(pause)* How do I know YOU'RE not a pervert?

ABBY

Well, I'm not. My brother turned on multiplayer, and I have no clue how to turn it off in the middle of the game. I don't want to lose my progress. I'm stuck.

SAM

Well, I don't know how to do that, either. Sorry. I like the name of your Square. Wisteria. I saw that you were open for visitors.

ABBY

Hey! Don't go in the garden!

JACK

I wanna play SUPER RACING KARS! I WANNA PLAY SUPER RACING KARS!

ABBY

(Pulls off her headset, calls to mother off stage)

Mom! Will you please make Jack go upstairs?

ABBY'S MOM

(Off stage)

Sweetie, I'm in the laundry room. Can you bring him up?

ABBY

(Putting headset back on)

Look, I don't know who you are. But I have to take my brother upstairs. I'll be back in one minute. Don't mess with anything, okay? I mean it.

SAM

Okay.

ABBY

Jacko, will you help Mom with the socks? If you will, I will play Super Racing Kars as long as you want, after you're done.

JACK

Promise?

ABBY
Promise.

JACK
Cross your heart, hope to die?

ABBY
Yes yes. But no dying. Okay? Let's go see Mom.

(ABBY and JACK exit stage right. Spotlight on SAM only, continuing to play the video game.)

SAM'S MOTHER *(stirring on the couch)*
Sammy?

SAM
(Not looking.)
Yeah, Mom?

SAM'S MOTHER
Did you say something?

SAM
Nope.

SAM'S MOTHER
Okay.

(SAM'S MOTHER turns on her side, falling back to sleep. Spotlight on ABBY, re-entering her living room, and also on SAM.)

ABBY
Are you still there?

SAM
Yeah. Can you see me?

ABBY
I TOLD YOU TO STAY OUT OF MY GARDEN!

SAM
Sorry. I am just looking for seeds. For my own garden.

ABBY
Too bad. Get out! I have some seeds in my shed that I **could** give you. Let's go there.

SAM
Okay. Where's your house?

ABBY
This one. Right here.

SAM
Really? It's so ... pink.

ABBY
Wow. Rude. Maybe I WON'T give you any seeds.

ABBY

That's awful. I'm going stir crazy. We have to stay home, all the time, because Jack has a heart condition, and my dad is diabetic. No thank you Covid. But it is a zoo around here. My brother and sister and I want to kill each other. My mom is worried all the time about my nonnie, who goes out too much and is too old.

SAM

Oh, you're lucky, though! I wish I had a brother or a sister.

ABBY

Trust me, you are the only person in the universe who would say that. *(pause)* I am sorry about your friend who worked at the market.

SAM *(after a pause)*

Seeds now, please.

ABBY

Okay, do you want the daffodils or the roses?

SAM

Do you have any lilies?

ABBY

Seriously, dude? Be grateful for daffodils or roses. I've never been lucky enough to find lily seeds, and I have spent HOURS on this game.

SAM

Fine. I'll take the daffodils. *(Both fiddle with their controllers for a moment)*

SAM

Your village is so much nicer than mine. How do you have enough time to make it so great?

ABBY

Well, outside of school, this is all I do. And what can I say, I want to keep Wisteria in ship-shape condition!

SAM

I don't even know what wisteria is. It is a cool word. Yeah, I haven't been doing much recently either, but playing video games all the time gives me a headache.

ABBY

My sister is just like that! She never wants to play with me or my brother. Wisteria is really pretty, in real life. It's a vine with purple flowers, climbing up a wall. It is prettier than I can describe. My nonnie has some at her house.

SAM

That sounds nice. Man, I wish I had someone to play video games with in real life. No one here thinks they're entertaining.

(JACK claps loudly off stage, and then laughs.)

SAM

Are you guys setting off fireworks? Isn't that illegal? It's illegal here.

ABBY

Oh no, that's just my brother. Also, how is setting off fireworks illegal?!

SAM

I don't know? Because they're likely to cause a fire or kill someone or something.

ABBY

We set them off every year on the 4th of July. In a big field where my Mom grew up. They're pretty, but loud. I like the fountains the best. They light up the sky but don't freak me out with the loud noises.

SAM

That sounds amazing. I'd love to see them. *(pause)* Did you set them off this year?

ABBY

Nope.

(JACK claps loudly offstage, and both ABBY and SAM start, and then laugh.)

SAM

Can you give me a tour of your town?

ABBY

Sure! Follow me, and I'll show you Village Hall. And if you take this path through the woods, you come to Meadowbrook Lodge.

SAM

Meadowbrook Lodge! Geez. Don't you have to put in at least a hundred hours to unlock it?

ABBY

I already told you. I have no life outside of Town Square!

ABBY'S MOM

(Off stage)

Abby, can you play with Jack?

ABBY

Yes, Mom. I'll come get him. Can you hang on another minute? I have to go grab my brother?

SAM

Sure.

(Abby exits stage right. Spotlight on SAM only, continuing playing the game)

SAM

This is unbelievably good. I can't believe she got Meadowbrook Lodge. Look at that library! I wonder which ten villagers she has right now. And how many hours it took to build all this. And to get the villagers to come.

(SAM'S MOTHER stirs, turning on the couch again. A blanket falls off her, to the floor. SAM gets up, covers her gently, and returns to the video game. SAM looks back toward the couch for a long moment. Then SAM sighs, picks up the game console, and begins playing the game again. After a moment, ABBY returns with her brother JACK. They sit in front of the television, and ABBY puts on her headset again. Spotlight on ABBY and JACK, and also on SAM.)

ABBY

Hey, I'm back. With Jack.

SAM

Hi Jack!

JACK

(In a silly voice)

Hello!

ABBY

I'm gonna have to go in a few minutes, but there's one last thing I wanted to show you. Will you follow me?

SAM

Sure!

ABBY

Ta-da! It's a Fairy Garden!

SAM

Wow! This is fantastic. I've never seen one in the game. Did you build it all by yourself?

ABBY

Well, I had a little help from Jack.

(ABBY turns to JACK and smiles. Jack smiles back, and pokes her hard. ABBY shakes a pretend fist at JACK.)

SAM

You may not have any lilies, but you have tons of flowers I've never seen. Pansies, mums, tulips, windflowers ...

ABBY

You sure know your flowers!

SAM

I know the ones in Town Square, anyway. I'd love to grow some, in real life. Anything beautiful. Do you have any hybrids?

ABBY

I literally just learned about hybrids! I planted a few different colors next to each other, but no hybrids yet. I am hoping to see some soon, though.

SAM

I read online that the only way to find all the flower colors in Town Square is to visit other squares. That's one reason I look for any squares that are open to visitors, whenever I log on.

ABBY

I'm glad you chose my square today.

SAM

I'm glad Jack turned on multiplayer.

(JACK claps and laughs. ABBY and SAM smile too.)

JACK

Abbbbyyy. Can we play Super Racing Kars now? Please? Please? Please?

ABBY

Okay, Jacko. I'll turn on Super Racing Kars. I am so sorry, but I've gotta go. It's time for Jack to race some Kars. It was really nice talking to you, Sam1313.

SAM

It was really nice talking to you too, AKR221.

(Pause, as SAM looks like he's trying to put another thought into words. But ABBY leans forward and ejects a cartridge from her game console. She takes off her headset and turns to JACK.)

ABBY

All right, dude. It's Super Racing Kars Time!

JACK

Yay!

(JACK laughs and claps. As ABBY and JACK begin to play, steering their wheels, their spotlight dims. Spotlight remains on SAM alone on stage.)

SAM

(Sighs.)

I sure wish I knew you in real life, AKR221.

(SAM sits on the stage looking dejected. The spotlight slowly dims, leaving the stage dark.)

End of Scene

THE END

PRUITT, NYLA**Nyla Pruitt**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: James Lewis

Category: Poetry

The beginning of the End starts with a Tick

The beginning of the End starts with a Tick-
And a quieting- of the pulsating Heart
His Birth-comes from Within-
Heavy heat in lungs-He begs to part

Ground whimpers beneath pounding feet
Willows weep-visceral cries
Bathed in Fever-skin turned Crisp
End-Tick--ticking

My wails deafen-through shattering Bones
He paints-my skin-a Crimson-salvation
Ashes turned Dust-in shivering Palms
Swallow and gulp-take me Whole

PUTNAM, WYLIE**Wylie Putnam**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Poetry

My Day

My day

You ask me about my day

No

I wish you asked me about my day

longing for you to be here

with me

Your scent vanishes into

a distant memory

My memory

Coldness biting

Emptiness within

The leaves crunch

Shadows engulf

a cloak surrounding me

There is no more left

The sunsets

vibrant colors

fade to black

Curtains close

I take a bow

No more light

but the corner street lamp

The street is dark

The street we used to walk

Where my heart skipped

a rock skimming the surface of a lake

Splish

splash

Splish

splash

splash

My day was bad.

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Monsoons to Murder: The Scale of Evil

Monsoons to Murder: The Scale of Evil

My eyes jolted open, not from my alarm that still had precious seconds left of “snooze” but from the dinging of my phone. As a notification popped up, the familiar red and white logo of Apple News caught my glance, my stomach filling with dread. I groaned, realizing that I was awake to begin another day of near constant sensory assault, drowning in other people’s struggles on top of my own. While most people regard nightmares as part of their dreams, the waking world lately had been feeling far too similar. Ugly truths - natural disasters, coronavirus, poverty - commanded headlines and news reports every waking moment.

As I walked into the kitchen, my dad greeted me with a cheery good morning, in sharp contrast to my mood. Grabbing a mug, I poured the fresh-brewed coffee, inhaling the soothing aroma until my moment of peace was shattered by the familiar voices coming from the radio. “It’s seven o’clock and this is....*NPR*.” As the sound of the news anchor’s voice filled the air, she shared what had occurred while we slept: a tornado in Alabama leaving 12 dead and a woman murdered while walking home from work.

“I guess the world really doesn’t stop for anyone,” I remarked to myself.

Both seemed mundane to the newscaster, passing events in her long day ahead just read off a script, but as I poured a bowl of cereal and sat down, I turned the stories over in my head. The tornado stirred a memory of years previous, my family sheltered in the basement eating popcorn as we waited out one of many annual tornadoes circling overhead. The threat had always felt somewhat imaginary, a constant event each year that never seemed to touch us, even though we lived very much within “tornado valley.” The privilege or luck of my lived experiences actively influenced my perception of evil. I had never been forced to confront the aftermath of such a horrific natural disaster and they had been normalized as a result.

The reporter echoed in my ears like a broken record as I heard her say again “found dead on the side of the road early this morning.” Why was my mind dwelling on this story -- was it a sense of connection with something that could just as easily happen to me? The tornado was far more destructive, yet I couldn’t bring myself to care quite as much.

The reason lies in control, or lack thereof, on the part of each individual. Our general disregard to fatal events like weather disasters are a direct result of the ease with which mankind surrenders any sense of control, because “nature, even at its most destructive, has clean hands. Humankind does not” (Morrow 49). The scale of pain caused by hurricanes or fire is devastating, and while I feel empathy for those who suffer, there is no direct call to action, no pull to create justice. Perhaps, that is how God intended humans to be. After all, when Adam dares to venture outside his lot, Raphael warns him to “solicit not thy thoughts with matters hid, / leave them to God above, him serve and fear / . . . heav’n is for thee too high / to know what passes there; be lowly wise: / think only what concerns thee” (Milton 8.167-174). Perhaps our nonchalance about natural disasters is not a choice, but the way humanity was formed in order to maintain God’s hierarchy of man over animals and He himself over man. As Morrow continues later on, he defines natural evil as “acts of God and therefore his responsibility, or acts of the blind universe and therefore no one’s [responsibility]” (Morrow 49). This echoes the familiar words of John Milton; mankind can let go of evil on a much larger scale when they can remove it from their conscience. In giving responsibility to God, the *natural* world becomes predetermined and our natural freedom of self determination restricted to personal actions, absolving us of blame for any events outside ourselves. The natural world, a force personified into a being through colloquial references like “Mother Nature,” is out of our control and any disaster that can be attributed to nature alone is therefore easily discarded as caused by God and fate.

“Shouldn’t you get going soon?” my mom asked, breaking me out of my stupor.

I glanced at the clock, realizing nearly 40 minutes had gone by as I absentmindedly twirled my spoon in now-warm milk, lost in thought, imagining the life that the murder victim had left behind. I jumped out of my seat, hearing the

legs of the chair screech against our tile floors. Shoving binders in my backpack, I pulled on tennis shoes and ran out the door. In the cold, my car ignition sputtered. "Please, not today," I begged. After all, don't bad things only happen to bad people?

On the third try, it turned over and the heater began to blast, blowing my hair into my eyes. A wave of relief washed over me as I pulled out of the driveway, and turned onto the street towards school that I'd driven a thousand times before. As I came around a bend, I passed a deer, lying on its side in the middle of my lane. Not even cleared off the road yet, I could see blood spreading over concrete and the look of terror in its expression. I slowed to a stop, waiting for the other side of traffic to pass. "That's sad," I thought to myself, "it must be because of all the new construction. I've seen them cutting down most of the woods bordering the development." As an orange Jeep approached from the opposite direction, the driver slowed, waving me through, I casually pulled around the dead animal without a second thought.

Did the person who hit the animal intend to do so when they got in their car? The answer is invariably no, they didn't. That absence of intention leads to society's general disregard for roadkill. Just like weather, we assume it was an accident and surrender any sort of blame besides circumstantial responsibility on the person who hit it. "Moral evil refers to actions undertaken knowingly to harm or exploit others in contravention of accepted moral principles or statutes within a society" (Shattuck 76) and without premeditation, our mind can gloss over the cause of the animal's death.

More specifically, Oedipus best contextualizes the conundrum of outcome and intent. Until he becomes excessively prideful and angry, viewers can almost sympathize with his ignorance. After he was incensed by a drunk man in Corinth, he nobly sought the truth from the Oracle at Delphi. In horror, he was told he was "fated to couple with your mother / . . . you will kill your father, the one who gave you life" (Sophocles 873-875). With fear instilled in his heart, Oedipus "heard all that and ran. / [He] abandoned Corinth, from that day on / . . . always running / toward some place where I would never see / the shame of all those oracles come true" (Sophocles 876-880). Landing in Thebes, the diction and tone of distress that Sophocles presents paint Oedipus as frantic and fearful of the inevitable, a respectable reaction to horrific news. Of course, this situation ended the way it was originally claimed, but through no fault of his own. He was deceived in the truth about his parents, not the king and queen of Corinth but instead of Thebes where he *did* accidentally marry his mother after killing his father. However, with false information, Oedipus acted with the best possible intentions. Before the introduction of other personal faults, his ignorance makes him a sympathetic character, not deserving of punishment caused by actions he did not understand but only of those rooted in freestanding character flaws like rage.

Furthermore, Milton emphasizes the concept of exemption from moral justice that Shattuck sought to explain: a belief of the evildoers that no one else can stoop low enough to punish them repeats in Eden. As Satan moves to corrupt the human race, created by God to be "man in our image, man / in our similitude" (Milton 7.519-520), he tempts Eve with challenges to God's goodness. He tricks his way into her logical mind, explaining the Tree of Knowledge will only help her know "of good, how just? Of evil, if what is evil / be real, why not known, since easier shunned? / God therefore cannot hurt thee and be just: / not just, not God, not feared then, nor obeyed. / Your fear itself of death removes the fear" (Milton 9.698-702). In the same way that murderers rely on the awe their crimes will inspire to elevate them, Satan relies on Eve's unwavering piety by telling her that if God is good, the punishment deserved will be less than the verdict delivered. Additionally, he manipulates her to feel gratitude for sin, that through the Tree she will know "how just" God is and grow closer to him, which is a blatant lie.

Satan makes certain that immorality, when freely chosen, is the driver of our anger. His dedication to Hell as an experience *and* a place close the door on sympathy, and teach that the level of thought and premeditation behind evil acts directly dictates whether an outsider feels called to deliver justice, as we feel no need to make excuses for his behavior but abuse his character instead because his intent was nothing but malice.

As I slid into the cold plastic seat of my 6th hour history class, we turned our focus to the current effects of the pandemic on food availability for many families.

"Many people are struggling to feed themselves or their kids," she explained, as CNN 10 showed a man being arrested for stealing from a grocery store.

Immediately, she was met with sighs of sadness and compassion towards him and his plight, not anger at the attempted wrongdoing. We turned to our small groups to discuss.

"How is this fair," I mused, "what makes it okay for other humans to go hungry?"

Next to me, my friend jumped in, sharing thoughts on whether something like a foodbank can even begin to compensate.

In the middle of her thought, the bell rang, a metallic echo resounding through the hall. Just as quickly as the conversation began it was over. We all had lunches packed, or money in our pocket to purchase one, and that very irony allowed us to create distance from those less fortunate. Is evil our disregard, or the fact that so many are hungry in the first place? A hubbub distinctly unique to high school in sound and odor filled the hall as we filed

towards the lunchroom.

As I sat in the cafeteria, my phone buzzed again. I flipped it upwards to see another headline, the local news breaking coverage of an attempted armed robbery. I turned towards my friend, and she inclined her head downwards to read the text on my dimming screen.

"I was just there last week," she exclaimed, "how could someone do that in the middle of the day?"

A sense of sympathy and fear took root as we related to each customer. We could just have easily been one of the shoppers going about our day. I clicked on the notification and read further.

"They were caught and arrested," I told her.

"Still, it makes me mad," she insisted.

Why was it so easy to gloss over the first man's stealing of food -- an illegal act -- and feel empathy or sorrow towards the raw pain of the situation instead? In the same vein, how can that same action be reprimanded in an armed robbery? Returning to Milton, he presented a belief that the root of temptation to sin matters most in considering the consequences. Upon the first exaltation of the Son of God and discussion of man's inevitable demise, God declared that "the first sort by the own suggestion fell, / self-tempted, self-depraved: man falls deceived / by the other first: man therefore shall find grace, / the other none: in mercy and justice both, / through Heav'n and Earth, so shall my glory excel" (Milton 3.129-133). Someone who attempts an unnecessary violent crime benefits only selfishly, if at all, from actions they were largely in control of: not deceived but intrinsically choosing to follow a desire for evil in a manner equatable to Satan. This unfathomable cruelty creates our sense of obligation to any victims and causes my anger towards the situation. After all, "the prospect awakens, in the Western, secular mind, the idea that all future outcomes, good or evil, are a human responsibility" (Morrow 53). People feel called to act, in contrast to justifying the man who stole for his family. Those actions, while wrong in tangible execution, can be argued in principle -- he was acting on understandable intentions and victim to the harshness of the world (a deception of sorts). The discrepancy in emotion can be summed up in the firm belief that "actions which are ostensibly the same kinds of actions can be right or wrong depending on the circumstances" (Kolakowski 23). As the final bell of the school day sounded, I shrugged into my jacket, feeling a sense of sorrow that is far too familiar for many students. I swung my bag onto my shoulders and headed out the door.

I spun at the sound of my name, to see my friend speed walking towards me. She swung her arms overdramatically, weaving through the crowds of freshmen standing in the commons. Nearing the doors, we broke into laughter at the ridiculousness of it all. Sometimes, that's the only response we can muster, an attempt to accommodate for a world which pelts us relentlessly.

That night, I sighed as I rolled into bed, letting the day wash over me. Seconds of my waking hours flashed before my eyes, from hearing that very first NPR story to learning about photosynthesis in biology to small smiles exchanged with friends in class over the top of our masks. Did the good parts of my day balance out the bad? Although quantifiably less, the moments of joy *were* enough.

At some point, the jump to blind faith that there is "a creator who is both unique and infinitely good," (Kolakowski 18) is all that carries people through their day. In order to exist in the chaos that is life, everyone must find a way to organize the constant influx of good and bad to provide themselves comfort -- whether that's believing in God or Fate or the biology of our brains, people individually find ways to allow the horrific things to slough away, and make sure we hold the good moments closer.

Regardless, we don't make it easy on ourselves. Almost instinctively, my finger clicked the familiar purple and pink logo of Instagram, scrolling through the last few hours worth of posts, people sharing their entire lives in a never ending stream just like everything else. By choice this time, I was choosing to submerge myself into worlds outside my own. Part of the never ending cycle is the addictiveness of evil, the adrenaline rush that comes with strong negative emotions that happy memories do not provide. As the world increasingly digitalizes, each day makes evil more accessible, both to consume and experience. I scrolled past a post which flipped a switch, a spark of rage catching in my chest.

In this moment, the blame for the emotions I was feeling lay with me. I chose to open the app, and therefore assume a responsibility for whatever I would see there. While the outside world happens incessantly, consumption of it does not need to match the pace. Perhaps the creator did not mean any harm in their post, and besides, if you turn to anti theological beliefs "nothing is good or evil in itself, something can be pleasant or unpleasant. . . to particular people, and without this qualifier even the words. . . are meaningless" (Kolakowski 22). My experience of the news through the lens of lived experience influences a response unlike any other individual, creating a constant need for awareness of the way consume and react to the evil of the world.

I watched the clock flip to 11:00, officially marking the 17th hour of my day, and dutifully reached for my alarm.

Setting it for 6am, I prepared myself to do it over again - this endless cycle, lather rinse repeat.

What is evil? As a force, the power lies in the name, to inspire fear and create a name for emotions or action otherwise unspeakable. Larger than life, it looms over everything in an omnipotent sense, always present and

working in ways we can't see. There will never be a time when everyone reaches a consensus on how to act or react - to some extent, then, evil is an experience unique to me in a way that's irreplicable and unexplainable, a part of the patchwork which is life. Evil is a scale, dependent on motive and outcome, but not learned in a textbook. As each of us move through life, our view of evil evolves. Each day is a conscious choice on how to process or engage with the evil we encounter, informed by what we've been through. Pain and suffering aren't going away, so the question becomes simply, how do I choose the good? How do I make the moments of joy enough?

As I lay drifting out of consciousness, my mind surrendered to sleep and for at least a few hours, the world dimmed into the background, fading back into focus only as the sun began to peak over the horizon and from dreamland, my alarm squealed in the distance.

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Category: Critical Essay

How "The Great Gatsby" and a Plastic Pink Flamingo Define the American Dream

The American Dream is one that everyone wishes to achieve. Even today, people wish to take advantage of the opportunity and wealth that America provides. The United States is seen by people all over the world as a place of good fortune and growth, even equality and equal opportunity. However, this dream to achieve everything one wants and be happy in America is all too often interrupted by money and wealth. The desire to be rich in America has clouded the judgments of people everywhere, ruining lives over the materialistic ideas of American culture. Although it's true that everyone wants money and wants to be rich, when the wrong people chase after these things and acquire them, disaster ensues. In addition to the materialism ever present in America, another common focus of those seeking success in the land of opportunity is the return to the past, or simply the ways in which some people take advantage of it. People in America commonly have trouble accepting the past and trying to force it to repeat itself, despite the inability to completely repeat the past, only the ability to vaguely recreate it. These aspects of American life are demonstrated in two pieces of literature: one a fictional novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald about a man using money to chase love that he once had, and the other an essay by Jennifer Price analyzing the significance of the pink plastic lawn flamingo. *The Great Gatsby*, the first piece of literature that represents the fall of the American Dream, uses symbolism and imagery to explain the effect of ambition and a broken dream using a cynical, judgemental, yet slightly sympathetic tone. "The Plastic Pink Flamingo: A Natural History" uses juxtaposition, repetition, and ethos to describe the American desire to follow trends and fit in while taking advantage of the past with a sarcastic, ironic, and informative tone. Both approach themes of American culture differently, but both express the same ideas of what life in America is like for those who follow corrupted values and empty promises of a purpose fulfilled by money.

One of the most obvious and central themes in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald is the recurrence of money and how it can affect the lives of others. The main characters are all wealthy and privileged, and the narration of the story by Nick Carraway, a character who is not as wealthy as the other main characters, gives the story a unique perspective and truly gets to pull back the curtain, so to speak, to show the audience the different mindsets of those who have been corrupted by money. Within the novel, money itself symbolizes life and luxury in the 1920s. The parties that Gatsby throws are a significant example of this, since people from all over the city were flocking to Gatsby's house to be a part of the rich lifestyle that he projected. It also, though, symbolizes ignorance. Everyone attending these Gatsby parties effectively has no idea who he really is, not only symbolizing Gatsby as an illusion to the outside world, but also establishing that in America, particularly in this time period, the majority of people do not care about being ignorant, they only care about the money that surrounds it. However, Nick comments several times how he admires Gatsby because of his hopefulness, despite everything that has happened to him. For this reason, not only does money symbolize luxury and insanity and blissful ignorance, but it also symbolizes hope and optimism, which is in itself a very "Gatsby-like" value. Throughout the book, we see the many ways in which Gatsby is attempting to use his money to make Daisy notice and once again fall in love with him, such as throwing extravagant parties to get her attention, giving her a tour of his mansion, and showing her his exotic shirts. Although Gatsby has "new money" and doesn't come from a line of rich and famous people, he still chooses to use his money to try to get Daisy to love him, to try to rekindle the love that they once felt. Additionally, despite Gatsby maintaining a slightly altered version of Daisy in his mind, his passion and drive to make Daisy's life better and convince her to fall in love with him once again is what money truly means in the eyes of Gatsby.

In addition to money being a significant symbol in *The Great Gatsby*, one of the less prominent but still incredibly significant symbols throughout the book is the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg. These eyes sit above the Valley of Ashes on an old, forgotten billboard. Nick mentions these eyes several times, occasionally at times that would seem random at face value. However, these eyes and their symbolism are not only creepy in nature, but symbolize judgment. The eyes are first mentioned when Nick visits the Valley of Ashes the first time, which sets the tone for the entire location

and introduces the possibility of consequences and one's actions being watched closely. Later in the story, when something bad happens in the Valley of Ashes, the eyes are always mentioned. They were mentioned when Myrtle was hit by the car and found dead, representing Nick's realization that no action goes unseen and no act goes without judgment. He then realizes in this moment that many things, including reputations, relationships, and lives, were destroyed, and the eyes, therefore, represent that there will always be someone or something watching. Additionally, George Wilson eventually adopts the belief that the eyes symbolize the eyes of God in his grief over his wife, and causes the reader to therefore make the connection that the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg were not only meant to represent judgment as a whole, but judgment from God and the unfathomable consequences of taking something as significant as a life away from someone. Following this thought pattern, the eyes could then, therefore, represent God watching America with judgment. This especially makes an impact when one considers that the eyes are located specifically in the Valley of Ashes, which is seen as the worst, dirtiest, disappointing location in the city. This shows the level of judgment the author looks at America with while simultaneously representing the consequences of actions, even for the rich and powerful.

Fitzgerald's choice to have the story narrated by Nick instead of Gatsby or another one of the main characters seems like a questionable choice at first glance. However, this choice allows the author to talk through Nick to some extent, therefore allowing the reader to better comprehend the tone and the message of the story. Nick often speaks with a cynical tone, often looking down on the ways in which the more wealthy characters live, and especially criticizing Gatsby and how he uses his money. This, however, allows for a deeper insight into what Fitzgerald's actual opinion on this matter is. The cynical tone used by Nick shows the author's criticism of American society and confirms that he thinks the ways of life of the wealthier characters are ineffective and wrong. However, Nick occasionally uses a sympathetic tone, especially while talking about Gatsby. This tells the reader that Fitzgerald likely admires Gatsby's hopefulness and the fact that he is driven by love, despite him trying to buy back this love with riches and luxury.

In addition to *The Great Gatsby* and its subtle analysis of American culture and the American Dream, Jennifer Price's essay titled "The Plastic Pink Flamingo: A Natural History" not only gives the reader information about the plastic flamingo and the history behind it, but also how Americans reacted to this trend and what it says about American culture. In her essay, Price argues that pink flamingos, while being important motifs throughout history in other countries and cultures, came to represent wealth and luxury in America. Price uses numerous literary and rhetorical devices such as juxtaposition, repetition, and ethos in order to explain the trends in early to mid-1900s America and the wealth and high status that pink flamingos represent, as well as how this, in turn, represents Americans at the time, and even still today. She uses a humorous yet sarcastic and ironic tone to appeal to her audience of Americans and therefore showcases the ways in which the country was changed by the color pink.

Towards the beginning of her essay, Price describes the Miami Beach hotel named The Flamingo, which was an early symbol of status mentioned in her essay. She explains that, because this hotel was so "grand," many upper-class people chose to stay there, which then caused other Americans to associate the hotel with money, leisure, and "pizzaz," as Price puts it. This resulted in the flamingo becoming a symbol of wealth because of the hotel's affiliation, but Price says that this fact is particularly interesting because "Americans had hunted flamingos to extinction in Florida in the late 1800s..." This first example of juxtaposition shows the newfound American love for flamingos, and then immediately contradicts it with symbols of hate and aggression, which in this case is the hunting and extinction of flamingos. This juxtaposition is highly symbolic because it represents how many Americans act in certain situations: take advantage of something for personal and financial gain, and later show love for the same thing, despite past aggression. This heavily represents Price's view of United States culture, because no matter what had occurred in the past, Americans will simply follow trends and ignore the consequences of their own actions. Additionally, in the third paragraph, Price uses several examples of juxtaposition, such as describing the colors of the 50s to be "forward-looking" as opposed to "old-fashioned." This represents not only American culture but the American Dream as a whole as well. America is very commonly known as a "forward-looking" country, which is what provides so many people with opportunities (at least, that's the idea). The comparison of colors, including the introduction of the bright pink, flamingo or otherwise, shows American culture and how the idea of being advanced and open-minded as a country can encourage people to live out their American Dream.

Although Price refers to the flamingo throughout the essay, her real focus was oftentimes not truly on flamingos, but on the color pink itself. She uses repetition throughout the piece, such as in the third paragraph when she says "And the flamingo was *pink*." This introduces the importance of not only the flamingo symbol throughout American culture, but the color pink as well. During this time, bright colors like pinks were a symbol of wealth and luxury, similar to the flamingo itself, because these colors signified a more advanced country and culture. Furthermore, throughout paragraph three, Price continues to repeat the word pink multiple times, like when she listed different examples of pink such as "passion pink, sunset pink, and Bermuda pink." This once again drives home her point that pink is clearly a very significant color to Americans and symbolizes a plethora of wealthy and luxurious motifs.

Despite the essay containing many historical facts, Price effectively incorporates some of her own tone and interesting yet engaging writing tactics. One of the most important tactics used within the essay is Price's deliberate and effective use of ethos. At the beginning of the third paragraph, she included a quotation from Tom Wolfe of him calling the new colors of the fifties "the new electromechanical pastels..." and later in the paragraph she mentions that Elvis Presley bought a Cadillac in the color pink. Both of these examples reference real people, and these people establish credibility within the essay due to the names such as Elvis Presley, that everyone knows. This immediately clues the reader in on the significance of pink and therefore pink flamingos, and offers another comparison to American culture; if a major pop culture figure owned a pink Cadillac, it was more likely to have a lasting impact on American citizens as a result of the mob mentality often showcased all over America. In addition to using ethos, Price also utilizes an extremely engaging and humorous tone. She begins the essay with several plastic flamingo or bird puns, including words such as "splashed," "staked," and "flocking." This further establishes a lighthearted tone, showing that American culture at the time was interesting and fun and only spurred on more due to the ridiculousness of the pink plastic yard flamingo trend. Furthermore, in the last sentence of the essay, Price continues her use of jokes and puns by comparing the spread of the flamingo trend across the country to "wading" through the inland grass. This, once again, shows the positive light in which pink flamingos were portrayed at the time. It also proved that her view of United States culture was potentially not all "bad."

Although Price's essay overall has many more differences to *The Great Gatsby* than similarities, some of the prevalent themes in both works make vaguely the same statement about American culture. While Price discusses the color pink and how it became a symbol of wealth in the 1900s, Fitzgerald represents this same idea with parties and extravagant lifestyles. Both of these authors express judgment over American society and the values under which the country operates, therefore getting the same idea across but with vastly different tones and symbolism. Price uses a history of the plastic pink lawn flamingo to demonstrate the desire for wealth and power in America at the time, while Fitzgerald uses a complicated narrative about a newly rich man trying to win back a forgotten love. Though vastly different imagery is used, these two authors still manage to make the same statement about American culture: money corrupts, and although everyone all over the country has a desire for this money, it largely never has any benefit to those who acquire it, and especially not to those who use it in the wrong way. The rich main characters in *The Great Gatsby* used their money and lineage for the wrong reasons, like to get away with murder, and the citizens mentioned in Price's essay, like the people who stayed at the Miami hotel, used their wealth and status to make an animal that was hunted to extinction in America only a few decades earlier the symbol of wealth and status itself. While different symbolism was used in the two works, the message about the effect of money on American society, specifically how much it can harm others, remains constant.

In addition to the statements about riches and wealth made in both pieces, another recurring theme is the inability to bring back the past. As mentioned, Price made sure to mention in her essay that the flamingo had been living in America, specifically Florida, until the late 1800s. During the late 1800s though, the flamingo was hunted to extinction by Americans themselves. Despite this, people in America became set on making the flamingo, and by extension the color pink in general, a symbol of wealth and riches. The contrast of the flamingo existing in past America before being killed off and America adopting this symbol into their culture sends a strong message about trying to recreate the past and regretting losing that idea in the following years, which happens to be an extremely prominent theme in *The Great Gatsby*. Throughout the story, Gatsby is obsessed with trying to win back Daisy, a girl he had fallen in love with five years prior, but who had eventually married another man. This concern with the past and attempting to recreate it or bring it back is almost directly parallel to the history of the pink flamingo. Both of these pieces of literature discuss bringing back the past, the regret of not being able to recreate what once was, and the inability to accept the actions that led up to the reconstruction of the future, while using vastly different symbols, language, and messages.

There are clearly many differences between "The Plastic Pink Flamingo: A Natural History" and *The Great Gatsby*. *The Great Gatsby* uses symbolism, tone, and narration choices to discuss the American Dream and how, as well as why, money can corrupt people so easily and why some feel the need to recreate the past. "The Plastic Pink Flamingo: A Natural History" uses juxtaposition, repetition, and ethos, as well as creative tone choices, to reflect the American desire to follow existing trends as well as the drive to increase one's status. Although these two works are different in many ways, both authors agree that there are aspects of America and by extension the American Dream that work to corrupt more than improve aspects of modern society. Both works discuss the inability to bring things back from the past, as well as the extent to which money can harm the consciousness of those who abuse the power it provides in the wrong ways. Although many people have found happiness and success through the concept of the American Dream, the desire for money, the need to fit in, and the inability to recreate what has already passed has been the downfall of many so far, and undoubtedly will be the downfall of many more to come.

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Category: Short Story

Charade

The server was climbing up the lushly carpeted spiraling staircase, holding a platter of caviar for the esteemed guests, who were attending the party on the 78th floor, when it happened. Having climbed up seventy four levels previously, - due to an elevator that was conveniently under maintenance - sweat was streaming from his armpits, wetting his finely tailored, burgundy tuxedo. He knew he wouldn't be able to enter the ballroom without being sniffed at and shooed away like he was some sort of smelly stray dog. So, he sat, placing a hand on the varnished ebony handrail to steady himself. The silver, diamond-encrusted platter of caviar settled into the red carpet beside him. He decided he would take a quick rest, allow for the sweat stains to evaporate, and then continue his journey up the remaining four levels to deliver the appetizer. A huge window adorned the wall opposite to the staircase, allowing guests to have a gorgeous view of Chennai's impressively tall structures, colorful temples, and the bustling city life below. At night, the sparkling lights emitting from buildings nearby gave the city life, all of which the server noticed as he gazed through the glass. Tearing his eyes away from the scenery, he nervously glanced at his watch. The caviar was due to be served... five minutes ago?

Fidgeting, he bolted up, carefully attempting to balance the caviar platter on one hand. The moment he swung open the heavy, tall, wooden double doors on the 78th floor, Aisha would make a beeline for him, planner in hand, ready to tell him off in her shrieky voice for being late yet again. The server took a deep breath, readying himself for what awaited him once he embarked on his journey to the gala again. He gazed, wistfully, through the glass window for the last time. He longed to be riding his motorcycle through the crowded streets below, feeling the wind in his hair as he rushed past colorful stands and vendors eagerly enticing potential customers. Sighing, letting his eyes linger on the city, he prepared to continue up the remaining stairs, until he heard shouts coming from above.

In movies, climactic scenes always take place in slow motion. The server had never understood why, how the clock ceased to tick at a normal pace, and, as a result, generally didn't believe in these foolish thematic elements; however, in the moments that followed, it wasn't as though time had slowed down, it was as though it had ceased to progress. He watched as a beautiful woman tumbled through the air, outside of the huge glass window he had been admiring minutes ago. She fell in such a position that the server could easily make out her facial features, could clearly read her shocked expression, could see the betrayal in her deep brown eyes. This was when time suspended. She hung in the air, frozen for what seemed like several minutes. The server stood still in shock, eyes wide, as he attempted to make sense of what was unfolding in front of his very eyes. He was able to identify the woman as Mahija Raj, heir to Raj Enterprises, one of the wealthiest women in Chennai. *Tick Tock*: the clock resumed, Mahija plummeted to her imminent death, and the diamond-encrusted platter of caviar tumbled from the server's hands, cushioned by the lushly carpeted spiraling staircase.

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]

(Working Title: The Veil) **Act 1, Scene 1: LAYLA**

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LAYLA (cont.): There.

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[END]

RICE, EMMA**Emma Rice**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Gifted

Advanced, proficient, or basic. Students are taught to strive for the highest grade possible, or the best adjective to describe their efforts. In my case, words like “gifted”, brilliant, and talented were used to describe me in elementary school. I was labelled, and ever since, my mind has not let me forget it. Overconfident, cocky, and arrogant are what describe me now. Ever since we were in primary school, we have been graded and tested. Either handing out a 5 to those who can sing the ABC’s and a 1 to those who were too shy to speak. Strong memories of stacking blocks and playing games have placed me in the gifted category for as long as I can remember. This was supposed to be where I belonged, so why did I feel so different? Joy seeped into my veins when I received the letters saying I was advanced in my 4th grade math class. Now dread has replaced it, when I look down and see *Proficient* in bold letters for my 10th grade math class.

Junior year has a different aura than normal, is it the amount of AP classes I signed up for? All the dual credit college courses? Maybe the 4 AP tests I’ll take in the span of 4 days? The new high school gifted teacher emailed me, she wants to discuss how we’re doing emotionally and academically. How do I explain to her that I don’t even want to talk about how I’m doing, because I feel as if I do not deserve to be called gifted anymore? How do I explain that how I’m doing academically directly impacts how I am doing emotionally? My grades start to drop, and so does my happiness. I cried today. Right in front of my entire Warrior Time. How about that for a discussion.

Duke Tip wants me? They want *me* to take the ACT as a 7th grader? This is it. This is my time to shine. Obviously I expected to get a pretty high score. The day of the test I walk in with clammy hands and cottonmouth. Deep down, I can feel the excitement, hoping that I score really good. Maybe I’ll get free college! The scores come back, I score a brilliant score of 19. Not even 20. My shoulders drop. I’m not even smarter than a sophomore. My mom searches the internet one day, she sees a post about middle schoolers from Smithville scoring high on the ACT, scanning the faces she doesn’t see mine. I look throughout the photo and see my fellow classmates that took the ACT and their smiling faces. I feel dumb. I will never be as good as them, why am I in the same class as them? Those around me give me reassurance, I can take it 11 more times before I graduate, but I don’t even want to take it one more time.

QUEST class never helped me. It wasn’t a place where I felt like I belonged, and it only gave me another reason to doubt myself, but I am so glad if it helped out one student so they don’t feel like I do. But sometimes it makes me wonder, has my body outgrown my intelligence, or did my intelligence shrink because I was always told it was bigger than anyone else’s? Gifted was something I was proud to call myself, but now I can’t even stand to say it. However, I am not the only one with this problem. Gifted kid burnout is a real thing, and too many gifted kids suffer from it.

It is to no surprise when I say that gifted programs in our public education are not perfect, much like the rest of our systems. There are frequently different types of neurodiverse students in gifted classes, and these programs also lack the resources to cater to the needs of these students one-on-one. No child is the same, so we shouldn’t act like every student classified as gifted is the same. Burnout in gifted kids is caused by the reliance of grades to bring us happiness. We need to learn that our self-worth is much deeper than that. Grades are such a surface level part to our lives, there is so much more to us. Our ability to see things others can’t, our ability to find solutions to problems that others can’t even comprehend.

No, this is not a medical term, but it refers to the emotional pain and anxiety young adults feel right now, that was triggered from our past academic accomplishments. Or in my case, my low performance levels. Circling around on the internet, this term has been adopted by many teens around the world. Even adolescents who weren’t in a gifted program are familiar with this term. The feeling of burnout is one everyone is familiar with, everyone knows what it feels like to not live up to certain expectations. In gifted programs, children learn from a young age that the expectation of them is greater than the rest of the population. Our teachers may not have given these to us, but we have developed them through our life. While some of these expectations can be beneficial in ways that will push us to

work harder, some of these expectations, if not met, can be detrimental. Comparison also follows along with these expectations. We have learned to picture someone who we want to be, and compare ourselves to them daily. Constantly, I have thoughts about what I picture my life in the future, what will my family look like? How much money will I have? What job do I have?

As someone who has too many expectations about who I need to be, who I should love, and where I should go to college, I can confirm that expectations are hard to live up to. As we all know, nobody is perfect, so why do parents, or even ourselves, set our standards so high? However, these expectations can be changed, we can change our mindsets about school, life, or love. Maybe that is why we are called gifted? Maybe our ability to recognize these harms and learn and grow from these experiences is what makes us gifted? In conclusion, this paper was due over a week ago and I can only slightly blame this on the Quest program. I have set expectations for myself to be able to balance multiple AP classes, a job, and even a high rank in the School's Student Council. Thank you for instilling procrastination into my mind, ruining my love for school, and destroying what little study habits I had. All in all, I said a lot of negative things in this paper, but I want to leave on a positive note. I want everyone to be kind to everyone, including themselves.

ROSENBERG, SADIE**Sadie Rosenberg**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Pranks and Pranksters

“Mom!” A shrill shriek had erupted from a bathroom in a suburban house in Missouri. “He pranked me ~~again~~. My sink has gross stuff in it!” The shrieks started to turn to whines.

My body was shaking, all of the blood in my body had rushed to my head and it was going to erupt. My foot started to stomp on the ground like a toddler who doesn’t get their way. Every year on April fools day my brother always pranked me. One year it was shaving cream on my pancakes, another, shaving cream filling my sink making it impossible to use. This year was going to be mine. This time the younger was going to be on top, I was going to prevail.

I was out for revenge. Revenge, “getting even” with someone, is found all over the media and content humans have been consuming. Movies such as *Carrie* and *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* both use revenge to show emotion and make the watcher root for the character. Revenge is portrayed in the media as something so natural and so common that it seems like it is a human emotion that is a part of the brain. In reality, it is. Psychologist Michael McCullough, Ph.D., the director of the Evolution and Human Behavior Laboratory at the University of Miami, has said that “the desire to seek revenge is as natural to human beings as grief, happiness, fear, and hunger. The instinct for it has been crafted by natural selection because of the critical problems it solved as our species was evolving.” (Thornton 114) I wanted to make my brother mad because my brain was telling me that it was the way to make me feel better. I would need to create the perfect prank so that I could become victorious, and be stronger than my brother. I was tired of him pushing me around.

“Water from the toilet is gross to put in a cup to drink,” my friend said with a look of disgust on her face after I had merely suggested something I could do for April fools day.

“I am just trying to come up with some ideas here. You are not giving me any.” I wanted to find the perfect prank that would finally make my brother stop pranking me because he would be too shocked by how vengeful I was. After days of work, the perfect idea was formed. To put toothpaste on the toilet seat. The toothpaste was white so it was hard to see, and it would be the worst thing in the world it got sat on. It would make a person sticky, and very inconvenienced. It was the best idea I came up with, and it would make my brother mad.

On the eve of April fools day, I put my plan into action. I looked around the house for the toothpaste with the most white in it. I then squirted the toothpaste onto the seat just in a few areas so it would be splotchy when it was sat in. Finally, my work was done, and I could rest. However, that may have been the last time I got good sleep for a while.

While I went to bed, my brother was up working on his major prank. He went into my room and took the clothes from my dresser, the toys from my shelves, and the blankets from my bed and threw them to the floor. For the sprinkle on top, he threw toilet paper around the room like it was a house to be teeped on Halloween night. The room was impossible to navigate, it had turned into a jungle on the Amazon. I was livid. My head was heating up as it did in years past. The volcano was going to erupt. I wanted to beat my brother to a pulp. I wanted him to feel the rage and pain he brought me. He needed to feel as bad as I did. My drive for vengeance became even stronger. A study that was published in *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, found evidence that “when we harm someone else, we tend to downplay it and distance ourselves from the seriousness of our transgression. On the other hand, when we are harmed in the very same way, we see ourselves as victims of a grave injustice.” (Thornton 116) I was planning to hurt my brother the same way that he hurt me. My revenge was just an instinct that I couldn’t comprehend. All I knew is that I was a victim, and I wasn’t going to be for much longer. In 2004 a study was published in the *Journal Science* and was one of the first to show “that the drive to seek out vengeance resides in a specific part of the human brain.” (Thornton 114) It was only natural that I didn’t want to be a victim and the path to that was through revenge. I knew that revenge was the quickest way to please myself.

The only way I knew how to make him hurt was to try and prank him back. However I had just woken up, so the

bathroom was first on my list. It was an early morning, and my head was still adjusting to the lights, and my brain was trying to get the mouse to run on the wheel to make it work. I was running a little bit late because of the jungle I had to get out of to make it to the bathroom. I was rushing a little too fast and didn't think when I sat on the toilet. I sat and I squished into the grainy mess of toothpaste that was sitting on top of my now extra green toilet seat. I jumped up immediately to try and fix the mess I had made. My perfect plan was just flushed down the toilet. I was enraged. There was not a nerve in my body that wanted to get back at him, not a nerve that wasn't turning red in anger.

This meant action had to be taken. I started to write down every prank that had ever come into my mind at any point in time. Some of the ideas were crazy, and some were just plain stupid. I was going to put a whoopie cushion under his seat, write him notes from a kidnapper, and take the brick for his phone charger. These were too small for me. I needed to do more. I needed something like putting a bucket full of water on the bathroom door so when the door was opened, he would become very wet.

As it has been noted before, revenge is in all sorts of media, and people are surrounded by it. However, the revenge portrayed in the media humans consume can be seen as the perfect revenge that humans strive for. Revenge that makes a character get their happy ending, that makes the villain suffer forever. Peg Streep, a science writer and author of "Mean Mothers: Overcoming the Legacy of Hurt," says that "Revenge turns out to be this great cleansing moment that permits someone who's been abused to triumph." (Cox 1) For example in *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*, Anakin Skywalker kills Count Dooku from a place of revenge. Dooku had nearly killed his master and the woman he loved and was the leader of the opposing side in a war that had been going on for years. Killing Dooku was a way for him to get that perfect revenge at the moment. The hero killed the villain. While I wasn't looking to kill my brother, I was looking to kill his confidence so he could never prank me again. I was going to prank him even harder than before so I could be triumphant forever.

It was time to call for backup.

"We should just do a series of smaller pranks." My friend grew tired of my shrill voice going on and on about pranks that might have cost thousands of dollars in both preparations, and damages.

I was fed up and my face was turning red again. I was tired of hearing the same ideas over and over from her. I wanted something big, and she was not helping me at all but I had no other ideas so this was better than nothing. I put all of my energy into getting him back. My days revolved around going home and starting a new prank. Changing my handwriting so I could try and write scary notes. Lifting his heavy and huge mattress to put whoopie cushions and get them to not deflate. I was laser-focused on trying to get these pranks done, I started to slip behind in my homework, as much as a third-grader can.

My life was being turned upside down. My revenge plan was keeping me "focused on the mistreatment and doesn't allow [for me] to move forward and redirect [my] life." (Cox 2) My life was being changed, not for the better. I was starting to get desperate. The need for revenge was staying inside of me and rotting me from the inside out. Being focused on revenge was changing who I was as a person. People were finding me to be annoying for only talking about the pranks I wanted to try. My mind was exploding with the different pranks I said I was going to do to my brother. I was not able to move on from April 1st even though it had long passed.

"You are acting weird," my mom said as she picked me up from school. "I haven't seen you smile wide in a while. What's up with that?"

I was ruined, but something clicked in my mind. I was stuck in this endless cycle of revenge over some stupid prank anyone could have done. I was a hamster on a wheel going about revenge, being in my mind for days. As people, "we can't control when toxic emotions flood our minds, but we can control what we do in response to them. Seeking revenge or payback may seem like a good idea at the time, but in the long run, it'll likely only do us a disservice." (Cox 3) I was served with losing time and my mind. I saw revenge as my only way to make myself stronger and better than my brother while in reality, it was making me worse than him. Revenge was making me into a different person.

Dylan Marron, a performer and writer who works with LGBTQ issues recently said in a Ted talk that "The better option is to turn inward, finding the root of that feeling and either using it as a learning experience or warning flag as we move forward to something better." (Cox 3) My mom always said to me that my siblings do things just to see a reaction and rile me up. Taking that lesson hand in hand with what Marron says it is clear that revenge is not the path to take but rather the issue should be learned from and then dropped. Forgiveness is not necessarily needed, just the ability to move on and forget about it. If I would have taken this to heart earlier than I would have saved my own time and my sanity. No one likes a third grader who wants to just get revenge. Dropping the pranks was the best revenge I could have ever gotten against my brother.

Shortly after the incident of the pranks with my brother, he started to make jokes and jab at me, calling me stupid. However, instead of getting red and angry, I just left him alone. It made me feel even better about myself, and I didn't give him the satisfaction of being riled up. This was in turn, the perfect revenge.

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ROSENBLOOM, NOAH**Noah Rosenbloom**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Sarah Burgess

Category: Poetry

Eyes**Eyes:**

The windows to your soul.
The first judge of character.
They shape our perspective.
What we see becomes our reality.
We judge what others see.
Without seeing for ourselves.
In a world of individual perspectives.
Nobody shares the same pair.
We hate being watched at every step.
Yet we watch others with no regret.
Monitor their actions, judge their behavior.
What hypocrites we humans are.
Looks can be deceiving after all.
So take care of your perspective.
Always look two steps behind and one step forward.
Look through to who I am.
Beyond my eyes, into my soul.
See me for my essence.
My state of being, underneath the skin and bones of my body.
Deeper than my actions, down to my very atoms.
No microscope can look deep enough to find it.
Only we can guide each other beyond our own limitations.
To the truth of what we are.

ROSENBLUM, NOAH**Noah Rosenbloom**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Sarah Burgess

Category: Poetry

Pottery of the Soul**Pottery of the Soul:**

I've heard that stories used to be weaved through the words of men.
Huddled around fires in the days of old.
Knowing history makes reality even more simple then.
Being a storyteller has only gotten more complex.
Where word of mouth and honeyed voices soothed the soul, there is the smashing of souls against the ground like
flawed pottery. Smashing over and over until you find the "right one."
Is there ever truly a perfect work though?
True stories are those weaved through endless midnights of frustration.
Staring at a blank screen waiting for inspiration.
Nothing comes from perfection.
Nothing but broken dreams and shattered souls bound by twine.
My soul among them.
My imagination is limited by my rationality.
My consciousness is a prisoner of my insecurities.
To be a storyteller, I must free my mind.
Let it roam free within my thoughts as animals grazing the land.
The purpose of it all?
To share the words of the past and future to those in the present.
To open the minds of others to worlds never seen and worlds yet to come.
To enlighten and entertain the thoughts of young and old alike.
One day, my stories will perhaps become the stories for the next generation.
That is my dream, my aspiration that I will fight for.
That I will push against my doubts and vices in order to achieve.
To be a storyteller.
To fire in the kiln of knowledge my soul, so that it may be like the strongest ceramic.
So that it may last for years to come.
To forge my soul into something greater.

ROSENBLUM, NOAH**Noah Rosenbloom**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Sarah Burgess

Category: Poetry

Journeyman**Journeyman:**

I am a traveller on this open road.

Unsure of destination and my journey.

I am bathed in the glow of the scorching sun.

Under the gloomy cover of the pillows in the sky.

Or the tears of giants and gods alike.

I've been on this path for as long as I've lived.

Crossing paths with others like me.

Sometimes, the path ahead is clear.

Other times, I must walk in hand with other travellers to reach the next point.

I've seen far away lands and ventured in the footsteps of the legends before me.

Their markings are still imprinted onto the very trails themselves.

All the while, my predecessors watch from the heavens, gazing at my struggles and triumphs with amusement and awe.

My heart yearns to feel, my mind wondering where the end of the path lies.

The destination to this path of suffering and indecision fueled by misplaced passion and vices.

The long nights of nothing but staring at the stars, trying to find patterns amongst them.

Most suffer more than I do though.

Some hail from nothing, having nowhere to call home.

Some are caught in the crossfire of wars and violence that never seem to come to a rest.

They don't have the same paths that I have.

So I scream to the heavens, calling out this injustice.

Only to get no response from the gods.

So every night, I save my breath.

For the day when high atop a mountain, the ears of the gods will be filled with the breath of my lungs, the tone of my screams.

The day when the injustices will stop.

Until then, all I can do is stop alongside my own paths.

Taking time to see where I've been, and to where I will go next.

To stop and gaze at the night sky, to dance amongst the stars.

To fly to the moon.

Life is a game, and sometimes, the best way to play is to pause.

ROSENBLOOM, NOAH**Noah Rosenbloom**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Sarah Burgess

Category: Poetry

The Progress of Loss**Act I: Denial**

The picture in the living room.
It sickens me to look at it.
How long has it really been since that moment?
Days? Weeks? Months? Years?
Did it even truly happen?
Do I truly regret that moment, or is it misplaced guilt?
Meant for some other unlucky soul.
Who is to say which?
Maybe the true answer is neither.
My eyes gloss over the picture once more.
Before tossing it in the trash.
Maybe some things are better off forgotten.

Act II: Dreams

I wake from my slumber in terror.
Another nightmare.
I saw your face.
Taunting me from the shadows.
Laughing at my sadness.
The only thing I can comprehend.
The only thing is your face.
Was it always that beautiful?
Is this just a dream within a nightmare?
I close my eyes, trying to get another glimpse.
Only to be greeted with silence.
My thoughts echo like a voice in a cavern.
Are you mad at me, my love?
Is this silence a punishment?
My mind soon forgets.
I drift off into the void of slumber once more.

Act III: Shrine

The shrine on the mountain.
It was always your favorite place to visit.
A home for your spirit.
When you appeared, everything always blossomed.
Faces smiled with joy and sunshine gleamed on the ground.
Now, the land is barren.
Smiles are rarely seen, sunlight rarely felt.
Once a place of life, now an abode of death.
Melancholy overtakes me.
I leave the shrine once more.
Turning back for another look.
Turning my head to the past.

To the memories we made.
Before leaving them all in the dust.
Just like I left you.

Act IV: Heart Void

Clawing and tearing.
My soul ripped asunder.
Emotions fade away.
Nothing left for me to feel.
Where you once resided, there is only void.
Dark as ink, expanding evermore.
I hate you for this.
For leaving me to suffer.
Tears swell my eyes.
My fist crashes into the nightstand.
Pain rushes to my hand.
More tears, more pain.
The memories flow in.
The void grows yet again.

Act V: Soul

How's the afterlife?
If there is one though.
Can you hear my words?
Hear my thoughts?
Gaze down with disgust at my grief and my actions?
I can't bear the thought of such a fate.
Living as something in between nothing.
A mind without a body.
Unable to do anything other than think.
Subject to either numbing pleasure or endless torture.
The end is something most of us never think of.
Perhaps it should not be that way.
Perhaps.

ROSENBLUM, NOAH**Noah Rosenbloom**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Sarah Burgess

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Drawing a Blank

I stare at the Google Doc, my hands frozen on the keyboard as the lightbulb in my head flickers. At first inspiration comes, and I type away at the keyboard, letting my ideas flow onto the screen. Then, I stop, letting my doubts flow in. I massacre my work, erasing any trace of its existence from my mind as the cycle repeats. Repeating over and over like a hamster running on a wheel, knowing that time is running out and it's efforts are futile. Even when something gets done, there's always the urge to want more. It's the greatest irony that in my quest to write better, I sabotage my efforts to write in the first place. My greatest ally, and my worst nemesis, is undoubtedly myself. It reminds me of what Descartes once said: "The only thing I know, is that I know nothing." That's the mindset I chain myself up in every time I sit down and place my hands on the keys. Worrying that I'll just end up with nothing, worrying that I won't write anything at all.

I've still got time, I think to myself. *There's always more time. Always another day. Just have some fun and start working on it tomorrow.* I sugarcoat my insecurities with these dangerous, comforting thoughts, and my hands lift away, drifting into a wonderful world of sights and sounds, while the words on the page remain neglected, waiting to be complete once more. I pity the words on the page, never knowing when they'll be swept up and discarded, only to be replaced by others who will be discarded just as quickly as they were. They must wonder if they have a purpose at all given how easily I cast them aside. That would make us have something in common, though. Which makes destroying them even more problematic.

Sometimes, the stress is too much. Sometimes I wish I'd never bothered writing anything. *Does it really matter? It's not your best, so why even bother trying? Why not just go back to procrastinating?* All these and more crowd my thoughts, blocking out the flow of inspiration like a boulder obstructing a stream. It corrupts my mindset until all that is left is self-pity and loathing. It feeds into the cycle; it is what keeps the cycle repeating. An endless loop of regret, denial, and anger, fueled by misplaced passion and desperate ideals.

It's not a hopeless situation however. As much as writing is a cycle of pain and wanting to obliterate my keyboard into a million tiny pieces whenever I lose my train of thought, there's always a light at the end of the tunnel. There's always the voice in my head, working against my perfectionist tendencies. Letting me know that I am doing well, telling me to write from my heart unopposed to my melancholy and the cycle of writer's block. Listening to that voice gives me hope, even if for a second, that I can break through the cycle, and accomplish something. *It's the effort that counts*, I tell myself. After all, with enough effort, one can do what one sets their mind to, right?

ROSENBLOOM, NOAH**Noah Rosenbloom**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Sarah Burgess

Category: Critical Essay

The Definition of an Antihero**The Definition of an Antihero:**

Antiheroes are often defined as protagonists who lack qualities associated with heroic protagonists, acting as the darker and morally ambiguous foil to the hero archetype. Antiheroes at their foundation are characters who lack qualities often associated with heroism.

Antiheroes are often depicted in most media as being morally darker compared to the story's hero. While antiheroes may achieve heroic deeds, their methods are often seen as being much more accepting of brutality than with the methods of heroic characters. For example, antiheroes are often shown as being less adverse in the use of violence against enemies, whereas heroes, who often possess a greater magnitude of compassion, will be more hesitant to resort to violence if the situation does not necessitate it, and even if it does, they will often display violence that on a lesser scale than the antihero. Additionally, antiheroes often lack the sheer idealism and moral compass present in heroic characters, with their actions and behaviors coming from a morally grey position. Antiheroes may have the good intentions of the heroes, but they take less than moral actions to achieve said goals, or they sometimes are initially only looking out for their own self-interest: in both cases, their growth often comes from understanding the negative sides of their actions and learning to embrace their positive qualities in order to become more heroic.

Design wise, antiheroes will adopt a darker color scheme in comparison to the ones associated with heroes, such as with Deadpool's red and black costume. Star Wars lends us an example of the good intentioned or even selfish nature of the antihero in Han Solo: While Solo is initially presented as a shady smuggler who's concerned for his survival, it is his assistance to Luke and his crew that helps the Rebels achieve their goal of dismantling the Empire's control over the galaxy, even though he himself makes it clear that he is only helping them because he's being paid to. Antiheroes are in many ways a reflection of ourselves, as they represent a flawed yet still good intentioned figure.

On a deeper level though, the distinction between antiheroes and heroes are not just simply in the presence of flaws. In fact, the presence of flaws in heroic characters reinforces the notion that we all have the capability to be a hero. Antiheroes simply put more emphasis on the flaws of their character compared to regular heroes, but the point of an anti-hero is that they eventually grow into a heroic character, or rather they simply take on more heroic traits than before as they learn to dispel their cynicism and embrace the idealism in being a hero. They also exist on a spectrum, with many differing "types" of antiheroes depending on what part of their character is unheroic. There are certainly many examples of anti-heroes in popular media: Lord of the Rings' Frodo Baggins is a classic antihero, as not only does he lack fighting ability compared to the rest of the cast, but he also struggles with self-doubt throughout the journey (Bilbo Baggins from *The Hobbit* is also an example of this type of antihero,) and ultimately, his quest fails in spite of his efforts. Most heroes actually do have elements of the classical antihero in them, representative of flaws and self-doubts that clash with their roles as heroes, which makes them all the more relatable as people who, despite their flaws, still look out for what's right. Other variants of the antihero exist on a spectrum as well, from pragmatic heroes, heroes who set aside morality in order to do what is necessary, to Byronic heroes, named after the writer who popularized them, Lord Byron, and who are presented as individuals with strong passions and ideals that struggle with the cynicism of their world.

Antiheroes, even if they have become more intertwined with heroic characters in the media over time, the essence of an antihero is still there. They are still heroes who, although their methods and morals are not as clean, or their outlooks as idealistic, still stick up for what is right like any other hero would.

ROY, AARJO**Aarjo Roy**

Age: 15, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Diane Morris

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Ruins, Legacies, and Love

Legacies are actions that have been told differently throughout history. My family's Legacy consists of verbal stories that have been passed down generations; old photos and heirlooms gleam in the modern sun after decades of being put away in a locked box. As a few of my relatives passed away, these heirlooms are then given to my intermediate family. My sister gains jewelry from the early 1900s; I gain a set of rings from the time period as well. My mother gains her mother's entire jewelry collection, and my father gains his parent's wedding jewelry. Why do we have so many of these shiny objects? How could our family afford them? To answer that question, we have to go back to the late 1500s, before India was colonized by Great Britain.

My family names were originally Banerjee and Raichandra. We were descendants of widely respected people: Peshwas of Marathi Royalty, Bengali Sultanates, and local Royalty. That is the side of my family that we like to uplift. During the 1500s, my family controlled large plots of land on which they could sell, rent, or create cities. On one of these plots of land, my ancestors established the city of Bolpur. In that city was a large lot, large enough to build a mansion. Specifically, one to house 4 adults and 16 children, along with servants' quarters. The mansion was built, and it was vast; it lay 2.5 stories tall and on a 9-acre plot of land. Intricate carvings on the walls were added, seeming as if that place were fit for royalty, but the thing my family was most proud of was the courtyard; a large floral courtyard bloomed with hibiscus and sacred trees, adding splashes of color underneath the hot Bengal sun. On all 4 sides were 2 large pillars that held up the ceiling and lead into the wings of the house, with patios on every side. There, my predecessors would throw lavish parties for councilmen, celebrate Holi, and create memories for years. Or so, that is what they thought.

The British invaded the Indian subcontinent in the early 1600s, and only the most elite families were left with their belongings. My family was fortunate enough to be one of those families. They were granted permission to stay in Bolpur and remained there for around 2 centuries while the British still held control over the subcontinent.

My eighth great grandfather, who we will call Rahul Raichandra, was the second eldest of 7 children. He grew up a privileged life, surrounded by everything he could ever want, never thinking of what was outside his little city. My grandmother says that when Rahul was a young man, he met a girl, who we will call Laila. Laila was a daughter of a local farmer, and Rahul set his sights on her, turning away arranged marriages his parents had forced on him. Laila felt the same, but everyone around them shamed them for it. Their castes, or social classes, were entirely separate, and marrying into another caste would be considered a kind of treason within the family. Still, Rahul vowed that he would return with a piece of jewelry of his mother's, and if he did, he would have gotten her blessing to marry Laila. One night, Rahul brought Laila into the courtyard, where the hibiscus and lotus flowers were in full bloom, and gave her a priceless jhoomar, a kind of headpiece, encrusted with pearls, rubies, emeralds, and gold. They say it was the most important heirloom in our family, for it had been with us for at least 2 centuries. Laila and Rahul were married, and they lived together for about 4 years, with Laila bearing 3 children in that time period. Their lives were happy, but that bliss couldn't last.

About 4 years after they had gotten married, the Indian revolution had begun and spread to Bolpur. It was complete madness as people ransacked the house, destroying and taking everything in sight. Walls were burned and paintings were destroyed. Artifacts were stolen and years worth of family history were forgotten. In the midst of the chaos, the jhoomar was lost, and the mansion was abandoned. Our family's legacy had been nearly destroyed.

About 2 centuries later, give or take a couple of decades, my family traveled to India for my grandfather's funeral. While we were there, my mother suggested we visit that mansion. My family all agreed that we should go. I visited there this past March. We knew the house still stood, but it was in ruins. No one had bothered to restore it, and the damage had been done. There was no turning back. The flowers were all gone, tree roots crawled up the walls, and nature had reclaimed that lot like its own.

While I was there, I got to see the courtyard where Rahul supposedly gave Laila the Jhoomar. I tried to imagine the

lush gardens and fountains that were dotted around, and it brought a strange sense of peace to my mind. I felt as if I could feel their spirits still roaming those gardens, hopelessly watching as their forever home was destroyed, piece by piece. I snapped this photo while my grandmother told us the story once more, telling us that one day, someone powerful enough would restore that house. I looked at the pillars with a sense of fear. A tremble passed through me as I touched a stone that hadn't been restored for over a hundred years.

Perhaps my family's legacy isn't complete this house, but includes the jhoomar as well, along with other heirlooms given to us by our ancestors and stories that have been passed down generation after generation. But I do know this much; I know that Rahul and Laila's love for each other created a couple more memories that still beat in our hearts decades after they ceased to exist. The courtyard still stands, with trees and vines on every stone, and 7 pillars still erect. It was in disastrous shape, but I did notice one thing as I snapped that photo. There was a hibiscus tree, which wasn't in season, in the left corner, hanging down from the roof of the courtyard. The truth is, I don't know if that tree is a descendant of the hibiscus flowers left during the revolution, but I like to think; I like to believe, that somehow, if those hibiscus seeds survived and planted themselves there while waiting to grow anew, restarting its life cycle over and over so its "bloodline" would persist, maybe there is hope for the courtyard to be restored, and in its full glory again after years of waiting in the wings.

RUSHING, ABBYGAIL**Abbygail Rushing**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

“We are Liars”

“We are liars”

*“You know that I can't help myself
Help myself, help myself
I try but I don't do too well”*

Walking down the hall I have my earbuds in, the music playing at a volume that is a tell that I will have hearing damage in the next few years. Shoulders bump me, knocking me around like a rag doll. I can't remember caring. I can't remember feeling anything. I just wanted to get out of here. I make it to the bathroom and lock the door behind me, taking a few deep breaths. I open my bag and draw out my work uniform, uncomfortable khakis and a blue polo made for a boy so it doesn't fit me correctly.

*“I'm just a little messed up, ooh, ooh
I'm just a little messed up, like you
Know I never felt this
Love how you built this
I'm gonna tear it down”*

I walk out of the school with my bag heavy on my shoulders, I race to my car and throw the bag in the back. Pulling out of the school parking lot I almost get hit by other idiot drivers who don't know the difference between left and right. I make it out however and start my drive to work. I remember sitting in the car, the music still blaring, looking up at the glowing store logo and thinking. *Why am I still here? I could Turn the car back on and drive away. Keep going till I run off the end of the world.* I sit there for probably 10 minutes before popping open the door and stepping out, the competent part of my brain winning out, the part saying *gas is expensive if you're going to run off the end of the world you're gonna need gas.* Before I go in, I check my phone. One new notification.

“Hey, I want to see you. Do you work today?”
I text back a simple yes and that I get off at 8
“Have a good day at work.<3” is the message I receive
Throwing my phone in the glove box I leave the car, slamming the door behind me.
I clock in and start mumbling to myself the words to a song stuck in my head.

*“But when I come home
Lights out
Will you sleep safe and sound?
I'm obsessed with you
But you never work me out”*

The time passed slowly, an hour for every minute. You could feel the years draining off your life.
“How are you doing today sir?” I ask in my best customer service voice.
“I'm doing mighty fine dear! How are you today?”
“I'm doing great sir, just a little tired.” I lied. We are all liars, aren't we?
More customers more “I'm great, just a bit tired.”
More lies.

My shift ends with a customer telling me I did my job wrong and that they want someone else to take over. I use my voice again.

"I'm sorry sir, I will get someone else to assist you." I trade out with someone else and punch out. A manager stops me. She asks me to take the job more seriously. I told her I will and that I was sorry. I wasn't sorry.

Another lie.

Walking out to my car My vision blurs with tears, I can't hold it anymore.

I lock myself in the car and curl up around the steering wheel.

I hear a knock on my window and my fight or flight kicks in. I jump away from the fear of the unknown. After the initial heart attack I am able to relax enough to recognize the face in the window as one I know. My boyfriend. I unlocked my door and let him open it. I feel myself being pulled into a hug and hear comforting words in my ear.

Words asking me what's wrong? I'm here for you. I cry a little more. I have no more energy to lie, so this time I tell the truth.

"I'm not ok."

"That's ok, Lets just talk it out now ok?"

So that's what we did. Sitting on the pavement outside my car, blocked from the world by his, we talk through the rampant thoughts in my head. Unraveling the knot and clearing the noise. He says comforting words to me like how an adult would talk down a child. Unlike the adult talking to the child, I can tell he is seeing me as an equal and he isn't lying to me.

Maybe we don't all have to be liars.

He stays with me until the negative thoughts subside, then he hops back up and grabs the food he had brought for us to eat, from his car. It's cold now but still good. SITting there I am able to forget about the day and be optimistic about tomorrow. Optimistic. A word I haven't used in a while. I like that word. Hopefully It can stay awhile. I think it will. At least while I have him here to help me untangle myself.

I don't want to be a liar anymore.

"Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh (just a little messed up)

Messed up

I'm just a little messed up, like you"

RUSHING, ABBYGAIL**Abbygail Rushing**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Helping hand

Freshman year, the leaves were just starting to change their beautiful colors and the weather was just now getting cold enough to have to bring a jacket to school in the mornings. I stood in the pac lobby, a decision racking my brain. Should I go in and risk defeat or should I stay out here and go home to hide away from the world once again? The pac doors never looked so daunting before, shaking, I placed my fingers around the cold metal handle, my heart pumping so fast I couldn't breathe. I laced my fingers around the handle, but as if I was electrocuted I ripped them away. Fear raced through my body and before I knew it I was running, running away from the audition away from the doors where judgment was inside. I was doomed to fail so why even try, right? I didn't even have a chance. After all I wasn't good at anything.

I jumped onto the bus right as the doors closed and found a last empty seat before sitting down and trying to get my breathing to steady out. I took a deep breath and pulled my backpack up onto my lap, hugging it to my body for stability. Reaching inside I pulled out the lyric page. The sweet little love song that I had practiced for hours was glaring back at me. My failure in bold letters. Tears rolled down my cheeks staining the paper and making some of the ink run, I silently cried on the bus. I pulled my black hood up over my head and pressed my face into my backpack. Trying to shut out the loud world for a little while. I jammed my earbuds into my ears and pressed play on the music blasting it full volume, and if the bus had not been full of screaming middle schoolers and aggressive highschoolers the person across the aisle from me could have probably heard it. I didn't care though I just wanted my bus stop to come already so I could go into my room and pretend this never happened. To pretend I wasn't always scared and that I was ok.

I wasn't.

2 years later

The bright lights of the stage shines down on me as I present my monologue to the dark empty abyss.

“That was great but can you bring it down on stage more? And that final light is going to be a visual cue from you, so make sure your hand gestures are clear so the box can see it.” Says the voice of God (Or more accurately Mr. Pittenger with what the department has dubbed God mic.)

“Yeah I can do that.” I called back up.

I went through my lines again bringing it more down stage and made my hand gesture clear and crisp so that up in the box they could see the cue to cause the full black out.

“Yeah that works, I like that. Alright let's take five everyone and then we'll talk.”

The house lights come back up and the fellow cast members come out from the wings of the stage. Everyone buzzes about the close nearing show and the lines they still need to memorize. I took a deep breath before dropping down onto the side of the stage. My legs dangle off the end and my hands hold on to the sides. I looked around at all the people milling around and talking to one another, some are practicing lines and others are just goofing around and having fun. I smile slightly and think about how far I've come. I went from not even being able to enter the pac to now not only in the pac but as one of the main cast up on stage with my fellow extremely talented cast mates. I've worked for this moment for years and it's surreal that it's happening. I can't imagine doing anything else with my time and yet it almost never happened at all.

The day after freshman auditions

“Hey, do you do theater?”

I was laying on my bed after school texting this boy. He was a few years older than me and we had met through a mutual friend and started talking at lunch earlier today.

“I did in middle school.”

“Did you audition for Snoopy?”

“Umm no I didn't. I got too scared and just went home instead.” I was honest. I was ashamed that I got scared and ran away. I haven't told anyone yet and it was nice to get it off my chest. “Did you?” I asked.

“Yeah I did. I've been doing theater since I was a kid. Hey, I'm sorry you got scared.”

“It's ok, I just didn't know anyone and the thought of trying to perform in front of everyone else just scared me.”

“Stage fright?”

“No, it's something else because once I know the stuff I can perform it fine but just trying to do it when I don't know anything or anyone scares me.”

“Oh I see, well hey now you know someone, ok? And next time auditions roll around why don't you come with me and we can do it together, ok?”

“Ok, Thank you.”

“Always.”

And that's exactly what happened. He convinced me to do crew for *Snoopy*, to meet everyone and get familiar with the idea of being involved with the theater. Later that week we started dating and up until he graduated he came with me to every audition and supported me through each and every one. And even though he obviously was better than me at it and I was like a chicken with my head cut off, or a dancer with two left feet, he never made fun of me. Now after he left and is attending college he always texts me encouragement so that I don't fall back into my head.

“Hey, you coming?” I'm pulled out of my thoughts by Isaiah, waving me over to a group of people talking by the front row of seats.

“We're talking about cast dinner.”

“Yeah, I'm coming.” I called back.

Taking a breath I let go of the side of the stage and let myself fall to the ground, after all life is a fall, and you either land on your feet or you crash and it's your job if you crash to get back up again and keep going, and that's what I did and that's what I will continue to do. I'm not saying that I don't get scared anymore, because I do. I still get anxious over a lot of small things and there are still nights where I fall back into being scared of literally everything but I'm getting better, and that's all that matters. I don't have to be perfect, I just have to be myself and that's enough.

RYAN, EMMA**Emma Ryan**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Lawrence Virtual High School, Lawrence, KS

Educator: Nancy Jackson

Category: Novel Writing

A Rose and a Raven**Brief summary:**

Undead Kyle (AKA infector Caleb) is reunited with Ash, the woman he believes led him into the trap that killed him. Ash has a job at an institute which researches creatures like Caleb, and when tasked with finding Frost who happens to be a close friend of Caleb's, she uses the opportunity to get closer with her old friend. Caleb is bitter and rude towards Ash when she appears to his friend group. Star, the leader of the group, uses her power to freeze Ash in place while the others leave the area. Ash doesn't give up on mending her relationship with Caleb and meets again with the three in a park. Ash uses a strange book she found at work as a way to get the bitter Caleb alone with her. Caleb, learning slowly to forgive, meets with her the next day. With some hesitation from Caleb, the two travel to the place where Caleb was killed. There, Ash freezes as she did upon first running across Star, and Caleb narrowly saves her life. He concludes that Star was the true reason for his death and offers Ash a chance to move away with him. While Ash declines his offer, Caleb decides to continue contact through letters. When Caleb arrives in his new town, he reflects upon how he should have been following his father's advice to assume the best of people.

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Kyle heard the creak of a door announcing someone's arrival. Ash had suggested that she, Kyle, and Mark explore the oldest house in town. The lights no longer worked so he was only able to see a winged silhouette standing next to a shorter one. As the two entered the room, they stepped into a light from a hole in the wall, allowing Kyle to tell who each silhouette was.

Ash was one of them. Her hair was long, wavy, silver, and tied in a high ponytail. Her hair reached her wings - those of a raven, inky black with luscious feathers. And because Ash was of the quarter of Willow Town lucky enough to possess wings, Kyle suddenly felt small. Desperately he looked over to Mark, the only other person in the house. Mark didn't see Kyle, so Kyle tried to make himself heard. "Ma-" Kyle started before finding a hand had been clapped over his mouth, and that Ash had flown over to him in the blink of an eye.

"Kyle," Ash whispered. "Must you scream? You'll get us caught!" Her tone was colder than Kyle was used to. Ash sighed just loud enough for Kyle to hear. There was a small creak as a mostly intact mirror slid down the wall. Kyle then saw Ash lunge forward, knocking him into the wall before the world disappeared.

Then, Kyle woke up. He moved his foot to take a step, but when his foot should have hit the floor, it phased through it. He jumped in surprise, causing him to realize he was floating. He had a sensation of fading throughout his body. His first instinct was to find someone. *What if I went to Ash?* Kyle thought before turning down the idea. If his

hunch was correct, Ash having wings would be bad news. Then, he looked at Mark. Mark and Ash's horror-struck faces were fixed upon something in the distance where Kyle dared not look. They appeared frozen, and Kyle thought he knew why upon seeing the wave of a hand and then a white glove being placed onto it.

As the sense of fading grew stronger Kyle dived into what seemed to be Mark's head. Kyle was about to back out to look around again when realized he no longer felt as if he was fading. Kyle paced around what appeared to be a blank room with a screen showing what Mark was seeing. Kyle watched the screen while trying to figure out what to do.

When Kyle saw on the screen that Mark had gone home to his and Kyle's dorm and laid down in his extremely dark red bed, Kyle waited. Once Mark had gone to sleep, Kyle noticed an ink splatter in the middle of the screen. Instinctively Kyle walked up to it. Upon what Kyle perceived as walking through the screen into the real world, he fell asleep.

The next morning when Kyle woke up, he checked the mirror in the bathroom which he and Mark had shared as roommates. He seemed, for the most part, to still be himself. The only differences were that his hair was a brighter red and his skin was a ghostly pale grey. *If I'm right, does that mean I died?* He thought, *If I don't figure out what's going on I'll have more trouble down the line.* He made a rose with his power, which was making constructs, to test if it still worked. Satisfied that not all went badly, he made his way to the library to read up on his situation.

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Caleb walked outside and almost immediately covered his eyes. The sun shined just bright enough to be painful to light-averse infectors like Caleb. Infectors like Caleb are undead beings, formed after bleeding out. After a long walk-through reflective snow amplifying the light, Caleb arrived at the school's auditorium, lightheaded.

Throughout the majority of the ceremony, Caleb was falling asleep. *I have nowhere to be, and I'm waking up before the sun has set to 'support' people I knew for two months,* he thought. Only when the name "Ash Raven" was called did Caleb pay attention.

Ash walked to grab her diploma. Her wavy hair spilled beautifully over her wings. Caleb was bitterly thinking, *How come she gets to graduate? I worked just as hard until she...* Caleb's thoughts trailed off as Ash sat down. Caleb knew he wouldn't have liked the ceremony anyway; he'd always hated having everyone's eyes on him.

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"Careful," Ash joked. Caleb looked at her with burning hatred. "Are you sick?" Ash asked, "You seem pale."

"I'm fine," Caleb said with a grumble as he pushed Ash into the snow on the ground. Caleb looked for a moment to Ash, both faces reflecting similar surprise, then he darted away.

Ash still had confusion circling through her thoughts after Caleb pushed her. She thought about what Caleb looked like to see if she knew him. *Red hair, orange eyes, small hands,* as she listed off the things she knew about Caleb's appearance, she could only think of Kyle. Ash thought that that *had* to be wrong. Kyle's death was one, soon to be two, years ago. She even saw it happen. Unless there was some Kyle zombie, or an infector, that was somebody else.

Ash got up and took off into the sky, leaving an imprint in the snow. She tried to fly daily so as to keep her wings strong. As she passed through the city darkened by the night, she saw a familiar person walking through the park. She quickly landed in front of Caleb. His face seemed to scream, *Kyle! My name is Kyle!* Ash decided to ignore the

thought and looked Caleb in the eye.

“What is your name?” Ash asked.

After a small hesitation, Caleb answered, “Caleb. Why do you care, Ash?” He stepped to the side in an attempt to walk away. Ash opened her wings and blocked his path.

“You remind me of someone is all,” Ash said, her voice full of fake joyfulness. “Wait,” she said as she was struck with a realization, “You know my name?”

Caleb looked angry, as if he noticed his mistake, then responded. “I would be quite dumb to forget the name of the person who asked me into a death trap.” His bitter tone was an unwelcome surprise for Ash.

“Wait you’re-” she started before he angrily cut her off.

“I’m an infector,” he growled, “my name at death was Kyle.” Caleb’s voice wavered with pain as he forced out the word ‘Kyle’. Ash’s body froze. She realized she was facing her old friend Kyle, now known as Caleb.

While Ash stayed frozen from shock, Caleb walked away. Ash shook her head to clear her thoughts, then flew home above snowcapped trees. She had a job interview at two o’clock tomorrow and needed rest.

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Ash woke up to the sound of an old alarm clock. She got out of bed and put on a pink dress. To avoid wasting time, she put her silver hair into its usual high ponytail while waiting for her toast to finish cooking.

After Ash ate her meal, she reflected, while looking in the mirror, why she had applied for a job researching infectors. *Was it because I have been intrigued by parasitic creatures since my father got a job researching them back in first grade?* She thought, *Or was it because I’m interested in reincarnation?* Ash rejected both ideas. While she was unable to pinpoint her exact reasoning, she knew it wasn’t just blind interest.

At half past one, Ash put on her shoes then flew to the Infector Research Institute. Her wings were tired from the twenty-minute flight, but she shook them out and folded them with confidence. Walking through the glass doors to the institute’s building, she felt at home. A smile crossed her face as she sat down for the interview.

“What is your name?” The petite, red-haired young woman who Ash assumed to be the interviewer asked as she sat down.

“Ash,” Ash answered, “Ash Raven.”

“My name is Diamond Miller and I’ll be in charge of your interview.”

As the interview went on, Diamond asked questions Ash expected such as, “What jobs have you worked before?” and “Did you go to college?” However, Ash was hit with worry as Diamond asked, “Why did you apply for *this* job?”

Ash decided she would be as honest as she could be. “Ever since I was young,” she said, “I wanted to learn more about how something could be moving and breathing, even after death.” Diamond nodded her head.

“You seem to be a strong candidate; I will notify you of our decision by the end of the week.” The seasoned interviewer held out a hand as she spoke, the handshake dismissing Ash.

The moon had risen by the time Caleb actually went outside; its tiny sliver of light making Caleb seem unwelcome, even in his hometown. *I feel so alone*, he thought. It was nearing two years since he’d last talked with or made a friend. Guilt about Mark made him reluctant to converse with others. However, luck served him well that night, as he ended up walking past two unnaturally pale girls by the unused farmland. At second glance, he saw they had the light grey skin that was a telltale sign of being an infector.

Caleb briefly smiled at them as he started to walk past the fence. The two seemed rather engrossed in conversation while leaning against the fence. When he had almost gotten past the lot, he heard a voice. "Hey you!" The shorter of the two called, "Over here!" her high-pitched voice sounded excited to call someone over.

"What do you need?" Caleb asked, confused as he walked up to them. Caleb was lucky he could see well in everything but pitch black.

"Frost here said you were in obvious pain yesterday," the taller, blonde one said. Caleb tried to ignore his discomfort with being noticed and recognized. "Are you an infector?"

"Well, yes-" Caleb started defensively.

The shorter one, who Caleb assumed to be Frost, cut in, "So are we!" As she bounced, the snowflake hairpin she was wearing fell an inch or so down her bangs.

The taller infector nodded her head, then reached out a gloved hand for Caleb to shake. "Star," she said warmly as Caleb shook her hand.

"Caleb," Caleb responded. "Are you Frost?" he asked as he turned to the little one.

"Bingo!" she said with a happy voice. Her blue pigtails bounced with her in excitement. "Are you willing to help us?"

"Help with what?" Caleb asked, concerned.

Star cut in, "We just need another infector to help keep track of the undead in the area," she was completely void of emotion while speaking, "An adult infector." She said as her red eyes pierced through Caleb.

"How many do you need?" Caleb pushed.

"Two," Frost said hopefully.

"Then why do you need me?" Caleb asked as he gestured to Frost.

"Frost is *not* an adult infector," Star seemed bothered to even have to say the words as she pointed to Frost's stuffed rabbit.

"Sorry," Caleb mumbled. After a moment's thought he made a decision. "I should be able to help you," he said, uncertain if it was a good idea.

"Really!" Frost's green eyes were huge with happiness.

"Really," he confirmed, any prior uncertainty gone.

Chapter Three

A few days later Ash received a call from Diamond. As her sweet voice filled Ash's ears, she couldn't help but smile. "You got the job, be in the building by 9:00 pm."

That evening Diamond greeted Ash with a handshake and quick hello. As Diamond gave Ash a tour of the building, she told Ash interesting facts about infectors. Things such as how they often disappear before they can find a host, how some are in a permanent child-like state. Even how they only remember the most important parts of their lives. However, one fact stood out from the rest. "Infectors are forced to change their name as their name at death is either extremely painful or impossible for them to say." Ash was surprised by how casually Diamond stated the fact.

In order to get more information, Ash asked, "So if an infector doesn't change their name, they will be in extreme pain?"

Diamond clarified, “Yes, or they simply cannot use their name.”

As the two continued walking, Ash replayed what happened when she met Caleb. He had trouble saying “Kyle” which was his name at death. If he had been a different Kyle, he wouldn’t have recognized Ash. Ash sighed knowing she needed to focus. She knew her job would mostly be babysitting the infectors. Getting them food on days they needed it so their bodies wouldn’t shut down, making sure infectors with assigned reading, sleeping, or writing times were doing as they were supposed to, and other similar jobs concerning them.

Ash’s assignments for her first night was to learn who each infector was and which infectors had more specialized schedules. If she had extra time, she was instructed to figure out the layout of the institute’s library for when she needed to get someone a new book.

Caleb went looking for Star and Frost and found them in the same spot as the previous night. “Took you long enough, Caleb,” Star scoffed while Frost smiled at him.

“Hi Caleb!” Frost giggled, “Are you gonna say why you were so late?”

“Yeah,” Caleb said as he brushed some of his messy hair out of his eyes. He then explained about having seen Ash entering Willow Town’s main infector research building.

“Are you going to tell me how you recognized a random person?” Star said coldly, as if she hadn’t been able to recognize over half the town’s infectors at a glance.

“She...” Caleb started before Star interjected.

“Made you an infector?”

“Yes,” Caleb said, confused as to how Star knew.

“Is Ash bad then?” Frost asked, hugging her plushie to her chest in fear.

Star bent down and hugged Frost. “We don’t know for sure yet, Frost,” she comforted.

The three infectors didn’t talk much for the rest of the night as they watched the town’s wildlife. Stray cats occasionally jumped onto the fence, but Star often waved them away before they could do much. A raven gave the three a glance, as if it knew they weren’t breathing. Frost seemed to calm down, but still had a look of sorrow resting on her face as she leaned over the fence to watch a raccoon scurry over the farmland. To cheer her up, Caleb used his power to make Frost a rose. With Frost’s tiny smile in mind, Caleb went home.

Chapter Four

A few days later, Caleb was wandering around Willow Town by the crescent moon’s light when he spied Ash exiting the research building, her silver hair blowing in the wind, dotted with snow. As Caleb started walking away, he noticed someone else leaving the building. Caleb didn’t know the man. Thinking about it, Caleb decided it would be best to hurry home. But despite his efforts to stay hidden, Ash saw him.

“Caleb, right?” Ash asked after running over to Caleb.

“Yeah,” Caleb answered while still trying to avoid Ash. “I have somewhere to be.”

Then a voice Caleb was unable to recognize chipped in, “Do you two know each other?”

Caleb groaned as he sped up. Ash answered, “We’ve met.”

“Alright,” the man said, “is he an infector?”

Caleb started running as he heard the question. Caleb's curiosity about who the man was and what Ash was doing at the research building didn't matter anymore. *I refuse to end up like the infectors Star tells me about* Caleb thought. *I'm not letting anyone lock me up* Caleb, due to what Star had described over the past few days, knew most employees at the research center were more interested in capturing infectors to analyze than befriending them.

A Rose and a Raven

Prologue

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“Is Ash bad then?” Frost asked, hugging her plushie to her chest in fear.

Star bent down and hugged Frost. “We don’t know for sure yet, Frost,” she comforted.

The three infectors didn’t talk much for the rest of the night as they watched the town’s wildlife. Stray cats occasionally jumped onto the fence, but Star often waved them away before they could do much. A raven gave the three a glance, as if it knew they weren’t breathing. Frost seemed to calm down, but still had a look of sorrow resting on her face as she leaned over the fence to watch a raccoon scurry over the farmland. To cheer her up, Caleb used his power to make Frost a rose. With Frost’s tiny smile in mind, Caleb went home.

Chapter Four

A few days later, Caleb was wandering around Willow Town by the crescent moon’s light when he spied Ash exiting the research building, her silver hair blowing in the wind, dotted with snow. As Caleb started walking away, he noticed someone else leaving the building. Caleb didn’t know the man. Thinking about it, Caleb decided it would be best to hurry home. But despite his efforts to stay hidden, Ash saw him.

“Caleb, right?” Ash asked after running over to Caleb.

“Yeah,” Caleb answered while still trying to avoid Ash. “I have somewhere to be.”

Then a voice Caleb was unable to recognize chipped in, “Do you two know each other?”

Caleb groaned as he sped up. Ash answered, “We’ve met.”

“Alright,” the man said, “is he an infector?”

Caleb started running as he heard the question. Caleb’s curiosity about who the man was and what Ash was doing at the research building didn’t matter anymore. *I refuse to end up like the infectors Star tells me about!* Caleb thought. *I’m not letting anyone lock me up.* Caleb, due to what Star had described over the past few days, knew most employees at the research center were more interested in capturing infectors to analyze than befriending them.

Caleb quickly turned a corner, and making sure he wasn’t being followed, found a safe place to listen to Ash’s conversation with the man. The sun wouldn’t be up for hours so he would have time before needing to sleep.

Ash sighed and turned to Darren. His normally neat grey-blue hair was messy from the strong wind. “Do you know who that was?” Darren asked as he gestured to the corner Caleb turned.

“I’m fairly certain that was Caleb, an infector who went to school with me when he was alive.”

Darren looked to be contemplating something before speaking again. “I have a task for you.”

Ash was surprised but replied, “What is it?”

Darren’s cold, green eyes seemed to be looking through Ash as he answered, “I need you to find an infector named Frost. From what we’ve observed, she’s normally in a group of two or three.”

Ash listened intently as Darren described Frost’s long blue hair and green eyes, and that she was short. And after he finished describing Frost, Ash asked him, “Why?”

“We haven’t talked with a child infector before.” Darren’s tone was cold and harsh.

“Child...?” Ash asked shakily, contemplating her options.

As Darren nodded, Ash accepted the task. The only information she had on Frost was appearance. But there was a chance one of the infectors Frost hung out around was Caleb. As Ash went home, she concocted a plan.

Chapter Five

Remembering that she was supposed to be looking for Frost, Ash got out of bed. As she put her hair into a ponytail, she ran through her plan. She left her house as the sun set, and flew up, looking for groups of two or three people. Upon spotting a group, she would fly in for a closer look. After finding three groups, none fitting what she was looking for, and spending at least ten minutes searching for the next group, she finally saw a young looking, blue haired girl standing with a familiar orange haired boy and blonde girl, the bright hair standing out from the blanket of snow.

Ash flew down and landed about a block away, then walked to the three infectors to make it look like she'd only happened to run into them. Nervously, Ash turned the corner. She saw Caleb standing with the young girl and another infector. As Caleb glared at Ash, he used his construct abilities to make a wall on all four of Ash's sides, rendering running impossible. Ash looked up, knowing that flying would be the easiest way to leave.

"Caleb? What's wrong?" A high-pitched voice cut in just as Ash prepared to take off into the night.

"Nothing," Caleb replied.

Ash tried once again to take off, then realized her wings weren't moving. She looked at the group through the transparent construct and saw the tallest of the three holding two gloves, staring at Ash with intensity equal to Caleb. "If you're going to show up uninvited, introduce yourself," the female infector said while taking a step in Ash's direction.

"My name is Ash," Ash started speaking before the shortest, who Ash assumed to be Frost, popped into the conversation.

"Why are *you* here?" Her voice was shaky as she hugged a rabbit plushie to her chest.

Caleb made a small gesture with his hand, making the wall disappear. Caleb then walked towards Ash so he could get away from the conflict. Roses climbed up the fence he had been leaning on. Each step he took in Ash's direction quickened until he sprinted past her. As he went away, the taller one glared at Ash. Once a sickening silence ceased, the infector spoke, "My name is Selene," her voice shook as she said her name. "Kyle and Riley are none of your concern." Avoiding giving away their post death names.

"Selene?" the shortest asked.

After a small hesitation, Selene nodded, and Frost took off running. Ash started walking, then realized she wasn't moving. Selene realized this too. Her hand moved slightly, releasing Ash, and Ash flew out of the alley.

While Ash flew, she realized Caleb's name at death was Kyle, and Selene had trouble saying her name. They were with Caleb, in a group of three, and the shortest perfectly matched Darren's description of Frost.

Caleb was fuming. Ash had not only accepted the task from the man, but she had also walked straight up to Caleb, Frost, and Star. *If she can lead me to a death trap she can harm my friends*, he thought, *But I won't - can't let her*. Eventually Frost ran up to Caleb and hugged him. "Caleb?" Frost said, looking up, "Was that the Ash that works for the Research Institute?"

"Yeah," Caleb said backing up and leaning on the wall. After a while of silence, the two saw Star walking up to them, putting her gloves back on.

"Caleb, next time someone from the research building sneaks up on us, *don't* run off" her normally warm voice was surprisingly harsh.

"Yeah...sorry," Caleb said. The words were far from sincere, but they were all he could say. All that was on Caleb's mind was wondering how Ash knew where they were. Without realizing it Caleb made a rose next to his foot. Caleb asked Star, "Why do you think Ash didn't fly when she had the chance?"

Star shuffled slightly before answering, “My power. I gave you two the chance to get away.”

Raising an eyebrow, Caleb pushed further, “And your power is...?”

Star didn’t answer, and Caleb got the feeling that Frost wouldn’t say anything either. He was starting to see how often Star kept secrets. She did befriend him just to help her spy, though, so it wasn’t a huge surprise. Caleb looked down at his feet and saw a rose. After getting rid of it, he pushed himself off the wall and started to walk away. “Wait,” Star commanded.

Turning around Caleb sharply asked, “What do you need?”

“You said Ash accepted a task from someone, what was that?”

“Finding Frost, I think. Why?”

“I just want to make sure everyone is okay,” Star said.

Chapter Six

Caleb sighed as he woke up. Checking his clock, he saw that he’d woken at three pm. He checked his window. The rain outside was keeping the sun in check. Hopefully it wouldn’t get too much colder, sleet was the last thing he needed. He left the house and grabbed an umbrella.

As Caleb opened the umbrella, he realized the wind was stronger than he had anticipated. He walked to a grocery store to get food, an uncommon errand considering he ate only sparingly.

Ash left her house after the rain had mostly passed. Smiling at the beautiful half-moon, she walked through the town. She had a day off, but still wanted to talk to Frost. She knew that if Selene or Caleb were around it would be difficult, but Ash was willing to risk it. She knew she had to make a better impression if she wanted even a tiny chance.

After at least an hour of aimless wandering, Ash spotted Caleb examining the thorns of a white rose. She looked around for the other two, and after confirming they weren’t watching, Ash walked over to Caleb. “Rose, huh?” Ash asked, remembering her and Caleb’s time together at school.

Caleb spun around as the rose he held shattered, then disappeared. His lips pressed into a scowl; Caleb walked away.

Ash didn’t follow him, but she did follow his footprints in the other direction. Thanks to the small rise in temperature, the dirt paths were muddy. She walked the way Caleb’s heels pointed. After turning a few corners, Ash came across Willow Town Park. Near the entrance, she saw the short, blue haired infector from earlier. The girl was standing alone, poking at a table that appeared to have wet paint. Ash walked over to her to talk.

“Hello,” Ash said in a friendly voice, “can I ask you a little something about Caleb?”

Chapter Seven

As Ash tended to the infectors at the research institute, she let her mind wander. *Sure, it was my idea to explore the estate, but I didn’t kill him!* Ash thought, *if Mark didn’t go missing, I would be able to confirm it for him! Why does he have to be so petty?* With a sigh she fed the book through the slot in the door designed to keep infectors contained.

Ash knew Frost was a child. Even if she hadn’t been told, it was obvious. She hoped that Frost was an honest child.

The raven winged girl stepped to the next infector’s quarters. He was proudly holding up the book he finished reading. It was long, made to see if attention spans differed from living to

dead. They didn't get shorter for this one, that was for sure. Ash grabbed the book through the slot in the wall and smiled as she walked away.

Ash headed to the library after a few more encounters. She needed a 2,000-piece jigsaw puzzle, a five-hundred-page book, and the two walkie talkies labeled "experimental". The walkie talkies and puzzle were closest to the door, so she decided to leave them for last. Ash started scanning the shelves for thicker books.

The book was meant to be nonfiction, so she scoured the far-right wall. In the bottom left corner of the shelf, she noticed a book with no title on its spine. Picking up the book she flipped open the page. "What in the name of winter?" she said to herself, "What is this?"

Later in the park, Caleb knew Ash was up to something by her smile. The two things he remembered most from his life were his dad's lectures to assume the best of someone, and that Ash always smiled a certain way when planning something. Caleb was sure he was correct when she came up to him, Star, and Frost at the park's largest water fountain - even if it was usually more of an ice fountain - after her shift was over. As Ash waved, Star stepped in front of Frost ready to remove her gloves in case Ash tried to pull something.

"Hello," Ash started, "could I speak with you three?"

Star started to speak before Frost cut her off, "What do you need?"

Caleb groaned angrily. Ash spoke, "While at work tonight I was poking around for books for one of our infectors, and I found..." Ash trailed off as she rummaged through the duffel bag on her shoulder.

Caleb's distrust grew with every word out of Ash's mouth. After a few long seconds of all four standing, Caleb broke the silence. "What could *you* possibly find?"

Ash finally pulled out a book. The book had a red hardcover and no title, author, or even indication of front or back. Ash handed Star the book. "What book is this? There isn't anything but a solid, dull red," Star thought out loud, for once not confident.

Frost giggled then said, "shouldn't you open the book instead of flipping it around in your hands?"

Caleb and Frost looked over Star's shoulder to see what was in the book. Nothing there made sense. Each page was a list of sets of two words, followed by three four-digit numbers. There was no explanation for what each meant. That was, however, until Star skipped to the last quarter of the book. There, the words seemed more familiar. They seemed to be names. By thinking of it that way, the numbers seemed more like years.

Star came to this conclusion and flipped backwards through the pages. "Why are you going back?" Frost asked.

Star didn't reply, but she found what she was looking for and pointed to one of the lines in the book. "Selene, Star; 4875-4912". Frost gasped and Caleb reached for the book, careful not to let it fall into the fountain.

Caleb flipped forward, using the years to gauge whether he was getting closer. Eventually he found it. "Kyle, Caleb; 4912-4929".

"What is this?" Caleb was shocked to see his name there. Uneasiness filling his head.

"Look for the years 4903 and 4909" Star commanded.

Caleb did as he was told and eventually saw Frost's names.

Ash grabbed the book and turned to the last page. As they scanned through the names, they saw "Ally, ???; 4900-4931" fade into view under what was previously the final name.

Chapter Eight

The next night the four met in the park around the largest tree stump. They opened the book and flipped to the final page to see if anything else had changed. The only change was that “???” had become “Alison”.

Star was first to speak. “It must track infectors.” Star flipped back to the page containing her name, every time she turned a page her smile grew bigger. “Seeing as me, Caleb, and Frost are all here.”

Ash was next to talk. “It’s one thing to track something, but is it accurate?”

“Wow! We are so surprised because a book got our birth year *wrong!* Aren’t we so smart?” Caleb sarcastically replied as he flipped back to the page containing his information. Sure enough, the first year was the year he was born, and the second the year he became an infector. “Oh my! Look it *is* correct. Who could have possibly guessed?” he said with a nod.

Frost looked confused. “Then why are there three years on some of them? Like at the beginning of the book.”

Caleb went back. Most of the names had a third year. Even recent pages. It seemed most infectors had three dates next to their names. The majority being very close together, if not having two of the same.

Ash opened her mouth to pitch in, saying, “Infectors are undead. Not immortal.”

The realization hit Caleb. The book kept track of every infector’s birth year, year of death, and year of disappearance. “How?” Caleb wondered out loud.

“Smart contribution, Caleb,” Ash criticized. She spread her wings to push the others away so she could get a closer look. Ash hadn’t noticed until now, but most names were bolded or underlined; some were italicized. Those underlined all had three dates. Those in italics or bold always had two.

“How long can an infector survive without a host?” Ash asked.

Star, Caleb, and Frost exchanged glances. “We don’t really know. It isn’t exactly something they want to test,” Star answered for the group. *Thankfully it was Star and not Caleb with another smart remark*, Ash reflected.

Ash waited awhile and managed to catch a bolded name as it faded to italics. Ash then gave an order to Caleb. “Note the time.”

Caleb wrote down the time from the watch in his hoodie pocket by writing it in the snow. and Ash folded her wings, allowing the infectors to see what she was watching. Ash pointed to the name “Lexi-Hourglass”, and they sat in silence. Ten minutes of waiting later, the name faded into an underlined one, and the number 4931 appeared next to the name.

Star and Frost looked on with a slightly sad look in their eyes. An infector without a host doesn’t last long.

“Around ten minutes then,” Caleb said. “That means we know how to read this book now.” He was the first to get over the time.

Ash nodded. “A bolded name is an infector with a host, an italicized name is an infector without a host, and an underlined name is an infector who’s disappeared.”

Frost seemed excited to know what was going on as she popped in, “and that means all the bolded names are infectors we can find! If we find them, then Star can talk to them, watch them or whatever she does!”

“Right...” Caleb was lost in thought. “But *how* does the book track this and *how* do we find someone when we know only their name?”

“Well, I may know the answer to the second question,” Ash stated calmly. “Check the very first page.”

Doing as she was told; Star saw what looked like an ink splatter. Star took off one of her gloves, then touched her hand to the marking. Star lifted her hand, showing that there was black ink where her hand made contact with the paper. She then touched her gloved hand to the paper. No black spots could be seen on her pure white gloves.

"Surely," Star said, "all of you recognize this ink."

Ash had no idea what Star was talking about. Frost seemed to be trying to remember. Meanwhile Caleb nodded. *He looks so smug that I don't know! Why's he being so difficult?* Ash thought. *Surely there's something I'm missing.* Ash touched her hand to the paper. Nothing. Why did Star's hand take the ink?

Frost touched her hand to the paper next. Her fingertips had ink on them, and she wiped it on the side of a tree stump. "It's infectors' ink, right?" Frost asked.

Star nodded. "It only adheres to an infector's skin, or the skin of a host whose infector is hiding," Star explained.

Confusion still gnawed at Ash, so she asked, "Why the host, though?"

Frost was the one to speak. "Because that ink keeps the host weak enough for the infector to show. A strong, healthy host could contest the infector, or even kill it."

Caleb nodded. "That's why we recognize it." Caleb then beckoned Ash, Star, and Frost to follow him, and he showed what Ash had always been told was a darker colored tree. Caleb then pressed the back of his hand into the tree. The back of his hand was covered in inky black.

"Getting used to ink locations is important," Star said. "Just being able to see who is on your side by walking on a certain trail or eating at a certain table is quite helpful."

"That's how I met Star!" Frost said with a smile.

Caleb walked back to the tree stump with the others and, without warning, threw the book hard onto the ground. The picnic blanket that the four had been sitting on turned an extremely dark red, reminding Caleb of Mark's old bed. "This book is the source of the ink, isn't it?" Caleb wondered out loud. "And it keeps track of who the ink is attracted to."

"You're right!" Ash said, "That's the only thing that makes sense!" Even though she was praising Caleb, he still felt cold toward her.

"Thanks!" while Caleb said it as smugly as possible; he couldn't find the words to be mean.

"And if the book is the source of ink, we can't allow it to stay in the hands of the Research Institute," Star cut in.

Ash nodded. "I planned on giving it to you three," she said. "On one condition!"

Caleb's attention shot to Ash, and coldly he asked, "What would that condition be?"

"I need one of you," Ash looked Caleb in the eye, "to help me with something tomorrow night."

Star held out a hand to shake. "Seeing as I'm the oldest, I'll go."

Ash chuckled. "Thanks for being so generous, but this is best suited for Caleb's abilities."

Caleb looked Ash dead in the eye. *So, it's just another trap? To make me disappear?* "Last time you dropped a broken mirror on my chest."

"Last time," Ash shot back, "You panicked."

"Just humor her, Caleb," Star said dryly. "I have eyes everywhere. If I notice her doing something funny, I'll stop her."

Caleb made an entire rose. The thorns on the stem pricked his hand, but he had grown used to the occasional thorn. Caleb then handed the flower to Ash, who seemed confused.

"That," Caleb showed the thorns, "you should recognize."

"I know," Ash sighed recalling her days in school, "your angry rose."

Chapter Nine

High on the list of things Caleb was tired of was Ash. Admittedly he had been harsh to her the previous night, but it was fair, right? *She killed me, it's alright not to trust her.* He told himself the sentence over, and over, and over as he walked to the weeping willow.

Ash appeared thirty minutes after Caleb got there. "Twenty-five minutes late?" He pointed out, "How do you manage to keep your job with that punctuality issue?"

Ignoring the snide remarks Ash started explaining the game plan. "You and I have some unfinished business; I want to prove myself right."

"Wow," Caleb said, "so selfless."

Ash glared at him. "Someone seems to have forgotten his father."

Leave him out of this! What's he even have to do with our rivalry? Composing himself to speak, Caleb said, "I surely haven't. You've forgotten manners though."

Ash kicked a rose - angry and thorned - at Caleb's feet. "I haven't. Do you want to know where we're going or not?"

"Fine," Caleb cooperated. "Where?"

Without missing a beat Ash responded, "Mark's parent's place after heading to the abandoned estate."

Caleb's thoughts were of nothing but his last day as Kyle. Rose heads buried his feet, no thorns, no anger. Just pure nervousness.

Ash felt bad for Caleb when she saw his roses overtake his feet. She knew what she needed to do, however, to make him tolerate her at least.

"You know, you're dead already, and ten minutes is more than enough time to find someone. The estate isn't that far from town."

Caleb made the roses - there must have been twenty of them - disappear. "Keep an eye on the book if something happens then."

"Deal." Ash said, starting to walk to the house. The mirror room wasn't far into the place, and all she wanted was to show Caleb the fragility of any mirror on the walls.

Ash slowed down every time Caleb lagged behind and eventually they were both standing still. "Ash," Caleb said darkly, "I don't think you know why I'm nervous."

Ash stared at Caleb. "Well, if it isn't about the estate then why are you so slow?"

Caleb rocked from toe to heel as two roses appeared at his feet. "It'll take longer to get to Mark's folks."

Ash looked at him funny. "Why would that make you nervous?" she said, using her wings so when she started walking forward again it took Caleb with her.

"Ash you aren't stupid," Caleb laughed, "right?"

Of course I'm not stupid! Ash thought, choosing to respond to Caleb with, "what's your point?"

Caleb sighed. "Put the pieces together."

I'm trying, Caleb. Ash thought, picking up the pace. *It's just Mark's parents, he went missing the same day as Kyle... wait... does that mean?*

Caleb moved briskly in order to keep up with Ash. She kept glancing at him, seemingly analyzing his features. The two walked silently together. It seemed they had come to the same conclusion. *If she knows I want to avoid acknowledging that Mark is my host, she'll know walking into the same death trap is something else I have much interest in avoiding.* Caleb thought to himself.

As if answering the thought, Ash said, "We can skip seeing his parents, but there's something we've fought over for quite some time that *needs* addressing."

Just admit it was purposeful then.

"I promise you won't get hurt," Ash finished talking and merely continued the journey. At their newfound quick pace, it only took five minutes to get to the estate. The curtains seemed

even more tattered or gone completely. Caleb quickly shot down any thought about the last time he had entered this house. If he didn't think about it, he didn't have to address it. That was his reasoning.

Ash, Caleb knew, knew this house well. She said that exploring the place with her would be a fun way to show them her interests. Caleb put up his guard. It was all he could do to not be suspicious of Ash.

After walking through the first room, Caleb saw the second thing he dreaded. The mirror's pieces. That mirror. Not in the same spot, but close. Around the room he could see evidence that people had been in the room, walking in, dragging something long and human shaped out. Dragging Kyle out.

Ash seemed oblivious to why Caleb was standing stone still, walking to the wall containing the mirrors. Despite the part of him holding a grudge, the thought of his old friendship made him shout out, "Watch out! That mirror's about to fall!"

Chapter Ten

Ash froze after she looked up. "Move, *move*, MOVE YOU IDIOT!" Caleb yelled. All he could think to do was yell as the mirror shook. The sharp golden frame started sliding down the wall. Slowly. Slow. Quick. In a flash the mirror was speeding down the wall.

One rose, then another, then a third, fourth, fifth and sixth.

Roses appeared on the floor. Slowly, more and more appeared climbing up the wall. To Caleb, it felt like a year before the net of roses barely stopped the mirror from hitting Ash. They started as a reflex, but soon became purposeful. For Ash, the roses, yelling, and the sudden freeze happened in a second.

Caleb used his power to move the mirror away with a few well-placed bricks. Ash didn't move. Caleb made the roses disappear. Ash didn't move. Caleb carefully made his way through the ancient room. Ash still didn't move. Caleb looked around, seeing a hand wave and a white glove placed back on it through the doorway. Ash speedily backed away from the wall.

"Thanks, Caleb," Ash gasped, "Thanks so much."

"Don't bother. Think of it as me, thanking you."

Me thanking you? Ash thought. In her mind there was nothing worthy of thanks. "For what?" she asked.

"When you tried to save me. Two years ago."

Ash smiled. He wouldn't become her friend overnight, but at least he could be sensible in the moment. "Did I prove myself right, then?" she chuckled, "that it was an accident?"

Caleb shook his head. "That was no accident. I think Star dropped the mirror. But, yes," he said, "you did prove that I should have been listening to what my father said."

Ash went over the situation in her head. She had to agree it was horrible. But she could avoid Star. Caleb couldn't avoid her nearly as easily.

Caleb turned to Ash. "I can afford two tickets on the train far away from here. Further south where there isn't always snow, and where Star and the power her white gloves hide aren't."

Ash sighed. "Do what you want, Caleb."

Caleb smiled. "Alright then. We still aren't friends, but we're a lot better than enemies."

"I'm not going," Ash said matter-of-factly. "Send me a letter when you get to your new place."

Smile fading, Caleb nodded. "I will, even if I don't get why you won't come."

Ash signaled for Caleb to follow her and the two left the estate's walls. Cracking a joke Caleb said, "Goodbye forever house. I will not reflect on our time together."

Ash laughed, then said, “And I shall never forget how you framed my personality, house.”

Smiling bittersweet smiles, the two said goodbye to each other, and left for their own houses.

Chapter Eleven

Ash ended up finding herself missing Caleb. *I finally get him to be reasonable and he runs off*, she thought, bringing a chuckle to herself. Although, Ash couldn't blame Caleb. Had she been closer to Star, unable to avoid her, and without a job she loved, she would've taken up Caleb's offer.

Caleb told Ash he'd gotten a ticket for two weeks later. Ash reminded him to write, and that was the last time she saw him. To her though, him even bothering to tell her felt like a step in the right direction.

The day the infector left town was when Ash saw a letter in her mailbox. She couldn't find a return address. Ash went into her house to read the letter.

As she opened the envelope, she saw two pictures and a letter. She looked at the pictures first. One was of a raven sitting alone on a fence post painted with roses, and the other was of a raven's feather laying in a rose bed.

Now intrigued, Ash unfolded the paper containing the letter. She read the letter to herself. “Dear Ash, I may not see you again, but I may send an occasional letter. If this message reaches you before I've left, I won't mind if you say hello. From Caleb.”

A smile crept over Ash's face. She hung the pictures on her wall and watched the new moon rise. The stars were alone in their effort to light the sky.

Caleb didn't talk much to Ash after informing her of the day he planned to leave. Not because he didn't want to, but because he wanted to think through his memories of town.

Most of what he knew was his father's endless lectures about assuming the best of someone. The lectures were so common he'd tried to ignore them and had partially succeeded. Though Caleb still ended up replaying the past week in his head. On the day he left, he slipped a letter he wrote to Ash into her mailbox. Assuming Ash had good intentions, the shattered mirror falling was simply an accident, or Star's doing, and Ash lunged at Caleb in an attempt to get him out of the mirror's way.

He intended to get off the train he rode late at night. He never thought he'd move into a new town alone, but the stars welcomed his arrival. The beauty of their reflections in the puddle in a field on the outskirts of town made Caleb smile. “I could see this sight every new moon, and still love it,” he said.

Caleb knew he'd find another group of friends eventually. He was sad to have to say goodbye - to Frost and Ash at least - but goodbye is an opening for another hello. At least that's what he told himself when he left. He knew goodbye could last forever, but not if someone who said goodbye opened the door for a hello to walk through. Which is why he'd sent Ash that letter. She really didn't have to remind him to write. Once he'd found a place to stay, he'd send another in case she wanted to continue contact.

“I'll be waiting,” Caleb told the starry sky with a nod, “and until then, I've got some hellos to say.”

SHEARBURN, BRICE**Brice Shearburn**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Lydia Smith

Category: Poetry

rolling hills

how they glow
with lacerations
to a blue dome
fading with the hour

*feet are in the grass
are on the ground
is under the shadow
is from the mound*

do you see them?
a reckoning
to the horizon line
neat and traced

*crucify me upon the
cacti and sandstone
let me rejoin
the desert dust*

illuminate me
with the power
of volume
and massivity

*I am alive
and I am on the flats
I am only breathing
but I want to glow*

let me enter the
airy and free
the kingdom
of the rolling hills

SISTLA, SIDDHARTH**Siddharth Sistla**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Trapped in my hate

Trapped in my hate

My mind was mixed with panic and fear as I waited. It had been 5 hours since my math competition and I waited impatiently for my results to come out. The screen of my computer lit up as the beep of a notification arrived. I jumped to the edge of my chair as I observed the screen. The results were out. I rushed to check who were the 10 people picked from the state of Missouri to advance to the Nationals. As my eyes bore into my computer screen, I searched for my name. I checked the tenth place spot. It wasn't me. I checked ninth place. It wasn't me. I checked eight, seventh and sixth. It wasn't me. I knew I didn't make it. I knew I had failed. But I scrolled up and checked anyway, unable to stop myself. I wasn't on the list. I didn't make it. I read the list again and again and again for what seemed like 10 minutes. I just kept checking the list as if that would change anything. I felt shocked, panicked, and despair rattle through my body like an earthquake. Right then my mom opened the door slowly peeking her head in to see what was happening. She saw me looking at the results and she came into the room.

"How did it go?" she asked with a calm expression on her face. I knew that she knew I didn't make it. I could see her eyes analyzing my face and instantly knowing the shame and anger I felt.

I sighed and replied with a sense of tiredness I never felt before. "I didn't make it." I felt a cold feeling pass over me as if that was the final straw. Saying those words made it final. There were no do-overs. There were no retries to get into the nationals.

My mom's expression didn't change. She shrugged and said, "Don't let the loss hurt you too much. There are many more competitions and you just have to try harder."

"I'm tired mom, I'm going to bed," I replied, ending the conversation. She nodded and left the room.

I closed my eyes and sighed. I slumped on the bed and my mind started to wander. I felt an overwhelming sensation of tiredness and uselessness. I felt as useful as a dead phone. I wanted to sleep and let the tiredness take me away. But sleep never came. As if out of nowhere my mind filled with anger. Anger towards myself for failing something I worked so hard for.

I jumped out of my bed and ran and punched my mattress as hard as I could. I spun around and kicked my chair and the chair toppled over. I wanted to scream; I wanted to destroy my whole room. But nothing happened. I closed my eyes wanting to change everything. I wished I didn't make those silly mistakes on the test. I wish I was more careful and would have gotten those ridiculous questions I missed. *I just am not good enough.* Those thoughts echoed through my mind as I threw myself onto my bed.

I was in a drowsy mood for the next day. I didn't talk to anyone or do anything. I was just slumped on my bed like it was the only thing I was taught to do. I wanted to be asleep and I didn't want to think about my failure haunting me like a ghost. I tried to blame anything and anyone but in the end, I knew it was my fault for all this. It was my imperfection that ruined it all.

As I heard my door creak and I was yanked out of my thoughts, I looked up to see my mom.

"What is it?" I snapped with annoyance I didn't mean to show.

She gave me a stare that made me regret my tone and made an abrupt sense of exhaustion pass through me like a flood. "What are you doing?" asked my mom patiently.

"Nothing," I said, trying to hide my annoyance.

"Then do something productive," my mom said.

"No," I replied, "I don't want to do it so please leave me alone."

My mom raised her eyebrows and said, "Rudeness has no excuse and I expect you to respect your elders." She closed the door and walked away.

Shock and annoyance crept up my spine. *I expected sympathy, not a lecture.* I sighed and closed my eyes.

As the day was coming to the end, I went to the bathroom and brushed my teeth. As I washed my mouth I looked

into the mirror to see my reflection. I stared at myself with a sort of disappointment as if the very sight of me was disgusting. I was reminded of the scores and the fact that I didn't make it. I felt a feeling of pure rage pass through me. I wanted to punch the mirror and break it into shards. I threw my brush away and rushed out.

The next day, I managed to head down for breakfast. I was eating cereal as my phone rang, breaking me out of my thoughts. I pick it up and hear my friend's voice.

"Hello," my friend said in a monotone voice.

"Hey, what's up," I replied.

As we exchanged normal greetings I brought up the math competition. "It's pretty sad we didn't make it into nationals," I said trying to hide my sadness.

"Yeah, but there's always next year," said my friend nonchalantly.

I was shocked by his nonchalant attitude. He also worked hard to get into the math competition and even when he failed he was okay. He didn't let his mistakes control him. I started to think about myself and how I reacted to failure compared to my friend.

As I was pondering over myself, my mom walked into the room. She had woken up a few hours ago and had a bright smile on her face.

"Hey buddy," she exclaimed as she walked into the kitchen to cook lunch.

"Hey mom," I replied, still reflecting on my past behavior.

"Who were you on the phone with? I heard you talking with somebody."

I explained I was on the phone with my friend and finally opened up about how I felt about losing the math competition. "Mom, I hated myself for losing the math competition. I hated that I was imperfect and made mistakes."

She looked at me with a calm gaze and slowly started nodding her head. "You can't let failure pull you down.

Mistakes are a common part of life and you have to embrace them and learn from them. If you just blind yourself with hatred for yourself, then you won't get better at anything," lectured my mom.

Deep down, I knew she was right. I knew that I had let anger at my mistakes cloud my better judgment and made me self-hate. *But not anymore.* I was going to change. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I excused myself from breakfast and went up to my room. I jumped in my chair and turned on my computer. The computer lit up with amazing speed and the screen opened up where I left it. The scores. I stared at it for a long time as if the screen was again trying to trap me in its prison of hate. But I moved my mouse and clicked on the "x" button on the top right of the screen. I felt a sense of freedom like I had finally broken out of the prison I trapped myself in. I had accepted my scores and my mistakes and come to terms with them. A small smile appeared on my face as I rushed outside to finally enjoy myself.

SMITH, HAILEY**Hailey Smith**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Wentzville Holt High School, Wentzville, MO

Educator: Jimmy Pruitt

Category: Flash Fiction

Celebration of Life

Flickering lights bounced off of the surrounding surfaces. The flames of the bonfire rose high into the sky, reaching out towards the heavens. It was a time of celebration. A celebration of life and what may lay beyond it. Most would see it as the darkness winning against the light as the days grew shorter, but the villagers did not agree with this idea. They saw it as a time to reflect on the light in their lives and to honor those who had passed in the past year. The steady beat of drums echoed across the valley, bringing the villagers to their feet and ushering in the new age. A feast was held with the yield from their last bountiful harvest. The smell of roasted meats and vegetables, savory bread, and sweets of all kinds wafted through the air. Every wooden table was adorned with the golden bounty. The bonfire took place in the stone courtyard for the villagers did not want to set fire to their quaint village. Strings of flowers and berries were hung from the nearby columns. The children had spent most of the day yesterday creating the garlands and helping their parents hang them. It was a tradition that everyone adored. Small jars filled with fireflies were hung from the columns as well, creating an enchanting glow that the villagers hoped would lead the departed back to them.

Dancers wound their way around the courtyard, their billowing skirts swirling together and creating a vibrant recreation of the fire that stood behind them. Laughter could be heard from every corner of the village. Children were swept up in the dancer's arms, as their parents clapped along to the rhythm the drums provided. As the night wore on and the fire became a mass of twinkling embers, the village Elders led them down to the cemetery. Contrary to popular belief, it was a happy little thing. Marigolds and Chrysanthemums were scattered throughout the grounds to provide protection to the wandering spirits, candles were lit around family plots, incense was left to burn, and possessions were left as offerings for the deceased. Families would sit near their plots, telling great stories of their ancestors and leaving the children with stars in their eyes. They would hear about how their ancestors had aided Cuchulainn in his battle against Queen Medb. Or about how a distant mother figure in the family had been a priestess to Bres and had brought a new age of fertility to the surrounding lands. This was the only way the children would know of their ancestors and the deeds they had accomplished.

As the full moon hit its peak, magick was at its fullest potential. The Elders would gather anyone who was able-bodied to complete the ritual that would restart the cycle. They would make their way towards sacred ground and each person would be given a job. One would start by burning sage to cleanse the area, another would burn incense and herbs to invite the dead to commune. Together, they would cast a circle and begin the commune. The Elders would call the dead forth so that they may ask questions about the year to come. It was a beneficial ritual that helped them to prepare for whatever may ail them in the following year. Energy would be grounded back into the earth as the circle broke, leaving everyone tired but content. Those involved would bury what was left of the food as an offering to the spirits who had assisted in the ritual.

The celebration would end as the sun began its journey across the sky. Children would rub their eyes as they're ushered off to sleep. The day after the celebration would be one of rest. Most would spend the day sleeping, dreaming of the future celebrations that awaited them.

SPROULL, MAX**Max Sproull**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Pembroke Hill School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Caro Thomas

Category: Poetry

When We Dance

When We Dance

She takes my shoulders, and I take Her waist.
and for a moment, for an eternity,
time and the world all fall away.

i am free.

subject only to the whims of Her softly swaying soul,
serene and sincere against the sonorous sound of Her
warm and pleasant pulse, beating brilliantly against my own,
imparting the rhythm to which we dance.

And while we sway my flaws fall away as I gaze
into Her glittering green eyes,
leaving me,
freed from my self-forged shackles,
and Her,
a goddess before my eyes, shining
in the divine light of the present
and the pulcherimus promise of tomorrow.

i am lost, but not alone,
living and thriving in Her presence.
drifting yet unwavering and ascending
through the vast well of time
for an eternity,
for a moment,
for a dance.

STAMATI, FRANCESCA**Francesca Stamati**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Journalism

Do Your Part

Looking at the blank space at the bottom of the restaurant bill, reasons not to tip may pop into a customer's head: the service wasn't above and beyond, they don't have an extra dollar to spend on top of a \$20 meal or they assume the employee doesn't need more money in addition to their wage. But as the customer scribbles down an amount that accounts for less than 10% of their meal, they don't realize that the tip was crucial to their waiter's paycheck.

It may be difficult to accurately quantify a server's worth in the moment with an expectant waiter watching and an already-hefty restaurant bill, but keep in mind that their bosses have already decided the exact value of their labor — and it's usually a generous underestimate.

In Kansas, the minimum cash wage for tipped employees is \$2.13 an hour, assuming the employee makes at least \$30 a month in tips, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. While it's required that the employer raises the wages if the combination of tips and cash wage isn't enough to reach minimum wage, this bare minimum takes advantage of workers. Unless the minimum wage is raised to meet the actual cost of pay bills and expenses — around \$15.41 an hour according to CNBC — the burden of tipping is forced on the customer.

Waiters aren't even paid minimum wage by their employers, and the tips make up the rest of their salary. Tips don't exclusively become extra money for the workers — they go toward reaching the cost of surviving. This ultimately leaves the responsibility to the customer to tip employees, since it helps close the gap between minimum wage and how much a person *actually* needs to live.

Even working full time, employees simply won't have enough to pay for rent, bills, gas, groceries and other expenses with only minimum wage. In Kansas City, Kan., the average cost of rent for an apartment is \$887 a month according to RENTCafé. The average Kansan pays around \$261 for groceries and over \$420 on gas every month, according to 13 WIBW. The combined cost of these basic expenses is already more than a person's monthly income on minimum wage — around \$1,160 before tax deductions for employees working 40 hours a week.

That's not just living paycheck to paycheck — it's needing to work another job to even scrape by. If everyone tipped in the customary 15-20% range, workers may have the extra money they need above their minimum wage to cover basic needs and expenses.

Low wages and tips are the number one reason for restaurant workers to consider leaving the industry, according to a survey conducted by TIME Magazine.

So instead of getting annoyed and uncomfortable the next time you feel an employee's eyes on you as you write their tip, realize they may be desperate — and for good reason. Behind those eyes could be the worry of having a dry faucet in the morning or the thought of an eviction notice taped on their door as they arrive home. Their forehead creases may be from the stress of working the long night shift for an insufficient wage. And we all know what happens after tax deductions, which also affect tips that count as part of the worker's salary.

So do your part when visiting restaurants by tipping the workers and help these people make a living — your \$5 tip might end up paying for their dinner later that night or a go towards a bus ticket in order to get home.

There are many reasons people don't tip — greed, a tight budget of their own or possibly a stubbornness to only tip

workers for extraordinary service. Workers have only so much time to make an impression on each table of customers they're serving, so this expectation isn't fair to warrant a tip.

It's not that tips need to go overboard. You shouldn't feel obligated to tip \$20 to a worker who simply handed you a coffee or a 50% tip on a single meal. But acknowledge that their job has forced them to depend on strangers' generosity for tips and show the workers the common decency of tipping for their service.

Don't feel guilty for not being able to give hefty tips — especially if you're a student who hardly makes money yourself. But remember empathy. Often when we go out to eat, we're caught up in our personal lives and just want our food, so it's easy to forget that the staff are people, not servants.

Every Friday after school, workers at the Prairie Village shops have to deal with the mass of middle schoolers clustering into their businesses for food — which may flood the kitchens' orders and disrupt the restaurant through childish behavior, only to leave only to leave with \$1.12 in the tip jar.

Next time you're heading to a restaurant with friends, remember to bring extra money to support these employees. A tip isn't about rewarding personalized, over-the-top service, it's about doing your part as a human being.

STEVENS, EMILY**Emily Stevens**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Lee's Summit North High School, Lees Summit, MO

Educator: Ashley Baker

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Sprout

There once was a forest fae named Chepi. She wandered the woods and tended to the fauna within. One day, she found a small child stumbling through the brush. While children would often come through and explore the outskirts of the forest, this one seemed scared. She decided to take him to the nearest human settlement. For two days she carried him in her arms, feeding him berries and giving him fresh water to drink along the way.

When she got near the border, she saw officers and flashing lights. Perfect, she thought, she'll drop him off in the safe hands of his people. Yet, things would not be so easy for her.

A small dart pinched her neck before she could even walk past the tree line. She barely had time to safely rest the sleeping child on the ground before fatigue overtook her. The last thing she heard was voices shouting unfamiliar phrases from behind an alternating blue and red haze.

When she woke, she was in a concrete room held together with metal bars. Fear enveloped every sense. There was no soil, no trees, not even the comforting hugs of the wind.

After what felt like days, she was taken to trial, a human trial, in a court where she had no concept of the rules she had to follow or the laws they obeyed.

A tall man in black robes told her she was accused of kidnapping the child and that her innocence was going to be debated before a jury of people she didn't know. A sigh of relief left her: after all, she was guilty of no crime.

However, what she didn't know was that the court thought she was a demon. While demons lived by humans, they held no inherent malice, but that didn't stop the fear that they would turn on them at any second, like in the stories of old. It was this fear that damned Chepi from the start. She just didn't know it.

She was found guilty of her false crime and sentenced to life in prison, which sounds far worse to someone whose lifespan is far greater than any human's and who doesn't know that "life" usually means only about twenty years. In the end, it didn't matter if her sentence was twenty or two hundred: she had done nothing wrong. But her cries and pleas fell on apathetic ears as she was dragged out of the courthouse.

In prison, she could feel herself draining away. The demonic inmates were intimidating, but the guards were even scarier. Worst of all, there was barely any plant life. There was almost none inside the building, and the outside area was desolate as well. It only had dried dirt that could practically be considered sand. Trees and ferns were in her sights, but far out of her grasp beyond the barbed wire. She was targeted almost immediately. 'Fresh meat' was a term she was taught on her first day. A particular group found enjoyment in beating her to the ground when she was on laundry duty.

The plants within the prison wilted with her, but no one gave this much attention. They simply replaced them with plastic replicas, further distancing Chepi from what gave her life. After only three months, she was completely shattered inside and out.

Then one day something happened that everyone took notice of. An inmate was missing from morning chow time. When the guards went to their cell, they were found dead. Flowers had grown seemingly *from* their throat, muffling their screams and suffocating them in the night.

It only got worse. Not two days later, a guard, who was known to be prone to power abuse, was found in the warden's office. Roots weaved in and out of their spine and held their arms in place. They looked like they were crawling with a hand outstretched towards the door. Their face was frozen in a contorted scream. Small vine-like plants with symmetrical leaves dripped from their throats.

No one knew what was happening, and the prison went into lockdown.

After three days, Chepi's tormentors regained their focus on her while they were in the yard. Despite the guards now being on high alert, they never stopped fights between inmates unless they got out of hand. But something was different. Chepi made no complaints or yells in protest. She just stood there, her arms pulled to her sides, taking blow after blow to her stomach.

Something interesting happened after the ring leader started punching Chepi's face. The inmate's hands began to hurt. When she looked down, she saw sprouts digging into her flesh from the blood smears on her knuckles. She screamed in pain as the tendrils wove in and out of her hands and down her arm, ripping her muscles and cracking her bones.

As she dropped to the ground, the other two inmates lost their hold on Chepi. The broken fae wiped her face before kneeling before the injured prisoner. She gingerly cupped the crying inmate's cheek in her hand like a mother would to her disturbed child. After a moment, more fauna sprouted from the blood covering Chepi's hand and rooted itself into the inmate's horrified face.

Finally, the shock faded and the guards kicked into gear. They surrounded the group as the ringleader suffered a loud, slow death--blossoms erupting from her eye sockets and vines snaking their way under her skin, ripping them from her muscles.

Chepi hadn't bothered to smother her throat this time. She had wanted to hear it each time--each moment of misery in proportion to the amount of pain and suffering the aggressors had given others--but some sense of self-preservation in this unfamiliar place had held her back. At this point, though, whatever illusion she clung to was gone.

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It would be days before anyone would check in on the prison. Sunday was when the next food shipment came in. The delivery boys arrived to a musty prison filled with corpses of all ilk, their mummified poses of agony creating the world's most sadistic greenhouse.

Sitting in the middle of it all was Chepi. People had failed her. She trusted no one anymore. The only thing she trusted was the plants that surrounded her. The world would be so much better if animal life gave way to plants. If only they would trade opposable thumbs for beautiful flowers, the ability to speak for the ability to produce oxygen, and the penchant for cruelty for the calmness of swaying in the wind. Intelligence gave people the choice to see others as less than them. Things would be better for everyone if they all disappeared into the grass. After all, it was going to happen eventually, why not start now?

STONE, COOPER**Cooper Stone**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Lawrence Free State High School, Lawrence, KS

Educators: Josie Clark, Kylee Johnston

Category: Short Story

Myiasis**Myiasis**

I can't begin to recount every bad thing I've done in my life. Specific moments have faded but I still feel the burden of every regrettable memory. The emotion is a maggot; it eats away at me. The larvae crawl deeper and deeper into my carcass every day. Sometimes I think if I lift up my shirt my eyes will meet thousands of oozing bodies instead of my pale skin. Sometimes I glance down at my shirt to see blood stains stemming from the cavity in my gut. Sometimes the tickling of slimy insects will dance across my chest in moments of calm.

I sit alone. Rough wood from an old bench discomforts my legs. My eyes are locked on the cement floor. Just past the bland gray surface is a set of train tracks. For the moment they are empty. Anticipation keeps my eyes open; without it the late night moon would take me over and I would fall into a deep, merciful sleep. More than a year ago, my best friend moved away. Today he comes back, if just for a couple of days. I can't help but question. What will he look like? What should I say to him?

I peer down at the cold cement. Two or three feet from my shoe an earthworm crawls helplessly across the ground. Its wet body slithers and its end drags along the rough surface; crippled by a sort of gash. Trailing the worm is a thin line of brownish liquid I assume is blood. Sneaking behind the worm, as if toying with it, is a small black salamander with a blue line down the middle of its scales. The salamander dashes to the worm and anchors it with its slimy, webbed feet. He clenches the bare body where the gash mark stood before, the probable origin to the slice in the first place. For five to ten seconds the salamander clutches its prey, celebrating the catch.

The worm squirms and twitches, trying to find a way out. It uses all its strength to break free from the salamander, but in its last seconds of life the worm gives up. It slumps to the ground in defeat, and only then does the salamander eat the worm.

The salamander scurries away; and once more I'm alone. I tell myself the loneliness doesn't bother me, but in truth I suspect I've become used to it.

Ever since he left, I've never felt so empty. We'd been friends all throughout elementary and middle school. For nine years, every weekend was reserved for video games and late night conversations concerning who was dating whom or which two meatheads got in a fight behind the dumpster. Though the thought seems so fresh, the memories still manage nostalgia. It's weird how one person's being is the difference between happiness and total isolation.

I study the landscape. The same gray walls, gray pillars, and gray ceiling as the beginning of the night. Gray walls where, over a year ago, I stood alone.

I grab my stomach as a heavy, almost queasy throbbing takes me over. Under my hand I feel the incessant scrambling of little bodies winding on top of each other. With pain, I think back to a simpler time. I knew he was going away. His family had decided the previous summer to move away. Rumors spread of the reason, but sometimes I think people simply need a fresh start. Everyone had gathered at the decrepit train station to watch as the rusty metal-on-wheels disappeared past the horizon. But I stayed in bed, like a child pretending to be sick in an attempt to miss school. In a last minute attempt to right my wrong, I rushed to the train station; but it was too late. I stood there and thought to myself *I'm a bad person*. That word, bad, sinks into my skin. The word itself is vile. The emotion that comes with it is worse. I can make excuses for myself all I want, but in my head I can't avoid *me*. *I'm* a bad person and there's nothing I can do to fix it. I grab my stomach in disgust. Maggots rise from my stomach to my sternum.

I regularly think of how I hurt someone. That's not an idea most people ponder, but it often exists lonesome in my head. I hurt someone, and I can't take that back. Because of what I did, everything must be worse. At times his family became mine. I would spend weekends consecutively with them instead of the cold environment that resided through my crooked front door. I was more their family than my own.

Thinking will only do me harm now. I try to empty my mind. I blankly stare down at my feet. My brain is numb for the time being, but absence always seeks company.

I gaze through the cold cement. In the emptiness I see everything. I remember a time not too long before now. A time which seems like a lifetime ago. The hot summer sun shone through our sunscreen smothered skin as we swam in the cool waters of the lake. All day we swam and talked, only taking breaks to lay out in the sun and resume conversation. With the sun at its apotheosis we challenged each other to submerge ourselves underwater and touch the shallow muddy floor of the lake with our life-vests still on.

As the sun started to descend; I made one last pursuit and managed my way through the ever-colder water to the weeds of the lake. When I turned right-side-up to resurface, something sharp coiled around my ankle. Piercing pain singed up my leg, and warm blood clouded at my feet. My achilles tendon ached. I couldn't swim up; I could hardly move more than nonsensical thrashing. I'd never been as terrified. Every time I tried to take a breath, salty brown water rushed down my throat. But worse than the throbbing sensation that crawled up my leg and the salinity that etched my throat and burned the deep wound in my leg was the unbearable pressure. It felt as though I was thousands of feet underwater, and the pressure crushed me like a grape.

I felt my stomach tug me down as my life jacket thrust me up. I felt my throat swell as more salty, mucky water filled my wind-pipe like blood fills veins. I felt my chest become tighter as my heart pounded faster with life threatening agony. It was like trying to swallow sharp rocks. My heartbeat pounded in my fingertips. Finally, I tore off the life jacket. I can only imagine what my friend thought seeing the life vest float up. Once I was freed of the chains, I swam down and untangled the sharp confinement and floated up.

I think of that day, that feeling constantly. I'm the same now as I was then: *drowning*. Every time I think of the awful things I've done it's like I'm back underwater. I reach for my stomach again. The pain grows; every second it does.

I jump up from my seat as I see the smoke from the train arriving. The most soothing sound I can think of doesn't rival that of the ground shaking and the rails shivering. I walk towards the track. Then, I stop. Something else has taken hold of my body. I clutch at my gut, and under my fingers the squirming grows more antsy. The trembling of the train coming in is drowned out by the noise of slimy insects piling on top of each other. My eyes tilt down, shocked to see my white button-up covered in blood. I slowly undo my shirt. My fingers stick to the buttons and to each other due to the thick, crimson liquid.

I pull my shirt back, revealing rose-colored maggots crawling up and down my chest. My stomach shudders from the wind exposing its pink blood-covered shell. I fear to peek down at what I might see but temptation takes the better of me. I can't help it. I look down and almost faint at the sight, a horror almost too brutal to describe, a terror too far from sanity for reality to perceive it as genuine. All this time the maggots have been carving out a cavity in my stomach. My abdomen stands torn agape. *They* gnaw at the irritated skin surrounding my chest. A maroon color drizzles down my hip to stain my jeans. The larvae pollute the pool of scarlet blood. Madness fills my head, and my only sane thought is more of a fear than a thought. The fear of where they will go once they've finished with my stomach.

The train finally arrives, still hyperventilating from the long journey. The old doors creak open, and finally I'm relieved, for no longer do I have to gawk at the horror that used to be my stomach. A man steps out, at first obscured by shadows. He steps into the pale fluorescent light. It's *him*. My friend tilts his head up. He opens his eyes. I expect to see hazel peering back at me but instead the sclera seems to be moving. I take a closer look. Why doesn't he have any pupils? I notice that something is trickling down his chin, then flops down his chest to sink into the ground. It's a squirming maggot. I glimpse up, and his eyes aren't eyes at all, but white worms. For the most part they remain confined to his sockets, but every once in a while a white tear will find its way down his cheek. Like a dead body, his jaw drops open and reveals *them* covering his tongue and likewise dangling down his esophagus. Unlike the eyes, the maggots pour down his mouth like a waterfall. His face remains in a torturous position. His mouth never closes nor do his eyes blink. But something about him is oddly beautiful. He glares at me; even without eyes I can still sense his judgmental attention.

He leads me onto the train. It feels foreign to be leaving the station which, although boring, gave me comfort in its consistency. We don't even bother to sit down in any seat. Unlike any train I've been on, this one doesn't feel like I'm moving at all. We're moving fast, faster than an image travels from eyes to a brain.

A rush of light organically passes through the windows, and after it does the old station is out of sight and a new scene obscures my eyes. It feels refreshing to leave the bland environment. It also feels vulnerable, raw. We step out onto the grass.

I remember this scene vividly. The same lake we always resided in, but something was different. The sun and the moon share the sky. The lake water reflects the soft blue from above. A thin layer of fog rests atop the horizon line and turns the light blue into a radiant violet. The full moon rests between the indigo stratus and the gradient blue atmosphere. Cumulus clouds catch a pink color that lingers from the afternoon. The only shape that breaks the

reflected blue is a line of silhouetted trees bare from autumn. If it weren't for the sweet ripples of water, I could never tell where the lake stops and the sky starts.

My friend stares at me, but my eyes remain fixated on the sight. I can't help but start to think of the things I've done. I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry. I'm a bad person, I can't fix that, but the least I can do is be sorry.

"I don't accept your apology," he remarks without talking.

I turn to him. He turns back to the water.

That feeling you have in your stomach, you call it a disease but it's not. No fever or sore throat could be compared to this sensation. It's not an illness; it's a punishment."

The punishment tightens my stomach, reminding me of its presence. I should have been there. It was just too difficult I couldn't do it. I thought you would understand.

"I understand a lot of things. You don't understand that it was hard for me too. I moved away from everyone I loved, and you couldn't stand to be there. You were my best friend."

The word "were" hurts.

"This is your fault. You were a bad friend. You still are a bad person. You can't act sad or lonely to get people to forgive you for how corrupt you are. They'll see right through that at your poison heart. You're a fire. Everywhere you go your ashy footsteps spread and destroy everything around you. There's not a person in this world who could say that you improved their life."

Guilt overwhelms all other pain in my body. Like many complex ideas that plague us, guilt is subjective. For me, guilt feels like nothing. Nothingness, I believe, is the greatest fear of all humankind. For what is darkness but the absence of vision, silence the absence of sound, and loneliness the absence of people.

With the last light, I see him cry. His face remains in the same dead hanging position as it has been. His mouth dangling open, crawling with maggots. The difference is his eyes which now cry, although not tears. No, instead blood streams down his face following the curves of his cheeks. It dyes the white entities a vermillion shade. He turns to face me and stands up. I haven't noticed this, but he's tall, possibly two feet taller than me. I back away.

"What's the matter? Is it my face? You did this to me. Remember that you did this to me. They chewed away at my heart first. It was agonizing. Afterward, they spread. Now all that's left of me is your poison. That's what maggots do. They feast away on your flesh until all that's left is a husk. Seems like you have a few of them on you as well."

I stare down at my chest. No, I won't let them do that to me. I can still fix this. I can change. I know I can. I tear at my own flesh. Starting with my chest. I rip away at the maggots with my finger nails. Even with the chill of the night, my skin burns. The flesh that remains glows an irritated red. Something's crawling behind my eye. Oh God, there's something in my eye. Just as the pressure under my eyelid is released, a maggot squirms over my iris, briefly leaving its slimy residue over my pupil. I gouge out my eye. One of *them* crawls up my throat. I scream to dislodge it. They refuse to be scratched free. I won't let it happen to me. I will change.

"False promises won't save you now. This is all your doing. If you don't want to spread your fire any longer, do everyone a favor - die."

With another flash of blinding light, I return to the dusty train station. He starts to walk away. I stop scratching at my body. It seems useless at this point. He's right; I should do everyone a favor. I walk closer to him. I stop. He walks onto the train and turns around to stare at my unmovable body. I sense a rush of energy leave me as the feeling I've come to be dependent on drains from my body thousands at a time. They walk upright in uniform movements. The last of the white worms trickles down my chin then my bare chest to join him. I never thought I'd miss the feeling of *them* on my skin, but without their presence I'm incapable of any emotion at all. Which is worse than the guilt. The door slams closed. I fall to my back sprawled on the ground. With my last dying breath I manage to croak out the same word over and over again: "No, no, no, no. . ."

I'm dead now. No maggots reside in the cavity my body has become; I suppose that's a good thing. My corpse sprawls on the train station floor. Blood pools all around me. If I were alive, I'd cough up the blood in the back of my throat, but since I'm not - the blood remains. My abdomen is shredded ajar and dead organs are idle in their place. I somehow don't feel better. I thought this might relinquish the pain but it did not. Now . . . I sleep.

A man sits in an empty train cart admiring a seemingly peaceful night. The full moon fills the sky. The rigid tree line lies level with the wheat colored grass dancing from side to side. The man's eyes stay fixed at the landscape, head in hand until he arrives at his stop, the last of the night. As the man takes his first step onto the bland, gray concrete, his eyes question their own sanity. The man drops to his knees at the sight of his dead friend on the ground. His friend lies on the cement covered in blood with his stomach torn open. From the scratch marks on his skin and blood under his friend's fingernails, he rightfully assumes his friend did this to himself. The last thing the man notices is something white pulsating in the back of his friend's dead, hanging mouth. He takes a closer look. To his horror, he sees maggots already eating away at the dead flesh. The man jumps up and grabs his gut in disgust. The feeling in his

stomach that he presumes to be sickness is only the beginning of a fatal infestation.

Myiasis: *Infestation of fly larvae (maggots) in a living human.*

STREIT, ALYSSA**Alyssa Streit**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Take Me Away**Take me Away**

It's a Friday night, and I'm home with my brother. I was upstairs laying in my bed watching Netflix, while he was downstairs in the living room watching TV. Little did I know he was drinking as well. He was drinking a great deal, to the point he came upstairs. He came to my room and started hugging me. I was confused because he never gives me hugs, he never tells me he loves me, and he never tells me thank you. But this time it was different. When he was telling me all of those things it hurt because he has never said them to me before, and then I smelled it on his breath. I asked him, "Have you been drinking?" And of course, he said no. I yelled at him to get out of my room, and he did just that. I locked my door and called my mom. She was at my other brother's football game, but luckily she was on her way home.

I called her and told her what was up, and she hurried home. An extensive fight went down, and it scared me. There was yelling and screaming, and I felt like it was my fault because I snitched; I know I snitched for a good reason because I was scared. I was scared that he was going to do something stupid. I was scared of losing my brother. I knew he had depression but never thought drinking excessively would become a thing.

My grandma passed, then my other grandma, and then my grandpa. I kept thinking to myself *When is this going to end?* I ended up losing friends, changing schools, losing myself, and faking a smile every day. I sit in my room wondering where I went wrong. I feel like I don't even have a purpose anymore. I cry and cry until it's all out, but the rain keeps raining. All I want to do is throw my phone across the room and go above the skies. I honestly want to just give up. My friends try to help me, but their words don't go through my mind. I wish I could tell my mom, but I can't because our relationship isn't close anymore.

I wake up reliving the same day again and again, and with school, it's just so much. I wake up, put on a "smile" and go to school. No one notices ever, except a couple of people. When they ask if I'm okay I say I'm great, so they believe me and keep going on with their day. I go home and just feel empty. I'm still in this dark place that I need to get out of, but physically and mentally I can't. I'm now thirteen, almost fourteen, and I'm still struggling with this. I want to get help but don't want people to treat me differently. I want to get better, but there's no hope in me.

I try to talk to some of my closest friends about it, and they help me, but it only helps me for a matter of time. Their words stay in my mind. The words like, *It will get better, there's a light at the end of the tunnel, it's all happening for a reason, and God is with you no matter what.* I know I know, but why would God be doing this to me if he loved me and wanted me to be happy? It's exhausting trying to make everyone happy when you're not even happy alone.

I got to the point where I knew I needed to talk to someone. I've talked about it with my friends, but one person who helped me was a teacher. I know we think teachers don't help us with anything, but Mr. Schmidt has helped me beyond what I could ask for. He's helped me see my purpose in life. He's helped me understand that we aren't all perfect. He's helped me by just being there, and everyone needs someone like that.

But I think what I've learned is that we're all going to go through this, either at a young age or an older age, but it will get better. I know we want to give up, but would we really do that? We have family who love us, friends who love us, pets who love us, and I know we don't feel that love, but it's there. You may have to fake it 'til you make it, or you can try to get better with professional help. It's hard, but if you want it, you'll work for it.

Remember, if you are having a dreadful night don't end it. I promise you it's not the way to go. I've thought about it but then realized that I wouldn't be able to live the life I have wanted and chase the dreams I want to chase. There is so much ahead of you in this life, and you have it for a reason. So get outside, go hang out with your friends, and create that happiness, because sooner or later, the rain will finally stop, and the sun will finally shine.

STUBBERT, BROOKLYN**Brooklyn Stubbert**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Jefferson High School, Festus, MO

Educator: Nicole Boyer

Category: Poetry

what do you do when it is all too much?

october twenty-sixth, twenty twenty-one at nine fifty-one pm

my heart rattles inside its cage,
i've kept it locked up tight.
i refuse to let my guard down,
only letting emotions out at night.
i'm sick of having a psychiatrist
i'm sick of this medication
finally opening up to my father,
and having him suggest meditation.
do you honestly believe i'm faking this?
that i've made it up in my head?
that would be wonderful,
i've imagined my demons instead.
if i could manage to put these feelings into words,
you'd be in tears.
my mind is darker than any place,
i'm my own biggest fear.
with the temper of an alcoholic,
i am unaware of what i'm capable of.
my hands get aggressive,
push, quite literally, turns into shove.
i've been invalidated and shut down numerous times,
far too many to count.
they're all going to leave,
and there isn't an ounce of doubt.
because why would they stay?
look at me, i'm a mess.
a ball of worry and paranoia,
ridden with mood swings and stress.
this medicine numbs me,
making me frustrated when i can't cry.
i rip my hair, scarring my legs too,
yet, i'll pretend it's alright.
it's only a few hours until the night,
everything escapes them, demons paint pictures on my ceilings.
my brain gets fuzzy and hazy,
losing every last feeling.
the complexes are insane,
i don't even feel real.
nothing can save me now,
shaking hands with the devil, we've just made a deal.

what do you do when it all is too much?

STUBBERT, BROOKLYN**Brooklyn Stubbert**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Jefferson High School, Festus, MO

Educator: Nicole Boyer

Category: Poetry

love, as viewed by a borderline.

september eighteenth, twenty twenty-one at four forty-one pm

i've been smiling more
i've felt happy, which is a shock
it's not mania, it's real.
insane, right?
but this happiness is bittersweet, unfortunately.
it's caused by a love
more so, a person.
my favorite person.
but what they don't tell you about finding happiness for borderlines is the highs feel absolutely amazing.
but the lows overtake your entire body, feels like the world is ending.
you see,
once your mind experiences a state of bliss so lovely as the one i've experienced,
you find yourself begging the universe to make it last forever.
but, reader,
as you're aware,
those good things don't last forever.
so before i was ecstatic to wake up and live,
i'm no longer satisfied by this life i live.
i must learn to stop living for this one specific person.
but i simply cannot,
it isn't in my programming.

love, as viewed by a borderline.

SUN, CASSIE**Cassie Sun**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Judith Miller

Category: Short Story

A Box Big Enough*There comes a day when your life ceases to hold meaning.*

The cursor blinks impatiently at Tara as if taunting her. *Do better*, it seems to chide. Tara groans, running her hands through her disastrously tangled curls. She usually managed to type a good two thousand words before she began personifying the cursor—an occurrence of her delusion this early on was most definitely a bad sign.

She tries again.

There comes a day when our lives cease to hold meaning.

She watches the cursor, seeking its approval, coveting some sign from the universe that she will probably never receive. Something, perhaps *someone* to tell her that what she hopes to make her deepest, most profound piece isn't simply the epitome of every broken-to-healed, cowardly-to-courageous, absolute-mess-of-a-person-to-self-actualized-main-character-Girlboss™ bullshit. The more she stares at her words, the more they seem to blur and haze together as one depressing mess of a sentence.

It is often in these moments that Tara wonders if she is someone who peaked in her teenage years. Someone who family friends and relatives-that-acted-like-strangers would take one look at and decide carried "untapped potential" once they found out how pathetically short her list of accomplishments stretched.

Her downward spiral inches its way back up slightly as she is reminded that she, in fact, would likely be considered someone who had lived up to that so-called "potential" she'd possessed so much of. She had transformed the miserable scribbles teenage Tara had furiously scrawled in her diary and made a career out of melancholic poems and even more depressing novels that far too many people related to. Now she simply had to write another one.

Tara aggressively grabs onto her desk before pushing her chair in the opposite direction, letting the momentum spin her around and around until she feels the room tilt in time to the pulsing migraine she feels coming on.

There comes a day when my (?) life ceases to hold meaning.

She writes this cautiously as if afraid someone is watching her in her lone apartment. As if they would sneak out from under her bed and wave a finger too close to her face.

Ha! They would cry. Your life? Why would your life be meaningless!

They would dramatically prance around her cluttered one-bedroom studio space and thrust their arms up to the sky.

Look, Tara! They would grab onto her shoulders and throttle her in a miserable attempt to shake some sense into her.

This is what you wanted! This is the life you dreamed about! This is what you wrote in your hideous, neon green diary, right under your biggest dream of all: Date. Daniella. Peng.

And they would be right about everything. And her head would ache a bit harder when she recalled the words

Daniella had written to her—written because Daniella was the type of girl to reject your romantic pursuits with a handwritten letter tucked neatly into a beige envelope—and that was precisely why Tara had liked her so much in the first place. She'd been exhilarated when she first spotted her name on the envelope, written in solid black ink without a smudge. Soon, however, her excitement dissipated into bitter disappointment as her eyes devoured the contents of the letter.

I genuinely appreciate your inquiry as to my romantic status and enthusiasm regarding possible romantic endeavors between us. However, it is with regret that I inform you that I am currently not in pursuit of a relationship of the romantic type as I am instead focused on the success of my prospective career. Thank you for understanding, and I will let you know accordingly if my judgments were to change.

*Best,
Dani*

Later, Tara would find that her employment rejection letters could hardly rival the level of detail and compassion tenth-grade Daniella had wielded to reject her. Perhaps it was for the best, Tara desperately tried to convince herself. After all, Tara had wild hopes for her future too! She grabbed the letter, crumpling up all the meticulously folded edges she knew Daniella had taken great pride in perfecting, and hurled it into the garbage can.

An hour later, she took it back out.

Throwing away the letter unsettled her. There was an aggravating, bothersome feeling inside her that had only grown in size after she had tossed the letter, and she couldn't seem to shake it. Fortunately, the letter only smelled mildly like moldy bread and the trademark scent of trash. Burning Daniella's letter didn't feel right either. Tara wasn't superstitious, but she couldn't help but feel that burning something Daniella had given to her felt a lot like cursing her, and Tara surely didn't despise her, even if she was a little (a lot) heartbroken.

And so Tara went into the forbidden land, the dangerous deep where monsters perched and demons dwelled (the basement, clearly), and grabbed the first Brown Paper Box she spied. She sprinted back upstairs, suddenly an Olympic runner of sorts, and examined her findings. It was the box her mother's monthly vitamins came in, about the size of six Monopoly boards stacked, and Tara carefully ripped off the faded shipping label, claiming the old Brown Paper Box as hers from then on. She then plopped Daniel's rumpled letter in before double, then triple sealing the box with the most durable shipping tape she could find. She slipped the box into a small crook underneath her bed, confident that she would not revisit it for a long, long time. Maybe someday she could even laugh about it.

She couldn't have been more wrong. The first time she tore open the Brown Paper Box was only two months after she first sealed it. This time, though, it had been like a sharp blow to her stomach: unexpected, uninvited, and excruciatingly painful.

This time, it was a funeral invitation.

She'd only known Larry for perhaps three-quarters of a year, yet they had undeniably grown closer than she had with friendships that stretched the span of five years, some even longer. Their friendship had always felt different than her other friendships; Larry was a year older in school, and she regularly sought him out for advice, for guidance when she couldn't admit to anyone else exactly how lost she was. He had a way of coaxing the truth out of her when it was second nature to brush off anyone's concerns about her with a simple, "I'm fine." Thinking back on it, she'd never been there the way he was for her. She was ashamed of it, yet she couldn't help the bitter anger she felt after his death—at herself, at the world, and perhaps even at Larry. She felt deceived. Fooled by the eternal smile Larry seemed to carry, the stories he would tell with such vibrant energy she could practically feel it buzzing, humming in the air. Perhaps his laughs had stifled his sobs in solitude, his smile so bright it overshadowed the misery he had truly felt.

When she tore off the still-new tape of the Brown Paper Box, it was with a heaviness and sorrow she had never known before. She'd gently laid the new letter to rest next to Daniella's, and she'd felt a sense of longing for the person she had been merely two months ago when the worst feeling she had ever known was Daniella's rejection. This time, she'd merely bound the tape once around the box.

The Brown Paper Box grew heavier over the years as the letters piled up. Some left her devastated and heartbroken while others merely drew out a long sigh and an immediate need for chocolate-cake therapy. Some she nearly burned, or shredded, or even tried to feed to her dog before she decided to surrender it to the Brown Paper Box. The first "D" she ever received on a test. The time she didn't get accepted to her dream university. The love letter her boyfriend had left a week before she caught him with another girl. It wasn't easy for her to watch her box of disappointments grow at such an alarming rate, and she had been more than terrified that she would eventually need one, then two, than many, many more boxes to carry the weight of her failures. Yet as the box grew, she'd like to think that she did too. She'd spent her lunches in the library after that "D," her head hunched and back aching from too many hours trying to cram facts about Europe's conquests of the early centuries and the metabolic processes of cellular respiration. She didn't despair, and after a year and a half of attending a local university, she had transferred to her dream school and graduated with a degree and a much more loyal boyfriend.

There were many days in which she had desperately wanted to be rid of the Brown Paper Box. To her, it was a reminder of what she had lost, rather than the new life she had built for herself. She often tried to take baby steps—jamming the box into the topmost shelf in her dusty closet or throwing her least favorite blanket over it and calling it a day—all to no avail.

No matter what she did, it seemed to be perpetually present, thrumming and pounding to the rhythm of her heart until she finally relented and let it sit beside her desk, out in the open. It sat there through what she considered the worst years of her life, growing heavier with each one of her defeats. It witnessed the years she held sacred, the months that she did not need to open the Brown Paper Box.

There came a day when my life ceased to hold meaning. There came another day when my life teemed with meaning. I could tell you that story, but my memories have tapered around the edges, my thoughts clouded and obscured. I could tell you all the happy moments of my life, but that would only be half the story. The other half? I keep it in a Brown Paper Box, filled to the brim with no tape enclosing it. Not because it's too full, but because I like it just the way it is.

Because it's earned its place.

SUN, CASSIE**Cassie Sun**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Judith Miller

Category: Short Story

Odd Fate

Ronald was an awkward woman, a woman who held herself with all the grace someone of her short stature and boyish name could muster. Coupled with her strawberry blonde hair and the sporadic bouts of cystic acne, Ron Chase had been a serious victim of teasing for all twenty-seven years of all her life, and she was fed up with it.

Hardly a day went by without Ron grumbling about something—her name or her face or the heinous three-cent increase of stamps coming February—her criticisms were endless, yet the peculiar folks of Tulken County never minded. At least, that's what Ron chose to believe.

Tulken County was a small town on the leftmost edge of Tennessee. It was a stubborn town, a feature that undeniably drew Ron to it a decade ago. It was a place that refused to join modern civilization, no matter how many odd looks or disparaging comments it received. Ron loved it. All of it, the old-fashioned houses and vintage restaurants and people who, despite it being the 21st century, partied like they were from the era of pop art and LSD.

She would never admit it, but somehow, somewhere in those twenty-seven years, Ron had taken a liking to her name. The Harry Potter references had died down (no, her parents were not obsessed with Ron Weasley), and she found herself startlingly content with her life. At least, yesterday she was content. Today, she was standing before the infamously aggravating clerk at the bank down the street, a splitting migraine developing.

"Ronald Chase?" the clerk smiled an ugly, revolting smile.

"Mhm."

"Ya sure Ron's not ya husband's name?"

"I am," she answered curtly.

"This sure looks like a lot of money for a pretty girl like you to be spending—"

"Jonathon, cut the bullshit," came a voice behind her. Ron turned, startled, yet quietly impressed by the firmness at which the gentleman spoke, and the ensuing sight of Jonathon (better known as Jackass Jon) recoiling at the reprimand.

It was a formidable task keeping her expression uninterested as she found herself facing the man who had dared to challenge the (heinous) niece of Mayor Larkins. And despite her firm resolution to defy the patriarchy at every turn, Ron was a woman of manners, and as such, she extended her right hand, offering a single handshake in thanks.

The man stared at it. Ron watched his eyes trail upward, tracing her silhouette. It was one thing to admire the curves of her torso or the arch of her breasts, but the gentleman seemed far more fascinated by the space above her chest, her jutting shoulder blades, and the (slightly concerning) transparency of her skin.

A minute passed, and then another, and still, the man was far too preoccupied with studying her jawline to notice Ron's irritation that he had not taken her outstretched hand growing heavier with each passing second.

“Ahem.”

She waited for the man to awaken from his bizarre trance, preparing to forgive him for his impoliteness. He glanced up, yet, to her dismay, became deeply engrossed by the browns and greens of her eyes; he was now shamelessly gazing into her pupils, yet simultaneously not seeing her at all. It was quite an astounding feat, though one Ron imagined far more suited for someone with a modicum of patience.

With a huff, Ron retracted her hand, muttering a deeply irritated, *God, I hate men*, as she gathered her things to leave. Yet as she prepared to stomp out of the office and into the snow-ridden streets of Tulken, a remarkable thing happened. She felt a warm hand, rough, but not calloused, latch on to her wrist. A soft gasp escaped her lips as once again, the strange man’s eyes met her own, and she felt his grip loosen enough to signify to her that she was free to walk away if she wished. Ron hesitated, then decided that she was a busy woman, and one who would not wait for men who believed they could take all the time in the world with her, and so she began to detach herself and

“How many days do you have left?”

She stilled.

“Sorry,” he volunteered a smile, free of judgment. “I don’t mean to pry, I just…”

The man rolled up the sleeve of his sweater, batting away the leftover bits of stubborn fuzz clinging to his arm. A battered hospital band wrapped around his wrist, and he rotated the plastic strip until that the words *Patient Identification* appeared, faded, but legible. Underneath, the space containing his full name was a smear of black ink, and Ron studied it, attempting to decipher the smudge of letters.

Dean Regans. She squinted, tilting her head to better examine the text *It almost sounds like the name of a king*, she thought.

He must've been wearing it for a long time, she noticed, recalling the sheer number of times she’d viciously tried to scrub her name off the indestructible plastic. *Perhaps even longer than me*.

Her fingers subconsciously reached for her own tattered band, hidden beneath the oversized sleeves of her coat. There was a familiarity to his hospital band, she thought. Past the worn edges, the malformed clasp; it was a distinct quality, unlike the generic identification code or alternating black and white lines of the barcode. It was the mundane name resting at the bottom of the band, just small enough that Ron didn’t notice it immediately: Dr. Willa Moise.

Her lungs stopped working. Or maybe it was her heart, for it wouldn’t be the first time that year Ron felt her pulse stop completely. For her chest felt shaky and fragile and unsteady. For Dr. Willa Moise was the one who stood by her side, rather, *knelt* before her with such a grave and sorrowful expression two years ago, Ron almost wanted to apologize for being sick.

Cardio Myopathy.

“Yeah,” the man nodded. Ron stared at him. *Oh*. She must've said the words aloud. She gaped, then scrutinized him with the same blinding intensity at which he examined her. She understood, then. It was all so clear; she took in the delicate frame of his body, the dangerously sharp point his cheeks tapered to beneath his jaw.

“Two.”

“Years?”

She shook her head. “Months.”

He hung his head, reaching for her hand. Ron faltered. They were strangers, but it didn't feel that way. It didn't feel that way because Ron had been alone in this world far longer than anyone deserved to be alone, than she'd deserved. It was easy at first. It was easy when she found solace in knowing that, when she died, she would merely be a single ray of light erased, insignificant in the blazing brilliance of the sun. And now? Now, all that was left was

loneliness, and her all-consuming thoughts that being insignificant shouldn't have hurt so bad.

Perhaps this was the unspoken reason she let him reach for her, let her fingers close around his, crossing the space between them and gently laying her other palm on his chest, waiting, asking for permission.

He granted it, drawing her in until she could feel his heart beating a simple melody. It was almost unreal, she thought, the way they melted into each other, the way they simply *became*.

They stayed like this for a long time. As long as they had together. They held on to each other, acted as anchors when the formidable sea came rushing through, steadfast on destroying them. He held her when Dr. Moise told her the news, that there was less time than she'd imagined. That he was sorry, but that all hope wasn't lost yet; she could still survive if there was a heart for her within the month. She sobbed into Dean's shoulder, her head resting against his neck until she stopped trembling. They fell asleep like that, and Ron stayed unconscious, lips parted and still clinging on to Dean when his phone rang. He padded downstairs, crouching on the last step as he answered the call.

The caller erupted with emotion; Dean stayed passive throughout. *Thank you*, he whispered, and slipped back upstairs, back into the warm covers where he tenderly intertwined Ron's fingers with his.

They fell at wild speeds. They fell for each other with the certainty of a man on death row; they fell for each other, watching the life they deserved fall apart to the blundering beat of their crooked hearts.

The day Ron received the news, there was no hint, no warning. There were clouds, and it was sunny, or perhaps it was thundering, or hailing, or snowing; she couldn't remember, even though movies teach you that the weather of Important Days become forever engrained in your memory. It was absent, for Ron had yet to stop sobbing onto her kitchen floor, a small, subconscious part of her mind thinking that later, she would need to mop the floors clean of her snot.

Her fingers fumbled as she punches in the numbers, as she tries to call him, the one person she wants to share the news with.

"Hey," he picked up, and Ron blubbered, trying and failing to get the words out.

"I...heart...transplant,"

"What?"

"They have...a heart for me..." she squeezed out.

The line went silent.

Then he, too, cried and told her how much he loved her, and she was far too distracted to think it then, but later. Later, when she feels the cheap linen rub against her back and she's silently weeping, she thinks it. That this is the moment she should've known.

An unexpected warmth engulfed her whole; she smiled, reaching for him. She could feel his love as he pulls her close, gives her an all-encompassing embrace that leaves their souls entwined and poisoned hearts beating for each other. They drove to the Tulken Medical Center, where a flurry of papers and congratulatory hugs greeted her, and Dr. Moise held her, letting her feel all fourteen years of love she carries for Ron. Ron felt it all. She felt loved. So, so loved as she drew them both—Dr. Moise and the man she treasured—into a massive group hug.

Thank you, she heard him tell Dr. Moise. She repeated it throughout the day, thank you, thank you, thank you, and Dr. Moise nods each time, accepting, but averting her gaze. Ron was confused but not concerned; perhaps it was selfish, but she had wanted, needed this for far too long. Not just the heart, but this, a hand, reaching out, touching, holding her, giving her the space and acceptance to love, and to be loved. The tears came, as they always did when she thought of him, of *his* heart. She worried about it, angered that there simply weren't enough hearts to save him, too.

I'm okay, I promise. I won't be in pain once you're okay, Ron He told her, repeating it like a mantra.

She tugged on his sleeve, and he kicked off his shoes to lay with her on the hospital bed.

“Even though I’m getting a new heart,” she snuggled closer to him, bringing his hand to lay on her chest. “Know that I loved you with all of this one, and I’ll love you even more with the next.”

He smiled, tucking his face into the curve of her neck.

“I love you,” he whispers. “My heart belongs to you.”

His words comforted her as they wheel her down to the operating room. They wrapped around her, blocking out all her anxieties and fears; she cradled them, committed them to memory, pressed them to her chest as the doctor strapped on the transparent green mask, the anesthesia fogging her senses. She peeked over at the medical cart brimming with sharp equipment, on the edge of unconsciousness.

There it was. She smiled. Her profile, decorated with checkmarks and those beautiful words: *transplant recipient* in extra large font.

Her eyes drifted, and there was a similar profile peeking out beneath hers. Inked in the same black text, the form truly is nearly identical to hers, she noticed. *Cardio Myopathy*, she reads. *Dr. Willa Moise*.

The only missing check was the one she had dreamed of for so long. *Transplant recipient*. Ron felt a deep sorrow in her chest. Yet it was strange, she thought. Strange, for shifting, she saw it more clearly now. The checkbox—it wasn't simply unchecked. It was struck through, accompanied by a small note beside it.

Rejected transplant, it spelled, and Ron was baffled, perplexed as to why anyone would reject a heart until she sees the name.

It is devastating. It is stunning; it is the most beautiful name she has ever seen. And it is the worst name to ever exist. She almost laughs, because of how absurd it is.

It is a king's name. It was *her* king's name.

Impossible.

She couldn't breathe, grasping at the anesthetic mask.

Impossible, but his treasured words were now piercing her heart, splintering it until she was suffocating on its pieces.

My heart belongs to you. No, no, no, no.

“Please,” she whispered as her arms turned leaden and her vision darkened and Dean’s voice was all she can hear, echoing, swimming in her mind, and she was falling.

And falling.

And falling.

SUZUKI, REINA**Reina Suzuki**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Victim of a Victim**Victim of a Victim**

One of the number one, frequently asked questions I get is "Why do you live with your grandparents"? Although some people can be very insensitive when asking such a question, I always tell them the truth. In all honesty, they probably thought I would say something fast and quick like my parents are dead. However, that would be too easy.

At the age of seven, my mom started to be less of a mother. Her actions were cruel and hurtful as she said, "I don't want to be a mother anymore." During this time, I didn't understand why my mom and dad were constantly yelling or why my mom would leave at different times. It also wasn't long until my dad would begin tipping his elbow more as he grabbed not one, but many beers nightly. Eventually, my grandparents stepped in and said, "No more".

After the state gave full guardianship to my grandparents, it wasn't long until more drama emerged. My mom ended up having two more daughters and continued to allow her "druggy" and abusive boyfriend in. Many people, including myself, ask why she doesn't leave him. I am aware of the psychological effects that an abuser can cause, however, it doesn't excuse the fact she abandoned and neglected her other three daughters to be with him in the first place. There have been many opportunities for help but she has refused. Despite everything that happened, I continued to love and visit my mom when it came to visitations on the weekend. However, the stress and conflict within our family never went away.

One fight especially, I remember waking up on Christmas Eve to "I am going to kill you!". I was too scared to move a muscle, but I listened to the hitting and crying as my mom's boyfriend angrily abused my mother. I was on the top bunk crying, afraid of what was going to happen next. After what seemed like forever, I made sure he was gone and checked on my mom and the Christmas tree. No presents. I was disappointed that the clock read 4:30 am and my mom showed no sign of getting up to wrap gifts. I took the initiative and went downstairs to the secret stash of gifts I found earlier. I began to wrap all my sister's gifts, including mine until the sky turned blue. It was that late night when I realized I am so grateful for my grandparents for speaking up and saving me from having to deal with these adult issues.

I never told my grandparents about that night, until I got older and understood that my grandparents only had good intentions for my sisters and me. I was brainwashed into thinking that they "stole" us for their own enjoyment. Regardless of her blaming me for not saving her, I still continued to lie and trust my mom. It has taken me time to realize that I encouraged her behavior by rescuing her continuously. She only got worse as she allowed her boyfriend to come in and out of her life and influence her into doing drugs.

Over this past year, I have put boundaries on my relationship with her. I learned that I was not to blame for her actions and that I can not control how she acts. Most recently, I had the opportunity to speak out on everything that my mom and her boyfriend have done to affect my sisters and my life. I was put in the position, to tell the truth about the physical and emotional abuse that my half-sisters have had to grow up with, and it was the hardest thing I have ever done. Something in me made me feel guilty that I was going against my mom, and that I waited too long to do something. I know exactly how emotional my grandparents must have felt after speaking up. It was the feeling of peace and uncertainty. They had no idea what life would bring or how we would turn out, but they took us with open arms to hope that we could live normal lives.

All of my life I have felt obligated to protect my mom and feel guilty when I shouldn't. I have felt ashamed and like a coward to not do something to get my sisters out of the same situation I was in about ten years ago. I also felt bad for my mom because she has to go through physical abuse. I have been caught in the middle and it's exhausting. That is what a victim of emotional abuse feels.

This is why ways to deal with trauma needs to be talked about and bringing awareness of all abuse situations. One of the many reasons I could not get my sisters out of the care of my mother is because I can not legally prove emotional and verbal abuse by text messages or by my word. I need "proof" as if I didn't show them enough. It is frustrating, especially when emotional abuse can be the most damaging. Unfortunately, physical abuse happens quite often, but people being emotionally abused need to be heard and acknowledged too.

Being told they can't do anything and being doubted makes reporting so much harder. I think people are scared of rejection, at least I am. I get nervous and uncomfortable when I don't know how to help the situation. It's easy to feel helpless after being shut down.

Thankfully for my grandparents, sober dad, sisters, and friends, I have a strong support system that supports me in doing the right thing even when it is hard. I am now able to let go of the burden that my mom placed on me and make hard decisions guilt-free. Proudly, I have taken the bad example of my mother to do my very best in school and have strong relationships with other people. Life is full of unexpected things but for now, life is good. I am on track to graduate as a junior in May of 2022, but the most exciting thing is that I can go to sleep knowing that ALL my sisters are safe because of my heroes, my grandparents.

TADAKAMALLA, RUTHVI**Ruthvi Tadakamalla**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Annemarie Schloeman

Category: Poetry

Blood Poem

There is a river in me,
one that is red,
one that makes me strong,
one that fights for me
and one that protects me.

Like stars composed of hydrogen and helium,
my river is composed of plasma and river cells.
My river is red from the hemoglobin in my red river cells.
The red river cells with a span of 4 months,
being replaced as they die.

Like the simplicity of the color white,
white river cells are uncomplicated but crucial.
These leukocytes are created in my bone marrow
but stored in my river.
Their job is to destroy harmful substances and prevent illness.

Platelets are like knights in shining armor,
whose shields protect them
and the people they serve.
Platelets defend blood vessels from leaking
by making a barrier in the damaged area.

My river is a saint,
carrying so much,
all the waste materials and carbon dioxide,
along with the hormones and cells that fight infectious diseases,
carrying these is a job my river does constantly.

Like the way the earth travels around the sun,
my river travels all through my body,
transporting vital nutrients and oxygen.
Without oxygen,
the most sensitive organ in my body would be damaged and left with no fix.

Without this river,
I would perish.
My friends and family would be left with a body discolored,
veins empty,
and nothing being pumped by my heart.

Even with this river,

I may suffer from numerous conditions.
From cancers like Leukemia and Lymphoma to
infections like malaria and bacteremia to
imbalances in my body like polycythemia and anemia.

There is no guarantee that I will die with these conditions,
for there are many treatments.
Chemotherapy for cancers,
antibiotics for infections,
And erythropoietin and bloodletting for imbalances.

My river may need to be tested sometimes,
and it may undergo one of the three main types of tests.
One is a complete river count,
another is a metabolic panel,
and lastly, there is a lipid panel.

My river may not be a universal river donor,
but I've always thought of my river as unique.
I'm part of the one percent who has an AB negative river.
I'm grateful to the antigens on the surface of my red river cells,
which told me my river is not part of the other 99%.

There is a river in me,
one that is red,
one that makes me strong,
one that fights for me,
and one that protects me.

TAO, CHRIS**Chris Tao**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Flash Fiction

Peeled Paint

I zip up my coat all the way to the top, so that the zipper hits my chin and it stings. Every day I miss my father, but I try to push those thoughts out of my head. I wish I could go back to school, I wish I didn't have to take care of my mom and baby sister, I wish we could have our car, and I wish I didn't have to work two shifts a day just so we can barely keep going. I've gotten used to wishing these things, and I've also gotten used to the realization that they won't come true.

The harsh snow and wind howl in my ears and sting my face as I sludge through the unplowed streets. My faded North Face jacket is soaked and sticks to my skin. The green polo with the shiny name tag that says "Zach" and black pants along with the half eaten subway sandwich felt like bricks in my bag on the long walk back home. It hardly ever snows down here, so when it does no one is prepared. The smell of hot coffee and the sound of laughter pouring out of the town almost made me crack a smile. But I haven't done that since the days of family photos and board games, middle school and running through the sprinklers. The streets are busy full of vendors, which I try to avoid like hurdles. The unmowed walk up to the house makes my ankles itch, and the snow makes my nose sting with pain.

"I'm home mama" the words ring through the house as the silence screams back at me. I slowly clasp my hands in my shirt in a vain attempt to warm them up as I head to the staircase. The stairs creak as my hand runs along the wall, some peeled paint falling off. I walk past my mama's room, which is full of employment ads and numbers of job leads that she has been frantically trying to land for as long as I can remember. The ashtray on her coffee table is full and you can almost feel every time she's cried as she hung up the phone hoping for something better. You can see the splintered wood haphazardly lying on the floor because of all the times she's come home, slammed the door and I would know I would have to do everything myself like usual. I hear the muffled wails coming from the next room over. I walk over to Tulip's room and slowly turn the doorknob. Her crib sits there in the middle of the cornflower colored walls. The thin stack of diapers and pull ups sits there in the corner. Exiting quietly, I wondered if mama's even fed her this morning.

I enter my room, put my bag down in a thump and sit there in the silence. My hands move under my bed and look for the familiar soft feel of the wooden box that I've reached for during the last 5 years. My callused hands carefully sort through the dozens of old polaroid photos of me and my daddy and mama. The cleaning fluid from the Hilton Inn is still partly dried on my hands, and I gingerly try to touch the photos only on the very corner so that there isn't a chance that they will be damaged. At the beach, by the fire, memories so faded I can't even remember being in them. I can't take much longer, because soon mama will be home, and I'll have to start preparing dinner before my night shift at the gas station. The sadness that has always trapped me, like when I wake up to an alarm and keep pressing snooze and never end up waking up, started to boil up.

I run and grab Tulip from her crib. I put her sleeping tiny body into the baby carrier we got at goodwill 6 months ago. I remember memories of wondering who the father was. So many things in this family were lost, and I pray to god she won't be one of them. I had to give up so much just to survive, and I won't let that happen to her. I grab one of the pencil stubs and scrawl out a note.

"Mama, 5 years ago you told me to be strong. Now it's your turn."

TIGGARD, SKYLAR**Skylar Tiggard**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Humor

Battle of the Bingo Hall*God, I hate that old bat.*

Velma. I hate the way she always taps her fake nails on the bingo table like she's already won and the game is just a formality. Those red nails are always impeccable; her daughter takes her out every other Tuesday to get them done. Not that I keep track, mind you. Anyone would notice that her nails were so perfect if she was tapping them in their face all the time.

"G16!"

Velma reached into her pile of chips and placed one in her square very deliberately with each side going down in a *tap-thump*. I must have grumbled out loud because one of the nurses came over, a young woman in her forties, and asked,

"Edith, can I get you a glass of water?"

"Oh, no thank you, dear." I smiled sweetly at her. If she really wanted to help, she'd make sure the next one was an I4.

"B7!"

Not ideal. My B7 was hanging off the edge instead of in line with my other chips, but a win's a win. Or so I thought until I saw Velma grab a chip with her ridiculous nails and place it down. I leaned forward just a little to see her board. *Damn*. All she needed was an N77 and a G21 to win.

"You got a problem or something?" It was Velma looking right at me.

"Not at all, why?" I tried to look as innocent as possible, but she wasn't buying it.

"Then keep your eyes on your own board, you busybody."

She used her nail to push back a clump of black hair. Still dying her hair at our age! Who is she trying to fool? And such an ugly black too! Cheap and dry, and there were still coarse strands of silver streaking through. She had real pretty brown hair when we were younger that she always wore in a braid down her back. When we were on the cheer team in high school, it would whip around every time she turned her head, nearly taking out the girl next to her. And all these years later, I'm still stuck with her! Where else would we be, though? It's the only nursing home within an hour of town, and there's not a whole lot of us who stuck around.

"N77!"

Velma grabbed her chip. I was running out of time. I just needed a few more to win.

"I4!"

Yes! I snatched up a chip and put it down on my board, looking right at Velma who rolled her eyes.

"O28!"

Tap-thump

"B12!"

Mine.

"N6!"

We stared at each other. Neither of us had it, and we were just more away.

"G21!"

And that's it. I'm done. I waited to hear Velma's *tap-thump*. But it didn't come. I looked at her, and she looked right back, not moving a twitch. She didn't hear? No, Velma's like a bloodhound in the bingo hall, she doesn't miss a thing. I was so wrapped up in it that I almost didn't hear the next number.

"B81!"

"BINGO!"

I stood up waving my arms. After reading off my numbers, the room let out a smattering of polite applause. As the nurses came around to collect the boards, I followed the crowd out into the sitting room, and there was Velma sitting

alone by the west window where the last rays of sun were streaming in. I walked over and stood right in front of her. She kept looking out the window pretending not to see me.

“Why didn’t you call it?” She finally looked up.

“Call what?”

“Bingo. You won and we both know it.” I crossed my arms, staring down at her.

“I missed it,” She said bluntly as if she didn’t care at all.

“Bull. You don’t miss anything, as you love to remind people.” She rolled her eyes.

“Oh move on, would ya? I said I missed it, so I missed it. Now go bother someone else, you’re blocking the window.”

There it is. I don’t know what else I expected from this senile old hag. She’s just as snotty as she was back when we were kids. I stomped off, but I still wonder about it. *Why didn’t she put her chip down?*

TIGGARD, SKYLAR**Skylar Tiggard**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

Fighting Everyday Evils

“You don’t interrupt me *ever*. That was rude.”

This sentence was the final straw for me. After over a year of witnessing my coworker mistreat others, I was enraged at his hypocrisy. I couldn’t believe that he would be so appalled by being accidentally talked over after hearing the things he said to others.

When I was sixteen years old, I got my first job at a local restaurant. I had done some babysitting for neighbors in the past, but had never had a job with a real boss and coworkers. I was the youngest person working there with most of my coworkers being in their mid-20s or older. Yet there was one shift leader, Jim, who I had heard about on my first day of training. I had other coworkers warn me that he was generally lazy and rude, but I assumed that any job had at least one worker like that and figured I would make the best of my shifts with him.

As the months went on, this became more and more difficult. Jim was regularly condescending, and seemed to target one particular cashier in his early 20s who was autistic and had a habit of oversharing information about his poor relationship with his family. Jim would regularly spread false rumors about him, and even lie to the coworker directly about things that others had said about him. This struck a particular nerve with me. I can comprehend laziness or having poor social skills, but spreading rumors like this seemed completely unnecessary. This idea of needless evil is explored in the article “When Evil is Cool” in which Roger Shattuck explores three examples of evil literature, one of which is known as the Renegade of Avignon. In this story, a man, the renegade, gained the friendship of a wealthy Jew and lived in his home. One night the renegade comes home and laments that someone has denounced them to the Inquisition and they were both to be imprisoned and burned at the stake. The wealthy man made plans to sell all of his belongings and buy a ship in which they could both escape with his fortune. But the night before they left, it is revealed that no one has denounced them, and the renegade stole the other man’s last belongings and moved to escape alone on the ship with his fortune, but not before denouncing his victim to the Inquisition himself, causing the poor man to die a horrible death. This final detail of the story is described by Shattuck as “Largely unnecessary, a kind of meastos flourish or fiend’s laughter” (Shattuck 74). It is this lack of purpose that makes the renegade’s actions so despicable. As readers, we can comprehend feelings of greed, and while robbing someone who trusts you is a horrible action, the renegade’s decision to kill the man in a horrible way even when he gains nothing from it brings the story to another level of cruelty. While true evil may be extreme when describing a workplace bully, it certainly explained how Jim’s actions stood out to me.

As this behavior continued, I found him repeatedly yelling at our cooks, mainly those who didn’t speak English as their first language. One night came after working there for several months where I was in the kitchen doing dishes after close. Jim was trying to tell our cook, a trans woman who only speaks Spanish, that she didn’t need to scrub the floor that night, as someone else had already done it earlier. He typed this into Google Translate and showed it to her, yet she seemed visibly confused. After Jim walked away, our cook, not understanding, continued to close as usual which included scrubbing the floors. When Jim saw this, he began yelling “No!” and screaming at her in English. She was angry at this point and tried to argue back in Spanish at which point Jim said to “Go, just leave!” She clocked out and left while Jim finished closing the kitchen. When I finished closing, Jim said that it was unacceptable for Her to walk out on a shift and that Codey would hear about it. I tried to tell myself that it didn’t have anything to do with me. I wasn’t the one being targeted, so it wasn’t my place to speak up. After all, both of Jim’s victims were adults and presumably more capable than me at handling issues with coworkers. At the same time, it was difficult for me to get out of my head. Certainly, feelings of empathy are all a result of what evolution has put in our heads as explained in the article “What Makes Us Moral?” where Jeffery Kluger covers a study that was done to explain the science behind empathy. He explains that couples underwent MRI screening while subjected to mild pain. Researchers took note of which parts of the brain lit up when participants were warned they would experience pain and while they experienced pain. They compared these findings to when participants were told their

partner was about to experience pain and found that, “Even when they couldn’t see their partner, the brains of the subjects lit up precisely as if they were about to experience the pain themselves” (Kluger 57). In this way, humans feel each other’s pain in more than just a metaphorical sense. Empathy is not only natural, but ingrained into who we were as human beings. It explained why, even though I wasn’t the target of Jim’s words, I felt driven to help my coworkers. But if empathy is controlled by our brains and is a mechanical result of evolution, then why did I have this conflicting pressure to not speak up?

Consequently, Kluger acknowledges another influence over our morals; our desire to belong. He references the story of the Arnhem Zoo in the Netherland in which chimpanzees were only fed when the entire group was present. Two young chimps willfully remained outside the enclosure, and it took hours for zoo keepers to coax them inside at which point, the rest of the group had grown angry. The next day the other chimps beat the two adolescents who, as a result, were the first to reach the feeding enclosure that night. Kluger clarifies these events by explaining, “If membership in a tribe is the way you ensure yourself food, family and protection from predators, being blackballed can be a terrifying thing” (Kluger 58). Likewise, I knew what Jim was doing was wrong, yet there was such a strong part of me that wanted to let it go. I was sixteen. I was a part-time teenage girl in the world of adults who was likely to be viewed as causing drama and meddling in things that weren’t my place to intervene in. It seemed unlikely that I would be taken seriously, and instead would be looked down on by others. Then there was the fear of retaliation as I knew that Jim was likely to retaliate in some way if it got back to him that I went over his head and spoke to our boss. I thought it might be easier to put in my two weeks notice and find a new job as other former coworkers had done after working with this shift leader. The fear of being ostracized or looked down upon within this group discouraged me from speaking up in defense of my coworkers.

At the same time, I realized that Jim had been targeting specific people for a reason. The cook didn’t speak English, so she had no way of defending herself to our boss, someone who didn’t speak Spanish. Similarly, the cashier was very open about his autism and the fact that he didn’t have family to rely on. Jim was taking advantage of the fact that neither of them had the tools to defend themselves as well as his own position of power in the store. Much like how in *Paradise Lost*, Satan paints God as a tyrant by claiming, “What matter where, if I still be the same,/ And what should I be, all but less than he/ Whom thunder hath made greater?” (Milton 1.256-258). In his case, God was a tyrant because he treated others as less than for being less strong than himself and used his power to bully others into submission. In like manner, Jim was more powerful than them as a manager of the store and used that to target those that were below him position wise as well as vulnerable in ways that made them feel as though they were unable to defend themselves. I had previously had the assumption that since everyone else was an adult, they would be more mature than I was or otherwise be able to defend themselves against bullies. When Emilia in Shakespeare’s *Othello* realized that, despite being a woman speaking in an arena she wasn’t allowed, she was the only one who was able to speak the truth about Desdemona’s death, she declared, “I will speak as liberal as the North./ Let heaven and men and devils, let them all,/ All, all cry shame against me, yet I’ll speak” (Shakespeare 5.2.261-263). Similarly, I knew that I was the only one who had witnessed all of these events and who had the ability to speak out against them. This realization is what encouraged me to go to my boss about what I had seen.

The next day I came in a few minutes earlier to talk to my boss. I told him briefly about what I had seen, and I was told to turn in a signed statement. My parents helped me write the statement as I had never written anything like it before. I was completely out of my depth and needed my parents there to help show me through as Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, writes “What in me is dark/ Illumine, what is low raise and support,” (Milton 1.22-23) to call upon the support of a muse who would guide him through the writing of his epic. I also needed guidance to ensure that I wrote something professional that got my point across without being seen as a dramatic child. It is this social, collaborative part of humanity that required me to call on the adults in my life for help much like my coworkers needed my voice to speak out.

Jim’s actions stood out to me, someone who had never had a real job before, because a part of my biology—a part shared by all humans— signaled that his behavior was morally wrong. This innate knowledge of what is good and what is evil is perhaps the most human thing of all, and perhaps knowing is the best tool nature could give us against needless, everyday evils.

TRAN, SAMANTHA**Samantha Tran**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Angry

Angry

Would you believe me if I said my favorite word is angry? Angry. It's a simple five-letter word, emotion, and feeling that we are all familiar with. An emotion that people commonly try to avoid, and one of those people used to be me. I've always been taught, the world doesn't want you to be angry, the world wants you to, *Be Happy!* and *Choose Joy!* But what people don't talk about are the struggles and anger even the people with the most seemingly perfect life feel.

I was always an angry child growing up. I would slam doors, break my lego sets, and hit my siblings to express my shallow anger. The biggest difference between me then, and me now, is I didn't have much to be angry about when I was younger. Besides not having dinosaur nuggets for dinner every night, I was pretty much living my life to the fullest. Fortunately, and unfortunately, with age comes knowledge, so let's just say knowledge hit me like a bus.

My parents divorced before I was three-years-old. At first, this didn't seem like a big deal to me. Two houses and two Christmases did not sound like the end of the world. As I grew older, I realized there was entirely more to divorced parents than double the birthday presents. Deep down, I was jealous of the other kids at school who were blessed enough to have only one, connected and unbroken family and not two, divided ones. I felt angry and frustrated that everyone around me seemed to have such perfect families, but my family was nowhere near that.

Along with being the only person I knew with divorced parents, I was also the only person I knew who was Vietnamese. I go to a predominantly Caucasian school, with an Asian population of .004 percent. Not a single person at my school looked like me, besides my sister. At a young age, I noticed when girls with beautiful blonde hair started to take the spotlight. *What do I have to do, to be likðer?* I would think to myself. I desperately wanted to be beautiful, I wanted to feel beautiful, but most importantly, I wanted to blend in. In my group of friends, I felt like I stuck out like a sore thumb, and I hated it. I wanted to live carelessly, put on an outfit without a thought, go home to a family dinner and tell my mom and dad how my day was, but I couldn't. I just couldn't get the feeling of anger and jealousy out of my mind.

As I entered middle school, I changed. Changed me to be the girl my younger self dreamt of being. The number on the scale dropped, the amount of makeup increased, and my fake confidence was higher than ever. Boys like me now, so why don't I like myself? I couldn't handle the feeling of still being left unsatisfied, so I chose to ignore the true emptiness inside of me. In my mind, if I made myself busy enough, there would be no time to acknowledge my inner self. Wake up, put on makeup, go to school, go to volleyball practice, eat a snack, go to softball, eat dinner, shower, and then repeat. Nowhere in my "perfect" schedule did I allow myself to feel any sort of true emotion.

The label of, "ugly Vietnamese girl with a weird family life," turned into "a smart girl, a girlfriend, an athlete." I decided I needed to live by my labels. My new labels were normal, they were accepted, and even though they were shallow and basic, they were validating. I was stuck. Stuck in a loop of emotionless invaluable activity. But if I don't feel sadness, it must mean I'm happy, right?

In a moment of darkness and loneliness, I was left with nothing to keep me occupied. I no longer had labels and schedules to devote my life to. There was no school, I lost all my friends, and my sports seasons were on hold; the only thing left was "me." When my life started slowing down, I finally noticed the world I built around me was crumbling apart. I thought I liked my new self, but really I liked the idea of the labels I lived by. If I didn't like myself now, and I didn't like myself before I changed, what, and who, was I supposed to morph into this time? I was lost, scared, and unhappy. But most of all I was angry: angry nobody knew the real me, angry that even I didn't know the real me, angry that no matter what I did I was never good enough for the one person who truly matters in my life: myself.

I finally realized I needed to stop running from my anger. I could never grow as a person if I didn't face the battles I ignored the past thirteen years of my life. I now know that being angry isn't always a bad thing. "Angry"

means passion, “Angry” means you care, “Angry” means that at this moment you might be at rock bottom; but the fact you have the strength to be angry about something means you can find happiness, too. I became okay with my family life and culture. I stopped being embarrassed about the things going on around me that I couldn’t control. I didn’t hide behind my labels anymore; I embraced them. I didn’t just have to be smart, stressed, athletic, sad, basic, exciting, happy, or angry. I could be me. Samantha Tran, the person who I’ve been running from my entire life. I would be lying if I said my life has been consummate since my new realizations, but the most important thing is I am no longer scared of being angry. I take my emotions one day at a time, I validate myself, and I no longer try to “blend in” and make my life look perfect. I used to think being different was my greatest weakness, but now I know that being special is my greatest strength.

TUTEUR, JACOB**Jacob Tuteur**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Personal Analytical Reflection on The Scarlet Letter

A couple years ago, my dance teacher invited some of her students to work at her wedding reception. I don't vividly remember the reception itself, but what I do remember vividly are the events that followed the reception. As guests began to leave, our work-load lessened enough to where I was able to hang out with some of my friends who also worked that night. Eventually, I received a text from my dad. He told me that he had arrived and was ready to leave. I asked for more time and he agreed to wait outside. Shortly thereafter, my pocket began to buzz. With an urgent tone, he said that he needed to go home now to use the bathroom. I then gathered my belongings, said goodbye to my friends, and left. Sure, I might have wanted to stay with my friends a little longer, but I was not bothered at all that I had to leave. As I sat down in the passenger's seat of my dad's station wagon, I could sense his skittishness. Immediately, he apologized for making me leave, and I forgave him. I did not think too much about it. Still very tense and hurried, he continued to plead for forgiveness the entire ride home, and I continued mindlessly to forgive him. However, once we arrived back at home, he hobbled inside to the restroom as I went up to my room. A few minutes later, he knocked on my door, continuing to apologize. By this point, I clearly had expressed that I was not bothered in the slightest. I came to grow more annoyed by his repeated apologies than for what he even was apologizing.

I found it worth examining why he reacted with such guilt at that moment. To what extent does his guilt, and guilt in general, revolve around one's own values or the values of others? At the beginning of this investigation, I figured that exploring the source of Dimmesdale's grief might provide some insight into my dad's shame, having noticed some striking similarities between their situations. After reuniting with seven years of no interaction, Dimmesdale asks Hester whether she has found peace. In response, she gestures to her scarlet letter and returns the same question. Dimmesdale then emphatically shares that he has retained his grief and asserts, "What else could I look for, being what I am, and leading such a life as mine? Were I an atheist, - a man devoid of conscience, - a wretch with coarse and brutal instincts, - I might have found peace, ere long ago." (131) I found his suggestion that his conscience prevents him from achieving peace to provide insight into the source of my dad's guilt. The minister expresses that, if he no longer devoted himself to promoting God and spreading Puritan ideology, he would be capable of escaping his current grief. While my dad may not be a Puritan minister, I realized that both he and Dimmesdale believed themselves to have violated a moral standard. Given that his occupation entails him to promote purity, Dimmesdale's involvement in Hester's adultery complicates his attainment of peace by directly opposing the societal values that he advocates. Although, at this point in the book, he has not yet revealed his offence publicly, he still recognizes his deceitfulness to society in his present preachings as a result of his past sin. Similarly, I think that my dad understands his guilt to arise from his deceitfulness to me. While he had intended for me to stay at the reception with my friends for as long as I wished, he ultimately went against his own word upon urgently having to use the restroom. Just as Dimmesdale feels that society expects him to be a symbol of purity, my dad feels that I expect him to be an objectively "good parent." The fear of not living up to this parental standard was the source of his immense guilt.

Unlike the Puritan society in Dimmesdale's case, however, I clearly had shared with my dad that I was unbothered by the situation. He was able to hear my direct response, whereas the minister only could imagine the response of the Puritan people. Why has my dad continued to hold onto his shame *to this day*, even after I repeatedly had forgiven him? What would allow my dad to relieve himself of this guilt? I revisited his response to Hester for any answers and found that, in addition to his conscience, Dimmesdale blames his guilt on his inability to act by his own instincts. More specifically, he conveys that those driven by self-values will find peace, implying that those such as he, driven by external values, would have difficulty in this endeavor. In this claim, I discovered that the remedy to my dad's guilt was to trust his own instincts over those of others. After considering this notion, I began to notice how this

struggle applied to other instances in his everyday life, one of which being his drafting of important emails. Frequently, my dad will run email drafts by my mom or me before sending them. While my dad is capable of reviewing the drafts himself, he chooses to turn to others who are less versed than he in grammar and writing. In order to relieve himself of his guilt from the wedding reception incident, I believe that my dad should learn that he doesn't need to please everyone all of the time and to trust that his own desires, in this case using the bathroom, are just as important as everyone else's.

In my investigation of this moment, however, I realized that I am just as attached to this memory as my dad. For so long, I have viewed my dad's remembrance of this moment as bizarre, while retaining this moment myself in the process. To what extent does my investigation of this moment differ from my dad's remembrance of it? I related this dilemma of mine to Hester's feelings of guilt over Dimmesdale's grief. She questions, "...whether there had not originally been a defect of truth, courage, and loyalty, on her own part in allowing the minister to be thrown into a position where so much evil was to be foreboded, and nothing auspicious to be hoped. Her only justification lay in the fact, that she had been able to discern no method of rescuing him from a blacker ruin than had overwhelmed herself, except by acquiescing in Roger Chillingworth's scheme of disguise." (114) As I further analyzed Hester's attachment toward Dimmesdale's guilt, I began to notice some similarities between Hester's and my behavior. She contends that her own vices have caused her to take blame for the minister's grief. Moreover, she feels the urge to take responsibility for this guilt and single-handedly remove it, as suggested by the word "rescued." I feel that I share this habit with Hester. Especially when it comes to group projects in school, I always tend to take the leadership position and micro-manage everything. Hester notes that this habit of assuming authority motivates her intense concern for Dimmesdale's mental health by causing her to feel responsible for resolving it. While I long have been aware of my tendency to micro-manage, I now see that it similarly provokes mild feelings of guilt regarding my dad's shame. Hester's odd feelings of authority over Dimmesdale's guilt helped me realize that my remembrance of this incident is not all that different from my dad's.

The Scarlet Letter has helped me realize that, in order to overcome guilt, one must pursue their own values and stop trying to fulfill others' expectations. While I initially prescribed this advice to my dad on account of his attachment to an incident that occurred several years ago, I have come to define my own attachment to it and learned that I should consider applying this advice to my own life.

URIBE, HADLEY**Hadley Uribe**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Geri Cruvey

Category: Poetry

Sunday Dinners**Sunday Dinners**

Every Sunday,
for as long as I can remember,
Great-Grandma Millie,
floating around
humming a soft tone
smile so wide and infectious.

Her secret for looking so young,
never frown
laugh.

The sound was a song I only heard on Sundays.
If you smile,
then you'll be young forever.
I never frowned at a family dinner.

As I got older,
family dinners became rarer and rarer.
I don't remember the last Sunday meal Grandma Millie cooked.
Her smile and her laugh,
I remember.

URIBE, HADLEY**Hadley Uribe**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Geri Cruvey

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

2:48 AM

I sit on the couch, facing my sister, as she hangs up the phone. She sets her phone on the glass table in front of us. Her solid purple case stares back at me.

“Who were you talking to?” I ask.

“Dad—Grandpa’s in the hospital.” Her frown deepens. “He said we should go see him today.”

I blink. “Do I have to?”

Her eyes snap from the carpet to me. “Yes. You *have* to. What do you have going on?”

“Well...Sadie and Layne and I were gonna go to Worlds of Fun.”

“You can’t go tomorrow night?”

“We have practice,” I say. She sighs and shakes her head. “I mean he’ll be okay, right? Can’t I go see him tomorrow?”

“He’ll be fine but let me talk to Dad.”

I watch her leave the living room and disappear into the basement. My stomach is inside out, and my feet are covered in cement. My grandpa is the strongest man I know, and this isn’t the first time he’s been in the hospital. *It’s just for precaution*, my dad’s words from the last time he was there echos in my mind. My fingers are typing as I imagine my grandpa sitting on the couch next to me. He smiles wide when I press *send*.

“Dad says you need to go see Grandpa,” my sister—Lucy—says.

“Is he gonna be okay?”

“...You need to see him.”

“Lucy...” My throat closes. Waves of chills run down my arms, my legs, my spine. *Just a precaution*. My fingers are engulfed in my grandpa’s—my Papa’s—soft hand. I squeeze my fist making sure he doesn’t float away.

“Just get ready...What are you doing about your friends?” She runs her hand through her thick, straight hair, disrupting her middle part.

“I already texted them.” I turn to walk upstairs. “While you were talking to Dad,” I add. She nods and goes back downstairs. I open my hand, hoping to find Papa’s gold ring staring back at me, but I’m met with crescent shaped marks refusing to fade from my palm.

I spend the car ride imagining the lives of the people driving around us. I try to imagine if they were going to the hospital to see a loved one as well. The car is stuck in uncomfortable silence. No one tries to speak, and music is a forgotten concept. We all try to hold our breaths. Like one breath too loud and we’d break into pieces. As soon as I step into the waiting room and am met with a hug from my aunt, I break down. I cry and I don’t even know why. Caitlin said he was going to be fine. Dad said it was just a precaution. There was no reason to cry. My aunt strokes my hair, making the same kind of promises to me.

They warned me that he might not look like himself. That I shouldn’t think of him like this. That this wasn’t really him. I don’t believe them until I see the tubes sticking out of his nose and the monitors surrounding him—ready to alert the doctors and everyone in the room if things went bad. My lip quivers as I hover by the door. My sister pinches my arm. Her eyes bore into mine as if saying, *Don’t cry*. I nod and step towards him.

“Hi Papa,” I say. “How are you feeling?” My voice betrays me as it breaks. Because we all know how he’s doing. He tells us he’s been better. We all hug him and I want to kiss him on the cheek—like usual—but the tubes discourage me. I don’t move away from him right away. He doesn’t smell like himself—like leather. He notices my lingering and takes my hand into his own. I let out a breath as I feel his soft skin on mine. His grasp is weak, but I don’t let his hand go. On the outside his eighty-one years shine bright, but his palm feels like a warm, soothing blanket. I didn’t let go until he pats our entwined hands with his free one. A silent signal that he won’t float away. I squeeze my eyes shut and let go, slowly moving to stand by my sister. She holds me to her side. My brother talks softly like he doesn’t trust his voice, but he keeps telling Papa about his work—he works as an intern for the same

company my grandpa and dad worked for. Papa laughs and tells his own story about work. Then a story about his life growing up. Caitlin and my mom laugh loudly and ask questions. Their voices are strong and happy. I stay silent.

We take turns talking to him and sitting in the waiting room. Only four of us can be in the room at a time, and my aunt or grandma come in every twenty minutes to listen to him talk. At those times a few of us would leave to give them a turn. I leave first, telling them I have to use the bathroom anyway. I cry in the stall. The waiting room is silent when I get back. All I hear is the machines helping my grandpa breathe. No one else seems to hear them.

My aunt asks me how softball is and I tell her good. "We have a tournament this weekend," I say. She nods and looks at the ground. A beat goes by. "It's just hard to be in there," I say. "He sounds like Papa, but he doesn't..."

"Sound like him," she says. I nod. "Well, he's still making jokes."

"Yeah...nothing could stop that." We both laugh, but nothing is funny. I don't know when our laughing turns to crying, but we don't stop until my mom comes back out to tell me he's getting his medicine and we should probably say goodbye.

I hug him as we say goodbye, but I can't say anything as I hold back tears. I can't tell him that he was my first best friend, that I want to hear more stories about his life, that I can't wait for him to watch me graduate like he did for everyone else, that he makes me laugh, how much I love him. My grandpa makes a joke about his heart, his liver, his lungs, and everything else in him failing. We all laugh. I wonder if I'm the only one who doesn't think it's a joke. His monitors start beeping and the nurse watching us say goodbye tells us he needs his medicine. That translates to *You have to leave now* I give him one more hug and am halfway out the door when I realize I didn't tell him that I loved him. My mom stops and says we need to go. Two nurses surround him as he looks at the tiled ceiling.

"I love you, Papa," I say. It comes out as a whisper. He doesn't react. My mom nods once more towards my fleeting siblings. "He didn't hear me."

"It's okay, we'll come back tomorrow. You can tell him then." I nod. With one last look at the tubes, the nurses, and machines blocking Papa from my view, I walk out of the room.

I didn't fall asleep until 3 a.m. that night. I'm wide-awake thinking of his laugh and his hands. They were the only things that seemed normal about him. The only things about that visit that I want to remember. I want to forget the way he had to stop his stories to cough. I want to forget the way his eyes drooped down even as he smiled. Most of all I want to forget how I didn't say I love you and I didn't get to hear him say it back. Something in me interrupts my thoughts and tells me to look at the time: 2:48 a.m. My mind settles as I stare at the time.

"I love you Papa." I turn my lights off.

The next morning, I hear my dad cry for the first time as he tells me Papa passed away at 2:48 a.m. last night.

URIBE, HADLEY**Hadley Uribe**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Geri Cruvey

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Mi Casa No es Tu Casa

“I love you round and round the world. I love you through and through. And when it seems impossible to love you more... I do.” Dad’s voice rings through my ears.

The Hallmark pre-recorded book feels heavy in my lap. “I love you too, Daddy,” I whisper. Tears stream down my pink cheeks.

It’s not fair. It’s not fair. It’s not fair.

xxx

“Everyone, Gather around Baylor’s computer,” Mrs. Murphy says.

Twenty kindergarteners, just like me, are quickly making their way towards my seat. My smile grows at the wide eyes of my peers.

“So, these are flowers that my dad sees every day,” I say, “He lives in this really cool place. It’s called Guam. It has the most beautiful flowers you’ll ever see.”

Sadness washes over me as I think of the months my dad spends in Guam, and not with me.

I blink. The little faces all around me don’t reflect my own. They seem almost jealous. My shoulders straighten. I imagine dad next to me, his hand on my shoulder.

Sure, he isn’t home all the time, but he sends me pictures of rare flowers. A beat goes by. They have dads that get to stay all of the time.

It’s not fair. It’s not fair. It’s not fair.

xxx

“Dad, pass the ball to me!” a fellow seven-year-old says. His voice carries through the playground. I squeeze my knuckles so tight I feel a burn in my palm from my nails.

The days there are visitors, recess is the hardest. I see girls my age hugging their dads. I’m reminded that mine isn’t here. I stare blankly ahead as I throw the tetherball around the pole—imagining my dad is here, throwing back around to me, picturing all the different games we’d play on the playground. I can’t help but start to smile.

I know that’ll never be me, but I find happiness in the hope that my dad might, one day, stop working so much and come throw the tetherball with me.

It’s not fair. It’s not fair.

xxx

“I’m gonna write them a letter!” I say into my mom’s shoulder. “It’s not fair! Why does he have to go!” There’s silence as the world sits still.

“He promised!” I say. She soothes my back, nodding her head. “My birthday is next Tuesday! It’s my eighth birthday—my golden birthday—and he can’t be there.” *Stupid Guam*, I think; the anger boils inside me.

It’s not fair.

xxx

“What can I do to make it better?” my dad asks. His voice is rushed, and he holds a slight smile. It’s not like his real smile. I want to tell him to stay.

“You—you can’t fix it...” I say.

“Bay?”

Tell him to stay Tell him how you feel. Tell him it’s hard to stay happy.

“Baylor, come on,” he says. Each sentence is coming out in a sigh that sounds more like a laugh. Nothing is funny to me.

“I—I want you to— maybe you could buy me a golden retriever?”

His eyebrows raise and his head leans to the left slightly. I know what I’ve just asked is impossible. *Next time, he’ll have to stay.*

"I'll see what I can do...I'll ask your mom," he says. I focus on the small gap between his two front teeth. He talks with his hands. I force a smile while my throat burns.

"Okay, Bay, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Oh, okay—bye, Dad." My voice cracks as I hang up the Skype call.

It's not f—the thought stops in my head.

xxx

"Baylor, your dad is so cool!" the nine-year-old boy, who hasn't spoken two words to me all year, says after Dad talks with the class at Career Day. My dad is an engineer, and I think he's even some type of president in his company. I didn't expect kids to be so interested, but truth be told, he does travel all over the world to design these amazing structures. Not to mention, he moved to America from Colombia when he was only twelve-years-old.

"Thanks, yeah, he is pretty cool," I say with a strain in my voice. *Why are you about to cry?*

I push down any feelings of sadness. My dad is here with me, talking to my class, and not with his work; *you should be happy*. But I'm not. I wish we could engage like this every day.

It's not stopped myself.

xxx

"Hola, Bay!" Dad's voice rings through my ears as I answer his call.

"Hey, Dad," I say. His favorite blanket sits folded in the basement closet. The couch cushions are still two on the left and two on the right—just as Mom had fixed them the night before. I ask why never came home last night. A beat goes by. I say his name. He asks for a venti iced coffee with three shots of espresso on the other end. I say his name again. I hold the phone away from my ear and see I'm not muted. I say his name louder.

"I did," he says.

"Then you should be home."

"Daughter," he sighs. "This time, I'm at a hotel."

URIBE, HADLEY**Hadley Uribe**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Geri Cruey

Category: Flash Fiction

Letters From the Subway

Dear Mom,

Thank you for the subway rides. You taught me that subways go uptown and downtown, that staring is rude, that giving up your seat for pregnant women or the elderly is the right thing to do, Dad always needs to be told what stop to get off on, that reading is a good pastime, people watching is an even better pastime.

Dear Evan,

Thank you for the subway rides. A hug on the subway goes a long way. *You* taught me that. Your father says hello.

Dear Claire,

I spoke to Mom—she says hello. Dad too. How's London? Talk soon.

Dear Mom,

Claire says hello. I went to the park today. I saw a dog that looked just like Koa. He had white, short legs and his latte-colored body was chunky and soft. His bark was mighty despite his size. Maybe it was Koa. He had a red frisbee.

Dear Evan,

Please stop sending me letters. I can't do this anymore.

Dear Evan,

Koa always had a red ball—not a frisbee. Your father says anyone who took in Koa would've given him up by now. How was the park? I'm sure the leaves have started to turn colors. Is it cold out yet? Or is the summer still squeezing out its last days of warmth? It's always cold here. Even on hot summer days—without a cloud in sight—I imagine. Did you get a hot chocolate like usual? In a big round mug?

Dear Claire,

Do you give your daughter high fives on the subway when she finishes a book? Do you tell her you love her? I hope she doesn't want to forget you when she's older.

Dear Mom,

Most trees are still green; except the one by our rock in the park. There are clusters of color hiding under the green. There's one singular yellow leaf out in front. Nothing shields it from view. It looks content. Though I'm sure it's lonely. I see your face sketched with veins within. It's cold here too—summer is long forgotten. Clouds paint the skies; long coats have joined the latest fashion trends once more. I drink coffee now. In a round mug.

Dear Mom,

I haven't heard back from you. I hope you're still feeling cold. I hope you're still thinking about the colors of the trees.

Dear Claire,

You can forget now.

Dear Mom,

All the leaves are different colors now. I hope you're with Dad. Claire used to say if someday you met Dad again he'd turn you away. I never thought that. If it would've been the other way around, you would forgive him. I won't wonder if Dad made it to Heaven like Claire swore he would. Or if your prayers saved you from Hell—despite how you deserved it. I only wonder what your last meal was. Today, I'll take the subway and avoid the paper.

Love,
Evan

URIBE, HADLEY**Hadley Uribe**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Geri Cruvey

Category: Short Story

Eight

I look to the sky. I see flashes of red and blue in the reflection of the stars. Officer Rain says he'll keep the lights going until we find my friend. I ask for a flashlight too, so I can look under the deck. I told him he'd better look in the cornfield, as I'm sure my old mind would get lost in there.

"Oh no, Ms. Harper, I think it best we stay 'ere at the house. Wouldn't want your daughter to think you wandered off, would ya?"

I don't quite understand Officer Rain's question, or even why they had me call my daughter. *The more people looking for Eight, the better, I suppose.*

I see my daughter's headlights as her Honda makes its way up the gravel hill to the house. Once she steps out of her car, I can't help but smile. *I've missed you.* I might have lost her in the darkness if it weren't for Officer Rain's flashing lights illuminating her face.

We look alike. We have the same bright, ocean blue eyes and noses that are slightly larger than the average person's. Her blonde hair falls at her shoulders, while mine, now grey, reaches mid-back when I let it down. Her ears were bigger than mine from the time she was a sweet, little baby, but no one ever pays mind to the fact.

"I'm terribly sorry Officer for the inconvenience," my daughter says to Officer Rain.

"It's quite alright Miss..."

"Harper. Penelope Harper."

"Well, Miss Harper, I'm just doing my job. You got 'er from 'ere?" "Yes, we'll be alright. Thank you, Officer."

With the tip of his hat, he was gone. He was a nice man. I wish he could've met Eight, they would've gotten along. *Wait, Eight. Where's Eight?*

"Mom, you can't just call the police whenever you're lonely."

She thinks I called Officer Rain because I was *lonely*. *Pen has always been such a naive girl.*

"Oh, my sweet Pen. I didn't call the police because I was lonely. I called them because Eight is missing." She frowns at my words. *I wish she wouldn't do that; it gives you wrinkles.*

"Mom, your rabbit is gone. He's been gone for a very long time. We've talked about this before," Pen says.

Pen seems so tired. *I wonder if she's sleeping.* I smile sweetly at her and nod my head. I'd hate to cause her any more stress than what she seems to already be under. *Eight always turns up.*

She ushers me through the door and out of the night's chilly air. I sit in the dining room while Pen goes to the kitchen. I stare down at the tattered, red lace cloth resting on the dark oak table. I've had that cloth since I was a little girl. It was a gift to my Mama and Papa from the neighbors. They were real sweet; bought us all sorts of gifts. *I wonder if they still work at the old schoolhouse.*

Clicking keys echo throughout the otherwise silent house. Pen must be making a call. *I love Pen.* I don't know why she'd say that about Eight. They used to be so close. My favorite memory of them is when Pen was seven. Eight was just two years old but quite big for a rabbit of his age. He had the cutest little pink nose. It reminded Pen of the pebbles I used to throw into the creek with my brothers when we were young. Pen was sitting at the same oak table that I'm sitting at now—minus the dent in one of the legs. It was covered by the same red silky cloth, except it looked brand new. Mama had just placed a cage, the size of a small aquarium, in the middle of the table. Pen tried to unlatch the cage so Eight could roam free, but Mama stopped her.

"My child, you're being impatient."

"But he's done eating."

Mama pointed to the small stub still stuck between his paws. Pen hadn't noticed it before. He looked so content, munching away on the remaining carrot. Her small ears could just barely hear his short breaths.

"Does that look done to you?"

"No, Mama." Pen waited until Mama was gone before she reached through the cage to pet Eight. She stroked his

back with her palm, pushing his ears down in the process. He stared back at her with his tiny, pink-rimmed eyes. He looked at her as a *friend*. Immediately Pen knew what she had to do.

As quietly as she could, she unlatched the square door to the white, metal cage. She reached her pudgy hands inside and lifted Eight up and out with all her might. Once she had him secure in her arms, she tip-toed to the kitchen. She was careful not to move the sweet creature too much as he was already drifting to sleep in her embrace. She reached into a drawer in the kitchen island, searching blindly. She pulled out a blue Sharpie, smiling to herself. *Perfect*; she thought.

Pen plopped to the floor with a thud, flinching at the feeling of cold tile on her short legs. She sat crisscrossed with Eight resting comfortably in her lap. She was thankful he was asleep. Making the least number of movements as possible, she tugged the cap of the Sharpie off, discarding it somewhere on the floor. She carefully traced the numeral eight on the rabbit's back with her finger. Then, with the release of a breath she didn't know she was holding, she traced the same line, but this time with the blue sharpie.

Happiness washed over her as she admired how the blue ink contrasted with his snow-white fur. *Now he'll never forget who he is.*

"Jamie, I can't keep making trips out here. I have a job and my kids to take care of, and besides, she's your mom too."

I'm pulled out of my memory by Pen's voice. She sounds really upset. *Is she talking about me? I hope she's okay; I better go check on her.* I start to rise from my chair and make my way to the kitchen.

"Look, you can't move back here, and I can't stay here every day. Maybe we should look into putting her in a home. Just until she starts to feel like herself again." Penelope's voice freezes me in place. By now, I'm sure she's talking about me. Anger boils in my chest. Suddenly, I'm aware of every noise, smell, and feeling around me. There's a buzzing in my ear, and my socks sit uncomfortably on my feet, making my toes curl. *They're going to send me to a home. My own daughters are sending me to live with strangers.*

I enter the kitchen and Penelope quickly hangs up the phone. She flashes me a fake smile as I round the corner. *She should be ashamed of herself for pretending like everything is happy right now.*

"Hey Mom, how are you feeling?"

"Don't act innocent Penelope. I know what you want to do with me. Where you want to send me."

"Mom, calm down. Nothing has been finalized, and we wanted to talk to you about it first--"

"Oh, please. You've been waiting for this moment. In fact, I'd bet my life you kids stole Eight just to make me look like some old loon, so you could lock me up for good." I knew I hurt her as her gaze dropped to the slightly dirty floor. *God, I need to mop.*

"Mom, please. You have to believe me. We don't want to lock you up."

Bullshit. Those girls have seen me as crazy for years now. Eight is the only one who truly loves me. He doesn't look at me like I'm crazy, he looks at me like a *friend*. "Mom," Penelope's voice comes out as a whisper as she speaks, "can I please have a hug?"

My eyebrows immediately pull together in confusion. Pen sounds so broken. I take a step towards her, but she slides her foot back slightly.

"Pen, Hon, what's troubling you?"

Pen raises her gaze to meet mine. Her normally bright, full of life eyes now look dull. They're filled with tears threatening to spill. My heart breaks at the sight. *What on God's green earth made her feel this way?*

"I just- I miss you." Her nails scratch at her forearms. Goosebumps scatter up and down her pale skin. I quickly take a long stride to reach her and hold her arms still. She doesn't move this time but instead leans into my touch. She tries to scratch her arms again and I steady her, as if to keep her from scratching herself away.

"Well, I'm right here darling," I say.

With that Pen throws herself into my arms, burying her face into my hair. Eight does that when I hold him on my shoulder. *Where is that little thing? I could've sworn I just had him in my lap, sitting on the kitchen floor.* The smell of sharpie lingers in my nose.

I finally pull away from the hug, but Pen doesn't release her grip on my shoulders. Her face is flushed red and her mouth stays in a frown.

"Darling?" I ask.

"Yeah?" She turns away to reach for the tissues on the kitchen island.

"Do you think you could feed Eight while I'm away? I don't want him to come with me to the home. He doesn't like strangers," I say. The ends of Pen's mouth twitch into a soft smile. Maybe even a sad smile? She slowly nods her head, sending relief through my old bones.

"Yeah, Mom. I can do that," she says.

I smile a genuine smile and pull her close again. I breathe in her scent, but all I smell is sharpie.

Eight, please don't let me forget who I am.

URIBE, HADLEY**Hadley Uribe**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Geri Cruvey

Category: Short Story

The Middle Room

The angelic, middle-aged woman stares back at me, waiting for a response. If I wasn't still in shock, I might ask how she gets her teeth to sparkle like that. *She's an angel, Idiot.* I don't think she's blinked once since I first arrived.

"Would you like me to repeat the question, Love?"

"Oh, uh... Yes. I mean, yes please-or yes please, Ma'am," I sigh. "Sorry, I'm new at this." She must think I'm a mess, or she's questioning if I'm in the right place.

"My dear, please don't worry yourself about formalities. You're doing just fine, and I'll let you in on a little secret," she leans in closer. "Everyone is new at this." Her laugh fills my ears and my heart. It's laced with the warmth of every Hallmark Christmas movie ever made.

"Right. Thank you," I say, trying to mimic her perfect smile. "I guess, yes, then. I would like to relive a day."

I swear her smile grows wider, if that's even possible. Her slim fingers begin slamming the keys on the large keypad. If someone had told me three hours ago that I'd be here--in The Middle Room--deciding if I wanted to enter the beyond or redo a day of my life, or past life, I guess, I'd tell them they were insane. I don't think anything could've prepared me for this moment.

"Alright Miss Ray, what day would you like to relive? Please remember, your death will stay permanent, so all days of your life are available for reliving. With that being said, nothing you do will change the course of your life. This is for your peace of mind and will not impact any currently living person's life," the angel says.

I blink, trying to process all that information. *What day do I most regret?*

A few embarrassing falls and bad hair days come to mind first. I could always go back to my brother's first day of high school. It was my senior year, so Dad made us pancakes and bacon in celebration. Timmy tried to act confident walking into the brick hellhole, surrounded by my senior friends. I even believed him until he reached over to squeeze my hand. It was quick, but I felt it. I nudged him in response, as if to say, 'I got you.' It was the first time he showed me any type of affection since he was in diapers. It was the beginning of our unspoken Ray sibling alliance.

The angel, (*god, what is her name?*), clears her throat. I feel her eyes, ironically *burning* into me. *Okay, Posie, think.* My mind feels like mush as I rack my brain for more memories. Maybe I should just choose the memory of Timmy on his first day. It would be a sweet-BAM! Flashes of a memory appear in my mind. Perfect.

"Miss angel-er wait, no- I'm sorry miss-?"

"Prose, dear. Angelina Prose."

"Right, thank you. Miss Prose, I've decided what day I would like to relive," I say.

A droplet of sweat makes its way down my armpit. I'm about to make the most important decision of my life. Miss Prose stares up at me with a slight tilt of her head, as if waiting for me to continue. "Do I just tell you what day I want to return to?"

"You can. Or you could just think very clearly of the day in question, and I'll have you there faster than you can say *The Middle Room*," she says.

I nod slowly. I strain my neck to take a good look at the room surrounding me. The once bigger than life itself, pun intended, room seems so small now, like the walls are caving in on me. I was so thankful to be in The Middle Room when I first arrived. After all, it was here or the side room. According to Miss Prose, The Side Room has to relive the day they regret the most until they finally understand the true message of it and have enough peace to move on to the end room. The End Room is where souls live on for eternity after they die on Earth.

I always worried about if I was gonna end up in Heaven or Hell, but they're about as real as ghosts, which coincidentally, also don't exist. Miss Prose says our souls can't leave the end room once we enter. We immediately get transferred there after we relive our day, or we find peace in The Side Room. There's no way for ghosts to even

get the chance to exist; none of it really makes sense to me.

“Miss Ray, if you could please focus on a memory, it would be greatly appreciated.”

My eyes widen in embarrassment. Her perfect smile looks strained now. *Way to go, you managed to annoy a fricken angel.* I become aware of the cold sensation under my arms again as I close my eyes, letting my mind wander through the years of memories, before settling on one specific day. My shoulders feel heavy like there’s something draped over them. My mouth is dry, but a feeling of hope enters my heart. I feel warm all over. My ears are filled with cheers so loud that I *almost* miss Miss Prose’s last words to me.

“Good luck, love.”

My eyes snap open to the sound of my phone ringing. *Thank the lord, it was just a dream* The incessant car horn of a ringtone echoes throughout my room once again. With a *very* unladylike grunt, I press the green button and hold my phone to my ear, not looking at the name that lights up the screen.

“Posie, are you almost ready? You know we need to be there by 9:15 if we want to avoid waiting for hours.” The sound of honks echoes through the line. “Nice blinker, idiot!”

“Wait, Macy, be where by 9:15?”

Macy sighs and mumbles something under her breath, but I can’t make it out. I can hear the frown in her voice.

“Senior breakfast. Po, come on, we really don’t have time for this. I’m supposed to be the first one there to put all of our names down,” she says.

Senior breakfast? Why would we go to the senior breakfast as juniors in college? I try to blink the confusion away. Sitting up in my twin bed, I reach to my fan and yawn. A beat goes by. *Holy Crap. I’m reliving my graduation day.*

“Macy? Are you still there?”

“Duh.”

I cringe at the cold tone in her voice. “Right, sorry. I’ll be ready in 10,” I say. I don’t give her a chance to argue as I’m already hanging up the phone.

Ten minutes to the second, there’s rapid knocking on the front door. I can’t help the tears that threaten to fall as I open the door to Macy, tapping her foot against the ‘Welcome’ mat. *God, I’m gonna miss you so much* She tugs my wrist, shouting a quick, “Hello!” and, “See ya later Mrs. R!”

We trip over our feet, giggling, as we make our way to her white Ford Fusion. Macy always has a crease between her brows, so seeing her look so peaceful makes me feel *alive*.

“Dude, what took you so long? You’ve known about this for weeks,” she says. If it weren’t for the soft smile gracing her features, I’d think she was annoyed. Or maybe she is annoyed; you never really know with Macy.

“I know, I know. I just woke up feeling...out of place?”

“What do you mean?” Macy asks.

How do I explain that without telling her I’m dead?

“I just felt a little discombobulated, or I still feel like it. I don’t really know,” I say.

Macy reaches for the radio dial. The white noise of Lana Del Rey fades away. She pulls into Sunset Bay Cafe and pulls the key out of the ignition. Florida heat fills the car, as soon as the AC stops blowing. My breath catches in my throat as Macy turns to fully face me.

“Talk to me,” she says.

“How long do you think we’ll be friends?” A thin layer of sweat forms above my brows due to the mix of humidity and anxiety. Macy doesn’t miss a beat in answering.

“Forever,” she says.

The tears are back, but their threat to spill is harder to ignore.

“What if we don’t have forever?”

“Why are you asking me this, Po?”

I don’t have the heart to tell her. I don’t even know if I’m allowed to tell her.

“I’m just- I’m worried about college,” I say. Her posture loosens and she rolls her eyes. I know she thinks I sound ridiculous. *I think I sound ridiculous.* We’ve been friends since we were eight, and our schools are only an hour away from each other. Why would college change anything? It’s a stupid thing to worry about considering we *do* stay friends during college. I guess I’m not supposed to know that though.

“Posie, I can promise you right now that we will be friends forever,” she says.

That’s one of the qualities I love about Macy. She always makes me feel like my feelings are validated. All I can manage to get out is a small smile and nod. Anything more and I might break down.

With the reassurance that my outburst is done, Macy reaches for the door handle. I avoid the cracks in the concrete as we make our way towards the brick building. There’s really no point in avoiding bad luck. I just can’t help myself.

A bell rings above us, causing the host to lift his head from his phone. I can’t believe I forgot where exactly we

were going.

“Hey Sis!” Timmy’s loose curls hang over his eyes. Mom always tells him he needs to cut it, but I think it reflects Timmy’s vibe well. The Timmy I’ve gotten used to stands at 6 foot 2, and only wears, according to him, “the coolest new threads”. This Timmy is shorter and less trendy; it’s comforting to see this version of him again.

“Hey Tim, can we get a table for six?” Macy asks, bringing me back to the present. To the past.

“Yeah, of course. You guys excited for tonight? Knowing you two, I’m surprised you’re not already getting ready,” Timmy says. His laughter fuels my heart with warmth. A warmth I’ve felt before...with Miss Prose.

Macy bounces on the balls of her feet. “I’m so excited! I’m not so sure about this one,” she says, her thumb poking me in the shoulder. “I practically had to drag her out of bed.”

The lines around Timmy’s eyes grow, as does his smile. “Why am I not surprised?” he says.

“Hey, watch it dork, or I might just *forget* to drive you to soccer practice tomorrow,” I say. We both know I’d never actually do it. Timmy loves soccer almost as much as Macy loves being in charge.

“Alright, I’m sorry,” he says, barely containing his amusement.

A silence falls over us, but no one seems to mind. I’m so caught up in trying to memorize every one of Timmy’s features that I miss him telling us to follow him. By the time we make it to the rectangular table in the corner of the cafe, the remaining four of our group are waving at us through the small window that displays the rundown parking lot.

Macy leaps from her seat and meets them at the front. I stay put, watching the scene unfold. Lori and Adelynn are tackled to the ground in a Macy-snug, as we call it, while Miller and Grayson hold on to each other to avoid falling in a fit of laughter. I love my friends.

“You’re gonna miss them when you’re gone, aren’t you?”

Timmy. What does he mean when I’m gone? Does he know? No, that’s not possible.

My voice is shaky as I speak. “What do you mean by ‘when I’m gone’?” I don’t remember him saying that before.

He leans against the table, shoving his hands into the pockets of his khakis. His eyes squint like he’s searching for something.

“When you’re at college?”

“Oh, right, gone at college. Yeah, I’m going to miss them a lot,” I sigh. “Before them, I didn’t know who I was or what I could be. I was just a shell of the person Mom and Dad wanted. Or what society thought I should be. They loved me no matter what for the past four years, and I’ll never forget that.”

I meet Timmy’s eyes and there’s a single tear forming, but he makes no move to wipe it. Instead, he lets it take its natural course down his cheek.

“I’m gonna miss you a lot, Pos,” he says. “It’s gonna be weird without you around.”

My heart breaks as he says this. Timmy doesn’t even know the reality of his words.

“I’m gonna miss you more, Tim. Don’t ever doubt that.” A small smile forms on his face contradicting the pool of tears coating his pale cheeks. “Hey, come on, no tears today, dork. It’s just graduation, no big deal.”

I shove his shoulder, trying to distract him and myself from the conversation.

“First graduation, then, last summer of freedom. Next thing you know, you’re off on your own in the world, and we’ll never see you again.” He takes a breath, hesitating, before going on. “You’ll forget all about us because that’s what happens after high school. You start your *real* life.”

Miss Prose did not prepare me for this conversation. Timmy did not prepare me for this conversation. *I* did not prepare myself for this conversation.

My eyes are a broken tap now, a never-ending stream of tears. I grab Timmy’s hands in my own. I know my friends are watching us, but I don’t care.

“I will *never* forget about you, Timothy Jo Ray,” I say, feeling his hands begin to shake. “Sure, I’ll be starting my life outside of Destin, but that doesn’t mean I forget about all the memories, or people that are still here. It’s not about starting a *new* life, Timmy. It’s about expanding my current one.” I barely have time to get out my last word as I’m wrapped in Timmy’s arms.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

I pull away from the hug but keep my hands on his shoulders.

“You don’t have to thank me Tim. That’s what big sisters are for.” I wipe the last of his tears away. “Besides, there really is no reason to get upset. I’m not leaving you today.”

Except I was.

The rest of our “family” breakfast was filled with stories of the past four years, laughs, and above all else, tears. By the time Macy dropped me back at my house it was time to get ready for the last night of my conscious life on Earth.

Time slows as my classmates and I walk, single file, to our respected seats. Without the fear of tripping or missing

my turn when they call my name, I try to allow myself to appreciate the world around me. Hundreds of kids in blue gowns, identical to mine, fill the space of our school football field.

My throat feels dry, and my toes curl in my heels. The weight of the gown doubles on my shoulders, causing them to slump down. Cheers and whistles of proud parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends reach my ears. A familiar warmth fills my body once more, chasing any feelings of doubt away. I look to the stands and just manage to catch a mop of curly hair. Mom is clapping so fast, her face flushes. Dad just stands tall, slowly waving his ginormous hand at me. I can't help but wave back. Timmy smiles and nods, as if to say, 'I got you'.

Once my cap is in the air with all the others, time slows once more. My eyes sweep through my old peers for the last time. In this moment, I forget about death, Miss Prose, and The Middle Room. All I feel is hope. Hope for my new life. Hope for the continuation of their life.

WAGNER, ANNIE**Annie Wagner**

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Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Malice in Mario Kart

Malice in Mario Kart

“How does the dust taste back there?” I asked mockingly, my eyes glued to the t.v, gripping the blue plastic controller tightly in my hands. I smirked as I heard my sister’s grumbles, but I kept my attention focused on the video game and my imminent victory.

“Left! Right! Right again!” I cried as I maneuvered my character around the obstacles and sharp turns toward the finish line.

With one last turn, the end was in sight. I leapt up from the old, worn couch as excitement coursed through my veins. I checked the minimap located on the side of the screen to determine the other players’ positions. Genavieve was fairly close behind, but from what I could tell there was nothing she could do to prevent me from claiming first place.

After driving through the last set of mystery cubes, which grant a variety of items, I briefly glanced at the minimap one last time. My eyes widened and I felt my blood run cold. My sister held a blue shell. This item targets the player in first place, flying up to them and then exploding. I shook my head in denial and looked pleadingly at my sister, but I was met with a look of sheer contempt as she hit the button that released the shell. I heard the game’s sirens announce impending doom, but I could do nothing but watch in horror as the dreaded blue shell approached my cart and exploded, launching my character into the air a mere few meters away from the finish line.

“NO!” I screamed, holding the gas button as hard as I could while my cart was still in the air, trying in vain to speed up the fall and finish the race.

“YES!” shouted Genavieve as she zipped past my recovering character and crossed the finish line.

“I’m the champion of Mario Kart!” she declared proudly as I gawked at the screen.

“How’d you like the taste of that blue shell?” she asked smugly, referencing my earlier mocking question.

I glowered at my sister, and my blood began heating up until it was practically boiling. The hate I felt in that moment was more potent than I had felt in a long time. First place was rightfully mine, not my sister’s. I vowed that I would make her suffer for her treachery.

The rage and need for revenge I had felt seemed controlling, and even a little frightening. However, these are natural responses to certain stimuli, as “the drive to seek out vengeance resides in a specific part of the human brain” (Thornton 114). That “specific part of the human brain”, or the dorsal striatum, came into existence through evolution many years ago. This part of the brain encouraged one to seek vengeance when they or someone they cared about was threatened. When Genavieve won first place, my dorsal striatum activated. Its activation resulted in the need to exact revenge upon her.

There is another part of the brain, however, which is newer than the dorsal striatum. This part of the brain is known as the medial prefrontal cortex, which “raises intellectual doubts about whether [revenge] [is] worth the effort” (Thornton 114). After my dorsal striatum’s activation, my medial prefrontal cortex activated as well. My medial prefrontal cortex would have cautioned me to move on and accept defeat, but I was too blinded by rage to listen to it. The rage I felt was tied to my desire for revenge; I wanted to frustrate and anger Genavieve in order to feel satisfaction and resolve my own anger.

I knew that I had to play it cool, or else I would frighten my sister off before my mission was fulfilled. I took a deep breath and smiled tightly at her, forcing the darkness and rage deep within myself. I leaned back on the couch and opened the game’s course selection. As per our agreement, the loser picked the next map. I calmly scrolled through the options until I encountered the perfect course: Rainbow Road. Genavieve groaned and flopped backward dramatically.

“Can we please do a different map? This one is too hard!” she whined, but I silenced her with a single threatening look.

“I get to pick the map. I choose this one,” I replied with an icyness that conveyed my intolerance for complaints.

Genavieve, dejected, nodded sullenly, eliciting a sneer from me as I opened the character selection screen. We chose our usual characters, and we were placed at the starting line. I watched the screen intently and listened to each of the chimes that accompanied the countdown. At the final one, I did not instantly slam my finger down on the gas button like I normally did. Instead, I waited a second longer so that I could race behind Genavieve. She zoomed ahead, and I followed.

I drove through all of the mystery cubes I could to find items that I could throw at her. Each time I picked up a shell, I instantly threw it at my sister. Whenever my projectiles struck her cart, I laughed in her face. Whenever her cart slid off of the track and into the abyss on both sides of the course, I insulted her driving skills with an arrogant tone. She became increasingly upset and protested at the unfair treatment, but I ignored her.

I could not, however, ignore the computer-controlled characters as they drove past. Being very competitive, it agitated me to see the npcs (non-player characters) winning, especially since I was quite adept at that course. I reminded myself constantly throughout that race that it didn’t matter if I was beaten as long as I made Genavieve suffer.

Winning and having fun were very important to me, but I allowed the need for revenge to “tether [me] to the past in a way that overshadows any potential positive outcome the motivation might bring” (Cox 2). Mario Kart was a harmless game that my sister and I decided to play together for some fun and bonding time. However, I was too focused on the event that I perceived as an injustice to recognize that my sister was only playing the game. I allowed my rage to take control of me rather than accepting defeat and moving on. By failing to continue on with my life, I transformed an enjoyable experience into a miserable one, for both my sister and for myself.

“What the heck, Annie?” she cried when she was struck by my third red shell. I smirked and said nothing.

“You’d better stop, right now!” she shouted, and I sneered in response.

I realized that we were nearing the end of the race, with only one more cluster of mystery cubes before the finish line. I had one more chance to hit her with some sort of weapon. When we drove through the last set of mystery cubes, she began to swerve on the track, anticipating an attack after seeing that I had picked up a trio of green shells. Green shells could not home in on a target like the red or blue shells, but they were still effective weapons when they made contact. I threw them in rapid succession, hoping at least one hit her.

“Yeah! Take that!” I blurted triumphantly upon seeing that one of the shells had struck her.

“Oh, come on!” she screamed, her face growing bright red from anger and frustration.

As her cart recovered, I sped past her and crossed the finish line. Throughout the race, I had imagined various scenarios in which I exacted my revenge. In all of them, I enjoyed the immense satisfaction of getting even. However, after this race, I did not feel the satisfaction I thought I would. It felt like being excited for a wonderful meal at a restaurant, only to be disappointed by a mediocre dish that left one wanting for more.

I glanced over at my sister, who was huffing angrily and picking at the leather couch with her fingernails. *She’s upset, which is good, but why didn’t my revenge feel more enjoyable? I must have done something wrong,* I thought as I looked absently at the screen. Suddenly, a light bulb turned on in my head, and I perked up. *I know! It didn’t feel as satisfying because while I passed Genavieve at the end, she hadn’t been in first place like I was. If I boot her from first place, she will feel the anger I felt!*

I turned to Genavieve with a small, fake smile plastered on my face.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” I murmured as I placed my hand on her shoulder. She jerked away from my touch and continued to pick at the couch.

Upon seeing her sensitivity, my smile became more sincere.

“Seriously, I’m sorry,” I lied, louder this time. She grunted in acknowledgment, but she still refused to talk.

“I promise I won’t pick on you anymore,” I announced, crossing my fingers behind my back. Genavieve looked up at me slowly with eyes resembling a sad puppy’s.

“You promise?” she asked quietly, her bottom lip protruding to make her appear even more fragile and pathetic.

I smiled reassuringly at her and nodded my head. Having believed my act, my sister immediately perked back up and asked for me to proceed to the course selection screen. I did as she asked, and we browsed the multitude of courses. As I predicted, she chose Yoshi Circuit, as it was her favorite. We selected our characters once again, and began to race. Given that this map was easier for Genavieve, she quickly climbed the ranks with me close behind. By the second lap, she was in first place, and I was in second. On the last lap, I was sweating; I had to dodge the numerous banana peels that littered the track, the kart-chomping plants that were dotted around the map, and the npcs. Before long, though, the finish line was in sight. I had a red shell in my possession, but I needed to be careful to not hit Genavieve prematurely, or my revenge wouldn’t be as satisfying. My sister was getting excited, which I could tell by listening to the changes in her breathing and the movements in my peripheral vision.

However, I couldn’t afford to divert my attention to her for even a moment. I could feel the suppressed feelings of anger and the need for revenge bubbling back up as we rapidly approached the finish line. The moment I released

the red shell, I felt those emotions being released as well. I watched with glee as the shell smacked into Genavieve's cart, stopping it in its tracks just before the finish line.

"NOOO!" Genavieve screamed as I passed her and won first place.

"Ha!" I barked, leaping up from the couch, fist held high in the air. "That didn't feel so good, did it, Gen?" I asked in a condescending tone, turning back to her without attempting to conceal the evil smile that had spread on my face. However, the moment I saw her, I hesitated and my smile faltered. On her face was an expression of pure hatred and pain. Tears ran down her reddened cheeks, and she stood abruptly. Without saying a word, she threw her red controller onto the ground and fled from the room.

When I looked inside myself at that moment, I realized that "revenge . . . look[s] sweet only in anticipation. . . [and] it's rarely so delectable in execution" (Thornton 7). I had been dead set on exacting revenge, believing that I would acquire satisfaction. I had thought that getting satisfaction would fill the void within me that formed when my sister stole my victory. Upon seeing her reaction after that last race, however, I felt guilt rather than joy. Despite wanting to make Genavieve angry, it pained me to see my sister so hurt by my thoughtless actions.

After seeing my sister so angry and heartbroken, I could not feel any triumph from my victory. I looked at the floor, and then at the abandoned controller that Genavieve once held. I was left with no playmate, and no satisfaction. I sighed and shuffled from the basement to the second floor, where the bedrooms were situated. I slightly opened the door to Genavieve's room, and cautiously peeked inside. She was lying face-down on her large, soft mattress, which muffled her sobs. I took a slow, deep breath and opened the door a little wider. I entered the room silently and closed the door behind me.

"Gen?" I asked quietly as I shuffled a little closer to the bed. She gasped, and her body became rigid.

"What do you want?" she snarled into the mattress, just loud enough for me to hear. I winced slightly and stopped moving.

"I... I'm... sorry," I mumbled, looking guiltily at my feet as I clasped my hands behind my back. I heard the sheets rustle.

"What did you say?" she asked tearily, her voice now unmuffled.

"I said... I'm sorry," I responded, only slightly louder than before.

"I... can't... hear you!" she growled, her speech broken up with sniffles. I squeezed my hands tighter.

"I said I'm sorry!" I blurted out, unclasping my hands and forming them into fists at my side. "I was mean and stupid, and I'm sorry!"

The sheets rustled some more, and I heard Genavieve's feet hit the carpeted floor with a dull thump. My gaze remained downward, but I could still see her slowly approach.

Before she could say anything, I asked meekly, "Will you play Mario Kart some more with me?"

"Do you promise not to pick on me anymore?" she replied gently.

"Yes!" I answered energetically, looking up at her with hope. "I promise!"

That time, the promise was genuine.

This whole affair tested our relationship. My sister beat me in a game, and "Over such trivialities, lifelong relationships crack apart; only forgiveness can halt the widening fissures" (Yancey 2). I have known Gen for most of my life, and she has known me for all of her's; I loved her and her company, and she looked up to me. The need for revenge drove me to hurt Genavieve, despite the fact that we were sisters, and I had gained nothing from it. My sister had every right to be angry with me, and could have chosen to exact her own revenge against me. However, she chose to forgive me instead. By forgiving me, she allowed us to mend our frayed relationship and grow from that experience rather than dwell on it.

Upon reflecting on my actions, I learned that revenge causes more problems than it solves. Thereafter, I worked to better myself by learning from my mistakes. While I still have a competitive nature, I am neither prone to outbursts of rage nor feel the need to take revenge. Should someone wrong me, whether intentionally or unintentionally, I can forgive them as my sister forgave me.

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WALLACE, CAITLIN**Caitlin Wallace**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Poetry

In My MindOnly Darkness

Everything is gone.

Only I remain.

I am everywhere,
cold and unforgiving.Those who venture into my realm
do not know what lies ahead.Am I calming, in an eerie sort of way,
or are they desperate for a way out.

For them, everything has disappeared.

No sound, no light, no warmth,
suffocating in nothingness.They tread through a field of silence,
through the never-ending maze of despair,
until they fade away, all hope, lost.

Then, nothing else remains.

Only Darkness.

When The Sun Sets

When the sun sets,

Shadows come alive,
dancing in the cool night breeze.Everything is at peace
as the moon shines down,
barely giving light to the world.Then the sun begins to rise
and the moonlight fades.The world wakes up,
and night is almost forgotten.One WeekOne week gone,
seven days behind me.One week past,
but it's getting in my head now,
spinning all around.Screaming in my head now,
you're not gonna make it out.Gotta move,
gotta run,

I can't let these thoughts take over

Have to go somewhere where I won't
be in danger.
Get out of my mind.
Just get away from me.
Make it stop, make it stop,
but they just keep getting louder.

I Think I'm in Love With the Sky

Sitting on a hill,
watching the sunlight fade away.
Clouds change from grey
to pretty orange and pink
Painting the sky.
And I can hear the sounds of the city quiet,
the traffic's all gone down.
I can see the blinking lights of the cell phone towers,
flashing through the night.
I sing "oohh.."
I think I'm in love with the sky.
Singing "oohh.."
and I'm dancing in the night.
Under the stars,
under the moon,
we can be anyone we choose.
I sing "oohh.."
I think I'm in love with the sky.

Dreams

We all have that feeling
wondering what lies ahead.
Will we find true happiness,
or something that we dread?
We think of tomorrow
and of past things we've said.
When you've finally drifted off,
safe inside your bed.
Dreams come from reality,
in them we can go far.
In them we find our hearts desire;
they show us who we are.
Our hopes and passions and our joys,
our sadness and our scars.
Then there can come nightmares
which come from different things.
Although our voice is in them,
who knows what they can bring.
Each is different from the last,
like each feather on a wing.

WANG, ALEX**Alex Wang**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Ladue Middle School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Judith Miller

Category: Short Story

Beetles and Battles

A shrill cry echoed through the jungle, startling the animals. Another piercing shriek shattered the silence of the world around us.

"I found one!" A voice calls out from behind the shrubbery.

We go to the source of the voice to see that one of the natives has trapped the bug. We gather around in a circle, looking over and around each other to catch a glimpse. A mud-colored insect, only about the size of a paperclip, was scuttering around in a glass jar. *Callosobruchus nanomaculatus*, more commonly known as the small cowpea beetle.

We thank the aboriginal for his help, and take it back to the laboratory for testing. Tracing back our steps with the help of a few markers on the ground, we reach the cramped hut. Disguised on the outside to look like the ones made by the natives, the hut resembled a shabby straw shack. After entering for the first time since my deployment, I was appalled by the quality on the inside. White marble floor, perfectly painted walls, photographs of native creatures, hanging on thumbtacks, materials a scientist would use stacked neatly on a counter, and an uncountable amount of high tech gadgets strewn about.

"Test #013, *Callosobruchus nanomaculatus* 'liquid life' extraction beginning," I turn around to see a skinny, pale boy, speaking out loud into a recorder. "Dissection has begun, separating the exoskeleton and shell. Removing heart chambers and gastric caeca. Splitting the storage containing the designated liquid. Using a pipette to extract the designated liquid. Test success and complete," the boy mumbled in a monotone voice.

"Hey! What are you doing?" I ask loudly.

"I'm, er, I'm doing an experiment," the boy muttered.

"I'm doing an experiment," I say as I copy his voice. "Well we don't have time to do silly science stuff while there's a war going on! The *Dinarmus* are already on their way here, and they will do anything to steal the life juice."

The boy grumbles and walks away to store the liquid, muttering something about a PhD in entomology at 16. I perambulate around the lab, exploring more tech gadgets and finally stop by the couch to rest a bit.

Halfway through a newspaper, my phone rings.

"A random number from California. Probably just a scam call," I imagine, returning to my newspaper. Not before long does a voicemail pop up in the form of a notification.

"Weird," I mouth, opening it up to see what it is.

"HELP! I know that you're a part of the good guys, so that's why I'm calling you right now. I've been captured by the *Dinarmus* and I'm somewhere in their base, but I don't know where. I managed to steal one of the guards' phones. I only have enough time to call, and plus there isn't any service here. I suspect that I'm underground based on my surroundings. They are going to attack soon, and they've raided most of the villages already. I overheard one of them talking about the south side of the island, so be there to support. Pass this information to the higher-ups. I don't have much time left so-," the person said in a hushed voice, suddenly cutting off at the end.

"What did they want to say at the end," I wonder. I shoot an email to the president in charge of this operation, asking for a meeting. He replies after a few minutes, and a mysterious person comes into my room, claiming that she's going to escort me to the president's office. After setting up basic escort procedures, blindfolding me and turning me around rapidly, she leads me to the office, and I sit down, taking my blindfold off.

"What information do you have?" He asks seriously.

"I received a phone call from California, but I suspect it is just the phone that's been captured. The message contains information on the *Dinarmus*'s plans. Listen for yourself." I open the voicemail, letting him listen. He asks me to replay the message, this time jotting down notes, asking me to pause at certain times.

"I have all the information I need. Thank you for your help and support. This info will be used for good. You

are dismissed."

"Thank you," I politely reply. The escorter reenters the room, repeating the procedure. I return to the main base where all the troops and collectors are housed. I feel a lot better about myself, like I contributed something extremely important to our mission.

After I finish up my dinner, an announcement is broadcasted through the public-address system.

"At promptly 0630 hours tomorrow morning, troops and collectors are to meet up at the south wing, dressed for battle with firearms and weapons onhand. This is not a drill. We suspect the *Dinarmus* are going to attack, for we inferred from reliable sources." I manage a small smile while the president says that. "They are looking to steal the liquid life from our storages and sell it for profit and to destroy the ecosystem here. Remember, 0630 hours and be ready to fight. Good luck."

The mess hall explodes with talk, people conversing with each other, causing a tumultuous uproar of disorderly noise. I walk out and return back to my room, and I try to get a lot of sleep before tomorrow. But I can't. All that's on my mind is the battle of tomorrow, part of me telling me that I'll be fine, and the other part telling me that I could die. After a lot of constant internal bickering, I fall asleep from exhaustion, unknown to the tragedies of tomorrow.

An alarm wakes me from my state of stupor. It takes me a while to remember yesterday's announcement, and I quickly check the time: 6:13. I groan as I put on my armor and gear, stuffing a piece of bread in my mouth as I hurry towards the south wing. I arrive just on time as the general is just about to start his pre-battle speech.

"Today is going to be one of the most important days of your life. If we win, then we survive and succeed in our mission. If we lose, then we die and the bad guys get to win. And we don't want that to happen, right?" We shout "Yes sir!" in reply, almost as if it were instinct.

"We will be marching towards the southern border of the island, and we need to stay alert and on the lookout for the enemies. Anything you see needs to be reported to me," he orders as he walks through our ranks and hands us each a small bottle of liquid.

"This is a vial of liquid life, and it will save you if you are on the brink of death. Use it wisely, as it is only enough for one use." I store it in my highly secured pocket, ensuring that it won't leak.

"I'm running out of time, so we need to get moving." The general leads us as we march in formation, but I sense something wrong in the air, like a sense of uneasiness. We march for a while, and suddenly the general put his fist up in the air, signaling for us to stop. I barely hear anything other than the animals and insects around us, and the pounding in my ears and chest. He opens up his palm again, signaling for us to keep moving ahead. We move into a clearing, and birds fly away from above us. We know what it means, but we are still too late.

The enemies found us first.

Gunshots are fired and a few of our troops are hit, but none are mortally wounded. We hide and duck for cover, some of us shooting blindly into the thick green jungle. A left side flank from us forces the opponents into backing off. We reach a stalemate position. Our general commands two of the sections to initiate a right side attack, one leading the charge and one to support. They reluctantly agree after reassuring thoughts of their phials of liquid life. They charge ahead, and both sides trade hits and deaths. In the end, they suffer more losses due to us having a "second life", but we've reached the stalemate position once again. Our general orders another section to bait out the enemy into revealing themselves, and the right side sections charge again. He then orders us to charge on the left side as the right side is being defended. My hand instinctively floats towards my secured pocket. We nod and wait for the perfect time to rush ahead. Thoughts race through my mind.

"What if I don't make it out alive?"

"What if I'm captured?"

"What if we lose?"

But there isn't enough time to debate the choice of fighting. The general commands us to initiate our attack, and we charge forward, shooting in the general vicinity of the enemies. I manage to land a few hits, but I can't tell if they are decisive kills or not. The front lines start collapsing even after they drink the flask. Then, time seems to slow down. I watch as a bullet fired from the green shrubbery floats toward me, but not for long. I get hit, and I feel a sharp pain in my chest. I try to reach into my pocket for the bottle, but the pain saps all my energy. I pick it up, but darkness is closing in on me. I can't get it to open, and I scream, but no sound comes out.

My time has run out.

WANGLER, ALYSSA**Alyssa Wangler**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

Daisy

It felt like my heart was a daisy in his hands,
I could feel him ripping my petals away one by one,
Each time saying "she loves me,"
Or "She loves me not."

But it wasn't the fact he was tearing me apart,
It was the fact I wasn't even the girl he had in mind,

The only reason he chose the daisy,
The only reason he chose my heart,
Is because I stood alone.

I was an easy target,
Surrounded by roses and obviously out of place,
The roses had thorns on their stem,
Knowledge about the real world,
But a daisy,
Sheltered as it grew,
Had nothing.

A daisy is mere preparation for picking a rose,
A safe option to practice on,
And a plan B to fall back on if the rose pricks you.

At first I was thrilled that out of all the roses,
I was his flower of choice.

I didn't know I was being picked just to be torn apart and discarded,
I didn't think I'd be thrown back onto the ground,
And the worst part,
Who would want a flower with no petals?

WILLIAMS, ANWEN**Anwen Williams**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Lawrence Free State High School, Lawrence, KS
Educators: Devin Heath, Jeff MorrisonCategory: Poetry

one day the world tipped**I. Drowning**

When I was little
Dollhouses and running
Around the apartment
Seeing
Him smile
Laugh
Knowing
He loved me

Now
His eyes closed
A tube
Down his throat
Where is he?

When I grew up
He looked all the
Photos
Me dancing
Me dreaming
Me in a thousand places
Me smiling
Him smiling back

Now
His hands tremble
He
Cannot speak
Cannot smile
What does he think?

I thought
I was old
Calling him every night
An ocean between
Us
An illness between
Us
A million things
That stop me from seeing
His smile

Now
I do not see him
I see a mask
A shell
A ghost
He cannot think
But all I can think of
Is him

He was my world
He showed me
A thousand things
A thousand places
But
The world has tipped
He has drowned
And now
I
Am
Drowning

II. Bought

I look at photos
Memories
That I almost
Forgot
All the times
He made me smile

Once a year
I bake a cake
Chocolate
His favorite
I write his name
Lou DaPeng
In powdered sugar
I set it before the empty seat
An offering I know
Nobody will eat

Five years ago
My grandpa
Died
Three years ago
I dreamed
That he was
Here
Last night
I could see his smile
Hear his voice
He said
You cannot buy
A moment of time
You cannot buy
A life that was lost

Today
I remember
His smile
The sound
Of his voice
His words
You cannot buy
A memory
Good or bad
It is priceless

I remember
The dollhouses
The apartment
The newspaper he read
Every morning
The song he sang
Every night

I remember
The tube down his throat
Up his nose
In his wrist
I remember everything
I remember
It all
Because
You cannot buy
Love

WILLIAMS, ANWEN**Anwen Williams**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Lawrence Free State High School, Lawrence, KS
 Educators: Devin Heath, Jeff Morrison

Category: Flash Fiction

Every Street the Same

A thousand streets. A million houses. A trillion people who aren't really people anymore. Am I one of them? Stuck here where the sun doesn't set and the world doesn't spin?

I walk to the end of the street. Every street is the same. Every sign reads "Guñ Lane." Every house is grey, grey like the sky and the blank eyes that surround me. The world is grey and the people are silent and no matter how hard I try, I can't get away from Guñ Lane.

I want to know that I am not truly supposed to be here – I want for someone to tell me, their voice firm and loving. I want nothing more than to wake up and see my father. He will be mad. But I will be so, so relieved.

"Please Lord." My whisper spirals up into thin air, disappearing like a magic trick.

Here, I am voiceless, nameless, a girl without a past and without a future. Stuck in the present, even though she doesn't know what the present is. A girl who is going to wait forever, waiting for something she doesn't want.

A girl without a past.

In my head where no one can see, my past is vivid. It plays on repeat like a commercial, too bright and loud.

There were moments when I bled from the knife in my hand, the floor of the shower dyed red. The water would fall around me like rain until it went cold and I was shivering, waiting for the blood to slow.

There were moments when I felt five years old again. Back to the days when I was certain I would have my very own fairy-tale ending. Ball gowns and Prince Charming.

And then there were all the moments when the world was a blur and I could have sworn my life was all a dream.

Those times I wasn't really there. I was waiting to die, suspended in the In Between, my brain buzzing with drugs, my throat dry from whatever pill I'd just taken.

It had always been when and not if. Only a matter of time.

She's killing herself, I once heard my father say, tears strangling his deep voice.

When I heard that I looked in the mirror, pressed a hand to my face. I wasn't killing myself. I was right here. Brown hair green eyes pink lips tawny skin. I was right here.

I never thought I would actually leave. Actually float so far away that even my father couldn't reach me.

I never thought that his words would prove true.

"What is it?" I asked, my voice slurred and my eyes sparkling red.

I didn't know where I was anymore, but I wanted to get away. I wanted to run like I ran from everything – all the scars and all the things I'd broken.

"Half is molly," said the boy whose name I didn't know. He had brown-gold eyes. Cheekbones carved from marble. He was pretty. And he had a little baggy of pills.

"A half plus a half is a whole." My math teacher in fourth grade had been the sweetest young lady. I wonder what she'd think if she saw me here, so different from the girl who kept her head down and always turned in work two days early.

The boy whose name I didn't know smirked. He had pretty skin, smooth and shiny in the dim light. His hair was fluffy and brown. He looked my age, but his voice had the hoarse timbre of an old man's.

When he spoke I'd already forgotten who he was and why he was here, holding out a little pill. I was lost, already dreaming, already running.

"I don't know what the other half is. You still want it?"

I latched on to the boy's voice. You still want it?

I didn't think I could say no anymore. Everyday there was more to escape and less to live for.

"Give it to me."

I want to go back and spit the pill out.

One little tablet, a gulp of water, a nameless boy with brown-gold eyes.

A carpet in my bedroom that I've had since I was five. Nine years, me and that carpet. It was that nine-year old carpet where my dad found my body the next morning, curled up, drool plastered to my cheek, my heart still.

I sit on the curb of Guǐ Lane.

I'm aching for my father and his warm green eyes just a shade darker than mine. Aching, even if don't want to admit it, for the nameless boy and his baggy of pills.

Even here, where nothing holds meaning and meaning means nothing, I'm not sure if I am real or not. Everything is so grey. The people are so still. Am I still on my carpet? In a hospital bed? In the dirt with my father six feet above me?

The grey world swirls around me, blurring until it's all just fog.

The mist clears and I want to scream. Everything is the same. Every single house, every single street.

I am just another person waiting for death, waiting until the wires are unplugged.

I am In Between, stuck in a never-ending dream.

WILLIAMS, CHAUNTELL**Chauntell Williams**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Paseo Academy Performing Arts, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Ben Bullington

Category: Poetry

Writer

When A Winter Flower Blooms

By Chauntell D. Williams

*A young flower sprouts; her body blossoms and grows
 She is baffled by the New World she beholds
 An icy front replaces the warmth in her womb
 Only did she know; When A Winter Flower Blooms*

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 She woke out of bed and hit her head; Her mouth plastered in drool
 As she wanders about, mother shouts ‘Get ready for school!’
 Away from her blanket, she quivers, spine shivers; The air filled with dust
 However, as she got nearer to her pink framed mirror she saw she was growing a bust!

She thinks ‘what happened! The growth was very rapid, how? She has not a clue
 So she got ready for school to start a day anew but she felt a little blue
 As she went downstairs her mother stared and said “A new bra can be arranged.”
 The girl looked down, her mouth formed a frown and mother says “Puberty is strange.”

‘I hate it so much!’, She thought as she walks in the snow; Her nose wisped by the cold air
 A hit of depression as she glances at her reflection, ‘This is so not fair!’
 As she walks into school, boys rage like biofuels; She tries to cover her chest
 It's fine at first but they're about to burst- ‘OMG here comes Jess!’

“Look who grew into their boobs! OMG, you are so lucky~!”
 Two more girls come! I'm suddenly a zoo attraction! A slug swirls in my tummy
 I say “Thank you.” at last and try to walk fast, but my jeans suddenly feel tight
 As I walk faster, Bryce jumps in front of me with laughter and asks “What u doing tonite?”

His grin was unsettling, ‘Oh god this is embarrassing- I wish I'd just tell em’ to shoo!’
 But it's as if I bumped my head and said instead, “O-oh, I have nothing to do.”
 He nods happily and says “U wanna party~?” ‘I think my insides just cringed!’
 At last, I succumb and say “Sure! I will come!” I let my pride be trimmed

As I walked home I thought ‘Why didn't I say no?’”He had caught me by surprise...’
 Oh sure he must've seen I was disgusted, ‘But why did I have butterflies?’
 Ugh, what a whirl! If he wanted to gawk at girls, he could've just gone on Pinterest
 Am I just an easy score? He's never noticed me before. Why now a sudden interest?

But strangely, I like the attention! I'm open to suggestions. What shall I do?
 I'm not stating this with treason; He invited me for a reason- ‘Could it be he likes me too?’
 Now let's not get willy nilly! HA! How silly! But how will I ever know?

The suspense is not helpful- Oh god this is stressful. 'Now I must go!'

As I got to Bryce's house, I crept like a mouse to his front porch
 With a knock, two boys follow "Girl are you a model?~" 'Oh god, burn me with a torch.'
 With a slight steer, a quick smell of beer stung my nostrils
 I sat on the couch. I thought 'Maybe they won't stare if I slouch.' 'Oh no- Spin the Bottle?'

As if this could get any worse- "Hey Bryce, spin first!" 'It can land on anyone just about.'
 It spins and it spins- "Oh SNAP! IT LANDED ON LIN!-" Me and my big mouth
 He's leaning for the kiss my gut forms a fist. 'Oh man, I need to close my eyes!'
 'It's about to commence!' but why is he lifting his hands?! A little part of me died

My lungs hit the floor "Hey Bryce! What a SCORE!" I feel like such a noob
 Oh, this is awful! I've never played Spin The Bottle. Was he supposed to touch my boob?
 Jenna scooted closer and said "Ha! This party isn't over!~" Mya said, "Boys will be boys."
 But these boys have plots and ploys and I may be drunk, but I'm not a toy

'I need to leave this party...' Mom, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have snuck out of the house
 I mean this party's no bore but I feel deep down in my core a brick load of doubt
 "Man, this is getting lame. Let's play another game!~" Samuel said with a sneer
 Jenna says, "That's not fair-" "OH TRUTH OR DARE!~" 'I REALLY regret coming here!'

So they started the game. 'I feel like I'm being framed.' "Hey, Lin! Truth or Dare?"
 Oh man, I can't take it! Why are my lips shaking? Like a dummy, I say "Dare."
 "Oh, nice! I dare you to kiss Bryce!" 'This whole being a teenager thing is corrupt!'
 But when we kissed, I felt nothing but bliss! Screaming bringing plenty of interruptions

"OMG girl! That was so unreal! How did it feel?" Jess says for all to hear
 I didn't hesitate "I guess it felt great." I started blushing from ear to ear
 Then everybody left us alone 'Oh god, why can I smell his cologne?! NOT a good sign.'
 He's scooting closer! Oh man, this is the moment! "Yo girl. Lemme touch em one mo time."

The ending isn't that complex, you know what came next. I punched him right in the face!
 Yes, the kiss was pleasing, but I'm not at all 'easy'. His interest was in one place.
 So the glory of this story is that boys are hormonal mammoths
 Your chest may be little, yes, but trust me, you can manage

So DON'T stuff your bras or go do smoochies with Hass or bust a pesky pimple
 Or duck tape neither! Why? Trust me, sister, you are guaranteed to lose a nipple
 Hey! I'm not cupid and I know this all sounds stupid and your gonna do what you want instead
 But don't get in a wallop! I just blessed you with knowledge! And remember what I said

Please don't make the same mistakes I made. It's not worth it AT ALL
 This is about to sound cheesy, but take pride and stand tall
 But when you recognize and realize and make sense of what we call 'Life?'
 Not gonna pose, I'm 16, not 54, let me know so I can get mines right

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*A young flower sprouts; her body blossoms and grows
 She is baffled by the New World she beholds
 An icy front replaces the warmth in her womb
 Only did she know; When A Winter Flower Blooms*

WRIGHT, MCKENNA**McKenna Wright**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

My Culture is Not a Costume

Growing up in a community with little to no diversity, I realized I look different compared to those around me. My darker features stood out, and I knew I was “Indian”. That is what my mom told me. I looked like her, but not like my half-brother, my schoolmates, or my friends. The thing is, I didn’t realize that I was using the wrong term until I was older and educated myself. Indigenous or Native American is the correct way to describe my ethnicity. However, seeing a mascot or a Halloween costume of someone dressed in my culture meant nothing to me at a young age. Nonetheless, I have learned that this is an example of cultural appropriation. Learning and understanding what is right and wrong, has changed how I view these actions and comments. As of these past few years of connecting to my culture, I now take pride in it. This misunderstanding is an issue with my culture, and with people of different cultures all over the world.

Since Halloween is a national holiday, it needs to be addressed on what would be inappropriate for anyone to wear on this night. For example, dressing up as “Pocahontas”, an “Indian princess”, or wearing some type of headdress is offensive to many. It has been said, from recent studies, that Pocahontas was abused. This insinuates that people are dressing as a trafficked child, not a happy princess. Another costume idea that shouldn't be included for Halloween, is the western and Indian costume. Just because you think it's a “cute” couple costume, doesn't mean it is. This costume is offensive, and just further reveals the racial issue in the US. Anyways, other tribal and cultural clothing is offensive to wear if you do not associate yourself with the culture, because these articles of clothing, hairstyles, or jewelry hold meaning to these people and their cultures. This means that the people who wear cultural clothing that are not associated, probably don't care about the meaning behind these sacred traditions. A traditional, meaningful outfit to a culture is not a costume.

A women's regalia, the actual item that is worn by a Native American/ Indigenous woman is created by her learnings and her family. They are often longer and depending on the type of dance, the dress is then decorated differently. However, the ones worn on Halloween are usually used to sexualize the outfit. While a real regalia is worn for traditional dancing, paired with moccasins at pow wows and spiritual ceremonies. With non-native people wearing these types of costumes, they are continuing stereotypes and normalizing cultural appropriation. Headdresses are similarly made. For example, an article stated that, “To make a headdress, one single feather would be added to the band each time that the recipient committed an act of bravery. Headdresses were only made for someone to earn this honorable headpiece, some tribes required the person headdress wearer to fast for several days before they received each additional feather to display their loyalty to the tribe.” (The Significance of the Native American Headdress, *Tribal Trade*) The value and the time taken to make the headdresses, regalias, moccasins, etc, are super important to the Native American culture. Making or buying a fake item of clothing that resembles my culture, is just mocking us. They shouldn't be worn as a costume or joke.

Our school's mascot is a Native American warrior. People yell “Go Warriors!”, but don't know the history of an actual indigenous warrior. They don't know their struggle, bravery, and issues that came with being a warrior before, during, and after the invasion of European settlers. When I was little, I used to see a person dressed up in a mascot uniform as a “warrior” at our school football games. I'm grateful that no one is dressed in that costume anymore. However, there are still people wearing similar costumes, which are inappropriate to wear or to be a school or team mascot. My culture is full of people, who are human beings. What makes us a mascot or costume? That our skin isn't white? That we are “savages”? That we live differently? What makes it okay? I don't see why people get mad when we get offended seeing our people used as a mascot. Most schools use animals to represent them and their teams. Does this mean that us, Native Americans, are being compared to animals? Using a human being, especially coming from a minority, as a mascot, shows how uneducated those who chose to have an indigenous person as a mascot.

There are tons of people who do not know or understand this problem, which takes place all over in America. They

figure that they aren't harming anyone and that there is no issue wearing a mock version of traditional clothing. To some people, you may not offend them at all, but it offends my culture, me, and many others who believe it is inappropriate. This issue makes me, and probably others, feel that you think my culture is a joke, or unimportant. Today, our schools are finally starting to teach the truth, and teaching students to not call us "Indians". They have only learned a few of our hardships. Yet, so many people are uneducated on our traditions, and the racist comments and actions that take place, that persist to happen. They are pretending to dance like us, pretending to know our language, pretending to wear our clothes, pretending to be us all for the "fun" of it. My culture is not a costume for me, or anyone else. It resembles Native Americans, their beliefs, ideology, their teachings, and their learnings.

XUE, REBECCA**Rebecca Xue**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Jeffrey Baxter

Category: Poetry

Distance**Distance**

I looked in your eyes
While we sat on my bed
Reminded me of those heavenly skies
And I quietly said

Can I always trust you?
Like my righteous gods
Of course you can, just like I do,
You said with reassuring nods.

Each day you're on my mind
Wondering whether you're the same
You used to say there's never a day where you'll find
My head filled with anything but your name

Yet now the distance between us is quite far,
Does trust endure even if we're apart?

Gravity of True Love

The galaxy's Earth and Moon
Their asteroids cried
They'll be separated soon
Until it seemed as if they died

The loud silence of the universe grew
As the planets looked for answers
Which were held by only a few
And this is when the role of the neighbor enters

Mars and Venus wore down the attraction
Held by Earth and Moon and their two bodies
Between the thieves, a clear lack of affection
Now, the truth has brought them to their knees.

The passion between Earth and Moon, written like a song
Was never supposed to be broken all along.

Strength of a Mother

I was only four or five
When I innocently wished

For a younger sibling quick
Boy or girl it's all the same
Just a friend to play my games

And when I found out it was a boy
I was probably overjoyed
Each night in bed
I listened to his heart
Thump, thump, thump
I could hear from her bump

Slowly, slowly, December came
When my mom went in terrible pain
He just wants to see you soon
And I believed that through and through

But what I did not know was
They were fighting for their lives
I still cried everyday
Wondering when I could see my mom again

Finally the day arrived when
I came back from school
My mother sitting on
A lovely rocking chair

Holding an unimaginably small human
In her soft and caring arms

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Leslie Sainz

Category: Poetry

Danaides

The bronze pot scowls & leaks.
Lean flock, we march upriver, bear

his weight through twilight.
Each path we cut seals up

behind us. Dull-eyed, we're sutures.
Or statues. We fill our hands

with river-water, cupped
cold bite, and loose it in the pot.

Over and over, he winces,
dribbles. Always emptying:

that's how it is. Remember
when Father herded us

into the tiled hall, where
we danced with husbands,

ruddy, bristled, fifty brothers?
Later, fifty times, we twisted

hilts, watched neck-veins cord.
Forty-nine times men bucked

and bloomed, then sputtered out.
It was a crime, too,

to disobey. Now we move
in search of water, long-lost

pitchers gone to sand.
The pot drinks endlessly,

leaves a dark wet trail behind us.
White-robed,

we're specters. Or sisters.
We cluster home.

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Annelyse Gelman

Category: Poetry

Votive

The angel's flat hand settles
around her waist. The city

melts behind her: she's thinking
of the lemon grove, the red

plates, her husband. *Don't look
back*, he says: *your mother's*

pillaring to salt. He's sweating.
The horizon-line, sulfur-gauzed,

keeps slipping, and her father
lurches forward, bleeding

from the nose. Last night
he offered her to strangers.

Another angel, bright and spitting,
gutters in along the road.

*How much meat
could I have seasoned with*

my mother's salt? she thinks, and
her throat begins

to burn. Next to her, this angel's
arms are crossed with mud,

lead-heavy. Too late,
he says, *Don't turn—*

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

Music Lessons

“No,” Ms. Zaslavsky sighed. “Percival—look, you’ll have to cross the *thumb* under your *third* finger to get it on the E. Watch me do it, and then try again.” She swatted him away from the keys, poising her hand above the keyboard. Percival eyed the small suspended wrist and long swift fingers as they moved through the correct motions, and felt something heavy settle in his stomach.

Ms. Zaslavsky played the notes again, stood up, and turned to Percival. “Do it again,” she prodded. “Go slow.” Percival settled his right hand on the piano, hesitating. Ms. Zaslavsky was standing behind him now, taking those slow, deliberate breaths—this always happened at the end of the lesson. Carefully, Percival lifted his wrist and plunked out the notes, doing his best to cross his thumb and shift his hand in the way that Ms. Zaslavsky had. His fingers were too thick for this, too short; from behind him, Ms. Zaslavsky let out a long, steady sigh.

“Your wrist isn’t high enough, Percival,” she corrected. “Too stiff.” Her voice was higher, constricted. He could not see her face, but he could picture her tightened jaw, the mouth compressed into a thin line.

Percival played the first note of the phrase again, intending to try it a second time, but Ms. Zaslavsky cleared her throat. “Don’t worry about doing that right now,” she interrupted. “You can practice the fingerings this week. It’s three-thirty.”

It was, according to Percival’s digital watch face, 2:27—but he wanted to be done as much as she did. The weight vanished from his stomach. “Thank you, Ms. Zaslavsky,” he recited dutifully, and gathered his sheet music off of the piano as quickly as he could.

She gave him a silent, terse nod of acknowledgement. Percival pulled on his coat and strode to her front door, wiggling his fingers in the air in an attempt to approximate the correct fingerings she had shown him. His mother was waiting in the car, and he had a week until the next lesson.

When Percival got into the backseat of the SUV, his mother was on the phone, brow furrowed. She turned to smile at him, but it was brief—the voice through the phone was shrill and buzzing. Percival’s mother nodded. “Yes,” she said, pressing the phone against her ear with her shoulder while she shifted the car into drive. “Yes, I think it’s really in your best interest to find it . . . I can, but Percival’s with me right now, and Todd is working, so I’d have to . . . Wonderful. Okay. Great. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

She set the phone in the cupholder and sighed deeply.

“I hope your piano lesson went well,” she began. “That was Aunt Lena on the phone—we have to head over to her place, for probably about an hour—if you want something to eat, we can stop at a drive-through or something, but it has to be along the way.” She made eye contact with Percival through the driver’s mirror, and he shook his head.

“Why are we going to Aunt Lena’s?” he said. Percival hadn’t been over to Aunt Lena’s house in years. She visited them at Thanksgiving and had stopped by last Christmas because she hadn’t played the Christmas Eve concert, but that was it. Percival’s mother sometimes got lunch with her, but rarely; the last time had been in January, when Percival’s grandfather had died.

“Grandpa’s stuff,” his mother answered, flatly. “He left a bunch of music behind—Aunt Lena and I are going to try and find some of the original music for his symphony, because—well, it’s valuable, and we just want to know where it is.” She glanced around, and pulled out of the neighborhood street onto the road. Her hands shifted on the wheel and Percival saw that her fingernails had been bitten down again.

“But why Aunt Lena’s house?” he asked. His mother’s mouth tightened.

“He gave everything to her,” she said. “All the music. So it’s at her house. We’re just going through it now because Aunt Lena needs to find it—I assumed she would have sorted through everything when she picked up his things three weeks ago, but . . .” She sighed. “Anyway. It should only take an hour, maybe two hours. I don’t know

how much he left, but it's just paper."

She shook her head, clicking at random for a radio station that wasn't playing static, and landed on a classical music channel. It was some kind of quartet piece that sounded familiar to Percival, but he didn't have time to place it; his mother wrenched the volume down with a scowl. The drive continued in silence.

Percival had only met his grandfather twice: once, on his second birthday, which he didn't remember, and then again two years ago. His mother had taken him to his grandfather's cramped, cluttered New York apartment; Aunt Lena was there too. They were trying, Percival recalled, to get his grandfather to sell it; his grandfather had paced around the living room with a petulant, mulish expression on his face, muttering to himself. He was a short man, curled over, his bony forearms covered in white hair. He watched Percival's mother with pale, canny eyes, making sure she didn't touch anything she wasn't supposed to; after the trip, Percival caught her biting at her fingernails again.

His grandfather spent most of the time talking to Aunt Lena, asking about her career in the orchestra, or rambling on about one of his new projects. She sat and nodded quietly, her hands folded together. Percival waited on the couch, holding his mother's hand and hoping that they could go home soon.

"Anyway, Lena," his grandfather continued, "I'm thinking I'll do another big one—but before that, I've got to finish the quartet—and Lena, did you know they use software for this now? They put the notes on a computer instead of just doing it on paper first—absolutely ridiculous . . . Making it too easy, is what they're doing. The computer does all the work, you see."

When Aunt Lena didn't begin nodding in agreement, Percival found his grandfather turning to him. "Percival," he said. It sounded as if he was trying the name out for the first time. "Percival, what do you play?"

Percival hesitated; was his grandfather talking about sports? His grandfather turned to Percival's mother. "Does he play anything?" he repeated, jabbing a gnarled thumb at Percival.

"Yes," she stuttered. "Yes—he plays piano."

"Ah," his grandfather said, clapping his hands. "Well, is he any good?"

Percival felt his mother's hand tighten around his wrist. "He's only been taking lessons for two years," she said. "But I—well, I enjoy his playing."

His grandfather scoffed. "Enjoyment isn't the same as taste, Anna. Well, Percival, let's hear you play something! Go on—there's a piano in the next room." A glint in his eyes made Percival queasy.

He opened his mouth to say no, he didn't want to, but his mother nudged him and murmured, "Just do it, please, Percival." Aunt Lena was staring at the coffee table; Percival watched his grandfather lean forward in anticipation.

"Okay," Percival muttered. He stood and moved slowly through the doorway to the piano, and heard his grandfather hobbling in behind him.

Compared to his electronic keyboard at home, his grandfather's piano was massive; black and hulking, it was crouched in the corner of the room, sheet music scattered beneath it. There were more papers stuffed into the shelves behind it. Percival was about to sit down, but stopped; a large green box took up all the space on the piano bench. It was pretty—dyed leather, with two golden clasps on the lid. He reached out to move it.

"Don't touch that!" his grandfather spat, grabbing Percival's wrist. "Don't touch my box!" He pulled the box off the bench and limped over to the fireplace, setting it on the mantle. When he turned back to Percival, his eyes narrowed. "Don't touch what isn't yours," he growled. "The things in that box are very important! I won't have your grubby hands leaving stains on anything in my house!"

Aunt Lena and Percival's mother dashed into the living room.

"Dad, don't speak to him that way!" Percival's mother cried. "He's just a kid—"

"Oh, be quiet, Anna," his grandfather snapped. "Percival needs to learn respect." He whirled back to Percival and his eyes narrowed. "I shouldn't let you touch my piano," he hissed. "This piano is worth more than the apartment we're standing in, boy. It wasn't made to be played by a novice like you."

He turned to Aunt Lena and Percival's mother. "As for you two," he growled, "coming into my apartment and talking about nursing homes—I'm still writing music! You can't put a composer like me into retirement! Now, I think you both have taken up enough of my time today. Come back tomorrow."

They hadn't. Percival's mother had ushered him quickly out of the apartment, pale and flustered, without another word. Aunt Lena had followed behind them, stiff, her face blank. The next day they had taken a flight back to Michigan, and Percival's mother had explained that his grandfather had some issues with his temper. And then they hadn't spoken about his grandfather again, until January, when Aunt Lena called to say that he was dead.

When they pulled up to Aunt Lena's house, Percival wondered if his mother was thinking about this too. She parked the car in the street by Lena's small, untidy yard and smoothed her hair into a ponytail, all without saying anything to him. The vague frown on her face hadn't gone away since she had turned off the radio. Percival followed

her as she trudged up to Aunt Lena's front steps; the concrete was slick with frost, and rust was flaking off the railing. His mother pressed the doorbell, and looked over at him.

"Percival," she began. "Aunt Lena hasn't been playing concerts recently. I'm not sure if you knew . . . I don't want you to say anything to her about the symphony orchestra, okay? I think that would be for the best."

He nodded, and her face lightened.

"Good," she said. "Thank you."

A moment later, Aunt Lena opened the door and ushered them into the house. She had lost weight since the funeral and her face was pallid; when she ushered them inside, Percival saw that her knuckles were swollen and knobbed.

"How are you?" she asked, taking their coats. "Chilly out there, isn't it? I'm getting over a cold myself." She flashed a smile at Percival and his mother, but it didn't reach her eyes. "They left a lot of his stuff," she continued. "Here—it's in the living room." She led them through a crooked doorway into a small room with a couch and white walls; several large cardboard boxes were stacked along the wall. Her cello rested in the corner of the room, zipped up in its case.

"You haven't even started to unpack them yet?" Percival's mother asked sharply, putting her palm across her forehead. "These are big boxes, Lena—I don't think we can do this in two hours."

Aunt Lena sighed. "It's my hands," she said. "The weather's been bad and my wrists have been aching. I just—I'm sure you understand. I haven't gotten around to it yet."

"Oh," Percival's mother said quietly. Her eyes landed on the zippered cello. "I'm sorry. Of course, that makes sense." She dragged one of the boxes towards the center of the room. "Let's start with this one. Lena, do you have scissors?"

Aunt Lena went to get them from the kitchen. When she was gone, Percival's mother sighed heavily and rubbed her forehead again. "I can't believe all of this is *music*," she muttered.

"I think some of them have books inside," Percival offered, pointing to a label scrawled in Sharpie on one of the boxes.

His mother smiled wanly. "Hopefully we find his original stuff soon, so we can go home for an early dinner," she said.

"If most of this is still sheet music, isn't it going to take a long time?" Percival asked. His mother shook her head.

"We think he kept his original music in the box," she said. She didn't have to say anything more; they both knew what box it was. "Hopefully it'll be easy to find."

At that moment, Aunt Lena arrived with the scissors. "Well," she said, "here's hoping that we find that box soon! The bank's after me about my mortgage." She chuckled dryly and passed the scissors to Percival's mother, who began cutting through the tape at the top of the first box.

Percival sat down and tapped his fingers on the arm of the couch, imagining it was the keyboard of a piano, and tapped out the movements of a C major scale. Ms. Zaslavsky could go up two octaves and down again without stopping or adjusting her fingers . . . how did she do it? He wondered if his grandfather had been a good piano player. Chances are he wouldn't have been impressed by Percival's fumbled scales.

"Ah," he heard his mother say, sharply, and Percival snapped out of his thoughts. His mother, after rifling through paper for the last minute, was now holding the green box in her hands. Aunt Lena put her hand up to her mouth, her eyebrows furrowed.

"Lucky guess on which one to open first, huh?" Percival's mother said lightly, but Percival saw her hands trembling.

"He never let us touch this," Aunt Lena murmured, peering at the box. "I was always so curious to see what he kept in here. Well—let's hope it was his original music. Here, Anna, you should open it."

Percival's mother stared at the box for a long moment, and then she undid the clasps and pulled back the lid. "It's music . . ." she began. "It looks new, though. Lena, is this—is this worth anything?"

Percival watched Aunt Lena remove the stack of paper from the box. Her eyes flickered over the music, and her shoulders sank. "No, it's not. This one here looks like recent work, unfinished—it's for the cello, but it's so simple. I don't even know if it would sound good." She began peeling through the sheet music. "They're all recent arrangements. Maybe he couldn't do anything complicated towards the end . . . though I don't know why he would have put it in here . . ."

"Where *would* he have put his good music?" Percival's mother groaned. "All this time, I thought he was hoarding it in there!"

"Maybe it's in with the rest of this stuff," Aunt Lena sighed. "It would take ages to find it. He might have lost it, or stashed it somewhere . . . they've already cleaned out his apartment, so if it's not in here I don't know if we'll ever find it." She sank down on the couch and put her head in her hands. "I really don't know how I'm going to keep buying medication for my hands, much less keep the house if we don't have that music to auction off," she

murmured. “It’s not like the symphony can afford to pay me a pension.” She sat up and Percival saw that her eyes were red.

Percival’s mother placed the box on the coffee table and sat down next to Aunt Lena on the couch, putting a hand on her shoulder. “You know, Lena,” she began, raising her eyebrows, “I’ve always wanted to learn how to play the cello.”

Aunt Lena blinked, and she half-shook her head. “What?” she said. “You were never—I mean, you never wanted to take music lessons as a kid. And I can’t play like I used to—I don’t know if I could teach . . .” She paused, sniffing. “Is that what you meant? Are you asking me to teach you?”

Percival’s mother nodded firmly. “How would you feel about seeing me once a week? I’ll pay you in advance.”

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Poetry

Radiology

What I want are explanations.

My mother who now must
work from home reads screens in
a dark room all day.

I come down
to watch.

The clavicles of people look like
handlebars; ribs
are only ticker-tape, no weight, no
curve. Blank ribbons, striping
over white billows of
what's in your
stomach, the record
of how you swallowed.

A woman's breast
becomes a pouch of heavy static,
a curve of gray. My
mother finds a tissue-paper crack,
a spiderweb, the nuance
of unforgiving growth—
which sometimes turns too
obvious: a large white spot,
the mass
that surfaces beneath the skin
and is caught by
probing fingers terrified.

My mother points to lungs, shot
through with white
spirals, comets of infection, white
lispings trails:
Why there is no school right now,
or the man might be
a smoker, which would
be safer for us but not
for him.

If I could touch my collarbones and
steer myself away
I would. The white/black static
of people's see-through bodies,

ruined lungs, slip-disk spines,
white blots of cancer, white
filled lungs of no breath
and no breathing, the shimmering
pale outlines of hearts
that hurt for reasons unexplained—
They could all be me,
secret images of the dark world
underneath my skin, and
how would I know?

My mother covers up
the names of patients every time
before she calls me down
to look—
To keep from violating
my own privacy, I might
be staring at a picture
of myself, the lucid screen
a black mirror, a snapshot
of the white thing that grows
to take my life.

How would I know?—
I am not familiar
with how I look
outside-in.

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Poetry

Empyrean

To dream of a line
makes me a mystic.

My life a series an impulse—

Like morning
when I pawed through drawers
for a ballpoint,

my mother
shimmering concerned
with a bottle & bright glass

while the closest
closet door fractaled,
Hildegard's battlement—

The white page gleamed
and twisted—

*Fever-driven aura
Astrolabe
The blue vault*

YANG, MAX**Max Yang**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Julie Blank

Category: Critical Essay

Healthier?

Healthier?

In March 2011, Senator Susan Collins from Maine indignantly marched onto the Senate floor. In one hand, she held a potato—the pride of the state’s north, which had once been the nation’s leading producer of the crop. In the other, a head of iceberg lettuce. She turned to Tom Vilsack, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, and demanded, “Mr. Secretary, [...] what does the department have against potatoes?” (Confessore). This dramatic showdown was prompted by the passing of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which promised to usher in a new wave of healthier school lunches by cutting calories and limiting “unhealthy foods,” like potatoes, from the lunch line. Meanwhile, a guerilla war was being waged in school cafeterias across the nation: children staged boycotts, threw uneaten vegetables on the floor, and expressed their grievances on social media. In a country where one in five children are obese or overweight, reforming school lunches seemed like the perfectly logical solution. Yet, the turmoil surrounding the passing of the HFFKA revealed the complexity of this multifaceted issue. Although increasing the nutritional value of meals has proven benefits for students, current legislation surrounding school lunches overlooks several key factors—including how much the food appeals to students and the length of the lunch period—that limit its overall effectiveness.

School lunches are a vital part of the day for the over 30 millions students from nearly 100,000 schools that are a part of the National School Lunch Program. Thus, it is crucial that school lunches contain a balanced nutritional profile to best provide for students. Studies have shown that healthier lunches include more zinc, Vitamin B, and omega-3 fatty acids, nutrients vital for cognitive development, while containing low amounts of saturated and trans fats, which have been shown to impede learning (CU Online). Eating a well-balanced lunch has also been linked to social and emotional benefits by increasing energy levels, reducing aggression among students, and improving overall mental well-being. Furthermore, students who consume foods higher in essential nutrients are less likely to become sick and miss class, in turn meaning they are less likely to fall behind (CU Online). The benefits of school lunches also translate to quantifiable measures. A 2008 study of 9,700 elementary, middle, and high schools found that after contracting with a healthy meal vendor, schools saw standardized tests performance increase by an average of 4 percentile points. Additionally, the measure only cost schools \$222 per student per year, considerably cheaper than alternative methods (Andersen). Thus, improving the nutritional quality of school lunches presents itself as an economically efficient way to increase students’ success. The aforementioned benefits are even more important for the nearly 25 million students who receive free or reduced-price lunches, as for many of these students, school lunches are their only reliable source of healthy, balanced meals. Kweko Powers, a sophomore from Oakland High School, claims that “in areas where youth don't have access to healthier food options,” one “tend[s] to see more obesity” (Andersen). Without grocery stores or access to fresh produce, students that live in these “food deserts” are forced to turn to liquor stores and gas stations to buy cheaper but ultimately healthier food. Powers asserts that school lunches can reduce food insecurity and help alleviate the worries about “hunger” and “lack of proper nutrition” for those students. Evidently, school lunches play a key role in the success of students across the nation.

On paper, making school lunches healthier by reducing the amount of calories, sodium, and saturated fats while increasing the amount of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains should result in enormous benefits for students. Yet, with the enactment of the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, school administrators across the nation have complained that their “trash cans are overflowing while their cash register receipts are diminishing” (Murphy). Kids simply will not eat these healthier meals. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that while the HFFKA incentivized schools to increase nutritional quantity, it failed to address how the food would appeal to students. For

example, the act set stringent requirements that forced schools to greatly reduce the amount of sodium in dishes and only serve whole grains. Cafeterias and food manufacturers have adapted by re-engineering their dishes to meet the guidelines set by the HHFKA, but often at the expense of flavor (Murphy). As a result, students have lamented that the new foods are bland and unpalatable, and leave much of their meals untouched. Clearly, no matter how healthy the foods are, students cannot reap its benefits if they refuse to eat the foods they are served. Furthermore, many school cafeterias have been forced to serve food in smaller portions in order to fit the new guidelines. Professor Craig Gundersen of the University of Illinois warns that because of this change, students not satiated by their reduced-sized lunches may turn to outside, unhealthier food options to make up for their lost calories (Gundersen). This effectively nullifies the benefits of the supposedly healthier school lunches, and as a result, the act may not lead to a decline in obesity as it had intended to do. Ultimately, the HHFKA forced schools to make meals healthier, but failed to consider how students would respond to these new restrictions.

Additionally, the duration of school lunches in the United States—considerably less than in other countries—may be impacting how much students benefit from the healthier foods. While students in France can have upwards of two hours to eat, their American counterparts are often given as little as 15 to 20 minutes (Prothero). This short lunch period may be perpetuating picky eating habits in American children that are at the root of the current obesity epidemic. For example, fresh fruits and vegetables are packed with fibers that by nature take longer to chew and consume. As a result, when faced with a time crunch, students often forgo eating these items and lose out on their nutritional benefits. Even though the HHFKA now requires students to have a fruit or a vegetable with their lunch, most administrators have observed that these foods are “particularly neglected” (Prothero). Given this information, one might then predict that giving students more time may encourage them to try healthier foods that they would otherwise toss out, which was exactly what an experiment by Bergman et al. demonstrated. His group’s experiment revealed that giving students just 10 more minutes for lunch resulted in a 16% reduction in food waste and significantly increased the consumption of various vitamins and minerals (Bergman et al.). By not forcing students to default to eating their familiar options under the time pressure, schools can greatly increase the variety of foods and quantity of nutrients students consume in their lunches. The importance of the length of students’ lunch period once again demonstrates how overlooked external factors limited the efficacy of the HHFKA.

While the nutritional guidelines set by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act may theoretically have enormous benefits, policymakers cannot blindly view cutting calories and increasing nutritional content as a panacea for solving all the problems of school lunches. Yes, the legislation did create quantifiable standards that policymakers could point to and claim that they made school lunches healthier. But when so many crucial factors were simply not addressed, the extent of their claims should come under scrutiny. After all, given the importance of school lunches, shouldn’t lawmakers try everything in their power to make school lunches better? Accounting for these external factors will admittedly not be easy. Increasing the length of lunchtime would cut into the school day and result in inevitable pushback from teachers. Improving the quality of school lunches would be substantially more difficult to enact into law. And creating meals that students find palatable could require efforts beyond just reformulating existing menu items. But if done correctly, these changes could mean that one day, students across the country will truly be able to live healthy and hunger-free.

YANG, MAX**Max Yang**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Julie Blank

Category: Critical Essay

A World Unraveled: An Analysis of Innocence in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Innocence can be seen as the delicate threads of a cocoon. When a child is born, the threads wrap tightly around them, protecting the child from evil, and shielding them from the problems of the adult world. Through this, the child can grow up in a safe and protected environment, one where curiosity, creativity, and learning from mistakes are encouraged. Yet, as the child grows, the cocoon becomes too tight and restrictive. It must loosen a bit, and slowly, the threads of innocence unravel, introducing the child to forms of hatred that they have never experienced before. Eventually, the child comes of age, and the cocoon will fall away completely, leaving them fully exposed to a world of injustice, bigotry, and racism. For a young adult, the struggle of growing up and the inevitable loss of innocence is reflected in the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*, written by Harper Lee. In the novel, Harper Lee uses the character of Jem Finch to demonstrate how the threads of innocence gradually unravel with the coming of age, revealing the hatred and racism that exists in the outside world.

In the beginning of the novel, Jem is fully encased within the threads of innocence and sees Maycomb through the eyes of a child. His childhood preoccupies him, and he spends most of his time playing with his sister Scout and their friend Dill. One of the most important aspects of his childhood is his fascination with the rumors surrounding Boo Radley, a mysterious neighbor seen as a “malevolent phantom.” When Dill asks Jem to describe Boo, Jem states: “Boo was about six and a half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that’s why his hands are blood stained” (20). To the reader, Jem’s preposterous claims are rather humorous, as it would be highly unlikely for him to be able to determine Boo’s height, or that “he dined on raw squirrels,” solely from observing Boo’s tracks. These claims help demonstrate Jem’s innocence, as it shows that he is too naive to question if the rumors that he spreads about Boo are true. Instead, he blindly believes in them, and portrays Boo as a force of evil to Dill. Jem displays his childish innocence again when Dill dares him to knock on the Radley door. As he deliberates on the corner of the Radley property, Jem shouts back to Dill: “I hope you’ve got it through your head that he’ll kill us each and every one, Dill Harris. [...] Don’t blame me when he gouges your eyes out” (21). Once again, Jem shows his innocence as he states that he fears that Boo would “kill us each and every one” and “gouge [our] eyes out.” This use of language clearly comes from the creative mind of a child, as it would be extremely unlikely that Boo would actually commit such atrocities. Harper Lee demonstrates that Jem’s imagination, not logic, dictates the beliefs and actions of his childhood. Finally, Jem’s fear of Boo reappears when he sees Scout chewing a stick of gum that she found in the hole of the Radley tree. He promptly orders: “Spit it out right now! [...] Don’t you know you’re not supposed to even touch the trees over there? You’ll get killed if you do!” (54). Fear often reveals one’s true emotions, and Jem’s tone of urgency and the statement, “You’ll get killed if you do!” makes it clear that he believes Boo is evil. However, this again demonstrates Jem’s innocence, as his unwarranted fear stems from the monster he created in Boo Radley, the epitome of his childish beliefs. Moreover, this fear prevents Jem from perceiving Boo as anything other than a force of evil, which also blinds him from seeing that Boo may just be acting out of kindness.

As the novel progresses, the thread of innocence around Jem begins to unravel, allowing him to develop an understanding of the hatred that comes with being part of the adult world. After receiving multiple gifts in the hole of the Radley tree, Jem feels obliged to thank the unknown sender of the gifts, and intends to leave a letter in the hole. However, Nathan Radley, Boo’s father figure, fills in the hole of the tree, leaving Jem utterly distraught. Scout observes: “[Jem] stood there until nightfall, and I waited for him. When we went in the house I saw he had been crying; his face was dirty in the right places, but I thought it odd that I had not heard him” (103). Here, Jem is developing a new maturity as he understands the significance of cementing the hole. Jem realizes that now, he will never be able to thank Boo, the sender of the gifts. Even more importantly, he cries for Boo’s lost connection with

the outside world, as he understands that Mr. Radley cements the tree out of hatred in order to cut Boo off from contact. This new maturity is again tested when Atticus's involvement in the Tom Robinson trial forces Jem to confront a significantly more serious topic: racism. Mrs. Dubose, an elderly neighbor, criticizes Jem and Scout everytime they walk past her house. The two ignore her insults. One day however, Jem loses his temper after Mrs. Dubose insults his father, and in a rage of fury, destroys her camellias by slashing them with a baton. Afterwards, Atticus comes home holding a camellia bud, and asks: "'Jem...are you responsible for this?' 'Yes sir.' 'Why'd you do it?' Jem said softly, 'She said you lawed for n***** and trash'" (170). The final straw that causes Jem to lose control over himself was Mrs. Dubose derogatory comment, comparing Atticus to the "n***** and trash" he defended. Because Jem demonstrates such a visceral reaction, we see that he understands the connotations behind these hateful words, which shows a development in his maturity and a loss in his innocence. Finally, Jem experiences racism again when Calpurnia decides to bring him and Scout to her African-American church. When they arrive, Lula, one of the members of the church, expresses her discontent towards Calpurnia's decision, stating "'You ain't got no business bringin' white chillun here—they got their church, we got our'n. It is our church, ain't it, Miss Cal?' [...] Jem said, 'Let's go home, Cal, they don't want us here—'" (196). For the first time in this book dominated by racism against African-Americans, we see that African-Americans also harbor ill-feelings towards Caucasians. Jem's statement of, "they don't want us here," shows that he consciously senses the hatred that certain members of the church harbor, thus demonstrating that he is developing an understanding of the racism that divides Maycomb. Although Jem is not an adult yet, the threads of innocence have loosened enough for him to begin to see that the world around him is not perfect.

At the end of the book, Jem's faith in his community is torn apart, as the trial forces him to realize that racism and forces of evil exist in the citizens of Maycomb. After Tom Robinson is convicted guilty of a rape that he did not do, Jem's emotions could not be held back. "His face was streaked with angry tears as we made our way through the cheerful crowd. 'It ain't right,' he muttered" (350). As the cocoon around Jem has just fallen away, he is unaccustomed to the extreme injustice that occurs in the world. His reaction, sobbing and saying, "It ain't right," shows how he is unable to accept the unfairness of it all, that an innocent man was sentenced to death solely on the words of a white girl. Jem realizes that the justice system is inherently corrupt, as no matter the evidence proving Tom is innocent, the racist ideas of the era are so deeply ingrained into the townspeople that it would be impossible for Tom to be acquitted. Jem, who previously thought the people of Maycomb were "the best folks in the world" (356), now doubts those in his community. As Ms. Maudie tries to console him, Jem desperately asks: "Who? [...] Who in this town did one thing to help Tom Robinson, just who?" (356). Jem's sorrow is turning into despair, as evident by the change from believing that the people of Maycomb were the "best folks in the world," to suddenly believing that not a single person in Maycomb did anything to help Tom Robinson. This revelation, brought on by his heightened maturity, shows that Jem no longer sees the world as an idealistic society that he saw as a child. Finally, after Jem's visit with Ms. Maudie, Atticus explains how the jury works to Jem. In the middle of the conversation, Jem asserts: "No sir, they oughta do away with juries. [Tom] wasn't guilty in the first place and they said he was" (364). The trial is a critical turning point for Jem's innocence, as he now understands the injustice that African-Americans face. In addition, Jem fixates on the fact that twelve white men from the areas around Maycomb convict Tom Robinson solely on Mayella's testimony, and sees them as a force of evil. His loss of faith in the people of Maycomb is fully reflected, as he says "they oughta do away with juries." This also demonstrates that Jem has matured enough to develop his own sense of justice. Yet, in this time of despair, Atticus does leave Jem with some hope: the fact that the jury took a few hours signals the possibility of change.

For Jem and many other young adults, growing up is a difficult experience. Through the course of the novel, the cocoon of innocence around Jem gradually unravels, slowly exposing him to the injustices of the community. Yet, in the end, the cocoon must inevitably fall away. Having to suddenly emerge into reality can often drastically change a young adult's perspective on his or her own world. After the Tom Robinson trial, Jem reflects on his innocent childhood, calling it "like bein' a caterpillar in a cocoon," protecting him from evil and allowing Maycomb to seem like a better place than it really is. And while the cocoon of innocence falling away so suddenly may seem harsh for a young adult, it does provide an invaluable learning opportunity. There are often problems in the real world that are too big for individuals to fix single-handedly, and young adults must learn to accept this. After being shielded by innocence for so long, they are finally mature enough to establish their own stances on controversial subjects. Most important of all, they can develop their own moral compass, which will be instrumental in shaping a young adult's future.

YUN, YEJUN**Yejun Yun**

Age: 14, Grade: 10

School Name: Lawrence Free State High School, Lawrence, KS

Educator: Jeff Morrison

Category: Humor

The Individualist

The Individualist

I am a selfish person.

That is the only thought I have as I throw all one hundred and seventy pounds of my body against the frail woman in front of me, who weighs much less than one hundred and seventy pounds, pushing her in front of the train screeching into the station.

Naturally, this is not in my usual course of action for any day. I am not some irrational serial killer who gains pleasure from such a senseless act. What I am is a well-adjusted, elite, and financially secure corporate employee: the furthest thing possible from a serial killer who breaks the rules, placing severe consequences on themselves for only a moment of supposed happiness. Laws are not meant to be fought against but instead stretched and exaggerated in the correct places for your own gain.

Therefore, what I am doing surprises even myself in the split-second the woman is falling, suspended above the tracks while the harsh light of twin LED headlights illuminates her face. There is nothing but shock and disbelief, which I'm sure is mirrored on my own features. Time passes by in a blur, the delicate hands of my tasteful Rolex spinning at a frantic pace, and I wish I could slow down. But before I can breathe or even think, it is all over.

Dressed in a crisp, dark-blue Hugo Boss three-piece, my hair is immaculately combed and my black leather shoes are polished to a mirror-like finish. My face is smooth-shaven, and any wrinkles that might have been are staved off by my regular moisturizing routine, leaving only healthy, youthful, and energetic skin that shows no sign of age. I am absolutely positive that I look like the exemplar of an effective employee, one that signals to his superiors that he is the right man for the promotion.

That is probably why the police officer in front of me looks so surprised. The middle-aged man wears an almost comically bright blue cap, elbows resting on the rickety wooden table of the interrogation room. The space itself is both poorly ventilated and slightly too cold, factors that even a layperson would identify as liable to decrease employee performance. But I have to concede that the uncomfortable room was likely not built with any considerations for efficient Excel spreadsheet processing or data input in mind.

Examining his face in the light of the single fluorescent bulb flickering above us, my mind switches gears, now thinking that my skin-care routine has paid more dividends than I had initially expected. And speaking of dividends, I am reminded of my mediocre performance in the stock market this year—although my index funds appreciated respectably, they lagged behind more volatile assets. I could have likely gained higher returns if I had taken the time to research my portfolio more thoroughly, but my career in human resources required too much time for me to focus on aggressively increasing my gains in finance.

“Sir, do you understand what you’re trying to say here?”

I used the past tense “required” because my career is now quite possibly a train wreck in and of itself after the near-disaster of the morning. But fortunately, miracles—miracles and connections—can fix even the worst of catastrophes.

“An accident? I saw the footage, and that was the furthest thing possible from an accident, let me tell you that,” he says, brow twitching erratically. “Are you really trying to say that you have no responsibility for what almost happened back there?” He pauses to massage his forehead with his fingers. “Can’t you at least manage an apology? Isn’t that the least you can do?”

The miracle I talk about is truly fortunate for me. Somehow one of the passersby, a stocky man with an abundance of muscles and quick reflexes, grabbed onto the falling woman’s hand in the instant that she fell. Normally, the physics of such a compassionate act would favor neither the helper nor the one being helped, but there

had been a convenient stairwell nearby, the man having grabbed the railing with his other free hand.

“Why should I take the blame for something I didn’t do?” I reply, wearing the same blank mask I used for firings and hirings at my job. “It was an unfortunate accident that happened through no fault of either party and thankfully, no one got hurt. That’s it.”

A purple vein pulses in his neck. “Look, I’ll tell you again, we saw the footage from the security cameras in the area. Do you know what was on there? A full-grown man pushing a tiny little woman old enough to be my grandmother in front of a train. Listen, can we be honest with ourselves for just one second here?”

“That’s what I’ve been doing,” I say. “As for what you saw, I’ll admit it’s misleading, but I have a history of cataplexy. I sometimes go limp, and I was off balance when the accident happened. I’ve been working with an excellent neurologist to fix the problem; however, I’m afraid it’s not quite that easy.”

The neurologist I mention is one small portion of the second part of the plan to alleviate catastrophes. Connections and preparation are two resources that I believe to be extremely valuable, nearly as much as money. I possess a great deal of all three precisely for moments such as these: disasters with nearly-negligible odds of occurring, black swans that even I cannot see coming.

With a sigh of someone learning they’d have to stay in the office until morning, the officer says simply, “Really? Cataplexy? You know what, I’ll let someone else deal with you.” He slinks out of the room, closing the door behind him in a half-hearted manner and not quite locking it shut.

After a few more hours of questioning, I’m allowed to leave the police station.

Walking out, I almost feel bad for the tired man. Stuck in a dead-end job, he clearly had neither the mindset nor the ability necessary to move further in life. For a brief moment, I wonder what it would be like to be in his position. I come up empty; it seems like my imagination has its limits. I am sure my subordinates at work would find that statement amusing. They try to hide the somewhat disdainful opinion they have of me, but I am not a blind or unaware person by any means, a trait which I’ve worked hard to build up from an admittedly lackluster starting point. After all, the ability to understand the general feelings of others is invaluable in making connections. I constantly assess myself to alleviate my limitations. Hard work and ceaseless rationalism are what define me, and I am proud of that.

So I plan and discuss with my lawyer and make phone calls as I wait for my court date to arrive, using up my accumulated stock of unused sick days that I had once deemed unnecessary. Fortunately, I don’t have to liquidate any of my assets, instead pulling from my various bank accounts flush with enough money to feed an African village for many days. I once saw an advertisement for a charity that listed how much money would be necessary to feed such a hypothetical place for one year and, out of amusement, subsequently calculated how much impact my net worth could have. Then I looked away from the poster on the train and went to work, as usual, removing the image from my mind until now.

Soon enough, I am there, standing before a wooden podium that faces another wrinkled, middle-aged man. He has an even more bulldog-like face than the emotional police officer, and his hair is grayer as well, any luster that might once have been now replaced by a dullness like dusty books in a forgotten library. It feels like it is every day now that I am thankful for my collection of high-quality creams and lotions.

My lawyer is close, sitting behind and to the left of me at a wooden table, having also lost any spirited glow he once had. It seems that I am the sort of person who comes into contact with an inordinate amount of middle-aged men in his life, despite having a wife and children back at home. I suppose that if I went home more often then that ratio would change, but seeing middle-aged men is preferable to having to interact with children, who know of nothing but how to tear and stain and break things that cost as much as it takes to feed them. As for my wife, she is pleasant company, but ultimately not someone who is worth more than being employee of the month for three years running.

I watch as dry, withered lips part. “Now, let us begin with the plaintiff’s opening statement. If you may.”

The proceedings move surprisingly quickly. In all of the shows involving law I have watched in order to have something to discuss with my colleagues, it is described as something akin to the slowest, most lethargic form of torture invented by men—the modern-day Catherine wheel or iron maiden. However, I find myself liking the ordered regularity of the system, composed of steps that have been refined over countless years to conclude the squabbles of the masses, although it is grating to be lumped in together with them. If I had to compare it to something, then I would say it is like sitting through a day of doing nothing but listening to reports of employee performance: things like whether that saleswoman has finally learned to show up on time, or if that low-level manager had demonstrated proper initiative during the meeting with the regional director yesterday.

Leaving the grand building of law, my lawyer informs me with what passes for a happy face in his profession that he believes the case would resolve smoothly, with amazingly little consequences for someone who was charged with attempted second-degree murder.

The fact that the incident occurred in the first place will harm my standing in the company; that is an unfortunate

given of any criminal conduct. However, my otherwise impeccable record and connections with management will likely save my career, even if any further promotion will only be considered when I have one hand in the grave and the other still typing away at the office.

Sighing as I climb into my silver Mercedes, I think back to the day that has strained my resources to such an extent.

It had been one like any other, myself arriving at the station at seven o'clock on the dot, waiting for my train to arrive in five minutes while standing behind the faded yellow safety marker. Despite the unpleasant company that I found in the public space, it was more efficient than taking the commute by car through the streets of the city that are as clogged as a junk food addict's arteries. I could normally endure the wandering vagrant that smelled like moldy cheese, the loud-mouthed brats clinging to everything but their mothers, and even the drunk still staggering from a hangover acquired the previous night.

But on that day, a frail, elderly woman had come up to me.

I had already been ill-composed, in the middle of a major restructuring that was being fought against by the swarm of irrational actors that plagued the company. For a sensible person who values reason and holds in esteem the laws of cause and effect—poor performance begets removal from the company—it was irritating. Extremely irritating. Despite my efforts in improving my empathy, I couldn't understand what they were saying, their talk about needing money for college funds and retirement, things they should have planned for and worked hard for already as I had. And for some inconceivable reason, other people in branch management seemed to agree.

So when the woman came out of the blue and said, "Ask for forgiveness from God, and your soul will be saved," and continued to prattle on about how she could see in my eyes that my attachment to wealth was ruining me—the work of some devil or demon, perhaps—and how I could achieve salvation by joining some obscure church that I had never before heard of in my entire life—I made a mistake, one that set my career back an unforgivable amount.

I should have acted differently; I should have stopped myself. I am nothing like the criminals and felons of the world who are incapable of controlling a single one of their impulses. And yet, I wasted precious resources that could have been used to further my career. Everything has an opportunity cost. I can only explain away my actions by dismissing them as a mulligan, a fluke, some unavoidable act of nature. But I do know what I have learned from the experience.

Solicitors should stay on the side away from the train, for everyone's sake.

ZHAO, JASON**Jason Zhao**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Judith Miller

Category: Flash Fiction

The Academy for Space Recruits

Bright sunlight beamed through Jack's window, cutting through the gloom in the dim room. Small dust motes flitted around the solid-looking beam like small, bug-like creatures on a summer day. Groggily, Jack glanced around the cramped room as he slowly woke up. Walking to his window to shut the blinds so that he could have just a few more minutes of sleep, he was suddenly greeted not with the sight of the familiar thicket that bordered his family home but with the sight of a sheer black void. Far off in the distance, there seemed to be what looked like an agate marble with white wisps and green flecks. Remembering where he was, Jack hurried to get dressed as the first bell rang clearly through the loudspeaker in his room.

Still lacing up his combat-style boots, Jack shuffled down the hallway to join the rest of the soldiers making up a line that seemed to span the entire length of the B12 Carrier Ship. Moving up the line, Jack finally got his breakfast and made his way to the dining area. As he quietly munched on his eggs and toast, Jack wondered if he'd ever return home to Earth again.

"Hey, man," a voice said, startling Jack. Of course, it was only Trevor. "Have ya heard about what we're doin' today? We're goin' on a conquest! Our very first conquest! I bet it'll be so fun; maybe I'll even get to choose some recruits!"

"Yeah, right," Jack scoffed. "They would never let newbies do that. Everyone knows you gotta have been at the academy for at least a year to even get a chance at choosing."

"Hey, man, you never know. Maybe I'll be an exception!"

After twenty minutes, the second bell blared, and it was officially time for training. As the soldiers headed to the third floor of the ship, the murmurs among them all seemed to agree on one thing: today would be their first conquest. As the soldiers entered the grand auditorium for the commander's daily speech, Jack glanced up at the stage. The commander seemed much more chipper than normal.

"Greetings, soldiers," he boomed over the loudspeakers, "today, we're going to do something fun. If you think today will be your first real conquest, then you're right." Pointing to what seemed to be a group of large, reinforced metal canisters, the commander continued. "This baby right here is known as 'the Dropper.' You know what it does?" He said excitedly, "It drops you! Once all soldiers have been dropped, the fun can begin. You'll all be equipped with earpieces that will direct you to your objectives. So, are you guys ready? 'Cause you better be!" And with that, the soldiers walked to the armory, as they had done in training so many times before. Of course, not one soldier was walking with precise rhythm; they were too excited for that.

Having geared up, the soldiers lined up single-file and began to funnel towards the Droppers like ants swarming a piece of bread. As Jack and Trevor stepped into their Droppers, Trevor flashed a quick smile as they headed down toward the target planet.

Looking around, Jack couldn't help but notice how similar the planet seemed to Earth. The trees around them were still lush green, and the sky was a beautiful light blue. Jack almost felt as if he had returned home. Suddenly, the commander's voice sliced through the chatter.

“Listen up soldiers,” he said, “here’s what we’re gonna do: everyone is going to follow me until we reach the beacon. Once we reach the beacon, I want us to split into groups of three. We’re going to have the senior go drag one person from the pile. Be sure to strap ‘em up to the teleboard real nice, and have someone go and beam ‘em up,” said the commander. Jack looked over at Trevor. No longer beaming, Trevor almost appeared afraid.

As Jack followed the group, he couldn’t help but notice even more similarities this planet bore to Earth. The path they were on was almost identical to the one he would take to get to the lake during the dog days of summer. Jack even saw an old willow that seemed to droop with the same sadness that the one he had napped under after school had. It almost seemed as if he was nearing his old neighborhood. The only thing to convince him otherwise was the absence of the old church that was built near that willow.

Eventually, the group had reached the beacon. It was an anomaly. It had to have at least stood fifty stories tall. The base was a circular disk inlaid with various wirings and teleboards. To Jack, it almost seemed like the Eiffel Tower had been magnified many times and randomly placed in a field. Astonishingly, no one had noticed it until the group had arrived at its base.

The senior with Jack and Trevor immediately headed toward the pile. There, he grabbed a muscular-looking boy who seemed seventeen at most. Pulling him toward one of the teleboards, he motioned for Jack and Trevor to give him a hand. Slowly, the two walked towards the senior. Trevor stood like a statue beside the motionless body, scrutinizing every detail of the boy’s face. Suddenly, he ran off the base and bolted towards the woods. Confused, Jack called out to Trevor, but Trevor kept running.

At that moment, all the teleboards had been loaded, and all that was on the base of the beacon began to rise at a dizzying rate. Desperately, Jack shouted out to the commander, “Sir, my friend was left behind. We need to go back to get him.” But he was simply ignored. Panicking, Jack ran towards the edge of the disc in hopes of spotting Trevor. Instead, he was greeted by the sight of an old church near the weeping willow.

ZHOU, CELINA**Celina Zhou**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Ladue Middle School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Judith Miller, Greg Schmitz

Category: Poetry

messages**i love you.**

the words linger in the brilliant light of day,
 carried by whip-sharp winds
 settle soft in awaiting ears
 (yours or mine, yours or mine, yours or mine?
 mine.)

they
 grow, grow, grow,
 into an eldritch abomination that shrieks a terrible scream,
 echoing hollow in the deepest caverns of the mind,
 reaches where even
 the heat of rage,
 the spark of wonder,
 the light of hope,
 reaches not.
 sink their teeth deep into the psyche,
 curl in the frigid shadows
 bringing with them tendrils of terrible, beautiful light.

you
 (we, i, --
 these are my demons
 not yours, not yours, not yours.
 never yours.)
 scream and claw and tear at them,
 let the flames of madness burn and burn and burn those hollow words to an ash.
 but they endure,
 rise from the broken fragments,
 left behind from the destruction wrought by the monstrous storm of my despair,
 as they always have, as they always will.

they weasel under the walls that guard my pithos, and the fragile, faintest light that flickers within --
 slip through grasping fingers
 like mist fading in the golden light of morning,
 in a spiraling dance that leaves splinters of agony bursting behind my eyes.

do they soothe, do they warm,
 do they drown, do they burn,
 the singularity consumes me,
 seizing every thought that dares wander near,
 it will take, take, take,

until there is nothing left of me.
 (and i will let it --
 because what part of me is worth taking, worth guarding, worth keeping --
 worth loving?)

"i love you."
 (do you, do you, do you?)

"i love you."
 (why, why, why,
 why would you love a monster?)

lines.

these lines between us,
 these lines that define us,
 as heart, as mind, as soul --
 as a person instead of a people --
 have blurred.
 but the glass wall that separates us from you
 only grows ever clearer.

the brave ones, the bold ones,
 (the ones with nothing to lose, the ones who have already lost)
 will step out, out, out,
 of these walls,
 creating millions of fissures that remain for the ones left behind to behold,
 to fear,
 for they make our shield (our cage) ever more fragile.
 some will rise and some will fall,
 and we,
 will whisper amongst ourselves,
 twist fingers and bite lips,
 but we,
 will never scream, never shout,
 for we know that our voices will only echo off these walls and resound back around us,
 as though taunting us for our weakness.
 and so we become a quiet people.
 and so we can -- we will --
 do nothing but watch.

just as you do.

you have always looked at us,
 at our hair, at our eyes, at our noses and chins and mouths,
 mimicked
 (mocked)
 our food, our clothing, our languages,
 the remnants of our uprooted cultures that clung to us,
 trailing across the sea as our mothers and fathers journeyed here.
 but you have never known us,
 never lived in our skin, not black nor white nor anything in between,
 never dipped your hands in the rich history that flows from mouth to mouth, parent to child, sister to brother,
 never felt the warmth of the community we have built
 kindled by love, by tenacity, by solidarity.

even as slurs are shouted and shots are fired,

elders are beaten in the streets and
 our people walk alone in fear,
 the horrors will be buried and the blood will dry,
 we will swallow our indignation and
 we will stifle our rage and
 we will shoulder our grief,
 as we always have.

but maybe,
 we will break the silence that has shackled us for generations.
 maybe,
 we will demand that you no longer simply watch
 as we are stalked and hunted by beasts within our cage,
 beasts of your creation.
 we will demand that you listen, you feel,
 you experience the pain that we have endured for decades,
 wrought upon us by people with power that you offered,
 only for you to watch and turn away when blood is spilled.

maybe,
 we will look at these cracks in the lines that cage us,
 and
 make
 more.

frigid.

you
 have always liked
 to hold my hands,
 snake your arms under kitchen tables and
 trace patterns onto clammy palms and
 ghost fingertips over delicate wrists
 lips stretching into a crooked line as i
 flinch away from icecold skin.

stealing my warmth,
 you call it.
 for you,
 inherited our mother's hatred of the cold,
 and i,
 inherited our father's inner-warmth.
 and yet even when my hands are chilled,
 touched by icy air and sharp wind,
 you curl your fingers over mine.

you,
 fumble hands over cotton sheets
 searching, seeking mine in the dark,
 fingers clasp tight once they find their mark.
 soft moon-light slants through the shutters
 forty silvery lines that adorn my floor --
 we counted
 (nine rows from the bottom, a broken shutter interrupts the pattern,
 you insist that it only counts as one half
 i like to round.)
 murmured secrets vanishing into the night,

the stars our only witness.
footsteps sound outside my door,
whisper-soft cotton on my tongue,
smothering my laughter.

chatter blooms, surrounding us,
in humid beijing streets,
the air is full and heaving with heat and breath and sound and scent,
shrill calls echo in my skull,
lilting words that jerk and bounce.
my breath expands in my chest like a flame,
surges through my lungs and scorches my tongue.

you,
murmur softly in my ear,
low and smooth and calm,
slide your hands down to meet mine.
fingers uncurl like the first blooms of spring,
white crescents carved into my palms,
as porcelain flushes rosy-pink.
you,
take my hands and
you,
don't let go.

your hands are always cold,
and yet, somehow,
they warm me nonetheless.

ZOLYNAS, LUKAS**Lukas Zolynas**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

How to leave a person.

Silence lets us make our own conclusions that are easier to accept.
If someone else gives us the reason, then we have no way to change it.
Why would we?
The answer or conclusion is given to us.
If they're in their own silence, then they make the conclusion that best works.

It's terrifying trying to think of why they left without a word.
Did they hate you?
Did you do something wrong?
They never said or admitted these things.
Conclusions made of your own accord.
That you find acceptable.
Harder mentally to bear, but easier to accept.

Silence drove you to your conclusions.
Not a word spoken, but in that absence of communication, an agreement was reached. They left.
Silence told you everything you needed to know.
Nothing more nothing less.

*The less you give them to know when you leave the better.
Nothing they can hold against you except silence.
They can think whatever works for them.
That was their conclusion, their reason you left...
Not your reason you left.*

*Once you've left you can never come back.
They made up their minds.
You can't change that.
Not worth trying.*

*They'll be ok.
You know they will be.
You only did this because you knew they could handle it this way.
You didn't leave to hurt them.
You left so they can be better.
You left so they can too.*

Easier for the both of you...